

# What Drives Media Slant?

Evidence from U.S. Daily Newspapers

Matthew Gentzkow   Jesse Shapiro  
*Chicago Booth and NBER*

# Motivation: Policy

- Central principles
- Diversity is good
  - “One of the **most vital of all general interests** [is] the dissemination of news from as many different sources, and with as many different facets and colors as is possible. That interest...presupposes that right conclusions are more likely to be gathered out of a multitude of tongues, than through any kind of authoritative selection” (**U.S. Supreme Court** 1945)
- Ownership consolidation threatens diversity
  - “[The FCC] has traditionally assumed that there is a positive correlation between viewpoints expressed and ownership of an outlet. The Commission has sought, therefore, to diffuse ownership of media outlets among multiple firms in order to diversify the viewpoints available to the public” (**FCC** 2003)

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  - FCC: “A larger number of independent owners will tend to generate a wider array of viewpoints in the media than would a comparatively smaller number of owners. We believe this proposition, **even without the benefit of conclusive empirical evidence.**”



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M a uring Slant

# Measuring Newspaper Slant: An Example

- Strategic language in social security debate

# M a u r i n g N e w p a p e r S l a n t : A n E x a m p l e

- Strategic language in social security debate
  - Memo to Rep. candidates: “Never say ‘**privatization/private accounts.**’ Instead say ‘**personalization/personal accounts.**’  
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# Making New Paper Slant: An Example

- Strategic language in social security debate
  - Memo to Rep. candidates: “Never say ‘**privatization/private accounts.**’ Instead say ‘**personalization/personal accounts.**’ Two-thirds of America want to personalize Social Security while only one-third would privatize it. Why? Personalizing Social Security suggests ownership and control over your retirement savings, while privatizing it suggests a profit motive and winners and losers.”
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  - Congress: "personal account" (48 D vs 184 R); "private account" (54 D vs 5 R)
  - Frequency of these phrases is a good predictor of a politician's ideology

# Making Newspaper Slant: An Example

- Look at use of these same phrases in newspapers



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  - "House GOP offers plan for Social Security; Bush's **private accounts** would be scaled back" (*Washington Post*, 6/ 3/05)
  - "GOP backs use of Social Security surplus ; Finds funding for **personal accounts**" (*Washington Times*, 6/ 3/05)
  - Use frequency of these phrases as a measure of newspaper's ideology









# Top Phrases: Social Security

Republicans: 2-word	Republicans: 3-word	Democrats: 2-word	Democrats: 3-word
stem cell	embryonic stem cell	<b>private accounts</b>	veterans health care
natural gas	hate crimes legislation	trade agreement	congressional black caucus
death tax	adult stem cells	american people	va health care
illegal aliens	oil for food program	tax breaks	billion in tax cuts
class action	<b>personal retirement accounts</b>	trade deficit	credit card companies
war on terror	energy and natural resources	oil companies	<b>security trust fund</b>
embryonic stem	global war on terror	credit card	<b>social security trust</b>
tax relief	hate crimes law	nuclear option	<b>privatize social security</b>
illegal immigration	change hearts and minds	war in iraq	american free trade
date the time	global war on terrorism	middle class	central american free
boy scouts	class action fairness	african american	national wildlife refuge
hate crimes	committee on foreign relations	budget cuts	dependence on foreign oil
oil for food	deficit reduction bill	nuclear weapons	tax cuts for the wealthy
global war	boy scouts of america	checks and balances	vice president cheney
medical liability	repeal of the death tax	civil rights	arctic national wildlife
highway bill	highway trust fund	veterans health	bring our troops home
adult stem	action fairness act	cut medicaid	<b>social security privatization</b>
democratic leader	committee on commerce science	foreign oil	billion trade deficit
federal spending	cord blood stem	president plan	asian pacific american
tax increase	medical liability reform	gun violence	president bush took office

Other R: **personal accounts; social security reform; social security system**

Other D: **privatization plan; security trust; security trust fund; social security trust; privatize social security; social security privatization; privatization of social security; cut social security**

# Top Phrases: Foreign Policy

## Republicans: 2-word

stem cell  
natural gas  
death tax  
illegal aliens  
class action  
**war on terror**  
embryonic stem  
tax relief  
illegal immigration  
date the time  
boy scouts  
hate crimes  
**oil for food**  
**global war**  
medical liability  
highway bill  
adult stem

## Republicans: 3-word

embryonic stem cell  
hate crimes legislation  
adult stem cells  
**oil for food program**  
personal retirement accounts  
energy and natural resources  
**global war on terror**  
hate crimes law  
**change hearts and minds**  
**global war on terrorism**  
class action fairness  
committee on foreign relations  
deficit reduction bill  
boy scouts of america  
repeal of the death tax  
highway trust fund  
action fairness act

## Democrats: 2-word

private accounts  
trade agreement  
american people  
tax breaks  
trade deficit  
oil companies  
credit card  
nuclear option  
**war in iraq**  
middle class  
african american  
budget cuts  
**nuclear weapons**  
checks and balances  
civil rights  
veterans health  
cut medicaid

## Democrats: 3-word

**veterans health care**  
congressional black caucus  
**va health care**  
billion in tax cuts  
credit card companies  
security trust fund  
social security trust  
privatize social security  
american free trade  
central american free  
national wildlife refuge  
**dependence on foreign oil**  
tax cuts for the wealthy  
vice president cheney  
arctic national wildlife  
**bring our troops home**  
social security privatization

# Top Phrases: Fiscal Policy

## Republicans: 2-word

stem cell  
natural gas  
**death tax**  
illegal aliens  
class action  
war on terror  
embryonic stem

## tax relief

illegal immigration  
date the time  
boy scouts  
hate crimes  
oil for food  
global war  
medical liability  
highway bill  
adult stem  
democratic leader

## federal spending

## tax increase

Other R: **raise taxes; percent growth; increase taxes; growth rate; government spending; raising taxes; death tax repeal; million jobs created; percent growth rate**

Other D:

## Republicans: 3-word

embryonic stem cell  
hate crimes legislation  
adult stem cells  
oil for food program  
personal retirement accounts  
energy and natural resources  
global war on terror  
hate crimes law  
change hearts and minds  
global war on terrorism  
class action fairness  
committee on foreign relations

## deficit reduction bill

boy scouts of america

## repeal of the death tax

highway trust fund  
action fairness act  
committee on commerce science  
cord blood stem  
medical liability reform

## Democrats: 2-word

private accounts  
trade agreement  
american people

## tax breaks

trade deficit  
oil companies  
credit card  
nuclear option  
war in iraq  
middle class  
african american

## budget cuts

nuclear weapons  
checks and balances  
civil rights  
veterans health

## cut medicaid

foreign oil  
president plan  
gun violence

## Democrats: 3-word

veterans health care  
congressional black caucus  
va health care

## billion in tax cuts

credit card companies  
security trust fund  
social security trust  
privatize social security  
american free trade  
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national wildlife refuge  
dependence on foreign oil

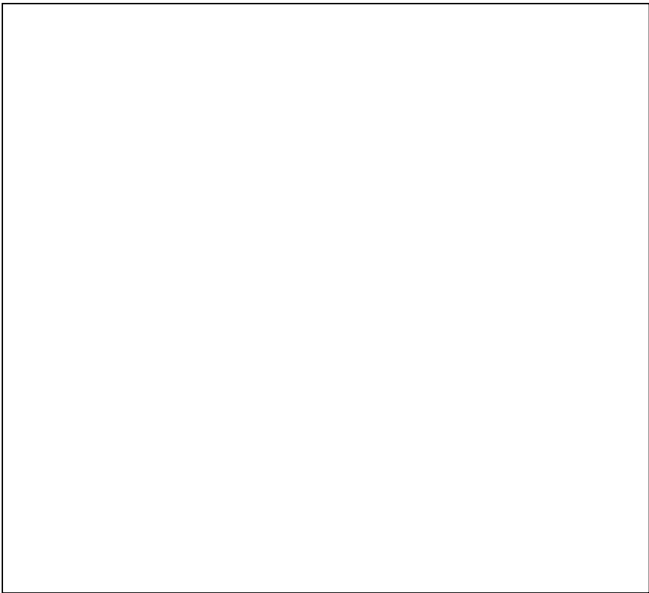
## tax cuts for the wealthy

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## Step 3: Apply to Newspaper

- Search 433 newspapers in online textual databases
- (70+% of daily circulation in US)
- Obtain phrase counts for 2005
- Ignore editorials, opinion, P stories, etc. (within limits of database)
- Estimate ideology from language: If newspaper were in Congress, how Republican would it be?













## Key Hypothesis

- Consumer demand greater for newspapers with slant similar to consumer ideology
- More Republican newspapers circulate more in more Republican zipcodes
- Find support for both of these in the data

Supply



- Hypothesis: Newspapers in more conservative markets have more conservative language
- Strong support for this hypothesis



# Ownership

- Hypothesis: Two newspapers with same owner have more similar slant than two newspapers with different owners
- Little support for this hypothesis



# Own r hip and Slant



# Incumbent Politician

- Hypothesis: Republican governor/Representative pushes newspaper to the right
- No support for this hypothesis

# Conclusion

- New measure of slant
- Significant demand for slant
- Firms respond strongly to consumer preferences
- Little evidence that owner identity matters
- Little evidence that party affiliation of incumbent politicians matters