

Be specific: Perceived media bias can lead to political action

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Politicians should be careful when they rail against mainstream news media. A study from North Carolina State University shows that perceived bias of media outlets can lead to increased political engagement – but only on specific issues. When there is a general perception of bias in the news media it actually results in increased apathy among citizens.

"With this study, we wanted to see whether people's perception of media [bias](#) affected their political participation, beyond voting," says Dr. Andrew Binder, an assistant professor of communication at NC State and co-author of a paper describing the research. "For example, if people think the [news media](#) do not reflect their views, are they less politically engaged? Or does it spur them to take political action?"
Answer: It depends.

In the first part of the study, researchers asked 485 survey respondents if they felt news media were biased against their views in general. The respondents were then asked a series of questions designed to capture the extent of each participant's political engagement – from working for a political campaign to writing a "letter to the editor."

The researchers found no direct evidence of a connection between perceived bias and political engagement, but did find some evidence that perceived bias undermined both people's trust in government and belief that they could influence government. Ultimately, this indirect influence also undermined their likelihood of engaging in political behavior.

In the second part of the study, researchers asked about a particularly controversial political issue. Specifically, 508 respondents were asked whether they felt mainstream media were biased against their views on stem cell research. They were then asked about the extent of their political engagement in regard to stem cell research.

On this specific issue, the researchers found a direct link between perceived media bias and an increase in political action.

"The people who perceived the most media bias on stem cell research were also the most willing to join a demonstration or take other political action," Binder says. "I think this shows that people are more likely to get involved in the political process if they do not feel their views are represented by the media on specific issues. That does not hold true for people who feel a general disconnect between their overarching views and the media.

"This has clear implications for [politicians](#) and interest groups. It seems to be far less effective for them to make sweeping claims that the media are universally biased than it is for them to attack the [media](#) on specific issues."

More information: The paper, "The Role of Perceptions of Media Bias in General and Issue-Specific Political Participation," is published in the May issue of *Mass Communication and Society*.

Provided by North Carolina State University

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