"This is about agenda setting," Hassell added. "Lots of studies have shown that what people perceive as the most important problems are based on what's being covered in the news."

Hassell's work on the study began in 2017 and embraced a number of research-gathering methods, including a survey of 6,000 journalists, election returns, Twitter data and a novel correspondence experiment design.

That work led Hassell and his team to conclude that what journalists choose to cover is dictated by a multitude of factors.

"There is an institutional set of norms that dictate newsworthiness," he said. "Lots of things drive those norms, but reporters' personal, ideological preferences about what they view as valuable is not one of them."

More information: Hans J. G. Hassell et al. There is no liberal media bias in which news stories political journalists choose to cover, Science Advances (2020). DOI: 10.1126/sciadv.aay9344