

Partisan Control, Media Bias, and Viewer Responses: Evidence from Berlusconi's Italy

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines whether and how viewers respond to changes in partisan bias in media news. We use data from Italy, where the main private television network is owned by Silvio Berlusconi, the leader of the center-right coalition, and the public television corporation is largely controlled by the ruling coalition. We first document that after the 2001 national elections, when the control of the government moved from the center-left to the center-right, news content on public television shifted to the right. Using individual survey data, we find robust evidence that viewers responded to these changes by modifying their choice of favorite news programs. On the one hand, right-leaning viewers increased their propensity to watch public channels which, even after the change, remained to the left of private channels. On the other hand, left-wing viewers reacted by switching from the main public channel to another public channel that was controlled by the left during both periods. We show that this behavioral response, which tended to shift ideological exposure to the left, significantly, though only partially, offset the movement of public news content to the right.

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