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Abstract

During the 2008 presidential election, the authors submitted letters to the editor at 100 major U.S. newspapers as part of a field experiment to test whether interest in the letter depended on which candidate the letter supported. The authors find, contrary to what charges of a liberal media bias would suggest, that newspapers expressed more interest in pro-McCain letters than pro-Obama letters. Furthermore, it was found that papers were most likely to be interested in letters supporting the candidate they did not endorse, a result that is consistent with the idea that editors seem to be using their gatekeeping powers to allow dissenting opinions to be heard.

Keywords

election campaigns, 2008 presidential election, Barack Obama, newspapers, letters to the editor, field experiments

In late July 2008, the *New York Times* rejected an op-ed submission by Senator and presumptive Republican presidential nominee John McCain. McCain's op-ed was a response piece to a July 14, 2008, op-ed written by Democratic presidential nominee Senator Barack Obama. In the following

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days, what in many situations would have been a routine and unnoticed op-ed rejection suddenly turned into a topic of national debate.

Almost immediately, the incident was picked up by numerous mainstream media sources.¹ CNN, *The Los Angeles Times*, Fox News, *The Washington Post*, and many more media outlets nationwide quickly reported on the occurrence. Whereas some news sources simply reported the series of events, other outlets were more direct in their articulation of what exactly spurred the controversy—the suspicion that a liberal media bias, rather than the merit of the two letters, was responsible for the decision to publish Obama’s letter and reject McCain’s submission.

A McCain spokesperson argued the conservative perspective on the *Times*’ decision by asserting that the choice “reveal[ed] where they’re coming from” (Kurtz, 2008), whereas the *Times*’ editor forcefully fought back by explaining that Obama’s submission “worked for me because it offered new information” [italics added] (Frederick, 2008). The clear implication of the *Times*’ response was that it was the content of the letters, not the political ideologies motivating the content, that ultimately led to McCain’s rejection and Obama’s acceptance. In the end, the McCain campaign submitted the candidate’s letter to the conservative-leaning online *Drudge Report*, where the full op-ed as well as the *Times*’ response were published.

This incident raises the question of how editors are using their power as gatekeepers. Editors receive numerous op-eds and letters to the editor each year. How do they decide which ones to accept? Do they systematically choose those that reflect their own preferences and opinions? Or do they allow those with dissenting opinions to be heard? In other words, do editors use their gatekeeping powers to promote bias or balance? Because campaigns often use the media to vie for voters’ attention, it is important to know how editors are using their gatekeeping powers and thus potentially affecting election outcomes.

To help better understand how editors are using their gatekeeping powers, we conducted a field experiment during the 2008 presidential election where we examined how the level of interest editors had in publishing a letter to the editor depended on which candidate the letter supported. We studied letters to the editor rather than op-eds for three reasons. First, as seen in the incident with McCain and Obama’s op-eds, most op-ed writers have the reputation and clout to get their opinions published in other outlets. Individuals submitting letters to the editor do not enjoy the same prestige. Thus, if editors are using their gatekeeping powers to suppress opinions they do not agree with, they are likely to have a bigger impact on individuals writing letters to the editor, who will not otherwise have their opinions heard. Second, the number of letters being submitted to editors is quite large. By the early 1990s the

majority of newspapers reported receiving thousands of letters per year (Hynds, 1991). Because the sheer volume of letters to the editor requires them to exercise gatekeeping, it is important to see how they are using those gatekeeping powers. Finally, for more practical reasons, we use letters to the editors because we do not have the reputation necessary to have an op-ed that we might write be taken seriously.

The rest of the article proceeds as follows. In the section *Research on Letters to the Editors*, we discuss how our study builds on the previous research looking at letters to the editor. Section *Experimental Research Design* reviews our research design and is followed by the *Results* section. We find, contrary to what the charges of liberal media bias might suggest, that newspapers actually expressed more interest in pro-McCain letters. Furthermore, we find that papers were most likely to be interested in letters supporting the candidate they did not endorse, a result that is consistent with the idea that editors seem to be using their gatekeeping powers to allow dissenting opinions to be heard.

Research on Letters to the Editors

Previous research has shown that letters to the editor are an important part of the newspaper. Editors rank them as one of the most-read items and about half of readers indicate reading the letters to the editor (Hynds, 1994). There is some evidence that letters to the editor may even affect the platform that some politicians use in elections (Converse, Clausen, & Miller, 1965; Volgy, Krigbaum, Langan, & Mosher, 1977).

Despite the potential importance of letters to the editor, research on the subject is still relatively sparse. Most of what has been written on the topic can be divided into three general categories: studies of who writes, studies of what is written, and studies of how editors use their gatekeeping powers to determine which letters get published. Early studies of “who writes” showed that letter writers were not necessarily odd or out of the main stream but actually using the letters as a forum for serious discussion (Buell, 1975; Volgy et al., 1977). More recently, Hart (2001) found that letter writers were older and more politically engaged than their counterparts who did not write. Cooper, Knotts, and Haspel (2009) used the North Carolina state voter file to learn basic demographic information about the writers of published letters in the major North Carolina papers and found that females, African Americans, and younger people were all underrepresented.

Cooper et al. (2009) are also among the few who have analyzed the content of letters. In their study of eight North Carolina newspapers between 2002 and 2005, they found that nearly half of the letters dealt with national

politics, a third focused on local politics, and the remaining 17% dealt with state politics. Perrin and Vaisey (2008) also looked at the scope of issues addressed in the letters, whether they were local or national and related this to the tone and argumentative style used in the letter. They found that local issues were more reasoned and more likely to use conciliatory tones compared with those dealing with issues beyond the local context. Finally, Perrin (2005) looked at the content of letters written just before and just after the September 11 attacks in 2001 and found increased attention to issues dealing with authoritarianism in the postattack period relative to the preattack period.

The third category of studies has looked at whether gatekeeping biases the content of published letters. The evidence from these studies is mixed. Renfro (1979), studying the letters received and published at one paper, found little support for the idea that gatekeeping introduces bias. Similarly, Sigelman and Walkosz (1992) concluded that published letters to the editor reflected the general dimensions of public opinion in Arizona. However, in contrast, Grey and Brown (1970) found evidence of significant bias due to editorial gatekeeping. Thus, although a few studies have explored how editorial gatekeeping might affect the types of letters published, the existing evidence is far from conclusive.

To better understand this issue of gatekeeping, we conducted a field experiment where we randomized across newspapers whether they received a letter supporting John McCain or Barack Obama in the 2008 Presidential election. The advantage of this approach over the previous studies is that it allowed us to hold everything else about the letter constant. As we discuss in more detail below, everything about the two treatment versions of the submitted letters was constant except for the name of the candidate whom the letter supported. Thus, if letters supporting one of the candidates were more likely to be published than letters supporting the other candidate, we could infer that this was attributable to the candidate support expressed in the letter rather than to the letter's content. Although we are not the first to conduct a field experiment using the media (e.g., Gerber, Karlan, & Bergan, 2006; Panagopoulos & Green, 2008), we are, to our knowledge, the first to run a field experiment on letters to the editor. We turn now to describing our experimental design.

Experimental Research Design

The Sample

In our study, we limited our sample to the set of newspapers with a daily circulation of more than 100,000, as listed in the 2005 edition of *Bacon's Newspaper*

Directory. This initial subject pool consisted of 116 newspapers nationwide, but was then narrowed down to our final sample size of 100 because of factors that mandated exclusion of certain papers including bankruptcy of the newspaper since 2005, papers printed primarily in a foreign language, or data coding problems such as returned to sender submissions of letters.

We limited our study to larger papers for two reasons. First, the type of editorial gatekeeping that is motivating this study has much more potential to occur at larger papers, which have to be more selective due to the larger number of submissions they receive (Hynds, 1991). Second, recall that in response to the rejection of McCain's op-ed at the *New York Times*, claims were made in top Republican circles and elsewhere that this incident was representative of how unfairly the larger national media treats Republican candidates (Byrne, 2008; Limbaugh, 2008). It seems reasonable to think that these accusations were made with the major news sources in mind as opposed to local or small-town publications.

Once we had chosen the sample, a search was undertaken to identify contact information for each of the 100 papers used in the analysis. Although the majority of the used contact information was found on newspapers' Web sites, Bacon's directory was used to fill in missing gaps in information.

The Treatment Manipulation

For each of the papers, we randomized whether the letter to the editor they received was pro-Obama or pro-McCain. One of the advantages of focusing on candidates in the letters to the editors is that the majority of papers, 86% in our sample, endorsed one of the two candidates. Thus, we know each paper's preferred candidate and are able to test whether papers are more likely to be interested in letters supporting their preferred candidate.

The full text of the letter we submitted is given in Figure 1. Because we wanted to isolate the effect of supporting a particular candidate, the letters were designed to be flexible enough that the only change in content was the change in candidate name.² We also designed our letter to maximize the chances of being published by paying close attention to the length and topic of the letter. For length, the vast majority of newspapers' Web sites recommend that submissions be within a certain word limit to increase the chances of being published. Although specific limits varied, 150 words was a very common constraint, and only a small number of papers set a limit lower than this, so our letters were kept under this limit.

As for topic, the submission instructions of numerous newspapers clearly indicated that they were most interested in publishing timely letters to the

Dear Editor,

As a frequent reader of your paper, I'm writing to ask that you stop compromising accuracy in the name of "balance," especially with respect to your recent coverage of the economic crisis. One candidate's stance—**[Obama / McCain]**'s—is legitimately and factually better, and you shouldn't shrink from reporting that merely to appear balanced.

The economic crisis is very real to me as a graduating college student looking for a job this year. It is obvious that **[Obama / McCain]** is absolutely the right man to set our country back on track because of his clearly articulated economic plan for the future, his first-rate economic advisers, and most importantly, his genuine and natural leadership abilities that can unify Washington in action. Sometimes one option really is just better than the others. As a respected and influential newspaper, you should not be afraid to report that.

Sincerely,
Emily Ross

Figure 1. Text of letter sent to editors

Note: Bolded items were assigned randomly across letters based on the treatment group.

editor, sometimes even explicitly stating this. For example, the *New York Times* letter to the editor Web page stated that "letters for publication . . . must refer to an article that has appeared within the last seven days." Because of this common requirement, the economic crisis of the fall of 2008 was selected as the topic of the letter because almost every major paper in the country was running numerous articles about different aspects of the economy during October 2008.

Finally, most newspapers required a phone number for verification purposes. Because the phone number we provided had an area code that was local to the researchers but outside of the newspapers' markets (except in the case of the national papers), we identified the writer as a student to provide a realistic cover story for this discrepancy. One potential downside of identifying the writer as a student is that editors may have taken our letter less seriously. However, because the identity of the letter writer was held constant across the two treatments, we have no reason to believe it affected the measure of interest: the relative treatment of the pro-Obama versus pro-McCain letters.

Submitting the Letters and Measuring the Response

The letters to the editors were submitted using the alias Emily Ross. To add credibility to the submissions, a valid voicemail box and e-mail address were

Table 1. Randomization Checks

Variable	McCain Letter	Obama Letter	p Value
Circulation (in units of 10,000)	34.5	26.7	.25
Unemployment rate in state (%)	5.7	5.7	.96
Unemployment rate in metro area (%)	5.4	5.6	.45
2004 Two-party democratic presidential vote share; state-level (%)	51	50	.60
Paper located in South (%)	38	33	.67
Population in designated market area/city of target area	2,195,569	1,907,136	.69
Price of annual subscription to the newspaper (\$)	188.03	192.83	.70
Price for ad buy in paper on most expensive day; typically Sunday (\$)	462.47	421.97	.50

also created using the alias. After each newspaper was randomly assigned into one of the two treatments, the appropriate letters were submitted via email and online submission forms on Monday, October 20, and Tuesday, October 21, 2008.

Table 1 presents the results of randomization checks for balance in the characteristics of the newspaper outlets that received pro-Obama and pro-McCain letters using data from several sources, including the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Dave Leip's *Atlas of Presidential Elections* (Leip, 2009), and the *Editor & Publisher International Yearbook* (Maddux, 2008). Although there are differences in the means of these observed characteristics across the two treatments, none of the differences reach statistical significance at any of the standard levels. The only variable that comes close to reaching statistical significance is *circulation*. This is potentially troublesome because circulation is likely to be related to the number of letters that are submitted to the editor and therefore expected to affect the likelihood that a paper is interested in our letter. To be sure this is not driving our results, *circulation* is one of the variables we control for in the analyses we run.

The dependent variable in all of the analyses we run is whether the newspaper was interested in publishing the letter. We consider a newspaper to be interested in publishing the letter if it either tried to contact the alias for verification purposes or if it in fact published the letter. The main reason our dependent variable is interest in the letter rather than publication of the letter is that when papers contacted for verification purposes and asked whether we lived in the area, we

honestly reported that we did not. Because this is almost universally used as a criterion for publication, the letter was not published in these outlets. The problem is that we do not know how these papers would have acted if we had in fact lived in the local area. Because some papers published the letter without contacting us for verification, we chose to focus on whether papers expressed interest in publishing the letter because it was comparable across papers.

Another justification for including verification attempts in measuring the outcome is that it is simply too costly for the papers to verify the authenticity of every submitted letter, so newspapers generally only spend their human resources on verification if they are seriously considering publishing the submission. This reasoning is supported by explicit statements on the Web sites of numerous papers in our sample including, for example, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Kansas City Star*, the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, and many more. Such statements were generally to the same effect as that found in the *San Francisco Chronicle's* confirmation email that stated, "We will call to verify the authenticity of your letter if it is selected for publication." Therefore, phone calls, emails, or other modes of communication by the newspapers attempting to verify the authenticity of the submitted letters were considered to be strong indications that the newspaper was seriously interested in publishing the letter.

Of the 100 papers we submitted letters to, 20 contacted the alias seeking information for verification. Because some papers publish letters without contacting the writer for verification of authorship, a manual search of the approximately 80 remaining papers' Web sites was undertaken in the window starting 10 days after the letters had been submitted to verify whether or not the letter to the editor had been published. If the submitted letter was not found on the site using the paper's search engine, the paper was coded as not having interest in the submitted letter. In these online searches, five papers that had not contacted us for verification purposes were found to have published the letter and were thus appropriately coded.

After these efforts, the status of 21 letters was still unknown because of insufficient Web site search engines. For these papers, further efforts were made through direct phone and email contact to determine whether the paper had published the submitted letter. One additional publication was found in this stage. Through these comprehensive efforts we were able to identify that 26 of the 100 papers had either published the letter or tried to verify its authenticity.

Regression Model

Because the dependent variable is binary, taking the value of 1 if the newspaper was interested in publishing the letter and the value of 0 otherwise, we use probit

regression models throughout. For each set of analyses, we run and present regressions both with and without the following control variables: the newspaper's circulation numbers measured in units of 10,000 and the 2008 level of unemployment in the metro area where the newspaper is headquartered. As mentioned previously, we control for the circulation numbers because papers with larger circulations are likely to have more letter submissions and are therefore less likely to be interested in our letter. Similarly, we control for the level of unemployment in the area because our letter specifically raises concerns about finding employment. If the editors try to choose letters that deal with issues pertinent to their readers, we might expect newspapers in locations with higher levels of unemployment to be more likely to be interested in our letter.

To get at the substantive significance of the results, we report the predicted probability of the newspaper being interested in the letter along with the estimated coefficients and standard errors. For the continuous variables, we report the change in predicted probability of the newspaper being interested in the letter when increasing the value of that variable from the mean value to one standard deviation above the mean when holding the other variables at their mean values. For the binary variables, we report the change in the predicted probability of the newspaper being interested in the letter between those receiving the different treatments while holding the other variables at their mean values.

Results

We begin by looking at the average treatment effect of receiving a pro-McCain versus a pro-Obama letter. Of the 49 papers receiving the pro-McCain letter 16 (33%) were interested in publishing the letter, whereas of the 51 newspapers that received pro-Obama letters, only 10 (20%) were interested in publishing the letter.³ The regression results for the average treatment effect of receiving a pro-McCain letter are presented in Table 2. The primary result of interest is the positive coefficient on the variable *pro-McCain letter*, which indicates that the newspapers were more likely to be interested in publishing pro-McCain letters to the editor. The magnitude of this effect is quite large, suggesting that papers were between 13 and 16 percentage points more likely to be interested in the pro-McCain letter. Furthermore, the difference is statistically significant at the .05 level when controlling for local unemployment numbers and the paper's circulation numbers (column 2), but not statistically significant without the control variables (column 1, $p = .14$). The differential treatment in favor of the pro-McCain letters was surprising, even if it is only statistically significant when controlling for the circulation and unemployment numbers, because the

Table 2. The Effect of Candidate Support on Interest in Letter to the Editor

Dependent Variable = Interested in Publishing Letter Independent Variable	Coefficient (Standard Error) [Change in Probability]	Coefficient (Standard Error) [Change in Probability]
Pro-McCain letter	0.41 (0.27) [13.0%]	0.58** (0.29) [16.3%]
Circulation (in units of 10,000)		-0.028** (0.013) [-16.4%]
Unemployment rate in metro area		-0.009 (0.13) [-0.3%]
Intercept	-0.86** (0.20)	-0.23 (0.75)
N	100	100
Pseudo R ²	.02	.09
Log-likelihood	-56.2	-51.9

Note: The dependent variable is a binary variable that takes the value of 1 if the newspaper either tried to contact the alias for verification purposes or if it published the letter and 0 otherwise. Standard errors are given in parentheses. The estimated predicted probabilities are given in brackets. For the binary variables, the predicted probabilities report the change in the predicted probability when the value of the variable goes from 0 to 1 while holding other variables constant. For the continuous variables, the predicted probabilities report the change in predicted probability when increasing the value of that variable from the mean value to one standard deviation above the mean.

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$.

discussion surrounding the McCain–Obama op-ed incident had centered on whether Obama was treated better or whether both candidates were treated equally. The idea that McCain might receive more favorable treatment was not part of the discussion.

As for the control variables, the results show that the local level of unemployment had little to no effect on editors' decisions about our letter. In contrast, the negative, statistically significant coefficient on the variable *circulation* indicates that papers with more circulation were, as expected, less likely to be interested in publishing our letters. Again, most likely this captures the fact that papers with larger circulation numbers are more likely to receive a greater number of submissions and therefore less likely to publish any given letter they receive.

Up to this point we have simply looked at the average treatment effect across all papers. However, one of the advantages of using letters in support of the candidates is that we also know which, if any, candidate the paper endorsed. This is important because it affords us the opportunity to see how papers were acting relative to their endorsement decision. If editors were using their gatekeeping powers to skew the content of the published letters toward their favored candidate, we would expect to see papers being more likely to be interested in letters supporting the candidate they endorsed. If,

Table 3. Interest in Letter to the Editor by Newspaper Endorsement and Candidate Supported

Dependent Variable = Interested in Publishing Letter Independent Variable	Coefficient (Standard Error) [Change in Probability]	Coefficient (Standard Error) [Change in Probability]
Endorsed McCain and received the pro-McCain letter	0.42 (0.50) [14.9%]	0.38 (0.54) [13.0%]
Endorsed Obama and received the pro-McCain letter	0.56 (0.37) [19.1%]	0.67* (0.39) [21.8%]
Endorsed McCain and received the pro-Obama letter	0.77* (0.44) [28.1%]	0.61 (0.46) [21.2%]
Circulation (in units of 10,000)		-0.024* (0.013) [-15.5%]
Unemployment rate in metro area		-0.04 (0.13) [-1.4%]
Intercept	-1.02** (0.30)	7.79** (3.96)
N	86	86
Pseudo R ²	.04	.09
Log-likelihood	-49.1	-46.3

Note: The dependent variable is a binary variable that takes the value of 1 if the newspaper either tried to contact the alias for verification purposes or if it published the letter and 0 otherwise. Standard errors are given in parentheses. The estimated predicted probabilities are given in brackets. For the binary variables, the predicted probabilities report the change in the predicted probability when the value of the variable goes from 0 to 1 while holding other variables constant. For the continuous variables, the predicted probabilities report the change in predicted probability when increasing the value of that variable from the mean value to one standard deviation above the mean.

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$.

however, editors were using their gatekeeping powers to provide an outlet for other views, we might expect them to actually be more likely to be interested in letters supporting the candidate they did *not* endorse.

Among the 100 papers in our sample, 86 endorsed one of the two candidates. The remaining 14 either had a policy of not endorsing candidates in any election or simply chose not to endorse a candidate in the 2008 election. Using the sample of the 86 papers that endorsed one of the candidates, we created dummy variables that divided the newspapers into four groups: endorsed McCain and received the pro-McCain letter, endorsed McCain and received the pro-Obama letter, endorsed Obama and received the pro-McCain letter, and endorsed Obama and received the pro-Obama letter. Table 3 reports the results of probit regressions where the dependent variable is again whether the newspaper was interested in publishing the letter, but now the independent variables are the dummy variables for the different groups. The baseline or omitted group is those papers that endorsed Obama and received the pro-Obama letter.

Table 4. Newspaper Balancing Letters to the Editor With Candidate Endorsement

Dependent Variable = Interested in Publishing Letter Independent Variable	Coefficient (Standard Error) [Change in Probability]	Coefficient (Standard Error) [Change in Probability]
Letter supporting candidate NOT endorsed by paper	0.49 (0.30) [15.8%]	0.54* (0.31) [16.1%]
Circulation (in units of 10,000)		-0.69*** (0.30) [-15.7%]
Unemployment rate in metro area		-0.84*** (0.31) [-2.1%]
Intercept	-0.88*** (0.24)	7.49*** (3.71)
N	86	86
Pseudo R ²	.03	.08
Log-likelihood	-49.6	-46.7

Note: The dependent variable is a binary variable that takes the value of 1 if the newspaper either tried to contact the alias for verification purposes or if it published the letter and 0 otherwise. Standard errors are given in parentheses. The estimated predicted probabilities are given in brackets. For the binary variables, the predicted probabilities report the change in the predicted probability when the value of the variable goes from 0 to 1 while holding other variables constant. For the continuous variables, the predicted probabilities report the change in predicted probability when increasing the value of that variable from the mean value to one standard deviation above the mean.

* $p < .10$. *** $p < .05$.

Again, the coefficient on *unemployment* rate is neither statistically nor substantively significant, whereas the coefficient on *circulation* is negative, substantively important, and statistically significant at the .05 level. The positive coefficients on the remaining three dummy variables indicate that pro-Obama letters sent to newspapers that endorsed Obama were the group of letters that received the least amount of interest. What is striking about the results is the fact that the largest two coefficients are for the papers that received letters supporting the candidate they did *not* endorse: *endorsed Obama and received the pro-McCain letter* and *endorsed McCain and received the pro-Obama letter*. In other words, the letters that went against the endorsement decision of the newspaper were the ones that received the most interest.

Because the key distinction seems to be whether or not the letter favored the candidate endorsed by the paper, we ran a third set of probit regressions to look specifically at how letters that ran counter to the editorial endorsement decision were treated. The results of these regressions are given in Table 4 and show that papers were about 16 percentage points more likely to be interested in letters supporting the candidate who they did *not* endorse. When the control variables are included, the difference is statistically

significant at the .10 level. When the circulation numbers are not controlled for, the difference just misses reaching the .10 level of statistical significance ($p = .105$). Although these results are not overwhelming, they are evidence consistent with the idea that during the 2008 presidential elections, newspapers were using their letter to the editor page to provide dissenting opinion that ran counter to the paper's announced position.

Conclusion

Our experiment was motivated in part by the July 2008 incident in which the *New York Times* published an op-ed piece by Senator Obama, yet asked Senator McCain to resubmit a response op-ed that he had authored. Although our experiment does not allow us to comment on this specific event, we do have evidence that in the related case of letters to the editor, pro-McCain letters actually got more, not less interest. Part of this increased interest in pro-McCain letters seems to be related to the fact that papers were more likely to be interested in letters that ran counter to their endorsement decision. Because the majority of newspapers endorsed Barack Obama (in our sample 70% had endorsed Obama), it is not surprising that pro-McCain letters were more likely to be published.

The larger question is what do these results imply about the fairness and objectivity of the national newspaper media? Are editors using their gatekeeping powers to bias their papers' content to match their preferences? In this regard, our most important finding was the fact that newspapers were more likely to be interested in letters that supported the candidates the paper did *not* endorse. This finding suggests that editors were not using their gatekeeping power to promote their own preferences, but to the contrary, to allow an outlet for dissenting opinions. This suggests that papers may be fairer than they are often given credit for.

Although our results are consistent with the idea that editors are using their gatekeeping powers to promote balance, our experiment does not allow us to identify the mechanism by which that occurs. In particular, there are at least two potential mechanisms that could explain our results. First, it may simply be that newspapers are trying to publish the same number of pro-McCain and pro-Obama letters (i.e., a 50/50 rule) and newspapers that endorse Obama receive more pro-Obama letters. Second, newspapers may be consciously using the letter to the editor section to provide an outlet for dissenting opinion for what is covered in the rest of the paper. We cannot differentiate between these two explanations, but both stories suggest that editors are not using their gatekeeping powers over letter to the editor pages

to systematically promote their own views. Future work should try to understand why papers act in this way.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1. See for example:

CNN.com. (2008). *New York Times rejects McCain essay*. CNN Politics Online. Retrieved December 15, 2008, from <http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/07/21/mccain.nyt/index.html>

Drudgereport.com. (2008). *NYT rejects McCain's editorial; should "mirror" Obama*. Retrieved December 15, 2008, from <http://www.drudgereport.com/flashnym.htm>

Foxnews.com. (2008). *McCain campaign: New York Times blocked op-ed response to Obama*. Retrieved December 15, 2008, from <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/elections/2008/07/21/mccain-campaign-says-new-york-times-blocked-op-ed-response-to-obama/>

2. Because the literature has sometimes alleged that bias is hidden in the extent of positivity or negativity directed toward a certain candidate, we also varied the tone of the letter by randomizing whether moderating adjectives and descriptive phrases were included in the letter. The idea underlying this additional treatment manipulation was to see if perhaps an equal number of pro-McCain and pro-Obama letters were selected, but that a bias came through in the strength of support expressed in each selected letter. The letter with the more moderate tone only included the following changes from what is given in Box 1.

1. In the first paragraph: "One candidate's stance—(Obama/McCain)'s . . ." was changed to, "Sometimes one candidate's stance—in this case, (Obama/McCain)'s . . ."
2. In the second paragraph: "(Obama/McCain) is absolutely the right man . . ." was changed to, "(Obama/McCain) is the right man . . ."

3. In the second paragraph: "It is obvious . . ." was changed to, "It is obvious to me . . ."

Given how small these changes are, that initial analysis of these results yielded little insight into our question of gatekeeping and that this treatment was orthogonal to the main manipulation, further analysis in this article is restricted to the primary manipulation of partisan support.

3. The 16 papers interested in the McCain letter were the *Austin American-Statesman*, the *Blade* (Toledo), the *Columbus Dispatch*, the *Contra Costa Times* (CA), the *Dayton Daily News*, the *Des Moines Register*, the *Honolulu Advertiser*, the *Miami Herald*, the *Morning Call* (Allentown), the *Pioneer Press* (St. Paul), the *Press Register* (Mobile AL), the *Seattle Times*, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, the *Star-Ledger* (NJ), the *Sun Times* (Chicago), and the *Oregonian*. The 10 papers interested in the Obama letter were the *Birmingham News*, the *Charlotte Observer*, the *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis), the *Knoxville News Sentinel* (TN), the *Patriot News* (Harrisburg), the *Post Gazette* (Pittsburgh), the *Post and Courier* (Charleston), the *Spokesman-Review* (Spokane), the *State* (Columbia, SC), and the *Tulsa World* (OK). As this list makes clear, it was many of the papers from relatively smaller cities that expressed interest in our letter. This is as would be expected because larger newspapers no doubt publish a much smaller overall proportion of submitted letters (Hynds, 1991). In the analyses we control for circulation of the paper to ensure that this is not driving any of the results.

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Bios

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