

## Politicians, News Media, and the Culture War (joint with Shakked Noy, MIT)

### Abstract

We show that US politicians' campaign-trail appeals focus on economic issues such as taxes, jobs, and healthcare, while cable news coverage focuses on cultural issues such as crime, race, and gender. Politicians are more likely to win elections when they emphasize economic issues over cultural issues, but media outlets attract greater viewership when they cover cultural rather than economic issues. To explain these differences, we develop a framework in which voteshare-maximizing politicians benefit relatively more from poaching voters from their competitor ("persuasion") and audience-maximizing news outlets benefit relatively more from activating people who would otherwise not consume news ("mobilization"). We show empirically that economic content is better for persuasion and cultural content is better for mobilization, rationalizing differences in usage and performance between politicians and cable news channels. Finally, we show that voters in areas with exogenously higher cable news exposure assign greater importance to cultural issues and local politicians respond by supplying more cultural appeals. We link the rapid growth in voters' polarization on cultural issues to changes in the media landscape in the 1990s