

NISKANEN C E N T E R

LOCAL BEATS, NATIONAL CONSEQUENCES

The Link Between Local News and American Democratic Health

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Key Takeaways

- The federal structure of American democracy disperses power across national, state, and local levels. To function properly, citizens must be able to hold politicians accountable within each of these levels.
- News media are essential to democratic accountability. To effectively hold politicians accountable, voters need ready access to political information relevant to the office in question and are reliant upon the news media to provide it.
- As local news has withered, so too has citizens' ability to monitor the effectiveness of state and local officials. This has been a key driver in the "nationalization" of politics, which refers to voters only drawing on preferences regarding national politics to evaluate politicians and policy at all levels of the federal system.
- We must reinvigorate local news in order to make it more likely that our political ecosystem matches the assumptions that our federal republic was built on. To do so, it will likely take a shift in philanthropic priorities as well as policy intervention.

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One year shy of celebrating its centennial, *The Caroline Progress* closed down. The rural Virginia weekly newspaper had long been a center of community life, but by 2018 it had ceased to be profitable. Residents expressed sadness over the loss and reported a diminished sense of pride in their local community. One resident said of the newspaper closure, “I think there is a loss of the quality of life, with people not being as close because you lost the paper.”¹ Indeed, when the local paper goes away, so does coverage of the things that are common and unique to a given community, like local schools and sports teams, city government, the county commission, and the behavior of local legislators. Communities, in other words, are deprived of coverage of the kinds of things that most people care about but have no realistic way of learning about short of obsessively attending public meetings all the time. These are also the kind of communal concerns that can draw people out of their private lives and instill the traits of public-spirited citizenship. What tends to replace professional local journalism are ill-informed, highly charged, emotional posts — too often from cranks — on the local Facebook page. There is some evidence that the demise of *The Caroline Progress* had electoral implications, as well. For the first time in years, candidates for county sheriff and mayor of the largest town in the county ran unopposed.

The story of *The Caroline Progress* has become a familiar one. Shifts in the media landscape in recent decades have left an increasing number of Americans living in “news deserts,” or counties without a local paper.² Since 2004, approximately 2,100 newspapers — nearly one in four — have gone out of print, leaving well over 1,300 communities without local news outlets. Hundreds more have reduced their coverage to the point that they’ve become what researchers characterize as “ghost newspapers” — papers that cling to life but are too financially hobbled to serve any worthwhile democratic function.³ Nearly all of the others have scaled back as well, just not as far.⁴ This trend has certainly been consequential for these local communities, but the decline of local news nationwide has also deprived American democracy of one of its key support structures, and it has fueled the nationalization and, by extension, polarization, of our politics.⁵ Finding a way to revitalize local media could be a big part of the solution to revitalizing our politics.

The problem of nationalized politics

The nationalization of elections and public opinion in recent years has upended a key plank of the logic undergirding American democracy. A central premise behind our political system is that geographic interests are important and deserve representation at the local, state, and national levels. Indeed, our governing institutions are overwhelmingly geographic in nature, purposefully designed to accommodate variation in local interests throughout our spacious republic.

1. Nick Mathews, “Life in a News Desert: The Perceived Impact of a Newspaper Closure on Community Members,” *Journalism* (Sept. 2020).

2. For more information on news deserts, see: Penelope Abernathy, “News Deserts and Ghost Newspapers: Will Local News Survive?” Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media, School of Media and Journalism, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2020.

3. Brier Dudley, “News Deserts, Democracy, Discord and the Free Press,” *Seattle Times*, Jan. 22, 2021.

4. Clara Hendrickson, “Local Journalism in Crisis: Why America Must Revive Its Local Newsrooms,” The Brookings Institute, Nov. 12, 2019; Abernathy, “News Deserts and Ghosts Newspapers;” Abernathy, “The Expanding News Desert,” Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media, School of Media and Journalism, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2018.

5. Daniel J. Hopkins, *The Increasingly United States: How and Why American Political Behavior Nationalized* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

Foremost among these geographically-based institutions is our federal administrative and representation structure. A core assumption of federalism is that state and local peculiarities ought to be reflected in government. As distinguished law professor Richard C. Schragger puts it, concern for the local is “deeply embedded in the intellectual, cultural, and constitutional history of the United States.”⁶ Our system accommodated this assumption in two ways. First, as James Madison emphasized in Federalist 37, the U.S. Constitution established a government that wasn’t strictly national, but of “mixed character” in that it depended on and explicitly preserved essential roles for geographically-based levels of subnational government.⁷ These units – states, counties, municipalities – are explicitly dedicated to serving local interests. In the debate over ratifying the Constitution, Madison and Alexander Hamilton’s Anti-Federalist opponents concurred on the need for this institutional design. One writer, who went by the pseudonym “Federal Farmer,” argued that “the strength of the government, and the confidence of the people, must be collected principally in the local assemblies.”⁸ Another wrote, “It is only by protecting local concerns that the interest of the whole is preserved.”⁹ Second, even at the level of the national government in Washington, important roles were carved out for local interests. The Founders assumed that members of Congress ought to bring their diverse local perspectives to bear in determining which policies to support or oppose.¹⁰ As Madison wrote in Federalist 56, “The representatives of each State will not only bring with them a considerable knowledge of its laws, and a local knowledge of their respective districts, but will probably in all cases have been members...of the State legislature, where all the local information and interests of the State are assembled, and from whence they may easily be conveyed by a very few hands into the legislature of the United States.”¹¹ Other institutions similarly carve out protected space for local- and state-based interests to play a prominent role in our national government. Single-member districts – as opposed to alternative arrangements like proportional representation – privilege the local by allowing members to represent the particular concerns and needs of a given geographic area. And, of course, the Electoral College, rather than a national popular vote, decides who will reside in the White House.

Yet for most voters, localized considerations now take a back seat – if they have a seat at all – to nationalized considerations that have come to fully define partisan attachments. If you know how a voter feels about the president, you have enough information to make a very good guess about how they view their U.S. senator, their U.S. House member, and even their state legislators.¹² And if Americans go to the ballot box thinking solely about Trump or Biden, they are not thinking about the conditions of their local community. Simply put, in a federal system such as ours, nationalization is a troubling development that undermines the democratic health of society.

6. Richard C. Schragger, “The Limits of Localism,” *Michigan Law Review* 100:2 (2001): fn29.

7. James Madison, Federalist 39, 1787.

8. Federal Farmer, “An Additional Number of Letters to the Republican,” Jan. 8, 1788.

9. Agrippa, *Massachusetts Gazette*, 18 Dec. 1787.

10. William G. Howell and Terry M. Moe, *Relic: How Our Constitution Undermines Effective Government – and Why We Need a More Powerful Presidency* (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

11. Madison, Federalist 56, 1787.

12. Alan I. Abramowitz and Steven Webster, “The rise of negative partisanship and the nationalization of U.S. elections in the 21st century,” *Electoral Studies* 41 (2016): 12-22; Steven Rogers, “National Forces in State Legislative Elections,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 667: 1 (2016): 207-225.

In particular, the nationalization of American politics has altered partisan competition and fueled geographic polarization. Democrats are dominant in many urban areas but have seen their support collapse in rural parts of the country. Meanwhile, Republicans are nearly extinct in cities, though they are thriving in the countryside. For Democrats, this situation is a problem because the clustering of their voters in certain states and cities makes it difficult for them to translate their now routine national majorities into governing majorities in Washington and many statehouses. This status quo is also suboptimal for Republicans because, among other things, it leaves them all but absent in the country's most dynamic and productive economic, cultural, and technological centers.¹³

Even more distressing, nationalization has led to governance that is increasingly unresponsive and unaccountable, which poses significant problems for the legitimacy of American federal democracy.¹⁴ Regarding unresponsiveness, politicians navigating a polarized and nationalized electorate are incentivized not toward catering to the needs of their median constituent, but rather to the culture-war litmus tests that animate primary voters, producing a polarization feedback loop.¹⁵ Most problematic, though, from the standpoint of democratic theory, is that voters whose heads only harbor thoughts about national politics aren't able to hold non-national politicians accountable for their performance in office.

Local media's role in the American political system

While multiple factors have fueled the nationalization of American politics, our nationalized media culture deserves much of the blame. It wasn't always like this.

A robust local press has long been recognized as an essential support structure for a healthy liberal democracy. By local press, we mean news organizations whose stories are primarily of interest to geographic areas spanning a single state or more limited areas. Even coverage of federal programs, such as, for example, the *Montana Standard's* reporting on the Environmental Protection Agency's progress cleaning up Superfund sites in and around Butte, Mont., qualifies as local news provided that it pertains to events taking place nearby.

As Thomas Jefferson famously noted, "the only safeguard of the public liberty" is the citizenry's ability to keep tabs on government and hold it accountable. Performing that role, however, requires that the people have access to "full information of [governmental] affairs thro' the channel of the public papers...The basis of our governments being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment

13. Jonathan A. Rodden, *Why Cities Lose: The Deep Roots of the Urban-Rural Political Divide* (New York: Basic Books, 2019); Kal Munis and Robert P. Saldin, "Gone Country: Why Democrats Need to Play in Rural America and How They Can Do It Again," Niskanen Center, 6 Mar. 2021; Steven Teles, "Can Republicans Capitalize on Urban Political Opportunity? A Lifelong Democrat Suggests How the GOP Can Become Viable in American Cities," *City Journal*, Mar. 2021.

14. Steven Rogers, "Electoral Accountability for State Legislative Roll Calls and Ideological Representation," *American Political Science Review* 111:3 (2017): 555-571.

15. Jonathan Rauch and Ray La Raja, "Too Much Democracy is Bad for Democracy," *The Atlantic*, Dec. 2019.

to prefer the latter.”¹⁶ That assessment of the free press’s importance in a representative democracy was sufficiently widespread among the founding generation that laws were enacted that effectively subsidized journalism by, for example, eliminating postage fees for the distribution of in-county newspapers.¹⁷ A generation later, Alexis de Tocqueville similarly observed that “the sovereignty of the people and freedom of the press” go hand-in-hand. The country’s proliferation of newspapers “makes political life circulate in all sections of this vast territory. Its eye, always open, constantly lays bare the secret springs of politics and forces public men to come in turn to appear before the court of opinion.”¹⁸

In the days of Jefferson and Tocqueville, of course, there was nothing like the national media we have today. When they spoke of the press, they were referring to what we would now regard as local media. “In the United States,” Tocqueville noted, “there is almost no small town that does not have its newspaper.” And that decentralization was a crucial characteristic of that era’s press.¹⁹

Today, local media still retains the ability to play that vital role in maintaining the health of American democracy that Jefferson and Tocqueville observed. That is because it is in a unique position to enable the geographic interests on which our political system is premised to function and because it serves as a counterweight against nationalization. Indeed, political scientists Joshua Darr, Matthew Hitt, and Johanna Dunaway have shown that a strong local media infrastructure that prioritizes subnational news over national news mitigates against polarization.²⁰ They conducted experimental research in the neighboring and similarly situated California communities of Palm Springs and Ventura. They partnered with Palm Springs’ local paper, *The Desert Sun*, to temporarily eliminate national politics from its opinion page. Their subsequent surveys of residents in and around the two towns showed that partisan polarization was lower in Palm Springs than in Ventura. They concluded that the differing levels of polarization owed to *The Desert Sun*’s decision to temporarily downplay national politics.

Local media has this depolarizing effect on politics because its incentive structure encourages it to present content in a way that engenders a sense of commonality across a given community.²¹ While national media is often financially rewarded for distinguishing itself from competitors by targeting specific ideological niches that are broadly dispersed, financial viability usually requires

16. “From Thomas Jefferson to Edward Carrington, 16 January 1787,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-11-02-0047>.

17. United States Postal Service, “Postage Rates for Periodicals: A Narrative History,” <https://about.usps.com/who-we-are/postal-history/periodicals-postage-history.htm>, accessed on May 3, 2021; Timothy E. Cook, *Governing With the News*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012).

18. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 174, 178.

19. *Ibid.*, 177.

20. Joshua P. Darr, Matthew P. Hitt, and Johanna L. Dunaway, *Home Style Opinion: How Local Newspapers Can Slow Polarization* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

21. This is not to say that local political issues cannot also spark disagreement and division, which of course they can and do. However, divisive local issues have two primary advantages over divisive national ones: 1) citizens have considerably more of a direct stake in the state and local issues; 2) they often have a greater understanding of these issues based on lived experience within their community. In other words, local conflict, unlike much of the conflict taking place at the national level, often has direct consequences for the material interests of citizens and said conflict often involves “close to home” issues that are better understood by citizens.

local media outlets to seek the broadest possible audience within a specific geographic area.²² This requires local news outlets to concentrate on the topics that concern a large number of the area's residents, such as local government, weather, schools, and local and high school sports.²³ In focusing on these kinds of issues, local media outlets encourage community pride by reinforcing their audience's common identity as members of that community.²⁴ And if citizens care about their local community, they are also more likely to take an active interest in its politics.²⁵ Moreover, these links are likely most pronounced among weak partisans and independents — that is, the groups whose increased involvement would be most likely to help depolarize the electorate.²⁶

When it comes to political coverage, reaching this broad audience means concentrating on what political scientists call “valence issues,” or issues on which there is wide public agreement on the desired direction of change, such as economic performance and crime. Few people, after all, want to see the economy crash or crime skyrocket. This pursuit of stories emphasizing issues of broad agreement across a local community, of course, stands in stark contrast to the wedge issues and culture war arguments that frame much of the national media's content. Notably, these valence issues that drive local media are the types of issues that facilitate accountability and direct voters' attention toward government performance, rather than the partisan affiliation of officeholders. Recent research shows, for instance, that incumbents are punished and rewarded based on the performance of the local economy²⁷ and that news coverage plays a crucial role in this process.²⁸

A robust local media also provides an essential link for accountability in subnational politics by informing voters about subnational politics, policy, and candidates. Indeed, recent research shows that citizens who have access to local media know significantly more about subnational political candidates than do citizens without access to local media.²⁹ In a similar vein, local media is best positioned to provide voters with important information regarding the vast litany of government programs and initiatives that impact the lives of every citizen and community across the country. Unsurprisingly, given the state of local news media today, a large share of Americans claim that they have never used a government social program, even though most clearly have. These programs that directly impact people's lives despite people's failure to acknowledge them, including state and local tax rebates, collectively comprise what political scientist Suzanne Mettler calls the

22. Lisa M. George and Joel Waldfogel, “The New York Times and the market for local newspapers,” *American Economic Review* 96:1 (2006): 435-447.

23. Indeed, local news organizations, particularly nonprofits, benefit most from quality locally oriented stories that readers cannot find elsewhere. See, for example, Elia Powers and Ronald A. Yaros, “Cultivating Support for Non-Profit News Organizations: Commitment, Trust, and Donating Audiences,” *Journal of Communication Management* 17:2 (2013).

24. Phyllis Kaniss, *Making Local News* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991).

25. Cara J. Wong, *Boundaries of Obligation: Geographic, National, and Racial Communities* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

26. The following working paper, for instance, finds that independents and weak partisans are most swayed by localistic political appeals: Richard Burke and Kal Munis, “Talk Local to Me: Assessing the Heterogenous Effects of Localistic Appeals,” working paper, <https://bit.ly/2NxaoBS>.

27. Justin de Benedictis-Kessner and Christopher Warshaw, “Accountability for the Local Economy at all Levels of Government in United States Elections,” *American Political Science Review* 114:3 (2020): 660-676.

28. Marcel Garz and Gregory J. Martin, “Media Influence on Vote Choices: Unemployment News and Incumbents' Electoral Prospects,” *American Journal of Political Science* 65:2 (2021): 278-293.

29. Daniel J. Moskowitz, “Local News, Information, and the Nationalization of U.S. Elections,” *American Political Science Review* 115:1 (2021): 114-129.

submerged state.³⁰ While programs like tax credits and indirect subsidies can be difficult to track and understand under any circumstances, if there's no local news outlet around to cover them, even highly visible or obvious government programs may be overlooked. This is problematic for several reasons, not the least of which is that it leads people to believe that they benefit little or not at all from such programs and, by extension, government as a whole. That belief, in turn, creates fertile ground for the promulgation of anti-government cultural tropes that undermine effective governance and the public good in the long term. A stronger local news ecosystem would make it more likely that credit is given where it is due.

Local media is also a conduit for motivating challengers to run against incumbents and for allowing voters to learn about their policy positions. Where the local press shuts down, there are higher instances of incumbent politicians facing zero challengers to their reelection bids.³¹ On this front, then, the shuttering of *The Caroline Progress* and the lack of political competition in the county are illustrations of a widespread phenomenon.

America's contemporary media culture

Midway through the first decade of the 21st century, the rapid proliferation of internet access sounded the death knell for local journalism as we knew it because it undercut advertising, the industry's most vital source of revenue at that time. Newspaper subscriptions were also hit hard.³² In a parallel trend, cable news became ascendant during this same period, and the local television news landscape has been the subject of a great deal of consolidation.³³ Now, after some 20 years of this destructive trend, Americans find their country's democratic vitality being crushed by the hypernationalized and polarized politics that local media has traditionally helped keep at bay.

In 2005, there were 53 million newspapers circulated on a given weekday, but by 2018 that figure had declined by almost half, to 28.5 million.³⁴ During that same period of time, the number of newsroom employees was nearly sliced in half, from 72,600 to 37,900.³⁵ While many newspapers that serve large metropolitan areas have weathered the storm (or even thrived, in the cases of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, which are both primarily national and even global outlets rather than local ones), newspapers in smaller communities have become shells of their former selves or gone out of business altogether.³⁶ There has been considerable consolidation within the newspaper industry. The largest 25 newspaper companies now own two-thirds of all dailies.

30. Suzanne Mettler, *The Submerged State: How Invisible Government Policies Undermine American Democracy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011).

31. Meghan E. Rubado and Jay T. Jennings, "Political Consequences of the Endangered Local Watchdog: Newspaper Decline and Mayoral Elections in the United States," *Urban Affairs Review*, 56:5 (2019): 1327-1356; Sam Schulhofer-Wohl and Miguel Garrido, "Do Newspapers Matter? Short-Run and Long-Run Evidence From the Closure of *The Cincinnati Post*," *Journal of Media Economics* 26:2 (2013): 60-81.

32. Michael Barthel, "Despite Subscription Surges for Largest U.S. Newspapers, Circulation and Revenue Fall for Industry Overall," Pew Research Center, 1 June 2017.

33. Markus Prior, "Media and Political Polarization," *Annual Review of Political Science* 16 (2013): 101-127; Sara Fischer, "The Local TV Consolidation Race is Here," *Axios*, 10 Aug. 2018.

34. Pew Research Center, "Newspapers Fact Sheet," July 9, 2019, <https://www.journalism.org/fact-sheet/newspapers>.

35. *Ibid.*

36. Ben Smith, "Why the Success of The New York Times May Be Bad News for Journalism," *The New York Times*, Mar. 1, 2020.; Frank Blethen, "In this moment of multiple crises, we need strong local journalism," *The Washington Post*, 18 May 2020.

Newspapers also frequently change hands.³⁷ Between 2003 and 2018, nearly half of all papers experienced a change in ownership. Some of these newspapers fell into the hands of hedge funds that pushed the papers to cut costs and maximize short-term profits.³⁸ To cope with diminishing resources, many local newspapers have cut back on their political coverage.³⁹

Local television news, by contrast, remains viable. Although even here, the industry has undergone considerable consolidation that has reinforced the trend toward nationalization. As of 2016, just five companies controlled 37 percent of all local news stations.⁴⁰ And, unfortunately, these consolidations have been shown to increase the amount of national content relative to local content and to also shift news coverage in a conservative direction.⁴¹

Radio ownership has endured even greater consolidation following the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which lifted station ownership caps. One of the major players, iHeartRadio, a subsidiary of iHeartMedia, now dominates radio broadcasting in the U.S.⁴² The growth of iHeartRadio (previously Clear Channel) helped national conservative shock jocks such as Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity reach wider audiences than ever before. Radio consolidation has been found to have detrimental consequences for localism.⁴³

The decline of localism across these platforms has pushed consumers toward national news outlets, or no news outlets at all, and is a key driver of nationalized political behavior on the part of voters.⁴⁴ Notably, studies indicate that this is not a development Americans were seeking so much as one that was forced upon them by a lack of local media options.⁴⁵ Surveys show that Americans believe that local news is less biased than national news and does a better job providing them with information that they can use in their daily lives.⁴⁶ One might also speculate that this enhanced trust better positions local media to be the messenger regarding some issues that affect citizens in communities throughout the country, such as COVID-19. Although local newspapers saw a 51.2 percent increase in digital subscribers during 2020, it is unlikely that this boost in subscribers can compensate for losses on the advertising end of their business model.⁴⁷ In the decade between 2008 and 2018, advertising revenue fell from \$37.8 billion to \$14.3 billion.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, most

37. Abernethy, "The Expanding News Desert."

38. Joe Pompeo, "The Hedge Fund Vampire That Bleeds Newspapers Dry Now Has the *Chicago Tribune* by the Throat," *Vanity Fair*, February 5, 2020.

39. Erik Peterson, "Paper cuts: How reporting resources affect political news coverage," *American Journal of Political Science* 65:2 (2021): 443-459.

40. Katerina Eva Matsa, "Buying Spree Brings More Local TV Stations to Fewer Big Companies," Pew Research Center, 11 May 2017.

41. Gregory J. Martin and Joshua McCrain, "Local News and National Politics," *American Political Science Review* 113:2 (2019): 372-384.

42. Ben Sisario and Michael J. de la Merced, "The Radio Giant iHeartMedia Prepares for Possible I.P.O.," *The New York Times*, 3 April 2019.

43. Gregory M. Prindle, "No competition: How radio consolidation has diminished diversity and sacrificed localism," *Fordham Intell. Prop. Media & Ent. LJ* 14 (2003): 279.

44. Joshua P. Darr, Matthew P. Hitt, and Johanna L. Dunaway, "Newspaper Closures Polarize Voting Behavior," *Journal of Communication* 68:6 (2018): 1007-1028.

45. Martin and McCrain, "Local News and National Politics."

46. Knight Foundation and Gallup, "State of Public Trust in Local News" October 29, 2019. Full report available at: https://kf-site-production.s3.amazonaws.com/media_elements/files/000/000/440/original/State_of_Public_Trust_in_Local_Media_final_.pdf.

47. Mark Jacob, "Local News Outlets Boost Digital Subscriptions by About 50% in a Year," Northwestern Medill School of Journalism Local News Initiative, Dec. 16, 2020.

48. Pew Research Center, "Newspapers Fact Sheet," 9 July 2019.

Americans do not know that local news is struggling to stay afloat. A recent Pew survey found that 71 percent of those surveyed believed that local media is doing “well” financially.⁴⁹

In just a few decades, cable news and the internet dramatically changed our news diets, albeit in different ways. Some of us have become voracious consumers of (largely national) news while others have become disengaged. Notably, though, both of these paths have had the effect of stoking nationalization and polarization. For “news junkies,” the 10-15 percent of the adult population who consume more news than ever before, partisanship has intensified due to “selective exposure,” the process in which media consumers seek out ideological and politicized content that conforms with and reinforces their priors.⁵⁰ In practice, this has meant a gradual migration from subscribing to *The Caroline Progress* and watching the evening news to hitting refresh on Facebook and — if you’re a Republican — watching “Tucker Carlson Tonight,” or — for Democrats — “The Rachel Maddow Show.” Approximately one-fifth of Democrats and Republicans receive their news exclusively from left-leaning or right-leaning media sources, respectively.⁵¹

These developments in media consumption among the news-junkie set have spurred a rise in what political scientist Eitan Hersh calls “political hobbyism.”⁵² Political hobbyists are citizens with very high levels of political engagement centered around ideology. They view politics as a kind of identity sport or a parlor game that is disconnected from doing any real political work with their fellow citizens and that neglects the tangible goods politics can provide. Broken traffic lights and funding for community parks are rarely of interest to the news junky or the hobbyist who feed on sensation and ideological politics. Meanwhile, deprived of more mundane but useful information, the rest of the population follows the news less than before and has therefore become less engaged with and knowledgeable about politics.⁵³ A revival of local news could boost these people’s interest in public life — particularly at the subnational level — and in doing so also suck some poison out of our national politics.

Over the past few decades, political scientists have observed a growing gap between high and increasing levels of political engagement and participation in elections for federal office, such as president and U.S. Senate, and lower, declining levels of engagement on elections for subnational office such as governor and mayor.⁵⁴ This divergence has been attributed to the decline in geographic-based local identities and the rise of national, nongeographic identities such as partisanship, race, gender, and religion.⁵⁵ According to this line of research, many Americans no longer

49. Pew Research Center, “For Local News, Americans Embrace Digital But Still Want Strong Community Connection,” 28 March 2019.

50. Markus Prior, *Post-Broadcast Democracy: How Media Choice Increases Inequality in Political Involvement and Polarizes Elections* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Prior, “Media and Political Polarization,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 16 (2013): 101-127; Natalie Jomini Stroud, “Polarization and partisan selective exposure,” *Journal of Communication* 60, no. 3 (2010): 556-576.

51. Mark Jurkowitz and Amy Mitchell, “About One-Fifth of Democrats and Republicans Get News in a Kind of Media Bubble,” Pew Research Center, March 4, 2020.

52. Eitan Hersh, *Politics is for Power: How to Move Beyond Political Hobbyism, Take Action, and Make Real Change* (New York: Scribner, 2020); Hersh, “College-Educated Voters are Ruining American Politics,” *The Atlantic*, Jan. 20, 2020.

53. Yanna Krupnikov and John Barry Ryan, “The Real Divide in America is Between Political Junkies and Everyone Else,” *The New York Times*, 20 Oct. 2020.

54. Hopkins, *Increasingly United States*, 2018, Chapter 4. Hopkins, “Declining Turnout in Big-City Elections: A Growing Problem for Democratic Accountability.” Manhattan Institute Issue Brief, <https://media4.manhattan-institute.org/sites/default/files/declining-turnout-big-city-elections-DH.pdf>.

55. Hopkins, *Increasingly United States*.

participate in subnational elections because they do not feel connected to their states and localities. By inculcating strong local identities, local media encourages Americans to tune into local politics and reduce their attention to the national, partisan battles. Indeed, a variety of studies find strong correlations between local media and engagement with subnational politics.⁵⁶ Additionally, because local politics involves a different set of issues, it is less hospitable ground for those who embrace and find their identity as combatants in polarized politics. Local media is thus a potent weapon against the related trends of disengagement, nationalization, and polarization — but first, we have to get it working again.

Bolstering local media to improve the health of American democracy

How can we strengthen our media environment and allow it to better fulfill its central role in supporting a healthy liberal democracy? Bolstering local media to attenuate nationalization is one key to the puzzle. The challenge lies in figuring out how to do it when market forces are pushing in the other direction.

Here's one idea that doesn't require any action by the government: Political donors could redirect their financial support to local media. In cities such as Philadelphia, philanthropists and philanthropic organizations have already taken over local newspapers that were on shaky ground. There's no reason why this cannot be done throughout the United States. But there's also no reason to think it will happen on its own — there will likely need to be a concerted effort to encourage philanthropists concerned about the health of our democracy to redirect their giving to support local media. But it could find a receptive audience. The value per dollar of donations to local media would likely be far greater than, for example, the impact yielded by donating to big national PACs that, if 2020 spending totals are any indication, are just as confused as anyone else regarding which campaigns are actually competitive.

The same is true for interesting yet fantastical ideas of creating a third party to represent America's mythical centrist majority. Throwing more money at these long-shot schemes may provide some psychic satisfaction, but it's unlikely to do much more than that. While directly subsidizing local media does not translate into the kind of direct support for a candidate or political party that many donors are no doubt attracted to, it could be a better return on investment for those who are alarmed by the state of our politics. A rich local information environment would help candidates localize races and create space for them to campaign on issues that are important to their communities. This ability to localize races would indirectly serve parties that would be otherwise disadvantaged in a nationalized electoral environment (e.g., Rhode Island Republicans or Idaho Democrats). More importantly, introducing local issues into citizens' evaluations of campaigns for local offices can improve the functioning of our federal system by making our elections less about

56. Matthew Gentzkow, Jesse M. Shapiro, and Michael Sinkinson, "The Effect of Newspaper Entry and Exit on Electoral Politics," *American Economic Review* 101:7 (2011): 2980-3018; Lee Shaker, "Dead Newspapers and Citizens' Civic Engagement," *Political Communication* 31:1 (2014): 131-148; Danny Hayes and Jennifer L. Lawless, "As Local News Goes, So Goes Citizen Engagement: Media, Knowledge, and Participation in U.S. House Elections," *The Journal of Politics* 77:2 (2015): 447-462; Erik Peterson, «Not Dead Yet: Political Learning from Newspapers in a Changing Media Landscape,» *Political Behavior* (2019): 1-23.

intractable, symbolic, culture-war fights and more about ensuring that tangible local interests and needs are represented and met.

Action in Congress could help as well. Over the past few years, Congress has been considering the Journalism Competition and Preservation Act (JCPA), a bipartisan bill co-sponsored by Senators Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) and John Kennedy (R-LA).⁵⁷ The most recent version of the bill would allow any news outlet that publishes at least weekly and has an editorial staff, and whose original content comprises at least 25 percent of its output, to collectively negotiate with Facebook and Google for a share of the advertising revenue that their content generates for the tech giants.⁵⁸ A collective bargaining arrangement would be particularly helpful for smaller media outlets. These outlets have less leverage in negotiating with Facebook and Google because they provide less content and demand for their content is concentrated in specific locations. Many large national media outlets, such as the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*, already have mutually beneficial relationships with Facebook.⁵⁹ The increased revenue that the bill would generate for local media outlets could allow these outlets to invest in journalism and expand local coverage.

Perhaps more promising is Senator Brian Schatz’s (D-HI) “Future of Local News Act of 2021,” which calls for the creation of a committee that would assess the state of journalism across various platforms and would consider the creation of a new national endowment for local journalism.⁶⁰ This type of a public program could provide a reliable and stable lifeline to local news outlets and would reaffirm America’s commitment to the core democratic principle that access to information is a fundamental prerequisite of quality democratic participation. It’s also worth noting, this sort of program wouldn’t be without precedent – the Corporation for Public Broadcasting is a publicly funded entity that already exists to financially support radio and television news.

The historical record also provides another example of federally-subsidized local journalism. During the New Deal, the Federal Writers’ Project, which was a part of the Works Progress Administration, paid writers to craft local histories as part of the *American Guide* series. A similar initiative today could provide a big boost to both local identity and local journalism. Rules and regulations could be implemented to allay fears that the implementation of such grants would divert public funds to bankroll the production of ideological propaganda. For example, it could be stipulated that eligible news outlets have a nonprofit funding structure and be primarily dedicated to providing “hard news” (i.e., basic non-editorializing coverage) of state and local politics. Making access to public resources contingent on neutral, fact-based news coverage would also not be totally without precedent: For example, the “Fairness Doctrine” once required cable news channels with federal broadcasting licenses to present news in an honest, equitable, and balanced way.

If direct federal funding proves to be too contentious, a national endowment could be supported through “checkoff” contributions on federal income taxes, a process that already exists to provide

57. Amy Klobuchar, “Senator Klobuchar and Representative Cicilline Introduce Legislation to Protect Journalism in the United States,” press release, March 10, 2021.

58. “Factbox: How U.S. bills would help news media negotiate with Facebook, Google,” Reuters, March 10, 2021.

59. Dan Froomkin, “Is Facebook Buying Off the New York Times?” *Washington Monthly*, April 19, 2021.

60. S.1601 - 117th Congress (2021-2022): “Future of Local News Act of 2021,” <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/1601/text>.

public funds for presidential campaigns. Federal income tax forms could include a question asking, “Do you want \$5 of your federal tax to go to support the National Endowment for Journalism?” If 33 million Americans checked yes — the number who agree to support public funding for presidential campaigns — that would generate \$165 million dollars annually to support local journalism.⁶¹

Limiting eligibility to nonprofit news outlets could also help alleviate concerns that public funds would be directed toward for-profit media that some argue could be susceptible to political or ideological bias stemming mostly, though not exclusively, from the need to attract and retain advertisers.⁶² Others, however, worry that nonprofit media may also be more susceptible to adopting the ideological biases of their donors, though a Pew study finds that nonprofits with a diverse donor base are typically shielded from this, and government grants would certainly be a boon for funding diversification.⁶³ In addition, stories written by nonprofit media organizations are more broadly accessible, since they’re not locked away behind paywalls, which many for-profit news organizations put in place.⁶⁴ Incentivizing nonprofit news organizations in this manner to cover state and local news could also pressure for-profit legacy media to follow suit. While we are not aware of any systematic study on this point, there is encouraging anecdotal evidence. For example, following the emergence of the *Montana Free Press* and *The Daily Montanan* as serious nonprofit news operations dedicated to covering state politics, Lee Newspapers, which owns most of the legacy papers in Montana, dedicated more staff to covering Montana’s 2021 legislative session than they had for many years.⁶⁵

A third potential solution, one that is already in motion, is subscription-based, independent journalism. Currently, Substack, which was founded in 2017, is the most successful example of a platform that connects individual journalists with subscribers who pay for access to their content. Facebook announced that it would launch a similar platform called “Bulletin” this summer.⁶⁶ Under this model, independent journalists create their own subscription-based newsletters covering any particular beat or topic of their choosing, including local news. Indeed, there are already examples of “local newsletters,” such as the *Charlotte Ledger*, which was founded by Tony Mecia after his former employer, *The Weekly Standard*, was shuttered.⁶⁷ Mecia’s newsletter aims to cover important stories in Charlotte that aren’t being told elsewhere. The approach has proven to be viable. As of March, 2021, the *Charlotte Ledger* boasted over 7,000 subscribers.⁶⁸

61. Federal Election Commission, “The \$3 Tax Checkoff Brochure,” 1993 (updated April 2014). https://transition.fec.gov/pages/brochures/checkoff_brochure.pdf.

62. David Sassoon, “7 Things You Need to Know About Nonprofit Journalism,” Global Investigative Journalism Network, Aug. 8, 2016; Sophie Rope, “Progress Without Profit: Nonprofit News is More Necessary Than Ever,” *Daily Trojan*, Oct. 26, 2020; Mark Glaser, “5 Reasons that 2020 Was the Year of Nonprofit Local News,” The Knight Foundation, Dec. 10, 2020.

63. Jesse Holcomb et al., “The New Landscape of Non-Profit News Sites,” The Pew Research Center, July 18, 2011.

64. Richard J. Tofel, “Non-Profit Journalism: Issues Around Impact,” ProPublica, 2013.

65. Even if it means temporarily (or perhaps permanently) shifting resources from covering other beats, we believe that it’s worth it, given the severity of the stakes pertaining to the health of our democratic society. That said, other recent actions by Lee Newspapers are concerning regarding the long-term health of local news, including the elimination of positions at a newly unionized paper and the subsequent shifting of resources to non-unionized papers; firing of veteran journalists and replacing them younger reporters (who may cost less but also have little of the veterans’ experience-based contextual knowledge); and bolstering state politics coverage at the expense of city coverage.

66. Peter Kafka, “Why You Can’t Write for Bulletin, Facebook’s New Substack Clone,” *Vox*, June 4, 2021.

67. Elizabeth Djinis, “Is Substack the Panacea Local News is Looking For?” *Poynter*, March 3, 2021.

68. *Charlotte Ledger*, <https://charlotteledger.substack.com/about?sort=about>; Elizabeth Djinis, “Is Substack the Panacea Local News is Looking For?”

While writers covering local news still comprise a relatively small share of writers on these subscription-based platforms, Substack is betting that more writers interested in local journalism will come once there are more examples of locally focused journalists enjoying success.⁶⁹ In the meantime, to help incentivize local journalists to use its platform, the company has announced “Substack Local,” a \$1 million initiative “to foster and develop the local news ecosystem by helping independent writers build local news publications based on the subscription model.”⁷⁰ While these developments are intriguing, it is still too early to know whether these platforms will be capable of providing a widespread and long-term fix to the crisis of local journalism. It’s possible that Substack could become just another venue for news junkies to satisfy their cravings for ideological political theater. Facebook’s Bulletin may be a more viable alternative for local journalism. Rather than allowing anyone to create content, Facebook plans to solicit professional journalists. Some of these journalists will likely have backgrounds in local news and may even work full-time for local media companies.⁷¹ Given that Facebook’s community of users is already very large, Bulletin could provide a more effective means of connecting ordinary Americans to local news. If people want local news, as previously-mentioned research suggests, these platforms may provide an efficient means for meeting this demand.

Revitalizing localism

Localism is often seen as a potential antidote to our intense partisan polarization.⁷² Yet there is too little attention paid to the vital role that local media play in establishing “the local.” Rather than simply jamming our already gridlocked system with big ideas and fresh candidates, we must reestablish the communicative conditions that will allow the federal design of our system to function properly. This requires reconnecting Americans to their local communities through a robust local media system.

For most of American history, localism came naturally. But that’s no longer the case in our age of national and international connectivity. And while much has been gained in this changed environment, that connection to the local that our political system takes as a given has been severely undermined. Recapturing that type of community connection would help America’s political institutions function as intended. And a robust local media landscape is a prerequisite for a reinvigorated localism.

69. Peter Kafka, “Substack Wants to Pay You to Write About Local News,” Vox, April 15, 2021.

70. Substack, “Introducing Substack Local, for a new generation of local news,” April 15, 2021, <https://on.substack.com/p/introducing-substack-local-for-a>.

71. Mike Isaac, “Facebook unveils ‘Bulletin,’ a newsletter subscription service,” The New York Times, June 29, 2021.

72. David Brooks, “The Localist Revolution,” The New York Times, July 19, 2018.

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