

Apparent media bias has easy explanation

With the election two months away, we're bound to hear concerns of media bias. Let me save everyone the trouble: The media are biased, tilted comfortably left of center. In other news, moon implicated in tides.

S. Robert Lichter, Linda Lichter and Stanley Rothman's 1981 book "The Media Elite" showed how journalist self-reported voting patterns were far more Democratic and their political views more liberal than the population at large. A Los Angeles Times survey of 1985 reported similar results. More contemporary studies from the Pew Research Center to the Quarterly Journal of Economics draw similar conclusions.

I don't think that the liberalism of journalists affects the accuracy of reporting. Journalists and the newspapers that employ them are deeply committed to factual accuracy in what they write and print. I do think, however, that the same things that attract people to pick journalism as a career may be the same things that attract people to liberalism. There is something about mainstream journalism that means conservatives and libertarians are going to have a rough go of it.

Consider how journalists impact society. That impact is primarily through the ability to tell a compelling story, and liberalism is the politics of compelling stories. When something has concentrated costs and diffuse benefits, the most gripping stories focus on the costs. When the roles are reversed, they focus on the benefits. Either way, liberalism wins.

Consider, for example, handgun ownership. When a deranged psychopath goes on a rampage, the tragic human cost makes the best story. No editor will ever send a reporter out on assignment to write about the robberies, muggings and rapes that never happened because citizens were armed. The benefits are too diffuse. If you were a city reporter and had to interview the relatives of yet another victim of handgun violence, how could you not support gun control? You'd have to be made of stone.

Or take vouchers, another conservative hot-button issue. Families, if given the opportunity, will spend educational vouchers in a variety of ways. We cannot predict where the money will go, so the benefits are diffuse. The costs, however, are quite visible: the local public school will no longer get tax money. The easiest story to write will focus on that, because those are



OPINION

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the immediately visible costs.

Many years ago, the New York Times magazine ran a story about a pilot voucher program, with selection determined by lottery. They printed side-by-side photos of two mothers of school-age children, one overjoyed to be selected and another heartbroken because she was not. The story was all about inequity, because the human cost of inequity as captured in that picture was more visceral and more compelling than any as-yet-to-be-determined benefits.

The same is true with tax cuts and spending cuts. We have no way of knowing how people will spend any tax savings, so while you might interview a policy wonk and get a sentence or two for "balance," there's no real story there. But when spending cuts on any program are proposed, there is always an opportunity to interview the single mother who receives social benefit X or the lobbying group for target benefit Y. They'll be more than happy to tell you how much they'll be hurt.

In fact, you can take any political issue. If the benefits are concentrated and the costs are diffuse, or vice versa, I'll give you odds that the most compelling story will focus on whichever is most concentrated. That story will support the liberal view of the world.

Ultimately, journalism is a business like any other. The media want to write stories you want to read, produce TV shows you want to watch, and make films you want to go see. When people genuinely want to watch films about how to make health care cheaper and better, tune in TV shows about heroes who create wealth, and read daily factual stories about the diffuse but real benefits of individual freedom and responsibility, liberal media bias will disappear.

Can such stories be written, or is the deck stacked in favor of liberals? Are the things that make you a compelling writer more likely to make you a liberal? Or is it just that society's best writers, visual artists, and storytellers join liberal institutions because things have always been that way?

The future of freedom in America may depend on the answer.

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