

Leveling the Playing Field:

Local Televisions’ Effect on the Electorate’s “Knowledge Gap”

Michael Yoshida

Faculty Sponsor: Erika F. Fowler, Wesleyan University Government Department

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INTRODUCTION



In today’s information age, citizens are presented with an abundance of sources for news and current events. Counter intuitively, this influx of available information has not resulted in a more knowledgeable electorate. While aggregate knowledge trends have remained stable, a noticeable inequality or “knowledge gap” along socioeconomic lines has emerged among the American public. It has been argued that this gap emerges as new information is presented, with members of the public at higher levels of SES acquiring novel information at quicker rates than members of the public of low SES. In examining this gap and information acquisition, the literature has remained divided on the role television exposure plays on the “knowledge gap.”

- Television fails to increase political knowledge
- Television has power to “level” the information playing field

This study focuses on the ability of local television news to narrow the gap between citizens on the two sides of a political sophistication continuum. Taking television exposure as a “leveler” of information, we expect the following:

- Ability to place candidates should with news party mention exposure
- Ability to place candidates should with respondents of higher political sophistication
- Accounting for interaction between exposure and political sophistication, local news exposure should narrow the gap that exists between political sophisticates and political novices

METHODOLOGY



Resources

1. University of Wisconsin NewsLab

Tracked from four major affiliates in nine Midwest media markets from September 7 to November 6, 2006. In 2006 more than 2,000 hours were examined on which a total of 4,760 campaign stories aired.

2. 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study

The study consisted of 38,443 respondents complete online and field by Polimetrix during October and November 2006. The University of Wisconsin/UCLA portion of survey consisted of 3,002 respondents from the nine Midwest media markets tracked by the UW NewsLab.

Measuring Exposure

Using respondent information, exposure variables were created by accounting for individual viewing habits and news content aired on station respondent reports watching .

Dependent Variables:

Can the respondent place the House Democratic Candidate on liberal/conservative continuum ,

Can the respondent place the House Republican Candidate on liberal/conservative continuum

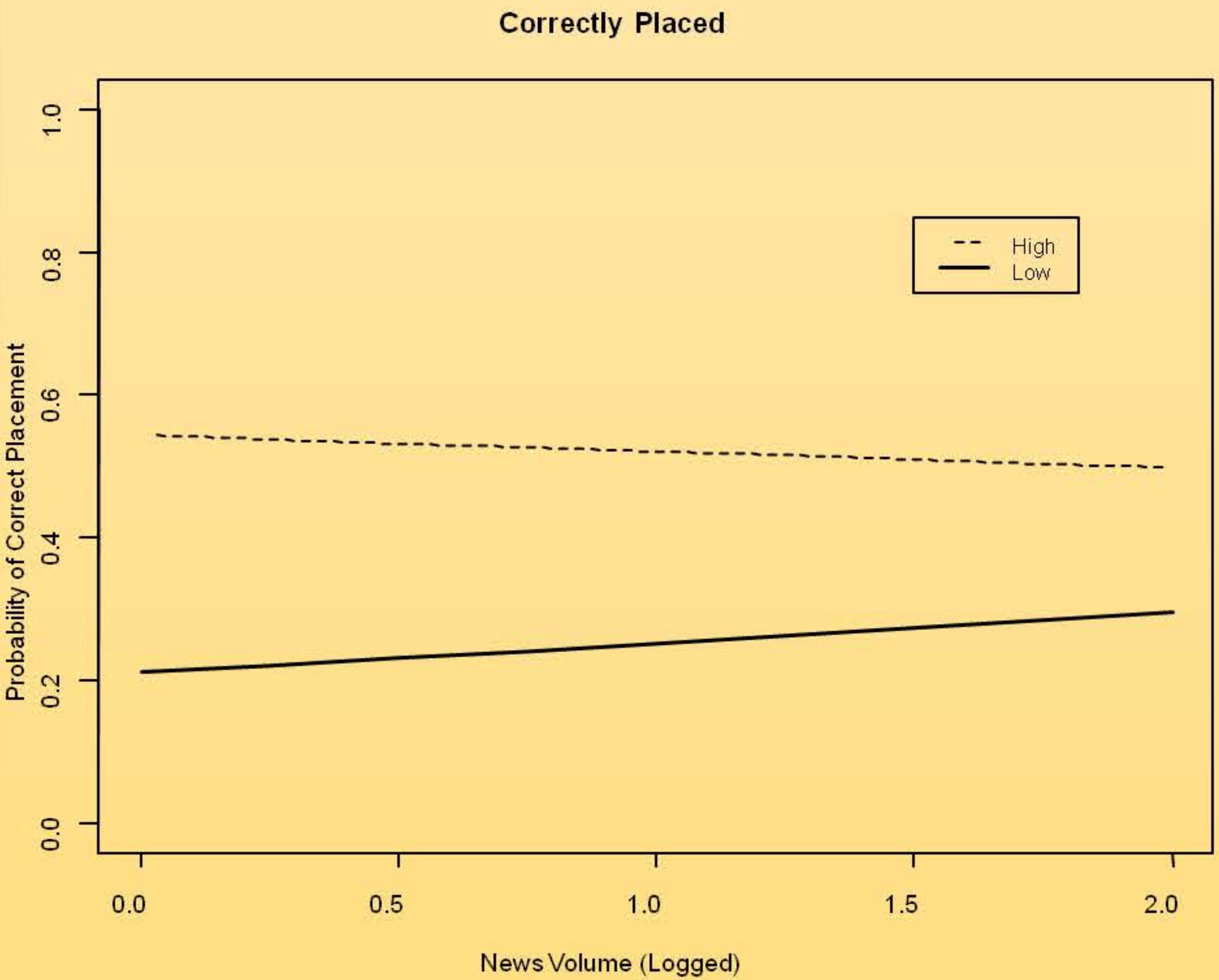
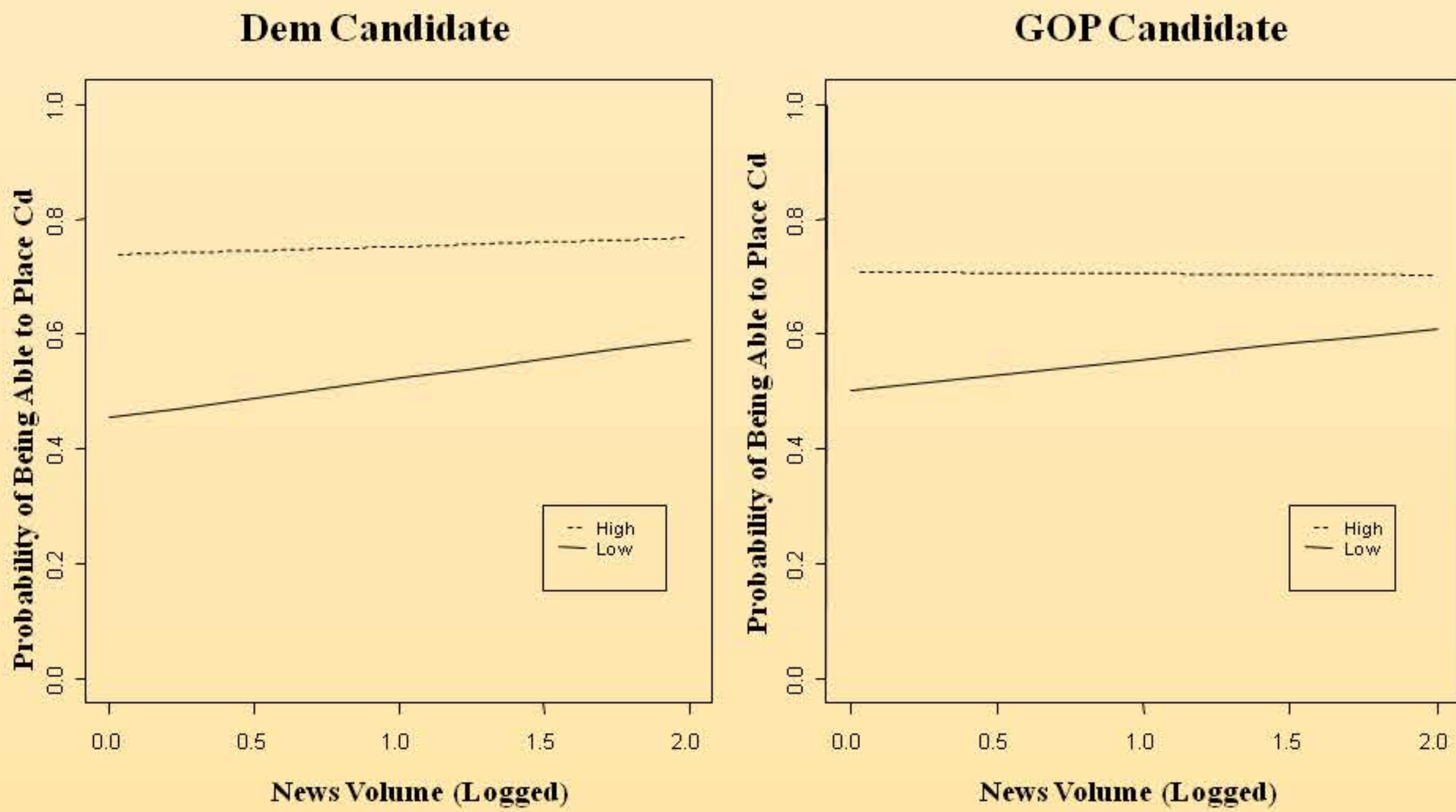
Can the respondent correctly place Democrat candidate left of Republican candidate on liberal/conservative continuum

Model Type: Logit **Weight:** pweight **Cluster:** DMA

RESULTS



Variables	Democratic placement	Standard Error	Confidence	Republican placement	Standard Error	Confidence	Correct placement	Standard Error	Confidence
Dem News	0.400	(0.184)	**						
Rep News				0.365	(0.192)	*			
All News							0.429	(0.170)	**
Pol. Knowledge	0.406	(0.069)	***	0.291	(0.084)	***	0.493	(0.057)	***
Dnews*Pknow	-0.065	(0.033)	**						
Rnews*Pknow				-0.076	(0.031)	**			
Allnews*Pknow							-0.104	(0.031)	***
Age	-0.003	(0.005)		-0.005	(0.004)		0.014	(0.004)	***
Party I.D. 7 scale	-0.069	(0.041)	*	0.168	(0.029)	***	-0.077	(0.029)	***
Party I.D. strength	0.024	(0.068)		0.099	(0.066)		0.079	(0.065)	
Female	-0.610	(0.094)	***	-0.368	(0.163)	**	-0.315	(0.137)	**
Non-White	0.248	(0.238)		-0.232	(0.141)	*	0.109	(0.139)	
Years of Education	0.017	(0.036)		0.032	(0.042)		0.100	(0.029)	***
Hopen	0.310	(0.352)		0.205	(0.368)		0.326	(0.277)	
Constant	-0.689	(0.414)	*	-1.503	(0.402)	***	-4.298	(0.355)	***
Observations	2,730			2,635			2,815		



CONCLUSIONS



The logit regressions allowed us to determine whether exposure to news party mentions is associated with individuals’ abilities to place candidates on a liberal/conservative continuum.

The results confirmed our expectations. As expected there is a significant gap between the abilities of political sophisticates and political novices to place and place correctly candidates. However, when you take into account the interaction between local news exposure and the individuals sophistication level you see a narrowing of the gap. That is, as political novices are exposed to more local news, their ability to place and correctly place increases.

One interesting result is seen in the correctly place logit regression. Similarly to the other regressions, we see an increase in the ability of political novices. However, we also see a decrease in the ability of political sophisticates. This may be attributed to political sophisticates being overconfident in their original abilities. As they are exposed to more local news, they may realize their confidence led them to have misplaced beliefs.

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