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Newspaper Presidential Endorsements:
Who Publications Support, Why Votes Change, and the Practice's Sharp Decline

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Introduction

American newspaper presidential endorsements are a tradition dating back to colonial times. Such endorsements today are unique to the medium of newspapers. Television stations, news magazines, or legitimate news websites rarely adopt the practice. While individual pundits or writers may endorse a candidate, newspapers persist as the only medium in which *institutional* endorsements remain commonplace. In 2013 such endorsements largely continue, although an increasing number of newspapers that previously endorsed are discontinuing the practice.

Do newspapers tend to mirror the political preferences of their primary readership? In other words, do they actually matter? Do they matter only if they mirror public opinion? What if they lead public opinion? Why do some newspaper endorsements change over time? Why are a growing number of newspapers discontinuing presidential endorsements – will they soon be a thing of the past? This paper aims to answer those questions and more.

A few trends stand out, three in particular.

- 1) The long history of newspapers endorsing presidential candidates may be coming to an end. In recent years many have discontinued the practice, a trend likely to continue.
- 2) The influence of endorsements is debatable. As often as not, newspapers don't back the candidate that eventually wins in their area.
- 3) Since the 1970s, the so-called liberal print media have actually endorsed more Republicans than Democrats for presidents. However, evidence shows that recent endorsements have clearly trended more Democratic.

How and why do newspaper endorsements change over time?

The news media often gets branded as having liberal-leaning views. Indeed, for the last five presidential elections with available data, this has been the case. The total circulation of newspapers endorsing Democrats has exceeded that of Republicans for every presidential election year with available data since Bill Clinton's first run in 1992. (I was unable to track down or calculate circulation totals for 2000.) Even throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Democratic endorsements increased as a percentage of circulation in every successive election – and vice versa for the Republicans – until the 1992 crossover.

In 2012, Democratic President Barack Obama received 58% of the two-party endorsements by circulation, versus 42% for Republican challenger Mitt Romney. Though a solid lead, this represented a decline from the 72%-28% edge Obama commanded in 2008 circulation over John McCain.

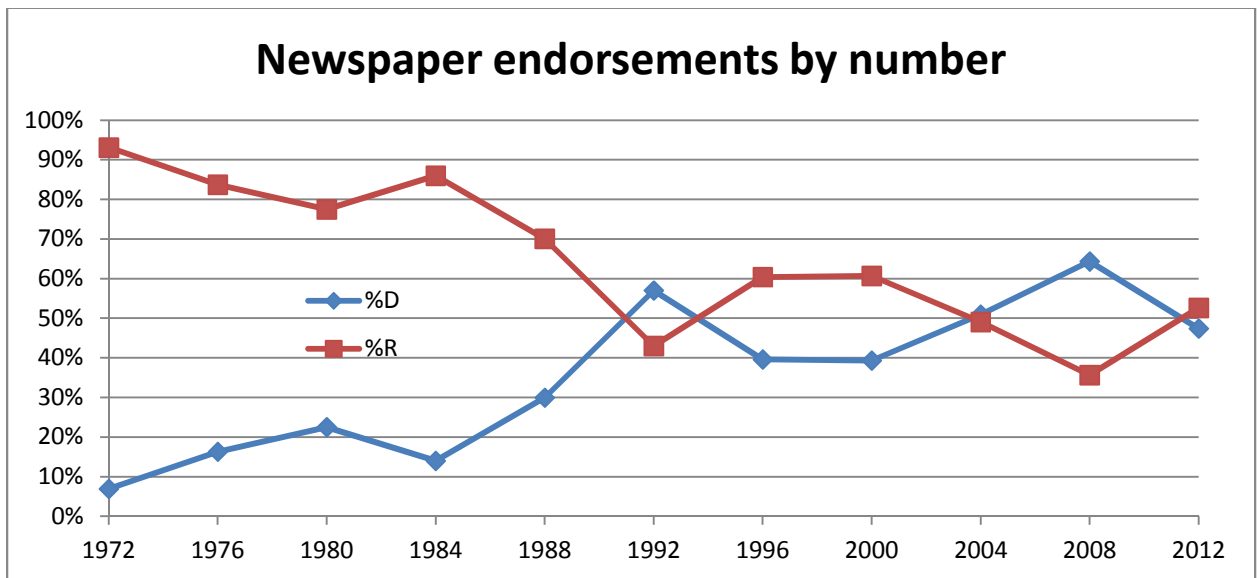
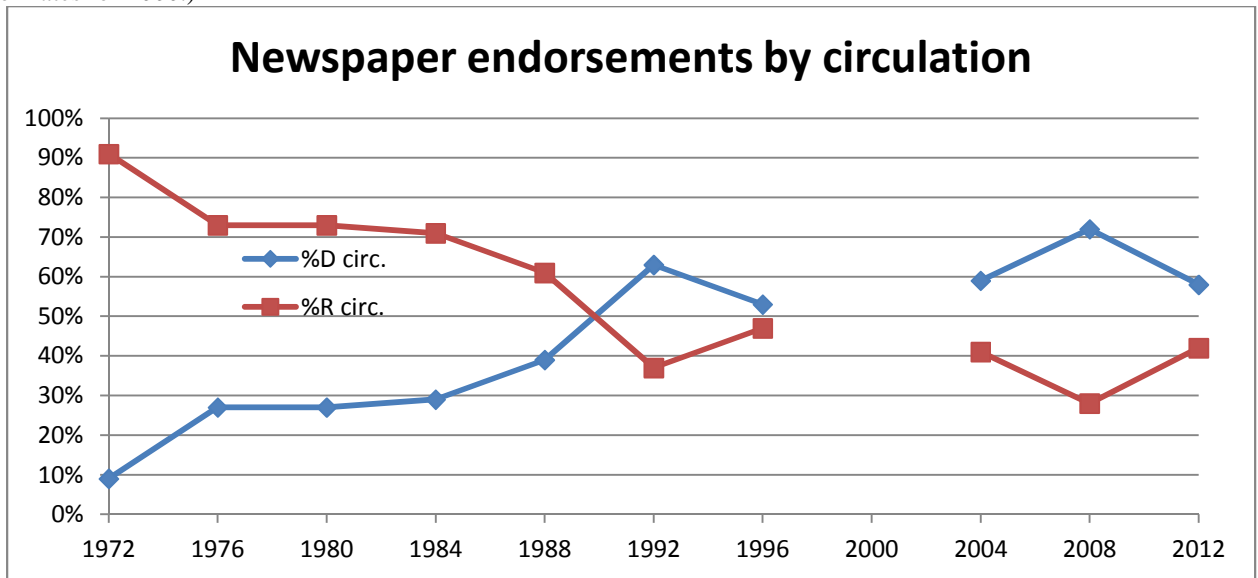
According to another measurement, historically this Democratic advantage has proven to be the exception, not the rule. According to data compiled by Mica Cohen of the *New York Times* Five Thirty Eight blog, measuring the number of total endorsements through the decades shows an edge to the Republican presidential candidate. Of the 11 presidential elections from 1972 on, Republicans won a greater number of endorsements in seven. Though the Democrats consistently win by total circulation since 1992, the Republican nevertheless received more endorsements numerically in 1996, 2000, and most recently in 2012. (Cohen 2011.)

Examining these differing metrics yields a fascinating result: the percentage of total circulation endorsing Democrats has *always* been greater than the percentage of actual newspapers doing so, going back at least to 1972. This is because newspapers representing urban areas with greater population tend to endorse Democrats, while rural newspapers representing

smaller populations go the opposite way. As a result, this contributes to a much larger Republican endorsement total by pure numbers, even while those same rural small-town papers barely increase the circulation total. There have even been two years – 1996 and 2012 – in which the Democrat earned the higher share of endorsements by circulation, even while racking up fewer endorsements overall.

However, these numbers are likely misleading. The number of newspapers that endorse a party’s candidate is certainly less important in reality than the overall reach of the endorsements. After all, how many small newspapers does it take to equal the impact of one *New York Times* or *Washington Post*?

(Graphs below: data 1972-2008 from Cohen, 2012 calculated by author. Note: no data could be found on circulation rates for 2000.)



Newspaper endorsements on average went from being reliably Republican for decades, to centrist in the 1990s-2000s, to only truly leaning noticeably left since 2008. Let's examine one NEWSPAPER that reflected these changes: the *Hartford Courant*.

Connecticut was a reliably Republican state for presidents, having voted that way in every election of the 1970s and 1980s. In 1992 President George H.W. Bush was running – born in Connecticut and the son of a popular former two-term U.S. senator from the state. Yet the state voted for Bill Clinton in 1992, just as its highest-circulation newspaper *Hartford Courant* wrote, “In 228 years of continuous publication, The Courant has never supported a Democratic candidate for president. Today's endorsement of Bill Clinton is therefore a milestone for this newspaper.” (“Four” 1992.) Clinton himself even frequently worked the endorsement into his stump speech during the final week of the campaign, although “there were no cheers from the crowd [in Florida and Georgia] after the reference to the faraway newspaper.” (Lightman 1992.)

Determining correlation from causality is a difficult if not impossible task. Was it the cart leading the horse? Was it just coincidence? Indeed, the *Courant* went on to endorse George W. Bush in 2000 and 2004, just as most newspapers across the country did, even as Connecticut voted for Gore, then Kerry. But by 2012, the *Courant* had gone back to endorsing not only a Democrat for president but also for senator and all five congressional races. Yet that oddly did not stop them from penning an editorial the week following the election bemoaning the fact that the state elected no Republicans. (“Next” 2012.)

Why are so many newspapers stopping endorsements?

Many newspapers that previously endorsed are discontinuing the practice. Twenty-three of the largest 100 newspapers declined to endorse in 2012, up from eight in 2008 (Gerhard 2012). Does this represent a one-time deviation or a more permanent trend?

Reading the reasons given for all of the “new” 15, 10 implied that the change was permanent while only five indicated that this was a temporary hiatus. And even one of those five – the *Oregonian* – did so on the grounds of lamenting that the presidential candidates only focused on swing states and made zero campaign stops at Oregon (“Oregonian” 2012), a rationale unlikely to change in the near future.

Over and over again, the same three reasons kept appearing for permanently suspending endorsements

- 1) Officially endorsing taints the perception of unbiased news coverage.
- 2) An inability to personally interview candidates renders a possible endorsement poorly researched compared to state or local races.
- 3) The endorsement does not matter or affect the outcome of an election.

Some of the highest-circulation newspapers to stop endorsing presidential candidates (seemingly) permanently include the *Chicago Sun-Times*, *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *Indianapolis Star*, *Austin American-Statesman*, *Knoxville News Sentinel*, *Dayton Daily News*, *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, *Palm Beach Post*, and *New Orleans Times-Picayune* (Gerhard 2012).

Essentially, the idea is that the newspaper presidential endorsement is like an appendix in the body, a now-useless remnant of a bygone era. Most newspapers were founded to be overtly political or party organs. The widespread acceptance of the concept of unbiased journalism only found mass favor in mid-twentieth century newsrooms. So the argument goes: newspaper presidential endorsements used to make sense, but no longer do.

While some stopped all endorsements, many papers announced they would continue endorsements on the local and state levels, citing an editorial board's ability to directly ask questions of candidates in those races. A focus on local instead of national endorsements mirrors the sharp decline over the past few years in local over national news coverage, exemplified by the widespread shuttering of Washington, D.C., bureaus for local newspapers over the past few years (Kurtz 2008).

There have been occasional cases of newspapers stopping presidential endorsements for one election only, such as Ohio's largest newspaper the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* in 2004. It wrote, "After nearly four years spent watching George W. Bush as president, and after a year of watching Sen. John Kerry campaign to oust him, we have decided not to add one more potentially polarizing voice to a poisoned debate. We make no endorsement for president this year." However, it resumed the practice subsequently. Anomalies such as this appear to be the exception rather than the rule.

Are endorsements affected by owner?

In an era of conglomerates along with fewer and fewer self-owned or family-owned newspapers, it is worth examining if newspaper presidential endorsements are affected by owner. If so, we would expect to see similar ideologies expressed across publications owned by the same parent company. In 2012 at least, that was generally not the case.

Of the top 100 newspapers by circulation, five companies owned at least seven outlets. Advance Publications, Gannett, MediaNews Group, and Tribune Company all showed no statistically significant majority of endorsements (Gerhard 2012). Only with McClatchy was a trend clearly visible: eight of nine went for Obama, with only the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* for Romney – and only after endorsing Obama in 2008. For the most part, endorsements did not seem to be correlated within media companies.

The increasing role of media conglomerates comes with a worrisome set of issues for the future of journalism – indeed, even for the present. However, at least if the last election was any guide, conformity in political endorsements does not appear to be one of those issues.

2012 endorsements

Examining the list of 2012 presidential endorsements for the top 100 newspapers by daily circulation, what do we get? Forty-one endorsed incumbent Obama's bid for a second term, versus 35 that endorsed Romney. (Twenty-three offered no endorsement, while the *Lancaster Intelligence Journal* in Pennsylvania split its endorsement.) Of the newspapers specifically endorsing one candidate, the Obama-Romney split was 54%-46%, close to the 51%-49% two-party split in the national popular vote.

Editor and Publisher attempted to track all presidential endorsements from around the country. According to their comprehensive data of 472 newspapers, 212 went for Romney, versus 191 which went for Obama. (Sixty-seven declined to endorse, and two endorsed Libertarian Party candidate Gary Johnson.) Obama received 47% of the two-party endorsement, compared to 53% for Romney ("2012 Presidential" 2012.)

As discussed above, perhaps the better barometer is total circulation of the publications endorsing each candidate. By this metric, the scales are tipped and Obama wins. Obama received endorsements totaling 58% of the major-party endorsements, crushing Romney's 42%.

Some endorsements came as no surprise, such as the big three by circulation. Considered the primary newspaper for the left, the *New York Times* had endorsed Democrats the previous 13 consecutive elections (“New” 2012), last endorsing a Republican for Dwight D. Eisenhower’s second term in 1956. Sure enough, this time around the *Times* wrote “President Obama has governed from a deep commitment to the role of government in fostering growth, forming sensible budget policies that are not dedicated to protecting the powerful, and saving the social safety net to protect the powerless” (“Barack” 2012).

The *Wall Street Journal* did not endorse, having not done so since Herbert Hoover in the Great Depression era (“Hoover’s” 2008). Although given its referring to Obama as “presidential amateur hour” during his fifth year in office (“Snowden’s” 2013), it obviously would have endorsed Romney, maintaining its status as the country’s pre-eminent conservative newspaper.

USA TODAY also did not endorse, writing “[The Editorial Board] is not aligned with either political party and, since the newspaper’s founding in 1982, has never endorsed any political candidate,” presumably to maintain a status as “America’s newspaper” (“USA” 2013). Predicting its endorsement may prove a bit more difficult given its more moderate centrist positions.

Other endorsements proved more noteworthy. For example, Utah’s largest newspaper, the *Salt Lake Tribune*, endorsed Obama, even though Romney won Utah by a larger margin than any other state (“2012 Election” 2012). Its endorsement editorial even began by acknowledging Romney’s popularity at home: “Nowhere has Mitt Romney’s pursuit of the presidency been more warmly welcomed or closely followed than here in Utah.” It continues, “But it was Romney’s singular role in rescuing Utah’s organization of the 2002 Olympics from a cesspool of scandal, and his oversight of the most successful Winter Games on record, that make him the Beehive State’s favorite adopted son. After all, Romney managed to save the state from ignominy, turning the extravaganza into a showcase for the matchless landscapes, volunteerism and efficiency that told the world what is best and most beautiful about Utah and its people” (“Too” 2012).

Skipping a line, it then writes as a one-sentence paragraph, “In short, this is the Mitt Romney we knew, or thought we knew, as one of us.” In this way it walks a tightrope, endorsing Obama while simultaneously recognizing the positives that his opponent brought to Utah.

Another noteworthy endorsement was the *San Antonio Express-News*, for being the only newspaper among the top 100 that switched from endorsing McCain to Obama the next election (“Obama” 2012). It had endorsed Republicans for the preceding eight elections, last endorsing Democrat Jimmy Carter in 1976. Several factors likely prompted the change. Bexar County where San Antonio is located voted for Obama and is an uncommonly left-leaning district within a solidly red state. San Antonio’s mayor, Julián Castro, delivered the keynote address at the 2012 Democratic National Convention, the same speaking position that propelled then-unknown Illinois State Senator Barack Obama in 2004. There is even some speculation that Castro himself might run for president someday (Wickham 2012).

How newspaper endorsements changed (or didn’t) from 2008

While the *Express-News* was the lone voice in the top 100 changing from Republican to Democrat, 22 switched from Democrat to Republican. According to Julie Moos of the Poynter Institute, data from all newspapers across the country proved much the same result (Moos 2012). Moos counted 35 newspapers switching from Obama to Romney. By contrast, only three went from McCain to Obama, including the *San Francisco Examiner* and the *Winston-Salem Journal*.

This in turn mirrors the country at large. While two states – Indiana and North Carolina – made the same voting switch on Election Day, not a single state switched *to* Obama (Politico 2012). This begs the question: when a state changes its vote, do its newspapers change endorsements as well?

North Carolina counts 20 newspapers according to *E&P*, 14 of them daily. [NC HAS MANY MORE NEWSPAPERS THAN THAT](http://www.newslink.org/ncnews.html) <http://www.newslink.org/ncnews.html> Only one endorsed Romney: the comparatively small *Daily Reflector*, circulation 20,000. In this respect, their newspapers went almost completely opposite of the state. While neither of the top two – the *Charlotte Observer* and the *Raleigh News and Observer* – mirrored the state at large, both reflected individual counties. Both Mecklenberg and Wake Counties went for Obama by double-digit margins.

Indiana’s newspapers came closer to mirroring the state. Of the top two newspapers, the *Indianapolis Star* and the *Northwest Indiana Times*, neither exactly mirrored the state’s switch. The former declined to endorse for president in 2012 while continuing to endorse for lower races, after splitting its 2008 endorsement (“We’ll” 2012). The *Times* maintained its Republican endorsement, writing “With all the red tape and red ink in Washington, D.C., the nation needs a fiscal conservative in the Oval Office... it’s obvious which candidate best fits that description” (“Run” 2012). Curiously, even though its Romney endorsement reflected the state at large, the *Times* is located in just about the only part of the state that went Democrat: the northwest.

(*E&P* counts one other daily newspaper, the *Lafayette Journal and Courier* which went for Romney.) <http://www.newslink.org/innews.html> [FOR INDIANA NEWSPAPERS. THERE ARE QUITE A FEW DAILIES>](#)

Swing states

Only two states actually “swung” in 2012, but several others were generally labeled “swing states” nonetheless. Obama won all of them, the primary reason for the widespread analysis that Middle America had moved left. But what about the newspapers located there? Were the publications there split between the candidates as closely as the states they represented? The results indicate that, for the most part, the answer is no (“2012 Presidential” 2012).

Politico defined nine states as battlegrounds (“2012 Swing” 2013). Of those, eight voted Obama, the ninth being the aforementioned North Carolina. (Strangely, Indiana was generally not considered a swing state, even though it was one of only two states to actually “swing.”) Three notable trends stick out.

- Although eight of these nine states voted Obama in the election, six contained more newspapers endorsing Romney by count. Also six (though not the same six) had a greater circulation of newspapers endorsing Romney. In this way, the newspapers predicted the states’ actual outcomes quite poorly, getting it correct less than half the time.

- Although 14% of newspapers nationally did not endorse, the vast majority in the swing states did endorse. This included every single newspaper counted by *E&P* in Iowa, Nevada, New Hampshire and Virginia, and all but one in Colorado, Ohio, and Wisconsin. Perhaps this is to be expected, with newspapers feeling a greater need to add a voice to the mix when the impact of that voice “matters” more.

- Whenever a state had a larger share of circulation endorsing a particular candidate, the numbers tended to be incredibly lopsided. Bizarrely, this is the opposite of the razor-thin margins typically characterizing these states’ actual vote totals. Only Ohio and Wisconsin had circulation

totals by candidate even remotely approaching the states' actual voting results. Why? The answer is nebulous.

(The following table lists those nine states along with the total number of newspapers as counted by *E&P*, endorsements by count and also by total circulation.)

State	Newspapers	D	R	D circ.	R circ.
Colorado	19	12	6	78%	22%
Florida	24	2	6	37%	73%
Iowa	7	1	6	3%	97%
Nevada	5	2	3	8%	92%
New Hampshire	8	4	4	32%	68%
North Carolina	20	8	1	97%	3%
Ohio	24	10	13	55%	45%
Virginia	9	2	7	17%	83%
Wisconsin	11	2	8	46%	54%

It is worth zeroing in on three particular swing state newspapers: the *Des Moines Register*, the *Manchester Union-Leader*, and the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*.

Iowa's *Des Moines Register* switched from Obama to Romney, writing "Which candidate could forge the compromises in Congress to achieve these goals? When the question is framed in those terms, Mitt Romney emerges the stronger candidate" ("Mitt" 2012). This was even as the state maintained its Obama vote, including Polk County specifically where the *Register* is headquartered. Interestingly, the newspaper had endorsed a Democrat for the preceding nine elections, last having gone Republican for Nixon in 1972.

But the *Register* may have a unique position possessed by perhaps none other: its primary endorsement may be even more highly sought than its general election endorsement, since Iowa holds the first caucus. It endorsed Romney for the 2012 Republican nomination, saying "Rebuilding the economy is the nation's top priority, and Romney makes the best case among the Republicans that he could do that" ("Mitt" 2011). Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum ultimately won the caucus. (However, preliminary results announced on caucus night gave Romney a razor-thin eight vote lead – meaning that while Santorum actually won, Romney gained the campaign momentum afforded the "winner.")

Since the *Register* began caucus endorsements in 1988, its predictions generally fail to reflect the winner (Silver 2011). Of its nine caucus endorsements for both parties, only three actually won the caucus. Strangely, the *Register's* caucus endorsements are more likely to win the party nomination than the actual caucus. Of its most recent four GOP caucus endorsements, all eventually won the party nomination, even though only two actually won the Iowa caucus.

While Iowa holds the first caucus, that is but an informal survey. New Hampshire, another of Politico's swing states, holds the first primary that actually counts toward determining each party's candidates. The *Manchester Union-Leader* is the highest-circulation newspaper in the state, and when it comes to its primary endorsements it does about as poorly as its Iowa counterpart.

Most recently, it endorsed Newt Gingrich even as Romney won the state. Of the *Union-Leader's* past seven Republican primary endorsements, for example, only three won the actual primary (Silver 2011), while only two won the party's nomination. A likely explanation: the newspaper leans conservative while the state's primaries are open to all registered voters,

generally resulting in more moderate winners. The newspaper endorsed Romney in the general election (“Why Mitt” 2012).

Ohio is widely considered the most reliable indicator of the presidential vote, being the only state to correctly predict the winner in every election for the past half century. The most reliable indicator of Ohio’s vote – and also the nation’s – appears to be the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. With the exception of not endorsing a candidate in 2004, it endorsed the eventual winner of both the state and country for the preceding eight elections, last going wrong in 1976 (“Plain” 2012). I have been unable to find another newspaper in the country with such an accurate track record.

The takeaway: in 2012 swing states, the top newspapers did not generally reflect the state’s vote. Eight of the nine swing states voted for Obama with a percentage in the low- to mid-50s. As judged by circulation of newspaper endorsements, only Ohio reflected this.

Conclusion: in the future

Newspaper presidential endorsements on average went from being reliably Republican for decades, to centrist in the 1990s-2000s, to only truly leaning noticeably left since 2008. This mirrors the country at large, electing four of five Republicans from 1972-1988, electing two from each party during 1992-2004, and Obama ever since.

While it is notoriously difficult to make accurate political predictions, it does seem difficult to imagine this trend in newspaper endorsements reversing in 2016. This seems especially true should the incredibly popular Hillary Clinton win the Democratic nomination and presidency, as many currently project.

Judged through this lens, the print media is now likely deserving of its liberal-leaning reputation. Then again, perhaps America as a whole increasingly deserves the reputation as well. For both the print news media and the public at large, these leftward leanings have only been pronounced since 2008. As is well known, these years have also coincided with print media exerting perhaps its lowest levels of influence on public opinion ever. Surely America could not have swung left in the last few years because newspaper endorsements did. Most likely, newspaper editorial boards were not immune to the ideological swing that much of the country experienced.

What makes this odd is the changed demographics of modern-day newspaper readership. It has been well-documented that the average newspaper reader is now both much older and whiter than the population at large. It has also been demonstrated that the Republican presidential candidate *always* wins the white vote, and also that Republican votes increase with age. Assuming that the average newspaper reader will likely get even older and whiter in the years to come as the Internet and digital media surge, it seems doubly unusual that newspaper endorsements would head in such a direction so contrary to that of their likely readership. [WHAT ABOUT THE READERSHIP OF ONLINE NEWS PUBLICATIONS. ALL THE LARGE CIRCULATION, LEFT-LEANING NEWSPAPERS ALSO HAVE EXTENSIVE WEB OFFERINGS. DOES IT MATTERS IF A NEWSPAPER PRODUCES ITS ENDORSEMENT ON PAPER OR BY ELECTRON? THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE PRINT PRODUCT MAY NOT BE AN ACCURATE REPRESENTATION OF THE READERSHIP OF A NEWSPAPER’S NEWS PRODUCT.](#)

All the above applied only for the newspapers that continue to endorse, that is. Newspapers seem to be reluctantly coming around to the idea that they should not officially endorse presidential candidates. Of the top 100 by circulation, eight did not do so in 2008, twenty-three did not do so in 2012, and expect that number to be even higher in 2016. Most publications that stopped endorsing will probably not resume the practice, while some that currently do endorse will come around to the same reasons that an ever-increasing number have already accepted: desire for impartiality, failure to interview candidates, and lack of influence. We may not be far from the election year where newspaper presidential endorsements are considered the exception rather than the rule.

The field is shifting due to online news, and not in a way that favors endorsements. Online readers can get information about candidates from so many sources, that the value of endorsements is particularly minimized there. As the *Chicago Sun-Times* explained in their decision to cease endorsements: “We have come to doubt the value of candidate endorsements by this newspaper or any newspaper, especially in a day when a multitude of information sources allow even a casual voter to be better informed than ever before. Research on the matter suggests that editorial endorsements don’t change many votes, especially in higher-profile races” (“Why We” 2012).

As long-lasting and historic as the practice has been, that may not be a negative development.

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