

Sustaining the Fourth Estate

A Conjoint Experiment on Public Support for Local Journalism

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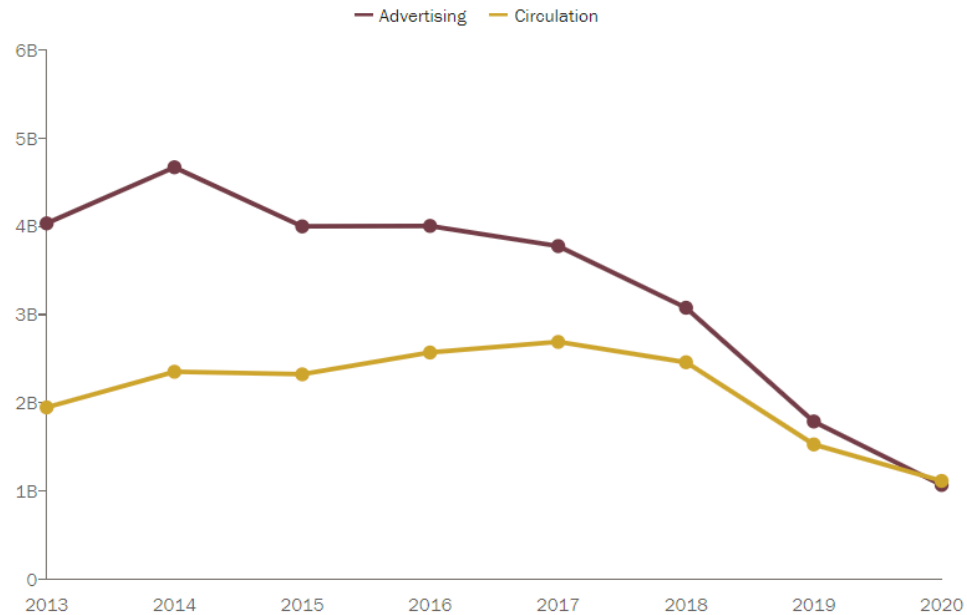
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UC San Diego

Josh McCrain
University of Utah

Not these again...

Advertising revenue for locally focused newspapers dips below circulation for the first time in 2020

Total revenue of locally focused U.S. newspapers (in U.S. dollars)



Note: Data shows the dollar amount of each revenue type according to analysis of year-end SEC filings. Figures do not include The New York Times, The Washington Post or The Wall Street Journal, which have a large national audience. USA Today is included as part of Gannett's overall revenues. Dollar values are not adjusted according to pre-2013 data from News Media Alliance and thus are not comparable to the estimated figures published in Pew Research Center's State of the News Media newspapers fact sheet.

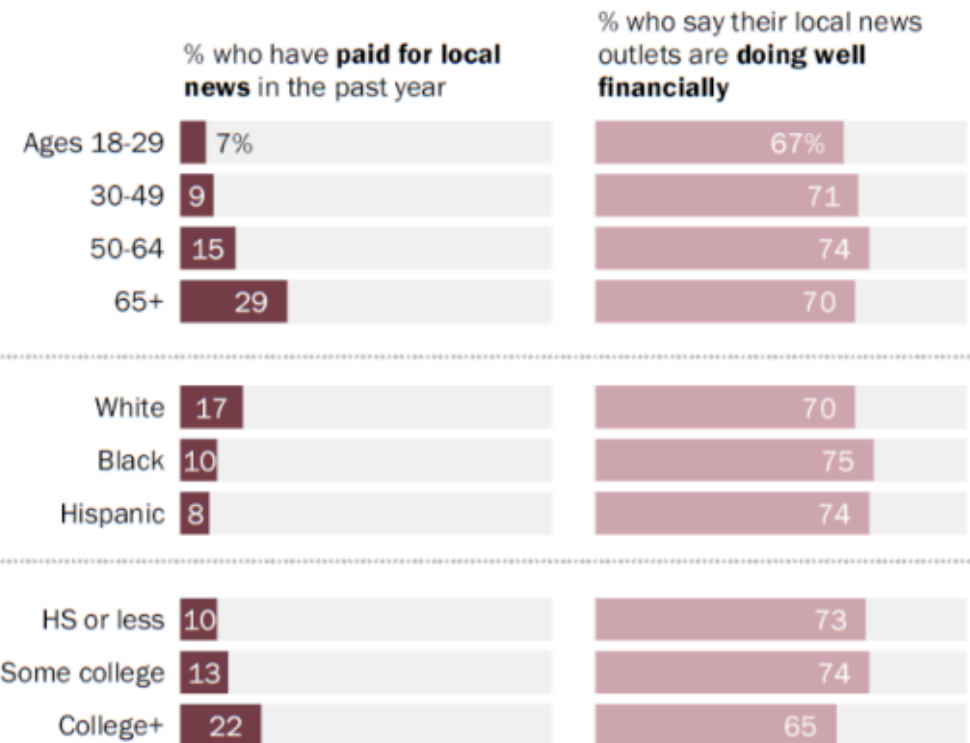
Source: Pew Research Center analysis of year-end Securities and Exchange Commission filings of publicly traded newspaper companies (2013-2020).

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Chart Data Share

Older Americans more likely to pay for local news

Among U.S. adults ...



Note: Whites and blacks include only non-Hispanics; Hispanics can be of any race.

Source: Survey conducted Oct. 15-Nov. 8, 2018.

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Experimental Design

Conjoint Experiment

- Choose between two offers for a subscription
 - Substantive appeal
 - Newspaper type
 - Coverage focus
 - Subscription price

Community Benefits

Appeal	Text
<i>Preserve Resource</i>	“ Our industry is in jeopardy. Due to rising costs, independent local papers like ours are disappearing across the country. Help preserve this community resource.”
<i>Public Utility</i>	“Like having a public fire department and local parks, we all benefit from the presence of a vibrant local news outlet in our community.”
<i>Government Watchdog</i>	“Local papers like ours serve as a faithful watchdog keeping a sharp eye out for corruption, abuse, and neglect by those in power that otherwise might never come to light.”
<i>Power the Newsroom</i>	“ Power our newsroom. Your subscription is a direct investment in our newsroom, helping us hire more reporters to cover pressing community issues.”
<i>Community Connectivity</i>	“ Connect with your community. Our newspaper helps the local community stay connected by keeping readers up to date on what’s happening.”
<i>By & For Locals</i>	“ By our community, for our community. We’re committed to amplifying the voices and concerns of our neighbors.”

Individual Benefits

Appeal	Text
<i>Special Access</i>	“Proven benefits. With access to expert journalists, award-winning coverage, and subscriber exclusives, you’ll enjoy benefits that you can’t get anywhere else.”
<i>Restaurants & HS Football</i>	“Stay connected. Keep up with what’s happening in your community—everything from your high school football team to the best new restaurants in town.”
<i>Nonpartisan Source</i>	“A non-partisan, trusted source. Tired of the political bias in national news? We’ll give you just the facts on issues that matter to you.”
<i>Know Your Officials</i>	“Do you know the names of your local elected officials? Local news can inform you about who represents your community, creating a more engaged and empowered citizenry.”
<i>Ad Free News</i>	“Your local news, ad free. Your subscription allows us to give you the local news that matters, without ads.”
<i>Escape Polarization</i>	“Truth over ideology. Escape the polarizing rhetoric of national media outlets by supporting your local paper.”

Information

Appeal	Text
<i>Newspaper Closures</i>	“ Over 1 in 5 American newspapers have closed since 2004 because of changing market conditions, leaving many communities without a dedicated source of local news.”
<i>Polarizing Alternatives</i>	“ In the absence of a local newspaper , people often turn to social media and cable news for information, which research shows tends to polarize the public.”
<i>Salutary Effects</i>	“Research shows that communities with newspapers have better financial health, are more prepared for natural disasters, and build better infrastructure to support future generations. ”
<i>More Complete Picture</i>	“Research shows that people who get their news from social media think they are better informed than they really are. Get a more complete picture with our local paper. ”
<i>Most Original Reporting</i>	“Local newspapers do most of the original reporting that other outlets like local TV and radio stations rely on to get information to the public.”
<i>Reflect Perspectives</i>	“Research shows that local newspapers usually reflect the perspectives and interests of their community much better than big national outlets.”

Newspaper Features

Firm Type	Coverage Focus	Subscription Price
(Unspecified)	(Unspecified)	\$5
Locally owned	Local	\$10
Nonprofit	Local & State	\$15
Publicly funded	Local & National	

Decision Task

<u>Offer A</u>	<u>Offer B</u>
<p>Power our newsroom. Your subscription is a direct investment in our newsroom, helping us hire more reporters to cover pressing community issues.</p> <p>Our nonprofit newspaper depends on subscribers like you. Get full digital access to exceptional local and nationwide journalism for just \$5 per month.</p>	<p>Local papers like ours serve as a faithful watchdog keeping a sharp eye out for corruption, abuse, and neglect by those in power that otherwise might never come to light.</p> <p>Our locally-owned newspaper depends on subscribers like you. Get full digital access to exceptional journalism for just \$10 per month.</p>

Which offer do you prefer?

Strongly prefer

[Offer A](#)

Slightly prefer

[Offer A](#)

Slightly prefer

[Offer B](#)

Strongly prefer

[Offer B](#)

Decision Task

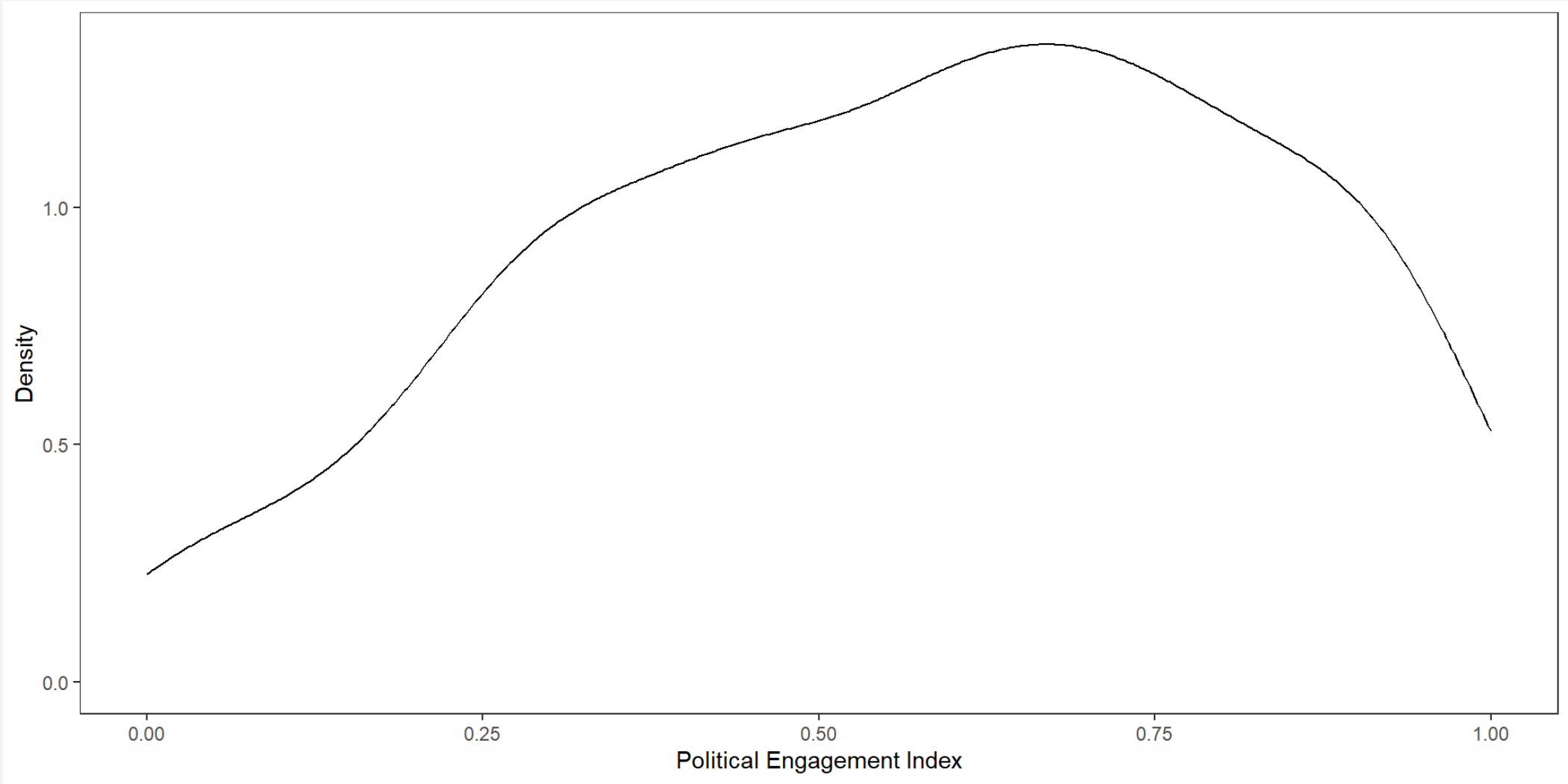
- Repeated decision task 6 times
 - 2 compared “community” appeals
 - 2 compared “individual” appeals
 - 2 compared “information” appeals
- Ranking task
 - Ranked 3 selected appeals on “most likely to pay”
 - Ranked 3 selected appeals on “most persuasive”

Sample

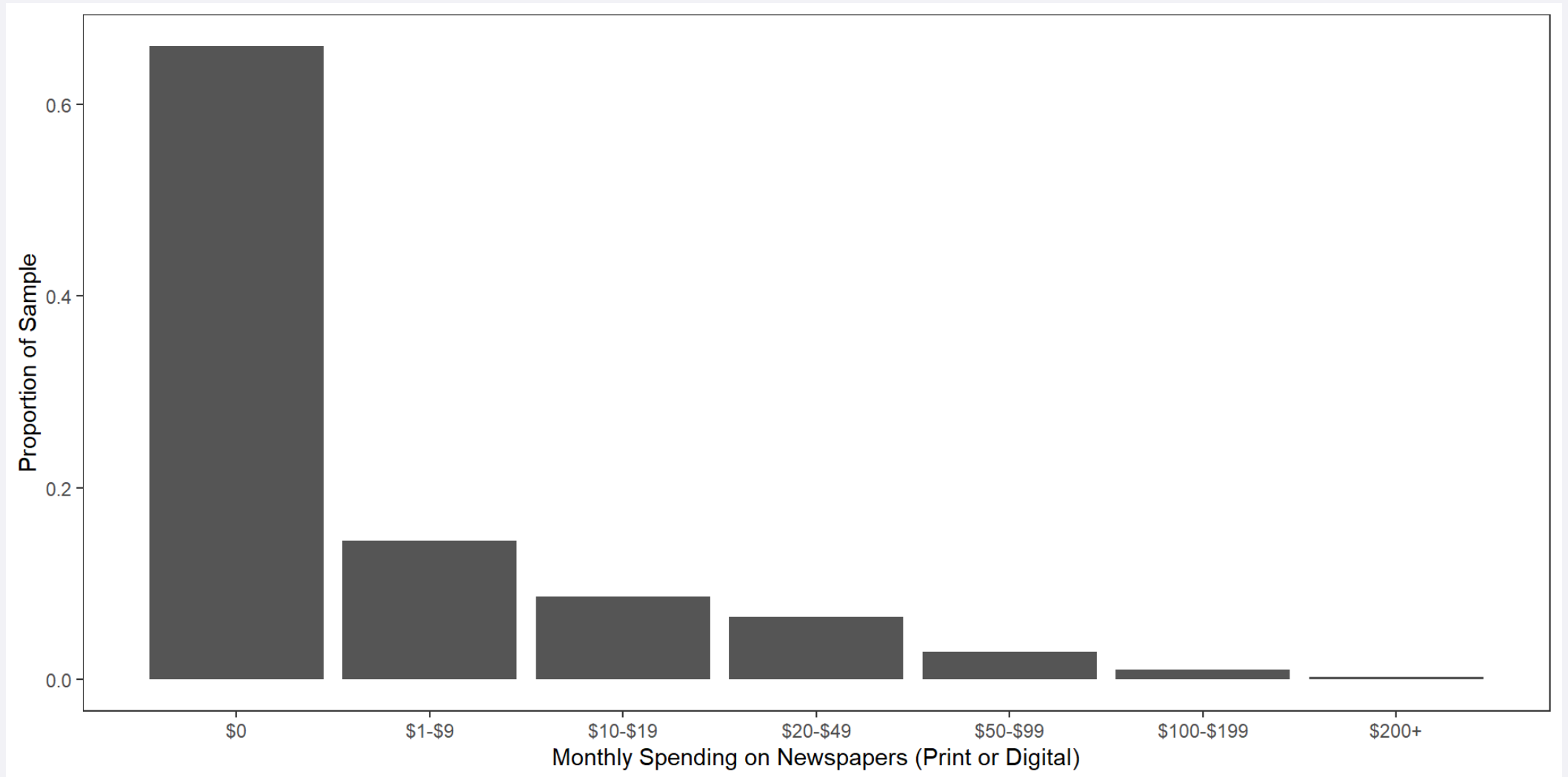
- Fielded pilot 2024 March 15-17
- 399 respondents recruited on Lucid Theorem
- Removed 19 for low quality
- Analysis sample $n = 380$
- Decision task observations $n = 4,560$
- Ranking task observations $n = 2,280$

Results

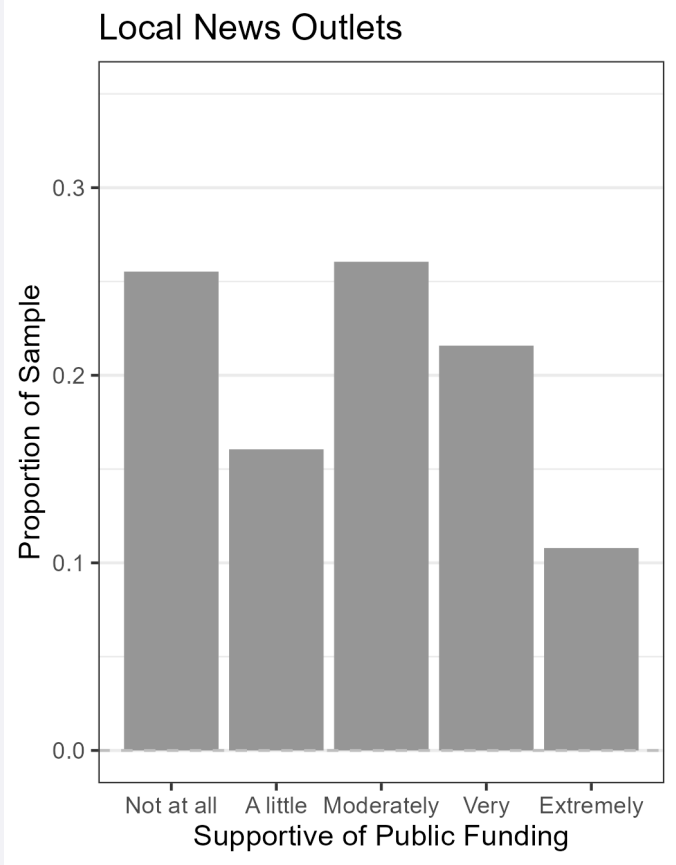
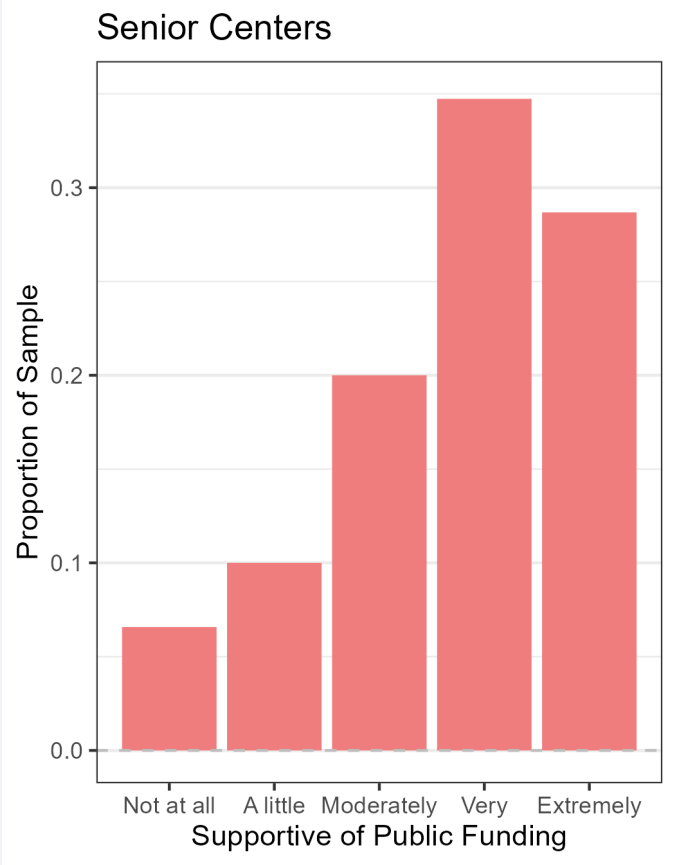
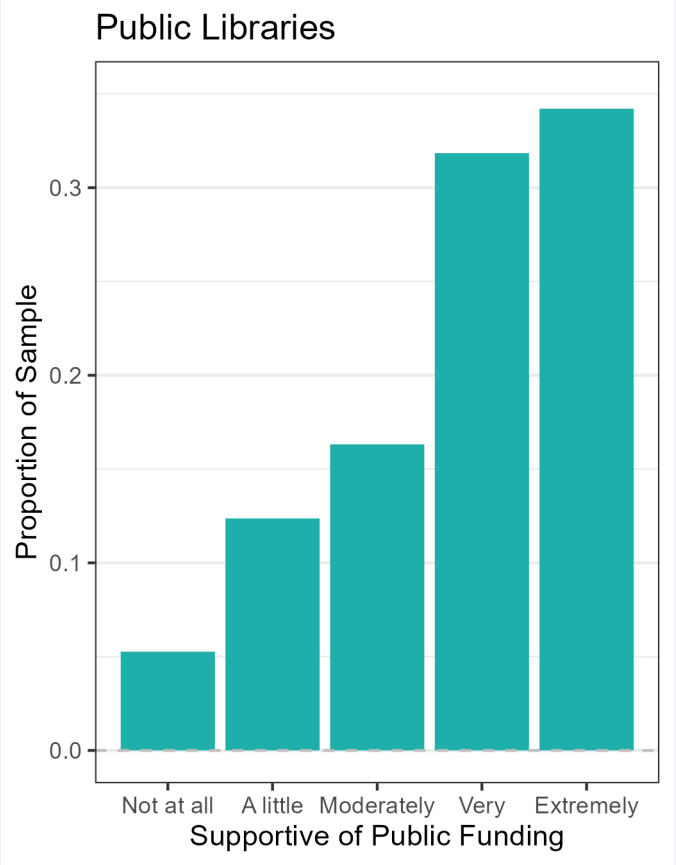
Political Engagement



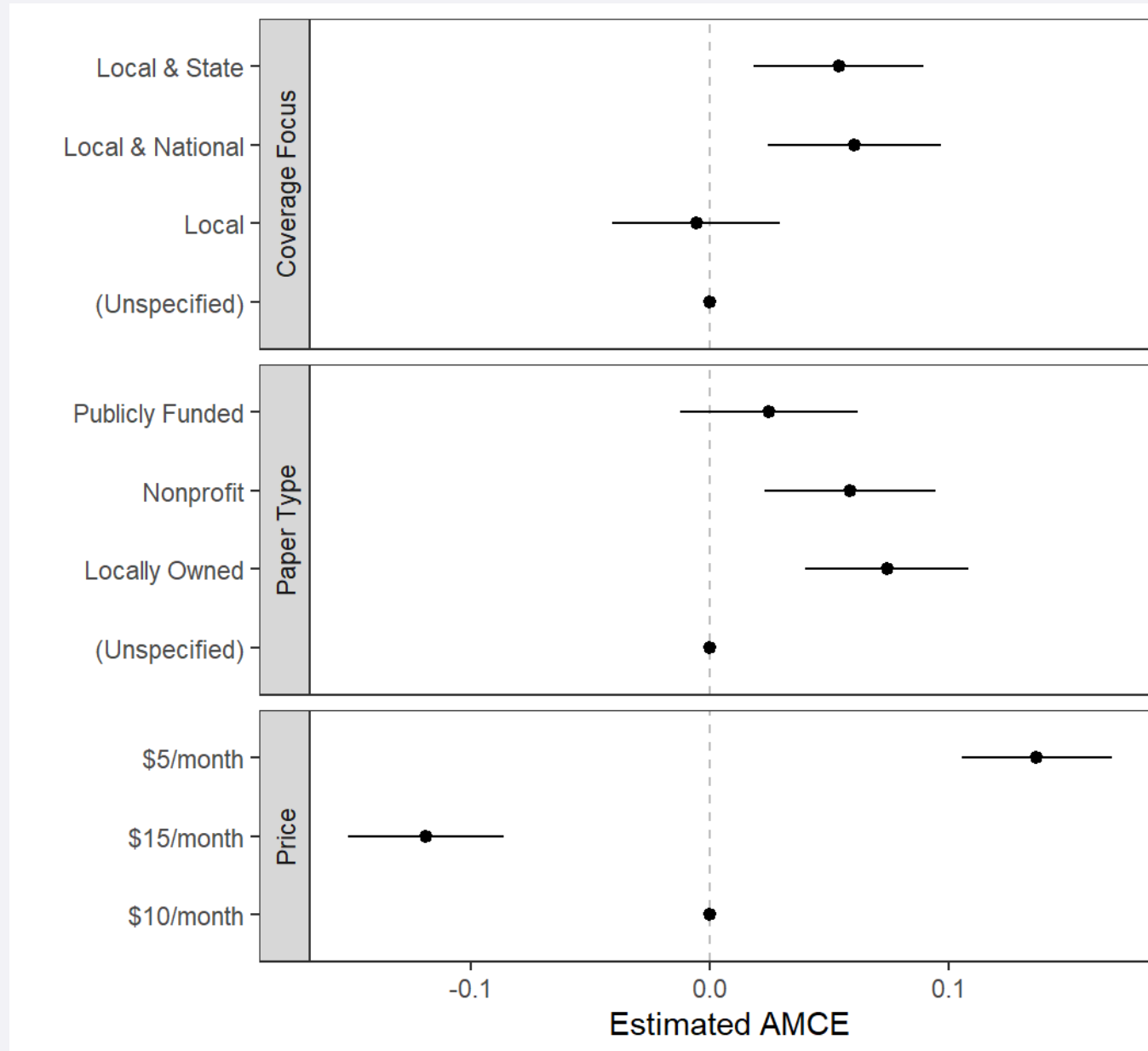
Few Pay for Subscriptions



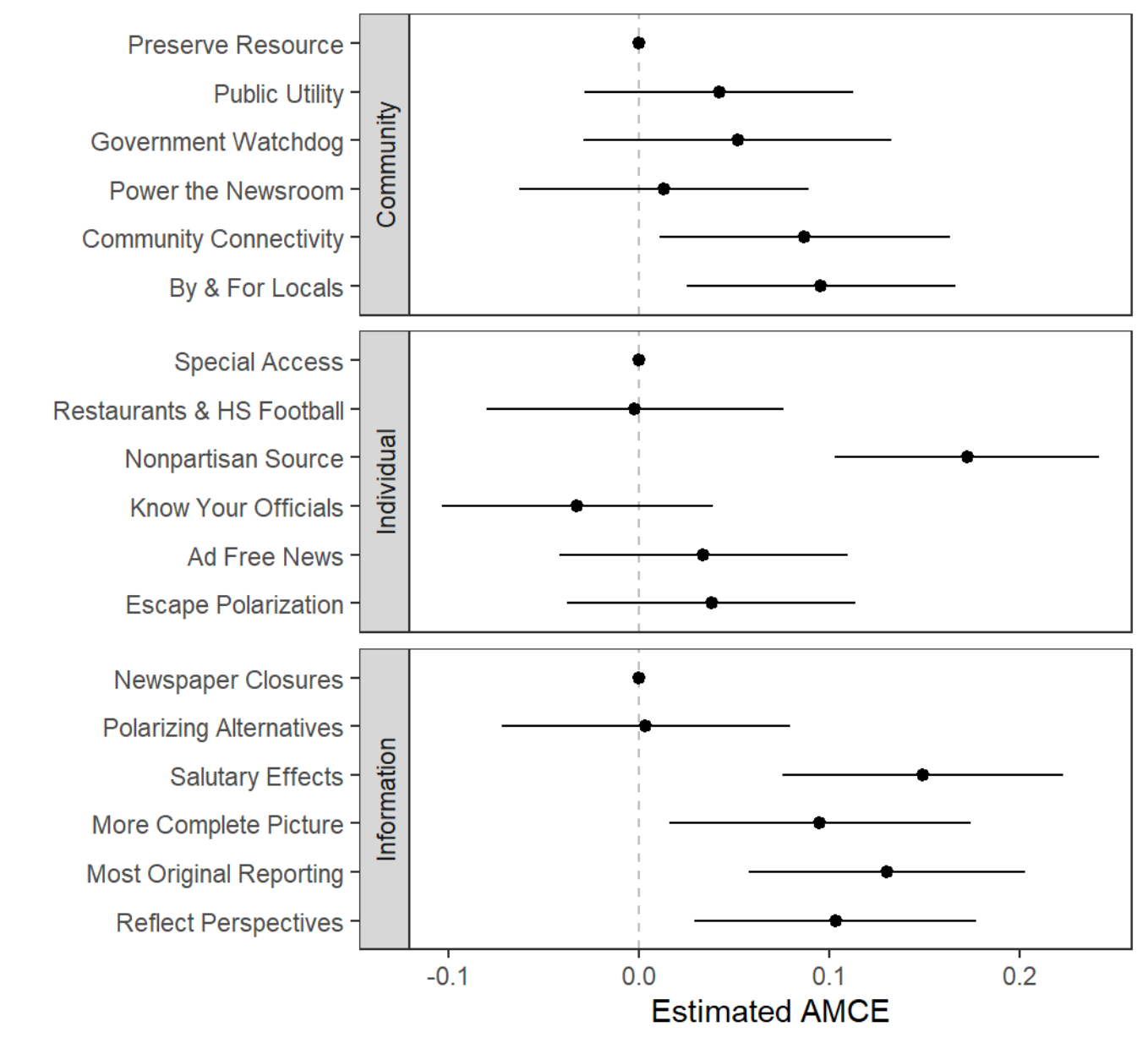
Support for Public Funding



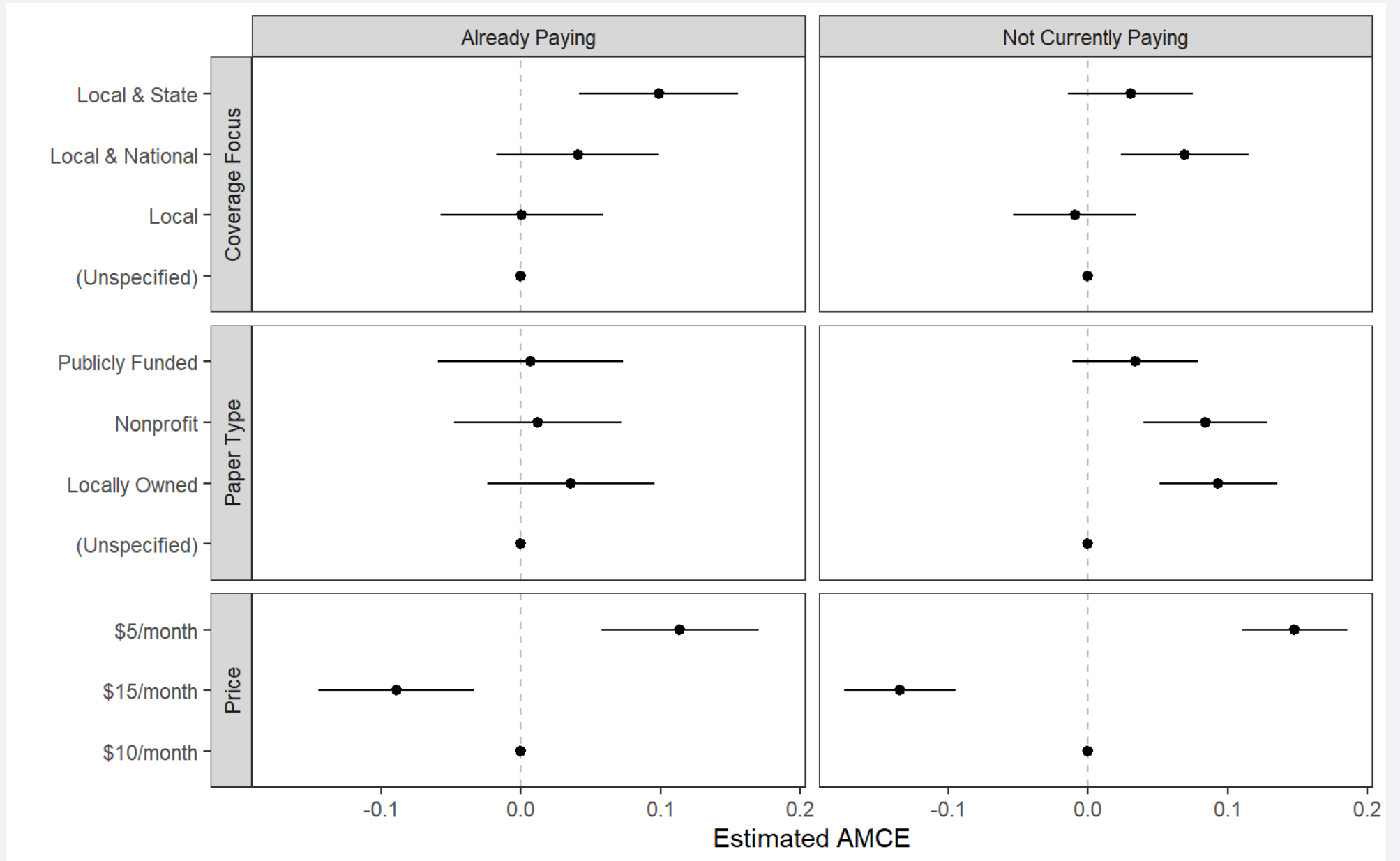
Newspaper Features



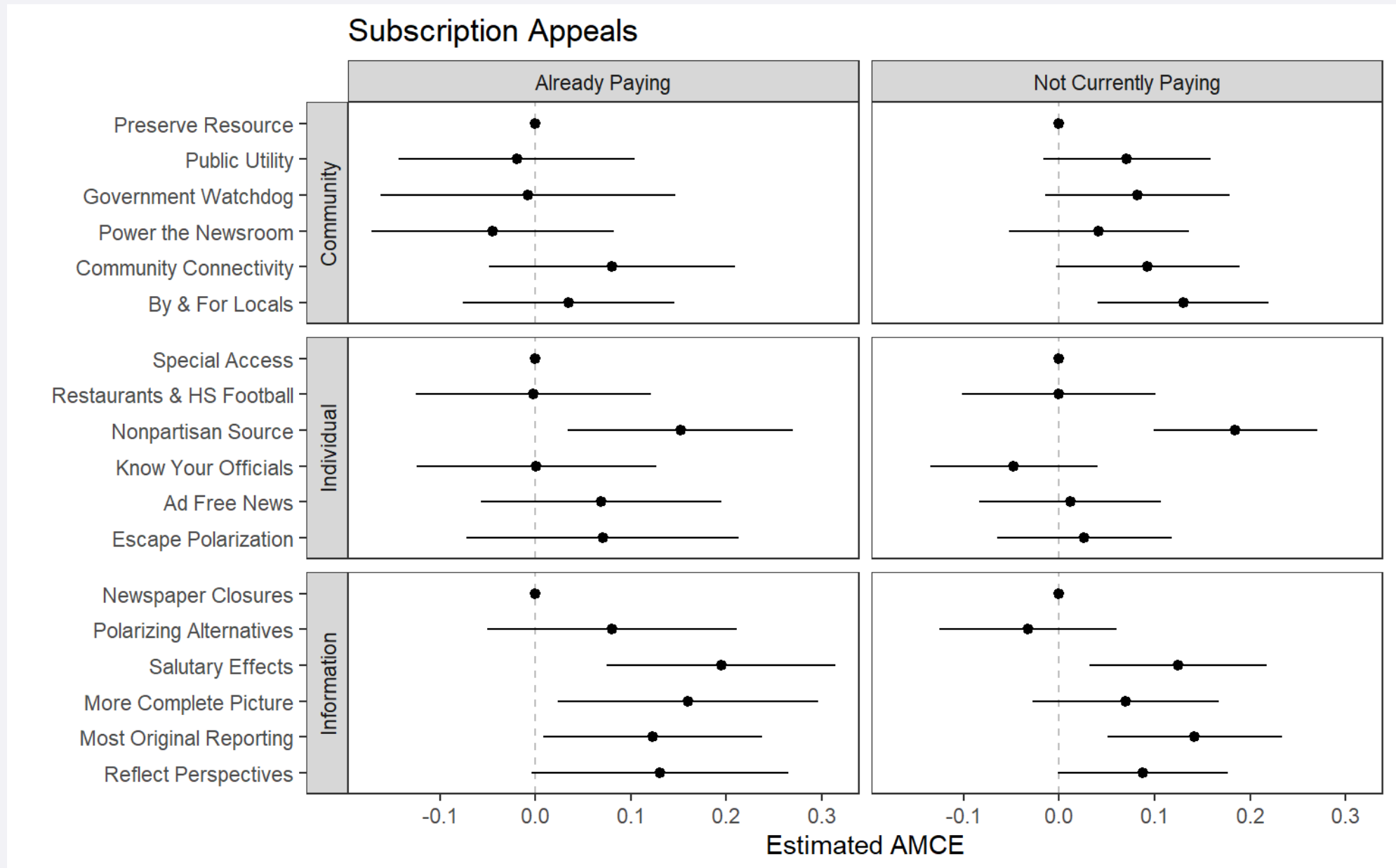
Subscription Appeals



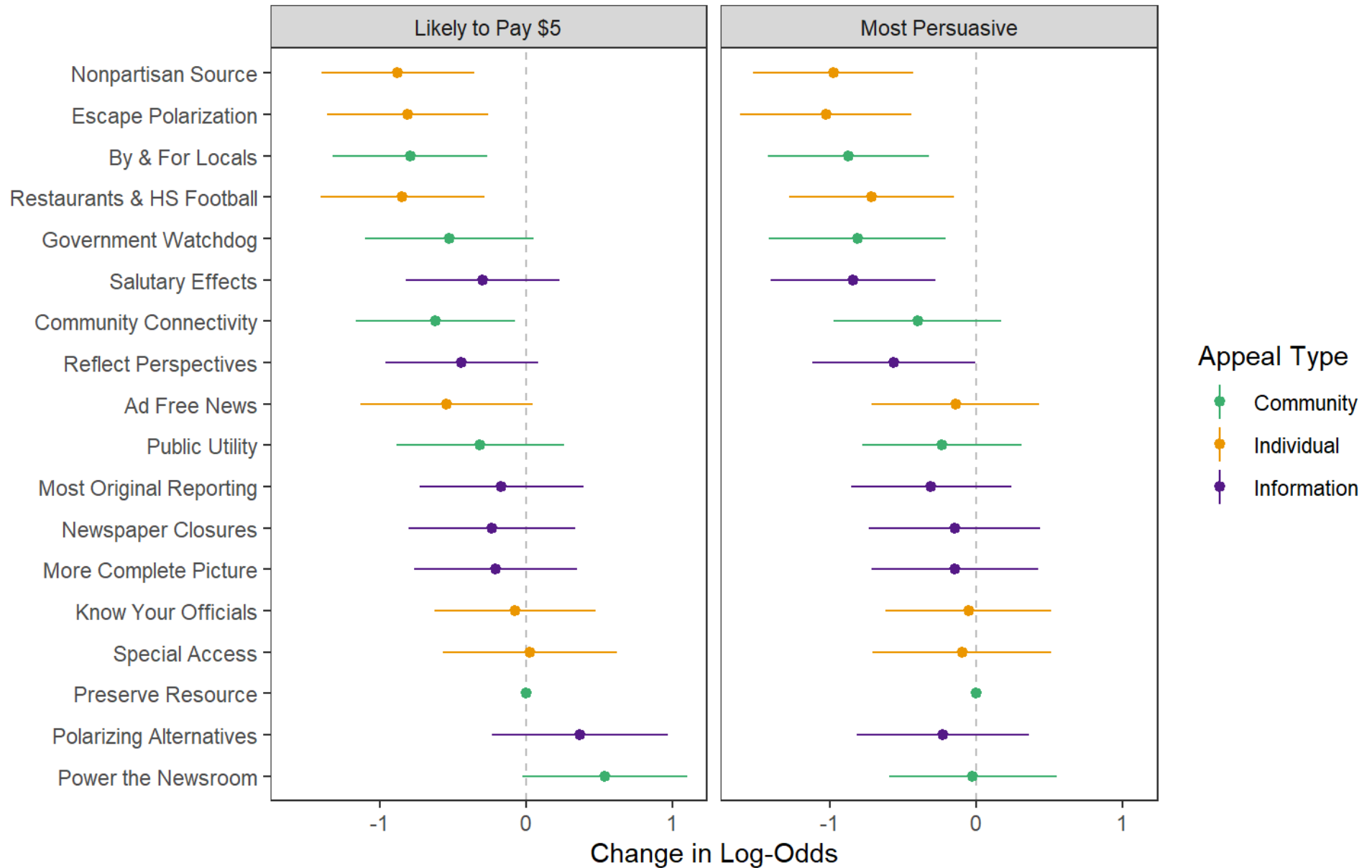
Current vs. New Customers?



Current vs. New Customers?



Ranking Appeals



Next Steps

Next Steps

- Field with larger sample ($n \sim 2,600$)
- Identify best substantive appeals
- Partner with local newspapers to test out the best in the real world

Thank you!

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Backup Slides

Sample Demographics

- Male: 47.9%
- Nonwhite: 30.3%
- Unemployed: 10.5%
- Education (median): 2-year college degree
- HH Income (median): \$40,000-59,999
- Democrat: 44.2%
- Republican: 38.4%
- True Independent: 17.4%