

# Media Markets and Localism: Does Local News en Español Boost Hispanic Voter Turnout?

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## Abstract

Since the dawn of broadcasting, and especially in the past decade, Americans have turned their attention from local to distant sources of news and entertainment. Television and national media generally are often thought to undermine civic engagement, transforming locally engaged *citizens* into *viewers* consuming programming from distant sources. Yet, some television, notably news programming, originates locally, raising the possibility that some kinds of television programming may promote civic engagement. While US broadcast regulation has traditionally promoted localism without clear rationale, in this paper we propose a simple test for the importance of localism, whether the presence of local television news affects local civic behavior. Although the ubiquity of local television news programming areas makes it impossible to study its effects on general populations, Spanish-language local television news programming was available in only about 25 US metro areas in 2002, up from 14 in 1994. We make use of this growth in targeted programming to document that Hispanic voter turnout is 10 percentage points higher, relative to non-Hispanic voter turnout, in markets with Spanish-language local television news. Longitudinal estimates, based on markets that get a first local Spanish-language news program between 1994 and 2002, are somewhat smaller (5 points) but still statistically significant.

## I. Introduction

The increased integration of markets for news and entertainment fundamentally changes the quality and quantity of media products available to consumers. Because the production of entertainment and news is characterized by significant fixed cost, increases in market size raise the number of feasible products. In a globally connected world of entertainment, more viewers watch shows that better match their preferences. Satellite and cable TV have brought American football to Europe, Japanese anime to Latin America and Mexican soap operas to the United States. In better-integrated markets, many consumers have turned their attention from local to distant sources of news and entertainment. As a result, some local media products may cease to exist if their audiences preferring local content falls below a critical threshold. Some scholars claim that the rise of integrated media transforms locally engaged *citizens* into passive *viewers* and undermines civic society (Putnam, 2000).

Against this backdrop, many regulatory agencies, including the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) of the United States, seek to protect local media and promote localism. In the words of FCC Chairman Michael K. Powell, “fostering localism is one of this Commission’s core missions and one of three policy goals, along with diversity and competition, which have driven much of our radio and television broadcast regulation during the last 70 years.” But what is “localism,” and why is it desirable? Despite an apparent commitment to localism, the FCC and others have not clearly articulated its meaning. Does it mean locally produced content? Content of local interest? Programming produced by persons, or by owners, who reside locally?

In the hand-wringing about disengagement from local activities, television is generally singled out for the most criticism. Gentzkow (2004), for instance, attributes most of the reduction in voter turnout between 1950 and 1970 to the spread of television. Yet, much of the debate confuses the medium and the message. While national media products may disengage citizens from local politics, local media – particular local news – may have the opposite effect. Evidence that local media affects engagement in local politics would provide some empirical basis for policy promotion of localism.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper we propose a simple test for the importance of one aspect localism, local news programming. We ask if the presence of local television news broadcasts affects local civic behavior. The ubiquity of local television news programming across all US metro areas makes it impossible to study its effects on the general population. In contrast, Spanish-language local television news programming is available in only about 25 US metro areas. The US Hispanic population grew by 58 percent between 1990 and 2000, from 22 to 38 million, and over this period the number of metropolitan areas with Spanish-language local television news (on Telemundo or Univision) grew from 14 to 25. We make use of both the cross sectional and time series variation in the availability of this type of targeted programming to study its effects on one important measure of civic engagement, voter turnout. We find that, relative to non-Hispanic voter turnout, Hispanic turnout is 5-10 percentage points higher in markets with Spanish-language local television news. Longitudinal estimates, based on markets that get a first local Spanish-language news program between 1994 and 2002, are somewhat smaller but still economically and statistically significant. For the case of Spanish-language television

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<sup>1</sup> Oberholzer-Gee and Waldfogel (2005) provide evidence on the relationship between black-targeted local radio and weekly newspapers and black voter turnout.

news, the spillovers from local media to civic engagement exist and they appear to be fairly important.

This paper proceeds in four sections. First, we present theoretical background on how the available products depend on the local distribution of types. We also discuss the relevant existing literature. Second we discuss the data used in the study. Third, we present evidence on availability of Spanish-language local television news and its dependence on the local population mix. Fourth, we present estimates of the effect of Spanish-language local news on Hispanic voter turnout in non-presidential general elections. We conclude with a discussion of how markets can undermine or foster civic engagement.

## **II. Background**

This study links the literature on entry in differentiated product markets with recent models of political economy. There is ample evidence that, in the presence of fixed costs, products are made available in markets only when large groups want them. For instance, black-targeted radio stations are only available in markets with many black citizens (Siegelman and Waldfogel, 2001; Waldfogel, 2004). Similarly, daily newspapers report more frequently about issues of interest to blacks in cities with a larger black share of population. This in turn increases black readership (George and Waldfogel, 2003). In the context of this study, we expect to observe Spanish-language news programming only in markets with a substantial number of Spanish speakers. Variation in the size of the local Spanish-speaking community, both across jurisdictions and over time, provides the

opportunity to study the link between market size, the provision of local news and electoral participation.

Models of political economy emphasize the importance of information for voter turnout. A strong empirical regularity is that people who receive campaign messages are more likely to turn out (Cox and Munger, 1989; Caldeira, Clausen and Patterson, 1990; Bartels, 1993; Wielhouwer and Lockerbie, 1994; Shachar and Nalebuff, 1999; Gerber and Green, 2000b). As a single vote is unlikely to change the electoral outcome, this observation is not easy to explain. Matsusaka (1995) suggests that the consumption benefits of voting are larger if citizens are more confident of voting for the “right” candidate. Campaign messages help citizens decide who the right candidate is. Feddersen and Pesendorfer (1996, 1999) also provide an information rationale for differences in the likelihood of participation. In their model, less informed voters have an incentive to delegate their vote to better informed citizens via abstention. If differences in information are critical, it becomes important to understand who the targets of campaign efforts are (Feddersen and Pesendorfer, 1996: 418). In part, the answer depends on the technology that is used in election campaigns. The media – television, newspapers and radio – are important channels to disseminate campaign information (Strömberg, 1999a). The basic premise of our approach is that candidates will find it easier to campaign to those who read papers, listen to the radio and watch television. Whether or not individuals consume media products depends on their preferences for news and entertainment and on the quality of the match between those preferences and the programming that is on offer. In particular, individuals are more likely to find programming appealing if it is aired in their language.

### **III. Data**

The data for this study are drawn from three sources, the Current Population Survey's Voting Supplement, 1994-2002, the 1990 and 2000 US Census, and direct collection of information on the availability of Spanish-language local television news in US metropolitan areas. Specifically, we have an MSA panel for the even-numbered years between 1994 and 2002 on the number of stations offering local news in Spanish for all US metro areas, and individual-level voter-turnout data from the CPS. The CPS data also indicate the individuals' MSA, Hispanic status, and various individual characteristics.

We gathered a list of stations broadcasting news in Spanish from the Telemundo and Univision websites. We contacted each of these 50 stations to learn if they produce and broadcast local news. We also know when these stations began airing local news in Spanish. This information from allows us to construct a variable indicating whether there is local Spanish-language news in each year for 265 markets. We assume that the metropolitan areas without affiliates of these networks lacked local Spanish news over the entire period.

### **IV. Availability of Spanish-Language Local News**

Of the 265 market areas we examine in this study, 14 had at least one station broadcasting local news in Spanish in 1994. Between the 1990 and 2000 Census enumerations, US Hispanic population increased from 22.4 million to 35.3 million (by 58

percent), while non-Hispanic US population increased by 9 percent. Because a sizable local Hispanic population predicts the presence of Spanish-language local news, so the past 10 years has been a period of growth in the availability of Spanish-language local news.

Table 1 explores the determinants of having at least one local station broadcasting local news in Spanish via a probit relating the presence of Spanish-language local news to Hispanic and non-Hispanic population (probability derivatives are reported in the table). We have Census data for 1990 and for 2000, while the local news data cover 1994-2002. Panel A of the table relates news availability to 1990 population, while panel B relates news availability to 2000 population.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Hispanic population bears a positive and significant relationship – an additional million Hispanics raises the probability by 45 percent in 1994 – while non-Hispanic population bears no statistically significant relationship. Successive columns after the first repeat the probit with Spanish local news availability in 1996-2002. These results echo findings elsewhere on the relationship between targeted local programming and targeted and other elements of the population.<sup>2</sup>

A probit relating 1994 Spanish local news availability to 1990 Hispanic population only can be used to simply calculate the Hispanic population threshold required for Spanish local news availability (the Hispanic population that generates a 50 percent chance of Hispanic news availability). The resulting Hispanic population is about 350,000. Figure 1 presents the distribution of Hispanic population across the metropolitan areas in the study in 1990 and 2000, and the vertical line shows the 1994

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<sup>2</sup> See Waldfogel (2003, 2004).

entry threshold. Not surprisingly – in light of the 58 percent growth in national Hispanic population between 1990 and 2000, many more metro areas are to the right of the entry threshold in 2000. And by 2004, 25 of the 265 metro areas have at least one Spanish-language local news broadcast (see table 2).

The metropolitan areas in our sample contain 85 percent of US Hispanic population in 2000. In 1994, the 14 metro areas with Spanish-language local news contained 63 percent of the Hispanics in the sample. By 2004, the number of sample metro areas with Spanish-language local television news had increased to 25, and these 25 areas contained 76 percent of sample Hispanic population.<sup>3</sup>

The substantial growth in Spanish-language local news availability suggests the promise of a longitudinal empirical strategy that we employ, along with other approaches, below.

While local news is available in Spanish in only selected metropolitan areas, national news on Telemundo or Univision is available almost anywhere there is cable – and over the air in some markets - during this entire period. National news programs cover the presidential election, so even Hispanic populations lacking local Spanish-language news had easy access to news about the presidential contests in 1996 and 2000. The widespread availability of Spanish-language national news suggests that the effects of Spanish-language local news programming on Hispanic turnout will be larger in non-presidential election years.

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<sup>3</sup> Percentages based on 2000 Census Hispanic population of each metro area.

## V. Spanish Local News and Hispanic Voter Turnout

### 1. Empirical Strategy

We are interested in determining whether the availability of Spanish-language local television new programming affects Hispanic voter turnout. A simple approach to this question would be to relate an Hispanic individual's turnout to a measure of the availability of Hispanic language news (HLN) by estimating an equation of the form

$$(1) \quad V_{im} = \alpha HLN_m + X_i \mathbf{b} + \mathbf{n}_{im}$$

on a sample of Hispanic persons, where  $V_{im}$  is a dummy indicating if individual  $i$ , who lives in metro area  $m$  voted.  $X(i)$  contains characteristics of the individual,  $HLN(m)$  indicates whether the area has Spanish-language local television news, and  $\mathbf{n}_{im}$  is an error term.

A basic problem with this approach is that the tendency for individuals (Hispanic or otherwise) to vote may be related to unobserved area factors, or that the error term is really  $v_{im} = \mu_m + \mathbf{e}_{im}$ , where  $\mu_m$  is common to all persons in the metro area. Factors of this sort might include the ease with which persons can travel to the polls, or the weather. If this is the form of unobserved differences, one solution is to “difference out” the behavior of non-Hispanics. If  $d^H$  is an indicator for whether a person is Hispanic, then one can estimate

$$(2) \quad V_{im} = \alpha HLN_m + X_i \mathbf{b} + \alpha^H d^H HLN_m + d^H X_i \mathbf{b}^H + \mu_m + \mathbf{e}_{im}$$

using the entire (Hispanic and non-Hispanic) sample. If Spanish-language news boosts Hispanic turnout – but not non-Hispanic turnout – then we expect  $\alpha^H$  to be positive. That

is, we expect the relationship between HLN and turnout to be more positive for Hispanics than for non-Hispanics.

## 2. Results

Before turning to regression evidence, we can get suggestive evidence about the effect of Spanish language local television news on Hispanic turnout from a comparison of Hispanic and non-Hispanic turnout in markets with and without local Spanish-language television news (see table 3). Using all available years for our sample markets – see table 3, panel A – Hispanic voter turnout averages 37 percent in markets without local Spanish news and 45 percent in markets with local television news in Spanish. Non-Hispanic turnout is 58 percent in markets without, and 60 percent in markets with, Spanish-language local television news. That is, in markets with Spanish-language local television news Hispanic turnout is 8 percentage points higher, while non-Hispanic turnout is about the same. Whatever is raising Hispanic turnout in the places with Spanish-language television news, it does not affect non-Hispanics.

Panels B and C of table 3 separate presidential and non-presidential election years. Two contrasts are immediately evident. First, turnout is much higher in presidential election years, for both Hispanics and non-Hispanics, regardless of the local media environment. Second, the difference in Hispanic turnout in places with and without Hispanic local news, relative to the same geographic difference for non-Hispanics, is slightly larger in absolute terms for non-presidential years. That is, the difference in differences for non-presidential years is 7.6 percentage points, while the

difference in differences for presidential years is 6.3 points.<sup>4</sup> Of course, the simple comparisons in table 3 are, and we turn to regressions to revisit the strategy with statistical controls.

Table 4 presents estimates of probit estimates of the model in equation (2), reporting probability derivatives. The  $X$  variables included are dummies for income, education level, and gender, as well as first and second-order terms in age. Hispanics and non-Hispanics are each allowed their own coefficients on the  $X$  variables.

The first column pools all years of data, and the results echo table 3a. After accounting for individual observable characteristics, the difference in non-Hispanic turnout is slightly negative (-2.6 points). Over and above this, the difference in Hispanic turnout is 9.8 percentage points. That is, the diff in diffs for Hispanics is 9.8. Pooling the non-presidential years, in column (2), the diff in diffs is 11.1 points, while it is 7.7 points for the presidential years. Columns (5)-(8) report results separately for each of the 5 sample years. The effect of interest is very large (14-15 points) in 1994 and 1998, and smaller (7-8 points) in 1996 and 2000. The estimated effect of interest is much smaller (4.4 points and insignificantly different from zero) for 2002.

These results are consistent with evidence on the relationship between black-targeted local media and black voter turnout, in Oberholzer-Gee and Waldfogel (2005). Like this one, that study documents elevated turnout by blacks (relative to whites) in markets with black-targeted local media outlets, particularly in years of non-presidential elections. The results above show that Spanish-language local television news boosts Hispanic voter turnout in non-presidential elections from about 30 to about 41 percent –

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<sup>4</sup> To see this, note that  $(40.0-30.8) - (54.5-52.9) = 7.6$ , while  $(53.5-45.7)-(68.5-67.0)=6.3$ .

or by over a third. In presidential election years, the presence of Spanish-language local television news appears to raise Hispanic turnout from about 46 to 54 percent, or by about a sixth.

These estimates are vulnerable to a concern of group-specific unobservables correlated with voter turnout. For example, Hispanics interested in political participation may congregate in metropolitan areas with media outlets. Circumventing this problem requires group-specific unobserved fixed effects for each metro area. Because we have data on 5 separate elections – and because of the growth in the availability of Spanish-language local news availability during our sample – we can include group-specific MSA fixed effects in our models. That is, we can estimate a longitudinal model of the form:

$$(3) \quad V_{imt} = \mathbf{a}HLN_{mt} + X_{it}\mathbf{b} + \mathbf{a}^H\mathbf{d}^H HLN_{mt} + \mathbf{d}^H X_{it}\mathbf{b}^H + \mathbf{f}_t + \mathbf{m}_m^H + \mathbf{m}_m^{Non-H} + \mathbf{e}_{im},$$

including group-specific MSA effects as well as time effects.

Table 5 presents estimates of this model (using linear probability models), and we find that  $a^H$  is roughly 5 percentage points and significant. While smaller than the estimates from the cross sectional models, this still implies that HLN presence boosts Hispanic turnout by roughly 15 percent. When we estimate the model separately for the presidential and non-presidential election years we obtain a statistically significant estimate of 7.8 percentage points for non-presidential years and a statistically insignificant estimate of 2.0 percentage points for presidential election years.

### 3. Size of the Estimated Effect

We take our results to indicate that Spanish-language news programs boost Hispanic turnout by 5 to 10 percentage points overall. In non-presidential election years,

the periods when the presence of local news actually changes the kind of political information available to Spanish-speakers through television, the effects are quite large. The presence of Spanish-language local television news raises Hispanic turnout by between 8 and 11 percentage points. Because Hispanic turnout averages 30 percent in non-presidential elections in places without local Spanish-language televisions news, the effects are between 27 and 37 percent. Using Hispanics as a window into the possible effects of television on political behavior, it appears that the effects of television can be large and positive on voter turnout.

As a practical matter, local television news can substantially change the Hispanic composition of the electorate. While Hispanics make up only 12.5 percent of the US population, their share varies widely across areas. Across the 265 sample metro areas, the median Hispanic share is xx, while the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile is xx, and the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile is xx. Figure 2 illustrates the effect of local Spanish-language television news on the Hispanic share of the electorate in non-presidential elections, using a simple calculation.

Assume (from table 3b) that 31 percent of Hispanics turn out to vote if there is no Spanish-language local news, while 39 percent turn out if there is Spanish-language local news (31 percent, plus the relatively conservative longitudinal estimate). Assume (from table 3b) that 53 percent of non-Hispanics turn out in non-presidential elections. Then, if  $h$  is the share of an area's population that is Hispanic, then the Hispanic share of the electorate is

$$(0.31 + d0.08)h / [(0.31 + d0.08)h + 0.53(1 - h)]$$

, where  $d$  is 1 if there is Spanish-

language local news, 0 otherwise. Figure 2 plots the Hispanic share of the electorate with

and without Spanish-language local news. For example, when Hispanics make up a quarter of local population, they make up 16.2 percent of the electorate without Spanish-language local news and 19.5 percent of the electorate with Spanish-language local news. When Hispanics make up half of local population, their corresponding shares of the electorate are 36.8 and 42.1.

## **VI. Conclusion**

With more integrated media markets and a larger variety of programming choices, many consumers opt for non-local programming. While such choices enhance the private benefits of media consumption, there is a concern that reduced localism undermines civic engagement. Exploiting variation in the cost of accessing information about local politics, we find support for this concern. Hispanics without access to local television news are significantly less likely to participate in elections than Hispanics with access to news in Spanish.

Many questions about localism in media remain unanswered. But it is clear from the results of this study that at least one aspect of localism – the availability of local news – is important. Other aspects of localism, such as the ownership of broadcast assets, remain topics for other research.

Television bears a mixed relationship with political participation. Historically, the spread of television has been linked with declining political participation. But it is important to distinguish the message and the medium. Television carries both local and national news. The spread of television, like other national information sources, can

attract people away from local products and local affairs. But television can also include local content, chiefly local news, and we find that the availability of Spanish-language local television news significantly boosts Hispanic voter turnout. These results are consistent with other findings that black-targeted local news media boost black voter turnout.

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Table 1: Presence of Spanish-Language Local Television News  
a. Using 1990 Population

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002
Non-Hisp. Pop 90 (mil)	-0.0308 (0.0168)	-0.0279 (0.0214)	-0.0158 (0.0200)	-0.0273 (0.0245)	-0.0304 (0.0304)
Hisp. Pop 90 (mil)	0.4445 (0.1941)*	0.6142 (0.2144)**	0.9309 (0.3008)**	1.1803 (0.3516)**	2.2953 (0.6323)**
Observations	265	265	265	265	265

b. Using 2000 Population

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002
Non-Hisp. Pop 90 (mil)	-0.0323 (0.0157)*	-0.0331 (0.0192)	-0.0190 (0.0181)	-0.0288 (0.0212)	-0.0438 (0.0273)
Hisp. Pop 90 (mil)	0.2485 (0.1046)*	0.3316 (0.1139)**	0.4427 (0.1396)**	0.5523 (0.1609)**	1.3458 (0.3742)**
Observations	264	264	264	264	264

Standard errors in parentheses. \* significant at 5%; \*\* significant at 1%.  
Probit estimates. Probability derivatives reported.

Table 2: Growth in Metro Areas with Spanish-Language Local Television News

Year	Number
1994	14
1996	16
1998	19
2000	21
2002	25

Table 3: Hispanic and Non-Hispanic Voter Turnout and the Presence of Spanish-Language Local Television News  
a. All Year

Spanish-Lang. Local News	Hispanic	Non-Hispanic
No	36.8	58.2
Obs	5,441	173,328
Yes	45.2	59.8
Obs	11,732	79,330

b. Non-Presidential Election Years (1994, 1998, 2002)

Spanish-Lang. Local News	Hispanic	Non-Hispanic
No	30.8	52.9
Obs	3,265	107,837
Yes	40.0	54.5
Obs	7,235	49,565

c. Presidential Election Years (1996, 2000)

Spanish-Lang. Local News	Hispanic	Non-Hispanic
No	45.7	67.0
Obs	2,176	65,491
Yes	53.5	68.5
Obs	4,497	29,765

Table 4: Voter Turnout and the Presence of Spanish-Language Local Television News

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	All yrs	94, 98, 02	96, 00	94	96	98	00	02
Hispanic Dummy x Spanish Local News	0.0979	0.1113	0.0773	0.1408	0.0785	0.1541	0.0736	0.0441
	(0.0179)**	(0.0216)**	(0.0167)**	(0.0267)**	(0.0173)**	(0.0319)**	(0.0242)**	(0.0316)
Local Sp. News Presence	-0.0255	-0.0232	-0.0286	-0.0040	-0.0262	-0.0047	-0.0309	-0.0583
	(0.0100)*	(0.0124)	(0.0099)**	(0.0218)	(0.0092)**	(0.0154)	(0.0146)*	(0.0177)**
<b>Observations</b>	240627	150100	90527	52868	47513	46606	43014	50626

Notes: All probits include group-specific (Hispanic and non-Hispanic) dummies for income, education levels, gender, and terms in individuals' age. Robust standard errors in parentheses (standard errors clustered on metro area). \* significant at 5%; \*\* significant at 1%. Probability derivatives reported

Table 5: Voter Turnout and the Growth in Spanish-Language Television News Presence

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	all	94, 98, 02	96, 00
Hispanic Dummy x Local Sp. News Presence	0.0478 (0.0244)	0.0774 (0.0305)*	0.0199 (0.0506)
Local Sp. News Presence	-0.0000 (0.0067)	0.0001 (0.0084)	0.0024 (0.0126)
Constant	0.5271 (0.0028)**	0.5274 (0.0031)**	0.6414 (0.0045)**
Observations	269831	167902	101929
R-squared	0.02	0.00	0.00
Fixed Effects	MSA x Hispanic	MSA x Hispanic	MSA x Hispanic

Notes: All models include year effects, group-specific metro area fixed effects and group-specific year effects. Standard errors in parentheses.

\* significant at 5%; \*\* significant at 1%. Linear probability models.

Figure 1: Hispanic Metro Area Population and the 1994 Entry Threshold

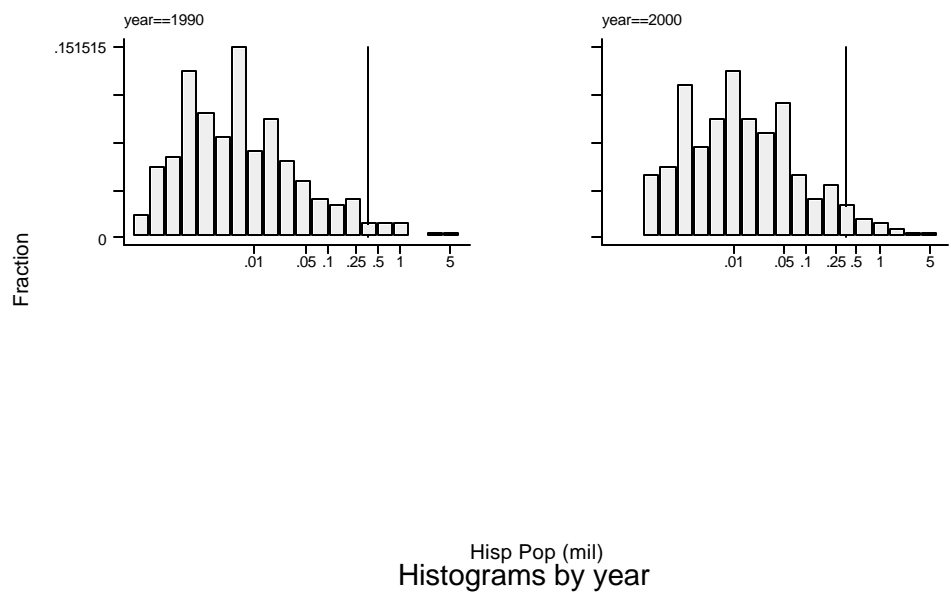


Figure 2

