Meghan Mercier
Political Science
Year in School: Senior
Hometown: Omaha, Neb.
Faculty Mentor: Dr. David Konisky, Truman School of Public Affairs

Public perceptions of the environment: The role of mass media
Meghan E. Mercier

This project examines the relationship between television news coverage of environmental issues and variations in public concern for the natural environment in the United States. Aggregate-level, time series data (GSS; Vanderbilt TV News Archive; 1973-2006) reveals a positive correlation between the amount of environmental news broadcasts in the U.S. and American public concern for the natural environment. Statistical analysis of the 2006 and 2007 Collaborative Congressional Election Studies, a set of nationally-representative surveys, shows that the amount of national network news an individual views (on average per week) is positively related to the person’s level of concern for the natural environment. National news networks have a stronger relationship with public concern than local news, which is not statistically significant in regression models. Thus, those who consume more national media are more likely to exhibit concern for environmental issues. However, stations that capture niche audiences (FOX, PBS) are highly indicative of an individual’s environmental opinions, and have an influence even when considering partisan affiliation and ideology. Regular FOX News viewers display the least concern for the environment, while PBS viewers are the most concerned. The author hypothesizes that national news networks help to shape public concern for these issues in one of two ways: The media may reinforce preexisting beliefs about environmental issues. Alternatively, networks may draw an audience that harbors partisan beliefs about major-issue areas (economic policy, social policy) and help form their opinions of peripheral policy issues like the environment.