

Media Use, Selective Exposure, and Political Polarization

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During the past several decades, many societies throughout the world have become increasingly polarized about politics. This polarization has taken many forms. Over time, members of opposing political parties or ideological groups have strengthened their attitudes about a number of political policies and issues, deepening the rift between citizens' opinions on a range of topics. In addition to widening disagreement about issues, political polarization also extends to partisans' feelings about each other. Members of one political party increasingly report disdain and animus toward members of opposed political parties (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012). These negative feelings may be indicative of a larger process of social polarization, in which individuals have increasingly incorporated their partisan or ideological affiliation as a fundamental aspect of their social identities. Considering partisanship or ideology as a core part of one's social identity contributes to two concurrent processes that may lead to polarization among the public: Partisans see members of their own party or ideology (i.e., the ingroup) more favorably, even as they view members of the opposed political party or those with different ideologies (i.e., the outgroup) more negatively (Mason, 2015).

What explains these patterns of political polarization? Scholars have offered a number of explanations ranging from the consequences of elite (i.e., politicians and public figures) polarization to broader cultural changes and geographical sorting. While each of these factors is important, changing patterns of media use may be particularly valuable for understanding political polarization. In particular, changes in the media environment, including the expansion of political content brought on by cable television, the Internet, and social media, have dramatically increased the media choices available to consumers. While people have historically preferred content in line with their existing opinions and attitudes, now more than ever individuals are able to choose media content that reflects their worldview, shaping their media environments in accordance with their political preferences. Political partisans—individuals who strongly identify with a political party or particular ideology—are able to select news media content that aligns with their political attitudes. These changes in the media environment raise the possibility that selective exposure processes may enhance political polarization, as people are exposed to more information that reinforces their attitudes. This entry explores that possibility by examining the existing evidence on selective exposure and its potential link to political polarization.

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What is selective exposure and why does it occur?

Ranging from specific acts of exposure to media use patterns and general exposure tendencies, selective exposure may be understood as any bias in message selection (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014). Selective exposure assumes that audiences actively engage in information seeking in order to trigger media effects they desire for themselves, such as providing entertainment, facilitating knowledge gain, or confirming opinions. When individuals seek information, they tend to demonstrate a strong preference for information that supports or aligns with their preexisting viewpoints. When it comes to political information, partisanship or ideology may play a key role in selective exposure. Namely, individuals may attempt to use their ideology as a guide to select attitude-consistent information, opting for media sources whose ideology is perceived to be in line with their own. Although there is little evidence that a majority of news consumers have media diets that consist of predominately like-minded content (Prior, 2013), partisan selective exposure may lead some individuals to systematically choose opinion-reinforcing political information.

Selective exposure is premised on the idea that individuals are motivated to avoid cognitive dissonance. Dissonance occurs when new, incoming information conflicts with or challenges preexisting attitudes or beliefs. Because holding contradictory beliefs is cognitively difficult and untenable when it comes to personally important issues, individuals seek to reduce dissonance by either updating preexisting beliefs in line with the new information, disregarding the incoming information, or changing their attitudes altogether. All of these options require cognitive effort, making heavy demands on individuals' limited cognitive capacity. People may try to reduce dissonance by actively attempting to avoid opinion-challenging information or come up with counterarguments against opposing information, but these dissonance reduction techniques also require significant cognitive effort. It may be easier to select attitude-confirming information in the first place in order to avoid the psychological discomfort induced by inconsistency. In the context of selective exposure, cognitive dissonance theory suggests that the preference for attitude-consistent information leads individuals to seek out information that aligns with their viewpoints and reinforces their prior opinions. When it comes to political information, individuals may attempt to avoid cognitive dissonance by selecting news sources they perceive to be in alignment with their own political views. By shaping their media exposure around their political preferences, individuals increase the likelihood that the political information they encounter will support their attitudes and be consistent with their existing views.

Importantly, a bias toward attitude-confirming information is not the same as a systematic bias against opinion-challenging information (Garrett, 2009). Put differently, while individuals do exhibit a preference for consuming attitude-reinforcing information, this does not necessarily mean they avoid opinion-challenging information. This distinction between seeking proattitudinal information and avoiding counterattitudinal information is especially important in a political context. If individuals jointly seek out opinion-reinforcing information and avoid counterattitudinal information, we might expect that a majority of people exclusively use partisan media. However, if individuals prefer attitude-consistent information but are tolerant of

opinion-challenging information, then variability and diversity in media sources remain possible. In the same vein, the balance of evidence suggests that the threat of avoiding opinion-challenging content in favor of like-minded content—a pattern of media use that is often described as an “echo chamber”—is overblown. While research has demonstrated that political conservatives tend to prefer conservative content and liberals tend to prefer liberal content, these preferences do not necessarily come at the expense of exposure to other viewpoints or more balanced information. Individuals who seek out opinion-confirming information are also likely to spend time consuming information they expect will challenge their opinions (Prior, 2013). There may be several reasons for choosing to be exposed to opinion-challenging information. For one, familiarity with opposing viewpoints can be useful for understanding social conflicts and bolstering opinion-affirming arguments. For another, individuals who desire to perceive themselves as fair and well-informed may seek out counterattitudinal information in line with that self-perception. In sum, selective exposure does not always equate to selective avoidance (Garrett, 2009).

The rapid expansion of media options combined with audiences’ increased ability to shape their media environments according to their individual preferences has implications for selective exposure processes. As the availability of information has increased, so, too, has individuals’ ability to select media in line with their preferences. The introduction of new communication technologies, along with changes in the structure of audiences toward greater fragmentation, have impacted the supply and sorting of information (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). Partisan or ideological content on television, online, and on social media is more plentiful and increasingly available. In addition, traditional news organizations and professional journalists are no longer the exclusive producers of political content. The Internet and social media in particular have provided audiences with the tools to seek out and interact with like-minded others who share partisan or ideological political content in those online spaces. In this environment, selectively exposing oneself to attitude-affirming information is easier than ever, media outlets have strong market incentives to produce niche ideological news, and individuals can easily follow and receive information from other people who share their political views. Receiving a steady stream of attitude-reinforcing content has the potential to further entrench political beliefs and drive wedges between partisans and ideologues of opposing stripes. Taken together, communication technology’s proliferation of media choices and opportunities for ideological selectivity illuminate a possible link between media use, selective exposure, and political polarization.

Selective exposure and political polarization

An important question is whether the increased potential for political media selectivity facilitates political polarization. Such polarization may emerge from selective exposure in a few ways, including (i) a growing divide between individuals in their positions on political issues (i.e., ideological polarization); (ii) increasingly negative feelings or affective responses toward political opponents (affective polarization); or (iii) larger

social distance between members of different political parties or ideologies (social polarization).

Selective exposure has the potential to drive polarization around political issues because it may increase the likelihood that people process content in a biased manner (Taber & Lodge, 2006). A prominent form of biased information processing is known as motivated reasoning. Motivated reasoning can lead people to perceive objectively neutral news and information as antagonistic to their side, or lead them to counterargue or discredit information that challenges their political attitudes and beliefs. Strong partisans who engage in selective exposure often gravitate toward ideological news sources because they perceive those sources to be more credible. In turn, ideological news consumption may promote motivated reasoning, increasing congruence between incoming information and prior beliefs. Selective exposure may enhance the motivated reasoning process because people may be exposed to biased, ideological news that encourages them to counterargue or dismiss disagreeable content and, in the process, strengthens their original attitudes and beliefs about political issues. If the attitudes of partisans over time move toward the ends of the ideological spectrum, ideological polarization has occurred.

Another approach to polarization emphasizes affect or feelings rather than policy or issue positions (Iyengar et al., 2012). While selective exposure could drive polarization about political issues, the evidence is mixed as to whether issue positions themselves are becoming more extreme, challenging the traditional wisdom that ideology-based polarization is responsible for increasingly divided electorates. Interparty affect, on the other hand, seems to be growing consistently more negative. Partisans express increasing dislike and animus toward their political opponents. Such negative feelings may in part be driven by how ideological media outlets cover members of the political opposition. Partisan media often cover the news in emotionally evocative ways, engaging in personal attacks and uncivil criticism that can promote strong feelings of anger and resentment toward political opponents (Hasell & Weeks, 2016). As this highly negative and emotional content can drive wedges between partisans and political opponents, it may contribute to growing affective polarization (Garrett et al., 2014). There is evidence to suggest that partisan selective exposure patterns may be connected to greater levels of polarization in the short and long term, especially with regard to attitudes toward political candidates (Stroud, 2010).

Emotional and negative coverage in ideological media may also contribute to increased animus against political opponents by making political identity more salient for audiences and reinforcing group-centric attitudes. In fact, it is possible that political ideology and media exposure exist in a cyclical, mutually reinforcing relationship. Even as ideology may shape audiences' media selection patterns, media selection patterns may strengthen the partisan or ideological identities of those audiences, increasing the likelihood that future media choices will continue to reflect ideological affiliations (Slater, 2007). Patterns of media use centered on identity-affirming content help to maintain partisanship and ideology as a social identity and keep partisan attitudes accessible for viewers. Thus, as viewers consume opinion-reinforcing media, their partisan and ideological identities may become stronger, driving further biased media selection decisions and further polarization. It is important to note that politically

interested ideologues are the audience most likely to attend to news in the first place. In attempting to appeal to strong partisans or ideologues, media outlets may thus have an incentive to produce affective political content that is increasingly negative toward the political opposition. The more ideological the media content, the more that ideological identity may be reinforced among already partisan audiences, potentially enhancing outgroup animus and affective polarization.

This reinforcing relationship between selective exposure and identity also highlights the possibility of social polarization among the public. Social polarization is characterized by growing partisan or ideological identification as a fundamental part of people's social identity (Mason, 2015). In short, people increasingly see their political identity as a core aspect of their social identity, defining like-minded partisans as the ingroup and political opponents as the outgroup. These political identities shape cognitive, affective, and behavioral reactions to information, and partisans who engage in selective exposure may encounter news that makes their partisan identity more salient. When partisanship or ideology constitutes a salient social identity for individuals, information that reinforces that identity can contribute to polarization (Mason, 2015). Moreover, ideological media often vilify the opposing party and its members, framing political and social problems as the express consequences of inept or nefarious actions by opposing, outgroup partisans. At the same time, ingroup politicians are often portrayed as hard-working public servants attempting to execute the will of the electorate (Levendusky, 2013). If media exposure both heightens partisan identity salience and strengthens affiliation with partisan groups, it may increase ideological bias and potentially reinforce group divisions and social schisms (Mason, 2015).

While there are reasons to suspect a link between selective exposure and political polarization, evidence of a relationship remains mixed. Although ideological messaging from political elites is on the rise, many prominent, mainstream media outlets continue to produce largely centrist content, and many citizens—particularly in America—still identify as ideological moderates or independents (Prior, 2013). Strong partisans compose a comparatively small portion of the electorate. In the same vein, research suggests that most voters attempt to avoid ideological media rather than seek it out, and many people get their news from a mix of sources with a variety of political perspectives. If most people are not selecting partisan news sources, then concerns around media choice amplifying ideological social identity and out-party animus may not apply. Individuals with balanced media diets would also encounter an ideologically diverse range of viewpoints, making motivated reasoning and increasingly polarized issue positions less likely. Further, critics of the idea that ideological media contribute to polarization emphasize that strong ideological identification is not a new phenomenon. With the multiplication of media choices in the modern information environment, it makes sense that some strong ideologues will gravitate toward attitude-reinforcing sources of political content. It is not necessarily the case that media themselves are strengthening partisanship or driving individuals toward political extremes (Prior, 2013).

Unanswered questions around selective exposure and polarization remain. First, given the inconclusive findings, more work needs to be conducted to tease out whether and how selective exposure is associated with various forms of political polarization. Second, it is important for future research to examine the ways in which socially shared

news online has altered patterns of news consumption, potentially changing the cues individuals use to decide what news to select, as well as altering possible effects of media choice on polarization. For example, the link between partisan source affiliation and news selection is well-documented. Today, however, partisan source affiliation may be complicated or even overruled by other source cues, such as social endorsements or the person posting the news article. This dynamic is likely to alter not only how people select news but also the effects of such exposure on polarization. Finally, much of the research on selective exposure, media use, and political polarization has been conducted in the United States. In some ways the case of the United States is unique, as the political system is characterized by two primary political parties and several highly partisan media outlets. This raises important questions about the relationship between like-minded media use and polarization in different countries, societies, and cultures throughout the world.

Conclusion

Selective exposure and its potential relationship with political polarization continues to be a fruitful area of research. The expansion of media choices and uptick in ideological messages combined with increased control over personal media exposure has given audiences unprecedented ability to shape their information environments according to their preferences. If individuals select political information that reinforces their pre-existing opinions, it is possible that they may become more entrenched in their views or their identities as partisans. With its tendency toward emotional and biased coverage, ideological and partisan news in particular may play a role in growing ideological or affective polarization among citizens throughout the world. In light of the negative ramifications of polarization for democratic deliberation and citizenship, it is important for scholars to continue examining the possible linkage between media use patterns and political polarization.

SEE ALSO: Channel Repertoire; Cognitive Dissonance; Information Seeking; Motivated Cognition; Selective Exposure

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