

Fact vs. Faction: Polarization in the Information Age

An Honors Paper for the Department of Government and Legal Studies

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For my dad, who taught me to be deliberative

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A zeal for different opinions concerning religion, concerning government, and many other points, as well of speculation as of practice; an attachment to different leaders ambitiously contending for pre-eminence and power; or to persons of other descriptions whose fortunes have been interesting to the human passions, have, in turn, divided mankind into parties, inflamed them with mutual animosity, and rendered them much more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to co-operate for their common good.

James Madison, *Federalist No. 10*

Introduction

On May 3, 2014, *The Economist Magazine* posed a provocative question: given the staggering amount of data that politicians have at their disposal, “how come their debates are so sterile?” The answer, at least according to the author of the article, is that politicians deal with data in a hyper-partisan way—praising results that support their ideological predispositions and ignoring or even denigrating those that do not. Unfortunately, the availability of more information does not “signal the start of a new Socratic age, in which the political classes jointly search for truth,” but rather gives partisan ideologues more “weapons with which to club [their] opposition.”¹

The partisan exploitation of information in American politics is by no means a new development—look no further than the partisan press of the 19th century (or to virtually any politician in human history).² However, the context within which this exploitation occurs has changed dramatically. Polarization pervades contemporary American politics³; and with the Internet, more people have access to more data (and spin) than ever before. For the idealist, these developments—a highly polarized political environment and unparalleled access to information—might seem incompatible. Individual citizens now have the ability to consider more data and more perspectives in forming their opinions than ever before. Shouldn’t they be able to determine when politicians are bending the truth? Or at the very least, ignoring important trade-offs and counter perspectives in presenting their arguments?

¹ “When facts are weapons,” *The Economist Magazine*.

² Ladd, *Why Americans Hate the Media and How it Matters*, 22.

³ At both the elite, see Poole and Rosenthal, *Ideology and Congress*; Noel, *Political Ideologies and Political Parties in America*; Fleisher and Bond, “The Shrinking Middle in the US Congress”; and Shor and McCarty, “The Ideological Mapping of American Legislatures,” and the mass level, see Abramowitz, *The Disappearing Center*; Levendusky, *The Partisan Sort*; and Hetherington and Rudolph, *Why Washington Won’t Work*, partisans are more polarized than at any time in the past century.

The Information Age appears to provide so much potential for people to form political beliefs backed by data—and to consistently improve those beliefs through exposure to the perspectives of others. But, even a quick look around suggests this potential is being continuously squandered. This project investigates why. In fact, in a polarized political climate (as the Economist article mentioned above suggests), it might be the case that information matters even less. I hope that exploring these questions will enable me to reflect on my own relationship with information in politics and to make suggestions as to how individuals should navigate the contemporary media environment in the context of a political discourse often defined by partisan polarization

The Deliberative Ideal For Information Processing

How should citizens engage with political information? In a perfect world, we'd all be *deliberative*.⁴ We'd carefully review arguments from all sides of an issue, evenhandedly evaluate the evidence that supports those arguments, and choose a position after considering the trade-offs necessitated by it. Deliberation—whether individual or with others through discussion—must meet at least two conditions: It requires exposure to a wide variety of political perspectives and arguments; and for this exposure to matter individuals must approach arguments, evidence, and others with an open-mind. In the abstract, these conditions are relatively uncontroversial. They are just another way to define the concept of *critical thinking*. But, what deliberation looks like in practice is less clear.

James S. Fishkin and Robert C. Luskin define the deliberative ideal as a “weighing of competing considerations” that is informed, balanced, conscientious, substantive, and comprehensive.⁵ Three preconditions—*informed*, *balanced*, and *comprehensive*—roughly map to the exposure requirement. Arguments need to be backed by “appropriate and

⁴ There are some who contest this standard on the grounds that it sets the bar too high for individuals, who have limited time and attention spans. See Zaller, “A New Standard for News Quality.” Others contend that it is not rational for citizens to incur the costs necessary to sort through political information; instead, most people maximize utility by spending time and energy on their careers and families. See Downs, “An Economic Theory of Political Action in Democracy.” Yet others contend that deliberation comes with its own assumptions. This is an argument that “rationality itself rests on [beliefs]” that are not necessarily superior to the ones that underlie other value systems used to form beliefs, like religious fundamentalism. See Fish, “Liberalism Doesn't Exist,” 997.

⁵ Fishkin and Luskin, “Experimenting with a Democratic Ideal,” 285.

reasonably accurate factual claims”; “met by contrary arguments”; and representative of “all points of view held by significant portions of the population.”⁶ Mere exposure to “oppositional political perspectives,” however, does not mean much if individuals don’t deal with uncomfortable information in good faith. Thus, this exposure is only “one necessary, though not sufficient, condition in almost all definitions of deliberation.”⁷ To approach arguments in good faith, individuals must be *conscientious*—“willing to talk and listen, with civility and respect”—and must care about the *substance* of the arguments advanced rather than “how they are made or who is making them.”⁸ Both attributes are essential to the very definition of open-mindedness.

Fishkin and Luskin’s definition clarifies one of the main objectives of deliberation: to help individuals form more accurate beliefs by learning from each other. As John Stuart Mill famously asserted in defense of free speech:

[T]he peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing...those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error.⁹

So long as individuals care about the quality of their beliefs, they should also care about exposure to alternative perspectives and by extension the potential for this exposure to provide an opportunity to learn.

The value of the deliberative ideal extends far beyond this individual accuracy goal. Many scholars argue that deliberation provides legitimacy for the democratic system.¹⁰ At a minimum, understanding the reasons that justify the government’s actions reduces the likelihood that people view those actions as an arbitrary abuse of power: “Most fundamentally, deliberative democracy affirms the need to justify decisions made by citizens and their representatives.”¹¹ When politicians and citizens alike deliberate about politics—or take part in what Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Bruce W. Hardy call “civil

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Mutz, *Hearing the Other Side*, 6.

⁸ Fishkin and Luskin, “Experimenting with a Democratic Ideal,” 285.

⁹ Mill, *On Liberty*, 87.

¹⁰ Manin, Stein, and Mansbridge, “On Legitimacy and Political Deliberation.”

¹¹ Gutmann and Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?* 3.

engaged argument”¹²— “norms are honored, areas of agreement and disagreement are clarified, the collective understanding of the issue at hand is advanced, the commitments of participants to the legitimacy of the system is reinforced, and judgment is based on reasoned argument and not prejudice, force, or fear.”¹³

In theory, deliberative democracy sounds great. However, it is reasonable to ask whether deliberative democratic theorists live in the same world we do. The ideal that they outline appears on its face so far removed from the world of politics in which we currently live. Some even argue that deliberation is virtually impossible if we want people to participate in politics.¹⁴ In reality, people rarely spend the amount of time and energy deliberation necessitates; and, as this project will later demonstrate, they have a large number of underlying (and uncontrollable) psychological tendencies that make deliberation extraordinarily difficult.

Despite these difficulties, deliberative information processing functions well as an ideal. Although it can never be reached, each of us can certainly have a more or less deliberative relationship with political information. With that ideal in mind, this project will explore how polarization affects the quality of individuals’ belief formation processes. Quality, defined broadly, is the extent to which those processes reflect the deliberative ideal outlined above. Ultimately, if people want to form “better” political beliefs, how should they rethink their own consumption of political information in an age of polarization?

The Role of the Media in Promoting Deliberation

Today’s diverse media environment empowers individuals with more choice over how they get political information than ever before. Unlike the mid-20th century, the “media” is no longer predominantly the domain of broadcast and newspaper journalists.

¹² Civil engaged argument shares important similarities with Fishkin and Luskin’s formulation of deliberation. Jamieson and Hardy define civil engaged argument as follows: “The rules of argument include the notions that assertions should be backed by relevant evidence that constitutes proof, the fairness and accuracy of evidence should be subject to scrutiny, the testimony of those who are self-interested should be suspect, evidence must not be ripped from its context, relevant evidence must be disclosed and not suppressed, like items should be compared to like items, and a plan should be tested by asking whether it meets the need and whether its advantages outweigh its disadvantages.” Jamieson and Hardy, “What is Civil Engaged Argument and Why Does Aspiring to it Matter?” 29.

¹³ Ibid., 30.

¹⁴ Mutz, *Hearing the Other Side*.

With the rise of ideologically slanted opinion programs like those on FOX News and MSNBC, online publications like *Breitbart* and *The Huffington Post*, and talk radio, the politically engaged individual can now sample from one or many partisan sources. With the emergence of social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, people can now consume political information socially: they can discuss political news articles, comment on political television segments, and even interact with the (albeit somewhat indirect) political communication of politicians, journalists, and public figures.

Any standard set for the media must recognize this fragmentation of the information environment. Thus, I follow Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Bruce W. Hardy, and Daniel Romer when, writing in 2007, they argue that normative theories of the press should distinguish the “detached” from the “partisan” media¹⁵; and James Curran, who writes in 2005: “There should be a division of labor in which different sectors of the media have different roles, practice different forms of journalism, and make different contributions to the functioning of the democratic system.”¹⁶ Since 2007, technological change has necessitated a third category: social media.

What types of media does each category—“detached,” “partisan,” and “social”—include, and what role does each play in promoting deliberation? The detached media consists of what many would think of as traditional news sources: newspapers like the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* and the major news networks like *CBS* and *NBC*. This type of media subscribes to the journalistic norm of objectivity. It attempts to present all sides of an issue without displaying a preference for one side or another. As James Curran writes, “balanced media report ‘multiple truths’ advanced by rival spokespersons.”¹⁷ By “enabling divergent viewpoints and interests to be aired in reciprocal debate” its “central democratic purpose is...to mediate between social groups, rather than to champion exclusively one group and set of concerns.”¹⁸ In other words, “objective” reporting functions to forge consensus in a politically fragmented society.

¹⁵ Jamieson, Hardy, and Romer, “The Effectiveness of the Press in Serving the Needs of American Democracy,” 27-28.

¹⁶ Curran, “What Democracy Requires of the Media,” 128.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 124.

But as much as we tend to “valorize consensus,”¹⁹ sometimes mainstream agreement only means that the media have ignored important minority viewpoints. In this view, trying to be objective “can lead journalists to rely on established power holders... as sources of news and comment, and unconsciously internalize assumptions that are “uncontroversial” within the prevailing framework of thought.”²⁰ In order to bring minority perspectives to the fore, American democracy also requires a partisan media. Bloggers, talk radio hosts, the highly partisan opinion segments on FOX News and MSNBC, and partisan news organizations like the Huffington Post and Breitbart can (at times) serve an important purpose. Even though the “partisan media are essentially propagandistic, advancing at best partial truths,”²¹ they are almost existentially disposed to criticize and question the detached or “mainstream” media. Thus, the partisan media bring arguments that might otherwise be ignored in the traditional media into the public discourse.

With the detached and partisan media playing distinct roles, “the media system” can “simultaneously promote conflict and conciliation.”²² The Internet, social media in particular, ought to facilitate deliberation too. Because it gives individuals access to more information—from both detached and partisan outlets—and the ability to discuss that information with an almost infinite number of other people, who come from varied perspectives, it ought to be much easier for individuals to approximate the deliberative ideal.

Those who promote a model of democracy based on deliberation argue that the media ought to nurture a public that is “alert, informed, and active in order to supervise the conduct of government.” It should encourage debate—and this debate should enable citizens to “become aware of other viewpoints and interests, register complexity, explore common ground and differences, consider alternative options, and become willing to contemplate tradeoffs.”²³ In this account, the normative role of “the media” writ large is clear: the synergy between the “detached,” “partisan,” and “social” media should create a

¹⁹ Selinger, “Putting Polarization in Historical Perspective,” 24.

²⁰ Curran, “What Democracy Requires of the Media,” 126.

²¹ Ibid., 130.

²² Ibid., 128.

²³ Ibid., 132.

marketplace of ideas—“where ideas battle for supremacy on the basis of merit, and where a reason-based consensus emerges that guides the public direction of society.”²⁴

It is worth briefly questioning whether and to what extent this marketplace of ideas standard works as a normative conception of the media. While most scholars agree that American democracy would greatly benefit if the media environment fostered a true marketplace of ideas, some argue that this standard places too high a burden on individual citizens. Scholarly disagreement is ultimately rooted in different conceptions of democracy. According to Curran, those who utilize this marketplace of ideas standard subscribe to a “deliberative” model of democracy (outlined above) while those who don’t usually endorse a “pragmatic” model.

John Zaller in particular takes a pragmatic view. Instead of judging the quality of the media by its ability to “provide citizens with the basic information necessary to form and update opinions on all of the major issues of the day,”²⁵ it should function more like a “burglar alarm,” calling attention to the most important issues with “intensely focused, dramatic, and entertaining” coverage.²⁶ This type of coverage would engage the average citizen and would provide him enough information necessary to hold his public official accountable.

But despite their criticism, many who support this pragmatic approach still advocate deliberation for the most active citizens. Thus, rather than rejecting the deliberative model outright, Zaller and others advocate a two-tiered standard: Pragmatic democracy “implicitly endorses a basic news service for the majority, and a fuller news service for a self-selecting minority involved in government, political activism, and civil society.”²⁷

When it comes to media’s role in informing the public, Thomas Patterson and Philip Seib don’t fall into either of Curran’s categories. On the one hand, their ideal seems to echo a lot of the deliberative one: In their model, “critical thinking occurs in the context of interests, values, beliefs, understandings, or principles. New information is weighed

²⁴ Ibid., 126.

²⁵ Zaller, “A New Standard of News Quality,” 110.

²⁶ Ibid., 122.

²⁷ Curran, “What Democracy Requires of the Media,” 132.

against existing positions, perceptions, or biases.”²⁸ Rather than the amount of facts a citizen can accurately recall about politics, informed citizens should be judged by the extent to which an individual has “an inquiring mind.”²⁹ On the other hand, they argue that we should not demand that the media be responsible for creating “inquiring minds”; instead, “if the informed citizenship is a habit of mind,” they “first emphasize the contribution of families and schools.”³⁰

At least for the most active citizens, all of these standards fall in line with the deliberative ideal for information processing that I outlined earlier. The media should function as a marketplace of ideas because it must provide citizens with the information necessary to hold their public officials accountable. Ultimately, it “must present a credible threat to deter politicians from lying with impunity.”³¹ As Joseph Pulitzer wrote in 1878, “more crime, immorality and rascality is prevented by the fear of exposure in the newspapers than by all laws, moral and statute, ever devised.”³²

Outline of Thesis

How can individuals in the contemporary media and political environment form better political beliefs? That (perhaps naively ambitious) question motivates this project. Answering it requires weaving together three distinct but interrelated literatures—on polarization, political psychology, and the media. It requires fundamentally rethinking how individuals consume political information.

My paper will consist of three chapters. In chapter one, I describe the polarized political context within which those who are most interested and most engaged in politics find themselves immersed. This chapter considers what it means to say American politics is polarized. It evaluates the extent of polarization in American politics. And it presents original evidence that suggests that just as the public and members of Congress have polarized, so too has American political discourse.

²⁸ Patterson and Seib, “Informing the Public,” 190.

²⁹ This standard explicitly recognizes the limits of the human mind: “Once a judgment is reached, much of the information that contributes to it is disgorged. The judgment is retained but most of the raw material that went into it is not.” Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 191.

³¹ Bennett and Serrin, “The Watchdog Rule,” 172.

³² Ibid.

In chapter two, I enter the world of political psychology to investigate how America's polarized politics has influenced the quality of individuals' beliefs. More specifically, this chapter focuses on the tendency of affectively polarized partisans to engage in selective exposure and motivated reasoning.

In chapter three, I explore the role that the media plays in encouraging or minimizing these biased information processing practices. This chapter argues that social media—compared with the detached and partisan forms—provides the greatest hope of moving individuals closer to the deliberative ideal. It also presents original evidence that suggests that people remain more open minded when a friend presents a political argument to them than when a politician does.

Drawing from the literatures outlined in the first three chapters, how can each of us help increase the influence of facts relative to that of factions in America's political discourse? In the conclusion, I argue that individuals need to fundamentally rethink how they consume political information; advocate for the creation of a completely new social media platform specifically designed to encourage political deliberation; and outline what such a platform might look like. By reimagining the relationship between citizens and political information and more effectively harnessing the power that the Information Age provides, I argue that we can trade our sterile, partisan, and polarized political discourse for a much more deliberative one—in sum, one that better approximates a marketplace of ideas.

Chapter One: Is American Politics Polarized?

Pundits love to talk about polarization. Rarely, however, do they clearly define what “polarization” means. Often, this lack of rigor can lead to significant misperceptions about the state of American politics.³³ In this chapter, I set out to explain what it means to say American politics is polarized and what the evidence in the political science literature suggests about the nature of polarization in American politics. First, I present a variety of different definitions for polarization. The vast majority of scholarly disagreement stems from not getting these definitions straight. Second, after clarifying the meaning of polarization, I assess the extent of polarization in American politics at both the elite and mass level. At the end of this chapter, I present empirical evidence that demonstrates that as elites in Congress have become polarized so too has America’s political discourse.

Defining Polarization

What is political polarization? When people are ‘polarized,’ they are “characterized by division into opposing groups.”³⁴ Polarization of the political variety takes a number of forms. For example, it might be strictly emotional: Republicans hate Democrats or vice-versa. It might be primarily over an individual issue: in the mid 19th century, slavery pit Northern against Southern States. Or it might be ideological: over a wide range of issues, conservatives fundamentally disagree with liberals.

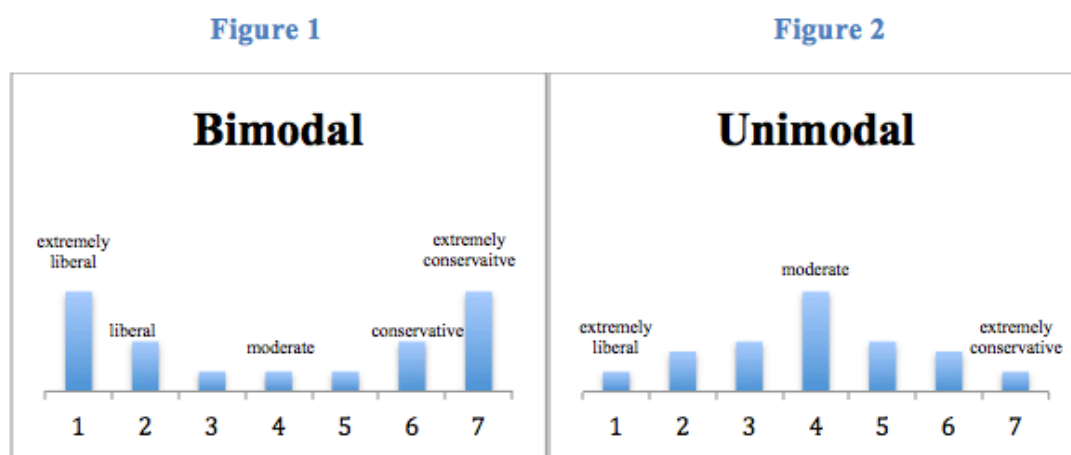
Each of these examples implies that polarization is more or less synonymous with a state of inter-group-disagreement. But, “polarization is both a state and a process.”³⁵ In other words, we can, like the examples above, refer to polarization at a given point in time: how much does group X disagree with group Y relative to how much they could theoretically disagree? Or we can refer to polarization over time: how much does group X disagree with group Y relative to how much they disagreed in the past?

³³ See Fiorina, *Culture War?* 21-25.

³⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary*, “polarized.”

³⁵ DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson, “Have American’s Social Attitudes Become More Polarized?” 693.

DiMaggio et al.³⁶ and Noel³⁷ mention four forms of polarization: dispersion,³⁸ bimodality, constraint, and between-group differences.³⁹ Bimodality refers to the clustering of opinions along a spectrum into distinct modes. Take, for example, the classic liberal-conservative seven point scale. If the data points are concentrated at 1 (extremely liberal) and 7 (extremely conservative), the distribution is bimodal—and arguably polarized (see Figure 1). If the data points cluster around the center, the distribution is unimodal—and not polarized (see Figure 2).



As Fiorina and Abrams point out, labeling “a given distribution as polarized is generally a matter of judgment.”⁴⁰ Observing polarization over time, however, is much less subjective. Moving from a unimodal distribution (Figure 2) to a bimodal one (Figure 1) clearly signals the process of polarization.

It is worth briefly noting a few distinguishing characteristics of the bimodal form. First, bimodality describes *an aggregate distribution* of opinions. This definition of polarization deemphasizes the role that groups play in organizing opinions; instead, it

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Noel, *Political Ideologies and Political Parties in America*.

³⁸ This form of polarization isn’t particularly relevant for my forthcoming discussion, but for more, see DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson, “Have American’s Social Attitudes Become More Polarized?”

³⁹ As my forthcoming discussion will demonstrate, there is a significant amount of overlap between the constraint and between-group differences conceptions of polarization.

⁴⁰ Fiorina and Abrams, “Political Polarization in the American Public,” 566.

focuses on where opinions (or ideological self-identification) are concentrated along a predefined spectrum. Second, moving away from the center of this spectrum represents increasingly *extreme* positions. Defining extremity requires subjective judgment; however, extremity *does not* mean consistency. For example, an individual might express a mixture of both “extreme” liberal and conservative positions: Favoring no regulation of business while at the same time endorsing the complete legalization of all drugs. We might call this individual a libertarian, but it would be misleading to place him in the “moderate” category along the liberal-conservative ideological dimension. In reality, this individual’s issue positions are “mixed.”⁴¹ Finally, bimodal polarization implies a disappearance of the center—the moderate portion—of the distribution. In sum, bimodal polarization answers the question, “have Americans become increasingly extreme in their political views?”

In contrast to the bimodal definition, recognizing the role that groups play in organizing voters into distinct camps and in facilitating conflict—in other words, between-group differences—makes a lot of sense for the polarization narrative. Alan I. Abramowitz acknowledges the crucial function political parties serve in this respect:

“Polarization...depends not just on the intensity of ideological and cultural conflict in society, but also on the extent to which these conflicts are expressed through political parties.”⁴² The intensity of differences between the political parties depends on at least two factors: the extent to which they generally take positions considered “far” away from each other and how unified the parties are in taking those positions. To clearly distinguish this form of polarization from the bimodality one, Fiorina⁴³ and Levendusky⁴⁴ label it “sorting” while Abramowitz calls it “partisan-ideological polarization.”⁴⁵

How does “sorting” differ from bimodal polarization? Sorting refers to an increasing correlation between ideology and partisan identification. The ideological makeup of the political parties provides a salient example.⁴⁶ Say the hypothetical political

⁴¹ This distinction is crucial not only because it differentiates the bimodal from the constraint form of polarization, but also because it is conceptually accurate. See Pew Research Center, “Political Polarization in the American Public,” 22.

⁴² Abramowitz, “Disconnected, or Joined at the Hip?” 79-80.

⁴³ Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope, *Culture War?*

⁴⁴ Levendusky, *The Partisan Sort*.

⁴⁵ Abramowitz, *The Disappearing Center*.

⁴⁶ This example is based on Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope, *Culture War?* 78.

world contains thirty people, ten Democrats, ten Republicans, and ten Independents. At first, each party contains an equal number of liberals and conservatives while all Independents are moderates. But over time, each ideology becomes associated with a party. Eventually, all ten Democrats identify as liberal, all ten Republicans identify as conservative, and all ten Independents identify as moderate. This process could have occurred because members of a party changed their ideological identification or because individuals changed their partisan one: a conservative Democrat became a liberal Democrat or a conservative Democrat became a conservative Republican. Either way, the parties initially resemble each other ideologically, but over time the differences between the groups grow tremendously without a change in the aggregate distribution of ideological identification.

But, sorting doesn't *just* denote a flip-flopping of partisan or ideological *identification*; it also represents the increasing homogenization of party members' *issue positions*. On the surface, this may seem like a trivial distinction. Of course "sorted"⁴⁷ partisans take similar positions; after all, members of the same party now have a stronger tendency to identify with the same ideology. But because ideological identification is just a self-designated label, it does not necessarily mean individuals have the same ideological *consistency* in issue positions. As Morris Fiorina implies, the extent to which individuals consistently hold positions associated with a 'liberal' or 'conservative' ideology may change without their overall ideological identification changing at all: "[I]f subgroups become more homogenous, cross-pressures diminish. In that case, increases in constraint will cumulate in a way that makes subgroup political positions more internally homogenous and externally distinct."⁴⁸ Thus, sorting is also about constraint.

What is constraint? Issue constraint is the extent to which an individual's beliefs are interdependent: holding opinion X means that this individual is also more likely to hold opinions A, B, and C.⁴⁹ For example, if a given person opposes public health insurance, then that person is also more likely to oppose a carbon tax and, in general, to take

⁴⁷ Individuals are defined as "sorted" when their partisan identification matches with the "correct" ideological identification: i.e. liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans. Levendusky, *The Partisan Sort*.

⁴⁸ Fiorina and Abrams, "Political Polarization in the American Public," 577.

⁴⁹ Converse, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics."

consistently conservative positions on many issues. Constraint is perhaps “the most important conception” of polarization because it “is what leads to defining coalitions”—it “is not about people moving apart” but “about the poles becoming increasingly well defined.”⁵⁰ In other words, higher levels of intra-party constraint mean increasingly cohesive parties, and party cohesion increases the likelihood and forcefulness of political conflict.⁵¹

As it is currently used in the literature, “sorting” stands for a whole lot: a strengthening relationship between partisanship and ideological identification *and* increasing issue constraint. Is the term sorting even appropriate for the definition that Fiorina, Levendusky, and others ascribe to it? Perhaps it is not. Instead, the phrase partisan polarization better describes the same phenomenon.

To “sort” means “to arrange according to kind or quality.”⁵² But merely arranging things (in this case, people) assumes that the underlying characteristics of those things (in this case, either the ideological nature of their issue positions or their partisan identification) remain constant. A change in the level of issue constraint, even if solely limited to members within a subgroup, directly violates that assumption. As a result, using the term sorting to capture the notion of issue constraint potentially deemphasizes significant shifts in the ideological consistency of partisans’ beliefs. Therefore, throughout the rest of this paper I will use the term partisan polarization rather than sorting.

Although most scholarship has focused “exclusively on policy preferences” in defining polarization, a growing number of scholars are beginning to define polarization in terms of feelings: *Affective polarization* is “the extent to which partisans view each other as a disliked out-group.”⁵³ From this perspective, it is not individuals’ concrete issue positions that matter—after all, public opinion suffers quite famously from response

⁵⁰ Noel, *Political Ideologies and Political Parties in America*, 171.

⁵¹ It is this type of cohesion that James Madison feared in *Federalist 10* when he wrote of factions: “By a faction, I understand a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or a minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.”

⁵² *Oxford English Dictionary*, “sort.”

⁵³ Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes, “Affect, Not Ideology,” 405-406.

instability⁵⁴; instead, it only matters how strongly Democrats and Republicans dislike each other's party. Compared to the definition for issue-based polarization, which has ignited an extensive conflict in the literature, the definition of affective polarization is much less controversial.

Table 1: Definitions of Polarization

Types of Polarization	Definition	Sample Scholars
Bimodal Polarization	How <i>extreme</i> Americans are in the issue positions that they express.	Fiorina and Abrams (2008)
Partisan Polarization (AKA Between Group-Differences)	Partisan polarization consists of both sorting and constraint .	Abramowitz (2010)
Sorting	When partisan and ideological identifications become increasingly correlated.	Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope (2005)
Constraint	When an individual's beliefs are interdependent: holding opinion X implies holding opinions A, B, and C.	Converse (1964)
Affective Polarization	How negatively partisans <i>feel</i> about the opposing party.	Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes (2012)

Are We Polarized?

Is contemporary American politics polarized? Answering this rather vague question requires answering a few more specific ones first. Are political elites polarized? What about the mass public? Which definitions of polarization apply? In this section, I'll start by addressing the question of elite polarization and then move on to that of polarization in the American public.

*Elite Polarization*⁵⁵

⁵⁴ For two conflicting explanations for response instability, see John R. Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, 53-75; and Christopher H. Achen, "Mass political attitudes and the survey response," 1218-1231.

⁵⁵ Portions of this section were taken from a paper I wrote, entitled "Polarization in American Political Development," in the fall of 2015 for Professor Jeffrey Selinger's American Political Development course.

There is broad consensus among scholars that political elites have become ideologically polarized. Ideological differences between the two parties in the House and Senate are greater than they've been since before World War One.⁵⁶ Moderates have largely disappeared from Congress.⁵⁷ And “*issue constraint* at the congressional level has expanded dramatically.”⁵⁸ Even state legislatures have polarized.⁵⁹

Poole and Rosenthal provide the clearest illustration of congressional polarization using roll call votes to map members of Congress along an ideological scale. By analyzing who votes with whom on a wide range of issues, they can assign each member of Congress an “ideal point” along the liberal-conservative dimension ranging from -1 (consistently liberal) to 1 (consistently conservative). Figure 3, which graphs these scores, also known as DW-NOMINATE scores, demonstrates the partisan polarization of Congress from the 82nd (1951-53) to the 112nd (2011-2013) session. In the 1950s, most congressmen fell in the ideological center of the distribution and a significant number of Democrats (blue) and Republicans (red) overlapped ideologically. By 2011, few congressmen taking mixed positions remained and the parties had no members overlap ideologically.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Poole and Rosenthal, *Ideology and Congress*, 106-107.

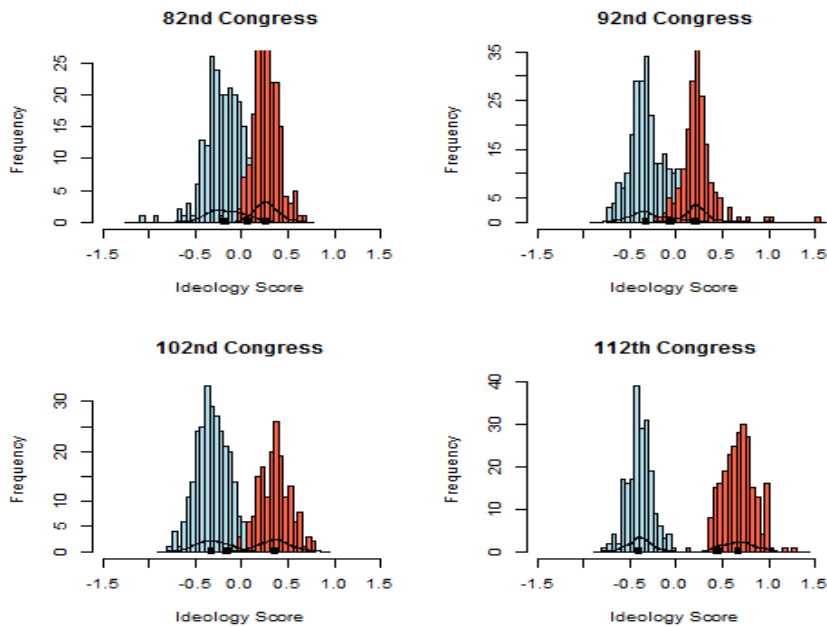
⁵⁷ Fleisher and Bond, “The Shrinking Middle in the US Congress.”

⁵⁸ Barber and McCarty, “Causes and Consequences of Polarization,” 23.

⁵⁹ Shor and McCarty, “The Ideological Mapping of American Legislatures.”

⁶⁰ I thank Professor Franz for permission in using this image from a lecture in his Public Opinion and Voting Behavior class.

Figure 3: Congressional Polarization (Using DW-NOMINATE)



Despite the fact that DW-NOMINATE has become the standard measure of congressional ideology, Richard Bensel argues that there are serious problems with assuming that these scores reflect ideology. In short, this measure cannot “distinguish partisan cooperation from individual commitments to ideological principles.”⁶¹ While DW-NOMINATE does capture increasing party cohesion, it does not reveal whether that cohesion results from increasing ideological issue constraint or merely from increasing party discipline.

It is important to remember what DW-NOMINATE scores represent: roll call voting patterns not pure ideology. Nonetheless, Hans Noel elegantly illustrates why these scores accurately demonstrate ideological polarization in Congress. Instead of assuming a liberal-conservative dimension to DW-NOMINATE data as many others do, he looks for the development of ideology in the *writings of political thinkers* based on the policy positions they put forth.⁶² Because politicians do not vote solely based on their ideological

⁶¹ Bensel, “The Emperor Never Had Clothes,” 21.

⁶² His dataset consists of thousands of articles (opinion pieces only) written by political thinkers in the 19th and 20th centuries. Publications range from *The New Republic* and *The New York Times* to *The National Review* and *The Wall Street Journal*. Although, as Noel admits, his sample of writings cannot possibly represent a perfectly random one, he does his best to choose publications that are “the best representatives of pundit opinion.” Articles were chosen in batches every twenty years between 1850 and 1990. Next, he and a

predispositions, the NOMINATE data cannot be said to accurately reflect ‘ideology’ per se; but writers, as opposed to politicians, are much more free to express their true views. Thus, their issue positions aren’t tainted by “partisan cooperation.” Noel reiterates this crucial point: “the issue space defined by the opinions is not influenced by the strategic considerations of political actors voting on the floor of Congress, and I therefore presume is a more direct measure of ideology.”⁶³

By comparing DW-NOMINATE scores with the ideological issue space defined by pundits in the 1950s, Noel finds that ideological coalitions—developed in the writings of political thinkers—have restructured congressional party politics over time. This unique methodological approach ultimately leads Noel to an important conclusion:

[T]here is something special about politics today, and the red and blue, polarized, values divide terminology is meant to capture that. There is a real phenomenon, which deserves the attention it is getting. Conceptualizing ideology as an independent force from parties, and recognizing that it is now oriented to reinforce party divisions, is a significant aspect of that phenomenon.⁶⁴

In other words, contemporary congressional polarization is fundamentally different from congressional polarization at any point in the last century because it is the first time party has become generally synonymous with ideology across nearly all issue domains.

In sum, elite polarization has unequivocally occurred. Rather than one issue replacing another in the realm of political conflict, known as conflict displacement,⁶⁵ contemporary polarization—as ideology and party continue to reinforce one another—

team of researchers engaged in an intensive (to say the least) data collection and coding endeavor. Not only did they read every single article in their sample, but they also wrote abstracts—summarizing the main argument advanced in each. To limit subjectivity, the articles were coded based on the author’s explicit (not assumed/implied) support or opposition to a policy proposal in Congress. I’ll give one example from Noel’s appendix on his data methods to clarify how this procedure works. Noel’s team summarized an article from the May 3rd 1950 issue of *Human Events* written by Frank Chodorov as follows: “We are buying the American people by telling them it is for their security, but social security, free education, tariffs, bonuses, parity payments are all just ways of limiting us.” They coded this data point as *against* Social Security. After eliminating duplicate opinions expressed by the same authors, Noel and his research crew coded almost 8,000 opinions from hundreds of authors. Finally, using a statistical model similar to Poole and Rosenthal’s NOMINATE model, Noel treats authors’ expressed opinions just like roll call votes. An article in favor of Social Security counts just like a vote for the Social Security Act. After coding thousands of opinion pieces, Noel has substantial data reflecting the development of ideological coalitions as they present themselves in American political discourse. Noel, *Political Ideologies and Political Parties in America*, 94.

⁶³ Ibid., 93.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 180.

⁶⁵ Hetherington, “Putting Polarization in Perspective,” 444.

extends to nearly all types of issues. This reality has led Geoffrey C. Layman and Thomas M. Carsey to characterize modern partisan polarization with the phrase “conflict extension”: today, ideological partisans fight over everything (instead of just one or two things).⁶⁶ While no single issue seems to threaten the viability of the Union like slavery once did,⁶⁷ elite ideological polarization has produced a political environment for which there is no direct comparison in the last century—and perhaps in all of American history.

Mass Polarization

The question of mass polarization has generated a significant amount of controversy in the literature. Much of this controversy, as Marc Hetherington points out, “can be understood as a question of definition.”⁶⁸ But, another crucial question underlies differences in how scholars define polarization: who counts in politics? From the perspective of bimodality, all citizens’ views are important. Whether individuals identify with a party doesn’t matter. Although, in measuring bimodal polarization, scholars sometimes limit their study to subsets of Americans (e.g. just voters), their evaluations of bimodal polarization tend to focus on the distribution of opinions for *all* Americans independent of political engagement.⁶⁹ In that case, the absence of bimodal polarization implies that there exists a large body of Americans with mostly moderate views.

Has polarization of the bimodal variety occurred? Evidence for the bimodal polarization of ordinary Americans has been relatively limited. In terms of extremity of issue positions, Levendusky finds that “there is some evidence of polarization,” but “the

⁶⁶ Layman and Carsey, “Party Polarization and ‘Conflict Extension’ in the American Electorate.”

⁶⁷ At the very least it is important to recognize that the political parties agree where it existentially counts: on the constitutional foundations of American government, which determine the legitimate transfer of power. As Jeffrey Selinger argues, “the two major parties...are polarized within a truncated ideological continuum.” Selinger, “Putting Polarization in Historical Perspective,” 21.

⁶⁸ Hetherington, “Putting Polarization in Perspective,” 415.

⁶⁹ Although nothing inherent in the definition of bimodal polarization precludes considering samples of politically engaged or sophisticated Americans, my impression has been that most scholars take this general approach. See Fiorina and Abrams, “Political Polarization in the American Public”; Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope, *Culture War?*; Levendusky, *The Partisan Sort*; and Fiorina and Levendusky, “Comments on Chapter Two.”

majority of the electorate remains closer to the center than to the poles.”⁷⁰ In terms of ideological self identification, Fiorina observes that since the 1970s there has been “virtually no change in the distribution of American ideological identification.”⁷¹ In sum, for the majority of Americans, bimodal polarization has been minimal if it has occurred at all.

Relative to bimodal polarization, evaluations of partisan polarization focus much more on subgroups of individuals: first and foremost the political parties, but also the most politically engaged within those parties. In order to show that partisan polarization has occurred, two conditions must be met. First, ideology and party must be increasingly related. Second, the ideological consistency of each group must have increased. Most evidence suggests that both conditions have been met.

As Matthew Levendusky exhaustively documents, Republicans are much more likely conservatives and Democrats much more likely liberals than a generation ago.⁷² Using NES partisan and ideological identification data, Alan I. Abramowitz reports similar results: “the [ideological identification] gap between Democratic and Republican identifiers doubled between 1972 and 2004.”⁷³

Issue constraint within the parties has increased too—though scholars still argue about its scope. Abramowitz reports that large percentages of voters now take consistently conservative and consistently liberal positions compared with voters in 1984—and that this tendency has become especially prominent for the most politically engaged voters.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ To test for increasing extremity in issue positions, Levendusky constructs a scale based on the average issue position of respondents to six questions, which appear in both the 1984 and 2004 NES. Levendusky, *The Partisan Sort*, 71.

⁷¹ Fiorina tests this contention using three data sources: NES data comparing 1972 to 2004, GSS data ranging from the 1970s to 2000s, and Gallup data from the 1970s to 2000s (which uses a five-point rather than seven-point scale). Fiorina and Abrams, “Political Polarization in the American Public,” 570.

⁷² “In 1972, 28 percent of the electorate was sorted, but that figure grows considerably over the next three decades to 46 percent in 2004.” Levendusky also notes: “If we take into account the fact that many Americans consider themselves “moderates” or cannot locate themselves on the liberal-conservative scale--and hence cannot be sorted by definition--these trends become even more impressive.” See Levendusky, *The Partisan Sort*, 45.

⁷³ Abramowitz, *The Disappearing Center*, 45.

⁷⁴ Abramowitz constructs his own liberal-conservative policy scale based on responses to seven NES policy questions asked in both 1984 and 2004. He assigns each respondent a score between -7 (consistently conservative) and 7 (consistently liberal). Then, making a distinction based on political engagement, he finds that “in 1984, 41 percent of voters were located within one unit of the center of the [liberal-conservative policy] scale and only 10 percent were located near the left and right extremes. In 2004 only 28 percent of

Fiorina and Levendusky argue that Abramowitz's claim is misleading because his measure of ideological polarization exaggerates the amount of issue polarization that has actually occurred.⁷⁵ Instead, Fiorina cites Pew data that reports a 4% increase (from 10% to 14%) in average issue position differences between Democrats and Republicans from 1987 to 2007.⁷⁶

The Pew Research Center's recent report, "Political Polarization in the American Public," sheds more light on the question of mass partisan polarization. Measuring ideological consistency using ten "value" questions as of 2014, Pew data suggests that many more Americans take consistently conservative or consistently liberal positions.⁷⁷ Furthermore, ideological consistency differences between the parties (including independent leaners) have become increasingly stark.⁷⁸ Among the politically engaged, increases in ideological consistency are even more astounding.⁷⁹ In sum, significant partisan polarization has occurred for the most politically engaged Americans,⁸⁰ especially in the intervening time (2008-2015) since Abramowitz and Fiorina first argued about its scope. While the majority of Americans still hold relatively moderate views, that majority is shrinking.⁸¹

As my above discussion of the literature on mass polarization illustrates, scholars have—for the last decade—been immersed in a debate over definition, measurement, and scope. Despite the valuable fruits of this labor, this debate has diverted attention away

voters were located within one unit of the center and 23 percent were located near the left and right extremes." Abramowitz, "Disconnected, or Joined at the Hip?" 77.

⁷⁵ They argue that Abramowitz's coding procedure inflates the amount of polarization because it takes relatively minor changes in an individual's survey responses to bump someone from a "moderate" category to an "extreme" one. Fiorina and Levendusky, "Comments on Chapter Two."

⁷⁶ Fiorina and Abrams, "Political Polarization in the American Public," 578.

⁷⁷ "Over the past twenty years, the number of Americans in the 'tails' of this ideological distribution has doubled from 10% to 21%." Pew Research Center, "Political Polarization in the American Public," 9.

⁷⁸ Pew reports that in 1994 the median Democrat held positions to left—on the consistency scale—of 64% of Republicans while in 2014 that number had ballooned to 92%. Similarly, in 1994, the median Republican held positions to the right of 70% of Democrats while in 2014 Republicans held positions to the right of 94%. Ibid., 10.

⁷⁹ Today almost four-in-ten (38%) politically engaged Democrats are consistent liberals, up from only 8% in 1994 and 20% in 2004. And the rise is also evident on the right: 33% of politically engaged Republicans are consistent conservatives, up from 23% in 1994, and just 10% in 2004. Ibid., 25.

⁸⁰ There are many different metrics for capturing the concept of political engagement. For the Pew study, the "politically engaged are defined as those who are registered to vote, follow government and public affairs most of the time and say they vote always or nearly always." Ibid., 24. Scholars disagree about the size of the politically engaged electorate—like polarization it often depends on the measurement that they utilize. For an example of this debate see Abramowitz, *The Disappearing Center* and Fiorina, *Culture War?*

⁸¹ Ibid., 9.

from a momentous development in the American electorate: affective polarization. Scholars have only recently begun to catch on.

In 2004, Morris Fiorina, Samuel J. Abrams, and Jeremy Pope published *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*, a key contribution to the mass polarization literature. In what comes across as a quick side note in the book, Fiorina mentions that “one colleague suggested that ‘affective’ measures might show more evidence of increasing polarization than ‘cognitive’ measures.”⁸² Using the NES feelings thermometer,⁸³ he briefly explores this suggestion. He finds “a slight increase (5-10 degrees) in emotional polarization” for partisans from the 1980s to 2004 and a larger increase in emotional polarization measured on the feelings thermometer using the terms “liberal” and “conservative.”⁸⁴ This evidence doesn’t quite help to dispel the ‘myth of a polarized America’—though neither does it fundamentally undermine it; and as a result, he doesn’t attribute much weight to the notion of affective polarization after the very brief mention.

Scholars took their eye off the ball. In the past few decades, and especially since 2004, affective polarization has transformed the American electorate and partisan politics writ large. As a shift in recent research suggests, this change has been impossible to ignore.⁸⁵ In their 2014 report on political polarization, the Pew Research Center describes a “rising tide of mutual antipathy” between the political parties: much larger percentages of partisan identifiers have negative views of the opposing party; these negative views have become increasingly intense in character; and those who participate most in politics express the most antipathy.⁸⁶

Looking at NES feelings thermometer data between 1972 and 2012, Alan Abramowitz’s analysis largely confirms the same results: the most politically engaged had

⁸² Fiorina, *Culture War?* 68.

⁸³ The feeling thermometer asks respondents to rate how warmly or coolly they feel towards particular groups of people on a scale of 0 to 100.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 68-69.

⁸⁵ Between 2012 and 2015 many scholars published articles on affective polarization. For some prominent examples, see Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes, “Affect, Not Ideology”; Iyengar and Westwood, “Fear and Loathing across Party Lines”; Fiorina, “Party Homogeneity and Contentious Politics”; and Abramowitz, “Partisan Nation.”

⁸⁶ Pew Research Center, “Political Polarization in the American Public,” 32-33.

the strongest negative feelings towards the opposing party and irrespective of engagement, “the average difference between voters’ ratings of the parties increased from approximately 23 degrees to approximately 39 degrees.”⁸⁷ Marc J. Hetherington and Thomas J. Rudolph present the NES data slightly differently, but again reach the same conclusion. They break the feelings thermometer into ten intervals to examine the increase in negative feelings towards the opposing party at the polls of the distribution. Between 1980 and 2012, those data suggest significant affective polarization: “Republicans and Democrats are abandoning the middle and heading for the poles in their negative feelings about the other party.”⁸⁸

In perhaps the most interesting exhibition of affective polarization, Shanto Iyengar and Sean J. Westwood test a sample of 2,500 adults to measure their *implicit* attitudes towards the oppositional political party. They utilize a variant of the Implicit Association Test (IAT),⁸⁹ which is often used to measure implicit racial bias. Measuring partisan implicit bias instead of explicit evaluations of antipathy provides researchers with a much more direct measure of affective feelings—untainted by social desirability bias.⁹⁰ Iyengar and Westwood reach an incredible conclusion about Americans’ feelings toward out-partisans: After giving participants an implicit racial bias test as well as the partisan one, they find implicit bias towards members of the out-party substantially exceeds that based on race.⁹¹

If that result isn’t shocking enough, consider the fact that when Pew asked Americans whether “the [opposing] party’s policies are so misguided that they threaten the nation’s well-being,” 27% of Democrats and 36% of Republicans responded that they do.

⁸⁷ Abramowitz, “Partisan Nation,” 4.

⁸⁸ Hetherington and Rudolph, *Why Washington Won’t Work*, 31.

⁸⁹ These tests essentially use reaction time experiments to reveal implicit attitudes. See Greenwald, McGhee, and Schwartz, “Measuring Individual Differences in Implicit Cognition.”

⁹⁰ “Implicit measures—not subject to cognitive processing—are more accurate since they do not permit active masking or accentuation of feelings toward out groups.” Iyengar and Westwood, “Fear and Loathing across Party Lines,” 692.

⁹¹ By their measure, constructed using response times from the IAT, implicit partisan bias between Republicans and Democrats was much larger than that of implicit racial bias between Whites and African Americans. *Ibid.*, 696.

As Pew observes, for many, feelings towards those in the out-party have moved to “a deep-seated dislike, bordering on sense of alarm.”⁹²

Affective polarization has fundamentally reshaped the American electorate. Democrats dislike Republicans and Republicans dislike Democrats with a greater intensity than at any time since measurements began tracking out-party sentiment. It is time for scholars to devote much more attention to this angle of polarization. For the average, individual voter, defining and focusing on polarization in terms of affect rather than issue preferences make the most sense: “current debates over the degree of ideological polarization within the electorate and dismissals of polarization as a symptom of partisan sorting do not come to grips with the concept of partisan identity and the significant role played by partisan affect in the psyche of ordinary Americans.”⁹³

Table 2: Are Americans Polarized?

Type of Polarization	Who Counts?	Are They Polarized?
Bimodal Polarization	The average American citizen regardless of political engagement.	Modestly, if at all.
Partisan Polarization	Members of the political parties and the most politically engaged.	Yes
Affective Polarization	Members of the political parties and the most politically engaged.	Yes

What Causes Affective Polarization?

Although Iyengar et al.⁹⁴ have been relatively successful in reframing the mass polarization debate around affect rather than ideology, there has been a limited amount of research on what causes affective polarization; however, from this research three primary theories emerge. First, partisan polarization at both the elite and mass level has increased the ideological distance between parties. As a result, some scholars argue that Democrats and Republicans’ increasingly divergent issue positions cause them to rate out-partisans more negatively.⁹⁵ Second, increasingly negative political campaigns have contributed to affective polarization.⁹⁶ Third, the explosion of partisan media is responsible for instilling

⁹² Pew Research Center, “Political Polarization in the American Public,” 35.

⁹³ Ibid., 704-705.

⁹⁴ See Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes, “Affect, Not Ideology”

⁹⁵ See Abramowitz, “Partisan Nation” and Rogowski and Sutherland, “How Ideology Fuels Affective Polarization.”

⁹⁶ See Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes, “Affect, Not Ideology”

intense partisan animus in the American electorate.⁹⁷ It is worth briefly reviewing existing evidence for each theory.

The substantial partisan polarization that has occurred over the past few decades means that the political parties are much more homogenous than they once were. At the elite level, this homogeneity has led to, what Fiorina has recently called, “contentious politics”: characterized by a loss of “understanding of, sympathy for, and eventually tolerance of those” in the opposing party.⁹⁸ Abramowitz argues that this type of politics extends to the mass public as well. He finds that ideological polarization—that is, the increasing perceived ideological distance between individuals and the opposite party—is closely connected to affective polarization.⁹⁹ Using both survey and experimental research, Jon. C. Rogowski and Joseph L. Sutherland reach a similar conclusion: those with the most ideological distance from fictional congressional candidates give the most negative reactions to representatives of the out-party. In addition, they demonstrate that, as the ideological gap between two hypothetical candidates increases (and thus the stakes of the electoral choice increases), affective evaluations polarize.¹⁰⁰

Despite this evidence, there are also reasons to doubt that policy preferences explain the explosion of affective polarization in the American electorate. Iyengar et al. find only “moderate to weak effects of policy preferences on net partisan affect.”¹⁰¹ Furthermore, Lilliana Mason argues that even for the majority of Americans, who do still express “moderate” issue positions, affective polarization has produced a strange result: “It is not that we are angry because we disagree so strongly about important issues; instead, we are angry, at least partially, because of team spirit.”¹⁰² On the one hand, ideological

⁹⁷ See Levendusky, *How Partisan Media Polarize America*.

⁹⁸ Fiorina, “Party Homogeneity and Contentious Politics,” 150.

⁹⁹ Using ANES data, Abramowitz demonstrates a strong relationship between individuals’ perceived ideological distance from the opposing political party and negative feeling thermometer scores. Since 1980, individuals increasingly perceive the out-party as further from their own ideological position. Abramowitz, “Partisan Nation.”

¹⁰⁰ Rogowski and Sutherland, “How Ideology Fuels Affective Polarization.”

¹⁰¹ Iyengar et al. substantiate their contention with two pieces of evidence. First, they note that “sorted” partisans—liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans—only have slightly higher differences in thermometer ratings than non-sorted partisans. Second, they use ANES data from 1988 and 2012 to show that individuals’ concrete issue positions on questions of social welfare had only a modest influence on negative affect while positions on questions of cultural difference—abortion, gay marriage, etc.—had no influence at all. Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes, “Affect, Not Ideology,” 421-424.

¹⁰² Mason, “The Rise of Uncivil Agreement,” 155.

polarization cannot account for significant portions of affective polarization—most Americans tend to agree on most issues even though they may detest members of the opposition party. On the other hand, ideological polarization likely does reinforce affective polarization, at least for the most politically engaged partisans who do tend to hold strong ideological issue positions and are most affectively polarized.¹⁰³

What about negative campaign advertising? Abramowitz suggests that because the mass electorate is much more polarized than in the past, Americans are more receptive to negative campaigns than they once were. In today's political climate, perhaps the most effective way to mobilize partisans is to foment hatred for the other side.¹⁰⁴ By looking at differences in levels of affective polarization for battleground states (states where political campaigns focus most of their messaging) and non-battleground states, Iyengar et al. found that both "battleground-state residence" and "the volume of general election attack ads aired in a state positively predicted net partisan affect."¹⁰⁵ This evidence suggests that negative campaigning does contribute to affective polarization.

Theoretically, however, negative campaigning cannot explain the majority of affective polarization because campaigns don't make up a large enough portion of individuals' political information diet. As a result, Iyengar et al. point to the increase of the partisan media as a fruitful area of further exploration.¹⁰⁶ I give a much more thorough review of the literature on the partisan media and its influence on affective polarization in chapter three. Overall, this literature suggests that partisan media is a potentially substantial source of affective polarization.¹⁰⁷ At the same time, those who view this type of programming tend to already be polarized—so the role of the partisan media in causing the widespread affective polarization that exists in the American electorate is at least somewhat suspect.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ Abramowitz, *The Disappearing Center* and Abramowitz, "Partisan Nation," 6.

¹⁰⁴ Abramowitz, "Partisan Nation," 17.

¹⁰⁵ Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes, "Affect, Not Ideology," 425.

¹⁰⁶ They write: "Exposure to loud negative campaigns is very likely not the strongest factor, much less the only factor, contributing to affective polarization." Ibid., 427.

¹⁰⁷ See Levendusky, *How Partisan Media Polarize America*; Mutz, "Effects of 'In-Your-Face' Television Discourse on Perceptions of a Legitimate Opposition"; and Berry and Sobieraj, *The Outrage Industry*.

¹⁰⁸ Arceneaux and Johnson, *Changing Minds or Changing Channels?*

Taken together, ideological issue polarization, negative campaigning, and the partisan media provide an initial set of explanatory factors for affective polarization; however, no scholars have yet provided a comprehensive treatment of the question. As Iyengar et al. note: in order to gain a greater understanding of the roots of mass affective polarization, “future research will need to address these possible explanations more systematically.”¹⁰⁹ While a systematic evaluation is well beyond the scope of this paper, I contribute to this hole in the literature by presenting evidence that links elite congressional polarization to an increasingly partisan political discourse—a discourse that in theory has likely induced or at the very least has continued to perpetuate affective polarization.

The Polarization of American Political Discourse

The Economist Magazine argues that politicians’ arguments are increasingly “sterile,” making use of facts as “weapons with which to club the opposition” rather than to find areas of potential agreement.¹¹⁰ In other words, America’s political discourse is increasingly partisan. It is reasonable to expect this type of discourse to engender affective polarization.¹¹¹ In this section, I provide empirical evidence for the contention that as Congress has polarized so too has American political discourse.

Literature Review

David Mayhew famously argued that public messages from congressman generally fall into three categories: credit claiming, advertising, and position taking.¹¹² Recently, however, Justin Grimmer and Gary King have used an innovative type of digital text analysis—computer-assisted clustering—to discover a fundamentally new category of congressional messaging: “partisan taunting.”¹¹³ Utilizing a data set of 64,033 press releases from members of the U.S. Senate from 2005-2007, Grimmer and King find that 27% of these press releases were “explicit, public, and negative attacks on a political party

¹⁰⁹ Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes, “Affect, Not Ideology,” 428.

¹¹⁰ “When facts are weapons,” *The Economist Magazine*.

¹¹¹ This expectation is an explicit assumption of this paper and deserving of future research.

¹¹² Mayhew, *The Electoral Connection*.

¹¹³ Grimmer and King, “General purpose computer-assisted clustering and conceptualization,” 2648.

or its members.”¹¹⁴ As Grimmer writes, this finding is especially important as it is likely that these “direct attacks contribute to the growing *affective polarization* in society.”¹¹⁵

Grimmer and King’s results suggest that partisan taunting is common practice in congressional political discourse. But has this type of partisan messaging increased as Congress has polarized? At least in terms of presidential rhetoric, the answer seems to be no. In fact, making use of perhaps the largest dataset of presidential campaign speeches to date (containing nearly every general election campaign speech from 1952-2012), Jesse Rhodes and Zachary Albert demonstrate that as polarization has increased, partisan appeals in speeches have *decreased* for Democrats and remained relatively stable for Republicans—who weren’t particularly partisan in their rhetoric to begin with.¹¹⁶ Rhodes and Albert argue that this low level of partisan rhetoric makes theoretical sense because presidential candidates in a general election scenario need to appeal to moderate voters.¹¹⁷

In the context of day-to-day congressional rhetoric, however, I expect the result to be quite the opposite. Compared to the President, congressmen—particularly members of the House, but also members of the Senate—only need to appeal to relatively politically homogenous constituencies. Grimmer and King present the best evidence for this expectation: they found that senators in non-competitive states (i.e. a Republican representing a heavily Republican state, or a Democrat representing a heavily Democratic state) were much more likely to use their press releases to “taunt” the opposing party or members of the opposing party.¹¹⁸ At the same time that polarization (at least in voting behavior) has increased, seats in Congress have also become safer.¹¹⁹ Although their analysis doesn’t make a distinction between the safety of congressional seats and polarization as measured by roll call votes, Grimmer and King’s results imply that American political discourse—at least measured by congressional press releases—has become increasingly polarized.

¹¹⁴ Grimmer, *Representational Style in Congress*, 168.

¹¹⁵ Ibid (emphasis in original).

¹¹⁶ Rhodes and Albert, “The transformation of partisan rhetoric in American presidential campaigns, 1952-2012.”

¹¹⁷ “Faced with growing antagonism to partisanship, especially among moderate voters, presidential candidates have increasing [*sic*] presented a conciliatory public image as a way to boost their electoral prospects.” Ibid., 2.

¹¹⁸ Grimmer and King, “General purpose computer-assisted clustering and conceptualization,” 2650.

¹¹⁹ Silver, “As Swing Districts Dwindle, Can a Divided House Stand?”

Data and Methods

Given the previous literature, I hypothesize that partisan polarization in Congress has led to an increasingly partisan political discourse. To test this hypothesis, I use Twitter data (“tweets”) from members of the 114th Congress. It is reasonable to ask, why use Twitter data? First, nearly every single member of Congress (henceforth MC) has a Twitter account and uses it regularly to communicate with constituents.¹²⁰ MCs primarily use Twitter to provide their constituents with information and to take positions on pertinent political issues¹²¹; but they also use it to try to mobilize voters and to attack political opponents.¹²² Second, Twitter is rapidly growing in importance as a source of political information.¹²³ And although Twitter users who follow MCs are not a representative sample of Americans in general, they do tend to reflect the subset of Americans on which this paper focuses—those most influential in politics.¹²⁴ Finally, because MCs’ Twitter discourse is often reflective of their followers’ Twitter discourse—particularly so for followers of the same party, followers who are most politically engaged, and followers from their own district—MCs’ Twitter discourse proxies well for American political discourse writ large.¹²⁵ Thus, if a MC’s ideological extremity (measured using their DW-NOMINATE score) positively predicts how partisan their tweets are, then it follows that American political discourse has polarized just as elites in Congress have. I call this hypothesis the polarized tweeting hypothesis.

My dataset reflects a comprehensive sample of MCs (every single member of the 114th Senate and all but two members of the 114th House are represented).¹²⁶ In sum, this dataset contains 1,070,370 tweets, which to my knowledge represents the largest and most

¹²⁰ In collecting the Twitter data, I found accounts for every Senator and all but two members of the House—Charlie Dent (D) of Pennsylvania and Rob Bishop (R) of Utah.

¹²¹ Golbeck, Grimes, and Rogers, “Twitter Use by the U.S. Congress”; and Hemphill, Otterbacher, and Shapiro, “What’s Congress Doing on Twitter?”

¹²² Evans, Cordova, and Sipole, “Twitter Style.”

¹²³ Pew Research Center, “The Evolving Role of News on Twitter and Facebook.”

¹²⁴ “Citizens who discuss politics on Twitter are more likely to be educated and politically interested.” Barberá, “Birds of the Same Feather Tweet Together,” 77.

¹²⁵ Barberá, Bonneau, Egan, Jost, Nagler, and Tucker, “Leaders or Followers?”

¹²⁶ See Data Appendix I for more information on the procedure that I used for collecting this Twitter data as well as for additional descriptive statistics of the dataset.

comprehensive set of congressional twitter data compiled to date.¹²⁷ In addition, this cross-section spans a fairly large segment of time, containing tweets ranging from February 15th, 2008 to February 9th, 2016.

Once I compiled Twitter data for each MC, I largely followed the same procedure that Rhodes and Albert used when they measured partisan rhetoric in presidential campaign speeches.¹²⁸ First, I wrote an R script with a keyword dictionary to capture only tweets that make explicit mention of one or both of the political parties. This filtered set contained 112,367 tweets. Next, I replicated the codebook developed by Rhodes and Albert to categorize partisan statements.¹²⁹ Tweets could be coded into one of eight mutually exclusive categories: Positive statements about only the Democratic Party; negative statements about only the Democratic Party; positive statements about only the Republican Party; negative statements about only the Republican Party; statements contrasting the parties in favor of the Democrats; statements contrasting the parties in favor of the Republicans; bipartisan statements; and statements not about the political parties.

Along with two gracious volunteers,¹³⁰ I discussed the codebook, trained on a practice set of tweets, and then talked over the results of that practice. Next, each of us hand coded the same random sample of 500 tweets derived from the filtered set containing tweets with explicit party mentions. Although tweets—due to their short length—can be somewhat difficult to categorize, we achieved a relatively high level of inter-coder reliability (Cohen’s Kappa = 0.675).¹³¹

Because coding all 112,367 tweets by hand was logistically infeasible, I took advantage of a powerful software tool for automated content analysis: ReadMe. Developed

¹²⁷ Golbeck et al. use 6,000 tweets, Evan et al. analyze 67,119 tweets, and Hemphill et al. look at 30,373 tweets. All of these studies used hand coding to classify tweets. Because I was able to make use of relatively new digital text analysis technique, my dataset is orders of magnitude larger than all similar studies to date.

¹²⁸ Again, see Rhodes and Albert, “The transformation of partisan rhetoric in American presidential campaigns, 1952-2012.”

¹²⁹ I thank Professors Jesse Rhodes and Zachary Albert for sending me their codebook.

¹³⁰ I also thank my friends Luke Trinka and Thomas Wiesner for taking the time to help me code tweets by hand.

¹³¹ Hand coding yielded a low number of tweets categorized as contrasting the parties in favor of one. As a result, I recoded the category “statements contrasting the parties in favor of the Democrats” as a “Positive statement about only the Democratic party” and I recoded the category “statements contrasting the parties in favor of the Republicans” as a “Positive statement about only the Republican party.” As a result, my estimates will likely underestimate the extent to which MCs are making substantively negative statements about one of the parties; however, this should not affect my eventual dependent variable because both positive statements about one’s own party and negative statements about the opposing one count as “partisan tweets.”

by Daniel J. Hopkins and Gary King, this tool only requires researchers to hand code a small subset of text documents. It uses a supervised machine-learning algorithm to “learn” the coding scheme and then to categorize large volumes of text documents. Note that this categorization does not occur at the individual document level; instead ReadMe takes a collection of text documents and outputs an “approximately unbiased estimate” of the proportion of those documents in each category.¹³² In addition to the Rhodes and Albert study, other political science work has also successfully used ReadMe to classify large volumes of textual data.¹³³

In the context of my Twitter data, ReadMe produced estimates for each MC: the proportion of a given MC’s tweets that fall into each category. To control for how frequently a MC tweets, I used this measure to calculate the portion a MC’s tweets (from the original set of 1,070,370 not just tweets making an explicit mention of the parties) that fall in each category. Finally, to get my key dependent variables, I reconstructed two of Rhodes and Albert’s analytic categories: partisan and bipartisan statements.¹³⁴ Because this measure only counts tweets as “partisan” if they make explicit mention of one or both of the political parties, it likely *substantially* underestimates the proportion of partisan tweets in congressional Twitter discourse. Take for example, a tweet that Sen. Ted Cruz posted on January 29th 2016: “The Obama administration has secretly settled refugees in #Texas. This lawlessness must end.” Or this January 11th 2016 tweet from Sen. Harry Reid: “After 8 years of disaster under President Bush, the State of our Union has only grown stronger each year under President Obama.” My data does not account for these types of tweets.

Finally, I gathered data on each MC in order to create a model that predicts the partisanship of individual MC’s Twitter messaging. The Congressional Record¹³⁵ had data

¹³² Hopkins and King, “A Method of Automated Nonparametric Content Analysis for Social Science,” 229.

¹³³ See King, Pan, and Roberts, “How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression”; and Jamal, Keohane, Romney, and Tingley, “Anti-Americanism and Anti-Interventionism in Arabic Twitter Discourses.”

¹³⁴ Partisan statements consist of negative statements about the opposite party or positive statements about one’s own. Bipartisan statements consist of tweets in which the MC calls for bipartisanship or criticizes the partisanship of both political parties. See Rhodes and Albert, “The transformation of partisan rhetoric in American presidential campaigns, 1952-2012,” 4.

¹³⁵ U.S. Congress, *Congressional Record*.

on each MC's party affiliation,¹³⁶ years of incumbency, and whether they were a member of the Senate or House. The official Senate and House webpages contained a list of members in the leadership.¹³⁷ Voteview.com contained DW-NOMINATE scores for each MC in the 113th Congress.¹³⁸ The Cook Political Report compiles a Partisan Voter Index score for every congressional district and State for the 113th Congress.¹³⁹ This index uses the results of the previous Presidential election to measure how much more "Republican" or "Democratic" a given district is relative to the rest of the country.

Model

Do more ideologically extreme MCs engage in a more partisan Twitter discourse? Scholars generally rely on DW-NOMINATE scores to measure polarization in Congress.¹⁴⁰ Because these scores range from -1 (consistently liberal) to 1 (consistently conservative), I measure a MC's ideological extremity using the distance of their DW-NOMINATE score from zero (Distance From Zero). As Distance From Zero increases, the polarized tweeting hypothesis predicts that MCs will be more partisan in their Twitter discourse. But this effect likely does not have an unambiguously linear relationship. That is, extremity predicts partisan tweeting, but as extremity continues to increase it likely increases partisan tweeting at a decreasing rate. Therefore, I include a squared term (Distance From Zero Squared) in the model.

Other than this primary independent variable, the model controls for a number of other factors. Because senators tend to represent more heterogeneous constituencies than do representatives, it makes sense to expect that they engage in less partisan tweeting. Because past research¹⁴¹ has found that senators in safer seats tend to "taunt" the opposing party more frequently, the model controls for the "safety" of a given State or district by using a slightly modified version of the Cook Political Report's Partisan Voter Index (PVI)

¹³⁶ I coded Senator Angus King (I-ME) and Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT) as Democrats because they caucus with the Democratic Party.

¹³⁷ See "Senate Organization Chart for the 114th Congress," *United States Senate*; and "Leadership," *United States House of Representatives*.

¹³⁸ Because DW-NOMINATE scores are only calculated after the completion of a session of Congress, I had to omit recently elected MCs from my model. <http://voteview.com/dwnomin.htm>

¹³⁹ Wasserman, David. "Introducing the 2014 Cook Political Report Partisan Voter Index."

¹⁴⁰ Poole and Rosenthal, *Ideology and Congress*. There are problems with assuming DW-NOMINATE scores reflect ideology. See Bense, "The Emperor Never Had Clothes."

¹⁴¹ Grimmer and King, "General purpose computer-assisted clustering and conceptualization," 2650.

score.¹⁴² The model also controls for the numbers of years a MC has been an incumbent, membership in congressional leadership, and partisan affiliation.

Using these explanatory variables, I estimate two primary models. Model 1a predicts the proportion of a MC's tweets that fall into the partisan category (Percentage of Partisan Tweets). Model 2a predicts the proportion of a MC's tweets that fall into the bipartisan category (Percentage of Bipartisan Tweets).

Model 1a: Percentage of Partisan Tweets = $\beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{Distance From Zero}) + \beta_2(\text{Distance From Zero Squared}) + \beta_3(\text{Senator}) + \beta_4(\text{Years of Incumbency}) + \beta_5(\text{Congressional Leadership}) + \beta_6(\text{Democrat}) + \beta_7(\text{Adjusted Partisan Voter Index})$

Model 2a: Percentage of Bipartisan Tweets = $\beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{Distance From Zero}) + \beta_2(\text{Distance From Zero Squared}) + \beta_3(\text{Senator}) + \beta_4(\text{Years of Incumbency}) + \beta_5(\text{Congressional Leadership}) + \beta_6(\text{Democrat}) + \beta_7(\text{Adjusted Partisan Voter Index})$

Results

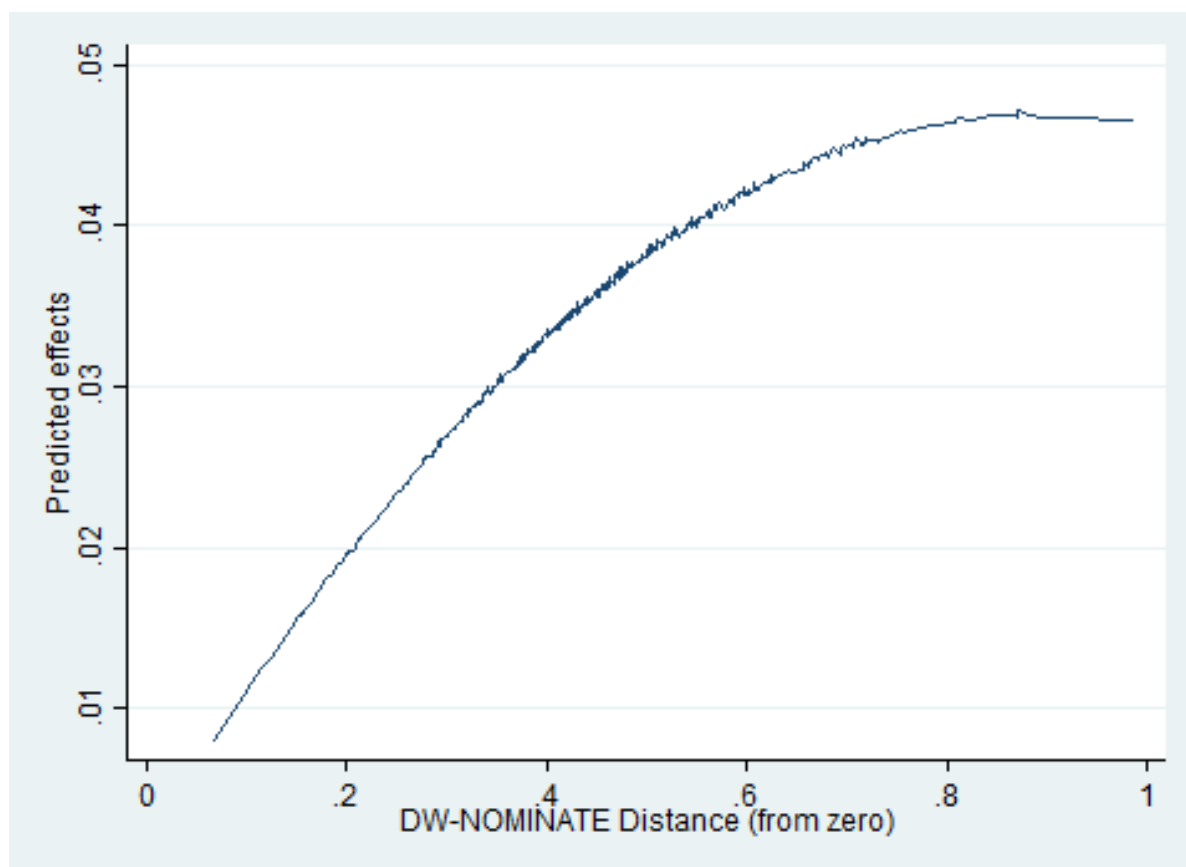
A simple OLS regression for Model 1a confirms the polarized tweeting hypothesis: more extreme MCs tweet in a more partisan manner than do less extreme members. Moving from a DW-NOMINATE distance of 0 (most moderate) to a distance of 1 (most extreme) results in a relatively large increase in partisan tweeting. For a given MC, moving from 0 to 1 means that an additional 10% of their total number of tweets shift into the partisan category ($\beta_1 = 0.1011$, $p < 0.001$). However, this coefficient overstates the increased proportion of partisan tweets because the true relationship is non-linear. Including the square term ($\beta_2 = -0.0567$, $p < 0.05$) reveals that although increasing extremity increases partisan tweeting, it does so at a decreasing rate.¹⁴³ As a result, if an

¹⁴² The Partisan Voter Index (PVI) essentially gives a partisanship score for each congressional district or State. For example, a score of D+7 indicates that a given district went 7 points more Democratic than the national average in the previous Presidential elections. In my model, I adjusted this score to account for how "safe" a district is for an MC. I modified, MCs' scores if their district went more heavily for the opposite party. For example, if a Republican represented a district that is D+7, they got an adjusted PVI score of -7. If a Democrat represented that district, they got an adjusted PVI score of 7. As a result, lower numbers represent less safe districts while higher numbers represent increasingly safe districts.

¹⁴³ To test the robustness of my primary model, I also ran three variations of it: 1b, 1c, and 1d. In 1b, the squared term is dropped and although the effects size on the primary explanatory variable is consistent with 1a, this model has a worse fit. In models 1c and 1d, I used a MC's distance from the median DW-

MC moved from most moderate to most extreme, they would be expected to increase the proportion of their tweets that fall into the partisan category by approximately 4.5%. Figure 4 displays the predicted effects of ideological extremity on partisan tweeting.

Figure 4: Predicted Effects of Ideological Extremity on Partisan Tweeting



All but one of the other independent variables also achieved statistical significance ($p < 0.001$). Senators were less partisan in their tweeting than were representatives ($\beta_3 = -0.0119$). An additional year of incumbency predicts slightly more partisan tweeting ($\beta_4 = 0.0008$). Membership in congressional party leadership significantly increases partisan rhetoric ($\beta_5 = 0.0213$). Finally, Democrats (even after controlling for ideological extremity) tend to be more partisan in their tweeting than their Republican counterparts (β_6

NOMINATE score rather than from zero. In 1c, neither the Distance From the Median nor the squared term achieves statistical significance. However, this is because starting from the median member rather than from zero skews the distribution in a conservative direction and eliminates the non-linear relationship in the data. After the squared term is dropped, 1d yields effect sizes similar to that of 1a and 1b for DW-NOMINATE scores measured from the median member.

= 0.0110). Because my sample ($N = 443$) consists of data from members of both chambers of Congress, rather than from just the Senate¹⁴⁴ or from past Presidents,¹⁴⁵ my model avoids the problems of small sample size inherent in similar studies. Unexpectedly, the “safety” of a MC’s seat has no statistically significant relationship with their partisan tweeting. Table 3 displays the complete regression results for this model.

One might expect that if ideological extremity predicts partisan tweeting, it might also predict a lack of bipartisan tweeting (the bipartisan tweeting hypothesis). Model 2a tests this expectation. Surprisingly, bipartisan tweeting appears to have no statistically significant relationship with ideological extremity. While Democrats and members of the congressional leadership do seem to engage in slightly more bipartisan tweeting than do Republicans and non-leaders, Model 2a fails to account for most of the variation in bipartisan tweeting (Adjusted R-squared = 0.1132).¹⁴⁶

Though this result seems to fly in the face of intuition, it is consistent with the extant literature. In an examination of 304,763 floor speeches by members of Congress, Westwood finds no relationship between a MCs ideology and the frequency with which that member employs bipartisan rhetoric. He also provides an interesting defense of this result: all MCs gain electoral benefits from bipartisan rhetoric—and electorally, it doesn’t seem to matter if they follow up on this rhetoric with legislative compromise.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ See Grimmer and King, “General purpose computer-assisted clustering and conceptualization”

¹⁴⁵ See Rhodes and Albert, “The transformation of partisan rhetoric in American presidential campaigns, 1952-2012.”

¹⁴⁶ See Data Appendix I for complete results of this regression model.

¹⁴⁷ Westwood, “The Partisanship of Bipartisanship.”

Table 3: Multivariate Analysis of the Polarized Tweeting Hypothesis (OLS)

	Model 1a	Model 1b	Model 1c	Model 1d
Distance From Zero	0.1011*** (0.0303)	0.0420*** (0.0078)	-	-
Distance From Zero Squared	-0.0567* (0.0281)	-	-	-
Distance From Median	-	-	0.0192 (0.0181)	0.0428*** (0.0080)
Distance From Median Squared	-	-	0.0293 (0.0203)	-
Senator	-0.0119*** (0.0028)	-0.0126*** (0.0028)	-0.0131*** (0.0028)	-0.0129*** (0.0028)
Years of Incumbency	0.0008*** (0.0001)	0.0008*** (0.0001)	0.0008*** (0.0001)	0.0008*** (0.0001)
Congressional Leadership	0.0213*** (0.0052)	0.0224*** (0.0052)	0.0234*** (0.0052)	0.0227*** (0.0052)
Democrat	0.0110*** (0.0023)	0.0107*** (0.0023)	-0.0111** (0.0036)	-0.0105** (0.0036)
Adjusted Partisan Voter Index	0.0000 (0.0001)	0.0001 (0.0001)	0.0001 (0.0001)	0.0001 (0.0001)
Constant	-0.0107 (0.0076)	0.0022 (0.0042)	0.0166*** (0.0040)	0.0123*** (0.0027)
Adjusted R²	0.263	0.257	0.259	0.258
N	443	443	443	443
Standard errors are in parentheses. ***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05				

Discussion

As I discussed earlier in this chapter, political elites are more polarized than at any time in the past century. It is in this political environment that many moderates have found it difficult to remain in Congress,¹⁴⁸ been consistently replaced by more extreme candidates,¹⁴⁹ or nudged to the poles in their own legislative behavior for fear of “getting primaried.”¹⁵⁰ Extreme voices now dominate political discourse.¹⁵¹ And because more extreme MCs tend to use more partisan rhetoric on Twitter, my results lend support for the oft-stated, but rarely tested contention that America’s political discourse has become more polarized just as polarization has gripped the country in other realms.

It might be reasonable to object that it is unfair to generalize the rhetorical patterns of MCs on Twitter to the broader American political discourse. After all, those who follow MCs on Twitter are more educated and more politically involved than the average American; and only a very small percentage of Americans actually follow MCs on Twitter. Nonetheless, I argue that these results are generalizable. Followers of MCs on Twitter are precisely the people that have the most influence in the political system and thus on the political discourse. Because Twitter has a “retweet” feature in which individuals can essentially forward tweets they like to their entire network of followers, MCs’ partisan rhetoric has the power to reach a much broader audience than just a MC’s immediate followers. More and more often, the media also feature tweets in their coverage of politics.¹⁵²

Although it remains an open question as to how representative congressional Twitter discourse is of American political discourse writ large, taken together with Grimmer and King’s analysis of congressional press releases and Barberá et. al’s finding that congressional Twitter discourse often reflects rather than drives that of their followers, the above results provide further evidence that America’s political discourse has become more partisan.

¹⁴⁸ Snowe, “Fighting For Common Ground.”

¹⁴⁹ Aldrich, “Did Hamilton, Jefferson, and Madison ‘Cause’ the U.S. Government Shutdown?”

¹⁵⁰ Boatright, “Getting Primaried.”

¹⁵¹ Grimmer, *Representation Style in Congress*, 155-160.

¹⁵² One would also expect the most partisan tweets to get the most coverage as conflict has inherent “news value.”

Are elites driving this polarization of political discourse? Or are they merely reflecting the discourse of their constituents? Because the partisan composition of a MC's district does not seem to have any relationship with how they tweet, the above results suggest that polarization at the elite level has led to an increasingly partisan political discourse. On the other hand, because MCs' Twitter behavior tends to reflect rather than direct that of their followers,¹⁵³ it may still be the case that (even if not driven by the partisan composition of their districts) MCs' partisan tweeting is driven by that of their most ardent supporters: those who follow them on Twitter. Thus, these results suggest an increase in partisan communication at the *mass* as well as the elite level.

It is worth noting that these results are in conflict with those of Grimmer and King.¹⁵⁴ While they find that senators in safer States taunt their opposition more often, after controlling for an MC's DW-NOMINATE distance, Model 1a suggests something different: in both the House and Senate, it is a MC's DW-NOMINATE distance that matters, not the partisan composition of that MC's district.

What does this increasingly polarized political discourse mean for affective polarization? Putting the question of causality aside, a discourse dominated by partisan appeals almost certainly exacerbates the tremendous amount of partisan antipathy that already exists in American politics. And in a vicious cycle, partisan rhetoric has likely become an increasingly profitable electoral tactic as the American electorate has become increasingly motivated by partisan animus.

The polarization and communications literatures have not yet fully isolated the causes of affective polarization. My investigation of partisan rhetoric in Twitter discourse contributes to this emerging literature. Particularly with respect to Twitter and other social media platforms, this project suggests many potential avenues for future research. Given the practice of "retweeting," how large of an audience do MCs' tweets actually reach? Is the media more likely to use their tweets in news coverage if they are related to partisan conflict? Is it possible to measure the affective consequences of partisan tweeting on MCs' followers and even on the followers of those followers? Does engaging in more partisan communication increase a MC's number of followers? Is partisan tweeting driven mostly

¹⁵³ Barberá, Bonneau, Egan, Jost, Nagler, and Tucker, "Leaders or Followers?"

¹⁵⁴ Grimmer and King, "General purpose computer-assisted clustering and conceptualization"

by political elites, or is it a reflection of the discourse that politically engaged Americans are having every day? While the data analyzed in this project suggests the former, it is more than likely some combination of both and more research ought to be conducted.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I set out to describe the political context within which those who are most interested and most engaged in politics find themselves immersed. Perhaps unsurprisingly, that is a political context that has become increasingly polarized. At the elite level, moderates are going extinct. Americans who are relatively disengaged from politics still don't hold very strong, or ideological issue positions, but the most active citizens, and thus, those with the most influence on the political process certainly do. Today, Democrats hold intensely negative feelings toward Republicans and so too do Republicans toward Democrats. A politics defined by affective polarization has brought about a vitriolic political environment in which hatred for the opposing party takes center stage. It has brought about a political discourse that is stubbornly sterile and unproductively divisive. It has brought about a national political climate ultimately antithetical to the pursuit of deliberation.

Chapter Two: Affective Polarization and Information Processing

Partisan polarization has a number of important implications for American democracy. For some scholars, a polarized Congress is a problem because it represents the interests of extremists rather than the interests of the vast majority of moderate Americans.¹⁵⁵ For others, the problem is institutional: ideologically opposed parties engender intense gridlock in a legislative system filled with veto points.¹⁵⁶ When it comes to polarization's impact on voters, "less attention has been paid"¹⁵⁷; however, when scholars do discuss this impact, they do so more positively. Elite polarization allows voters to choose between more distinct candidates and thus, "to participate more effectively."¹⁵⁸ Polarization, by raising the stakes of elections, can increase voter turnout and political engagement.¹⁵⁹

While these implications are significant, this chapter will take a different path. I will focus on the impact of partisan polarization on the quality of voters' beliefs. The polarization literature tends not to spend much time discussing the implications of polarization for the actual *quality* of voters' beliefs. One reason for this lack of investigation may be that many scholars work under the assumption that any such investigation will require making subjective value judgments about the content of particular belief systems. For example, asserting that some beliefs are of higher *quality* than others might necessitate arguing that for whatever reason conservatism is *better* than liberalism or vice-versa. Hans Noel warns that "[i]t is hard to evaluate the consequences of ideology without engaging the content of those ideologies...Any claim that politics is too polarized makes this same mistake." But it is possible to get at the question of quality indirectly: "we can think about what kind of ideological discourse we want, in the same way that many democratic theorists have thought hard about deliberation and discourse in other contexts."¹⁶⁰ From this perspective, *how* people form their beliefs matters more than *what* they actually believe. Because, as I will review in this chapter, passion consistently

¹⁵⁵ Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope, *Culture War?*

¹⁵⁶ Mann and Ornstein, *It's Even Worse Than It Looks*.

¹⁵⁷ Levendusky, *The Partisan Sort*, 140.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹⁵⁹ Abramowitz, *The Disappearing Center*.

¹⁶⁰ Noel, *Political Ideologies and Political Parties in America*, 193.

biases how each of us engage with political information, affective polarization has serious implications for the quality of our beliefs.

Political symbols have “mobilize[d] human emotions” throughout history.¹⁶¹ Hearing the word “taxes” quickly evokes negative feelings while hearing the word “justice” positive ones. Political campaigns prey on this psychological truth, making use of emotional appeals by pairing an opposing candidate with music, concepts, labels, and images that evoke negative affect.¹⁶² Through classical conditioning, this negative affect *transfers* to its associated political object and is stored along with that object in memory. This process, known as affect transfer, can be extrinsic: “feelings generated by an event *unrelated* to the object are transferred to the object.”¹⁶³ Or it can be intrinsic: “positive or negative feelings that are relevant to an object become associated with it through simple pairing.”¹⁶⁴

Milton Lodge and Charles S. Taber designed two experiments to test this affect transfer theory. They subliminally presented participants in their study with unambiguously positive words—like “love,” “laughter,” or “joy”—or negative words—like “torture,” “grief,” or “sad”—while participants read background information about a hypothetical candidate. Surprisingly, even though these words were presented outside of conscious awareness, Lodge and Taber found that the affect of the subliminal prime words transferred to later evaluations of the candidates for highly sophisticated participants. In addition, they found that the more these sophisticated participants thought about their evaluations, the more the subliminal primes had an effect. These results suggest that “people’s candidate evaluations are the product of far more than they are consciously aware of.”¹⁶⁵

Over time, partisans are consistently exposed to affect-laden messaging; political concepts, leaders, groups, and even words trigger emotions upon mention. In some sense, political concepts become “hot”: “all political objects that have been thought about in the

¹⁶¹ Sears, “The Role of Affect in Symbolic Politics,” 14.

¹⁶² Brader, *Campaigning for Hearts and Minds*.

¹⁶³ Lodge and Taber, *The Rationalizing Voter*, 57.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 124.

past are tagged to positive and/or negative feelings.”¹⁶⁶ As is common in cognitive psychology research, Lodge and Taber use reaction time experiments to test their hot cognition hypothesis. In a series of studies, participants were tasked with identifying target words as positive (“delightful”) or negative (“miserable”) “as quickly as possible without making too many errors.”¹⁶⁷ Unbeknownst to the participants in these studies, Lodge and Taber flash a political object prime (“Clinton,” or “Democrat,” or “Death Penalty”) before they show the positive or negative target word.¹⁶⁸ Because affectively congruent prime words have consistently been shown to facilitate faster response times in evaluating target words,¹⁶⁹ political objects—if they are indeed “hot”—should produce the same result. For example, if the prime “Hillary” instantly evokes negative feelings, then the participant should be faster at recognizing that “death” is a negative target word. The results of this test of “hot cognition” are striking: “affect it seems is triggered automatically on mere presentation of a political attitude object” and, the most politically sophisticated are, “because of their frequent evaluation of political objects, more prone to the effects of automatic affect on political attitudes.”¹⁷⁰ In other words, fairly minimal exposure to a political object (like the word “Republican”) automatically evokes negative or positive affect.

Some scholars, most notably George E. Marcus, W. Russell Neuman, and Michael MacKuen, approach feelings and political reasoning from a different perspective. Instead of an affect-oriented (like-dislike) theory, they focus primarily on discrete emotions. This theory, known as affective intelligence, is rooted in evolutionary biology. As humans evolved, emotions helped them make judgments pursuant to their own survival.¹⁷¹ Generally speaking, we have two “systems”—each associated with different emotional states. First, we have a dispositional system “primarily responsible for managing reliance on habits” and “previously learned strategies.”¹⁷² This system produces emotions like anger, enthusiasm, and depression. Second, we have a surveillance system, which

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 60. It is possible for objects to have both positive and negative feelings associated with them. In that case, the theory predicts political objects produce ambivalent feelings upon exposure.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 82.

¹⁶⁸ For a complete list of the positive and negative targets, and political object primes see *ibid.*, 83.

¹⁶⁹ Bargh, Chaiken, Gollwitzer, and Pratto, “The Generality of the Automatic Attitude Activation Effect.”

¹⁷⁰ Lodge and Taber, *The Rationalizing Voter*, 86-88.

¹⁷¹ Marcus, “Emotions and politics: hot cognitions and the rediscovery of passion.”

¹⁷² Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen, *Affective Intelligence and Political Judgment*, 46.

“monitors the environment for novel and threatening stimuli.”¹⁷³ This system produces emotions like tranquility and anxiety. Much of the research arising out of affective intelligence theory focuses on how anger and anxiety influence political judgment processes. In fact, there is some evidence that anger induces individuals to approach and evaluate political information in a partisan fashion while anxiety actually leads to deliberative processing in which individuals don’t solely rely on their predispositions to form opinions, but rather consider new information.¹⁷⁴

As individuals, each of us likes to believe in the validity of our own beliefs. We’ve weighed the arguments and evidence on both sides of a question and rationally come to the correct position. But, despite the fact that so many people feel so strongly about their own views, few people, if any at all, ever arrive at their beliefs by processing information in this deliberative and unbiased way. Instead, humans are hampered by countless cognitive biases, many of which strong partisan sentiments have the potential to exacerbate. Conducting an exhaustive examination of these biases and how partisanship interacts with them is well beyond the scope of this paper; however, to get a sense of how, at a psychological level, affective partisanship undermines the deliberative ideal outlined above, I call attention to a few problematic information processing tendencies emphasized by the political psychology literature.

To what end do we process information? We have at least two underlying motivations in tension with one another. On the one hand, we want to assimilate new information to form the most accurate beliefs possible. On the other, we want new information to reaffirm the conclusions that we already have. As Roy F. Baumeister and Leonard S Newman maintain, in the first case, we act like “intuitive scientists,” searching for a balanced and relatively complete set of information, evaluating our own potential biases, and ultimately integrating new information in an evenhanded way. In the second, we act like “intuitive lawyers,” selectively choosing information meant to bolster pre-determined convictions, criticizing challenging information, and integrating new information only to confirm those original convictions.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³ Ibid., 53.

¹⁷⁴ MacKuen, Wolak, Keele, and Marcus, “Civic Engagement.”

¹⁷⁵ Baumeister and Newman, “Self Regulation of Cognitive Inference and Decision Processes.”

What drives the “intuitive lawyer” motivated reasoning process? How does this type of reasoning undermine the deliberative democratic ideal for information processing? Recall two of the main components of the deliberative ideal for information processing: exposure to a wide range of perspectives and open-mindedness in considering those perspectives. In my review of the political psychology literature it will become apparent that, driven by feelings (often unconsciously), partisans (those most influenced by affective polarization) flout this ideal on both fronts.¹⁷⁶ First, through selective exposure to information, partisans have a tendency to gravitate toward belief-confirming information. Second, when they are met with uncomfortable information, partisans treat it with a closed-mind.

Selective Exposure

The selective exposure hypothesis is “the idea that people engage in belief-protection by exposing themselves primarily to pro-attitudinal arguments.”¹⁷⁷ This tendency poses a direct challenge to deliberative democratic theory: deliberation can’t occur if people only see information with which they already agree. The question of selective exposure has become especially salient in recent years as media consumers have much more control over the content they receive. I discuss the effect of a changing media environment on voters’ information processing in the next chapter. At the moment, the question of direct interest is psychological: do individuals have “an underlying psychological tendency to seek support and avoid challenge”?¹⁷⁸

The political psychology literature on selective exposure does not provide a straightforward answer. David O. Sears and Jonathan L. Freedman reviewed a number of studies conducted in the 1960s and found that under some circumstances people did prefer belief-consistent information; however, in others people even preferred belief-inconsistent information. Instead of a general psychological predisposition to choose belief-supportive over belief-challenging information, because of the mixed evidence in the early literature, Sears and Freedman suggest that “exposure is complexly determined by a great many

¹⁷⁶ Lodge and Taber, *The Rationalizing Voter*.

¹⁷⁷ Taber and Young, “Political Information Processing,” 15.

¹⁷⁸ Garrett, “Reframing the Selective Exposure Debate,” 678.

factors that are incidental to the supportiveness of the information.”¹⁷⁹ While many studies may show a strong correlation between belief predispositions and information exposure, those studies fail to support a causal claim.

Slightly more recent research, however, complicates this story. Dieter Frey, in a review of research between 1965 and 1986, finds that there are number of conditions under which individuals selectively expose themselves to information. First, when individuals have more freedom to choose their information, they are more selective in the pro-attitudinal direction. Second, selective exposure is strongest for people who are the most committed to their original decisions (or beliefs). Third, people might actually choose “dissonant information” if they think it will be easily refutable, and thus serve to confirm pre-existing beliefs. Fourth, an increase in the amount of information available from which to choose increases selectivity effects. Fifth, when people perceive conflicting information to be useful they might have a preference for belief-inconsistent information: if one expects to need to debate a topic, it makes sense to learn about oppositional arguments.¹⁸⁰ It is important to note that most of the evidence in Frey’s review “concentrated mainly on selective *seeking* rather than avoiding” behavior.¹⁸¹

As of 1992, although not citing Frey’s 1986 defense of selective exposure, the evidence in the psychology literature seemed mixed and conditional enough for John Zaller to discount selective exposure in his famous Receive-Accept-Sample (RAS) model of information processing and attitude change. In fact, it is “the implicit-assumption” of his model that “a person’s predispositions, although affecting acceptance of persuasive messages, do not affect reception.”¹⁸² Zaller had good reason to take this position. Much of the evidence in support of the selective exposure hypothesis suffered from problems of external validity—inapplicable to “situations of mass persuasion.”¹⁸³

Contemporary research attempts to reconcile past conflicting findings. R. Kelly Garrett argues that much of the controversy over selective exposure can be resolved by treating *seeking* and *avoiding* behavior as “separate phenomenon.”¹⁸⁴ From his perspective,

¹⁷⁹ Sears and Freedman, “Selective Exposure to Information,” 212.

¹⁸⁰ Frey, “Recent Research on Selective Exposure to Information.”

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 50 (emphasis in original).

¹⁸² Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, 139.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ Garrett, “Reframing the Selective Exposure Debate,” 679.

people exhibit “de facto selective avoidance, motivated by an attraction to opinion-reinforcing information, not an aversion to opinion-challenging information.”¹⁸⁵

Other scholars, most notably Milton Lodge and Charles Taber emphasize the centrality of affective feelings in motivating selective exposure. In a 2006 experiment, Lodge and Taber found evidence of a confirmation bias: “the prediction that people, especially those who feel strongest and know the most, will seek out confirmatory evidence and avoid what they suspect might be disconfirming evidence.”¹⁸⁶ Lodge and Taber argue that past research fails to find significant selective exposure effects because it comes at the issue from a cognitive dissonance perspective rather than an affect-oriented one. In other words, issues used to test selective exposure have been too “affectively tepid” and thus provided “insufficient motivation to engage in selective exposure.”¹⁸⁷

In their experiment, Lodge and Taber used affectively stimulating issues: gun control and affirmative action. Using an innovative information board experimental design, Lodge and Taber tracked which sources—labeled with the names of well-known groups like the NRA, the NAACP, the Republican Party and the Democratic Party—participants in their study chose to view. Their results confirmed that even though participants were instructed to treat information in an “even-handed way,” those with the strongest prior attitudes and most sophistication exhibited the *most* confirmation bias in selecting information sources.¹⁸⁸

Scholars working within the affective intelligence framework also argue that their theory reconciles conflicting results in the selective exposure literature. Aversive emotions like anger cause selective exposure while anxiety leads to consideration of a wide range of perspectives. MacKuen et al. devise an experiment to test this hypothesis. Participants sat down at a computer and were randomly shown a newspaper article either detailing how schools in Oregon began implementing a new affirmative action policy or how schools in Oregon rejected an affirmative action policy. The researchers then asked participants how reading the article made them feel. They found that the article induced a variety of emotions, among them aversion and anxiety. Participants were then set free to click on

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 680.

¹⁸⁶ Milton Lodge and Charles S. Taber, *The Rationalizing Voter*, 156.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 162.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 163.

clearly labeled links to articles supportive of their position, unsupportive of their position, or totally unrelated to politics in general. Based on these viewing patterns, MacKuen et al. found that aversion “provokes a resistance to outside information, while anxiety leads to a desire to learn about alternative views.”¹⁸⁹

Although evidence for selective exposure as a general psychological tendency has been historically controversial, recent research suggests that people at least have a disposition to seek belief-affirming political information, especially if they already have strong attitudes. Whether it is affect or discrete emotions, feelings play a key role in understanding why people engage in selective exposure. This emphasis on feelings instead of dissonance reduction is especially important in an environment of affective polarization—an environment in which partisans have more motivation than ever to selectively choose what information they view.

Motivated Reasoning

Motivated reasoning involves much more than just selective exposure. After all, no one can truly avoid every piece of disconfirming information. What happens when people do confront information that does not conform to their preexisting predispositions? The deliberative ideal necessitates treating new information and new arguments with an open mind. It requires a willingness to listen regardless of the identity of the messenger. As with selective exposure, feelings push partisans far short of this ideal.

It is no surprise that people tend to view evidence supportive of their pre-existing beliefs as more persuasive than evidence unsupportive of those beliefs; this tendency is known as the prior belief effect.¹⁹⁰ What is the psychology behind these biased evaluations? Kari Edwards and Edward E. Smith developed the “disconfirmation model” to explain the information processing mechanisms underpinning the prior belief effect. This model makes four claims: 1) people find belief-consistent arguments more convincing than belief-inconsistent ones; because it takes more cognitive effort to discredit than to just accept an argument, 2) people take more time thinking about belief-inconsistent arguments

¹⁸⁹ MacKuen, Wolak, Keele, and Marcus, “Civic Engagement,” 449.

¹⁹⁰ Lord, Ross, and Lepper, “Biased assimilation and attitude polarization.”

and 3) will have more—as John Zaller would say—“considerations”¹⁹¹ in their mind; 4) the content of these considerations will tend to refute belief-inconsistent arguments.¹⁹²

In two experiments, Edwards and Smith found support for these four hypotheses on a wide range of issues: people perceived belief-consistent information to be more convincing than inconsistent; they spent “considerably longer scrutinizing arguments that ran counter to their prior beliefs”; when the researchers prompted participants to write down their considerations, participants had much more to put down for the belief-inconsistent arguments; and a higher proportion of those considerations opposed belief-inconsistent arguments compared with belief-consistent ones.¹⁹³ Interestingly, Edwards and Smith also discovered that “participants who were evaluating an incompatible argument generated more redundant refutational arguments than participants with equally extreme prior beliefs who had less emotional conviction.”¹⁹⁴ Just like many other biases, emotion exacerbates disconfirmation bias.

In the 2006 study in which they expose participants to pro and con arguments for affirmative action and gun control, Lodge and Taber reach a similar conclusion. Those with the strongest prior beliefs and most initial knowledge about the two issues showed the strongest prior belief bias: participants judged confirming arguments as much stronger than disconfirming.¹⁹⁵ In terms of time spent thinking about arguments, those with the strongest prior beliefs and highest levels of political knowledge spent the most time “denigrating, deprecating, and counter-arguing...incongruent information.”¹⁹⁶ When asked to “leave their feelings aside and to concentrate on what made the arguments weak or strong,” participants demonstrated the importance of affect in their “reasoning”—often responding to the prompt with the justification that they “like” or “dislike” certain “facts or figures supporting an argument.”¹⁹⁷ Though it might seem ridiculous to evaluate the strength of an argument using the criterion “I dislike it,” this is often how the *most knowledgeable* actually “reason.” As Lodge and Taber demonstrate, motivated reasoning and

¹⁹¹ A “consideration” is “any reason that might induce an individual to decide a political issue one way or the other.” Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, 40.

¹⁹² Edwards and Smith, “A Disconfirmation Bias in the Evaluation of Arguments,” 7.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁵ Milton Lodge and Charles S. Taber, *The Rationalizing Voter*, 158.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 159.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 161.

disconfirmation bias is actually *highest* among those who are most knowledgeable—and especially *most passionate*—about an issue.

In Lodge and Taber’s affirmative action and gun control experiments, the combination of selective exposure, disconfirmation bias, and prior attitude effect all promote attitude polarization: “those on either side of a political issue should become more attitudinally extreme over time, even when exposed to the same balanced stream of information.”¹⁹⁸ It is important to point out that this attitude polarization effect only occurred for the most sophisticated participants and those with the strongest priors.

These two studies—that of Edwards and Smith and Lodge and Taber—describe the information processing practices that lead to the prior belief effect and attitude polarization. Description, however, is only part of the story. What *causes* people to denigrate challenging information; to have overwhelmingly negative thoughts in their mind when they do so; and, thus, to evaluate arguments in a manner that leads to attitude polarization? To get at this question, I’ll briefly compare two models of information processing, which draw the causal arrow in slightly different ways.

Political scientists are probably most familiar with John R. Zaller’s Receive-Accept-Sample (RAS) model. More directly out of the contemporary political psychology literature, Milton Lodge and Charles S. Taber’s *The Rationalizing Voter* has already become, as Brendan Nyhan put it, “the most important study of motivated reasoning about politics that has been published to date.”¹⁹⁹ In it, Lodge and Taber develop the John Q. Public (JQP) model. Although these are far from the only models of political information processing, because the first is a prototypical memory-based model and the second a motivated reasoning one, “it is particularly instructive to contrast” the two.²⁰⁰

Receive-Accept-Sample explains how people form their opinions. The word *form*, used in this context, does not imply that individuals hold true beliefs stored at some discrete point in memory. Rather, people “construct”²⁰¹ opinion statements based on the balance of “considerations” most salient to them at any given moment in time. So why

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 163.

¹⁹⁹ Nyhan, “The Rationalizing Voter,” 365.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 366.

²⁰¹ As Zaller writes, “citizens do not typically carry around in their heads fixed attitudes...rather, they construct ‘opinion statements’ on the fly as they confront each new issue.” Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, 1.

does Zaller characterize his model as “Receive-Accept-Sample”? He explains it this way: “Opinion statements...are the outcome of a process in which people *receive* new information, decide whether to *accept* it, and then *sample* at the moment of answering the question.”²⁰²

In Zaller’s model, whether a piece of information gets accepted is a function of political predispositions and political knowledge. His resistance axiom states:

People tend to resist arguments that are inconsistent with their political predispositions, but they do so only to the extent that they possess the contextual information necessary to perceive a relationship between the message and their predispositions.²⁰³

Stated bluntly, individuals tend to blindly accept information that reinforces their predispositions and to aggressively discount information that does not. Of course, they can only accept or reject considerations if they are politically aware enough to recognize which information conforms and which conflicts. Thus, low awareness citizens tend to mindlessly accept whatever information they are given although they are also less likely to “receive” information in the first place. In either case, this axiom “makes no allowance for citizens to think, reason, or deliberate about politics.”²⁰⁴ In many ways, Zaller’s resistance axiom is analogous to Lodge and Taber’s disconfirmation hypothesis—although, as I will emphasize in a moment, affect—as opposed to partisan contextual cues—is the key causal difference.

Once someone has received political information and then accepted or rejected that information as a consideration, what determines the opinion he expresses? The thoughts that enter one’s mind for evaluation depend on salience: “The more recently a consideration has been called to mind or thought about, the less time it takes to retrieve that consideration or related considerations from memory and bring them to the top of the head for use.” Once the most salient considerations have been called to mind, “individuals answer survey questions by averaging across considerations.”²⁰⁵ The number and salience of considerations that can be called to mind obviously vary from person to person;

²⁰² Ibid., 51 (emphasis in original).

²⁰³ Ibid., 44.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 45.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 48-49.

nonetheless, in Zaller's model, opinion statements ultimately reflect what considerations an individual can consciously recall from *memory*.

To be fair to Zaller, he does acknowledge that “considerations may involve feelings or emotions.”²⁰⁶ However, in his model, feelings are not what fundamentally drive reasoning. Partisan contextual cues—that is, recognizing that “that argument is a Republican position and I’m a Democrat so I should reject it”—lead to biased acceptance (storing in memory) of information. Importantly, people form their evaluations based on an averaging of the most salient considerations that come to mind. From this perspective, evaluations are a function of reasons—albeit biased ones—previously stored in memory.

Placing affective feelings front and center in their model, Lodge and Taber draw the causal arrow in the opposite direction: our evaluations occur spontaneously based on the affect associated with a given issue—and the reasons we express in support of those evaluations are no more than *rationalizations* for the affective appraisals we’ve already unconsciously made. Understanding how this works requires understanding the *associative conception of memory* on which the John Q. Public (JQP) model rests as well as the concept of *affect contagion*, which “is the underlying process that drives motivated reasoning and rationalization in political thinking.”²⁰⁷

Like most information processing models, the John Q. Public model relies on an associative conception of memory. We have “a long-term memory (LTM) for storing facts, beliefs, images, feelings, habits, and behavioral predispositions.”²⁰⁸ We have a working memory (WM): the limited system that allows us to consciously attend to information (what Zaller might refer to as the “top of the head”). And somehow information needs to get from LTM to WM. That’s where the associational conception of memory comes in. Concepts or “objects” in LTM are related to one another in an associational network. In JQP, for example, the concept “Obama” might be related to “Democrat” and “Liberal,” which also might be related to each other.²⁰⁹ Spreading activation explains which concepts enter WM: “an object node in LTM switches from being dormant to a state of readiness with the potential to be moved in WM when it is activated, either by direct recognition or

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 41.

²⁰⁷ Milton Lodge and Charles S. Taber, *The Rationalizing Voter*, 148.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 28.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 30.

because it is linked to an associated object of thought.”²¹⁰ Many concepts remain primed, but do not enter conscious awareness, because of their relatedness, cognitive or affective, to objects that have been activated strongly enough to enter conscious thought. This model of how memory works leads to an implication similar to that of the RAS model: “all beliefs and attitudes will be constructed in real time from whatever cognitive and affective information is momentarily accessible from LTM.”²¹¹ Unlike in RAS, however, information processing in JQP involves much more than just a conscious draw of considerations from memory.

As mentioned before, political concepts are often “hot.” Exposure to these concepts can induce what Lodge and Taber call “intrinsic affect” because feelings are linked directly to them in memory. Or affect might enter the information-processing stream “incidentally” through “unrelated environmental stimuli or prior mood.”²¹² In either case, *affect contagion*, so ominously named, is likely to occur. Lodge and Taber define affect contagion as “the facilitation of considerations from memory that are affectively congruent with initial feelings and the inhibition of incongruent considerations.”²¹³ In other words, spontaneously generated initial feelings systematically bias the thoughts that make it into working memory. Perhaps even more concerning, this initial feeling (and its influence on thought) often occurs outside of conscious awareness.

Lodge and Taber conduct two very similar studies to test their affect contagion hypothesis. Both yield remarkable results. The researchers found that a cartoon face prime—smiling or frowning—flashed for 39 milliseconds, which is well out of conscious awareness, affected the valence of thoughts that entered participants’ minds when they were asked to write down their considerations as they were shown an issue prompt about illegal immigration. In addition, the participants’ balance of thoughts strongly influenced their eventual evaluation of the issue. Most shockingly, their results demonstrated that “fleeting images of cartoon smiley faces have a *larger* effect than prior immigration attitudes on the valence of thoughts in response to illegal immigration policy prompts.”²¹⁴

²¹⁰ Ibid., 31.

²¹¹ Ibid., 33.

²¹² Ibid., 135.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 144-145 (emphasis in original).

So which model, RAS or JQP, better approximates how partisans process information? Undoubtedly, JQP applies more readily to the real political world: affect dominates in the realm of passionate politics. With that said, the RAS framework requires much less time and resource intensive methodologies. Whereas Lodge and Taber needed to devise somewhat complex laboratory experiments to measure unconscious affect, all Zaller's model really requires is a fairly run-of-the-mill survey. In the domain of survey research, which is "often sterile and artificial," political scientists clearly benefit from RAS's omission of affect.²¹⁵ In either model, however, one implication is glaringly clear: partisans treat challenging information with a closed-mind.

Research rooted in affective intelligence theory reinforces this same implication. In the same study that demonstrated how aversive emotions led to selective exposure, MacKuen et al. also find that aversion caused people to dig in their heels on their initial positions on affirmative action while anxiety promoted compromise. After giving participants the option to click on pro or con articles about affirmative action, MacKuen et al. instructed them to express their opinion on the policy "first from their own point of view and second, taking into account everyone's views."²¹⁶ Then they asked participants to write an open-ended essay "to explain their choices" and "to comment on the principles that underlie affirmative action," coding essays "with respect to the subjects' willingness to seek alternative solutions—rather than merely arguing for or against the Oregon affirmative action policy."²¹⁷ Anger made participants much less likely and anxiety made them more likely to compromise; however, this anger affect only holds for those participants who also engaged in a biased information search pattern because of that anger. Even after controlling for bias in participants' information search, anxiety had a moderating effect on opinions.²¹⁸

Are there limits to motivated reasoning? That is, if someone gets bombarded with disconfirming information, is there a point at which it ceases to counterproductively reinforce preexisting positions? Fusing the affect and affective intelligence approaches, David P. Redlawsk, Andrew J. W. Civettini, and Karen M. Emmerson ask "do motivated

²¹⁵ Nyhan, "The Rationalizing Voter," 367.

²¹⁶ MacKuen, Wolak, Keele, and Marcus, "Civic Engagement," 450.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 451.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 451- 452.

reasoners ever ‘get it’? In their evaluations of fictitious political candidates, subjects in the Redlawsk et al. study became more positive about their initially preferred candidates in the face of incongruent information about them; and, at higher levels of incongruent information this trend reverses. Their results suggest that people engage in motivated reasoning at low levels of incongruent information until the buildup of incongruent information causes them to feel increasingly anxious—at which point they reverse processing strategies, allowing new information to more accurately influence their candidate evaluations.²¹⁹

Evaluations of issues and candidates aren’t the only victims of motivated reasoning. Even factual beliefs can be motivated. Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifer identify a ‘back-fire’ effect by which attempts to correct factually incorrect beliefs—like the belief that Saddam Hussein had WMD’s in Iraq—actually make ideologically opposed participants believe in the false information *more*.²²⁰ Brian E. Weeks argues that using partisanship, as Nyhan and Reifer do, to explain the persistence of political misperceptions misses an important explanatory factor: emotion. He finds that anger exacerbates political misperceptions while anxiety reduces them. Rather than solely partisan motivation, it is the interaction of anger and partisanship that leads people astray.²²¹

The political psychology literature sheds light on an extremely consequential implication of affective polarization: partisan passion undermines deliberation. It motivates us to avoid a wide-variety of arguments. Often unconsciously, we like information that already confirms our feelings. Whether rooted in affect or anger, motivated reasoning infects nearly every stage of information processing. From the arguments we find persuasive to the very thoughts we bring to the top of our heads, we reject information because it is incongruent with our *feelings*. In sum, strong emotions make deliberative information processing extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible.

²¹⁹ Redlawsk, Civettini, and Emmerson, “The Affective Tipping Point.”

²²⁰ Nyhan and Reifler, “When Corrections Fail.”

²²¹ Weeks, “Emotions, Partisanship, and Misperceptions.”

Chapter Three: Does the Media Facilitate Fact or Faction?

Chapters one and two paint a depressing picture. American politics is increasingly polarized. Much of that polarization is affective in nature—and it is particularly intense for those most engaged in politics. Because affect induces selective exposure and motivated reasoning, affective polarization means that facts often matter less than factions in American politics. What is more a pity, these deeply ingrained, and often uncontrollable, psychological tendencies have become most salient just as individuals have gained unprecedented access to vast volumes of political information.

But there is good reason to be skeptical of my argument. After all, it has largely assumed that individuals' information processing practices are independent from their information environments. Perhaps the way that people actually get their information does not always lead to the type of bias that the political psychology literature predicts. Or perhaps it leads to more. This chapter explores these possibilities.

Theoretically, the media environment could undermine the deliberative ideal in at least two ways. First, the fragmentation of the media environment might provide greater opportunity for selective exposure, allowing affectively motivated partisans to filter out uncomfortable information. Second, the inflammatory delivery of political information may infuse political concepts—parties, leaders, and individual issues—with more affect, thereby causing, or at the very least exacerbating, affective polarization, and as a result increasing the likelihood that individuals engage in motivated reasoning.

In evaluating the contemporary media environment's influence on how individuals deliberate about politics, I follow scholars²²² who argue that the media should function as a marketplace of ideas: it ought to facilitate a public discussion in which “ideas battle for supremacy on the basis of merit, and where a reason-based consensus emerges that guides the public direction of society.”²²³ In essence, the media should be a forum for “mass-mediated deliberation.”²²⁴ With this ideal in mind, which aspects of each form of media—partisan, detached, or social—ought to be encouraged? And which discouraged? Given the contemporary media environment, how might the deliberative individual best consume political information?

²²² See Schmuhl and Picard, “The Marketplace of Ideas.”

²²³ Curran, 126. Also see the Introduction of this paper for a brief discussion of this ideal.

²²⁴ Schmuhl and Picard, “The Marketplace of Ideas,” 141.

Placing the Contemporary Media Environment in Historical Context

It is easy to uncritically accept the argument that, with the Internet, more people have more access to more data (and spin) than ever before. But it is important to gain an appreciation for just how unprecedented the contemporary media environment is.

Historically, technological advances have shaped the role of the media in American society. Perhaps it is no surprise that politicians have always used information as ammunition in the rhetorical war that so often defines politics. The “media” of the early 19th century, which largely consisted of partisan newspapers, functioned primarily as the “organs of the first political parties.”²²⁵ The chief purpose of these newspapers was not to inform the public, to hold government officials accountable, nor to promote deliberation.²²⁶ First and foremost, these newspapers were meant to persuade the public in service of elite ends.²²⁷

As printing press technology improved, both the character and purpose of newspapers shifted.²²⁸ In the mid 19th-century, the “penny press” began to challenge the partisan one: “The penny papers made their way in the world by seeking large circulation and the advertising it attracted, rather than by trusting subscription fees and subsidies from the political parties.”²²⁹ This newfound commercial viability and independence from the political parties moved papers away from coverage of national politics. They increasingly covered local news: police reports, murder trials, and sports.²³⁰ This approach to news heavily influenced much of the media environment of the late nineteenth and early

²²⁵ Ladd, *Why Americans Hate the Media and How it Matters*, 22.

²²⁶ Although, it could be argued that all three are potential byproducts of the intense partisan debate that these newspapers fueled.

²²⁷ Perhaps the most famous and powerful example of this function is the vigorous debate between the Federalists and the Anti-Federalists that played out in various newspapers across the country prior to the adoption of the U.S. Constitution. And after the founding, it wasn’t long before Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson—the leaders of the Federalist and Republican parties respectively—began to run their own newspapers: Hamilton the *Gazette of the United States* and Jefferson the *National Gazette*. They used these partisan newspapers to attack each other mercilessly. See *ibid.*, 18-24.

²²⁸ Most partisan papers originally sold for around six cents, relied on politicians and their respective party organizations for financing, and managed only a limited circulation. But in the 1840s, 1850s, and 1860s, thanks to the invention of the steam-powered cylinder press; the introduction of a process for turning wood pulp into paper (previously produced using rags); and the expansion of a vast railroad transportation network across the country, the price of a newspaper dropped from six cents to one and mass circulation became possible. See Schudson, *Discovering the News*, 31-33.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

²³⁰ As Michael Schudson writes, the “penny papers made the ‘human interest story’ not only an important part of daily journalism but its most characteristic feature.” They “invented the modern concept of ‘news.’” See Schudson, *Discovering the News*, 22-27.

twentieth century as entrepreneurs like William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer utilized this “sensational” model to great commercial success.²³¹ *The New York Times* represents an exception to this news-as-entertainment approach.²³²

After exposure to extensive propaganda during World War I and the emergence of the public relations industry, many people began to doubt the veracity of the information they read in newspapers.²³³ In reaction, Walter Lippmann, among others, argued that journalism needed professionalization. It needed highly trained and respected journalists. And above all, it needed a central guiding norm: objectivity. In practice, this meant that opinions belonged on the editorial page; and for their work to be truly classified as news, journalists had to present all sides of an issue without revealing a preference for one side or another.²³⁴

In the 1920s and 1930s, radio revolutionized how people got their information. In the 1950s, television did the same.²³⁵ But like newspapers in the middle of the twentieth century, radio and broadcast television were just different mediums for the same “objective” style of journalism.²³⁶ In fact, because these new communications technologies expanded the reach (audience size) of news outlets, news stations and television networks had even more of an incentive to follow a non-partisan model—lest they alienate large segments of the population. The absence of party polarization and lack of economic competition for the large media outlets during this time period created an environment in which Lippmann’s objective model flourished.²³⁷

²³¹ Ladd, *Why Americans Hate the Media and How it Matters*, 32-33.

²³² *The Times*, which appealed to upper and upper-middle class readers, promoted an information-model of journalism. Unlike the “yellow journalism” that preyed on the baser instincts of its readers, the *Times* “presented articles as useful knowledge, not as revelation.” Instead of murder stories, the *Times* wrote about politics. Instead of celebrity, it wrote about financial news. See Schudson, *Discovering the News*, 119.

²³³ Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News*, 121-159.

²³⁴ As a professional norm, objectivity was good practice. As an ideology, objectivity was moral virtue: “Virtue, as Lippmann defined it...is the refusal to credit one’s own tastes and desires as the basis for understanding the world. Detachment, disinterestedness, maturity: these are the marks of morality.” Ibid., 155.

²³⁵ Prior, *Post-Broadcast Democracy*, 13.

²³⁶ Walter Cronkite—the evening TV anchor once labeled “the most trusted man in America”—provides the best example of devotion to the objective model. After all, he closed each broadcast with a catchphrase suggestive of journalistic impartiality: “And that’s the way it is.”

²³⁷ “While news organizations surely could still have attracted readers and made money through partisanship or sensationalism as they had successfully done in earlier eras, absent the necessity to do otherwise, journalists adhered to their professional norms.” Ladd, *Why Americans Hate the Media and How it Matters*, 48.

Despite its dominance in the practice of journalism throughout the twentieth century, some thinkers—John Dewey in particular—challenged the norm of objectivity.²³⁸ From his perspective, seeking “objectivity” discourages questioning widely held assumptions or attempting to evaluate the extent to which arguments advanced by opposing sides are actually supported by evidence. The desire to appear detached, disinterested, and unbiased undermines the media’s “ability to discuss, deliberate on, and debate various perspectives in a manner that would move it toward consensus.”²³⁹

The Contemporary Media Environment

Fast-forward to today. Network news, traditional newspapers, and journalists devoted to the norm of objectivity still exist. Even so, the Internet has disrupted the institutional media’s business model of old. With barriers to entry essentially eliminated, a whole host of partisan blogs, websites, and cable news programs have emerged. As with past bursts of innovation in communications technology, the very definition of “the media” has fundamentally shifted. The contemporary information environment now includes the detached, partisan, and social forms of media.²⁴⁰

Where are citizens getting their political information today? Of course, people still read newspapers,²⁴¹ they still watch the evening news.²⁴² But, more and more, they also listen to talk radio,²⁴³ watch cable (often partisan) news programs,²⁴⁴ and have access to an endless set of sources for political information on the Internet. Some get little political

²³⁸ “Rather than journalists being scientific information senders and the public passive recipients, Dewey argued that the press should facilitate a conversation among political leaders and diverse factions of the public.” Ladd, *Why Americans Hate the Media and How it Matters*, 206.

²³⁹ Alterman, “Out of Print.”

²⁴⁰ Refer back to the Introduction for a discussion about what types of media each of these categories include.

²⁴¹ Even in the past decade alone newspaper readership has declined along side the rise of other forms of media. According to Pew data, in 2001 45% of Americans said that newspapers were their main source for news. In 2013, that number had fallen to 28%. Pew Research Center, “Main Source for News.”

²⁴² “Almost three out of four U.S. adults (71%) watch local television news and 65% view network newscasts over the course of a month, according to Nielsen data from February 2013.” Pew Research Center, “How Americans Get TV News at Home.”

²⁴³ 23% of Americans said radio was their main source for news in 2013, compared with 13% in 2001. Pew Research Center, “Main Source for News.”

²⁴⁴ 38% of Americans watched cable news at some point in February 2013. Most importantly, heavy viewers—those who view any one type of television news regularly—spent by far the most time with cable news: 72.4 minutes *per day* on average. Pew Research Center, “How Americans Get TV News at Home.”

information at all, opting instead to view any one of the nearly countless options for entertainment programming.²⁴⁵

In addition to the increasing number and type of news outlets, social media has fundamentally transformed not only how individuals consume, but also how they interact with political information. People no longer solely read, listen, or watch journalists present the news; increasingly, they “like,” “favorite,” “retweet,” share, reply to, comment on, and discuss the news with their “friends” and “followers” on Facebook and Twitter.²⁴⁶ Even in the two years since 2013, a significantly higher percentage of Facebook and Twitter users across nearly all demographic categories report getting news through social media.²⁴⁷ For Millennials, social media has become a particularly powerful source of news.²⁴⁸ According to the Pew Research Center, as of 2015, “one-in-ten U.S. adults get news on Twitter and about four-in-ten (41%) get news on Facebook.”²⁴⁹ These trends suggest that social media will continue to remake the media environment for years to come.

Writing before the full-scale emergence of social media, Markus Prior characterized contemporary American society, due to the explosion of choice in media outlets, as a “post-broadcast democracy”:

The differences between the media environments in 1935, 1970, and 2005 are impossible to miss. Americans in 1935 had to wait for newspapers to be printed and delivered if they wanted more than short radio news summaries. Newscasters and politicians were right in the living room of many Americans in 1970 on a routine basis, but they left at seven o’clock. For Americans in 2005, they stand by at every hour of the day, ready to drop a mountain of information at the click of a mouse or the push of a remote.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁵ See Markus Prior, *Post-Broadcast Democracy*.

²⁴⁶ “Facebook users (32%) say they post about government and politics on Facebook, and 28% comment on these types of posts. That compares to a quarter of Twitter users (25%) who tweet about a news topic and 13% who reply to tweets...About half (46%) of Twitter users follow news organizations, reporters or commentators, compared with about three-in-ten (28%) of Facebook users.” Pew Research Center, “The Evolving Role of News on Twitter and Facebook,” 4.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁴⁸ “About six-in-ten online Millennials (61%) report getting political news on Facebook in a given week, a much larger percentage than turn to any other news source.” Pew Research Center, “Millennials and Political News,” 2.

²⁴⁹ Pew Research Center, “The Evolving Role of News on Twitter and Facebook,” 5.

²⁵⁰ Markus Prior, *Post Broadcast Democracy*, 2-3.

It is a fact that the differences in the media environments of 1935, 1970, and 2005 are stark; but, with the rise of social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, even the media environment of 2005 is *substantially distinct* from that of 2015.

In this paper, I have largely followed those who endorse the deliberative conception of the role of the media in American democracy because, as far as ideals go, the dangers of setting the bar too high pale in comparison to those of setting it too low. Measured against this admittedly lofty ideal, how has the contemporary media—partisan, detached, and social—been doing? I’ll start by evaluating how recent trends in the media have influenced the tendency of affectively polarized partisans to engage in selective exposure. Next, I’ll assess the extent to which each form of media exacerbates (or perhaps mitigates) affective polarization—and thus, increases (or decreases) individuals’ susceptibility to eschew deliberation for motivated reasoning.

Selective Exposure

In the heyday of detached journalism, the news was relatively successful in presenting multiple viewpoints. Although viewers and readers had little media choice, the journalistic standard of objectivity ensured that individuals would at least be exposed to the two major sides of any political argument. Of course, this was only the case so long as editors found an issue worthy of reporting. And the establishmentarian bias of these journalistic norms also meant that individuals did not have access to many minority perspectives.

Today, with no shortage of outlets representing both minority and majority perspectives, choice abounds; but this choice is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, access to infinitely diverse viewpoints provides the potential for much greater deliberation.²⁵¹ On the other hand, choice makes the prospect of “echo chambers”—in which partisans only hear messages that constantly reinforce their prior attitudes—all the more likely.²⁵² As Thomas Rosenstiel notes:

Influence is moving from the media producers as mediators and gatekeepers to citizens functioning as their own editors. And citizens are having to change from

²⁵¹ See Sunstein, *Infotopia*.

²⁵² See Sunstein, *Republic.com 2.0*

merely passive consumers of media to pro-active assemblers of their own media diet each day.²⁵³

In constructing this media diet, people have more power to deliberate than ever before, but how are people using this power? Are people closing themselves off by engaging with only likeminded sources? Or are they opening themselves up to a diverse range of media outlets?

The Partisan Media and Selective Exposure

As far as selective exposure is concerned, the partisan media bears the brunt of attacks from scholars and pundits alike. In her book, *Niche News: The Politics of News Choice*, Natalie Stroud demonstrates that partisans prefer likeminded partisan media sources. Party conventions and partisan films “attract likeminded audiences”²⁵⁴; *ceteris paribus*, partisans are more likely to read newspapers that endorse candidates of their own party²⁵⁵; “talk radio listeners tended to tune in to radio programs and hosts that matched their political beliefs”²⁵⁶; “partisans were more likely to use likeminded Web sites”²⁵⁷; and Republicans were much more likely to watch FOX News than were Democrats while Democrats were much more likely to watch MSNBC and CNN than were Republicans—and this tendency has only *increased* over time.²⁵⁸

Partisan selective exposure is a real phenomenon. Some people have likely reacted to media fragmentation by closing themselves off from sources that challenge their worldview. But it is important not to overstate its impact on most viewers. Media fragmentation—and the partisan selective exposure that it makes possible—has not undermined the deliberative ideal by creating giant echo chambers. In fact, in the contemporary media environment, the most politically engaged citizens (even the highly partisan ones) experience exposure to more diverse sources than they did in the broadcast age.

²⁵³ Rosenstiel, 254.

²⁵⁴ Stroud, 45.

²⁵⁵ Stroud, 49.

²⁵⁶ Stroud, 51.

²⁵⁷ Stroud, 59.

²⁵⁸ Stroud 58.

According to Nielsen data, heavy viewers²⁵⁹ spend an average of 72.4 minutes per day watching cable news. These same viewers spend a significant amount of time watching network news (31.6 minutes per day) and local news (21.8 minutes per day) too. Moreover, viewers of partisan media are not closing themselves off from the detached media: 82% of cable news viewers watch local news and 76% watch network news. Even more interesting, significant numbers of FOX News viewers watch MSNBC—and vice-versa.²⁶⁰ With that said, there is still a sizable minority of cable news viewers who only watch one cable news source.²⁶¹ Choice has allowed some to hear only confirmatory voices; however, given the significant overlap between viewers of cable, network, and local news and even the overlap between viewers of ideologically opposed cable programs, it would be a stretch to say that media fragmentation has fundamentally undermined the deliberative ideal as far as exposure is concerned. Many of the most active and partisan news consumers now have more diverse news exposure, not less.

The Detached Media and Selective Exposure

Instead of increasing differences in partisans' political information exposure, the largest effect media fragmentation has had on the American public has been to increase the differences between those who get political information and those who get little, if any at all. In other words, by allowing many Americans to select themselves out of news altogether in favor of entertainment options,²⁶² the contemporary media environment undermines the deliberative ideal for information processing: many don't bother to process any political information in the first place.

The explosion of entertainment programming has also had a deleterious effect on the detached media's ability to encourage deliberation. Because of the intense competition that choice has brought to the media market, the institutional media talks less and less about political issues. Instead, there has been a marked increase in coverage of "soft

²⁵⁹ Heavy viewers are those who view any one type of television news regularly. Pew Research Center, "How Americans Get TV News at Home."

²⁶⁰ 28% of FOX News viewers also watch MSNBC while 34% of MSNBC viewers also watch FOX. Olmstead, Jurkowitz, Mitchell, and Enda, "How American's Get TV News at Home."

²⁶¹ "About one-quarter of American adults, (24%) watch only Fox News, 23% watch only CNN and 15% watch only MSNBC." This statistic does not imply that these viewers *only* watch one of the cable news programs. They likely also watch traditional news programs as well. Ibid.

²⁶² See Markus Prior, *Post Broadcast Democracy*.

news,” which focuses on celebrities, developments in the entertainment industry, and human-interest stories that don’t have to do with issues of government or politics.²⁶³

Social Media and Selective Exposure

How about social media? Greater and greater numbers of people now rely on Facebook and Twitter for their political information. Theoretically, the extent to which social media makes partisan selective exposure more or less likely depends on the algorithms that these sites employ and the heterogeneity of individuals’ social networks. If someone only has friends who share similar political beliefs, then social media can quickly turn into an echo chamber. But if one’s Facebook friends also include weak ties, then social media can be a powerful tool for diverse exposure. In fact, weak ties often provide novel information that leads to substantial knowledge gain.²⁶⁴ Fortunately, Facebook generally fosters networks that consist of both strong and weak ties.²⁶⁵ And despite the fact that partisans self report that their friends on Facebook mostly post information consistent with their own beliefs,²⁶⁶ people see belief inconsistent information on social media more than they think they do.²⁶⁷

Solomon Messing and Sean J. Westwood conducted two experiments to measure whether social media tends to exacerbate or to mitigate partisan selective exposure. They provided participants in their study an interface like Facebook from which to select news articles. Then they manipulated the source associated with the article title as well as the number of Facebook members who had “liked” the article. Some participants saw the “source” cue alone with the article title. Some saw the “endorsement cue” (Facebook users liking the article). Some saw both. Messing and Westwood’s results are fascinating: they find that “stronger social endorsements increase the probability that people select content and that their presence reduces partisan selective exposure to levels indistinguishable from chance.”²⁶⁸ In the condition in which participants saw both the partisan and social

²⁶³ See Ladd, *Why Americans Hate the Media and How it Matters*, 71-72.

²⁶⁴ See Granovetter, “The Strength of Weak Ties.”

²⁶⁵ Pew Research Center, “Social Isolation and New Technology.”

²⁶⁶ 47% of consistent conservatives “say posts about politics on Facebook are mostly or always in line with their own views” compared with 32% of consistent liberals. Pew Research Center, “Political Polarization and Media Habits,” 5.

²⁶⁷ Goel and Watts, “Real and perceived attitude agreement in social networks.”

²⁶⁸ Messing and Westwood, “Selective Exposure in the Age of Social Media,” 1.

endorsement cues, they were 24% more likely than chance to select an article with many endorsements and 8% less likely than chance to select one with only a few. In other words, the fact that an article receives “likes” substantially mitigates the tendency of partisans to engage in selective exposure!

A growing body of empirical evidence substantiates the claim that social media use leads to diverse exposure to political information. Using Pew data, Yonghwan Kim found that use of social network sites is “positively related to exposure to cross-cutting points of view.”²⁶⁹ Furthermore, he observes that the effects of social network sites on diverse exposure did not depend on partisanship.²⁷⁰ Kim et al. demonstrate that how often people use social media positively predicts their discussion network heterogeneity and their civic engagement. Surprisingly, this effect was strongest for more introverted and less open-minded individuals.²⁷¹

Jennifer Brundidge argues that because the Internet allows individuals to transcend geographic boundaries; share “political perspectives through news comments, hyperlinks, and interactive communications technologies”; and form weak ties to people with whom they wouldn’t otherwise connect, it creates a space for exposure (if only inadvertently) to heterogeneous discussion networks.²⁷²

In sum, at least when it comes to the exposure requirement, the contemporary media environment does not present an existential threat to the deliberative ideal. While partisan cable programs might allow some people to tune out uncomfortable information, the evidence does not suggest that people sample news this way. Instead, the most active news consumers watch partisan as well as traditional television programs.

It is, however, concerning that so many people have used increased media choice to filter out politics altogether; but social media might provide a solution to this problem as well. Magdalena Wojcieszak and Diana Mutz find that online chat rooms and message boards facilitate crosscutting political interactions when politics comes up incidentally.²⁷³ Utilizing national survey data, Kim et al. show that the Internet facilitates incidental news

²⁶⁹ Kim, “The contribution of social network sites to exposure to political difference,” 974.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 975.

²⁷¹ Kim, Hsu, and Zúñiga, “Influence of Social Media Use on Discussion Network Heterogeneity and Civic Engagement.”

²⁷² Brundidge, “Encountering ‘Difference’ in the Contemporary Public Sphere,” 684-687.

²⁷³ Wojcieszak and Mutz, “Online Groups and Political Discourse.”

exposure; however, they also find that the effects of this exposure on political participation were stronger for those who “consume less entertainment online.”²⁷⁴ Although the Internet in general may allow some to continue to select out of news, social media platforms, which mix social as well as political content from individuals’ networks, provide some hope of bringing the politically disengaged into the political process.

Motivated Reasoning

Partisan selective exposure does not pose an enormous danger to the deliberative ideal. Does that mean that the media has been successful in promoting deliberation? Unfortunately, as should be evident from my discussion of motivated reasoning in chapter two, exposure to counter attitudinal information does not ensure deliberation; to the contrary, it often causes affectively charged partisans to dig in their heels.

In this section I’ll review how the partisan, detached, and social forms of media are doing when it comes to encouraging citizens to treat information in good faith. Maintaining an open mind requires respect for information sources beyond those that merely confirm one’s predispositions. In other words, for the media to promote deliberation, consumers need to trust it. Because affect leads individuals to engage in motivated reasoning, the media moves farther from the deliberative ideal when it facilitates affective polarization—and closer when it is able to mitigate it. Thus, assessing the extent to which the media encourages deliberation also necessitates asking which forms of media exacerbate affective polarization and which reduce it?

The Impotency of the Detached Media: A Tale of Distrust

In the past decade alone, loads of fact-checking organizations have sprung up all across the United States—and the world for that matter.²⁷⁵ In theory, fact checking embodies what the media is supposed to be doing to encourage deliberation. Not only should it cause individuals to rethink statements made by their politicians, but it should also help set the parameters of political discourse pursuant to the deliberative ideal. Fishkin

²⁷⁴ Kim, Chen, and Zúñiga, “Stumbling upon news on the Internet,” 2607.

²⁷⁵ Kessler, “The Global Boom in Political Fact Checking.”

and Luskin's *informed* requirement comes to mind: Arguments need to be backed by "appropriate and reasonably accurate factual claims."²⁷⁶

The problem lies in moving from theory to reality. Trust in the media is lower than it has ever been.²⁷⁷ And that mistrust diminishes the effectiveness of fact-checking. As Kyle Mattes and David Redlawsk argue "even as it engages in fact-checking, the media cannot act as a legitimate watchdog if those whom it serves do not trust it or perceive it as biased."²⁷⁸ In other words, fact-checking only encourages deliberation if people care about *substance* not source.²⁷⁹ Unfortunately, that's often not the case. Fact-checking is often seen as just another instance of the partisan weaponization of information. As Brendan Nyhan notes, "partisans who pay attention to politics are being conditioned to disregard the fact-checkers when their own side gets criticized."²⁸⁰

Where did this widespread perception of media distrust come from? In his book, *Why Americans Hate the Media and How it Matters*, Jonathan M. Ladd provides evidence for two explanations. First, the news media's tendency to cover tabloid-style stories—like the death of Anna Nicole Smith—causes Americans to rate the news media lower on a feeling thermometer. Second, a significant increase in criticism of the institutional media from politicians and elites on both the left and right has fostered media distrust.²⁸¹ This mistrust means that the detached media is less effective in fulfilling its deliberative function: "those who distrust the press are more likely to resist new information that they attribute to the institutional media and seek additional information from more partisan sources. As a result, their beliefs tend to be less accurate and shaped more by partisanship."²⁸²

Politicians have an incentive to turn citizens against the media. A weakened watchdog means that elected officials have more leeway to say and do what they want.²⁸³ In his book, *Attack the Messenger*, Craig Crawford exhaustively documents how, since at

²⁷⁶ Fishkin and Luskin, "Experimenting with a Democratic Ideal," 285.

²⁷⁷ Ladd, *Why Americans Hate the Media and How it Matter*, 89.

²⁷⁸ Mattes and Redlawsk, *The Positive Case for Negative Campaigning*, 46.

²⁷⁹ Fishkin and Luskin, "Experimenting with a Democratic Ideal," 285.

²⁸⁰ Cooper, "Campaigns Play Loose with Truth in a Fact-Check Age."

²⁸¹ Ladd, *Why Americans Hate the Media and How it Matters*, 108-127.

²⁸² Ladd, *Why Americans Hate the Media and How it Matters*, 138.

²⁸³ "Politicians who manage to be unanswerable to the media are in effect unanswerable to the public they serve." Crawford, *Attack the Messenger*, 73.

least 1988, politicians have avoided answering important questions by blaming the media for biased coverage instead. And now for fear of appearing biased, news organization seldom ask politicians the tough questions; instead of “tak[ing] the lead or stick[ing] with it when powerful politicians might be offended...they prefer to hide behind the charges of political opponents.”²⁸⁴

Partisan Media and Affective Polarization

Because partisans generally don’t trust it, the institutional media has not been particularly successful at promoting deliberative information processing practices. But beyond being an ineffective tool for deliberation, does the media (particularly the partisan one) actually help push people away from the deliberative ideal? If, as I argued in chapter two, affect inspires motivated reasoning, then the media could move individuals farther from the deliberative ideal if its content infuses political leaders, issues, and ideas with more affect. Does the partisan media exacerbate or mitigate affective polarization?

Given that pundits of the partisan media routinely trade in outrage—“efforts to provoke emotional responses (e.g., anger, fear, moral indignation) from the audience through the use of overgeneralizations, sensationalism, misleading or patently inaccurate information, ad hominem attacks, and belittling ridicule of opponents”²⁸⁵—it is easy to imagine the partisan media as an affectively polarizing force. With the fragmentation of the media environment, and the end of the Fairness Doctrine, cable talk shows, radio shows, Internet blogs, and even newspaper columnists have found audiences for whom outrage sells.²⁸⁶

But does this type of outrageous, uncivil content affectively polarize viewers? For at least those who watch these programs, the answer seems to be yes. Diana Mutz conducted an experiment to test the effects of watching pundits engage in uncivil discourse on television. She found that “when uncivil discourse and close-up camera perspectives combine” for a type of “in-your-face” television, it actually “discourages the kind of

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 25.

²⁸⁵ Berry and Sobieraj, *The Outrage Industry*, 7. Specifically, Jeffrey M. Berry and Sarah Sobieraj identify 13 variants of outrageous rhetoric, which occur in the partisan media: insulting language, name-calling, emotional display, emotional language, verbal fighting/sparring, character assassination, misrepresentative exaggeration, mockery, conflagration, ideologically extremizing language, slipper slope argumentation, belittling, and obscene language. For more detailed descriptions of each type see *ibid.*, 245-248.

²⁸⁶ Berry and Sobieraj, *The Outrage Industry*, 120.

mutual respect that might sustain perceptions of a *legitimate* opposition.”²⁸⁷ Mutz’s result provides experimental evidence for the contention that uncivil, partisan news programming has the potential to increase negative affect towards the issues and people discussed.

Matthew Levendusky reports a similar finding. Not only do partisan shows on FOX News and MSNBC “attack the other side, highlight their flaws and foibles, and paint them as duplicitous and corrupt,” but they also “attack and criticize much of the effort to reach out and compromise.”²⁸⁸ Levendusky designed a number of experiments to test whether this type of presentation of information polarizes viewers. His results are consistent with both Mutz’s findings and the motivated reasoning hypothesis. Like-minded participants exposed to partisan programming showed attitude polarization (which lasted for several days!). When participants were forced to watch “cross-cutting” programming, their response depended on the strength of their initial beliefs. For those with strong priors, exposure actually caused them to express *more* extreme attitudes. For those with weak priors, exposure moderated their views.²⁸⁹ In terms of affect, “watching like-minded media makes viewers feel less affect for the other party, rate them less positively along a number of dimensions, have less support for bipartisanship, and have less trust in the other side to do what is right for the country.”²⁹⁰

Kevin Arceneaux and Martin Johnson find similar effects for partisan programming—at least for those who actual view them: “exposure to proattitudinal news can reinforce preexisting attitudes and cause people to be more resistant to opposing arguments.”²⁹¹ But for a number of reasons they “doubt that partisan news shows are *directly* responsible for polarizing the mass public.”²⁹² First, they argue that partisan media only reaches a limited number of people.²⁹³ Second, the people who self-select into watching these news programs are already polarized. Those who would have been most

²⁸⁷ Mutz, “Effects of “In-Your-Face” Television Discourse on Perceptions of a Legitimate Opposition, 632-633.

²⁸⁸ Levendusky, *How Partisan Media Polarize America*, 34.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

²⁹⁰ Levendusky, *How the Partisan Media Polarize America*, 108.

²⁹¹ Arceneaux and Johnson, *Changing Minds or Changing Channels?*, 103.

²⁹² Arceneaux and Johnson, *Changing Minds or Changing Channels?*, 5.

²⁹³ In contrast, Berry and Sobieraj argue that by factoring in radio shows, political blogs, and opinion-based newspaper columns, the partisan media has a significant reach to an audience of up to 47 million Americans, who are the very Americans also most likely to vote. Berry and Sobieraj, *The Outrage Industry*, 13.

affected by the partisan media—citizens with weak prior beliefs—have selected themselves out of partisan news in favor of entertainment programs.²⁹⁴

Arceneaux and Johnson's results suggest that the emergence of partisan media cannot truly explain mass affective polarization while Levendusky's suggest partisan media has a larger role in affectively polarizing the mass public. Additional research better substantiates Levendusky's claim. Lelkes, Iyengar, and Sood provide perhaps the best evidence for a causal relationship between the rise of partisan media and mass affective polarization. Before 1996 (the year FOX News entered American political discourse), partisan television programming was virtually non-existent. Lelkes et al. exploit this fact. They demonstrate that access to FOX News affectively polarized politically interested Republicans; and when the Internet granted all politically active partisans access to more partisan programming both Democrats and Republicans showed effects of affective polarization.²⁹⁵

Lelkes et al.'s results are also consistent with a number of other studies. Lawrence, Sides, and Farrell show that partisans self-segregate in the blogosphere; and readers of right and left-wing blogs are nearly as polarized as members of Congress.²⁹⁶ Garrett et al., demonstrate that exposure to liberal and conservative news sites and blogs decrease net favorability toward out-party candidates and supporters.²⁹⁷

Most evidence indicates that the partisan media is a key determinant of affective polarization. But even in spite of the scholarly disagreement over the influence of partisan media on aggregate levels of affective polarization, partisan media at least tends to affectively polarize those who watch it. For the purpose of my discussion that is enough. Neither the detached nor the partisan media seems to be able to mitigate affective polarization, especially once viewers already have strong prior beliefs. For the former,

²⁹⁴ They write: “if Americans are becoming more polarized, the rise of partisan media on cable television is not the likely culprit... while partisan news *can* polarize those who watch, the ample presence of entertainment programming likely mutes the overall effect of partisan media on mass attitudes.” Arceneaux and Johnson, *Changing Minds or Changing Channels?*, 88.

²⁹⁵ “When Fox News was the primary source of ideological information, partisan animus was expressed mainly by Republicans, but as biased information of all slants became available, access to cable and attention to news increased affective polarization for all identifiers.” Lelkes, Iyengar, and Sood, “The Hostile Audience: Selective Exposure to Partisan Sources and Affective Polarization,” 27.

²⁹⁶ Although the audience of right and left-wing blogs is relatively small, those who do read them tend to be the most politically active. Lawrence, Sides, and Farrell, “Self Segregation or Deliberation?”

²⁹⁷ Garrett, Gvirsman, Johnson, Tsifti, Neo, and Dal, “Implications of Pro- and Counterattitudinal Information Exposure for Affective Polarization.”

distrust of the media makes it ineffective at encouraging deliberation. For the latter, its inflammatory presentation of information further impassions an already affectively polarized audience, increasing each viewer's tendency to engage in motivated reasoning.

Social Media and Affective Polarization

Both traditional and non-traditional forms of media don't appear to be effective in reducing political affect. In the case of partisan selective exposure, social media provided some hope. Is it possible that social media can also minimize the prospect of motivated reasoning by reducing affective polarization?

While there has been relatively little research on this front, an innovative study conducted by Pablo Barberá suggests social media may reduce mass political polarization. By estimating ideological ideal points for individual Twitter users based on the politicians, political parties, think tanks, and journalistic outlets they follow, Barberá is able to demonstrate the effects of network diversity on political moderation. He finds that over the course of a year and a half individuals' ideal points *moderated* if their social networks were relatively diverse. Because social media generally encourages diverse networks—through weak ties—Barberá's results imply that social media can actually be a force for political moderation.²⁹⁸

There is even evidence that social media encourages individuals to both consider new political perspectives and change their mind based on that new information. In fact, even though most people use social media for primarily non-political purposes, “organic exposure to political diversity is taking place”—and crucially, this exposure has been shown to “stimulate persuasion.”²⁹⁹

The evidence reported thus far has implied a rather rosy view of social media as a force for depolarization. Unfortunately, not all the evidence in the literature supports this position. While Facebook and Twitter certainly expose Americans to much more diverse set of perspectives, Lee et al. find that those who frequently engage in political discussions

²⁹⁸ Barberá, “How Social Media Reduces Mass Political Polarization.”

²⁹⁹ Diehl, Weeks, and Zúñiga, “Political persuasion on social media,” 14-15. Diehl et al. measure persuasion on social media using three survey questions: they asked respondents how much they agree with the statement “I have changed an opinion based upon what someone influential to me posted on social media,” and the statements that they “take part in changing [their] mind about political issues because of information or interactions on social media, and “take part in reconsidering [their] political views because of information or interactions on social media. Ibid., 9.

on Facebook and Twitter often end up more polarized from the experience. Social media—at least Facebook and Twitter—cannot fully eliminate the all too human tendency to engage in motivated reasoning.³⁰⁰ Perhaps social media only succeeds in reducing affective polarization for those who use it passively for political information (i.e. getting information from news feeds rather than through interactions with others in the comment sections). When it comes time to personally undertake political discussions on these platforms, motivated reasoning trumps open-mindedness. In the next section of this chapter, I conduct a survey experiment to test whether or not passive encounters with political information prompt deliberation.

Politicians vs. Peers

Does friendship inspire an open mind? That is, are people more open to considering novel arguments when they come from peers as opposed to politicians? A substantial literature supports the notion that source cues shape public opinion. For many issues, individuals often use partisan affiliation as a heuristic to determine their own positions. In fact, because “affective attachment to a political party is [often] acquired before issue preferences,” many Americans will support arguments—at least on most low salient issues—so long as their own party’s label appears next to it.³⁰¹ Given, the rampant negative affect toward out-partisans in the American electorate, it should also not be surprising that a mere endorsement from a presidential candidate of the opposing party is enough to polarize opinions along partisan lines.³⁰²

While using source cues may be an effective shortcut to help voter become “fully informed” with minimal effort,³⁰³ retreating to partisan positions instead of engaging in thoughtful reflection directly violates a key tenet of the deliberative ideal: individuals must care about the *substance* of arguments advanced rather than “how they are made or who is

³⁰⁰ Lee, Choi, Kim, and Kim, “Social Media, Network Heterogeneity, and Opinion Polarization.” Lee et al. lament, “For individuals who join political discussions more often, the higher SNS heterogeneity is associated with more polarized opinion about party and ideology.” Ibid., 715.

³⁰¹ Arcenaux, “Can Partisan Cues Diminish Democratic Accountability,” 152. Also see Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes, *The American Voter*; and Green, Palmquist, and Schickler, *Partisan Hearts and Minds: Political Parties and the Social Identities of Voters*.

³⁰² Nicholson, “Polarizing Cues.”

³⁰³ Lau and Redlawsk, “Advantages and Disadvantages of Cognitive Heuristics in Political Decision Making.”

making them.”³⁰⁴ My discussion of motivated reasoning in chapter two suggests that negative affect for the out-party explains why Americans so often value source over substance. Using survey data gleaned from a representative sample of undergraduates at Bowdoin College, I test the peer-politician hypothesis: associating an idea with peers as opposed to an out-party politician induces open-mindedness.³⁰⁵

Data

My dataset consists of survey responses from 367 Bowdoin College students. Although college students are not a representative sample, they provide a better test of my hypothesis than would a sample of the public at large. First, college students tend to be more politically engaged than average citizens—precisely the segment of the American public on which this paper focuses. Second, my primary expectation—that people are more open-minded when they hear arguments from friends than from politicians—depends on the fact that each participant in the survey is part of the same, relatively small community. In other words, all participants in the study have the same “friends.”

Respondents in the study were presented with a brief, slightly modified excerpt from a *Wall Street Journal* opinion piece critical of Affirmative Action:

We live in a political environment where the intent of a policy aimed at helping minorities is all that matters; questioning the policy’s actual effectiveness is tantamount to racism. Our national debates about racial preferences tend to focus on their legality, not whether they work as intended. Yet both are important.

An analysis of black students at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the mid-1980s found that they had scored in the top 10% nationally on the math portion of the SAT but in the bottom 10% among their classmates at MIT. As a result, black students were dropping out at much higher rates, and those who didn’t leave typically received lower grades than their white and Asian classmates. Affirmative action had turned some of the smartest kids in the country into failures, in a misguided effort to obtain some predetermined racial mix on the quad.

After racial preferences were banned in the University of California system in 1996, black enrollment at higher-ranked UCLA and Berkeley fell, but black academic outcomes improved.³⁰⁶

³⁰⁴ Fishkin and Luskin, “Experimenting with a Democratic Ideal,” 285.

³⁰⁵ I thank Professor Franz for graciously allowing me to add a few questions to the survey that his “Quantitative Analysis in Political Science” course puts out to the Bowdoin campus each year.

³⁰⁶ Riley, “Scalia Was Right About Race Preferences.”

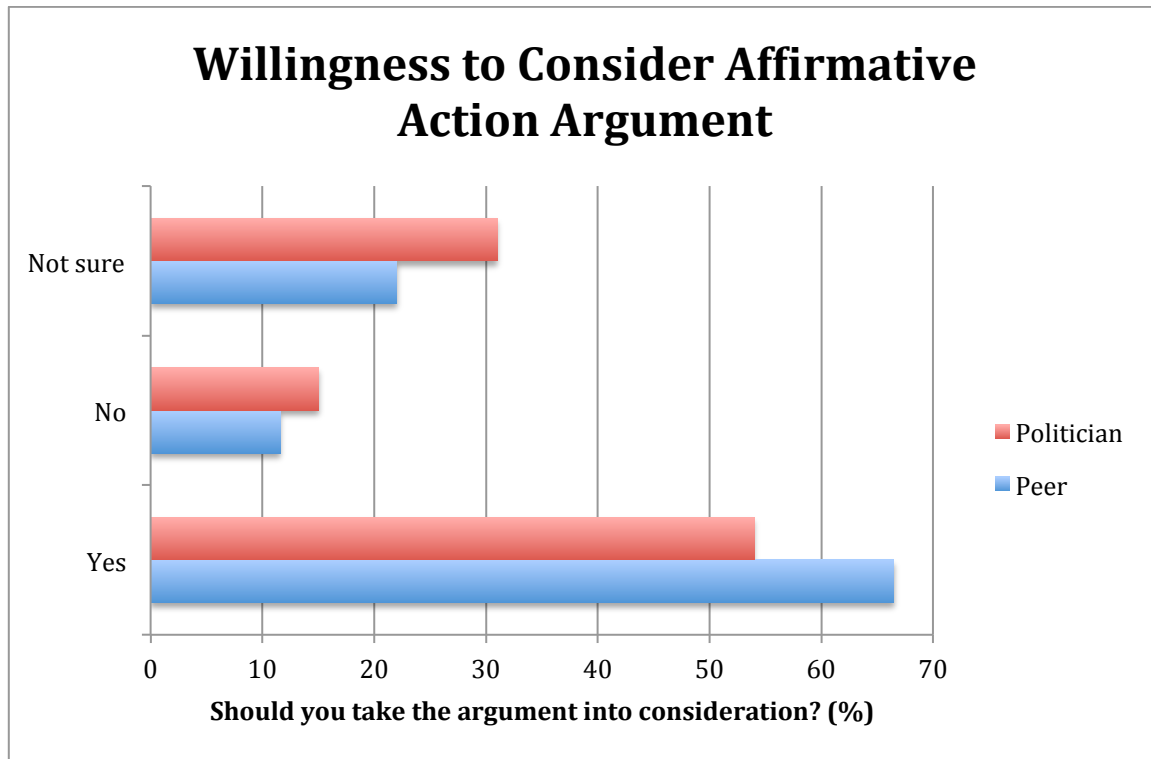
While all participants saw the exact same excerpt, it was preceded by an introductory sentence that varied based on the condition to which the participant had been randomly assigned: either the “peer” or “politician” condition. In the “politician” condition, participants were asked, “We'd like your opinion of the following argument recently made by a Republican congressman on the issue of affirmative action in college admissions.” In the “peer” condition, participants were asked, “We'd like your opinion of the following argument recently made by a Bowdoin student in the Orient on the issue of affirmative action in college admissions.”

To measure how open-minded participants were in each condition, they were asked, “In trying to form the most accurate opinion possible on the issue of affirmative action, do you think it is worth taking the previous argument into consideration?” They were presented with the options, “Yes,” “No,” and “Not sure.” Note that this question did not ask whether the participant should accept the argument from the excerpt, only whether this individual should consider it. Considering alternative perspectives is crucial in any definition of deliberation.

Results

Despite the fact that participants read the *exact same* argument on affirmative action, a much higher percentage of respondents in the “peer” condition reported a desire to consider the anti-affirmative action argument in forming their opinion. Overall, 66.5% of respondents in the peer condition expressed a willingness to consider the argument (N=115) compared with 54% in the politician condition (N=79). Running a one-tailed test confirms that the difference between the politician and peer condition is statistically significant using a 95% confidence interval. These results suggest that friends—at least relative to politicians—encourage greater deliberation.

Figure 5: Open-mindedness for Peer and Politician Primes



Discussion

While this experimental manipulation can get at how open-minded individuals are when they hear arguments from friends rather than politicians, it has a couple significant limitations. First, the sample size of this dataset ($N=367$) is less than ideal. With such a small sample, any results that I report must be considered preliminary. Second, because of this small sample size, I was only able to have two experimental conditions. Had the survey been larger, I would have added a control condition, which presented the excerpt without an explicit source cue. Currently, the experiment can only show differences between peers and politicians. This makes any results difficult to interpret. On the one hand, it may be that any difference in participants' willingness to consider the argument and to seek compromise implies that friendship inspires an open-mind. On the other hand, it may be that friendship is no different than a lack of any source cue; rather it is negative affect toward a politician that induces a closed mind. The literature suggests that both factors contribute to these results, but my experiment cannot reveal which factor is stronger or even that both are at play.

Conclusion

Does the contemporary media promote deliberation? Does it live up to the marketplace of ideas ideal? In terms of exposure, the contemporary media environment actually does relatively well. Most politically engaged Americans now see a much wider range of political perspectives than was once possible. These citizens often sample from partisan, detached, and social media sources. They often watch both liberal and conservative programming.

How this exposure affects individuals' information processing practices is another story. In most cases of exposure to diverse opinions—from both the detached and partisan media—politically engaged citizens tend to polarize. Regardless of the form of media, motivated reasoning is a stubbornly persistent human psychological tendency. Although social media is no panacea, evidence for the effects of social media use on polarization is more mixed than for other forms of media. Perhaps there is some hope that it can promote deliberation.

As Barberá argues, “individuals on one extreme of the ideological distribution may now discover that other members of their personal networks have completely different opinions, and therefore realize that holding such opinions is socially acceptable.”³⁰⁷ Whereas a journalist from the detached media, who produces an “objective” report on a political issue, may evoke distrust, and a partisan journalist may even evoke hatred. It is possible that a “friend” may prompt respect, and ultimately an open-mind.

³⁰⁷ Barberá, “How Social Media Reduces Mass Political Polarization.”

Where, when, how and for whom conscious processing will successfully override the automatic intuitive response is the critical unanswered question that goes to the heart of all discussions of human rationality and the meaning of a responsible electorate.

Milton Lodge and Charles S. Taber, *The Rationalizing Voter*

Toward a Marketplace of Ideas

In *Abrams v. United States*, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. penned a legendary dissenting opinion. The court had just upheld the conviction of a group of Russian immigrants whose crime had been to circulate leaflets in support of the Russian Revolution. Criticizing the court's disregard for the freedom of speech, Holmes invoked the metaphor of the marketplace of ideas:

When men have realized that time has upset many fighting faiths, they may come to believe even more than they believe the very foundations of their own conduct that the ultimate good desired is better reached by free trade in ideas—that the best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market, and that truth, is the only ground upon which their wishes safely can be carried out. That, at any rate, is the theory of our Constitution. It is an experiment, as all life is an experiment.³⁰⁸

Holmes argued that if only the government respected First Amendment rights, truth would eventually emerge from the public discourse. But, it is worth asking, as Isaiah Berlin does, “Are demagogues and liars, scoundrels and blind fanatics, always, in liberal societies, stopped in time, or refuted in the end?”³⁰⁹

The preponderance of evidence presented in this paper suggests not. As American politics has become increasingly defined by affective polarization, as our political discourse has become progressively more partisan, and as the Information Age has given ideologues more ammunition to rationalize away uncomfortable arguments than ever before, the prospect of a marketplace of ideas has perhaps never seemed so remote. Given how fundamental and largely uncontrollable feelings are to information processing, it is not surprising that neither the detached, partisan, nor social forms of media (as they exist

³⁰⁸ Schmuhl and Picard, “The Marketplace of Ideas,” 144.

³⁰⁹ Berlin, “John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life,” 338.

today) can substantially mitigate the tendency of politically active partisans to engage in motivated reasoning.

So how can individuals form “better” beliefs? How can the media environment more accurately reflect a marketplace of ideas? How can American political discourse prioritize facts rather than the stale arguments of factions? Despite the pessimistic picture that this paper has painted, I conclude by arguing that we can move our sterile, partisan, and polarized political discourse in a more deliberative direction. This task requires rethinking how people approach political information and developing new technologies to make deliberation easier.

Understanding Our Limits

In her book, *Being Wrong*, Kathryn Schulz makes a strong case for coming to terms with the limitations of human reason: “Of all the strife in the world...a staggering amount of it arises from the clash of mutually incompatible, entirely unshakable feelings of rightness.”³¹⁰ At the core of this anti-deliberative behavior is the “tacit assumption that current belief is identical with true belief.”³¹¹ If our beliefs are “true” (as it often feels), then rather than seeking to learn from others, we will attempt to proselytize them; rather than listening to opposing perspectives, we will “reason” them away. After all, when you are right, why bother considering what others have to say?

This approach to belief formation makes little sense, however, when one considers a crucial question: On what are our political opinions actually based? Chapter two suggests that they are no more than feelings (often unconscious) developed as a result of a lifetime of rather arbitrary exposure to information and dependent on the congruence of that information with our social or partisan identities. Each of us has a severely limited working memory.³¹² Ideas that do make it into long-term memory are tinged with affect.³¹³ When we try to bring arguments to the front of our minds, they are systematically biased by affect contagion—and are little more than mere rationalizations for how we feel about an

³¹⁰ Schulz, *Being Wrong*, 8.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

³¹² Miller, “The magical number seven, plus or minus two.”

³¹³ Lodge and Taber, *The Rationalizing Voter*, 60.

issue.³¹⁴ These limitations make motivated reasoning in the realm of affectively polarized politics virtually inevitable.

Nonetheless, if there's any hope of approximating the deliberative ideal, then each of us must attempt to consciously recognize our own partisan biases. We must understand that even when we try our best to be deliberative, affect unconsciously dominates all stages of our thought processes—from the very memories we can call to mind to the arguments that we find inherently persuasive.³¹⁵ Perhaps if we appreciate the role that affect plays in our “reasoning,” then we might choose to take steps to counteract its effects: maybe that means avoiding inflammatory information sources; going out of our way to learn from others rather than trying to convert them to our own position; or just living with a healthy amount of self-doubt. As Cass Sunstein argues, a “strong norm in favor of critical thinking can reduce some of the most damaging pressures, and hence ensure that people will hear from many minds rather than a few.”³¹⁶

Although a strong norm in favor of critical thinking would certainly make each of us relatively more deliberative, it is a fairly unsatisfying solution to the problem of motivated reasoning—much of which occurs as a result of forces outside of conscious control! Can we do better?

A Deliberative Social Media Platform

Henry Hazlitt quips, “eternal vigilance is the price of an open mind.”³¹⁷ But perhaps if the cost of open-mindedness weren't so steep, ideological, dogmatic, and emotional convictions would not substitute for deliberate thought quite so often. What if the price of an open mind weren't “eternal vigilance” but instead a moderate amount of engagement with political information and a whole lot of teamwork? Chapter three demonstrated that social media does marginally better than the partisan or detached forms of media at overcoming motivated reasoning; however, none of these platforms (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) were designed with human psychology and deliberation in mind.

³¹⁴ Ibid., 148.

³¹⁵ Ibid., 156.

³¹⁶ Sunstein, *Infotopia*, 223.

³¹⁷ Hazlitt, *Thinking as a Science*, 120.

In his book, *Respecting Truth: Willful Ignorance in the Internet Age*, Lee McIntyre points to two technologically related “sources of hope” for discovering truth in the Information Age: Wikipedia and social media, specifically Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Wikipedia is striking for its relatively accurate, voluminously expansive, and consistently up-to-date entries on nearly every subject. The key to Wikipedia’s success lies in the concept of *crowdsourcing*: “the idea that mass scrutiny of errors in an open forum is a powerful way to create knowledge, and may even be the best way to reach toward truth.”³¹⁸ In fact, the process of crowdsourcing—at least as it is implemented in Wikipedia—reflects a type of mass mediated deliberation:

Wikipedia is in part a deliberative forum, with reason-giving by those who disagree and with deliberative “places” to accompany disagreement. In fact, every page...includes an accompanying “talk” page. This means that every entry in the encyclopedia can be used as a deliberative space—and many entries are so used.³¹⁹ Thus, the page for any given Wikipedia entry reflects the, albeit imperfect,³²⁰ result of deliberation between its many editors. While Wikipedia serves as an easily accessible and reasonably reliable source of information for virtually any subject, it does not *directly* induce its readers to engage in deliberation. Social media, however, provides a more direct outlet for its users to deliberate about politics.

As chapter three reported, Americans are increasingly using social media—Facebook and Twitter in particular—for consuming political news. These platforms provide spaces for users to discuss (in the form of “comments” on Facebook and “replies” on Twitter) this news with other members of their personal networks and beyond. These platforms make diverse exposure to information more likely: “the openness and widespread availability of social media enables the sort of information dissemination that is crucial to keep from living in an information cocoon.”³²¹ And as my small survey experiment from chapter three suggests, getting information from friends (at least passively) rather than from politicians prompts more open-mindedness.

³¹⁸ McIntyre, *Respecting Truth*, 127.

³¹⁹ Sunstein, *Infotopia*, 152.

³²⁰ “In some areas, what is true is greatly disputed, and it is hard to find an impartial arbiter. If anyone in the world can serve as an editor, partisans should be able to move content in their preferred directions, making entries quite unreliable.” Sunstein, *Infotopia*, 154-155.

³²¹ McIntyre, *Respecting Truth*, 129.

While social media does better than the partisan or the detached media in promoting deliberation, current platforms encourage deliberation only incidentally. When partisans actively engage in discussions on these sites, motivated reasoning remains a powerful force as users end up more polarized than when they started.³²² Using the principle of crowdsourcing, can a novel social media platform be designed to work around the limitations of the human mind?

Recall that much of the impetus for motivated reasoning stems from the meager capacity of working memory and the biases in multiple stages of information processing that affect inspires. Our cognitive limitations make properly reevaluating our conclusions practically impossible: “Once a judgment is reached, much of the information that contributes to it is disgorged. The judgment is retained but most of the raw material that went into it is not.”³²³ Because we can’t keep track of the initial reasons that went into forming our original beliefs, it becomes impossible to deliberately weigh new information against old. Instead, we rely on feelings. As Milton Lodge and Charles Taber put it:

Rather than treating information about political parties, candidates, or issues evenhandedly, as normative models of rational decision making prescribe, citizens are prone to accept those facts and arguments they agree with and discount or actively counterargue those that challenge their preconceptions, where agreement or disagreement is marked by the *feelings* that are automatically triggered in the earliest stages of thinking about the issues. In short, citizens are often *partisan* in their political information processing, motivated more by their desire to maintain prior beliefs and feelings than by their desire to make “accurate” or otherwise optimal decisions.³²⁴

But what if a social media platform enabled users to construct, visualize, save, and easily update their beliefs—and crucially, the reasons and evidence that went into forming them in the first place? In other words, what if individuals could overcome the limits of working and long-term memory by outsourcing much of the belief formation process to the platform itself?

³²² Lee, Choi, Kim, and Kim, “Social Media, Network Heterogeneity, and Opinion Polarization.”

³²³ Patterson and Seib, “Informing the Public,” 190.

³²⁴ Lodge and Taber, *The Rationalizing Voter*, 150 (emphasis in original).

Hypothetically, here is how such a platform might work. First and foremost, information must exist in a standardized format amenable to constructing, visualizing, and updating one's own beliefs. Currently, we assimilate new information into our beliefs rather passively and arbitrarily: read a news article, watch a television segment, talk with a friend about politics, etc. To construct and visualize our beliefs, it must be easy to compare, contrast, and save the arguments and evidence advanced in that news article, journal article, television segment, or other source of political information. Reformatting this information might just mean summarizing it by pulling out the central arguments and evidence advanced.

Crowdsourcing would make it possible to reformat vast volumes of information into an agreed upon structure. And these new structures could be compared, combined, and reconstructed to allow users of the platform to create and save their beliefs to their personal pages. Users would be able to see the arguments and evidence that went into forming those beliefs. And beliefs would need to be substantiated by facts and data rather than just emotional conviction. In some sense, breaking down information into their fundamental logical units of analysis on a massive scale would create a type of marketplace of ideas in which crowdsourcing generates the currency for deliberation: arguments and evidence.

Once information is repackaged, individuals could pull arguments and evidence from across the platform to deliberate about a given issue. Users would be able to compare arguments with counterarguments from a wide variety of sources—and then construct more nuanced ones based on all the relevant evidence that they could find.

Being able to save and visualize one's own beliefs provides a number of deliberative benefits. For one, the social media platform, because it would be able to keep track of what arguments and evidence a user considered in forming a given belief, would be able to suggest arguments and evidence important to many others on the platform but that this user had not previously considered in forming his belief. Rather than affect contagion determining the information that individuals consider in forming their beliefs, an algorithm would.

In addition, easily being able to see the reasons that went into forming a given belief would allow a user's "friends" to easily critique—and thus help improve—it. Instead of discussions based on the typical comment sections structure of platforms like Facebook

and Twitter, users could engage in discussions with their friends that are narrowly focused on a given argument or piece of evidence—and because this platform would also function as a massive database of arguments and evidence from many sources, these discussions could be rooted in facts rather than mere opinion. In short, this would allow individuals to question every argument and piece of evidence that went into forming their own beliefs and that of their friends (or even politicians). User interactions would reflect a type of Socratic dialogue rather than a chaotic stream of consciousness.

Beyond the average individual, one could also imagine democratic benefits associated with politicians and other elites publically having to construct, visualize, and update their beliefs on this platform—and support those beliefs with evidence! Users would be able to see the reasons that went into a given politician’s position. They could create discussions questioning those reasons. And the platform itself could point out arguments and evidence that a politician had failed to consider in forming their beliefs. Ideally, this would force politicians to recognize the tradeoffs necessitated by their positions, acknowledge the value in the arguments of others, and ultimately, root their beliefs in facts rather than relying on the talking points of their respective factions. This social media platform would incentivize “the political classes [to] jointly search for truth” rather than give them more “weapons with which to club [their] opposition.”³²⁵

Conclusion

Passion has likely always polarized politics to some degree. There is nothing fundamentally new about humans engaging in motivated reasoning. And it is not surprising that ambitious politicians take advantage of this fact: if they are able to “[divide] mankind into parties, [inflame] them with mutual animosity, and [render] them much more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to co-operate for their common good,”³²⁶ then they can more easily keep power.

In the contemporary information and political environment, mutual antipathy for members and leaders of the opposing party had deteriorated the quality of American political discourse. The Information Age has blessed individuals with access to more data,

³²⁵ “When facts are weapons,” *The Economist Magazine*.

³²⁶ Madison, *Federalist No. 10*, 73.

and more perspectives than ever before; however, this wealth of information can often seem more like a curse than a blessing. Neither the detached, partisan, nor social form of media has been able to foster deliberation.

Despite these pessimistic pronouncements, it is as important as ever to find a way to harness the immense power of the Information Age in service of deliberation. As Robert Schmuhl and Robert G. Picard write:

For the marketplace of ideas to continue to have symbolic power and meaning in the modern communications environment of multiple media and messages without end, the lone, searching individual will need to discover, in a consciously deliberative way, the ideas and information that approximate the truth, from the perspective of a citizen-seeker. That concept, in itself, might seem unrealistic—and almost as idealistic as the metaphor Holmes introduced—but it is what our experimental and imperfect times require.³²⁷

Despite all of the challenges presented in this paper, we can take steps to make the “unrealistic,” “idealistic” vision of a marketplace of ideas a reality. The first step is to recognize the limits of our own minds. The second is to reimagine the tools at our disposal for processing information. The Information Age is currently defined by partisan polarization. Perhaps with a little more innovation it might become “a new Socratic age”³²⁸ defined by deliberation.

³²⁷ Schmuhl and Picard, “The Marketplace of Ideas,” 151-152.

³²⁸ “When facts are weapons,” *The Economist Magazine*.

Data Appendix I

Data Gathering Procedure

In order to get Twitter data for each member of the 114th Congress, I created a Python dictionary,³²⁹ which associated each MC with their Twitter handle. GovTrack provides an API that give access to this information. Next, I wrote a Python script to get this data from GovTrack. I discovered a few errors in GovTrack's list: some Twitter handles were incorrect and others were non-existent. After crosschecking the resulting list of MCs against the official lists of the 114th Senate and House by hand, I manually filled in the rest of the missing data. In a few cases, MCs appeared to have more than one Twitter account. When that was the case, I chose the Twitter handle that, upon closer inspection, seemed most closely affiliated with the MCs official office (rather than their campaign). Only two House members did not have Twitter accounts—Charlie Dent (D-PA) and Rob Bishop (R-UT).

Like GovTrack, Twitter provides a relatively straightforward API. In order to access this API, I modified a version of a Python script that I found on GitHub³³⁰ to scrape Twitter for each MC's tweets. This procedure allowed me to get every tweet that an MC has sent starting from February 9, 2016 and moving backward in time (up to approximately 3200 tweets for each MC)—the earliest tweet in the dataset is from February 15, 2008.

After scraping Twitter for these tweets, I filtered the data set to capture just tweets explicitly mentioning one or both of the political parties (or bipartisanship). The keyword dictionary that I constructed to filter these tweets contained the following words (not case-sensitive): "Democrat," "Democrats," "Dem," "Liberal," "Democratic," "Republican," "Republicans," "GOP," "Conservative," "Repub," "Repubs," "Bipartisan," and "Bipartisanship." 112, 367 tweets contained one or more of these keywords.

Descriptive Statistics

My dataset contains Twitter data for 533 MCs—though DW-NOMINATE data was only available for 443. Figure 6 reflects the distribution of partisan tweeting. Figure 7

³²⁹ <https://docs.python.org/2/tutorial/datastructures.html#dictionaries>

³³⁰ <https://gist.github.com/yanofsky/5436496>

shows the correlation between the key explanatory variable (a MC's ideological extremity) and the dependent variable (the proportion of a MC's tweets that fall into the partisan category). Figure 8 shows the same relationship instead broken down based on the MC's chamber of Congress. Table 2 contains the multivariate regression results for Models 2a-2d, which test the bipartisan tweeting hypothesis.

For most MCs, approximate 2-5% of their tweets fall into the partisan category. There are a significant number of MCs around 5-7% and a few MCs who engage in partisan tweeting more than 7% of the time. Again, because this data relies on only explicit mentions of the party to categorize partisan statements, it likely understates the true proportion of MCs tweets that are partisan in nature.

Figure 6: Distribution of Partisan Tweeting

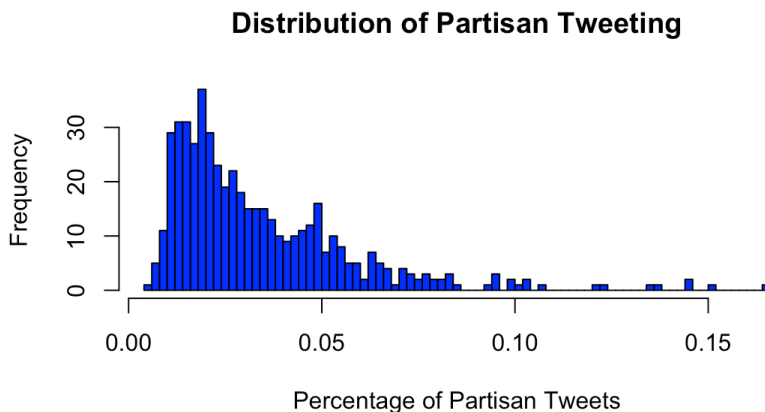
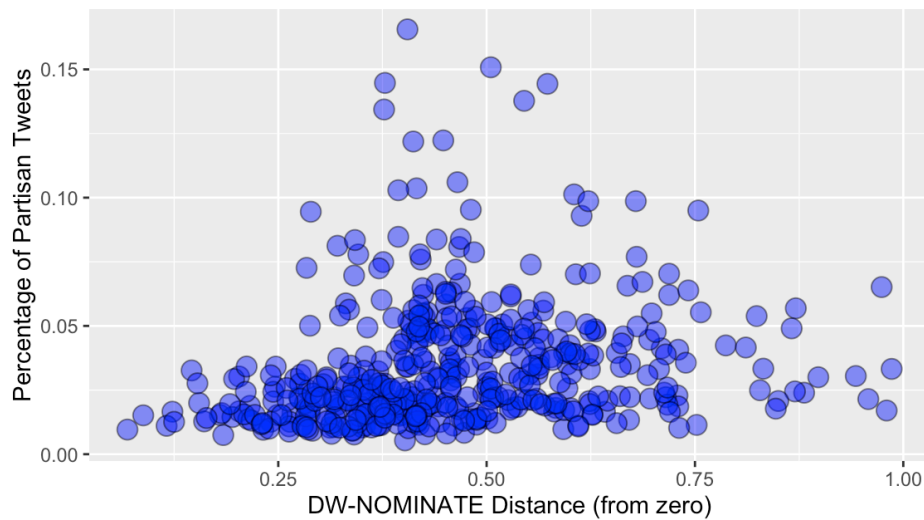


Figure 7 shows the raw data for partisan tweeting, plotting an MC's DW-NOMINATE Distance (from zero) along the x-axis. In line with the regression results reported in chapter one, increasingly extreme MCs tend to engage in more partisan tweeting, and this effect tails off after a DW-NOMINATE Distance of around 0.5. It is interesting that there are a few outliers who engage in relatively low levels of partisan tweeting even though they have very extreme DW-NOMINATE Distances.

I hypothesize that the distribution tails off slightly at high levels of extremity because MCs at that level of extremity may be less likely to praise their own party. Recall that "partisan" tweets consist of both negative statements about the opposing party and

positive statements about the MC's party. For example, Senator Mike Lee, who is depicted by the dot with the highest DW-NOMINATE Distance, makes negative statements about the Democratic Party in about 2.2% of his tweets. By comparison, he makes positive statements about the Republican Party only in 1.1% of his tweets. In fact, he even criticizes his own party more than he praises it: around 1.6% of his tweets are anti-Republican. This example, however, is only suggestive of an explanation, more systematic analysis must be undertaken to truly explain the outliers in the distribution—and that is beyond the scope of this paper.

Figure 7: Ideological Extremity and Partisan Tweeting (Correlation)



Breaking down this data based on a MC's chamber of Congress also visually demonstrates what the regression results from this chapter indicate: members of the House are more partisan in their tweeting than are members of the Senate.

**Figure 8: Ideological Extremity and Partisan Tweeting in the House and Senate
(Correlation)**

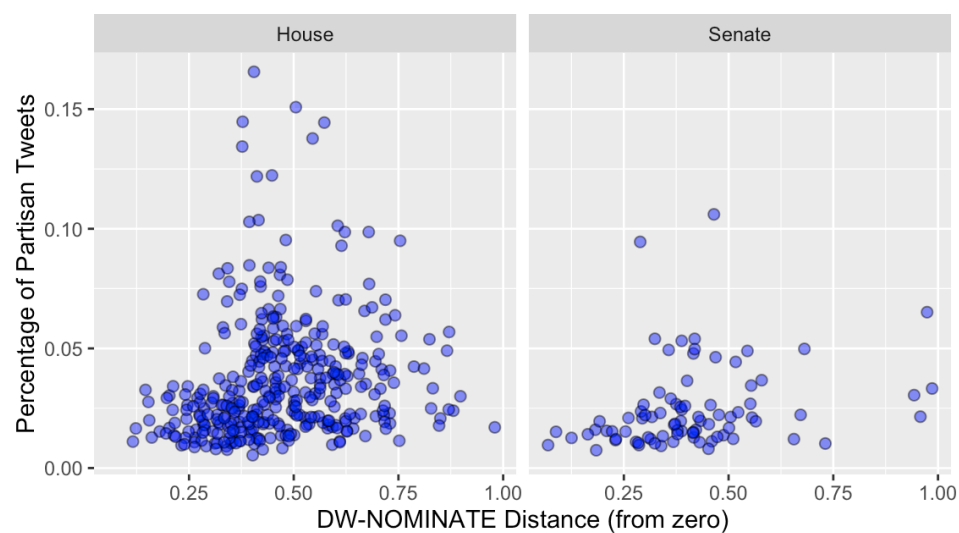


Table 4: Multivariate Analysis of the Bipartisan Tweeting Hypothesis (OLS)

	Model 2a	Model 2b	Model 2c	Model 2d
Distance From Zero	-0.0143 (0.0145)	-0.0010 (0.0037)	-	-
Distance From Zero Squared	0.0127 (0.0134)	-	-	-
Distance From Median	-	-	-0.0108 (0.0087)	-0.0016 (0.0038)
Distance From Median Squared	-	-	0.0113 (0.0097)	-
Senator	-0.0014 (0.0013)	-0.0013 (0.0013)	-0.0013 (0.0013)	-0.0013 (0.0013)
Years of Incumbency	0.0002*** (0.0001)	0.0002*** (0.0001)	0.0002** (0.0001)	0.0002*** (0.0001)
Congressional Leadership	0.0114*** (0.0025)	0.0112*** (0.0025)	0.0114*** (0.0025)	0.0112*** (0.0025)
Democrat	0.0043*** (0.0011)	0.0044*** (0.0011)	0.0049** (0.0017)	0.0051** (0.0017)
Adjusted Partisan Voter Index	-0.0001 (0.0001)	-0.0001 (0.0001)	-0.0001 (0.0001)	-0.0001 (0.0001)
Constant	0.0185*** (0.0036)	0.0156*** (0.0020)	0.0171*** (0.0019)	0.0155*** (0.0013)
Adjusted R²	0.1132	0.1134	0.1144	0.1136
N	443	443	443	443
Standard errors are in parentheses. ***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05				

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