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# Partisan Media Exposure and Attitudes Toward the Opposition

MATTHEW LEVENDUSKY

*How has the rise of partisan media outlets changed how citizens perceive the other party? In particular, does watching partisan news sources make citizens dislike and distrust the other party? Drawing on social identity theory, I explain how the slanted presentation of the news on partisan outlets leads viewers to perceive the other party more negatively, to trust them less, and to be less supportive of bipartisanship. Using a series of original experiments, I find strong support for my arguments. I conclude by discussing the normative and empirical implications of these findings.*

*[Supplementary material is available for this article. Go to the publisher's online edition of *Political Communication* for the following free supplemental resource(s): full details of the experiments, including descriptions of the samples, protocol, and text of the stimuli, results of manipulation checks, the replication of experiment 2 described in the text, and additional statistical results.]*

**Keywords** partisan media, media effects, social identity theory

For a democracy to function effectively, citizens must be willing to compromise with—and have respect for—those with whom they disagree. This is especially true in the American constitutional system, which requires compromise to govern effectively (Gutmann & Thompson, 2010; Mutz, 2007). Unfortunately, this normative ideal seems to be quite far removed from ordinary practice in the contemporary United States: Partisans in the electorate seem to dislike and distrust not only elites of the opposite party, but even ordinary partisans of a different stripe. So not only do (say) ordinary Republicans disapprove of President Obama and Nancy Pelosi, but they also hold quite negative views of ordinary Democrats (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2011). How has our contemporary political environment strayed so far from the normative ideal?

Undoubtedly, a wide variety of factors help to explain this gap, and a full documenting of them is beyond the scope of this article. I focus here on one key factor: partisan media outlets. I argue that partisan media, because of their slanted presentation of the news, make viewers dislike—and therefore distrust—the opposition. These affective shifts also make citizens less willing to support bipartisanship and compromise with the other party. Partisan media is certainly not the only—or even the primary—reason for the discord in American politics. But its skewed perspective on the news does help to exacerbate and reify the contemporary political divisions in the mass public.

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These results have important, and potentially disquieting, implications for American politics. This diminished support for compromise and consensus fosters what Gutmann and Thompson (2010) call the “uncompromising mind,” thereby exacerbating the gridlock characteristic of contemporary politics. By deepening the divisions between the mass parties and making ordinary voters less willing to support bipartisanship, partisan media contribute to the difficulty of governing in contemporary America.

## Partisan Media and the Opposition

For much of American history, news outlets were explicitly partisan—they did not just report the news, they took a position on it, slanting the day’s news to fit with their political outlook. But around the turn of the 20th century, journalists adopted a norm of “objective” reporting where they simply convey facts without offering an opinion, a model that dominated journalism for much of the last century (Schudson, 2001). But with the rise of a “post-broadcast” media market, partisan media outlets have reemerged in the U.S., particularly on cable news (Prior, 2007). To be clear, even in the contemporary era, most news organizations remain objective, mainstream outlets. But the growth of cable TV and the ability to “narrowcast” messages means that cable networks can now offer a particular partisan take on the news, with some offering a perspective from the political left and others from the political right (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2009).

As a result, citizens can now match their news consumption to fit with their ideological preferences (Iyengar & Han, 2009). The types of cable networks and shows I focus on here present a particular partisan vision of the news for viewers, one where stories are “framed, spun, and slanted so that certain political agendas are advanced” (Jamieson, Hardy, & Romer, 2007, p. 26). Indeed, one could define partisan media as opinionated media: outlets and programs that fit the news within a political narrative and create a coherent conservative or liberal interpretation of the day’s events (Baum & Groeling, 2008, 2010). Partisan news programs are less about simply conveying information and more about helping viewers make sense of the world given particular predispositions (Rosensteil, 2006, p. 253). These one-sided messages give the audience an easily digestible version of an otherwise confusing political world.

Part and parcel of this one-sided presentation of the facts is the criticism of the opposition on these outlets. On left-wing shows, it is not simply that Democrats are right, it is that Republicans are wrong, and the reverse is true on right-wing shows. They accomplish this task in several ways. First, when discussing a given news story, they selectively focus on the set of facts that is most congenial to their side, so the coverage of (say) global warming on Fox News looks quite different from MSNBC’s coverage (Feldman, Maibach, Roser-Renouf, & Leisewowitz, 2012; Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2009). These shows also vary the tone, language, and so forth to further emphasize which side has the “right” argument (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). Second, they also selectively choose which stories they will air: Right-wing sources discuss stories that make Democrats look foolish and inept, and left-wing ones similarly emphasize stories that highlight Republican foibles (Baum & Groeling, 2008, 2010). In particular, they look for stories where they can portray the other side as hypocritical and duplicitous, reinforcing the image of the other side as flawed (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008).

These shows also directly criticize and critique the other side. Unlike mainstream news, which favors balance and objectivity, partisan media outlets explicitly endorse one side and criticize the other (Jamieson et al., 2007; Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). Indeed, these programs spend, on average, more time attacking the other party than they do defending their own (Chalif, 2011). These shows are as much about learning why the opposition is

wrong as they are about learning why “our side” is right (Holbert, Garrett, & Gleason, 2010). They accentuate these attacks with language designed to invoke outrage at the other party (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). This is not simply incivility toward the other side (i.e., the eye rolling, sighing, etc., discussed in Mutz & Reeves, 2005), but rather a more sustained attempt to create a visceral reaction of anger and disgust in the audience (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). The other party is attacked, and in fairly strident and negative terms. This type of depiction of the opposing party has powerful implications for how viewers evaluate it and the broader political process more generally.

### **How Does This Slanted Coverage Impact Viewers?**

Partisan media shape how viewers see the “other side” because they powerfully invoke viewers’ partisan (social) identities. Decades of work on social identity theory demonstrate that humans naturally perceive the world in terms of in-groups (the group to which they belong) and out-groups (all other groups). As a result of this classification, we show a marked tendency to prefer members of the in-group to out-group members (Tajfel, 1970; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). While there are a host of potentially relevant political social groups (Huddy, 2001), arguably none is more politically relevant than one’s partisanship, at least in the U.S. (Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2002; Greene, 1999).

Partisan media’s framing of the news primes and activates viewers’ partisan group identity. These shows frame the news as a struggle between the two major parties (see above), which in turn cues voters that they should understand these issues through the lens of partisanship (Price, 1989; Yzerbyt, Dumont, Mathieu, Gordijn, & Wigboldus, 2006). When such identities are made especially salient, as they are on partisan media, this exacerbates in-group/out-group thinking (Mullen, Brown, & Smith, 1992), especially when in-groups are depicted as being in conflict with out-groups (Brewer, 1991). So while partisans should generally be susceptible to in-group/out-group thinking in politics (Greene, 1999), the depiction of the news on these programs strengthens this tendency.

This in turn shapes how partisans feel about members of the other party. Consider first what happens when a subject watches like-minded media, that is, pro-attitudinal media that reinforces his or her existing beliefs (for example, when a conservative Republican watches Fox News). Such shows polarize affect toward the parties for two reasons. First, heightened group identities shape attitudes and emotions, especially attitudes toward the out-group. In particular, viewers should be more likely to feel negatively toward the out-group and prescribe negative traits and attributes to them (Ray, Mackie, Rydell, & Smith, 2008). The content and presentation of these shows increase negative affect for the other party.

Second, because the host and the viewer share a common social identity (partisanship), the host’s message becomes especially compelling to the audience—the host serves as an in-group cue giver. Messages from in-group members are especially persuasive (Mackie, 1986; Mackie, Worth, & Asuncion, 1990), so individuals will be more likely to accept these in-group messages.<sup>1</sup> Given that many of the messages on these programs focus on the flaws and shortcomings of the opposition (see above), this will lower affect for the other party. This leads to Hypothesis 1: Exposure to like-minded media will decrease affect for the other party.

These shows should not only change how viewers feel about the other party, but they should also have consequences for viewers’ willingness to engage with them in the political process. In particular, they should lower levels of trust in the other party and viewers’ willingness to support bipartisan compromise with them. Take the case of trust first. Judgments about trust are implicitly rooted in some positive assessment of the authorities in question.

To trust a government actor or party is to believe that they will do what is right for the nation, even absent scrutiny (Levi & Stoker, 2000; Miller & Listhaug, 1990). So a failure to trust the other party implies a belief that they cannot (or will not) act in the nation's best interest, but rather will act in their own more narrow partisan interest. The like-minded media argument that the other party is flawed, duplicitous, and so forth will be a highly persuasive, in-group message, so it should shape viewers' attitudes toward the other party. Further, because distrust is a negative trait, subjects should also be willing to assign it to the other party as an out-group (Ray et al., 2008). Like-minded media remove the positive assessments of the other party that underlie trust and therefore should lead viewers to distrust the other side. Thus, Hypothesis 2 is as follows: Exposure to like-minded media will lower trust in the other party.

This partisan specific trust, while distinct from the more typical focus on trust in government more generally, still plays an important role in a mass democracy. Trust in government is shaped by trust in the parties (Keele, 2005), and in particular trusting the opposition party to do what is right (Anderson, Blais, Bowler, Donovan, & Listhaug, 2005). One need not like the other party or their policies, but one has to believe they will act in the best interest of the nation (Mutz, 2007). Otherwise, the trust that is crucial to actually solving social problems becomes all the more elusive (Hetherington, 2005).

This same process should likewise lower support for bipartisan compromise with the other party. Bipartisanship rests on the (implicit) idea that both parties have legitimate policy proposals, and the best policies are the ones that combine approaches from Democrats and Republicans (Gutmann & Thompson, 2010). Partisan media, however, diminish the belief that the other party offers some legitimate policy solutions. First, once again, the in-group message that the other party's policy positions are deeply flawed will be highly persuasive. Second, priming partisanship should lead viewers to see their party's proposals as stronger and more credible (since they come from the in-group), and likewise to see the opposing party's proposals as being less so (since they come from the out-group), which should lead viewers to be less willing to support the bipartisan approach that involves trading in-group ideas for out-group ones (Shea, 2013). This leads to Hypothesis 3: Exposure to like-minded media will lower support for bipartisanship.

Together, Hypotheses 1–3 suggest a particularly important role for partisan media in shaping viewers' beliefs about the policy process. It is not simply that viewers will dislike the other party, but they will see the party less as a legitimate partner for compromise and governing. Partisan media, especially like-minded media, can have quite broad consequences for citizens.

But what happens when subjects watch cross-cutting partisan media that goes against their prior beliefs (e.g., when a Democrat watches Fox News)? This situation is particularly interesting because now the partisan media source is not criticizing the other party but the subject's own party. I expect, however, that these cross-cutting messages will not be especially effective. These messages come from out-group members, and especially when group identity is salient, out-group messages are not particularly persuasive (Mackie et al., 1990; Mackie & Queller, 2000). Given this, I would expect cross-cutting media to have no discernable effect on same-party evaluations. Thus, Hypothesis 4 is as follows: Exposure to cross-cutting media will have no impact on evaluations of one's own party.

There is one exception to this expectation of null influence, however: individuals who perceive cross-cutting media to be credible. If (say) Democratic viewers believe Fox News to be a credible news outlet, then criticism of the Democratic party on Fox should have a greater effect on their attitudes. Outlet credibility is a necessary precondition for persuasion (Hovland & Weiss, 1951), so a credible source should be able to persuade listeners

to change their evaluations of their own party. While most viewers do not think cross-cutting sources are credible, that belief is not universal: In 2010, 21% of Democrats saw Fox News as a credible source, and likewise 13% of Republicans saw MSNBC as a credible outlet (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2010). Among this set of viewers, I expect to find lower levels of same-party affect after cross-cutting media exposure. According to Hypothesis 5, viewers who perceive cross-cutting sources to be credible will have lower levels of same-party affect.

## Research Design

To test these hypotheses, I conducted a series of original experiments. Each experiment begins with a brief pretest questionnaire to gather relevant background information. Subjects are then randomly assigned to watch a brief video clip that either features an apolitical story (the control condition) or a topical political story from either a like-minded or a cross-cutting perspective. Subjects in the like-minded and cross-cutting conditions watch a story on the same topic (for example, extending the Bush tax cuts); what differs is the source of the story, and hence the partisan slant.<sup>2</sup> The study concludes with a posttest questionnaire (including the dependent variables of interest).

I select like-minded and cross-cutting sources using two criteria. First, the shows should be slanted to one side according to some external actor's judgment, and second, their audiences should skew to one side of the political aisle. The external slant criterion is straightforward: If multiple sources say an outlet is slanted, then it likely is slanted. Second, the audience skew criterion reflects the fact that audience preferences reflect outlet slant—a paper with a more liberal audience skews the news in a liberal direction (Mullainathan & Shleifer, 2005). Together, these criteria should successfully identify sources that are biased toward one side of the political aisle.

Given these criteria, like-minded clips for Democrats come from MSNBC news shows (*Countdown with Keith Olbermann* and *The Rachel Maddow Show*), and cross-cutting clips come from Fox News (*The O'Reilly Factor* and *Hannity*); the opposite is true for Republicans.<sup>3</sup> Recent work suggests Fox News slants to the right (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008) and MSNBC leans to the left (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2009; Steinberg, 2007). Further, recent survey data suggest that conservative viewers favor Fox News, and liberals prefer MSNBC (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2010), suggesting both sources are appropriate for the current analysis. Comparing across these types of news should allow me to determine how partisan slant influences viewers' perceptions of the opposition.

The key difference between the like-minded and cross-cutting conditions, then, will be the partisan slant of the stories—the like-minded sources will actively critique and criticize the other party, whereas cross-cutting sources will do the same to the viewer's own party. This shift in emphasis and partisan slant is not especially subtle and should be easily detectable for the subjects. To test this claim, the experiments include a posttest manipulation check item asking subjects to rate the partisan slant in the news stories they watched. Consistent with the claim that partisan media are biased, subjects have little difficulty detecting the partisan slant of the sources. Any differences I find between sources should therefore be a product of this partisan slant.

My use of real-world segments, however, comes at a price. My treatment stimuli are actual partisan media clips, unedited from the original airings except to reduce their length. Given this, my ability to control the specific differences between the treatment and control conditions is more limited than in a traditional experiment. While it is clear that the partisan



slant differs between like-minded and cross-cutting sources (see above), this encompasses a number of factors: The framing of the story will be different, as will the tone, the imagery, and so forth. This limits my ability to argue that a specific aspect of the segments is responsible for the differences between conditions. While this is an obvious limitation of this study, it is not a debilitating one: My segments are real-world segments, so differences here should also be found in other real-world segments. An important future step would be to try and unpack these differences and discern what exactly is driving such effects, but having these initial baseline results is a crucial step in the process.

One might be concerned about the external validity of my study, both in terms of sample selection and broader generalizability. None of my experiments are conducted on random samples (the sample comes from an online sample pool), so I cannot claim that my results easily generalize to some broader population, at least in a facile way. As with any non-random sample, this limits the ecological validity of the study. That said, even if my results do not generalize to the broader U.S. population, they still speak to the underlying mechanisms through which partisan media affect viewers, and that finding in and of itself is intrinsically valuable (Berkowitz & Donnerstein, 1982). Future work will be needed to ascertain exactly how these results hold up in other contexts, but they establish a crucial baseline.

### Do Partisan Media Polarize Affect?

I begin by testing my hypotheses about the effects of partisan media on viewers' affect for the parties using data from Experiment 1. In the posttest section of Experiment 1, subjects rated both their own party and the opposite party using a standard 100-point feeling thermometer commonly used in the National Election Studies and other surveys. I use the feeling thermometer score as a general measure of affect toward the parties, which is consistent with past work in this vein (Mutz, 2007). This sets up a relatively straightforward estimation strategy to analyze my experiment:

$$y_i^P = \beta_0 + \beta_1 LM_i + \beta_2 CC_i + u_i, \quad (1)$$

where  $y_i^P$  is the feeling thermometer rating respondent  $i$  gives to party  $P$ ,  $LM_i$  and  $CC_i$  are indicators for whether respondent  $i$  has been assigned to the like-minded or cross-cutting conditions, and  $u$  is a stochastic disturbance term. The indicators for like-minded and cross-cutting exposure give the effect of treatment assignment, relative to the apolitical control condition. Note further that Equation 1 assumes that the effect across parties is the same; that is, like-minded/cross-cutting media have the same effect for both Democrats and Republicans. I have estimated a more complicated model that allows the effects to vary by party, and I found no substantive differences, so I present the results pooled across parties here. Table 1 estimates Equation 1 using the data from Experiment 1.<sup>4</sup>

I find strong support for Hypothesis 1. Like-minded media do decrease viewers' affect for the other party (relative to the apolitical control condition) by nearly 10 degrees, or approximately 0.5 standard deviations—opposite-party feeling thermometer ratings go from 30.4 degrees in the control condition to 20.9 degrees in the like-minded condition. Like-minded media cause viewers to feel less warmly toward the other party.<sup>5</sup>

Note, however, like-minded media have no effect on same-party feeling thermometers. It is not clear what drives this null effect. My theoretical argument focused on why

**Table 1**  
Effects on party feeling thermometers

	Same-party feeling thermometer	Other-party feeling thermometer
Like-minded treatment	-1.60 (4.8)	-9.49 (5.35)
Cross-cutting treatment	-2.88 (4.62)	3.98 (4.97)
Intercept	68.33 (3.34)	30.37 (3.71)
<i>N</i>	93	89
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.004	.08

*Note.* Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients with associated standard errors in parentheses.

like-minded media would decrease affect for the opposition, and so I simply have less to say here. That said, however, this result is consistent with a theoretical account stressing the centrality of negative information. Negative information is more powerful than positive information (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001; Lau, 1985), so it may simply be that the negative information about the other party overwhelms the positive information about one's own party. This parallels Mutz's (2007) findings that incivility decreases the legitimacy of disliked politicians but has no effect on the legitimacy of liked ones. A related study of campaign advertising found that positive ads (ads praising one's preferred candidate) had little effect on reinforcing preferences, but negative ones about the opposing candidate had a much larger effect on attitudes and behavior (Phillips, Urbany, & Reynolds, 2008). Interestingly, even when I conducted a follow-up experiment where the partisan media clip only contained positive information about one's own party (e.g., a left-wing segment that only praised Democrats without critiquing Republicans), there was still no impact on same-party affect. These findings seem to reflect the fact that people watch these programs more to learn why the other side is wrong than to learn why their own side is right (Chalif, 2011; Holbert et al., 2010). Future work to lay out a theoretical argument for this finding will be needed, but the findings from Experiment 1 (and the experiments below) show that like-minded media have a much larger effect on attitudes toward the other party than toward one's own party.

Cross-cutting media, in contrast, have little effect on either same-party or opposite-party feeling thermometers. Viewers simply seem to "tune out" the cross-cutting content, leaving their feelings about the parties unchanged. This should not be terribly surprising given that subjects typically find out-group messages to be unpersuasive, as I argued above (see Hypothesis 4). It therefore makes good theoretical sense that cross-cutting media are typically much less persuasive.

Experiment 1, however, lacks a measure of outlet credibility, so I cannot test Hypothesis 5's claims about the moderating effects of source credibility. To test this hypothesis, I turn to Experiment 2. Experiment 2 uses a slightly different design from Experiment 1. In Experiment 2, subjects are randomly shown either an apolitical control segment or a treatment segment. The treatment segment here comes from Fox News and contains a strong critique of Obama's foreign policy (arguing that Obama's foreign policy shows



too much weakness). Here, I use only this one treatment clip for both Democratic and Republican subjects, rather than the standard design of paring right-wing and left-wing segments used in Experiment 1. I did so because I could not locate a suitable corresponding clip from left-wing television discussing the same issue (Obama's foreign policy) in similar terms. Further, even if I could find a clip from a left-wing media source that praised Obama's foreign policy, it is not clear that it would have a comparable effect given that subjects process positive and negative information differently (Baumeister et al., 2001; Lau, 1985). But I can verify the robustness of the findings from Experiment 2 in one key regard. I selected a clip from a left-wing program that criticized Republican foreign policy proposals. The results I find analyzing that experiment parallel the findings reported below. This should increase the reader's confidence that these findings are more general and not simply confined to this one segment.

I test Hypothesis 5 using data from Experiment 2 by testing whether beliefs about outlet credibility<sup>6</sup> (here, Fox News) moderate the effects of the treatment for Democrats. Given that Experiment 2 focuses specifically on President Obama, and not Democrats more generally, I use the Obama feeling thermometer to test my hypothesis. This implies that I estimate the following equation:

$$y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Treat_i + \beta_2 Cred_i + \beta_3 Treat_i * Cred_i + u_i, \quad (2)$$

where  $y$  is the Obama feeling thermometer,  $Treat$  is an indicator for being assigned to the treatment condition (e.g., being assigned to watch the Fox News clip),  $Cred$  is a measure of media outlet credibility, and  $u$  is a stochastic disturbance term. Given the setup of Experiment 2, I estimate Equation 2 separately by party, since I expect the treatment clip (from Fox News) to have sharply different effects for Democrats and Republicans (consistent with Hypothesis 1). Table 2 gives the results.<sup>7</sup>

**Table 2**  
The moderating role of source credibility in affective evaluations

	Democrats	Democrats	Democrats	Republicans	Republicans	Republicans
Saw treatment segment	-0.95 (5.43)	4.52 (6.35)	9.38 (17.16)	-20.99 (10.76)	-13.6 (18.15)	-36.85 (36.24)
High source credibility		9.73 (9.65)	10.41 (9.55)		7.29 (15.09)	8.87 (18.45)
Saw Treatment Segment × High Source Credibility		-19.78 <sup>a</sup> (12.43)	-19.00 <sup>a</sup> (13.4)		-11.79 (23.08)	-20.08 (27.04)
Partisan strength			8.45 <sup>a</sup> (5.43)			-2.22 (13.82)
Partisan Strength × Saw Treatment Segment			-3.29 (7.75)			13.73 (19.56)
Constant	76.45 (3.93)	74.43 (4.39)	58.25 (11.27)	43.29 (6.94)	38.6 (12.10)	41.71 (23.04)
$N$	61	61	61	24	24	24
$R^2$	.03	.05	.10	.11	.03	.19

*Note.* Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients with associated standard errors in parentheses.

Columns 1 and 4 of Table 2 replicate the baseline results seen in Table 1: Like-minded media, but not cross-cutting media, change subjects' affect for President Obama. Given that the segment is highly critical of President Obama's foreign policy, it is not terribly surprising to find that Republicans (like-minded subjects) are moved by the segment to evaluate President Obama more negatively. But the real issue is whether beliefs about the credibility of Fox News condition its effect for Democrats; I test that hypothesis in column 2 (and present the parallel results for Republicans in column 5). The results in column 2 strongly support my argument. Watching the Fox News clip does make Democrats feel more negatively toward President Obama, but only if those Democrats think Fox News is credible. Put more broadly, cross-cutting media change respondents' affect for the parties and their leaders, but only if subjects think those cross-cutting sources are credible.

But this of course raises the question of which subjects find cross-cutting media to be credible. Existing research suggests that those who select cross-cutting media (or find it to be credible) are less in tune with their own party and more likely to be similar to partisans from the other party. In effect, Democrats who find Fox News credible (or Republicans who find MSNBC credible) are odd, and their selection of this type of media is an indication about their preferences (Holbert et al., 2010). Given this, one might worry that the effects in Table 2 about source credibility simply reflect partisan strength—perhaps Democrats who find Fox News credible are disproportionately weak Democrats, and the findings in column 2 simply reflect this fact. Column 3 tests partisan strength as an alternative moderator and shows that the credibility effect remains statistically significant. So the effect is not simply due to weak partisans defecting from their party, but seems to be a more general effect of outlet credibility. Though it is beyond the scope of the current article, unpacking the source of these credibility judgments is an important topic for future scholarship.<sup>8</sup>

### Effects on Bipartisanship and Trust

Tables 1 and 2 above show that partisan media drive affect toward the parties and their leaders. But as I argued above, these effects should extend to other evaluations of the leaders. For example, hearing Fox News discuss why President Obama is a flawed leader should make viewers (at least like-minded viewers) more critical of the president and his leadership, consistent with the logic of Hypothesis 1. Table 3 tests this possibility using the data from Experiment 2 by asking whether subjects assigned the treatment condition (who see the Fox News clip criticizing the president) view President Obama's leadership more negatively, and whether they are less likely to approve of his handling of national security issues.

Table 3 shows that for Republicans (for whom this constitutes like-minded media), there is an effect on these types of evaluations. They not only like the president less (see Table 2), but they also view him as a weaker leader, and they are less likely to approve of his handling of national security issues (though there is no cross-cutting effect, consistent with Hypothesis 4). These types of effects have real policy consequences. First, these sorts of perceptions, particularly of being a strong leader, have considerable electoral importance (Druckman, Jacobs, & Ostermeier, 2004; Funk, 1999). Second, these perceptions influence leaders' policy positions, particularly in the international arena (Schultz, 2005). These types of media segments have real consequences for how viewers evaluate the president and his leadership.

**Table 3**  
Effects on leader trait evaluations

Variable	National security approval		Strong leadership	
	Democrats	Republicans	Democrats	Republicans
Saw treatment segment	0.15 (0.26)	-0.57 (0.36)	-0.19 (0.23)	-0.81* (0.34)
Constant	3.45 (0.21)	2.57 (0.25)	3.69 (0.16)	3.21 (0.34)
<i>N</i>	61	24	61	24
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.01	.09	.01	.10

*Note.* Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients with associated standard errors in parentheses.

\*Distinguishable from 0 at the 0.05 level.

**Table 4**  
Effects on trust

	Same-party trust	Other-party trust
Like-minded treatment	0.05 (0.21)	-0.29 (0.19)
Cross-cutting treatment	-0.12 (0.19)	0.24 (0.19)
Intercept	3.21 (0.16)	2.13 (0.15)
<i>N</i>	93	93
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.01	.09

*Note.* Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients with associated standard errors in parentheses.

This same type of process should also lead subjects to be less trusting of the other party after watching like-minded media (see Hypothesis 2). Table 4 tests this claim using data from Experiment 1.

Table 4 illustrates that partisan media have consequences for subjects' trust in the other party. Watching like-minded media makes subjects less trusting of the other party to do what is right for the country. In the control condition, 67% of subjects rarely or never trust the other party to do what is right, but that figure jumps to 84% in the like-minded condition. Like-minded media consumption makes trust more partisan.

Likewise, I also expect a similar effect on support for bipartisanship (Hypothesis 3); Table 5 tests this hypothesis with data from Experiment 1. Just as in Table 4, like-minded media make viewers less supportive of bipartisanship and compromise with the other side. Support for bipartisan cooperation falls from 39% in the control condition to 22% in the like-minded media condition. Compromise and consensus become less desirable goals when the opposition is portrayed as dishonest and corrupt. Given the difference in affect engendered by these types of programs, viewers would prefer their own party to pursue its own policy goals without reaching out to the other party. As a whole, the findings are clear: Partisan media not only make subjects like the other side less, but that negative affect

**Table 5**  
Effects on support for bipartisanship

	Support for bipartisanship
Like-minded treatment	−0.87* (0.31)
Cross-cutting treatment	−0.28 (0.30)
Intercept	3.1 (0.23)
<i>N</i>	95
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.09

*Note.* Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients with associated standard errors in parentheses.

\*Distinguishable from 0 at the 0.05 level.

spills over into other areas, such as evaluations of political trust and bipartisanship. Partisan media have real consequences for subjects' attitudes toward the other party, as well as their willingness to engage with them in the political process.

### Addressing Potential Limitations of the Findings

Even if one accepts the validity of the findings in Tables 1–5, there are still several potential limitations that might explain away my findings. Here, I try to address some of the most salient ones. First, one might be concerned that my effects are real, but the effects are not due to the partisan slant of the programs, as I argue, but are instead a product of the incivility of these shows. While incivility does have important effects on factors like affect for the opposition (Mutz, 2007) and trust in the political system (Mutz & Reeves, 2005), my effects cannot be attributed to incivility. Both like-minded and cross-cutting television are, to some extent, “uncivil,” but as the results above demonstrate, they have very different effects on how viewers perceive the opposition. For example, Fox News has a striking effect on the attitudes of Republican viewers, but much less so on Democratic ones, yet it is the same program—and has the same level of civility—in both cases. It is the partisan slant of these shows, rather than the eye rolling or other forms of incivility, that generates my results.

Second, one could argue that these affective results are not normatively troubling. If (say) Republicans genuinely believe that Obama is making poor foreign policy choices, why shouldn't they be upset when they hear this message on Fox News? If the source of the affective arousal is legitimate (and not based on a distortion of the truth), then why should scholars be concerned by these findings?<sup>9</sup> This is certainly a valid point, but it also misses a more fundamental and troubling ramification of these findings. To the extent that partisan media help to paint the opposition in a disparaging light and decrease trust and support for bipartisanship, it has implications for American politics more broadly. Declining trust makes it more difficult for government to solve social problems (Hetherington, 2005), and mass support for bipartisanship shapes Congress members' incentives to support compromise (Harbridge & Malhotra, 2011). Whether Republicans *should* be upset with Obama because of his policy decisions is beyond the scope of this article. But the results here demonstrate the significance of these programs for American politics.

Third, one could likewise accept my findings but dismiss them as unimportant given the limited size of the audience for these programs. While the audience for these shows has grown sharply over time, the audiences are far smaller than for more conventional news outlets like the nightly broadcast news (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2010; Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2009). This fact, however, misses some important comparisons. First, while the partisan media audience is small, it is an engaged and intensely partisan/ideological audience (Bai, 2009; Baum & Groeling, 2010; Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). This is the audience that will make its preferences known—and its voices heard—in the halls of power. In a political system like the U.S., one should never assume that the power of a group is simply a product of its size without also considering its motivation and preference intensity. Even if the partisan media audience is small, it is a significant audience that cannot be easily discounted.

Further, these over-time audience trends need to be understood in the broader context of a post-broadcast media environment. Gone are the days of one “mainstream” message coming from the major broadcast networks; today’s media environment is characterized by a proliferation of news sources, many matched to viewers’ own partisan dispositions (Prior, 2007). Indeed, partisan media sources are simply one example of this broader trend of seeking out like-minded information, albeit a relatively extreme one (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Iyengar & Han, 2009). Given this new reality, scholars need to understand its consequences. Seen in this light, my findings represent an important contribution.

Finally, one might still be worried about these findings for another reason: Perhaps they come about because I force subjects to watch treatments they would never voluntarily watch in the real world, a problem known as randomization bias (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Heckman & Smith, 1995). To test this hypothesis, I can control for subjects’ real-world viewing habits to examine how this affects how subjects respond to the treatment (this is known as a patient preference trial; see Torgerson & Siddald, 1998). Doing so reveals that the effects exist even among those who would watch these programs in the real world. So these results cannot be attributed simply to asking subjects to watch treatments they would never actually watch in the real world. Rather, these effects are real effects with actual real-world analogues. While one can never anticipate all potential challenges to a set of findings, particularly experimental ones, this suggests that these findings are important and have real-world consequences for American politics.

## **A Disliked and Distrusted Opposition**

As a whole, my findings demonstrate that like-minded media have a significant effect on how viewers see the opposition: Watching like-minded media makes viewers feel more negatively toward the other party, rate them less positively along a number of dimensions, have less support for bipartisanship, and less trust in the other side to do what is right for the country.

While these results have important implications I discuss below, they also are the beginning of a discussion rather than the end. In particular, I would highlight two important topics for future research. First, there’s the question of over-time effects. My findings here all come from single-shot experiments, but among subjects who choose to watch partisan media programs, they tend to do so regularly (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2010). How long do these effects persist, and what is the effect of over-time repetition, especially in a world where subjects can select their own treatments? Second,

what drives judgments about outlet credibility, especially in the case of cross-cutting media? This too is beyond the scope of the current project, but it is a puzzle sorely in need of a clear answer.

My results also suggest a subtle twist on the existing debates over mass polarization. Much of the previous work focuses on attitudinal polarization and whether individuals today hold more extreme opinions than they did a generation ago (cf. Abramowitz, 2010; Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope, 2005), and what role partisan media might play in this process (Stroud, 2010). But my results show that affective polarization—divisions in how citizens evaluate the parties—may be equally consequential. At the most obvious level, this sort of affective extremity can generate the mistrust and lack of support for bipartisanship I document here, as well as other negative consequences more generally (see Iyengar et al., 2011). But this sort of affective polarization might also fuel *attitudinal* polarization as well. Because parties have known policy positions, changing how subjects feel about the parties has implications for subjects' attitudes as well: If a subject knows that (say) the Democrats take position X, and he dislikes the Democrats, then he knows he does not want to take position X (Brady & Sniderman, 1985). Further, as subjects dislike one party more, they may be more likely to engage in partisan-motivated reasoning, which can also polarize attitudes (Taber & Lodge, 2006). So affective polarization is quite deeply linked to attitudinal polarization. This is speculative, and would require additional research, but it does demonstrate how the affective shifts documented here can have important consequences for other domains as well.<sup>10</sup>

One might argue that a redeeming feature of this media-induced polarization is increased citizen participation: Previous work demonstrates that polarized politics draws more citizens into the political arena (Abramowitz, 2010, 2013). Such increased participation, however, need not be a normative good. Increased activity, especially from those already divided, helps to make politics more dysfunctional and gridlocked (Abramowitz, 2013). This is Fiorina's (1999) "dark side" of civic engagement, a trend the nation saw during the town hall meetings over health care during the summer of 2009 (Kraushaar & Lerrer, 2009).

Indeed, this dark side of involvement reinforces and reaffirms the findings seen above: Partisan media helps to promulgate and reify a set of beliefs that produce the "uncompromising mind" that eschews compromise and bipartisanship makes it more difficult for politics to function effectively (Gutmann & Thompson, 2010), a theme noted by President Obama in his address at the University of Michigan in 2010 (Obama, 2010). If citizens do not see the other party as a legitimate target for compromise, then government's ability to actually solve problems is diminished (Anderson et al., 2005; Fiorina, 2006). Especially in a constitutional system designed to make compromise a necessity, this makes governance extremely difficult (Price, 2010).

This sort of mass-level shift spills over to the elite level as well, since members' incentives to be bipartisan are shaped by electoral factors. If the mass public demands bipartisanship, then members will be bipartisan. But if constituents clamor against bipartisanship, telling members to stand firm on principles, then members will behave that way (Harbridge & Malhotra, 2011). Given that the partisan media audience is more politically engaged and involved (Baum & Groeling, 2010), this should only heighten the push away from compromise.

Of course, in the end, it is crucial not to attach too much importance to partisan media, as many other factors are more to blame for this gridlock and dissensus, and certainly America's institutions have proved to be resilient to deep problems in the past.<sup>11</sup> That said,



however, the results here suggest that partisan media do play a role in exacerbating these trends. Given the growth and expansion of these outlets in recent years, these trends are unlikely to abate in the near future.

## Notes

1. This persuasion can occur via two distinct mechanisms. First, in-group messages are seen as especially persuasive, so these messages persuade viewers to adopt the host's view (Mackie, 1986). Second, viewers might also come to believe that a trait of (say) Democratic identification is disliking Republicans (as the out-group), so they adopt that attitude as their own (Turner, 1991).

2. To ensure that the results do not hinge on discussing a particular issue, the issues used for the like-minded/cross-cutting clips change across experiments (in each experiment, the like-minded and cross-cutting clips discuss the same issue). Experiment 1 discussed party fundraising efforts, and Experiment 2 discussed Obama's foreign policy.

3. I treat partisan leaners as partisans (Keith et al., 1992) and drop pure Independents from the analysis. Including Independents in the analysis does not change any substantive conclusions but considerably complicates the presentation of the results.

4. Experiment 1 had 95 subjects, of whom 68% are Democrats, including leaners; 32% of subjects were assigned to the control condition, 33% were assigned to the like-minded condition, and 36% were assigned to the cross-cutting condition.

5. Note, however, that with my experiments, I cannot differentiate between the two potential mechanisms outlined in the theoretical discussion above (identity priming and in-group persuasion). Future work will be needed to differentiate these competing pathways; I thank a reader for making this point to me.

6. The measure of credibility was asked in the pretest, and to avoid cueing respondents that they would be evaluating Fox News, I asked them to rate a number of different outlets.

7. Experiment 2 had 85 subjects, 72% of whom are Democrats. Across parties, 49% were assigned to watch the control segment, and 51% were assigned to watch the Fox News segment.

8. Another important step for future work is to explore further variation in how viewers respond to these cross-cutting messages. For example, perhaps some highly engaged viewers actually rate their party more positively after listening to cross-cutting media; hearing their party attacked, they psychologically defend their party and come to like it even more (Taber & Lodge, 2006). I thank a reader for making this point to me.

9. I thank a referee for making this point to me.

10. While this discussion suggests implications of partisan media for future mass polarization, it is worth noting as well that mass polarization also helps to provide an increased audience for partisan media (Bernhardt, Krassa, & Polborn, 2008), suggesting reciprocal effects between partisan media and mass polarization. I thank a reader for making this point to me.

11. While partisan media have long existed in the U.S., today's hyper-connected, 24/7 news environment means that these types of messages are broadcast more loudly and much more widely than in the past, giving the potential for much broader and more pronounced effects.

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