

# Political interest and selective exposure in multiple contexts

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## **Abstract**

Political interest is a good predictor for media consumption, especially during campaign times. Also, some evidence shows that the more politically interested are also those who are more selective in their news consumption. However, first, the bulk of evidence on this link stems from the US and less is known about European democracies with less partisan news structures. In this paper, we investigate the link between political interest and news consumption in Switzerland and thus enrich the pool of countries studied in this literature. Importantly, we move the literature forward by analyzing this question beyond national election campaigns. In detail, we compare a direct democratic setting, a regional election to the national election campaign. We do so by relying on an identical, detailed news consumption battery fielded in these three contexts which allows for a direct comparison.

# Introduction

The digitalization of political information poses important challenges for modern democracies. The abundance of information available to citizens in nowadays societies offers media consumers more opportunities than ever to select and also avoid information (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). Given this, selection becomes key. One central mechanism for humans is to focus on information that matches their prior beliefs and attitudes, i.e. is congenial to what they already know.

This selective exposure to information congruent with their political predisposition represents a key challenge for representative democracies. As voters are able to select into news stories aligning with their political predispositions, levels of ideology and affective polarization might rise, strengthening discontent and lowering trust in democratic institutions. While Another central motivation to select into political news is political interest, i.e. the willingness to inform oneself about politics. While literature on selective exposure is growing and moving rapidly, we still know little about how political interest shapes whether individuals are more or less selective in their news consumption. Furthermore, while the research on selective exposure outside the highly polarized US context is advancing (Knobloch-Westerwick & Johnson, 2014; Kobayashi, Zhang, & Liu, 2024; Skovsgaard, Shehata, & Strömbäck, 2016; Steppat, Castro Herrero, & Esser, 2022), we add to this literature by focusing on the Swiss case with its diverse but not very partisan media landscape (Steppat et al., 2022; Trappel, 2018). Our empirical analysis focuses on selective exposure regarding newspapers as these constitute still the main source of political information in Switzerland.

In short, we ask the following research question: *How does political interest influence selective exposure of individual Swiss citizens?* and we approach the topic with original survey data collected during a direct democratic campaign in Switzerland<sup>1</sup>. The survey includes detailed questions on news consumption and frequency. Our findings suggest first that not only we find small tendencies of ideological leanings of Swiss newspapers but also selective exposure is indeed present in Switzerland and second that it is influenced by political interest: The more interested you are, the more selective you are in your newspaper choice. This finding has important consequences for the consequences we expect from selective exposure as the more interested are also those more likely to engage in politics.

## Theory

Our theoretical framework is built around two central concepts: selective exposure and political interest. We will begin by defining these concepts, then explore the links we hypothesize between

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<sup>1</sup>The data was collected within the "Swiss Direct Democracy in the 21. century" project.

these two variables, and finally present the hypotheses that address our research question.

## **Partisan selective exposure**

Selective exposure generally refers to the idea that individual beliefs shape their media consumption choices, specifically beliefs related to their 'self-identity', such as political attitudes (Stroud, 2008, , 345). Scholars have long been interested in understanding the factors driving individuals to select certain sources and news over others (Stroud, 2010). Among the numerous influential theories addressing this phenomenon is Festinger's "cognitive dissonance theory" (Festinger, 1957), which posits that individuals choose information to avoid encountering content that contradicts their beliefs. Put differently, it underlines the idea that individuals are motivated by the will to maintain consistency in their viewpoints, avoiding challenging perspectives, and thus minimizing cognitive dissonance. The concept of partisan selective exposure has received significant attention by scholars, specifically regarding its role in political polarization in the context of the United States (Rodriguez, Moskowitz, Salem, & Ditto, 2017). Within the broader framework of selective exposure, partisan selective exposure emphasizes the influence of individuals' political predispositions in explaining their media consumption patterns (Stroud, 2010). This concept can be defined as the tendency to choose media outlets aligned with one's political leanings: "the selection of politically like-minded media outlets" (Stroud, 2010), 557. Like general selective exposure, this behaviour reinforces pre-existing political attitudes by encouraging individuals to seek out information from sources that provide congruent information related to their political predispositions (Rodriguez et al., 2017).

Findings by Stroud (2008) demonstrate that individual political beliefs drive selective exposure, as individuals are more likely to select information from media that align with their views. Many studies have shown that partisan selective exposure is more pronounced among individuals who hold stronger political ideologies. More specifically, Humanes and Valera-Ordaz (2023) have demonstrated that both ideology as well as party identification predict selective exposure, with ideological orientations acting as strong predictors of individuals' media consumption, particularly when media align with their political beliefs. More precisely, right-wing and left-wing partisans tend to consume different media outlets based on ideological congruence. Further research shows an increasing trend in partisan media consumption over time. Many scholars highlight this growing shift towards partisan-aligned media, such as Rodriguez et al. (2017) and Dahlgren (2019). Ideology thus plays a central role in shaping individuals' preferences for news sources and content, as the latter's preference for media content that is congruent with their political predispositions. As demonstrated by Dahlgren (2019), ideology as well as party affiliation are strong predictors of selective exposure over time, emphasizing its role in shaping long-term

media consumption patterns. Thus, partisan selective exposure refers to the correspondence between individuals' political beliefs and the matching tone of media (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009); (Dilliplane, 2011); (Garrett, Carnahan, & Lynch, 2013).

Research on partisan selective exposure has largely focused on the United States (Stroud, 2010); (Rodriguez et al., 2017); (Peterson, Goel, & Iyengar, 2021), where the highly polarized two-party system offers a compelling context to analyze the relationship between media consumption and political attitudes. In this context, strong ideological divides encourage people to seek out congruent media information while avoiding challenging content. In such settings, partisan selective exposure is often conceptualized as a consequence of polarization, with pro-attitudinal media consumption reinforcing political predispositions. Although much less is known about partisan selective exposure in multiparty systems with lower levels of polarization, the study by Wüest and Traber (2014) support evidence of partisan selective exposure in Switzerland. Moreover, the research by Steppat et al. (2022) found interesting results from a quasi-experiment of individuals' self selection of ideologically congruent news in less fragmented countries, particularly Switzerland and Denmark. This paper seeks to build on these findings by providing further analysis to better understand partisan selective exposure in Switzerland.

We thus define the following hypothesis:

H1: Individuals are more likely to select ideologically congruent news.

## **Political interest**

Political interest is defined as a dual-faceted concept, following the work of Prior (2019). Political interest can be short-term, referred to as situational interest, which arises as an emotional reaction to a specific event that sparks interest where none existed before. However, this type of interest fades quickly once the event or object that triggered it disappears. On the other hand, political interest can also be stable and long-term, known as dispositional interest, which develops over a person's life and persists even when the initial trigger is no longer present. While dispositional interest emerges from situational interest, it is distinguished by its durability. Political interest and its forms are not the same for everyone. Some individuals stabilize their interests by their thirties, while others lose them over time. Contrary to initial assumptions, political interest is not causally linked to political knowledge, which complicates its measurement through factual knowledge-based questions. For instance, one might possess significant political knowledge without finding it interesting, and vice versa. However, while political interest differs from both political behavior and political knowledge, it can significantly influence these two variables. Political interest is typically self-reported, raising concerns about social desirability bias. Nevertheless, this approach remains relevant, as there are no perfect factual criteria to

measure political interest—it is more of an internal disposition that cannot be directly tied to specific behaviors (Prior, 2019).

In this study, political interest is examined for the link it has with media consumption. Indeed, it has been shown that political interest, as an intrinsic motivation, can have a direct effect on the type of media content people select (Dahlgren, 2019). Studies on this subject mention several points that we use to construct our argument. First, it has been shown that political interest can be a stronger predictor of media consumption than ideology or education, particularly in terms of the quantity of media consumed (Dahlgren, 2019; Skovsgaard, Shehata, & Strömbäck, 2016). Second, while political interest may be a strong predictor of the volume of media consumed, it is also a good predictor of the type of content consumed. Recent studies show that politically interested individuals are also those who consume the most diverse content, including content that contradicts their ideological alignment (Garrett, 2009; Garrett et al., 2013). The idea here is that people who are politically interested are more likely to seek content that challenges their beliefs, while those who are less politically interested prefer to read content that confirms their views. Thus, according to these recent findings, it would seem that political interest acts to limit the effect of cognitive dissonance described by Festinger (1957). People with a strong political interest are more likely to have a greater tolerance for ambiguity and a more flexible political identity as they are actively seeking for coherence. They are also more likely to seek information on their own while those who are less interested in politics do not and follow the recommendations of algorithms. In the light of these elements, we define the following hypothesis:

H2.1 : Individuals with a higher level of political interest are more likely to consume a greater diversity of media content compared to individuals with lower political interest, especially non-congruent news.

However, this idea is contradicted by other Garrett’s findings, which show that consumption must be distinguished from attention. In other words, politically interested individuals may consume more media sources than those who are less interested but still dedicate more attention to media that align with their ideological opinions. This behavior is referred to as politically motivated reinforcement seeking. This mechanism translates into a greater propensity for people with a high level of political interest or sophistication to confirm what they think. Indeed, people for whom politics is more important have greater incentives to confirm what they believe (Garrett, 2009; Garrett et al., 2013). Finally, according to Marcus Prior, political interest is potentially linked to political behavior and political sophistication because of the motivational role it can play (Prior, 2019). We hypothesize that individuals with a high level of political interest are more influenced by their ideological alignment when selecting media content, as their

intrinsic motivation amplifies the effect of ideology on selective exposure. They are also generally better informed than people with low political interest, which enables them to make more informed choices about their media consumption. Therefore, we define the following hypothesis:

H2.2: Individuals with a higher level of political interest are more likely to select into congruent news compared to individuals with lower political interest.

## Data and methods

discuss here:

- DDS sample size, recruitment, timing etc
- measure of media consumption included
- our focus on newspapers

### Data

#### Operationalization

The dependent variable refers to the political leaning of newspapers that citizens consumed during the period prior to the popular vote. This is useful insofar as it allows us to determine whether news consumption is selective. Since the political leaning of news outlets is not generally explicit, we rely on the ideology of their readers to operationalize this variable. This audience-based approach assumes that the content and editorial line of newspapers are likely to mirror their audience’s political ideology (Flaxman, Goel, & Rao, 2016; Fletcher, Robertson, & Nielsen, 2021; Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011). Simply put, if a newspaper’s readers identify as right-wing on average, we classify the newspaper as right-wing as well. Instead of defining a threshold, we used the difference between the mean ideological position of each newspaper’s audience and the same measure for the overall sample (see also Fletcher et al., 2021). Negative values indicate that the outlet’s slant is more left-wing compared to the citizens in the sample, while positive values suggest that the newspaper is more right-wing. If the value is close to zero, it means the political leaning of the newspaper rather aligns with the overall ideological position of the sample.

The main predictors of selective exposure are ideology and political interest. Ideology is measured using the self-reported position of an individual on a left-right continuum, with values ranging from 0 (left) to 10 (right). This is treated as a numeric variable. Similarly, political interest is determined based on respondents’ self-assessment of their general political interest,

rated on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 corresponds to no interest at all and 10 represents high interest. This variable is also considered numeric.

Our analysis also incorporates various control variables. First, we account for socio-demographic characteristics of voters, namely sex, education, and age group. Sex is a dummy variable, with 0 indicating male and 1 indicating female. Education is also binary, distinguishing individuals with a tertiary education degree (1) from those without (0). Finally, age group is a categorical variable with eight modalities: 18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, 65-74, 75-84, and 85 and older. This variable was derived by recoding the birth year of each respondent. Research has shown that socio-demographic factors influence political participation Melo and Stockemer (2014); Kriesi (2005); Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) and since political engagement is likely related to the seeking of political information, it is central to control for these variables in our regression models Bimber, Cunill, Copeland, and Gibson (2015); Strömbäck (2017). Furthermore, it has been shown Malinen, Koivula, Keipi, and Koiranen (2018) that education and sex are associated with distinct patterns of information exposure and avoidance, which have important implications for our research.

A second group of control variables pertains to six additional sources of information that respondents reported using to form their opinions about the ballots. These include TV programs, radio and podcasts, social media, internet pages, information from the authorities, and advertising. We selected these controls because existing evidence suggests that the type of news source can shape selective exposure behavior. For instance, online media consumption has been found to have a positive effect on selective exposure Wüest and Traber (2014), while social media usage might favor the creation of echo chambers Malinen et al. (2018).

To test our hypotheses, we estimate four OLS regression models, as the dependent variable is numeric. The first model incorporates ideology and political interest as predictors. The second model adds the interaction term between these variables. The third includes the socio-demographic control variables, and the fourth adds the alternative sources of information. Incrementally introducing variables in the models allows for a step-by-step evaluation of the effects of explanatory factors.

## Results

### Descriptive analyses

We start by presenting some descriptive analyses in order to provide an overview of the ideological characteristics of the respondents comprised in our sample, as well as those of the newspapers' audiences.

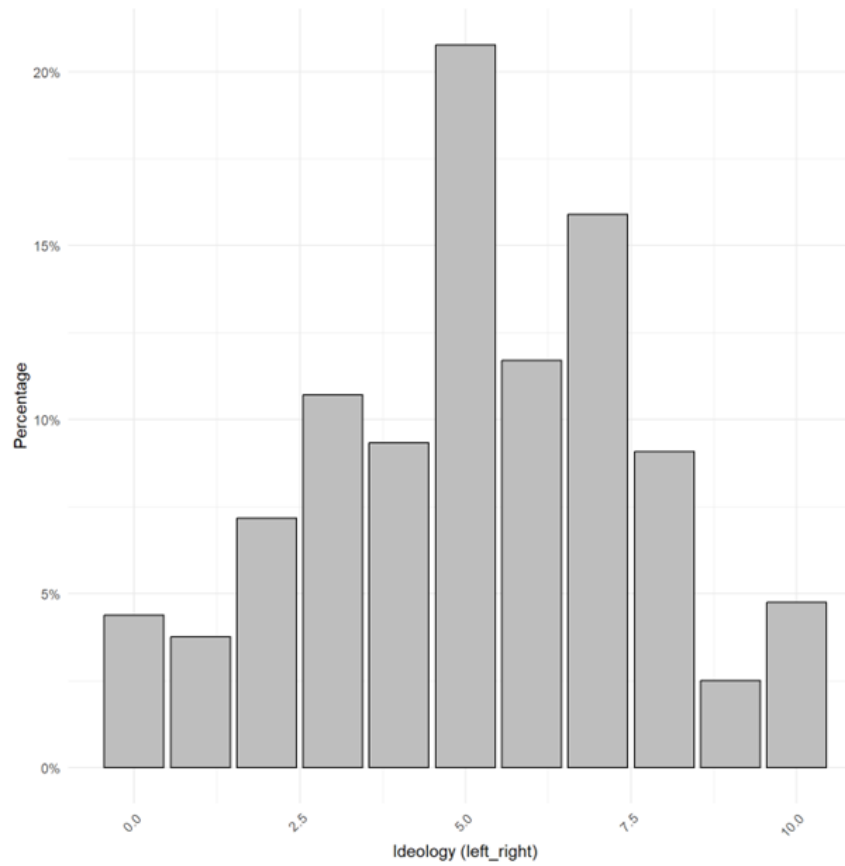


Figure 1: Ideology distribution

Figure 1 illustrates the ideological distribution of the sample, where the numeric variable "ideology" ranges from 0 (far left) to 10 (far right), represented on the x-axis. The majority of observations are concentrated around the value 5, which represents the mode and suggests a predominantly centrist ideology within the sample (around 20 percent of the observations). Both far left and far right ideologies have a lower representation compared to the center, thus less represented in the sample. The distribution does not present strong skewness; however, the center-right appears slightly more represented than the center-left.



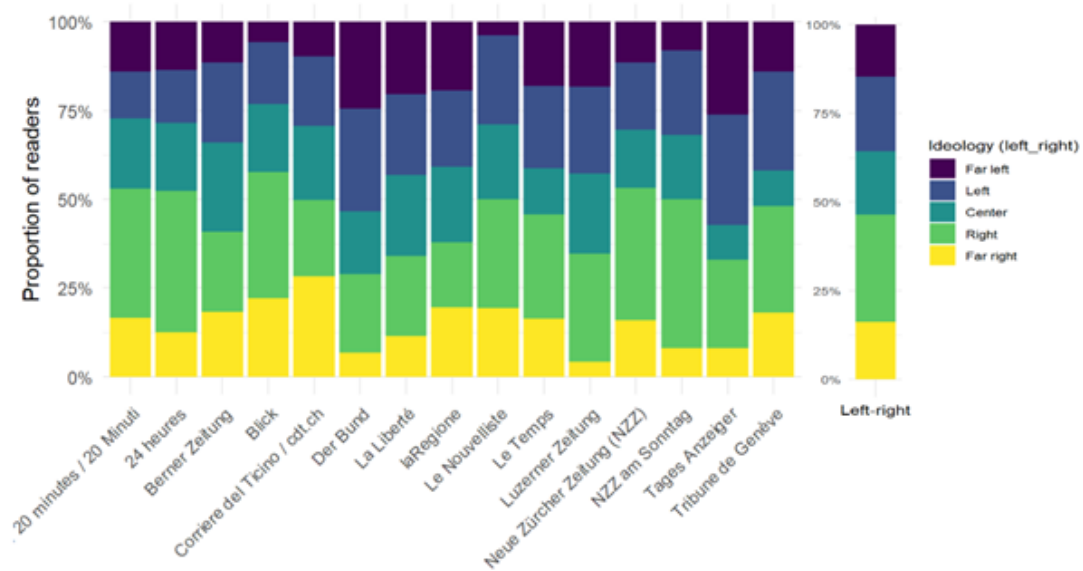


Figure 2: Newspapers consumption by ideology (Top 15 newspapers)

Figure 2 illustrates the ideological positions of the audiences for the 15 most read newspapers within the sample. The "ideology" variable was recoded into a categorical scale with the following categories: 0-1 ("Far left"), 2-4 ("Left"), 5 ("Center"), 6-8 ("Right"), and 9-10 ("Far right"). Alongside the ideological distribution for each newspaper, the graph also displays the overall ideological distribution of the entire sample based on this recoded categorical variable. The graph aims to highlight variations in the ideological composition of audiences across the 15 most read newspapers within the sample.

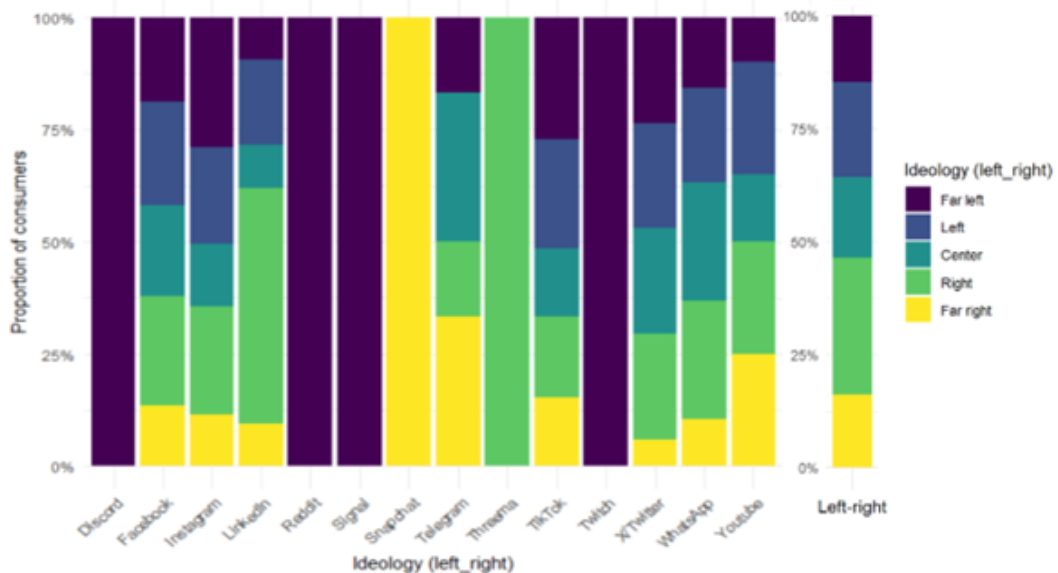


Figure 3: Social media consumption by ideology

Figure 3 illustrates the ideological positions of the audiences for the social media within the

sample, using the same recoded "ideology" variable as in Figure 2. Alongside the ideological distribution for each newspaper, the graph also displays the overall ideological distribution of the entire sample based on this recoded categorical variable. As in Figure 2, the graph aims to highlight variations in the ideological composition of audiences across social media within the sample.

Finally, table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics of the dependent variable, which represents the ideological slant of the newspapers read by voters before the ballot. The figures are rounded to three decimal places.

Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation
- 5.154	2.846	-1.25	- 0.006	0.497

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Newspapers Political Leaning

## Regression results

The regression analysis reveals several interesting patterns regarding the factors influencing newspaper consumption based on ideological alignment.

Table 2:

	<i>DV</i>			
Political interest	-0.012*** (0.002)	-0.046*** (0.005)	-0.043*** (0.005)	-0.042*** (0.006)
Left-Right self-position	0.041*** (0.002)	0.0002 (0.006)	-0.001 (0.006)	-0.002 (0.007)
Political interest X Left-Right self-position		0.006*** (0.001)	0.006*** (0.001)	0.006*** (0.001)
Constant	-0.136*** (0.020)	0.077** (0.037)	0.052 (0.042)	0.061 (0.045)
<i>Controls</i>				
Gender	No	No	Yes	Yes
Education	No	No	Yes	Yes
Age	No	No	Yes	Yes
Sources	No	No	No	Yes
Observations	7,197	7,197	7,197	7,107
R <sup>2</sup>	0.045	0.052	0.055	0.059
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.045	0.051	0.054	0.057

*Note:*

\*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

Political interest consistently has a negative and statistically significant effect on the dependent variable across all models, although the strength of this effect remains modest. This suggests that individuals with higher political interest are more likely to consume newspapers with a left-leaning bias. Importantly, the inclusion of control variables in later models makes this negative effect even stronger. Ideology, represented by the *lrsp* variable, shows a positive and statistically significant effect in the first model, indicating that individuals with more right-leaning views tend to consume right-wing newspapers. However, this effect is no longer significant in the subsequent models.

The interaction term between political interest and ideology is significant and positive in models 2, 3, and 4, showing that the effect of political interest on selective exposure becomes less negative as individuals identify more strongly with right-wing ideology, and even turns slightly positive for those on the far right. Figure 4 graphically illustrates the predicted values of the dependent variable at different levels of political interest, for individuals who identify with the far left, the center, and the far right. The figure shows that political interest has indeed an important effect on news consumptions. We find that the more interested people are in politics, the more they tend to consume newspapers that match the ideology they identify with. In contrast, people with low political interest tend to consume media that do not match their political ideology. In fact, there are no significant differences in the ideological slant of the newspapers they consume.

Interestingly, demographic variables such as age and education have no significant effects in any of the models. However, media sources play a role: in models 4 and 5, individuals who rely on radio (source 3) or internet pages (source 5) to form opinions are more likely to consume left-leaning newspapers compared to those who do not rely on these information sources.

In general, the findings suggest that political interest and ideology interact to shape media consumption patterns, with politically interested individuals gravitating toward newspapers that align with their ideological preferences, particularly on the left. Furthermore, media sources such as radio and the Internet appear to influence these tendencies, further supporting the complex relationship between individual traits and media consumption behaviors.

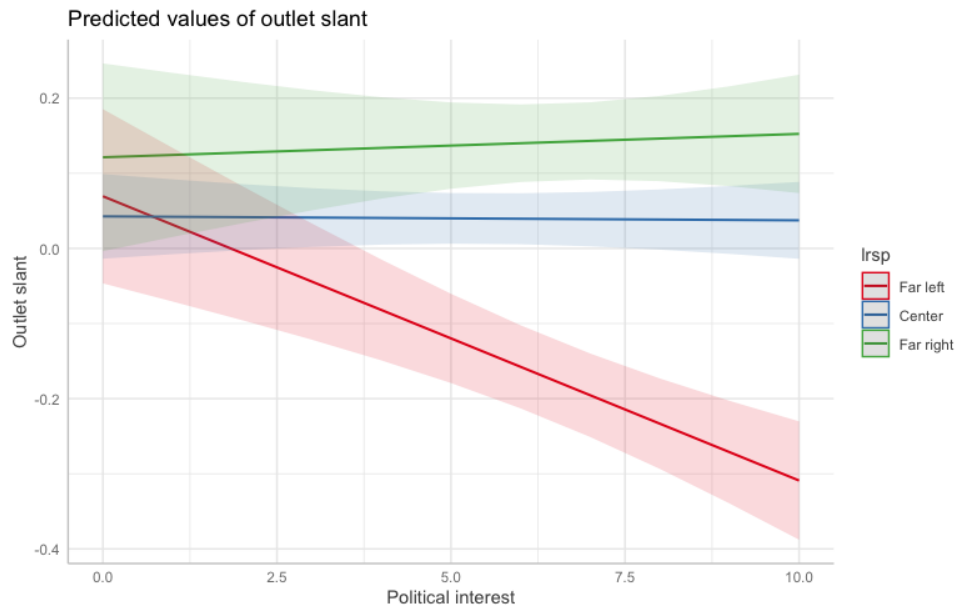


Figure 4: Effect of Political Interest according to Ideology

[H]

## Conclusion

-result of less polarized media system

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