

Polarization and Social Media Usage in Canada

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Social media is routinely invoked in public discourse as a culprit in higher levels of political and affective polarization. These increased levels of polarization have led to increasing calls for the regulation of some social media websites and implicated them in increasing levels of instability (Napoli 2019). However, the social scientific literature is much more sanguine (Tucker et al. 2018), implicating elite polarization and increasingly partisan news instead. Moreover, most of these studies were conducted in the United States with limited evidence indicating whether this relationship also exists in Canada (Kubin and Von Sikorski 2021). Therefore, this paper examines the relationship between self-reported social media consumption, online news consumption and both types of political polarization in Ontario. Data are drawn from the 2018 Ontario Provincial Election Survey, commissioned by the Laurier Institute For The Study Of Public Opinion And Policy. Measures of affective and policy polarization are drawn from Wagner and Polacko (2022). Consistent with Dubois and Blank's (2018) findings on echo chambers, the results show that the impact of social media usage on polarization is fully mediated by political interest, whereby individuals who are more interested in politics seek out online news sources more readily than individuals who are less interested in politics. These individuals are more polarized. These findings indicate that despite the conventional wisdom that consuming news from social media increases political polarization, this relationship does not seem to hold in the Ontario context.

References

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