

Social Media, Digital News Consumption and Polarization

Case Study of the 2018 Ontario General Election

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Headline Findings

- ▶ Partial evidence for polarization by social media and online news consumption.
- ▶ heavy social media use → slight increase in affective polarization
- ▶ online news media consumption → slight increase in policy polarization
- ▶ Caution: self-reported, observational, cross-sectional data from Ontario 2018
- ▶ Polarization by social media use and digital news consumption mostly occurs amongst low interest voters
- ▶ Contra Dubois and Blank (2018) political interest is directly, positively correlated with affective and policy polarization.

Methods

- ▶ Ontario Provincial Election Study, produced by LISPOP
- ▶ Available for public use at
<https://doi.org/10.5683/SP3/VFGL0E>
- ▶ Online consumer sample from SSI, weighted by gender, age and education
- ▶ Campaign survey fielded between May 28-June 07, 2018
- ▶ Rich set of questions on news consumption and social media usage
 - ▶ observational, cross-sectional and self-reports but interesting nonetheless.

Ontario 2018

- ▶ End of the Liberal regime
 - ▶ Kathleen Wynne and the party were deeply unpopular
- ▶ Doug Ford became PC leader at the last minute
- ▶ Ripe grounds for strong feelings about out-partisans

Sample Validation

Table 1: Vote intention of all respondents compared with actual vote results

Party	OPES	Election
Liberal Party of Ontario	14%	20%
Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario	29%	40%
New Democratic Party of Ontario	36%	34%
Green Party of Ontario	5%	5%
Undecided	16%	NA

Key Independent Variables

- ▶ **Primary media source:** respondents were asked how they primarily received news about the 2018 Ontario election
 - ▶ Respondents grouped into **legacy** (TV, radio, print newspapers) **online** (news aggregators, blogs, online newspaper) and **social media** (facebook or twitter feeds); otherwise **mixed**.
- ▶ **Social media usage:** How often respondents use social media from **never** to **multiple times a day**
 - ▶ No reference to news consumption

Key Dependent Variables

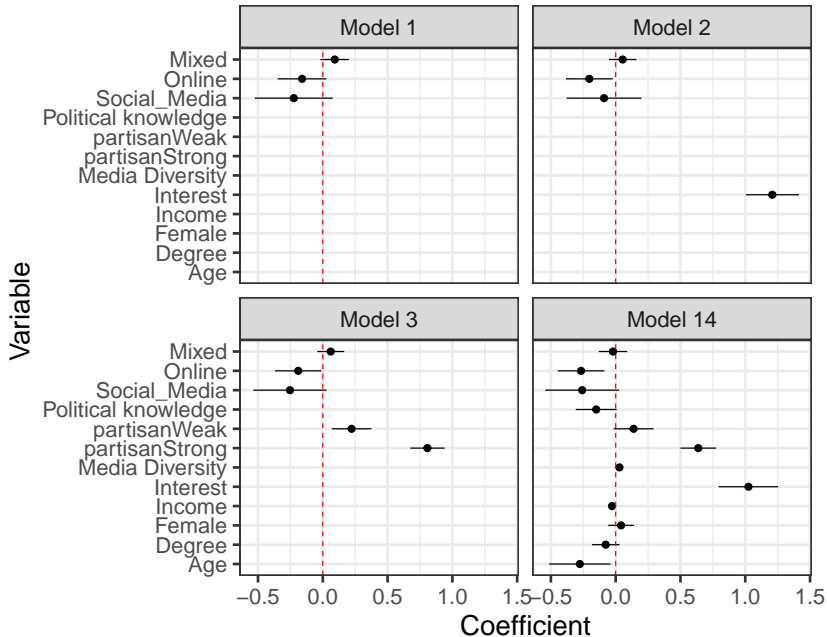
Affective polarization - Increasing dislike of out-partisans - Problem with multi-party democracies; weight by vote share (Wagner 2021). - **Calculates the average weighted difference between a respondent's average like score and their like score for each party, weighted by party vote share**

Key Dependent Variables

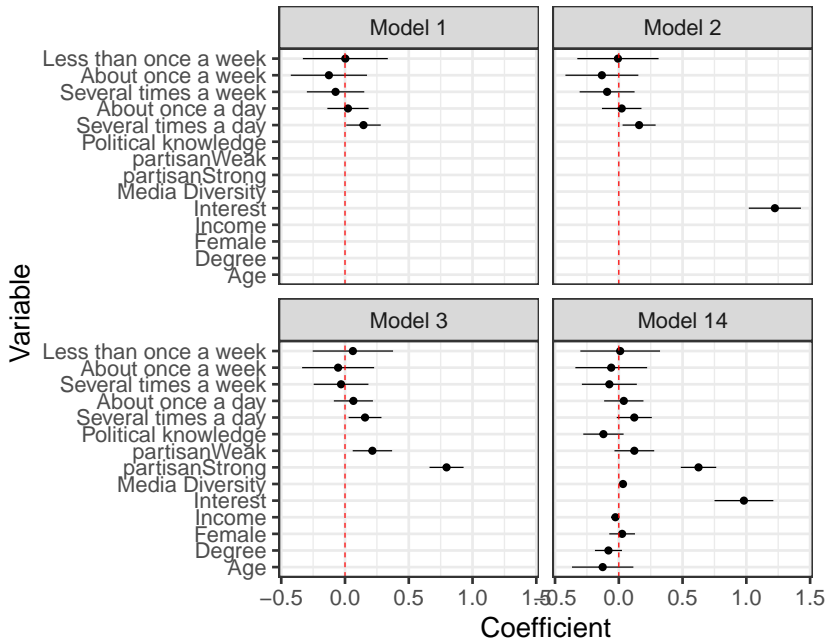
Policy polarization

- ▶ Index of 11 policy items (see Appendix in the paper).
- ▶ Two measures of policy polarization (See (Lelkes 2016; Levendusky and Pope 2011) - bimodality coefficient to examine bimodality of a distribution of policy preferences (Pfister et al. 2013). - the overlap coefficient to examine overlap between two distributions of policy preferences (Pastore and Calcagni 2019).

Affective Polarization and Primary Media Source



Affective Polarization and Social Media Usage



Policy Polarization and Primary Media Source - Bimodality Coefficient

Primary_media	Bimodality
Legacy	0.31
Mixed	0.35
Online	0.39
Social_Media	0.31

Policy Polarization and Primary Media Source - Bimodality Coefficient

Primary_media	Bimodality
Low	
Legacy	0.28
Mixed	0.39
Online	0.56
Social_Media	0.29
High	
Legacy	0.58
Mixed	0.40
Online	0.60
Social_Media	NaN

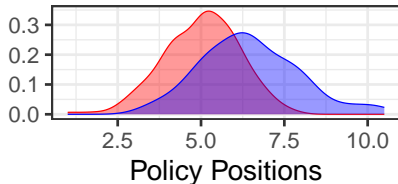
Policy Polarization and Social Media Usage - Bimodality Coefficient

Social_Use2	Bimodality
Never	0.33
Less than once a week	0.33
About once a week	0.29
Several times a week	0.27
About once a day	0.35
Several times a day	0.33

Policy Polarization - Overlap Coefficient

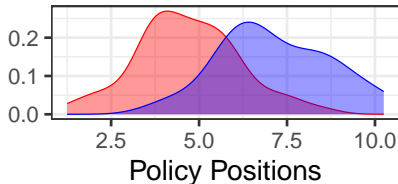
Legacy Media

Overlap Coefficient 0.61



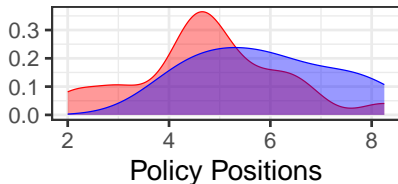
Online Media

Overlap Coefficient 0.45



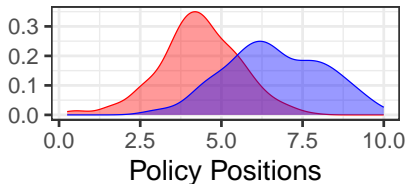
Social Media

Overlap Coefficient 0.74



Mixed Media

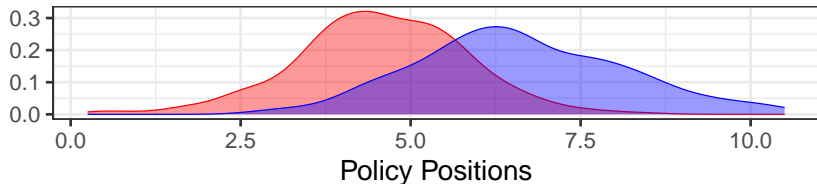
Overlap Coefficient 0.42



Policy Polarization - Overlap Coefficient

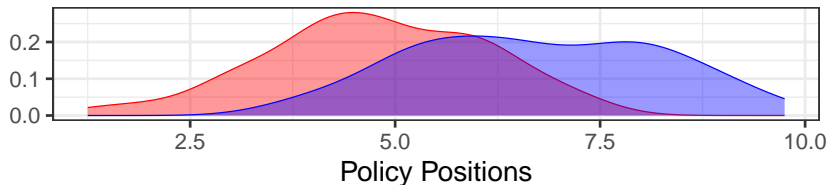
Uses Social Media Often

Overlap Coefficient 0.47



Uses Social Media Rarely

Overlap Coefficient 0.57



Discussion & Conclusion

- ▶ Some mild direct evidence for polarization
- ▶ Interacts with interest in politics even after controlling for partisanship.
- ▶ Consistent with Merkely (2022) who finds moderate increases in affective polarization, albeit we find increases amongst those with low levels of political interest
- ▶ Contra Dubois and Blank (2018), political interest
→ polarization

References I

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