

# 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

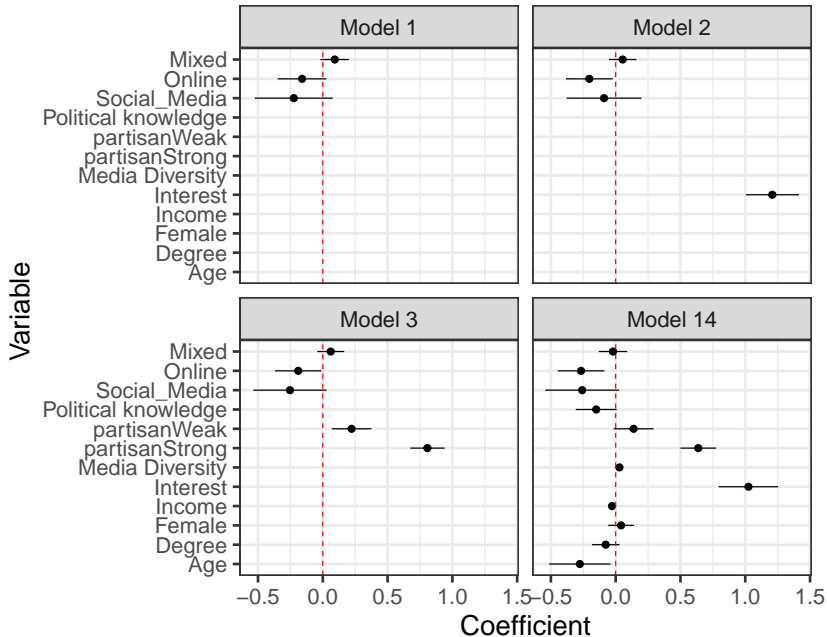
**Affective polarization** - Increasing dislike of out-partisans - Problem with multi-party democracies; weight by vote share (Wagner 2021). - **Calculates the average weighted difference between a respondent's average like score and their like score for each party, weighted by party vote share**

# Key Dependent Variables

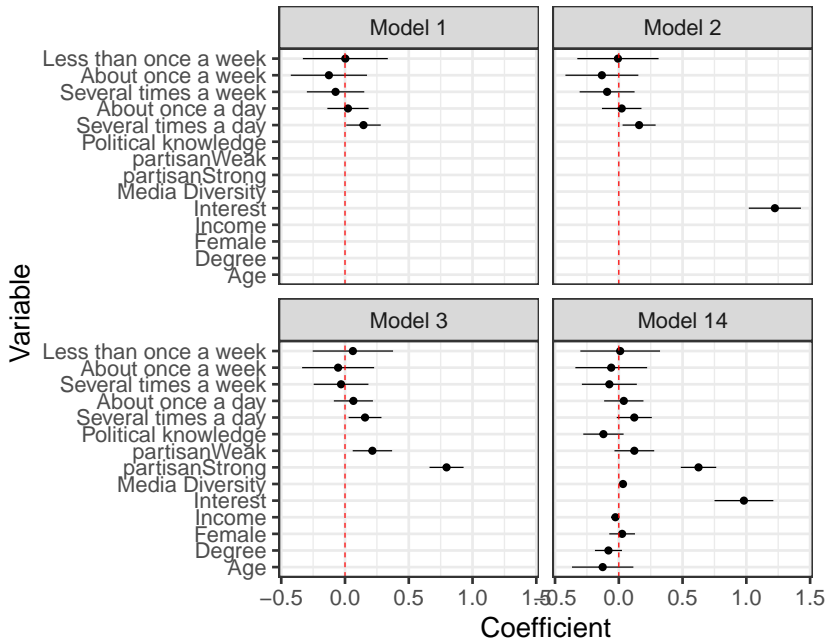
**Policy polarization** - Index of 11 policy items (see Appendix in the paper) - Two measures of policy polarization ( see (Lelkes 2016; Levendusky and Pope 2011) - bimodality coefficient to examine bimodality of a distribution of policy preferences (Pfister et al. 2013) - the overlap coefficient to 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

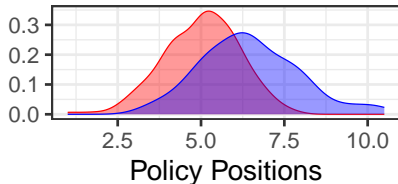
# Policy Polarization and Social Media Usage - Bimodality Coefficient

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

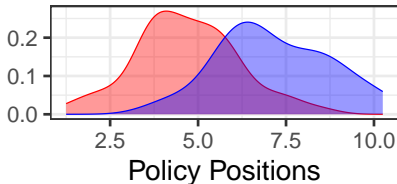
## Legacy Media

Overlap Coefficient 0.61



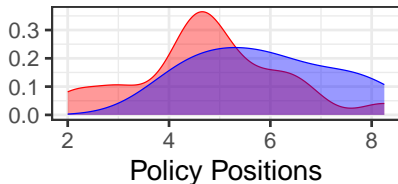
## Online Media

Overlap Coefficient 0.45



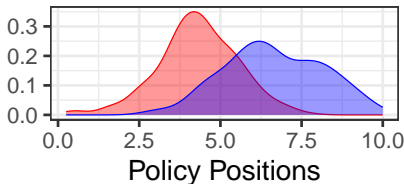
## Social Media

Overlap Coefficient 0.74



## Mixed Media

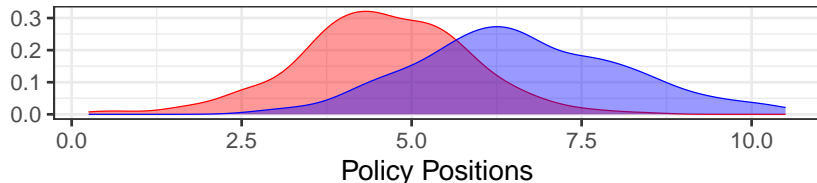
Overlap Coefficient 0.42



# Policy Polarization - Overlap Coefficient

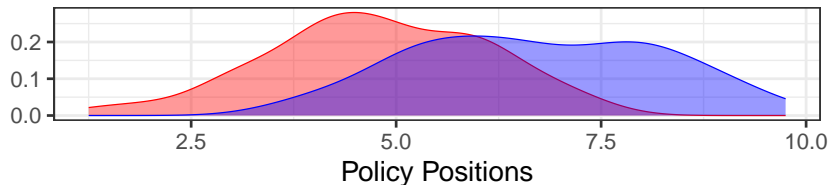
Uses Social Media Often

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



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