Social Media, Digital News Consumption and Polarization

Case Study of the 2018 Ontario General Election

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Headline Findings

- Evidence consistent with a polarizing role for social media usage and digital news consumption in self-reported, observational, cross-sectional data from Ontario 2018
- Primarily occurs amongst voters low in interest in politics
- Contra Dubois and Blank (2018) political interest is positively correlated with affective and policy polarization Abramowitz and Saunders (2008); (**?**); Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope (2011)

Definition

- **Affective polarization** - Increasing dislike of out-partisans
- **Policy polarization** - Increasing disagreement over policy issues

State of the Literature

▶ Seems like affective polarization in the United States is real Iyengar et al. (2019)

▶ Less consensus about policy polarization in the US (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; **?**; Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2011)

▶ Merkley (2022) and Johnston (2023) find increases in affective polarization in Canada, less evidence of policy polarization in Canada

▶ Overall, evidence seems to acquit social media (see (Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic 2015; Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro 2017; **?**))

▶ Digital news consumption might be different Gainous and Wagner (2023)

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

Measuring Affective polarization

▶ Measuring affective polarization is more difficult in multi-party democracies (Wagner 2021).

▶ Therefore, we draw on Wagner's (2021) weighted affective polarization (WAP) measure.

▶ **Calculates the average weighted difference between a respondent's average like score and their like score for each party, weighted by party vote share**

   ▶ Could understate polarization, of low Liberal vote share will weight feelings about the Liberals

Measuring 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
    empirical distributions of policy preferences (Pastore and
    Calcagnì 2019)

Affective Polarization and Primary Media Source
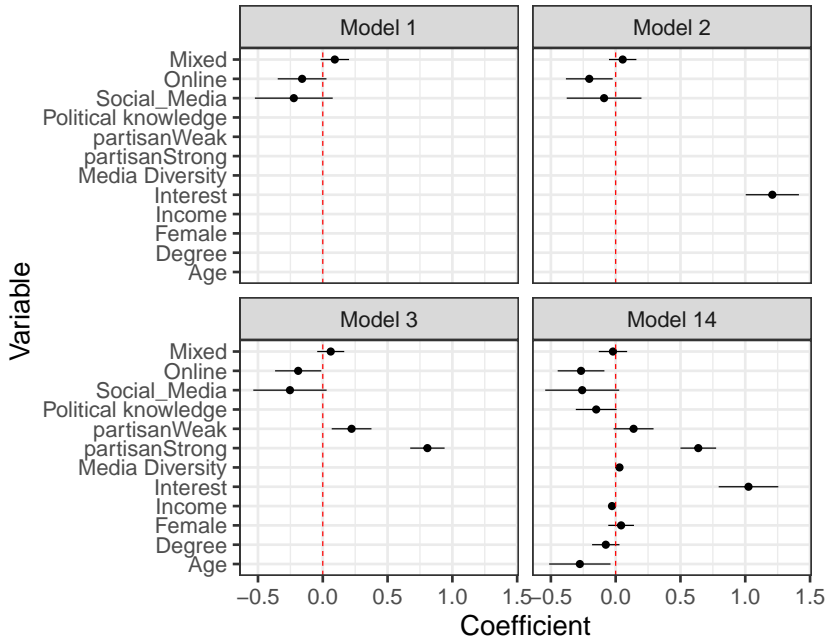
Affective Polarization and Social Media Usage
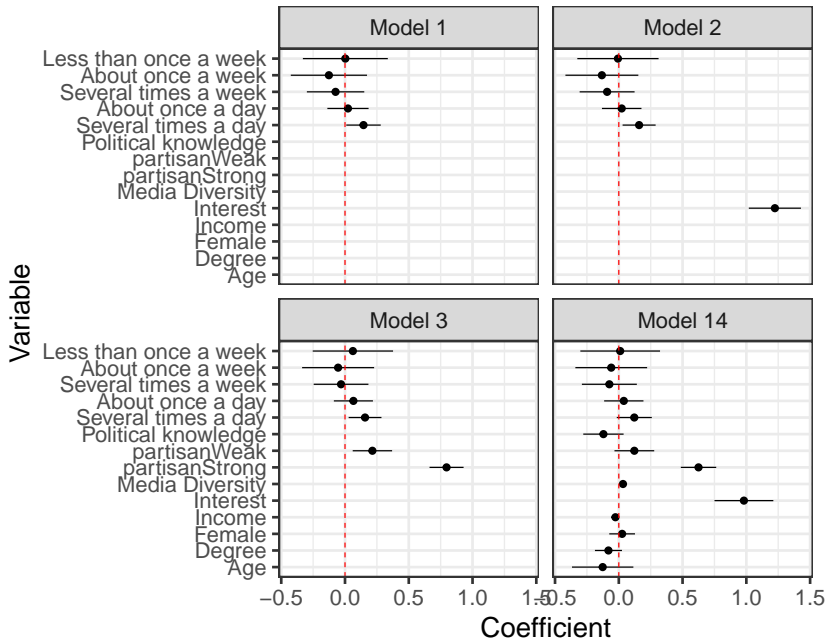
Notable Trends in Social Media Usage and Affective Polarization

- ▶ Online news consumption is associated with lower levels of affective polarization than legacy media consumption.
- ▶ **But** using social media several times a day is associated with higher levels of affective polarization than never using social media.
- ▶ Interest is positively related to levels of affective polarization, *contra*

Policy Polarization and Primary Media Source - Bimodality Coefficient

Primary_media	Bimodality
Legacy	0.31
Mixed	0.35
Online	0.39
Social_Media	0.31

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

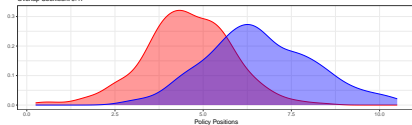| Social_Use2	Bimodality
Never	0.33
Less than once a week	0.33
About once a week	0.29
Several times a week	0.27
About once a day	0.35
Several times a day	0.33

Policy Polarization - Overlap Coefficent
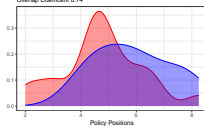

Legacy Media
Overlap Coefficent 0.61

Online Media
Overlap Coefficent 0.45
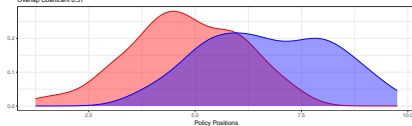
Uses Social Media Often
Overlap Coefficent 0.47

Social Media
Overlap Coefficent 0.74

Mixed Media
Overlap Coefficent 0.42

Uses Social Media Rarely
Overlap Coefficent 0.57

Discussion & Conclusion

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