Polarization and Social Media Usage in Canada

Rafael Campos-Gottardo, McGill University

Simon J. Kiss, Wilfrid Laurier University

Social media is routinely invoked in public discourse as a culprit in higher levels of polarization and democratic instability. These increased levels of polarization have lead 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 Institite 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

Dubois, Elizabeth, and Grant Blank. 2018. “The Echo Chamber Is Overstated: The Moderating Effect of Political Interest and Diverse Media.” *Information, Communication & Society* 21 (5): 729–45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2018.1428656>.

Kubin, Emily, and Christian Von Sikorski. 2021. “The Role of (Social) Media in Political Polarization: A Systematic Review.” *Annals of the International Communication Association* 45 (3): 188–206. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2021.1976070>.

Napoli, Philip M. 2019. “Social Media and the Public Interest: Media Regulation in the Disinformation Age.” In *Social Media and the Public Interest*. Columbia University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7312/napo18454>.

Polacko, Matthew. 2022. “Inequality, Policy Polarization and the Income Gap in Turnout.” *Party Politics* 28 (4): 739–54. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540688211011924>.

Tucker, Joshua, Andrew Guess, Pablo Barbera, Cristian Vaccari, Alexandra Siegel, Sergey Sanovich, Denis Stukal, and Brendan Nyhan. 2018. “Social Media, Political Polarization, and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature.” *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3144139>.

Wagner, Markus. 2021. “Affective Polarization in Multiparty Systems.” *Electoral Studies* 69 (February): 102199. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2020.102199>.