SELECTIVE EXPOSURE AND POLARIZATION

COMM 1a – WEEK 5 (Nov 9-11)
Outline

How do people choose where to get their information? Varieties of selective exposure and implications for political polarization

The polarization debate: why is the political class so extreme when ordinary people are moderates?

Polarization as affect: fear and loathing across party lines. Why do partisans dislike each other? Is it because of selective exposure?
## Information Overload

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Today</th>
<th>Contrast with 1970</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Most people have access to cable TV - on average consumer can choose from 700 channels</td>
<td>• Then the choice set included:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• &gt;1 billion websites, 25K news sites, 150 “A-list” political blogs</td>
<td>• 1-2 local newspapers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• New social media platforms – Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Yik Yak which provide access to all forms of media</td>
<td>• 6-7 TV channels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 10-20 radio stations</td>
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Clearly, media consumers have more choice with greater ability to control what information they receive; on what basis do they select?
### Varieties of Selective Exposure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Details</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>“Attentive Public” Hypothesis</strong></td>
<td>- The rich get richer, gap between the haves and have-nots is widened; people uninterested in politics now avoid it altogether</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Demise of the inadvertent audience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Partisan Polarization Hypothesis</strong></td>
<td>- People seek out information they expect to agree with (dissonance reduction)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>“Personal Relevance” Hypothesis</strong></td>
<td>- People pay attention only to issues that affect them personally (”issue publics” – environmentalists, farmers, hunters, immigrants, retired people, teachers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social networks hypothesis</strong></td>
<td>- People pay attention to information coming from their “friends”</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Who gets the news?

- Clear evidence that motivation matters — more informed, interested and educated more likely to follow hard news (Price & Zaller study on news recall)
- Exposure also correlated with partisan identity — strong partisans more likely to follow news about the campaign
- Evidence that the knowledge gap has increased suggests that exposure to news has declined among the inattentive
Evidence of Partisan Selectivity

Emergence of Fox News as the top-rated cable channel
• Audience made up primarily of Republicans-Conservatives

MSNBC as the left-leaning cable outlet
• Countdown with Keith Olbermann often was top-rated cable program
• MSNBC goal to “showcase its nighttime lineup as a welcome haven for viewers of a similar mind” (New York Times,

Cable audiences are relatively small
• Complete polarization of the blogosphere
Evidence of Issue-Based Selectivity

2000 CD study tracked voters’ use of election CD covering multiple issues

Candidates positions on healthcare visited more frequently by people with health-related problems

This study found that issue-based information search > party-based search
Who Pays Attention to Healthcare?

People personally affected by healthcare issue more attentive.

Figure 5.5: Selective Exposure to Healthcare Information

- Younger Parent
- Elderly Parent
- Other Occ.
- Health-Rel. Occ.
- < 59
- > 60
- Insured
- Uninsured
- Not HMO member
- HMO Member

Health Page Visits
Experiments on Partisan Selectivity: Iyengar-Hahn Study

Headlines randomly assigned to news organizations

Subject matter varied – war in Iraq, national politics, health news, travel destinations, and sports

Baseline control condition encountered same headlines, but without news logos

Study run between March 30 and April 17 2006
Participant Sample

Registered voters sampled from the YouGov national research panel

- Median age 39
- 51% women
- 35% high school only, 22% college graduates
- 34% Rep, 36% Independent, and 30% Dem
Politics Condition with Sources

Headlines taken from MSNBC daily news feed, then randomly assigned to sources.
Results: Source Effects on Selection

Large effects for Republicans, only weak effects for Dems

Figure 4: Effects of Story Label on Story Selection
Republicans especially likely to favor in-party sources

Most Democrats rely on non-partisan sources, while avoiding Fox
Preference for Biased Sources, Soft News

Republicans’ preference for in-party source just as great for soft as hard news.
Pew 2014 survey: self-reported exposure, likely exaggerated
Comscore and other web metrics show only limited “segregation” of news consumers; most people use “mainstream” non-partisan sources.

Goel et al. study of people who click on hard news links shows that partisan selectivity is modest for news, but increases for op eds/commentary.

They also find that traffic to partisan sites is limited to “in partisans” (no Democrats go to Fox News).

Referrals matter – links received from social media result in more partisan selectivity and segregated audiences.
Polarization Debates

Polarization as division in policy preferences; evidence shows elite but not mass polarization

Sorting as alternative to polarization (Fiorina)

Polarization as animus (Iyengar & Westwood)
## Ideological Polarization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time 1:</th>
<th>33 Libs</th>
<th>34 Mods</th>
<th>34 Cons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time 2:</td>
<td>50 Libs</td>
<td>0 Mods</td>
<td>50 Cons</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time 1:</th>
<th>33 Dems</th>
<th>34 Indeps</th>
<th>33 Reps</th>
</tr>
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<td>50 Dems</td>
<td>0 Indeps</td>
<td>50 Reps</td>
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Party Sorting

Sorting refers to consistency of party preference and ideological orientation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Democrats</th>
<th>Independents</th>
<th>Republicans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time 1</td>
<td>50 libs</td>
<td>50 moderates</td>
<td>25 libs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25 mods</td>
<td>25 mods</td>
<td>25 mods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25 conservs</td>
<td>50 conservs</td>
<td>50 conservs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 2</td>
<td>75 libs</td>
<td>50 moderates</td>
<td>75 conservs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25 mods</td>
<td>25 mods</td>
<td>25 mods</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Elite Polarization

- Significant increase in ideological distance between the parties in Congress and state legislatures since 1980
- 1950s – both parties were ideologically diverse – conservative Southern Dems, moderate Northeastern Repubs
- Gradual realignment of the South, adoption of primary elections, dependence of candidates on donors, all created pressures on parties to take more extreme positions
- Consequences include gridlock, govt shutdowns etc
Elites are Polarized, Public is not

Source: GSS (national, representative samples); moderates the largest group
Issue Centrists Still Dominate: 2012

Source: American National Election Surveys
Consistency of ideology and party much higher today than in the 1960s – evidence on sorted couples (whose issue positions are consistent with their party affiliation): 11 percent in 1965, 80 percent in 2015

- Might be due to persuasion effects (exposure to elite rhetoric that is more ideological)
- Might be due to introduction of value-laden issues such as abortion, gay rights, same-sex marriage which evoke strong views
- Might be due to availability of partisan sources (Dunaway 2015 study suggests that diffusion of web increases sorting among the attentive)
Increasing, but Limited Ideological Extremism: Pew Surveys
Ideological Position of Non-Donors v. Donors

But Activists are Hyper-Polarized

Consistent pattern across multiple studies: polarization heightened among activists
Approval of out-party president declines steadily.

Today, Obama’s approval among Repubs is <10%, among Dems, nearly 80%
Polarization as Depth of Cleavages

- Polarized or divided societies are those in which social, economic, racial, or religious divisions are the basis for conflict, often resulting in violence (N. Ireland, Basque Country, Rwanda, separation of Bangladesh from Pakistan).

- When social cleavages reinforce, they are more conflictual (language and region in Bangladesh, region and religion in N. Ireland, race and PID in US); cross-cutting cleavages have the opposite effect, i.e. are less divisive (social class and party in US).
Polarization as Animus

Social identity theory

Group members instinctively develop positive feelings about in group, negative feelings for out group

Partisans increasingly dislike their opponents and impute negative traits to them

PID has become sufficiently important to influence non-political judgments, e.g. dating and marriage
Seeing the Other Party as a Threat to Nation

% saying (Republican/Democratic) Party policies “are so misguided that they threaten the nation’s well-being”

Share of Democrats who see the Republican Party as a threat to the nation’s well-being

- All Democrats: 27%
- By level of political engagement:
  - High: 44%
  - Mid: 28%
  - Low: 18%
- By level of ideological consistency:
  - Consistently liberal: 50%
  - Mostly liberal: 22%
  - Mixed: 18%

Share of Republicans who see the Democratic Party as a threat to the nation’s well-being

- All Republicans: 36%
- By level of political engagement:
  - High: 51%
  - Mid: 40%
  - Low: 20%
- By level of ideological consistency:
  - Consistently conserv: 66%
  - Mostly conserv: 46%
  - Mixed: 16%
Over time, significant decline in ratings of out party, no change in affect for in party.
Race and religion are weaker divisions than partisanship. It is the party cleavage rather than racial or religious divisions that produces affective polarization.
2008 ANES: Party vs. Other Divisions

Rating of out party is the lowest thermometer rating in the entire ANES.
Pew Data on “Antipathy”

A Rising Tide of Mutual Antipathy

Democratic attitudes about the Republican Party

100%

Republican attitudes about the Democratic Party

100%

57%

Unfavorable

79%

Unfavorable

16%

Very unfavorable

38%

Very unfavorable

68%

Unfavorable

82%

Unfavorable

17%

Very unfavorable

43%

Very unfavorable

1994 2014

1994 2014
Antipathy Greater Among Ideologues

Note: antipathy significantly greater among Republican Ideologues - 72 versus 53 percent
Increased Social Distance

Friendship networks are politically homogeneous

Pew Data – National Survey, 2014

Some Share, Many do Not

Most Friends Share My Views
Online Networks More Polarized

Messing dissertation – shows that Facebook friendship groups are politically homogeneous
Increased Social Distance between Partisans: US-Uk Comparisons

Minimal social distance between partisans in 1960; dramatic increases over time in the U.S., but not U.K.
Party ID now a Relevant Cue in Personal Life

- Spousal selection based on political affinity **exceeds** selection based on physical (e.g. body shape) or personality attributes (Alford et al., 2011)

- Evidence from online dating sites shows that political preferences significantly predict probability of successful matching (Malhotra & Huber, 2011)
Marital Homogeneity over Time

- National Sample, N=1690, Agreement according to 3-point PID, Independents dropped
- California, two-persons household, both registered partisan, N=3,966,062
- California, two-persons household, both registered partisan, N=3,990,116
- National Sample, N=844, Agreement according to PID
- National Sample, N=1304, Agreement according to PID
Study participants asked to select one of two high school students for a college scholarship; resumes manipulated GPA, ethnicity, and political affiliation (extra-curricular activity)

- Political affiliation more important than GPA as “qualification”
A college student came to me recently with a quandary. He’d spent the summer interning at a conservative think tank. Now he was applying to schools and companies where most people were liberal. Should he remove the internship from his résumé? I advised him not to. Even if people disagreed with his politics, I argued, they’d still appreciate his public spiritedness. But now I’m thinking that advice was wrong. There’s a lot more political discrimination than I thought. In fact, the best recent research suggests that there’s more political discrimination than there is racial discrimination.
Implicit or Unconscious Bias: Party vs. Race

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>-0.23</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>844</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>423</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>542</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Cohen’s $d = .95$

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>1158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>421</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Cohen’s $d = .61$

Distance between Dems and Reps on the partisan D-score twice as large as the distance between whites and African Americans on the race D score.
$10 initial endowment; $4.17 allocated on average in trust game, $2.88 in dictator game. Co-partisans received a “bonus” of 41c and 68c.
“In the context of other forms of group identity, partisanship elicits by far the most extreme evaluations of in and out groups. Indeed, against the baseline of partisan affect, whites’ feelings toward African-Americans appear relatively benign. This remarkable pattern applies to both explicit and implicit measures of group affect and holds up even when the tests of in-group favoritism are unobtrusive, completely non-political, and partisans are incentivized to treat co-partisans no differently from out-partisans.”
Has Media Use Contributed to Increased Partisan Affect?

Seems more than coincidental that animus has spread simultaneously with the diffusion of IT

40 years ago, virtually all adults got their daily news from one of the three major network newscasts (combined audience of 100 million in 1969)
Selective Exposure as a Possible Contributor

- Revival of the partisan press (in the case of cable TV, talk radio, and the blogosphere news is not easily distinguishable from partisan diatribe)

“What does that make her?” Rush Limbaugh said of Fluke on Wednesday, according to the Washington Post. “It makes her a slut, right? It makes her a prostitute.” “She wants to be paid to have sex,” Limbaugh continued. “She’s having so much sex she can't afford the contraception.”
Mainstream news organizations typically viewed as biased

“Hostile media” phenomenon - group members view “objective” news as slanted against their point of view

Republicans attribute liberal slant, but Democrats see little bias
In era of political polarization, Republicans consider ALL mainstream media sources as biased.
Evidence of a Selective Exposure – Animosity Link

Partisans selecting biased sources:

- have more hostile stereotypes of out-party supporters
- prefer negative over positive appeals from in-party candidates
- are less likely to approve of inter-marriage

(Lelkes, Sood, Iyengar, 2013)
Possible Underlying Mechanisms

**Persuasion**
- Partisans who encounter the most polarizing messages become the most polarized.

**Motivated reasoning**
- Partisans interpret news, even when provided by scrupulously objective sources, as biased against their side.

**Social identity based processing**
- Exposure to congenial sources - and the individuals who appear and speak in these sources are typically co-partisans - strengthens salience of receiver’s political identity, thus increasing polarization.
Implications

(1) • Increased polarization, decreased incentives for elites to cooperate

(2) • Reinforcement of priors or “echo chamber” effect -- the news strengthens existing beliefs and attitudes

(3) • Financial incentives for news organizations to deliver biased news

(4) • Potential for opinion manipulation