



Liberals and conservatives are similarly motivated to avoid exposure to one another's opinions



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ABSTRACT

Ideologically committed people are similarly motivated to avoid ideologically crosscutting information. Although some previous research has found that political conservatives may be more prone to selective exposure than liberals are, we find similar selective exposure motives on the political left and right across a variety of issues. The majority of people on both sides of the same-sex marriage debate willingly gave up a chance to win money to avoid hearing from the other side (Study 1). When thinking back to the 2012 U.S. Presidential election (Study 2), ahead to upcoming elections in the U.S. and Canada (Study 3), and about a range of other Culture War issues (Study 4), liberals and conservatives reported similar aversion toward learning about the views of their ideological opponents. Their lack of interest was not due to already being informed about the other side or attributable election fatigue. Rather, people on both sides indicated that they anticipated that hearing from the other side would induce cognitive dissonance (e.g., require effort, cause frustration) and undermine a sense of shared reality with the person expressing disparate views (e.g., damage the relationship; Study 5). A high-powered meta-analysis of our data sets ($N = 2417$) did not detect a difference in the intensity of liberals' ($d = 0.63$) and conservatives' ($d = 0.58$) desires to remain in their respective ideological bubbles.

Only rarely do people dispassionately approach socio-political matters, such as whether abortion or owning automatic weapons should be permitted or limited. More often, people seem to gather, scrutinize, interpret, and remember information in a manner that confirms their pre-existing opinions (see Kunda, 1990; Nickerson, 1998; and, Smith, Fabrigar, & Norris, 2008, for reviews). A meta-analysis (Hart et al., 2009) attested to the prevalence of the confirmation/congeniality bias, with an average effect size of $d = 0.36$ ($d = 0.46$ for political issues). At least three basic processes work in tandem to create a confirmation bias: (a) people *selectively expose* themselves to belief-confirming information, (b) people *interpret* information that is already in front of them in a belief-confirming manner, and (c) people *remember* information that confirms their beliefs. In this paper, we focus on one specific aspect of selective exposure, namely the *motivation* to avoid crosscutting information. And we investigate whether people on the political right and left are equally or differentially motivated to remain in their ideological bubble.

1. Selective exposure

People tend to selectively expose themselves to belief-confirming

information for at least two reasons. First, information that conflicts with one's own beliefs creates cognitive dissonance and feelings of personal discomfort (Festinger, 1957). This personal discomfort thesis aligns with the well-supported notion that selective exposure is a form of self-defense against feeling threatened (Webb, Chang, & Benn, 2013; Hart et al., 2009). Selective exposure may also have interpersonal origins. According to the theory of shared reality (Echterhoff, Higgins, & Levine, 2009), people have a fundamental need to feel mental synchrony with others. Achieving a shared sense of reality requires that two or more people hold beliefs in common—and that they communicate their beliefs to one another. Seeking out information from like-minded others could satisfy this fundamental need and avoiding information from unlike-minded others could undermine this fundamental need. Liberals and conservatives may both engage in selective exposure to avoid cognitive dissonance and satisfy the need for a shared reality. But whether they do so to the same degree remains an unresolved matter.

1.1. Is selective exposure ideologically symmetric? Mixed evidence

People on the political left tend to value a more liberal, “loose”,

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egalitarian social structure, whereas people on the political right tend to value a more conservative, “tight”, hierarchical social structure (Harrington & Gelfand, 2014). Are people on the political right more motivated to remain ignorant of the lefts’ views than vice versa?

Several theories and studies suggest that conservatives may be more prone to selective exposure than are liberals. System justification theory, social dominance theory, and right wing authoritarianism characterize liberals as thoughtful, tolerant of differing opinions, and open-minded, and conservatives as fearful, prejudiced, and close-minded. For example, liberals seem to be more open to new experiences (e.g., McCrae, 1996) and are more analytic in their thinking style (Talhelm et al., 2015). In contrast, conservatives may be more prejudiced against and violent toward outgroups (Sibley & Duckitt, 2008; Vail & Motyl, 2010), dogmatic (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003), and have a stronger need to reduce uncertainty and threat (Jost, Nosek, & Gosling, 2008). According to system justification theory, these basic psychological differences cause conservatives (relative to liberals) to more strongly endorse a rigid, hierarchical social system that is intolerant of dissenting views. This may mean that conservatives are more likely to work harder to avoid exposure to liberals’ views—which conservatives perceive to be dissenting views—than vice versa.

On the question of whether selective exposure is ideologically symmetric, extant research has yielded mixed findings. Four studies found that conservatives are more prone to selective exposure than are liberals. First, Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944) found that Republicans read primarily pro-Republican media in the 1940 US Presidential election campaign season (Roosevelt vs. Willkie), whereas Democrats consumed equal amounts of pro-Republican and pro-Democratic media. Second, Nam, Jost, and van Bavel (2013) found that, when directly asked, liberals were more likely than conservatives to be willing to write a counter-ideological essay. Third, Iyengar, Hahn, Krosnick, and Walker (2008) found that during the 2000 US Presidential election campaign season (Bush vs. Gore), Republicans were more prone to selectively expose themselves to information about their preferred (Republican) candidate and to avoid information about their non-preferred (Democratic) candidate than were Democrats. And fourth, Barberá, Jost, Nagler, Tucker, and Bonneau (2015) found that, on Twitter, conservatives were less likely to retweet posts written by ideological opponents than were liberals (although, it is unclear whether they actually consumed the news contained in the links in those posts, or just shared them without reading their content).

One of the four studies just described, finding that conservatives are more prone to selective exposure, have been the subject of conceptual re-analyses. Specifically, Sears and Freedman (1967) pointed out that in the Lazarsfeld et al. (1944) study, the Republican Party spent more than twice as much as the Democratic Party in the 1940 electoral campaign (Overack, 1941), resulting in a greater availability of pro-Republican media to the public. That is, Republicans may have consumed more pro-Republican media simply because more Republican media was available. When taking into consideration the amount of available information, Sears and Freedman (1967) concluded that it was the Democratic Party members who were more prone to selective exposure in the 1940 electoral campaign than the Republicans (see p. 200). This follow-up analysis highlights the importance of leveling the contextual playing field before drawing inferences about ideological (a)symmetries.

Other studies have not shown that liberals are more prone to selective exposure effects than conservatives. Two studies show no differences (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Stroud, 2008), and one, attempting to replicate the Nam et al. (2013) findings, failed to do so (Collins, Crawford, & Brandt, 2015). One recent analysis of Facebook behaviors has shown the reverse effect: conservatives tended to click on and share ideologically crosscutting posts more than liberals did (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015), meaning that liberals were more prone to selective exposure on Facebook. In sum, the scientific record regarding whether liberals or conservatives are more prone to selective exposure is mixed and inconclusive. Some studies find that conservatives are

more prone to this bias, others find that liberals are more prone, and still others find no difference.

1.2. Why are the findings mixed?

Why has the growing literature on the ideological (a)symmetry of selective exposure produced mixed results? We suggest that study designs have varied in how well they actually measured selective exposure. Recall that in the Lazarsfeld et al. (1944) study, for instance, the amount of information available to the public was ideologically asymmetric—more pro-Republican than Democratic information was available. This asymmetry in the availability of information may have explained why Republicans consumed more ideologically congenial information than did Democrats (Sears & Freedman, 1967). Other field studies (e.g., Barberá et al., 2015) observed the tendency to retweet ideologically congenial and uncongenial content. Retweeting a cross-cutting post involves multiple distinct processes: seeing the original post (exposure), a desire to share the post, and a motive for sharing the post—a motive that could be a desire to communicate approval, criticism, or even sarcastic mockery. Without much more nuanced coding, it is impossible to know exactly what retweets mean. The degree to which the behaviors observed in these field studies relate to the phenomenon of selective exposure is therefore not very clear. Perhaps the observed heterogeneity in findings with respect to the ideological (a)symmetry question is attributable to the variable sets of contextual factors and psychological phenomena encapsulated in observed behaviors.

Studying selective exposure in naturalistic contexts, such as on social media, captures the phenomenon as it occurs in the real world. Although high in external validity, an accompanying limitation of real world studies is that many factors play a role in manifesting a behavioral trend, complicating the interpretation of the results. Although studies conducted in an artificial setting have limited external validity, a benefit of these studies is that they do offer more control over contextual factors and thus permit a more focused examination of a single psychological element.

Research investigating the ideological (a)symmetry of related social cognitive functions provide reasons to expect that leveling the contextual playing field may reveal ideological symmetry at the basic psychological level. For instance, research finding that conservatives are more prejudiced against minorities typically asked people to offer their opinions about minorities with which liberals tend to sympathize more, such as African Americans (Chambers, Schlenker, & Collisson, 2013). Research supporting the ideological conflict hypothesis studied a variety of groups, including some that liberals are more likely to find threatening than conservatives, such as Evangelical Christians, and found that liberals and conservatives are *similarly* intolerant of groups that challenge their own ideology (Brandt, Reyna, Chambers, Crawford, & Wetherell, 2014; Crawford, Brandt, Inbar, Chambers, & Motyl, 2016). Other studies found that, at a basic cognitive/emotional level, and counter to what some previous studies had suggested, conservatives and liberals may be similarly simple-minded (Conway et al., 2015; Gruenfeld, 1995), closed to new experiences (Brandt, Chambers, Crawford, Wetherell, & Reyna, 2015), prone to sacralize mundane objects (Frimer, Tell, & Haidt, 2015; Frimer, Motyl, & Tell, 2017), obedient to authority (Frimer, Gaucher, & Schaefer, 2014), reverent to moral heroes (Frimer, Biesanz, Walker, & Mackinlay, 2013), and self-righteous (Waytz, Young, & Ginges, 2014).

These new findings stop short of suggesting that liberals and conservatives are psychologically equivalent in every respect; a recent meta-analysis suggests otherwise (Onraet et al., 2015). Rather, studies finding ideological symmetry where asymmetries were previously found suggest that research designs that level the contextual playing field are helpful to assess whether liberals and conservatives are psychologically different. To our knowledge, no previous research has systematically tested whether liberals and conservatives are similarly

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