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Selective exposure to partisan media: Moderating factors in evaluations of the president

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ABSTRACT

The conditions in which moderating factors – media trust, mediabias, and political ideology – increase or limit the approval ratings of a politician in a partisan media environment were investigated using data obtained from the 2010 Pew survey. The findings show that media trust and media bias intensify negative presidential evaluations among consumers of conservative news programs, whereas these factors do not influence presidential approval among consumers of liberal news programs. The findings also reveal that conservatives tend to choose to be exposed to news messages that are congenial to their ideological orientations, while liberals select a more balanced diet of news messages. This study proposes that moderating factors have different effects on conservative and liberal news consumers.

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1. Introduction

With the rise of cable television and the Internet beginning in the 1980s, individuals have come to rely on their favorite media sources for news and information, selectively exposing themselves to content that accords with their own political predispositions (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Stroud, 2010). The advent of partisan media has especially altered people's patterns of media consumption. Thus, the degree to which individuals' selective exposure to news messages influences their attitudes and behaviors has been a topic of heated debate in communication studies (Garrett & Stroud, 2014; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Smith & Searles, 2014).

Scholars remain divided as to whether selective media exposure energizes or debilitates the condition of democracy in a society. On one hand, the availability of selective exposure options for individuals can encourage the continued pursuit of political information on the part of the public as a whole (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). Since informed citizens will arrive at better political decisions than uninformed citizens, selective exposure can help prevent political apathy or indifference (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). On the other hand, selective exposure to attitude-consistent messages raises serious problems for democratic ideals since it “may hinder an informed opinion-formation, polarize the electorate, and reduce political tolerance” (Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2011, p. 350). Consequently, selective exposure may lead to social fragmentation.

While selective exposure remains a major concern for social and democratic processes, the research is unclear as to whether selective exposure actually brings about significant effects (Goldman & Mutz, 2011). Scholars who

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are cynical of selective-exposure effects argue that media messages tend to confirm people's preexisting dispositions (Klapper, 1960). The researchers' findings indicate that individuals' selection of particular media sources can limit the direct effects of the news media on individuals (Klapper, 1960; Stroud, 2010).

Although a number of studies have reported the significant role of selective exposure in intensifying media effects (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Smith & Searles, 2014), the circumstances under which selective exposure effects are enhanced or tempered remain largely veiled. In this regard, the ways in which selective exposure influences the formation of people's opinions, given the increasing number of media sources, needs to be further explored. In this context, this study investigates the contingent conditions under which selective exposure to partisan media messages influences people's evaluations of politicians.

There are three primary approaches to examining selective exposure phenomena (Gvirsman, 2014). The sociological approach focuses on organizational and communal levels of selective exposure by exploring societal factors such as party identification and demographic variables (Goldman & Mutz, 2011; Stroud, 2008). The media effect approach concerns the overall effects of selective exposure on audiences (Sears & Freedman, 1967; Scheufele, 2007). Finally, the social-psychological approach focuses on selective exposure at the level of the individual, considering personality as well as cognitive and affective processing (Fischer, 2014). Within this approach, agenda-setting and priming theories emphasize the cognitive and affective processing of information. They are based on an accessibility model that posits media coverage can make an issue or attribute more prominent and consequently, the most salient issues (or attributes) will become more accessible to people and likely to influence their decision-making. In short, accessibility has been presumed to cause the transmission of issue (or attribute) salience from media outlets to their audiences (Iyengar, 1990).

News media shape people's opinions by highlighting particular issues and stressing certain aspects of those issues (McCombs, 2004). Two recent theoretical developments in agenda-setting research are "attribute agenda-setting" and "attribute priming." They suggest that the way in which the media present an issue – that is, the extent to which the media emphasizes some aspects (attributes) of an issue at the expense of other aspects – may significantly affect an audience's opinion of it (McCombs, 2004). It is probable that if the media emphasize certain attributes of a president's public policies such as a healthcare bill or an anti-terrorism strategy, public opinion toward those policies may be swayed toward approval or disapproval. Such positive or negative opinions of a president's policies are also likely to be prominent in people's minds, affecting their evaluations of the president (Kim, Han, & Scheufele, 2010).

The present study investigates how selective exposure to news programs affects an individual's evaluation of a politician. For the purposes of this study, news programs were divided into two types: conservative and liberal. This study examines whether selective exposure to one of these two types of programs (that is, exposure that results from

an individual choosing one type more often than the other) affects the individual's attitude toward the president, and if so, the process through which selective exposure produces this attitudinal shift. This study also explores the moderating factors of media trust, media bias, and political ideology as they amplify or mitigate the effects of partisan media on an individual's evaluation of the president.

2. Literature review

2.1. Selective exposure theory

Selective exposure theory can be traced to cognitive dissonance theory. First proposed by Festinger (1957), cognitive dissonance theory suggests that individuals do not want to experience the discomfort of cognitive dissonance, which is defined as an incongruity between attitudes and behaviors. The existence or non-existence of cognitive dissonance can determine not only the assiduity with which an individual hunts for information, but also the selectivity of the individual's information search (Festinger, 1957). People tend to pursue news or information with which they agree as a way of minimizing cognitive dissonance (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009).

Taber and Lodge (2006) stated that people tend to seek information with two simultaneous goals in mind. At the same time that individuals pursue an "accuracy goal" that requires them to "seek out and carefully consider relevant evidence so as to reach a correct or otherwise best conclusion," individuals also strive towards a "partisan goal," or a tendency to "apply their reasoning power in defense of a prior, specific conclusion" (Taber & Lodge, 2006; p. 756). People are therefore motivated to "ignore or devalue contrary information, bias [their] perception of credibility, or overlook important factors" (Taber, Lodge, & Glathar, 2001, pp. 208–209). Thus, people tend to seek out news content that accords with their prior beliefs and attitudes.

Political campaigns in the U.S. have become more media-centered since the 1950s with the increasing prevalence of television (Allen & D'Alessio, 2000). U.S. journalists have traditionally considered the core values of journalism to be objectivity and fairness (McNair, 2005) and have therefore strived to avoid bias. In the past, the news media rather than political parties dominated political campaigns, meaning that the public was less likely to encounter partisan media messages (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). However, the recent proliferation of news media outlets including blogs and social media have made the instantaneous promulgation of opinionated viewpoints by ordinary citizens as well as journalists easy to accomplish, and this has begun to replace objective journalism. One concern regarding the current media-saturated environment is that the more citizens are exposed to political messages congenial to their own predispositions, the more solidified and even more extreme their previously held views and attitudes will become (Mullainathan & Shleifer, 2005; Sunstein, 2007).

2.2. Democracy and polarization

One possible consequence of selective exposure is a "fragmented citizenry" (Sunstein, 2007). If individuals

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