More a Symptom than a Cause: Polarization and Partisan News Media in America

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Elite Partisan Polarization


- Abortion
- Economic Issues
- President Evaluation
- House of Representatives

Source: Poole and Rosenthal
Mass Partisan Polarization

Year


 Elite Partisan Polarization

Source: Poole and Rosenthal; American National Election Studies
Mass Partisan Polarization

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What about the emergence of partisan news media?

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*Indirect Effects* refer to the ways in which exposure to partisan news can influence public opinion without direct interaction with the content.
What about the emergence of partisan news media?

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<td>Partisan news may spread through discussant networks (Siegel 2013)</td>
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Elite Partisan Polarization (Fox News)

- Abortion
- Economic Issues
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Timing isn’t quite right for hypothesis that partisan media are the source of elite polarization.
And... Fox News had a depolarizing effect in the beginning!

Arceneaux, Johnson, Lindstädt, & Vander Wielen 2013
Elite Partisan Polarization

Mass Partisan Polarization

Year

Abortion

Economic Issues

President Evaluation

Fox News
Emergence of partisan media doesn’t line up with polarization on abortion, but could account for partisan polarization on economic issues and evaluations of the president.
Emergence of partisan news media did not occur in a vacuum
More entertainment options = Fewer news viewers (Prior 2007)

Source: American National Election Studies
With the exception of abortion, news-seekers polarized at a sharper rate than entertainment-seekers after 1996.
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But... this measure doesn’t isolate partisan news exposure.
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But... this measure doesn't isolate partisan news exposure.

And... this pattern could reflect selection bias.
Participant Preference Experiment
1. Partisan news has stronger effects on entertainment-seekers.
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2. Mainstream news can polarize, too!
Partisan Cues vs. Ideological Content vs. Partisan Cues
Sorting out Content vs. Cues
Sorting out Content vs. Cues

1. Participant Preference Design
Sorting out Content vs. Cues

1. Participant Preference Design
2. Provide people with counterstereotypical cues
Sorting out Content vs. Cues

1. Participant Preference Design
2. Provide people with countersterotypical cues
3. Vary source: likeminded news vs. co-partisan
Sorting out Content vs. Cues

1. Participant Preference Design
2. Provide people with counterstereotypical cues
3. Vary source: likeminded news vs. co-partisan

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<th>Conservatives</th>
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<td>Gun Control</td>
<td>Waiting periods and registries won’t stop criminals</td>
<td>Waiting periods and registries help law enforcement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Death Penalty</td>
<td>Heinous crimes deserve ultimately punishment</td>
<td>Recent mistakes require moratorium</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bank Regulation</td>
<td>Regulation hamstrings community banks</td>
<td>Regulation needed to so banks don’t become too big to fail</td>
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<tr>
<td>Federalism</td>
<td>Devolution empowers the people</td>
<td>Federal government needs to take charge to stop unfunded mandates</td>
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1. The emergence of partisan news media seems more of a symptom of elite polarization than a source.
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2. Both mainstream and partisan news media may play a role in mass partisan polarization.
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2. Both mainstream and partisan news media may play a role in mass partisan polarization

3. If partisan elites moved to the center, the electorate would likely follow