Implications of pro- and counter-attitudinal information exposure for affective polarization

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Abstract

The U.S. is characterized by high levels of political polarization and recent evidence suggests that this extends to affective responses: partisans’ dislike for members of the opposing party is at an all-time high. Exposure to campaign-related media is an important contributor to this effect, but we do not know the extent to which polarization can be attributed to information reinforcing individuals’ partisan identity versus information representing the views of partisan opponents. This study uses data collected via an online survey of a large, representative sample of Americans immediately following the 2012 U.S. Presidential election to begin to address these questions. We find that pro- and counter-attitudinal information exposure has distinct influences on perceptions of and attitudes towards members of the opposing party. We discuss the implications in light of recent evidence about partisans’ tendency to engage in selective exposure.
Over the last several decades, Americans’ attitudes toward members of an opposed political party have shifted from mild negativity to outright hostility, while attitudes toward their preferred party have remained relatively stable (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012). The phenomenon, which it is based on emotional reactions to party identifications and is evident among Democrats and Republicans alike, has been termed affective polarization, distinguishing it from other forms of political polarization. This is a relative new area of inquiry, but evidence for affective polarization appears to be more robust than for polarization grounded in citizens’ issue positions or policy preferences (Iyengar et al., 2012).

The potentially harmful consequences of affective polarization are numerous. As animosity increases, citizens’ interactions may become less deliberative and more partisan. Aversive emotional reactions make citizens less likely to seek diverse perspectives on controversial topics (Valentino, 2008), while reducing opportunities for collaboration and compromise (MacKuen, Wolak, Keele, and Marcus, 2010). Extrapolating from these effects, it is plausible that negative affect directed toward candidates, party elites, and citizens could also pose a threat other democratic goods, promoting incivility, intolerance, and perhaps even violence.

Given the undesirable consequences of affective polarization, understanding the reasons for this transformation has obvious practical significance, but it is also an intriguing theoretical puzzle. Iyengar and colleagues provide compelling evidence that it is due in part to negative campaign advertising. During the 2004 and 2008 U.S. presidential elections, individuals living in states with the most extensive political advertising, i.e. battleground states, exhibited higher levels of polarization, and they polarized more rapidly over the course of the election, than
individuals living in other parts of the country. Although negative advertising is an important contributing factor, it does not fully explain the phenomenon.

Our objective in this paper is two-fold. First, we examine whether the trend toward affective polarization continued into the 2012 election cycle. Given the consistency of the pattern over the preceding forty years, it would be surprising if it were to change dramatically, but verification sets the stage for the analyses that follow. Second, we consider the role that partisan online media play in this dynamic, paying special attention to the influence of individuals’ exposure decisions in a high-choice information environment. Previous scholarship has demonstrated that selective exposure to political news promotes polarization of attitudes toward political candidates <Stroud>; this work extends those findings by (a) distinguishing between selective approach, a preference for pro-attitudinal information, and selective avoidance, an aversion to counter-attitudinal information, and (b) by considering other expressions of affective polarization.

**Affective polarization and selective exposure to partisan media**

One possible explanation for the persistent increase in affective polarization is selective exposure to news media. Selective exposure is the phenomenon in which individuals exercise biases in what communications they allow themselves to encounter (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944). More specifically, media users tend to allocate a disproportionate amount of their diet of news and political media to attitude-consistent content, i.e., messages that agree with their ideological beliefs (Stroud, 2008). To a lesser extent (Garrett, 2009b), media content with attitude-discrepant content is avoided. Selective exposure may be an explanation for, or at least a contributing factor to, the increased affective polarization observed over several decades.
Successive technological advancements during this period, especially cable television and the Internet, have altered the media environment to allow for greater variety and accessibility of content, which presents the possibility (Sunstein, 2001) for more efficient observance of selective exposure by people across the partisan spectrum.

If selectivity in political media has become increasingly possible and prevalent, attendance to sympathetic media and insulation from or rejection of competing views may be responsible for greater polarization (Iyengar & Hahn, 2008; Prior, 2013). Evidence is mixed as to whether selectivity is on the rise. For example, Stroud’s (2011) analysis of Nielsen data demonstrates that selective exposure to partisan cable news increased between 2004 and 2008. There is, however, no evidence of a corresponding increase in online partisan selectivity during the same period, based both on surveys (Garrett, Carnahan, and Lynch, 2013) and web-traffic data (Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2011). Despite the lack of longitudinal evidence for increasing selectivity, it is clear that the contemporary media environment offers a wide array of partisan voices. Selective exposure to these politically charged media might be contributing to the trend of affective polarization.

Indeed, recent selective exposure research has begun to identify consequences of selectivity, including polarization. Correlational data show, for example, that readers of political blogs are as highly polarized as party elites in Congress (Lawrence, Sides, & Farrell, 2010), though this does not establish a causal effect of selective exposure on polarization. Stroud (2010) goes farther, using panel survey data to show that selective exposure was responsible for polarization of attitudes toward candidates during the 2004 election cycle. However, her analyses examined the amounts of exposure to conservative or liberal media, and did not distinguish between approaching attitude-consistent and avoiding attitude-discrepant media. Given that
approach and avoidance have been shown to be independent behaviors, with approach being more prevalent (Frey, 1986; Garrett, 2009a, b), the distinction may have implications for polarization, as discrete effects could emerge from those two facets of selective exposure.

Experimental evidence, using a variety of both forced-exposure and selective-exposure designs, has found that attitude-consistent exposure strengthened, and attitude-discrepant exposure weakened, subsequent attitudes toward parties and issues (Arceneaux et al., 2012; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2012; Levendusky, in press-b). Related studies into interpersonal political talk also generally show that depolarization or ambivalence commonly result from counterattitudinal exposure (Mutz, 2002; Parsons, 2010). Therefore, we would expect opposing effects from exposure to supportive and oppositional media.

**H1:** The influences of pro- and counter-party news exposure on affective polarization differ in sign.

In addition to a difference of direction, attitude-consistent and attitude-discrepant exposure may also differ in the magnitude of their impact. People are typically motivated to maintain and reinforce their existing beliefs when processing new information (Taber & Lodge, 2006), so that the attitude-reinforcing effect of pro-attitudinal exposure should be stronger than an attitude-weakening effect of counter-attitudinal exposure. Experimental evidence supports this notion of a stronger influence of attitude-consistent messages (Levendusky, in press-a; Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979). Likewise, in the context of political discussion, Eveland & Hively (2009) found that reinforcing, “safe” discussion promoted political participation, but that challenging or “dangerous” discussion did not significantly constraint it.
H2: The influences of pro- and counter-party exposure on affective polarization differ in magnitude.

*Exposure to both attitude-consistent and attitude-discrepant media.* Although the two types of exposure are expected to occur to different degrees and to yield distinct effects, they may also generate effects on affective polarization by working in tandem. There is growing evidence that those media users who engage in more selective exposure to pro-attitudinal outlets are also more likely to access counter-attitudinal outlets (Garrett et al., 2013; Holbert, Hmielowski, & Weeks, 2012). The combination of attitude-consistent and discrepant messages might have implications for polarization.

Some of the relevant evidence for combined exposure’s possible effect on affective polarization comes from research into interpersonal political talk. For example, Mutz (2002) argues that cross-pressures stemming from interaction with both sides of a political issue create ambivalence, leading to depolarization. Similarly, the presence of both Democratic and Republican discussants reduced polarization toward candidates (Huckfeldt, Mendez, & Osborn, 2004), and diverse discussion was more likely to reduce participation than attitude-discrepant discussion alone (Eveland & Hively, 2009). The contradictory claims received when both pro- and counter-attitudinal media exposures occur would then be expected to reduce polarization.

H3a: Counter-party exposure is more affectively depolarizing the more it is accompanied by pro-party exposure

There is another possibility, however. The presence of conflicting information in one’s media environment could heighten polarization. Consumption of counter-attitudinal information tends to go up with pro-attitudinal information exposure (Garrett et al., 2013), and there is some
evidence that this has a utilitarian motivation (Carnahan, 2012). For example, counter-attitudinal information is particularly attractive when it allows individuals to defend their opinions against critics (Albarracín & Mitchell, 2004; Valentino, Banks, Hutchings, & Davis, 2009). Indeed, cross-ideological links on blogs are frequently used in order to critique or ridicule opponents (Hargittai, Gallo, & Kane, 2008). This suggests that the depolarizing effects of counter-attitudinal exposure would be smaller the greater the individual’s pro-attitudinal exposure.

The presence of both pro- and counter-attitudinal information, and the contrast between the two, might make the former seem even more worthy and the latter more wrongheaded. Accordingly, the experimental presentation of balanced information appears to generate polarization (Taber & Lodge, 2006), and the combination of cross-cutting interpersonal talk and strong interpersonal ties to politically similar discussants increased polarization (Lee, Kwak, & Campbell, in press). Wojcieszak (2011) identified a similar effect and found that perceived disagreement contributed to polarization. Therefore, in contrast to H3a, increasing polarization might follow from exposure to conflicting media content.

**H3b:** Counter-party exposure is more affectively polarizing the more it is accompanied by pro-party exposure

Affective polarization, as operationalized by Iyengar and colleagues (2012), has at least two dimensions: favorability and social distance. Although related, these dimensions are distinct and it is plausible that that selective exposure to pro- and counter-attitudinal information might have different effects on each. Perhaps favorability judgments are not focused on evaluating a target’s worth, but instead are grounded in an emotional response to the target’s political beliefs. For example, it is possible to disagree with a candidate based on his or her policy positions,
leading to an unfavorable assessment, while still respecting the individual. In contrast, social
distance, which includes attitudes toward out-group marriages and out-group stereotyping, is
more consistent with a judgment of the individuals’ worth.

Levendusky and Malhotra (2013) have proposed that the current political climate in the
U.S. is characterized by “false polarization” (cf. Pronin, Puccio, & Ross, 2002), where the
perception of disagreement between groups is greater than the actual extent of disagreement.
Survey data support this idea (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2013), and media coverage of extensive
political polarization since 2000 may account for perceived (i.e., false) polarization. This, in turn,
leads individuals to depolarize ideologically and to see their own views as more centrist, but also
to polarize affectively and evaluate out-group members more negatively. The authors suggest
that emotions are the mechanism for this process, implying that favorability might be most
influenced by perceived disagreement (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2013). Thus, it is possible that
selective consumption of partisan media is more likely to promote divergent favorability
assessments than to increase perceived social distance.

There is, however, also evidence to suggest that that stereotyping is uniquely vulnerable
to the influence of selective exposure to partisan media. The interaction of political
sophistication and television exposure can activate party stereotypes (Rahn & Cramer, 1996), so
that heavy users of media might be prone to the cultivation of stereotypes (cf. Morgan,
Shanahan, & Signorielli, 2009). Given these unclear expectations about how exposure to pro-
and counter-attitudinal media might impact the multiple dimensions of affective polarization, we
pose the following research question.

**RQ:** Does selective exposure to partisan media have different implications for out-
party favorability and social distance?
Method

The hypotheses and research question were tested with data from a three-wave panel survey conducted during the 2012 U.S. presidential election. The survey was conducted by GfK Knowledge Networks with a sample selected from their KnowledgePanel, which uses probability-based sampling and dual-frame composition to attempt to capture a representative sample. Random-digital dialing and address-based sample techniques are used to recruit participants. A laptop and Internet access are provided for participants lacking existing access, as all KnowledgePanel surveys are conducted on a survey site where panelists log in after receiving survey invitations via email. The baseline survey was conducted from July 14 to August 7, 2012, with 1,004 respondents. Wave 2 ran from September 7 to October 4, with 782 returning participants (a 77.9% retention rate), followed by Wave 3 from November 2 to 19, with a final count of 652 respondents (83.4% retention from Wave 2, 64.9% retention from baseline). Most analyses are based on data collected in the third wave, which included relevant variables not available in prior waves, and any exceptions are explicitly noted below.

Sample demographics indicate its diversity and representativeness with regard to age ($M = 50.9$, $SD = 16.1$), gender (50.3% male), education (92.0% high school graduate or higher and 35.9% bachelor’s degree or higher), race (77.0% White, 7.7% Black, 8.7% Hispanic, 6.6% Other), political party affiliation (45.2% Democrat or Democrat-leaning, 13.3% pure Independent, 35.7% Republican or Republic-leaning), and ideology (30.8% liberal, 32.5% moderate, 36.7% conservative). ¹

Measures

¹ These descriptives characterize respondents participating in the third wave, though the demographic data was itself collected in the baseline survey. Respondent demographics were comparable across waves, and there is no evidence of disproportionate attrition along any of the characteristics reported.
**Party affiliation.** In the baseline survey, respondents were asked to select the option that best described their party affiliation: A strong Democrat; A not very strong Democrat; Independent, lean toward Democrat; Independent (close to neither party); Independent, lean toward Republican; A not very strong Republican; Strong Republican. On the basis of these categorizations, true independents were excluded and the remaining partisans were coded as either Democrat/leaning-Democrat (60.7%; dummy = 0) or Republican/leaning-Republican (39.3%; dummy = 1).²

**Mainstream and neutral media use.** Respondents’ frequency of exposure to mainstream, relatively neutral, online news was measured by asking how often in the previous month (1 = Every day or almost every day to 5 = Never, reverse coded) they received information about candidates or the campaign from the “the website of a major national news organization that is not frequently characterized as favoring a particular party or ideology, including USA Today, CBS News, and Yahoo! News” (M = 1.62, SD = 0.86).

**Pro-attitudinal and counter-attitudinal exposure.** In addition to measuring the frequency of online mainstream media use, additional questions about the online use of liberal and conservative media, operationalized as exposure to “the website of a major national news organization that is frequently characterized as favoring liberal positions or Democratic candidates, such as The New York Times or MSNBC” or “the website of a politically liberal online news organization or blog, such as The Huffington Post, ThinkProgress or the Daily Kos” for liberal media, and “the website of a major national news organization that is frequently characterized as favoring conservative positions or Republican candidates, such as The Wall

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² Note that we have also excluded true Independents when computing the descriptives that follow. The impact of filtering on sample statistics is small.
Street Journal or FOX News” or “the website of a politically conservative online news organization or blog, such as Drudge Report, TownHall or the Cybercast News Service (CNS News)” for conservative media. As with mainstream media use, a 5-point scale (1 = Every day or almost every day to 5 = Never) was implemented for each item, with the values reverse coded so that a greater number reflected more frequent exposure. Exposure to liberal media by Democratic or Democratic-leaning respondents and exposure to conservative media by Republicans or Republican-leaning was computed as pro-party exposure ($M = 1.64$, $SD = 0.95$). Likewise, conservative media exposure by Democratic or Democratic-leaning and liberal media exposure by Republican or Republican-leaning respondents was computed as counter-party exposure ($M = 1.30$, $SD = 0.61$).

Affective polarization. Following Iyengar et al. (2012), affective polarization was measured both using favorability ratings of in- and out-party candidates and partisans, and using assessments of social distance from the opposed party. Most of these measures were only included in wave 3, though candidate favorability ratings were measured in all three waves.

Favorability ratings utilized an 11-point feeling thermometer. Respondents were told “we would like to know your feelings towards some political figures on a scale from 0 to 10” (0 = very unfavorable to 10 = very favorable). Respondents assessed the two leading presidential candidates: Barack Obama, the Democrat, and Mitt Romney, the Republican. In-party ratings equal the scores given to the candidate sharing the respondent’s party affiliation, while out-party ratings correspond to scores for the opposing party’s candidate. Affective polarization is calculated as the difference between in-party and out-party ratings (Wave 1: $M = 4.99$, $SD = 3.86$; Wave 2: $M = 5.34$, $SD = 4.12$; Wave 3: $M = 5.62$, $SD = 4.13$).
Respondents were also asked about both “individuals who support the Republican party” and “individuals who support the Democratic party.” In-party, out-party, and affective polarization measures were computed as they were for the candidate ratings ($M = 4.12, SD = 3.75$). When comparing out-party thermometer ratings to those reported by Iyengar and colleagues (2012), the scores were rescaled to a 101-point scale, ranging from 0 to 100.

Social distance was operationalized in two ways. The first was displeasure at the prospect of one’s offspring marrying an out-group member (see Bogardus, 1947). Respondents were asked to indicate on a five-point scale how they would feel if their child married someone from their preferred political party (asked first) or the opposing party (1 = very upset to 5 = very pleased). As with the favorability ratings, a difference score was computed between the in-party and the out-party scores, with higher values corresponding to greater affective polarization, $M = 0.85, SD = 1.30$.

Out-party trait ratings are the second measure of social distance. Respondents used a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) to indicate whether out-party supporters (Republicans assessed Democratic Party supporters and vice versa) were patriotic, intelligent, honest, open-minded, generous, close-minded, hypocritical, selfish, or mean. The nine items were dichotomized, set to one if a respondent believed out-party supporters possessed the trait (i.e., scores of 4 or 5), and both positive ($\alpha = .72$) and negative ($\alpha = .78$) trait stereotypes were summed. On average, 1.81 ($SD = 1.54$, out of four) negative traits are attributed to the out-group, compared to 0.84 ($SD = 1.13$, out of five) positive traits. Finally, the net number of positive traits was computed by subtracting the number of negative traits from the number of positive traits, $M = -0.97, SD = 1.94$. Negative scores indicate a net negative attitude toward the out-party.
Control variables. A dummy variable was computed from the party affiliation item described above to identify strong partisans. Those who identified as strong Democrats or strong Republicans (27.8%) were assigned a value of 1 and all others a value of 0. Two additional controls were tested, but both were non-significant throughout and are omitted from the models reported here. The first is political knowledge, which is computed as the sum of correct responses to four multiple choice questions regard the U.S. unemployment rate, the partisan composition of Congress, the party of the president who appointed Chief Justice John Roberts, and the identity of the U.S. Secretary of State (Wave 1: $M = 2.32, SD = 1.29$; Wave 3: $M = 2.64, SD = 1.21$). The second control was a dummy variable that indicated if a respondent lived in a battleground state (CO, FL, IA, NV, NH, NC, OH, VA, or WI).

Results

We begin by reviewing the evidence for affective polarization over the last four U.S. Presidential elections. Comparing trend data assembled by Iyengar and colleagues with survey data collected during the 2012 election cycle suggests that affective polarization persists. Figure 1 visually depicts the favorability data over the past four U.S. presidential elections. Each line corresponds to how “warmly” Americans felt toward other citizen based on their partisan identification, with scores above 50 denoting positive feelings. There are four lines in all: in-party and out-party assessments by members of each of the two major political parties. Americans’ assessments of those who share their political affiliation are remarkably stable: among Democrats, they range from 72.5%-74.3%, while Republican means range from 66.9% to 73.0%. Attitudes toward the opposed party suggest a starkly different trend, extending patterns observed by Iyengar and colleagues to new extremes (2012). Republicans attitudes toward Democrats have dropped about four points in each of the last three elections. Although stable
between 2000 and 2004, Democrats favorability toward Republicans exhibits a parallel decline in subsequent elections.

**Fig. 1. Favorability toward parties and their supporters**

![Graph showing favorability toward parties and their supporters from 2000 to 2012.](image)

Notes: Data for 2000-2008 from Iyengar et al. All data are weighted.

Social distance is another important expression of affect. Although this is a multifaceted concept that can be measured in a variety of ways, dissatisfaction with inter-party marriage is among the most well established approaches (see Figure 2). Although those who object to their son or daughter marrying someone belonging to an out-party are still in the minority, it is striking that almost a quarter of Democrats (23%) and nearly three-in-ten (28%) Republicans find the prospect at least mildly disturbing. Iyengar and colleagues note that this is a substantial change from 1960, when less than one on 20 Americans objected regardless of party affiliation. The latest data suggest that increases in out-party social distance may be slowing. Although the
proportion of objecting Americans in 2012 appears slightly higher than in 2008, these differences are not statistically significant. There is no evidence, however, that the high levels of social distance observed in 2008 were an aberration.

**Fig. 2. Dissatisfaction with Inter-Party Marriage**

![Bar chart showing dissatisfied percentages for Democrats and Republicans in 2008 and 2012.](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Somewhat Upset</th>
<th>Very Upset</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Dems.</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reps.</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Dems.</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reps.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Data for 2008 from Iyengar et al. All data are weighted.

Trait ratings—the positive and negative stereotypes associated with each party—provide a second measure of social distance. Although these data do not indicate an increase in social distance between 2008 and 2012, Americans continue to attribute more negative traits than positive traits to the out-party during both elections. In 2008 Republicans attributed an average of 2.7 times more negative attributes to Democrats than positive attributes; in 2012, the number fell to 1.9. This is a considerably smaller ratio, but it remains disproportionately negative. The pattern for Democrats is comparable, falling from a ratio of 3.6 to 2.3 over the four-year period.
Two broad patterns emerge from these results. First, negative affect toward members of the out-party is the norm, and is expressed both as negative feelings toward these individuals and as social distance from them. Second, the rate of polarization appears to differ across these affective expressions. Feeling thermometer data suggest a rapidly growing chasm between in-party and out-party favorability—averaging almost a point a year over the past twelve years. Were this linear pattern to persist, Americans favorability toward those who do not share their party affiliation would hit zero, the measurement floor, around 2040. In contrast, social distance measures suggest that if polarization is occurring as suggested by the increase observed over almost half a century, from 1960 to 2008 (Iyengar, 2012), it is doing so at a much slower rate. We see no statistically significant increase between 2008 and 2012.

**Modeling affective polarization by selective media exposure**

Having established the prevalence of negative affective toward the out-party and provided evidence that in-party and out-party favorability are continuing to diverge, we next turn to the causal question. Specifically, we examine the influence of partisan selective approach and selective avoidance on polarization using four distinct measures of affect.

The first pair of measures focuses on favorability: U.S. presidential candidate favorability and party-supporter favorability. The former has been used to model the polarizing effects of selective exposure (e.g., Stroud, 2010), providing comparability across studies. The latter explicitly taps a concept that Iyengar and colleagues (2012) identify as crucial by asking respondents to assess “individuals who support” the Republican or Democratic Party. Although the affective polarization argument fundamentally concerns perceptions of citizens, not just

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3 This is admittedly unlikely, but it does help to illustrate how quickly attitudes have been changing.
political leaders or elites, scholars previously had to rely on ratings of Democrats/Republicans and of the Democratic/Republican Parties. Although it is plausible that assessments of these categories included perceptions of citizen supporters, Iyengar et al. note that they are unable to be sure that respondents were thinking only of partisan voters when providing these scores (7). Our measure helps reduce this ambiguity. Following Iyengar and colleagues, we utilize “net favorability” measures as our dependent variables, which we calculate as the difference between respondents favorability toward the in-party less favorability toward the out-party, in order to reduce measurement concerns.

We find that the frequency with which partisan media are consumed does influence favorability polarization, and that these effects vary according to whether the outlets utilized are tilted toward or away from the respondents’ own party. These results are based on a series of OLS regression models (see Table 1, result columns 1 and 3). We find that more frequent use of pro-party sites is associated with more polarized attitudes toward candidates and toward party supporters, while counter-party site use reduces polarization at comparable levels. Hypothesis 1 is supported.

H2 asserted that the influence of pro- and counter-party site usage would different in magnitude, but we fail to find evidence supporting this claim. To the contrary, the magnitudes of the coefficients on the two modes of selective exposure are very similar. Thus, both selective approach and selective avoidance contribute to polarization, and we cannot conclude that the influence of one is greater than the other. We will say more about this in the discussion.

The last test based on the two favorability measures concerns a pair competing hypotheses about using pro- and counter-party content in tandem. Theory and extant empirical
evidence suggest that diverse exposure could be associated with either polarization or depolarization. In these data we find that polarization is the more likely outcome, which supports H3b, not H3a. The evidence for this comes from a variation on the previously described regression models (see Table 1, result columns 2 and 4). An interaction between pro-party and counter-party site use has a positive significant influence on polarization levels. In other word, the polarizing effects of pro-party news exposure appears to be amplified when it is accompanied by counter-party exposure. This has important implications for the overall influence of partisan media on polarization, which we will return to in the discussion.

Table 1. Effects of pro- and counter-party exposure on net favorability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Net favorability toward candidates</th>
<th>Net favorability toward party supporters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pro-party site use</td>
<td>1.07***</td>
<td>0.88***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.25)</td>
<td>(0.22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counter-party site use</td>
<td>-1.17***</td>
<td>-0.84**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.32)</td>
<td>(0.29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro-party X Counter-party</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.66**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>–</td>
<td>(0.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major news sites use</td>
<td>-0.33</td>
<td>-0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.29)</td>
<td>(0.26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican or Republican leaning</td>
<td>-0.25</td>
<td>-0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.34)</td>
<td>(0.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong party identifier</td>
<td>2.72***</td>
<td>2.97***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.36)</td>
<td>(0.32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>5.15***</td>
<td>3.53***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.46)</td>
<td>(0.51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>521</td>
<td>513</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>0.165</td>
<td>0.221</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Standard errors in parentheses
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

The second pair of outcomes concern of the social distance measures described previously: objection to inter-party marriage and how many fewer positive than negative traits are attributed the out-party. Reassessing the first three hypotheses using these outcomes yields
intriguing results. As with the first set of analyses, we find that pro-party site use promotes social-distance polarization. More frequent use of these party-affirming outlets is associated with higher levels of objection to inter-party marriages and with attributing to the out-party fewer net positive traits (either by driving down positive assessments, or driving up negative ones). The influence of counter-party sites on both measures of social distance, however, is not statistically different than zero. Thus, H1 is not supported when considering social distance. Testing the magnitudes of the coefficients, we find that the magnitude of the pro-party coefficient is significantly larger than that of the counter-party coefficient when predicting out-party traits, $F(1, 520) = 7, p < .01$, which means that H2 is supported in the context of social distance.

Turning next to the moderating influence of counter-party use on pro-party use, H3a and H3b, we fail to find support for either of the competing hypotheses. When predicting perceived social distance from the out-group, we find no significant interaction between the two forms of selective exposure. This is a stark contrast to our models of favorability polarization, which showed evidence of a moderating relationship between the two forms of selective exposure. Taken together, these results suggest that pro- and counter-attitudinal exposure may have different implications for social distance than for favorability. We consider this possibility in the discussion.
Table 2. Effects of pro- and counter-party exposure on social distance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Objection to inter-party marriage</th>
<th>Net positive out-party traits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pro-party site use</td>
<td>0.15*</td>
<td>-0.37***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counter-party site use</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.10)</td>
<td>(0.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro-party X Counter-party</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
<td>(0.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major news sites use</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.09)</td>
<td>(0.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican or Republican leaning</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.10)</td>
<td>(0.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong party identifier</td>
<td>0.88***</td>
<td>-0.65***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.11)</td>
<td>(0.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>-0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.14)</td>
<td>(0.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>522</td>
<td>526</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R^2</td>
<td>0.151</td>
<td>0.158</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Standard errors in parentheses
* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Establishing temporal order

The results thus far are based on cross-sectional data, but this survey utilized a panel design, allowing us to examine changes over time. Respondents provided feeling-thermometer ratings of the two Presidential candidates at each wave of the survey. We can use these data to model the influence of partisan media on changes in net favorability toward preferred candidates. Using affective polarization in the second wave to model of polarization at wave three allows us to control for over-time measurement stability. Any remaining variance corresponds to a change between waves, which other predictors can help to explain. Utilizing this approach (see Table 3), we reexamine our assertion that pro- and counter-party site exposure have conflicting influence on affective polarization (H1). The results are consistent with those based on cross-sectional data: pro-party site use promotes affective polarization, while counter-party site use reduces it. Results are also comparable when considering the magnitude influence of these two
factors. The two types of exposure work in opposite directions, but we find no evidence that they differ in the size of their contribution to polarization.

There is, however, one noteworthy difference between the cross-sectional and longitudinal models. After controlling for prior-wave candidate favorability, the interaction between pro- and counter-party site use is no longer significance. We cannot be sure of the reason for the loss of significance, but it does raise the possibility that the effect may have been an artifact of cross-sectional data. We consider this in more detail in the discussion.

Table 3. Effect of pro- and counter-party exposure on change in net favorability toward candidates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Prior Wave</th>
<th>Later Wave</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Favorability toward candidates in prior wave</td>
<td>0.66***</td>
<td>0.65***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major news sites use</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro-party site use</td>
<td>0.43*</td>
<td>0.45*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counter-party site use</td>
<td>-0.53*</td>
<td>-0.89**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro-party X Counter-party</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican or Republican leaning</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong party identifier</td>
<td>0.81**</td>
<td>0.82**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>1.99***</td>
<td>1.93***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Observations | 509 | 509 |
\(R^2\) | 0.510 | 0.512 |

Standard errors in parentheses
* \(p < 0.05\), ** \(p < 0.01\), *** \(p < 0.001\)
Discussion

Over the past half century, American’s attitudes toward their countrymen have undergone a rapid bifurcation. While assessments of preferred-party members have remained relatively stable, out-party perceptions have deteriorated sharply. This study follows path-breaking work by Iyengar and colleagues (2012), which both provided a name for the phenomenon—affective polarization—and established its existence. Our first contribution is to demonstrate that negative attitudes toward out-party members persisted through the 2012 election, and to affirm that this animosity extends beyond party leaders and political elites, characterizing perceptions of party-supporters in general. Observing these patterns, it is worth noting that different expressions of polarization appear to be changing at different rates: favorability toward partisans on the other side of the aisle is declining more rapidly than social distance from these individuals is growing. Although objection to inter-party marriage is high—perhaps surprisingly so—the proportion of Americans who oppose it did not grow significantly between 2008 and 2012. Similarly, although negative trait attributions greatly outnumber positive attributions when assessing the out-party, there is no evidence of polarization between the two elections.

The biggest motivating question, though, concerns the influence of partisan media exposure on citizens’ attitudes toward one another, especially in light of evidence that political identity shapes the types of content that individuals consume (i.e. selective exposure). Recent scholarship suggests that individuals’ news consumption decisions are modestly informed by their pre-existing political attitudes. Contrary to some of the more dire predictions, it is not the case that individuals are using the choice afforded by new information and communication
technologies to systematically construct information echo chambers, embracing likeminded news coverage while shunning everything else <Sunstein>. Instead, individuals exhibit a preference for pro-attitudinal news, termed selective approach, while tolerating other perspectives (Garrett 2009a; Garrett et al., 2013).

Combined with the results reported here, the difference between people’s propensity to engage in selective approach toward pro-attitudinal content and selective avoidance of counter-attitudinal content has important implications for affective polarization. As expected, the more extensively individuals rely on partisan sources affirming their political viewpoint, the more polarized their attitudes toward other partisans. It is unsurprising that repeated exposure to content praising one’s allies and criticizing political opponents would cause attitudes toward these groups to diverge. And consistent with earlier work on cross-pressures (e.g., Mutz, 2002), more contact with opponents tends to lead to more moderate views. Opponents’ arguments can reduce negative affect toward these individual by providing evidence that they are thoughtful, have legitimate concerns, share some common ground, etc. Exposure to these arguments can be affectively depolarizing even if the arguments themselves are not found to be persuasive.

Although there is no statistically significant difference in the magnitudes of the effects of pro- and counter-party exposure, their real-world implications are distinct based on people’s greater propensity to engage in selective approach than selective avoidance. Although one-sided partisan media can either promote or constrain polarization, depending on which side is consumed, individuals are most likely to consume the polarizing pro-attitudinal information. This implies that as partisan news becomes more popular, affective polarization is likely to increase because sympathetic media tend to be used more often than the alternative.
Perhaps the most intrigue results, however, concern the interaction between pro- and counter-party exposure. Some of these results suggest that the depolarizing effects of counter-attitudinal exposure are constrained by contemporaneous pro-attitudinal exposure. This is in contrast to arguments that a diverse information environment can breed ambivalence (e.g., Mutz, 2002.). Instead, these results suggest that individuals who seek information from the other side may be doing so in order to critique it (e.g., Hargittai et al., 2008) and/or that placing pro- and counter-attitudinal claims side by side may actually reinforce the sense that one’s opponents are in the wrong (e.g., Taber and Lodge, 2006). We should be careful not to read too much into these results, though, as the interaction was not significant after controlling for favorability assessments made several weeks earlier. The loss of significance does not mean the effect is nonexistent, but it raises questions about the robustness of this evidence.

The potential differences between the two forms of affective polarization examined here also merit comment. Although the motivating research question on this topic was speculative, the pattern of results hints that there may be something important going. Specifically, these data suggest that favorability assessments are polarizing more rapidly than perceptions of out-party social distance. Furthermore, although pro-party exposure promotes both expressions of polarization, counter-party exposure is only significantly related to changes in net favorability. There are several possible explanations. This may simply be a measurement artifact: perhaps feeling thermometers are better for detecting change than either objection to inter-party marriage or stereotypic trait assignments. Alternatively, it may be that social distance polarization really is occurring less rapidly, and that our failure to detect a significant influence of counter-attitudinal exposure is a side-effect of this. Or it may be that there is a substantively important difference between how people approach favorability assessments versus social distance
assessments. We believe that these possibilities merit theoretical development and empirical testing.

There are a few limitations that to acknowledge. First, we rely on self-reported media consumption, which tends to be exaggerated and which can be biased by important socio-political attributes (Prior 2013). Experimental designs and naturalistic data collection (e.g., Nielson or comScore data, which capture consumers’ real-world exposure) are less prone to these threats, but they, too, have well known limitations. Our argument is not that these data are perfect, but rather that they provide a reasonable test of theoretically derived predictions. Methodological triangulation is the next logical step, testing to see if our results hold up under alternative designs. A second limitation concerns our use of these panel data. The lagged regression models reported here utilize only two of the three waves of data. A more sophisticated approach, which we have begun to explore, would be to conduct latent growth modeling using all three waves. A multilevel-model-based latent growth model (not shown) is consistent with the results reported in Table 3, but a structural-equation-based approach would afford a better test the relationships asserted here. We plan to pursue this approach in future iterations of this paper.

In sum, Americans’ feelings toward those who support the other party are continuing their downward spiral, reaching new lows during the 2012 U.S. presidential election cycle. These negative emotions are not limited to political candidates or political elites, but spillover to perceptions of party supporters more generally. Most importantly, consumption of partisan media contributes significantly to this growing hostility. Although these effects could stem from either a tendency to seek party-affirming information or to avoid contact with the other side, prior scholarship suggests that the former is more likely than the later. These patterns represent
both risk and opportunity. The risk is that Americans will become increasing intolerant and unable to work with one another to solve important social and political problems. The opportunity is that we may be able to stem this growing divide, and perhaps even promote greater empathy for political opponents, if we can find ways to facilitate cross-cutting exposure.

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References


