

Pathways to Polarization: Social media's impact on Mass Polarization

By

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Abstract

Social media has changed the political communication structure by providing new social spaces of interaction and communication. On the one hand, these new communication spaces may provide the public with a more collaborative and egalitarian “networked” space of social interaction. On the other, people can also use these online communication spaces to reinforce their already existing viewpoints while avoiding challenging information. The latter, the filtering of likeminded information, has increasingly become a concern of the elites, the public and scholars alike as a possible reason for the current high level of polarization. Social media, however, complicates the filtering process, because people form online social network around non-political reasons, yet, offline events can inspire online exchange of political information. Suffice it to say that social media networks are not impervious to the spectacle of election campaigns. Moreover, the current research builds upon research on affective polarization and social identity. Since the 1960’s, research has suggested that ordinary citizens are not really that ideologically consistent. Instead, partisanship is more often related to values and psychological attachment to one group over others. Given this social identity perspective, the current study examines social media not simply as communication technology, but as an online extension of offline social networks rooted in social identity negotiations.

First the study examines how social identity activation through social media during the 2016 U.S. election campaign effects levels of affective polarization. Next the study explores how social group comparison through social media drives both affective and issue polarization. Finally, the study concludes by testing the relationship between affective and issue polarization.

The study’s results indicate that social media alone is not responsible for increases in levels of polarization, but instead, the visibility of the political identity of one’s social media

contacts drives polarization. Specifically, mediated social group comparison increases the level of affective polarization. In addition, social media contacts political visibility only drives increase in levels of affective polarization, but not issue polarization. However, further analysis, shows that the relationship between mediated social comparison and issue polarization was mediated by affective polarization. The study concludes with a discussion on the permanence of past social connections online theorizing that these connections are no longer best conceptualized as strong or weak ties, but rather as gray ties.

Chapter 1

Introduction

During his final State of the Union Address, President Barack Obama reflected on his eight years in office and took a moment to identify a particular frustration from his tenure. Obama expressed disappointment over his administration's inability to stem the growing tide of political polarization, calling it one of his "few regrets." "The rancor and suspicion between the parties has gotten worse instead of better," he said to describe the tone of partisan divide in the nation. And it's true; the disparity between Republicans and Democrats on political values grew to a record high during Obama's presidency (Pew, 2017). Under the new Trump administration this trend continues, as political polarization grows further still.

It is possible that polarization was inevitable, despite what Obama did as President. For approximately forty years, American politics has become increasingly divided along party lines, especially at the elite level, among elected representatives (Iyenger, Sood & Lelkes, 2012; Carmines, Ensley & Wagner, 2012). Studies show that the major American political parties, the Republicans and Democrats, have become more ideologically homogenous. Over time, Democrats have become more consistently liberal, while Republicans more consistently conservative. This ideological sorting via political parties consequently diminishes the presence and impact of conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans in Congress; projects a less coherent political common ground to the public; and instead maps political disagreement along a liberal – conservative spectrum. Furthermore, the ideological homogeneity of the political parties manifests in partisan policy preferences, party platforms, and roll call voting (Stonecash,

Brewer, and Mariani, 2003; Poole, Rosenthal and Koford 1991; McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal, 2006). In short, both parties have become more team-oriented in spite of the other political party.

While there is substantial evidence of elite polarization, the extent to which political polarization has extended among the public is less clear. Research indicates that there is at least nuanced polarization among the mass public (Baldassarri & Gelman, 2008). One line of thought contends that the public, like the political parties, has also become more ideological (Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008). The argument posits that polarization, like other political norms and ideas, diffuses in a top down manner from elites to the attentive members of the public, who then diffuse it to less attentive publics (Zaller, 1992; Entman, 2004). In the case of political polarization, scholars argue that the divide among political elite polarization makes ideological positions more visible and salient to the public, which better “cues” the public about where they should stand on various issues and policies, based on their political identification (Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008). On the other hand, some scholars argue that mass polarization has not increased, despite elite polarization (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope, 2005). They contend that the extent of division among the public is exaggerated and confined to the highly politically interested and active (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope, 2005). This line of reasoning draws on Converse’s (1964) seminal work that found the average American citizen does not hold consistent and organized ideological beliefs. Fiorina and colleagues (2005) argue that the public is still not very ideological and that research findings that support mass polarization are an artifact of the research methodology. That is, the use of voting records, election returns and approval ratings to measure mass polarization is flawed because the choices allotted to the public in these instances are constrained by polarization at the elite level.

Indeed, reconciling the dispute on the extent of mass polarization is difficult because the polarization phenomenon is generally difficult to study among the public. Elite polarization, however, is easier to operationalize. Almost all research on elite polarization measures polarization as the ideological distance between issue positions. Political elites are not only more knowledgeable about issues, but also have a systematized manner in which they indicate their positions (e.g., Congressional voting records, campaigns). The public, however, is less informed on political issues, and their systematic avenue to express their issue positions is constrained by political elites (e.g., the number and range of candidates to vote for). Additionally, while the public is often polled about issues, their responses are partially an artifact of the simple act of asking the question (Zaller, 1992). That is, many respondents of public opinion polling do not think about the issue or issues in question until asked, at which point they respond based on the most recent relevant information they can remember. Nevertheless, dismissing the notion that elite polarization has an effect on the public would be shortsighted.

In response to the dispute about mass polarization, scholars have extended their research to examine the emotional and social dimensions of polarization, referred to as affective polarization (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012; 2006). This line of work reconciles the problem of a non-ideological public by suggesting that partisan identification alone can spur negative emotions toward the other party, thereby polarizing the public (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012; Garrett, Gvirsman, Johnson, Tsifti, Neo & Dal, 2014; Lelkes, Sood & Iyengar, 2015; Mason 2016). These studies suggest that increases in mass polarization are not reflected in the public's issue positions but are instead rooted in negative evaluations of one another. That is, simply recognizing that someone else is a member or supporter of a different political party is enough to evoke negative sentiment. Furthermore, elite polarization, filtered through various media, can

exacerbate affective mass polarization (Garrett, Gvirsman, Johnson, Tsfat, Neo & Dal, 2014). Political elites' rhetoric, whether about political or apolitical issues, is often laced with "affective tags," which at the very least cue the public about how they should feel toward the other party, in addition to the issue at hand. For example, conservative abortion rhetoric evokes the sentiments that pro-choice advocates are cruel. Similarly, liberal gay marriage rhetoric suggests that anti-gay marriage advocates are hateful. People that receive this information may not be able to recall the details of abortion or gay marriage policies, but they do retain the notion that conservatives are "hateful" and liberals are "cruel." These emotions drive cleavages among the public that are not always reflected in surveys of the public's issue positions. Moreover, emotional responses like anger and enthusiasm are catalysts toward various forms of political participation (Valentino, Brader, Groenendyk, Gregorowicz, & Hutchings, 2011). And anger also increases the likelihood of partisan motivated reasoning (Weeks, 2015). All together, these studies indicate that further research on mass polarization should explore emotional and social polarization and their subsequent impact on democratic society.

Affective polarization research is rooted in social identity theory. Social identity theory posits that people have a need to see themselves positively, but in developing this positive distinctiveness, they compare their in-group and relevant out-groups in a manner that favors the in-group and subsequently disparages the out-group (Tajfel, 1969; Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Hogg, Terry, and White, 1995). Consequently, this subconscious reasoning often leads people to develop negative sentiments toward the out-group. Researchers argue that partisan identification is a social identity that follows the theory, producing negative affect toward members of different political parties. Relatedly, social categorization explains that in-groups have an archetype—essentially an individual, either real or idealized, that embodies the norms and values of a given

social identity. These archetypes serve as exemplars that manage expected behavior within the associated social groups. When evaluating the out-group, however, the reverse is true. The out-group archetype is perceived to embody all the negative stereotypes associated with a given social group.

A focus on group dynamics permeates social identity theory. Social groups have played a role in political perceptions and behavior for several decades at least (Tajfel, 1969; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Miller, Gurin, Gurin & Malanchuk, 1981). Scholars have highlighted the strength of psychological attachment citizens have with formal and informal groups. Groups have influence because people tend to think of them as wholes, and respond positively or negatively in that form (Campbell, Converse, Miller & Stokes, 1960). Groups become a reference point for formation of attitudes, and group norms and values influence decisions about behavior. Furthermore, Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes (1960) provide an explanation for the relationship of groups to political behavior. First, they argue an individual's higher identification with a group causes higher probability that people's behavior will distinguish them from non-group members. Second, as proximity between the group and the world of politics increases, the political distinctiveness of the group will increase. Third, as perception of proximity between the group and the world of politics becomes clearer, the susceptibility of the individual member to group influence in political affairs increases. Additionally, these aforementioned groups are embedded in an individual's social network. Even before social media, Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995) found that the characteristics of social networks could affect residents' political behavior, opinions and attitudes. Social media obviously provide a new forum for people to organize their social and political world, enhancing in many cases the impact of social identity on political behavior.

Building on these theoretical foundations, my dissertation aims to extend the research on affective polarization by examining social media use in the context of a presidential election. Social networks are not new, but the online extension of these networks has reorganized how people experience their social and political worlds. Expanding the size and heterogeneity of the average pre-digital network, social media extend the individual's view of the mass public and enhance the potential for social influence (Rojas, 2015). Social media provide an extensive interactive space for peer-to-peer interaction, leading some scholars to laud its democratizing potential (Benkler, 2006; Shirky, 2008). Most, if not all, social media, however, are not formed around political interests or preferences. Instead, social media form around existing offline contacts, making social media an online articulation of offline social networks (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). This begs the question: What happens when these spaces of social interaction are politicized?

Scholars have studied the impact of using social media for political discussion and engagement, and they have discovered digital engagement effects (Dahlgren, 2004, 2005; Benkler 2006). Indeed, a major benefit of social media engagement is the extension of weak ties, which allows for more diverse discussion options. Social media also expand the public's information channels, increasing the likelihood of exposure to diverse information. Conversely, research has also found that online interaction and social media can weaken social capital and community, increase levels of political polarization, and raise levels of elite-driven media (Hindman, 2009; Sunstein, 2007). Sunstein asserts that by limiting their information intake, citizens will engage only with niche groups of like-minded individuals, which consequently undermines the public conversation on which the strength of democratic society depends. Hence, selective exposure on social media may be facilitating a more polarized society that is

more intolerant of opposing views. Research findings on social media and democracy largely focus on the consequences of online interaction, but for many people, social media are simply another screen to watch passively. The average citizen rarely posts or engages. In the age of social media, those that craft messages, especially political ones, are engaging in a deliberative and self-reflective act that Pingree (2007) suggests could produce sender effects. Thus, it is important to make the distinction between passive and active online users.

The context for my current research is a general presidential election. My reason for examining affective polarization in this context is twofold. As discussed above, scholars argue that individuals' attitudes toward opposing political parties are increasing negative. Moreover, the social identification process becomes salient during moments of intense competition or contest between groups. Accordingly, partisan identification is more salient to people during election campaigns—a competitive contest with high stakes—when one party gains at the expense of the other's loss. U.S. Presidential elections generate the most public attention and involve expensive media campaigns, making the 2016 election ideal for studying the social identification processes entwined in elections. Because negative campaign advertising is associated with an increase in affective polarization (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012), I argue that the visibility of out-group archetypes increases on social media leading up to a general election. Moreover, these archetypes are more salient on social media networks than in personal networks, furthering facilitating an increase in affective polarization among the public.

In addition to heightening social identification, election campaigns flood previously apolitical spaces of communication with political information, which provides my second reason for studying the election context. Research indicates that ideological polarization at the elite level of politics provides the public with a more coherent picture of ideological differences

between the Democratic and Republican parties (Hetherington, 2001). A clearer distinction between the parties consequently exacerbates partisanship among the American public. A general election simultaneously captures the public's attention and increases the amount of information that clarifies ideological distinctions between the parties. The combined effect produces more polarizing messages that permeate public discourse more thoroughly than in non-election cycles.

Ample research indicates that mass opinion is largely shaped by elite discourse (Zaller, 1992; Zaller & Feldman, 1992). Elites cue the public through the media with suggestions about how political issues connect with citizens' prior beliefs. The intensity of elite discourse influences the likelihood the public will receive and accept their information. As for the public, their attentiveness to information and political values influence their ability to accept elite cues. Only a select few are politically sophisticated enough to grasp the issues and consistently understand elite suggestions. I highlight the Zaller model because Iyengar Sood and Lelke's (2012) findings show that partisan affect and policy attitudes are inconsistently related, and their study did not find that the relationship strengthens over time. This research indicates that elite cues are potentially equipped with affective tags that have differential effects from informational/policy tags. When elites employ affective tags, they suggest to the public a corresponding sentiment based on one's political identity, perhaps separate from or in addition to the logic of a political policy.

To examine these ideas, this dissertation is organized as follows. I begin by discussing social identity and categorization theories in light of emerging pressures on identity. I then turn to the polarization debate and affective polarization, exploring how information flows and social media may affect political polarization. Next I describe the data I collected during the 2016

presidential election to investigate my theories. Lastly, I test for polarization among partisan identifiers and among social media users, and then provide discussion and conclusions based on my results.

Chapter 2

Identity Formation

a. New pressures on Identity

A shift toward post modernization and post material values has had profound consequences for democratic institutions and the construction of civic and political identity (Inglehart, 1981, 1988, 1997; Norris, 1999; Bennett, 1998; Beck, 2006; Baym, 2010). A leading theme among these authors is that societies are reaching an era that has led to changes for how citizens situate themselves within their community, nation state, and the rest of the world. In the era of modernity and material values, individuals were organized around groups. The old group structures helped manage social interactions, economic opportunities, and mitigated risk and participation in civic affairs. The social groupings of individuals offered identity anchors, such as with one's union or church. In the current era, instead, trust and reliance on bureaucratic institutions has diminished and identities become more complex. Social institutions that dictated, indeed educated, the public about their civic roles have come into question (Schudson, 1998).

Inglehart (1998) examines cultural societal change that happened in the late 20th century, with important implications for how mass publics influence political and social life. He argues that culture, which he defines as popularly held norms and attitudes, influence the political and economic development of different societies. Inglehart contends that culture can shape economic behavior as well as be shaped by it. Thus, the cultural component has reciprocal effects. These norms and attitudes are likewise influenced by changes to the economy and social life. A society's culture can impact the functioning of democratic institutions. In his own words, "the central claim underlying both Modernization theory and Post Modernization theory: that

technological and economic changes tend to be linked with specific types of cultural, political, and social change” (p.11). Shifts within culture and the bureaucratic institutions characterize post-modern society:

1. Values shift: the modernist drive for economic achievement is now giving way to concerns over quality of life.
2. Institutional structure shift: postmodern society is reaching the limits of hierarchical bureaucratic organization. These institutions were instrumental for industrializing society by organizing and mobilizing masses of people. But these institutions are reaching their both their functional effectiveness (strict bureaucracy is good for organizing and mobilizing proven methods, but stifles innovation, hence can't move forward) and mass acceptability (in affluent societies, people prioritize self expression over economic effectiveness, thus people are less willing to accept human cost of bureaucracy and rigid social norms).
3. Groups left behind, or perceiving being left behind from material success.

As a result of these three shifts, Inglehart concludes that post materialist values lead to an erosion of institutional authority, and declining confidence in institutional hierarchy. Moreover, existential security is a major factor for the rise of postmodern values. Feeling secure about survival has lead to, in the political realm, declining respect for authority, and growing emphasis on self-expression and participation. People participate in more active and issue specific ways, while voter turnout is stagnant. In the economic realm, people are more concerned with subjective well being and quality of life concerns; and for many people, these concerns take priority over economic growth. In the social realm, sexual norms are shifting from norms that

manage family size, to greater individual choice in sexual behavior. Finally, in the realm of values and life goals, the dominance of meaning of life concerns trump instrumental rationality.

Giddens (1998) and Beck (2006) argue that the individuals are shaped and affected by these cultural changes and that *reflexivity*, that society and individuals self-reflect, becomes increasingly important in this process. Giddens' (2013) contemplates the role of identity amid large-scale structural change. He argues that changes occurring during "high modernity" have created new stresses on the individual that were not there in traditional times. Changes have led to distinctive connections between abstract systems and the self. In the past, roles and meaning for self-identity were defined by institutions, (e.g. jobs, church, family). Today, individuals are left to their own devices to negotiate identity. For Giddens, media is central in this social shift. "Against the backdrop of new forms of mediated experience," Giddens explains, "self identity becomes a reflexively organized endeavor (p. 5, 2013)." This all culminates with a rise of something Giddens' calls "life politics" which is concerned with positive choices the individual makes once disengaged from traditional limits. He stresses how both institutional level and individual level change are happening. For example, he argues the rise of divorce and conspicuous sexual behavior is linked to the decline in church (institutional level) and the increase in self-reflection (individual level) about appropriate behavior. In essence, life style choices, organized in a self-referential manner, serve as a base for identity.

For Beck, (2006) a heightened perception of risk increases the individualization of the public. He contends that this increased individualization is in fact a consequence of the institutions' failure to minimize risk for individuals. Traditional institutions such as the media, the political system, or the military, are increasingly seen as incapable of rationally minimizing risk, thus the public are unable to trust the very institutions they hope will prevent a plethora of

perceived risks. For example, in considering genetically modified foods, the responsibility for deciding whether these are harmful or not, seems to become increasingly an individual consumption decision. The information surrounding this issue appears as contradictory and people are left with having to make big decisions without trusting the institutions that should provide them with the information in the first place. This amplifies the problem, as science, media and government agencies are eventually perceived as part of the problem.

Norris (2011) argues that the notion of erosion of public support for democracies is sometimes overstated. She explains that scholars are conflating increasing dissatisfaction with performance and the public's expectations of government. Norris argues, that political support has not decreased in the sense of a political community, that is, an individual's personal and psychological attachment to their national identity. In addition, support for institutions varies, for example, public support for Congress and the President are often different. Which suggest a more nuanced judgment from citizens. So, if the public support is waning it would be because of a disparity between perceived democratic performance (process performance) and the public's increasing expectations (fueled by civic education). Norris suggests that media exacerbate this deficit with negative coverage of government.

In summary, this shift from modern to post-modern social arrangements has increased pressure on self-identity development. Since individuals' identity is increasingly less attached to social institutions of the past, the burden of establishing one's political role rests more on the individual. As result of these a new form of citizenship is emerging that focuses more on personal values and self-expression.

b. Social Identity Approach and Politics

Affective polarization research is often rooted in social identity theory to explain the mechanism driving someone's affective response toward co-partisans and opposing partisans. Social identity theory provides a framework for understanding an individual's self-concept based on their group memberships. The process of social identification involves social categorization into disparate groups followed by *social comparison* between these groups in order for people to define themselves as a member of one of these groups (Tajfel, 1978). When group membership becomes salient, individuals look to their in-group norms and values for suggestions on how to interpret and evaluate information and appropriate behavioral responses. In addition, the relevant out-groups are defined stereotypically and contingent upon the relationship between the in-group and out-group can lead to discrimination and social competition. Hence, this theory gives insight for why people distinguish and discriminate between groups.

The research on social identity argues that self-enhancement (i.e. positive distinctiveness) was a key motivation for the social identification process. That is, people have a need to see themselves positively (Hogg, Terry, and White, 1995). In developing this positive distinctiveness, people make comparisons between their in-group and relevant out-groups in a manner that favors the in-group. For example, an experiment by Tajfel showed that people favored in-group members over out-group members when distributing resources and rewards. The conclusion here is that people did this because their psychological attachment to the in-group gave them a sense of positive distinctiveness from the members of the out-group. To put it more concretely, I being a Hispanic might give extra attention to Hispanic students as their teacher because doing so will help my in-group (i.e. Hispanics) move toward more positive stereotypes. In addition, to positive distinctiveness, Brewer's (1991) notion of optimal distinctiveness suggested that people have a contradictory need for social inclusion and social

differentiation. Seeing that needs for social inclusion and differentiation can contrast and conflict with one another, Brewer concludes that there is an optimal balance that needs to be achieved to optimally satisfy both these needs. So, for example, excessive distinction may result in stigma, but excessive inclusion may result in losing the positive attributes of group belonging.

Reviewing the tenets of the social identity approach lays the basic framework for how individuals shift their perceptions from the self to the social. Research in political science and political communication has shown the role of social identity with regards to how people interpret, evaluate, and make sense of political information. In addition, researchers have also demonstrated the effect of group identification on political behavior. To quote Cramer (2004) “models of understanding generally agree that interpretation is fundamentally about categorization. Simply put to make sense of the world, people carve it up into manageable parts” (p. 3). Cramer argues that variation in interpretations of politics by members of different social groups is a product of people’s interaction with their social context, where their informal conversations help them clarify and update their social identity. Indeed, further research on social identification with different groups illustrates how people use social identity as device to make sense and interpret political information.

For Campbell and colleagues, groups are a major component of political attitudes and behaviors (Campbell, Converse, Miller and Donald, 1966). In their seminal work, *The American Voter*, Campbell and colleagues elucidated several ways identification has consequences for how people perceive politics (Campbell, et al., 1966). Moreover, they explain that groups serve as a reference point for people about the appropriate or expected beliefs, attitudes, and/or suggested behavior (social categorization) in response to political objects (e.g. issue policies, candidate preference). Campbell and colleagues argue that group membership is best understood as a

psychological attachment instead of an involuntarily imposed categories (e.g. gender, race) (Campbell, et al., 1966). Thus, the influence of groups can vary from union membership or political party to social groups stemming from race, gender, or income. Yet it is important to note that at any given time individuals belong to several different groups.

In Campbell and colleagues work, there are three important takeaways for understanding the role of groups in political behavior and influence (Campbell, et al., 1966). First, the greater the psychological identification an individual has with a group, the higher the probability that they will think and behave in ways which distinguish members of this group from non-members. Second, as the proximity between the group and the world of politics increases, the political distinctiveness of the group will increase. Lastly, as perception of proximity between the group and the world of politics becomes clearer, the susceptibility of the individual member to group influence in political affairs (i.e. political attitudes and behavior) increases.

Adding to the understanding of social groups and politics is Miller and colleagues' work on group consciousness (Miller, Gurin, Gurin and Malanchuk, 1981). In this work, Miller and colleagues draw a clear distinction between group consciousness and group identification (Miller, et al., 1981). These scholars define group identification as the perceived self-location within a particular social stratum, along with psychological feelings of belonging to that particular stratum. In contrast, group consciousness, involves identification with a group and a political awareness or ideology regarding the group's relative position in society along with a commitment to realize the group's aims. Moreover, the perception that the relative out-group has more influential power than the in-group promotes the development of group consciousness. In short, Miller argues that group identification is related to political participation only after the

group has reached group consciousness, blames the system for the groups low status, and accepts that collective action is the appropriate course of action.

The importance of this study is that it illustrates that participation is not simply a reflection of the social conditions that people experience. How people perceive and evaluate their position is an important link between the experience of certain social situations and political participation. If an individual's social identification is politicized with the development of group consciousness and assessments of social justice, then this serves as motivation for political action. Critical to this process is the shift from personal experience to a more collective perception of the in-group's relative position in society. In addition, beliefs that the groups' disadvantaged status is a product of systemic, rather than self-directed reason, also leads to political behavior. In sum, group consciousness provides an excellent framework to explain how groups interpret, make sense of, and mobilize to participate politically. This notion of consciousness is an important link for connecting the social identity approach with questions about the public's political attitudes, opinions, and behaviors.

Building on the link between social identity and politics provided by the group consciousness literature, Pamela Conover (1988) outlined a cognitive affective model of the role of social groups in political thinking, giving special attention to the formation of issue preferences. Conover explains why people think in the ways that we do about social groups once they've engaged in political thinking. She argues that past work rarely differentiated between the cognitive and affective mechanisms in group formation, or the possibility that both interact. In her model, however, she asserts that people have both cognitive (i.e. information) and affective (i.e. emotional) 'tags' that guide their reactions to thinking about other groups. In addition, people are purposive in their political thinking about other groups in order to evaluate their

relative social position in society. Ultimately, Conover concludes that the dominant purpose for social group political thinking revolves around evaluating which groups get what and whether they deserve it. Subsequently, social group political thinking judge's political issues based on perceptions of outcomes and notions of fairness.

A running theme in all of the research on the effect of social identity on the political world is the notion that social identification with both groups that are political in nature (i.e. partisanship affiliation) and groups that are not expressly political (e.g. Union membership, Church affiliation) manage to influence political attitudes and behaviors (Campbell et al, 1960). This begs the question as to why partisanship doesn't always dominate political attitudes and behavior. Indeed, partisanship (e.g. Republican, Democrat) is a social identity, but not as static as generic understandings of partisanship suggest. For one, Converse (1964) showed that most people do not have strong belief systems; that is, they do not think ideologically. A minority of people have fixed preferences and answer survey questions consistently, but most simply give answers. *Most people do not interpret politics through an ideological lens.* In addition, Converse argues the reasons policy issues become important to people are because of social identification with a relative group, and/or the issue is relevant to an individual's basic social and personal values. Based on the aforementioned literature, we know that people use social identity and social categorization as tools to interpret political information, like political issues. Hence, partisanship works in relation to other, possibly more dominant, social identities to effect political understanding. For example, social identification as a woman affects how people evaluate policy issues and the different political parties (Conover, 1984; 1988). Related research has shown that social identification along race lines can influence how individuals make sense of

political statements, more so than does the ideology of the speaker (Kuklinski and Hurley, 1994). These findings further illustrate the prominent role of social identity for politics.

c. Social Categorization Theory

While social identity theory is understood best as a theory of intergroup relationships, social categorization builds upon it to provide a theory of inter and intragroup relations. Social categorization theory is a dynamic process, determined by comparative relations within a given context. More specifically, social categorization theory elaborates upon the mechanisms that underlie social categorization (Turner, Oakes, Haslam and McGarty, 1994; Hogg, Terry, and White, 1995). That is, this theory argues that the self can be categorized at different levels of abstraction and each level of abstraction can function distinctly from the others. For example, my social categorization as a UW-Madison alumnus can function separately from my social categorization as a native of Louisiana. Both, however, when salient to me, can influence how I interpret information. In addition to abstraction, Turner contends that the perceived difference from a relevant out-group social category is accentuated by one's similarities with their in-group.

Social categorization theory gave more clarity to variations in social identity salience, social influence and collective action. With regards to social identity salience is product of an individual's accessibility (i.e. perceptual readiness) of a relevant social categorization and it's normative and comparative fit to the given social context. The accessibility of a social category depends on an individual's motives, values, expectations, as well as background knowledge and experience. Comparative fit indicates that a social category's salience increases the more an individual perceives greater distance in differences between their relevant in-group and relevant out-group. In addition, normative fit suggest that issue salience increases with comparative fit

and if what makes the in-group different points in the appropriate normative direction. That is, if the group differences are consistent with the positive normative standards of the in-group.

Furthermore, social categorization contends that people conform to social norms defined by their salient in-group categories in a given context. In addition, social categories tend to prototypical or archetypical members that embody the ideals and norms of the social category, according to Turner and Oakes (1986) the clarity and prominence the prototype influences people to match the prototype as best as they can. However, prototypical members are often the extreme of the norms and values of the relevant social category, thus, the more individuals align themselves with the prototypical member leads to polarization between groups.

Lastly, with regards to collective action, Turner (1985) explains that individuals depersonalize their personal experience in place of a more collective perception, which allows for collective action. He argues that “the adaptive function of social identity is to produce group behaviors and attitudes, it is the cognitive mechanism which makes group behavior possible” (Turner, 1985, p. 527). More specifically, the level and identity used to represent oneself in relationship to other varies greatly, with regards to one’s motives, values, and expectations in addition to the immediate social context in which social comparison takes place (Turner, 1985). The salience of shared social identity leads individuals to depersonalize their self-perception for a collective perception. Lastly, the depersonalization leads to collective group behaviors. In addition, this theory indicates that people have a store of group identities available to them at any given context.

In summary, social identity theory explains that the degree of psychological attachment to a group will alter someone’s behavior and thinking to align with that group. However, group identity is only political when a person is aware of the group’s social position with regards to

politics, i.e. group consciousness. Once people tap into group consciousness, both rational and emotional ‘tags’ guide their political thinking and evaluation of other groups. In addition, the perceived distance between one’s in-group and the out-group will trigger group identification, negative stereotypes of the out-group, and viewing political conflict through a collective rather than a personal lens.

Since individuals’ identity is less anchored to the social institutions of the past, the burden of establishing one’s political role rests more on the individual. Social identity theory provides a framework from which to gauge how people understand themselves with regards to the political world and situate themselves in political groups. A key catalyst to social identification is social comparison. That is, in order to trigger in-group versus out-group evaluations, individuals need to see representative members of either their in-group or out-group. This act leads to social group comparisons. By extension, social media provides a unique online platform that allows for this process to take place. Therefore, social media provides an avenue for mediated social group comparison.

Social identity theory is fruitful to explain why learning a social media contacts political preference may trigger affective polarization. According to social identity theory the degree of psychological attachment to a group may alter someone’s behavior and thinking to align with that group. In the context of this study, respondents that indicate strong partisanship will possess strong psychological attachment to their preferred party. However, group identity needs to become salient through a process of awareness of the group’s social position with regards to politics, i.e. group consciousness. Once people tap into group consciousness, both rational and emotional ‘tags’ guide their political thinking and evaluation of other groups. Again, in the context of this study, partisans should be most aware of their group’s social position and this is

would be especially salient during an election. The visibility of one's social media contact's political preferences has the potential to trigger social identity-based behavior.

Seeing people in one's social network reveal political preferences can foster affective polarization. That is, the political preferences of one's contacts can be concordant or discordant with one's own political preferences and trigger in-group versus out-group evaluations. For example, learning a social media contact holds opposing political preferences should, in theory, lead to more negative evaluations of said social media contact. On the other hand, if the social media contact has similar political preferences, in-group positive feelings may be triggered. Social groups tend to have prototypical or archetypical members that embody the ideals and norms of a social category, according to the clarity and prominence the prototype influences people to match the prototype as best as they can (Turner and Oakes, 1986). Therefore, like-minded social media contacts may help foster in-group favorability and out-group negativity.

Chapter 3

a. Issue Polarization

A 2014 report by the Pew Research Center indicated the American public is more polarized than any time before in the last two decades. In 1994, when the Pew began tracking political values the average gap between Republicans and Democrats was 15%, two decades later the gap had ballooned to 36 percent (Pew, 2014). It's worth noting that the partisan gap over political values is larger than the gap for ethnic or gender divides. Reports like this highlight what has become a major concern for academics, political elites and the public alike. The consequences of polarization impact every level of civil society. But what exactly do people mean when they say polarization? The term polarization has become a hot buzzword given the recent political climate. But to clarify, the phrase political polarization, in the simplest terms, refers to the ideological distance between partisans. This ideological gap can occur on any level of society, the state, the public and even the market. In the United States this has been expressed as Republicans having become more consistently conservative, while Democrats have become more consistently liberal. Political polarization in this manner is defined as the ideological distance between political partisans where co-partisans are more ideologically similar and opposing partisans are ideologically distinct (Hetherington, 2008; Levendusky, 2010; McCarty, Poole & Rosenthal, 2006).

It's important to note that while often conflated, partisanship and ideology are related, but distinct concepts. Ideology is the collection of ideas and beliefs that underlie political theories on policy and governing. For example, conservative ideology values limited government and a free market. Thus, one could guess that a conservative will be more likely to support deregulation of the markets; however, this isn't the case always, for example when discussing

illegal drugs. Partisanship, on the other hand, is more about the level of commitment an individual has towards a political party. Simply put, a political party's primary purpose is to organize and mobilize the party and supporters to win elections (Downs, 1957; Schumpeter, 1942). Therefore, higher levels of partisanship are associated with willingness to ensure the party stays in power. While these can and at moments do overlap with ideology, they are not one the same. Liberal Republicans and Conservative Democrats, are not an oxymoron; but in Congress, lately, they have indeed, become increasingly rare.

At the elite level of American politics, there is scholarly consensus that elected representatives have become increasingly divided along party lines (Iyenger, Sood & Lelkes, 2012; Carmines, Ensley & Wagner, 2012). The major American political parties, the Republicans and Democrats, have become more ideologically homogenous. This ideological shift has transformed American politics. Research on the consequences of an ideologically polarized Congress found at least five related trends (Layman, Carsey, & Horowitz, 2006). First, almost all political conflict and disputes aligns neatly on a liberal – conservative dimension. In the past, issues like civil rights issues, lead liberal Republicans and Southern Democrats to vote distinctly from their respective parties. Lately, this hasn't been the case, civil rights or racial issues predictably fall along a liberal – conservative spectrum. Second, ideological polarization by the political parties has reduced the presence and impact of conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans. In the past, these middle ground officials often helped to negotiate political compromises. Essentially, both parties have evacuated the ideological middle. Third, the average ideological position between Republicans and Democrats has widened, that is, the mean ideological distance between party members has increased over time. In the absence of political moderates, more extreme conservative and liberal positions are represented in Congress. One

example of this is the freedom caucus in the House of Representatives comprised of tea party Republicans. Fourth, Intra-party differences on issues have almost completely vanished. Lastly and consequently, the political parties project to the public a less coherent political common ground. Further evidence of ideological polarization among the parties is supported by the trends in their partisan policy preferences, party platforms, and roll call voting (Stonecash, Brewer, and Mariani, 2003; Poole, Rosenthal and Koford 1991; McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal, 2006).

Polarization, however, is not a new phenomenon. U.S history is rife with moments of intense political conflict. For example, in the past, Americans have been polarized over issues such as the establishment of a national bank, slavery, social welfare issues and civil rights, to name but a few (Layman, Carsey, & Horowitz, 2006). Political scientists, however, argue that the current increase in polarization is distinct (Layman, Carsey, Green, Herrera and Cooperman, 2010). Past research suggests that political cleavages between partisans usually revolve around one dominant policy issue (Carmines & Stimson, 1989; Schattschneider, 1960). Since the 60's, however, political parties have polarized around more than one issue. In political science research on the ideological party realignment, the conflict displacement theory postulates that when a crosscutting issue emerges that resonates with the public; it causes the political parties to polarize around said issue. The increased polarization triggers two processes for both the political parties and the mass public. First, the intense debate helps the parties to negotiate and clarify their position on the emerging issue. Second, the increase in political polarization signals to the mass public how the parties are restructuring and posturing on the new dominant policy issue. Once these processes are complete, the parties stabilize and polarization subsides (Layman & Carsey, 2002; Schattschneider, 1960). For example, the civil rights issue was a central policy

dimension fostering polarization between the political parties. Civil rights lead to intense polarization as the public and the political parties negotiated their positions.

In their seminal book, Carmines and Stimson (1989) provide a case study on how a dominant issue evolves through conflict displacement and restructures American Politics. Specifically, they argue that until the 1960's the dominant policy contention for the parties was social and economic welfare. Later that decade, however, political parties became increasingly polarized around issues of civil rights and subsequently – racial issues. This conflict displacement was a catalyst for white southerners leaving the Democratic Party, and, conversely, shifted African Americans toward the Democratic Party (Abramowitz, 1994). Later research, argues that by the 1970's the dominant policy dimension shifted toward moral and cultural concerns; such as issues like gay marriage and abortion (Adams, 1997; Layman, 2001). Party polarization around the cultural dimension, restructured the public into religious traditionalists and modernists. The traditionalists found a home within the Republican Party, while modernists in the Democratic Party (Layman & Green, 2006). Yet research indicates that the old policy dimensions are not always displaced by a new dominant policy issue (Layman & Carsey, 2002). While the mechanisms of this theory are fairly logical, they don't address another glaring issue from the 1960's – the Vietnam War.

Research about the most recent increase in polarization finds that the conflict displacement theory is insufficient. Present day political parties are not displacing past dominant issues but are instead systematically extending conflict to new issues (Layman, Carsey, and Horowitz 2006; Layman, Carsey, Green, Herrera and Cooperman, 2010). Therefore, American political parties are polarized on multiple policy dimensions, instead of a single dominant one (Layman, et al., 2010). Scholars find that political elites and the electorate are polarized on

cultural, racial, and civil rights issues, as well as economic and social welfare issues (Brewer & Stonecash, 2006). The rise in racial and cultural issues has not corresponded with a decline in issues of social welfare. Instead all three – social welfare, race and cultural issues – structure the parties policy agenda. In short, party conflicts are extended not displaced. In addition, this suggests that the “weight” of the recent spike in political polarization might be more consequential than the past episodes of polarization. The extension, rather than the displacement of major policy dimensions provides an explanation for the current high level of polarization.

While there is substantial evidence of elite polarization, less clear, is to what extent political polarization has extended among the public. Research indicates that there is at least nuanced polarization among the mass public (Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008). One line of thought contends that the public, like the political parties, have also become more ideological (Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008). The reasoning for this is that polarization, like other political norms and ideas, is diffused in a top down manner from elites to the attentive members of the public; who then diffuse it to less attentive publics (Iyengar, Peters & Kinder, 1982; Zaller, 1992; Entman, 2004). Therefore, the more attentive and partisan people are the more likely they reflect elite level polarization. In fact, Hetherington (2008) argues that elite polarization helps make ideological positions more visible and salient to the public; which better helps to “cue” the public about where they should stand on various issues and policies based on their political identification (Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008). Clarifying the different parties positions, he argues, has led to a resurgence of partisanship among the public.

Other scholars argue that mass polarization has not increased, despite the growing trend of elite polarization (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope, 2005). They argue that the extent of division among the public is exaggerated and confined to the highly politically interested and active

(Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope, 2005). This line of reasoning is rooted in Converse's (1964) seminal work that found little support for the notion that the average American citizen holds consistent beliefs over time, or an organized ideological belief system. Fiorina and colleagues argue that the public is still not very ideological and that research findings that support mass polarization are an artifact of the research methodologies employed (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope, 2005). That is, the use of voting records, election returns and approval ratings to measure mass polarization would be flawed, because the choices allotted to the public in these instances are constrained by polarization at the elite level. Moreover, Fiorina and colleagues argue that in many cases the majority of the public is rather moderate, but their choices are often reduced to either a liberal or conservative choice (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope, 2005). So for example, when a political moderate votes for senator, their choices are often between two ideologically polarized candidates, thus the political moderate is constrained to vote in one direction or the other.

Indeed, reconciling the dispute on the extent of mass polarization is difficult because the public is overall more difficult to research with regards to the polarization phenomenon. Almost all of the research on elite polarization measures polarization as the ideological distance between issues positions. Political elites are not only more knowledgeable about issues, but also have a systematized manner in which they indicate their positions (i.e. Congressional voting records, campaigns). The public, however, is less informed on political issues, and their systematic avenue to express their issue positions is constrained by political elites. In addition, while the public is often polled about issues, their response is partially an artifact of being asked the question at all (Zaller, 1992). And as already mentioned, most of the formal avenues of political participation are constrained by political elites. However, dismissing the notion that elite polarization has any effect on the public would probably be short sighted at best.

b. Affective Polarization

In response to the dispute about mass polarization, scholars have extended this research to examine the emotional and social dimension of polarization, i.e. affective polarization. Working under the logic of party identification and how people identifying as Republicans or Democrats shift their views on opposing partisans towards more negative evaluations, while remaining positive for co-partisans (Iyengar Sood and Lelkes 2012; 2006; Garrett, Gvirsman, Johnson, Tsftati, Neo & Dal, 2014). This line of work reconciles the problem of a non-ideological public by suggesting that partisan identification alone is sufficient to spur negative emotions toward the other party, hence polarizing the public, even when policy positions are not clearly understood (Iyengar, et al., 2012; Garrett, et al., 2014; Lelkes, Sood & Iyengar, 2015; Mason 2016). These studies indicate that increases in mass polarization are not reflected in the public's issue positions but are instead rooted in negative evaluations of one another. That is, simply recognizing that someone else is a member or supporter of a different political party from one's own is enough to evoke negative sentiment. Indeed, research often finds that partisans find members of their own political party significantly more favorable and those from their opposing political party less favorable, with the gap between these evaluations on the rise (Abramowitz, 2013; Iyengar, et al., 2012; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Garrett, et al., 2014; Lelkes, et al., 2015; Mason 2016).

In addition, elite polarization, filtered through various media, can exacerbate affective mass polarization (Garrett, Gvirsman, Johnson, Tsftati, Neo & Dal, 2014). Political elites' rhetoric, whether about political issues or not, is often laced with "affective tags," that at the very least cue the public about how they should feel toward the other party, let alone the issue at hand. For example, conservative abortion rhetoric evokes the sentiments that pro-choice advocates are

cruel acts of violence toward a defenseless innocent. Similarly, liberal gay marriage rhetoric suggests that anti-gay marriage advocates are hateful, backward thinking and possibly dangerous. The validity or lack thereof for each of these claims may be less important than the feelings they generate for those holding different positions. These emotions may help drive cleavages among the public that aren't always reflected in surveys of the public's issue positions. Moreover, emotional responses like anger and enthusiasm have been shown to be catalyst toward various forms of political participation (Valentino, Brader, Groenendyk, Gregorowicz, & Hutchings, 2011). In addition, anger increases the likelihood of partisan motivated reasoning (Weeks, 2015). Taken together, these studies suggest that beyond issue positions partisanship evokes negative emotions toward opposing partisans and positive affect toward their co-partisans that results in affective political polarization. Therefore, I pose my first hypothesis as follows:

H1: Partisans will exhibit strong differential evaluations of ingroup versus outgroups. That is, they will exhibit affective polarization during the 2016 Election.

Chapter 4

Digital Technology and Communication Patterns

a. Information flow and communication structures

Implied in any discussion about social media and political outcomes is an underlying theory of information exchange. Indeed, the flow of public affairs information between the governing institutions has been a central issue for American democracy since the beginning. The Founding Fathers understood that changes to the form and structure of information exchange are understood to influence the political intermediaries between the people and their government (e.g. elected officials, political parties, interest groups) in the United States. So much so, that during the development of the U.S. Constitution, the representatives were concerned whether a democratic government of such a large scale could adequately govern fairly over disparate publics from a remote, central position. In response, the *Federalist*, led by Alexander Hamilton, put forth what Bimber (2003) would later describe as a “latent” theory of information flow (p. 35). They argued that information reaching the central government will be mediated through the state government institutions’ channels of government, allowing for diverse information to reach the capitol and vice versa. The exchange of political information between the state and national governments is the resource that will hold the country together; that is, they need one another as information resources. In addition, for Hamilton, diverse information would allow for a broader scope and better reflexivity for the governing institutions. This story highlights the importance of communication structures for the transmission of healthy public affairs information.

Habermas’ public sphere theory (1991) provides a normative framework for understanding the quality of communication between the public and the state. The public sphere is a metaphorical “space” of interaction, where public opinion is expressed and public consensus

is procured through rational discussion. Within this space, all those governed have input, that is their observations, opinions, or arguments for government policies or government outcomes are expressed. For Habermas, the ideal public sphere allows for representativeness of all voices, and prioritizes quality arguments, reach through rational critical debate. Through the expression of these arguments, individuals reach a consensus, not a compromise, which forms the base of public opinion that in turn communicates the needs and ideas of civil society to the state. Lastly, this space of interaction, or public sphere, must be independent of government influence as well as market influence to allow for true will of the public to be expressed.

Concurrent with the shift toward post-modern values, major technological and social shifts have led some scholars to question the normative premise of the public sphere ideal, and no longer believe it a suitable metaphor (Papacharissi, 2010; Bennett 2007; Dalton 2008; Dahlgren, 2004, 2005). The Internet has contributed to the destabilization of the traditional political communication structure and created new interactional dimensions of the public sphere (Dahlgren, 2004). This fluid nature of information available online and the communication capabilities of mobile technology potentially affect the nature of public discourse, and subsequently affect functioning of democratic systems. Some scholars argue that the Internet expands the public sphere into a more collaborative and egalitarian “networked” public sphere (Rheingold, 2010; Benkler, 2006). More specifically, the new technologies of networked societies allow citizens access to diverse information rather than that produced by elites and elite institutions. Thus, these network structures allow more voices to be heard and facilitate greater engagement from citizens, thereby bolstering the public sphere and the quality of democratic life.

Conversely, some research finds that the new communication structure presents challenges for democratic society; these scholars find that digital media serve mainly to increase

knowledge gaps; reduce social capital and community; increase levels of political polarization; and even higher levels of communication concentration (Hindman, 2009; Sunstein, 2007). For one, simple access to information doesn't necessarily lead individuals to seek public interest information, or engage in rational discourse about the public good, people must be motivated toward these behaviors. In addition, the Internet is permeated by social inequalities similar to those existing offline. Specifically, people vary in their technical means to access information; their degree of autonomy when searching information, their level of Internet competency, their access to individuals with internet literacy, and the purposes for which they use the internet (Dimaggio, Hargittai, Celeste, & Shafer, 2004). This leads to potentially greater gaps in knowledge, in which usually those high in SES gain more and those low in SES stay low. Moreover, research shows that people use the Internet mainly to confirm their already existing viewpoints while avoiding information that would challenge these views (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Sunstein, 2007). Sunstein asserts that by limiting their information intake, citizens will engage only with niche groups of like-minded individuals, and consequently undermine the public conversation on which the good of democratic society depends. Hence, this selective exposure is possibly facilitating a more polarized society that is less tolerant of opposing views. However, some of these concerns of the turn of the century have been ameliorated, as evidence starts to suggest that maybe homogeneity and echo-chambers are not as extended as originally conceived.

Research comparing the broadcast media era with the digital media one further illustrates the changing patterns of media consumption and its subsequent consequences. In *Post Broadcast Democracy*, Prior (2008) argues that watching television news together was a common media consumption pattern in the broadcast era. People did this despite having varied levels of political interest, Prior argues, because there were fewer outlets for media entertainment. In short,

sometimes the news was the only thing on to watch on television. A benefit from this was that the general public had at least a baseline understanding of public affairs information from an outlet not tailored to their partisan beliefs and predispositions. In the digital era, however, with the increase in media choices, people uninterested in politics were able to avoid news information altogether. Consequently, Prior finds that in the digital era people no longer have the same baseline understandings of the news and public affairs information. Instead, knowledge levels are conditioned by political interest. That is, political interest leads to people being more informed than they were in the broadcast era, but those less interested were less informed.

In Prior's research, the effects of media fragmentation are moderated by political interest, reminding us that fragmentation is not a sufficient condition for increases in polarization. From a cognitive psychological perspective, personally relevant beliefs; beliefs related to someone's self-identity or personal interest, drive selective exposure (Stroud, 2008). In addition, further research indicates that information or communication experiences that evoke an emotional response can motivate selective exposure (Valentino, Stroud, 2010). That is, people are motivated to remedy cognitive affective discomfort; being exposed to information that evokes a negative emotion will drive people toward information that will sway or undo the impact of the original dissonance inducing stimulus.

Implicit in these discussions of the Internet's role in democratic society are normative claims about the role of citizens in the public conversation, or the public sphere. Recently, some scholars have engaged with this normative premise of public discourse, and argued that due to the social, economic, and technological changes, this public sphere ideal is in question (Bennett 2007; Dalton 2008). Going one step further, Papacharissi (2010) argues that new media transform democratic societies in a manner that makes the concept of the public sphere obsolete.

Specifically, she contends that Internet technology has altered the parameters of the public sphere, creating new “spaces,” which allow citizens to broadcast both private and public expressions from the locus of the private sphere. The ability to implement these behaviors provides citizens with increased control over their civic identity, while allowing them to freely express their opinions. The private sphere was once considered the realm of the personal and the domestic; and removed from the realm of the greater public good. Today, these two spheres are collapsing in part due to convergent media technology. Ultimately, these claims about the private sphere suggest that most discourse is now infused with individualistic impulses; or more directly suggest the increasing role of personal identities.

b. Social Media

The impact of social media cannot be understated. In a decade since its launch, Facebook is now the leading news source for adult Americans. Specifically, 62 percent get news on social media, with 49 percent saying they see news on social media whether they mean to or not (Pew, 2016). Facebook, Twitter and Reddit, are the top three websites people state they receive news from. But before delving further into social media research, it’s important to first offer a definition for social media. Social media are virtually constructed semi-publics that create communication channels between users. Boyd and Ellison (2007) define social media as, “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (p. 211, 2007).” Underlying this definition is the notion that social networking sites are communication enabled. That is, social media only has content if people communicate through this interactive space. If no one posted pictures, comments, then there would be nothing in the social media

space for people to like, comment, and, of course, to judge. This, however, was not always the case. The evolution of the first widespread social media until now charts a shift from information centric to egocentric (Boyd, 2010).

Early forms of social networking sites were centered on discussion topics. For example, Usenet, a social networking site in which the social glue that held the network together were messages, operated like a temporary bulletin board. Started in 1979, Usenet functioned similar to an online bulletin board. Users would start a topic and other users would join in to discuss the topic before the discussion was removed for space. Over time, however, the shift from information centric social to egocentric began with development of Friendster. Jonathan Abrams, the founder of Friendster, was inspired to create an online social space where people could transpose their identity onto the web. "The way people interacted online was either anonymous or through aliases or handles," said Abrams in *Inc.* magazine, "I wanted to bring that real-life context that you had offline online - so instead of Cyberdude307, I would be Jonathan. (Chafkin, 2007)." Before Friendster, online communication usually involved a screen name, which users only employed when interacting with that particular space. For example, a college football fan would visit a chat board or website dedicated to his favorite team; but the user's identity was bound by the social platform.

The shift toward a more people based social platform was not necessarily an executive decision; instead it was a byproduct of the tension between the users and pioneering social networking sites. It's important to note, scholars argue that the communicative preferences of the public and the development of these tools are no coincidence (Wells, 2015; Deuze, 2006). That is, technology is not neutral, innovators and early adopters of new technology negotiate the utility and necessity of new inventions. These negotiations are not immune to the dominant

cultural values of the time. For example, elaborating from Fred Turner's account of the development of digital media, we can infer that the net neutrality ethos common in today's digital culture is no accident. Indeed, Turner (2010) argues digital media was steeped in the communitarian values of the counterculture movement in and around San Francisco in the 1960s. This argument echoes Deuze (2006) who suggest humans and machines implicate one another, rather than one influencing the other. Friendster, ultimately failed for two primary reasons: (1) Lack of technology to support the exponential growth of Friendster and (2) because of increasing tension between the creators and the users (Boyd & Ellison, 2010).

In order to mirror offline social networks and to manage growth, Friendster engineers embedded constraints to prevent users from meeting strangers. Specifically, the platform engineers prevented users from connecting with users more than 4 degrees removed from them. Nevertheless, users found their way around these restrictions by creating fake accounts. Over time, users began seeing fake accounts as a kind of online trophy and actively tried to connect to fake accounts. In turn, the number of fake celebrity accounts proliferated on the social media platform. Friendster, unfortunately, lacked the hardware to support their rapid growth and responded with further restrictions and regulations. One particular demographic that clashed with Friendster over increasing regulations were indie music artists. Many had been kicked off for failing to meet proper profile regulations (Boyd & Ellison, 2010). In 2004 amid the increasingly contentious relationship between Friendster and users, MySpace launched with very little user restrictions and allowed users to add HTML to customize their page. MySpace reached out the bands to learn how to help; this would become a precedent for things to come as MySpace regularly released updates based on user feedback. These open, horizontal structure employed by MySpace would help set one of the earliest norms of social media use.

With regards to politics, social media adds a new dimension to the research on Internet and politics (Bode, 2014). Research has shown an impact of social media has on political expression, social and political organization and political socialization (Prior, 2007; Valenzuela, Park & Kee, 2009; Bode, 2012, Thorson & Wells, 2015; Barnidge, Macafee, Alvarez & Rojas, 2014). In fact, young Americans are showing the shift toward post materialist values (Inglehart, 1998, Bennett, 1998). Youth right now are some of the most competent online users in the world and according to research, online competency matters for participation. Bennett (2007) contends that younger generations have a weak sense of obligation to traditional participatory activities and are more likely to engage in “lifestyle politics such as political consumerism or community volunteering” (p. 6). He argues that younger generations show less trust toward traditional media and politicians, than the older generations who favor mainstream media and political elites to inform them on social and political issues. Instead, the primary political goals of younger generations are personal in nature, and their primary political activities are individualistic and interactive. Conversely, the participatory behaviors of older generations continue to be driven by institutions (e.g. political parties) that minimize the roll of the individuals and depersonalize the act of participation.

Past Internet studies often measured online expression as an extended form of interpersonal expression (Eveland, Hayes, Shah, and Kwak, 2005; Kenski & Stroud, 2006; Moy and Gastil, 2006; Bode, Vraga, Borah and Shah, 2014). Initial research on social media applied the same concepts and methods used to understand the political outcomes of political Internet use. Indeed, research on online political message, emailing stories and online donations have provided excellent insights on the impact of digital media (Eveland, Hayes, Shah, and Kwak, 2005; Shah, Cho, Eveland and Kwak, 2005; Shah, Cho, Nah, Gotlieb, Hwang, Lee, Scholl, & McLeod,

2007). But social media adds a new dimension to the online political experience, primarily when it comes to incidental exposure. Internet research before social media were littered with concerns that online communication spaces will lead people to reinforce already existing viewpoints while avoiding discordant information (Prior, 2007, Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Sunstein, 2007). Sunstein (2007), for example, asserted that by limiting information intake, people could only engage with groups of like-minded individuals, and consequently undermine the public conversation on which the good of democratic society depends. In addition, Hindman (2008) grounds his argument in gatekeeping theory, arguing that the gatekeeping mechanism has changed from a barrier on the production of political information to a barrier on the filtering of political information. He contends that the infrastructure of the Internet is key to understanding how information is filtered. One division is the technological aspect, which includes the actual machine and its workable parts. The other is the actual online mechanism that determines how information is located and identified on the Internet. The latter is more central to Hindman's point, as he argues that the system of linking to websites influence which websites receive the most traffic.

Rojas and Puig-i-Abril (2009) added social networking sites to the communication mediation model. Their purpose was to explore the relationship between Internet news use and forms of political expression on various sites such as blogs, social networking and online forums, coupled with also trying to mobilize their online social network for a political cause. Their study found support for online news use and online political expressions, Moreover, this expressive act subsequently leads to using social networking sites to mobilize people for a political cause, and the attempts to mobilize via social media lead the initial mobilizer to mobilizing themselves to offline political action.

Social media has impacted the variety and kinds of social organization possible for political ends (Shirky, 2008). Research indicates that social media has allowed for more rapid and fluid social organizations, such as the case with flash mobs (Rheingold, 2006); or during major political uprisings like the Arab Spring (Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveria, 2012; Meraz and Papacharissi, 2013). For example, during the Arab Spring, scholars charted how anti-Mubarak citizens were able to crowd source regular citizens into roles traditionally held by news elites (Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveria, 2012). Moreover, by using Twitter, networks elevated individuals that had little activism experience into roles where they were communicating with news elites about the circumstances in Egypt. A key takeaway here is that these networks are communication enabled. A review of the evolution of social media websites over time illustrates a shift from spaces where initially people with similar interests gathered, to spaces where simply people gather.

Social media, however, is unique in that the channels of communication are not only moderated by algorithms, but also by people. Often times, the online social network is not a way to meet new people, but more an online representation of one's offline network. Indeed, many of the connections occur between what Haythornthwaite, (2005) calls "latent ties," that is, people who have some form of offline connection that gets activated. Additionally, research also shows new online groups form mostly around lifestyles, hobbies, community, and political associations (Norris, 2002). Research also suggests that people using these networks to express their views on issues will also engage in emergent political participation behaviors (Puig-i-Abril & Rojas, 2007; Gil de Zúñiga, Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009; Gil de Zúñiga, Veenstra, Vraga, & Shah, 2010).

Bode and colleagues argue that social media political behavior is related, yet distinctive from offline political behavior (Bode, Vraga, Borah, and Shah, 2014). Moreover, they argue that

people are less able to engage in selective exposure. People often join social media for reasons other than politics. This leads to a network structure that is likely between a high ability for selective exposure and low media control. Subsequently, Bode et al. (2014) highlight the public element of social media political use. “Political SNS use involves a more public avowal of political leaning than other forms of political expression,” ... “alerting supporters and opponents alike of an individual’s position – unlike other forms of expression that may be more susceptible to selective exposure to like-minded discussion partners” (p. 418).” This is indeed maybe the key distinction for social media, especially during an election period.

Wells and Thorson (2015) establish the concept of curated flows to help researchers adapt to research on social media. “The framework of curated flows,” Wells and Thorson argue, “takes as its thesis that citizens now sit at the epicenter of multiple, intertwined content flows. Media effects are contingent on the makeup of any individual’s incoming (and outgoing information).” In addition, they describe different kinds of curation on political information – social, personal and strategic curation. The first, social curation, involves people who receive political information through incidental exposure. These people didn’t seek political information; however, their friends shared a news story or updated their status to make a political statement. Second, personal curation involves information seeking behaviors and their political outcomes. These individuals follow news websites or possibly share news stories; in short, these people are politically interested. Lastly, strategic curation involves how political actors use the new information channels to reach, persuade, or provoke target audiences, as well as journalists.

Research also suggests that structural changes due to digital media allow people to restructure their social position within their social network (Papacharissi, 2010; Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Rojas, 2015). In the pre-digital era, Wellman argued that personal communities

should be analyzed as networks of interaction. Finding that “neighborhood” as the unit of analysis was no longer the most relevant; he uses network analysis to examine the impact of large scale social systems on individuals. Traditional community studies (see Wellman, 1988) suggested near universal characteristics of interpersonal networks:

1. People have about 6 intimate relationships, and 12 active, but not intimate ones.
2. Interpersonal networks contain a mix of relatives and non-relatives.
3. People have on average 2 work related or neighborly intimate ties, but between 6 – 12 weaker ties with neighbors and co-workers.
4. Around half the members of the network are linked with one another.
5. Personal ties provide support for the private life and the larger social system.

Wellman’s shift from community-based analysis to socially networked communities served Rojas and colleagues to propose the notion of egocentric publics in the digital age (Rojas, 2015; Rojas, Barnidge & Puig-i-Abril, 2016; Rojas & Macafee, 2013). These egocentric publics are not representative of the general public but are instead formed by cumulative social interactions. These communication-enabled networks transcend traditional boundaries of Wellman’s (1989) personal networks. Rojas’ concept of online egocentric publics exists at the meso level and overcomes the distance between mass publics and small groups. For one, online egocentric publics are much larger in size, lower in density and more heterogeneous than personal networks.

While changes to the communication environment have led many scholars to theorize the central role of the individual in curating their information environment, social media, or more precisely computer algorithms, also condition one’s social media experience (Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic, 2015; Pariser, 2011; Thorson and Wells, 2017). These computer algorithms, a series of rules and calculations, often change and condition the flow of information on social

media in order to maximize one's experience. What this means for the flow of political information in these online spaces is still an open question. Indeed, researchers are still unsure of the extent that computer algorithms regulate the flow of information on social media. For one, exactly how the algorithms work is proprietary, and second, each social media platform implements a distinctive system. Research on Facebook, for example, suggests that the order in which users see social media posts can depend on how often the user opens said social media, how much they interact with certain friends, and how often users have clicked on links to certain websites in the past (Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic, 2015; Chowdhry, 2015). This suggests, that the Facebook algorithm privileges posts that a users' friend network has liked, shared and commented on (Chowdhry, 2015). But these social media posts can be anything from wedding ideas to an article against a politician.

With all this in mind, Bakshy, Messing and Adamic's (2015) work is notable because they examine the political heterogeneity of Facebook users' networks and the potential for exposure to diverse political posts. In context of their study, they conclude that individual social media curation, more than algorithms, limit exposure to crosscutting political posts on Facebook. Beyond its limitations, this study points to support the idea that individuals still have the potential to encounter cross cutting information on social media.

In summary, social, cultural and technological have changed the structure of information exchange. Consequently, people have new communication channels for political expression and to reflexively negotiate their political identity. In the digital environment, social organization has added an online component that is distinctive from the traditional offline component. Digitally enabled social networks are distinctive from pre-digital networks in that they tend to be larger, heterogeneous, unbounded by geography, and communication enabled. Taken together, theories

of identity and the new opportunities provided by social media should help explain current climates of political polarization. Taking together the research on social structure of social media, it is plausible that social media use will expose people to pockets of congruent and incongruent information that results in political polarization. Thus, I pose a second set of hypotheses as follows:

H2: Social media use leads to political polarization

H2a: Social media leads to affective polarization.

H2b: Social media leads to issue polarization.

However, based on social identity theory, it is also plausible that being exposed to congruent and incongruent information on social media is not enough for polarization to occur. According to this logic we would need an ingroup/outgroup cue in order for citizens to “build” political difference and become polarized based on divergent affiliations. Consequently, I pose the following set of hypotheses:

H3: Mediated social group comparison leads to political polarization

H3a: Mediated social group comparison leads to affective polarization

H3b: Mediated social group comparison leads to issue polarization

Finally, it is also likely that social media’s effect on issue polarization being based on group categorization rather than ideology, is not direct but rather indirect and operating through affective polarization. Thus, I pose the following research question:

RQ1: Will affective polarization mediate the effects of social media use on issue polarization?

To test my hypothesis and answer my research question I collected data right before the 2016 U.S. presidential election, as described below.

Chapter 5

Methods

Sample

This study is an analysis of cross-sectional survey data collected in 2016. The survey used a national sample with 689 total respondents. Respondents completed a 25-minute online questionnaire during the lead up to the 2016 U.S. presidential election, when opinions regarding candidates and political issues are most salient and the flow of political information is high (Sciarini & Kreisi, 2003). Respondents had to be U.S. citizens who were 18 and older. The data collection period began November 1, 2016 and ended on November 7 (the day before the 2016 Election Day). The sample was collected using quota sampling through Survey Sampling Inc. Participants received a small monetary compensation through SSI to complete the survey.

Variables

Demographics and control variables. The demographic variables considered in our analysis were gender, race, education and household income. Gender was measured with three categorical options, male, female and other. Just over half of the respondents were female (52%), indicating a relatively even split by gender compared to the 50.9% female in the U.S. 2010 census.

With regards to race, the 2010 census showed 74.8% of the population was white, in my sample most respondents (72.9%) were white, 15.4% were black and 9.5% Hispanic, compared to 13.6% black and 9.7% in the 2010 U.S. Census.

Education was measured with eight ordinal options, ranging from some high school to graduate or professional degree. The measure provided options for graduating high school, trade school, and college ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.70$). My sample was more educated than the general population with 97 % having at least a high school diploma, compared to 88% in the census. In my sample 25.2% had a Bachelor's degree compared to 33% in the census, and 9.5% had a Master's degree or above compared to 12% in the U.S. census.

Household income was measured by asking respondents to place their household income within nine ordinal income brackets, (e.g. 20,000 – 229,999; or 30,000 – 49,999). The lowest category was a income below 10,000 with the highest category being a household income exceeding 250,000 ($M = 4.83$, $SD = 1.79$). The household income average of the respondents was between 50,000 and 75,000, which is higher than it was in the 2010 census where the mean was 51,000.

Partisanship Strength. The partisanship strength variable was constructed by folding a seven-point scale that asked participants to describe their partisanship from Strong Republican to Strong Democrat ($M = 1.86$, $SD = 1.06$)

News attention. The news attention variable was created by adding together four survey items measured on six-point scales (0 = Never, 5 = Frequently) asking respondents how attentive they are to the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, CNN, and MSNBC ($M = 1.69$, $SD = 1.49$, $\alpha = .9$).

Election Information. The election interest variable consists of four items measured on a six-point scale ($M = 2.81$, $SD = 1.58$, $\alpha = .83$). The survey items asked respondents how well the following statements described their election interest: I pay attention to election information; I

like to stay informed about the election; I'm interested in election information; and I actively seek out information concerning the elections.

Offline Talk Variables. It is well established that talking about politics affects political attitudes (Chaffee & Mutz, 1988; Gamson, 1992; McLeod, Scheufele, and Moy, 1999; Mutz, 2006). Previous research has found that the distribution of preferences in a neighborhood is related to the extent to which people perceive whether they are in the minority or in the majority with regards to their own party and their presidential preferences, and this consequently affects the effort they give to resisting dissonant messages. In addition, this work shows that the partisan context can influence whom people believe their acquaintances are likely to support in an election, sometimes making incorrect assumptions. Finally, people perceiving themselves in the minority are more careful about who they discuss politics with. Given the glut of research indicating that political talk moderates the effects of political information, three key political talk variables were constructed from the survey: Political talk frequency, Political talk comfort, Political talk diversity.

Political Talk Frequency. The political talk frequency variable comprises five items measured on a six-point scale ($M = 2.81$, $SD = 1.58$, $\alpha = .83$). For the political talk frequency variable, survey items asked how often respondents discussed the presidential election, political issues, or politics in general with family; coworkers or classmates; neighbors; friends; or acquaintances.

Political Talk Comfort. The political talk comfort variable includes five items measured on a six-point scale ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 1.23$, $\alpha = .8$) For the talk comfort variable, survey items asked how comfortable respondents were discussing their opinions about the current election at

work; at a family dinner; among people that share their views; and among people with different views.

Political Talk Diversity. The political talk diversity variable consisted of three items measured on a six-point scale ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 1.23$, $\alpha = .83$). For the talk diversity variable, survey items asked how different from themselves were the people respondents talked to about politics with regards to education, age, and income.

Social media variables. Three key online social media use variables were constructed from the survey: Facebook use, political Facebook use, and mediated social group comparison. The Facebook use variable ($M = 2.91$, $SD = 1.28$, $\alpha = .92$) was measured by asking the frequency a respondent post videos and photos, read news articles posted by others, shared entertaining content or stories, saw posts about the Presidential election and read comments others posted about the election.

The Facebook political use variable ($M = 2.6$, $SD = 1.33$, $\alpha = .88$) was measured by asking the frequency a respondent encouraged others to get involved in social or political causes, commented on post about the election, read news articles posted by others, saw posts about the Presidential election and read comments others posted about the election.

Mediated Social group comparison. The mediated social group comparison includes four items measured on a six-point scale ($M = 2.05$, $SD = 1.55$, $\alpha = .91$). For this variable, survey items asked how often on social media do you first learn about someone's preference for presidential candidate, learned someone liked or followed a political candidate's social media, learned someone's political stance on political issues; and learned someone's political leaning (e.g. liberal, conservative).

Polarization variables. Building on previous research, three polarization variables were

constructed to measure three conceptualizations of affective polarization. The first, affective polarization, replicates the long used ANES thermometer scales that ask people to rate how favorable they feel toward distinctive groups. Respondents rated different groups on a thermometer scale ranging from 0 to 10, where 0 means the respondent feels “cold” toward the group, a score of 5 means the respondent either doesn’t know much about the group or doesn’t have positive or negative feelings towards them and a score of 10 implies the respondent has “warm” feelings toward the group. To construct the *favorability polarization variable*, I took the difference between favorability ratings toward democrats, republicans, conservatives, liberals, and democrat supporters and republican supporters ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 2.91$, $\alpha = .850$).

Trait Polarization: The next dimension of affective polarization we tested was trait polarization. Instead of asking about respondents to rate their favorability toward different groups, these questions ask respondents to indicate how well both negative and positive traits describe different groups (e.g. honest, hypocritical). I made two variables from these questions, with the first being *positive trait polarization*. This variable is comprised of four indicators asking people how well the traits honesty, patriotism, intelligence and open mindedness describe Republicans and Democrats on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means does not describe them well at all and 10 means 10 describes them very well. Next, I took the absolute value after subtracting how people felt about Republicans and Democrats for each respective positive trait. For example, I subtracted the ratings for honest Republicans from how honest they rated Democrats. Once I did this for all four positive traits, I took the mean of all four absolute values ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 2.72$, $\alpha = .89$).

The second dependent variable constructed for this dimension of affective polarization was for negative traits. This variable is comprised of three indicators asking people how well the

traits cruelty, hypocrisy and selfishness describe Republicans and Democrats on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means does not describe them well at all and 10 means 10 describes them very well. To make these variables I took the absolute value after subtracting how people felt about Republicans and democrats for these terms. For example, I subtracted the ratings of Republicans as cruel from the ratings of Democrats as cruel. Once I did this for all three negative traits, I took the mean of all three to construct the negative polarization trait variable ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 2.78$, $\alpha = .89$)

Issue Polarization variables. In addition to affective polarization, I also constructed an issue polarization variable in order to compare the results of the affective polarization models. Respondents were asked to rate whether immigration was more of a good thing or a bad, for this country. I folded this scale to make an issue polarization variable ($M = 1.91$, $SD = .83$).

Chapter 6

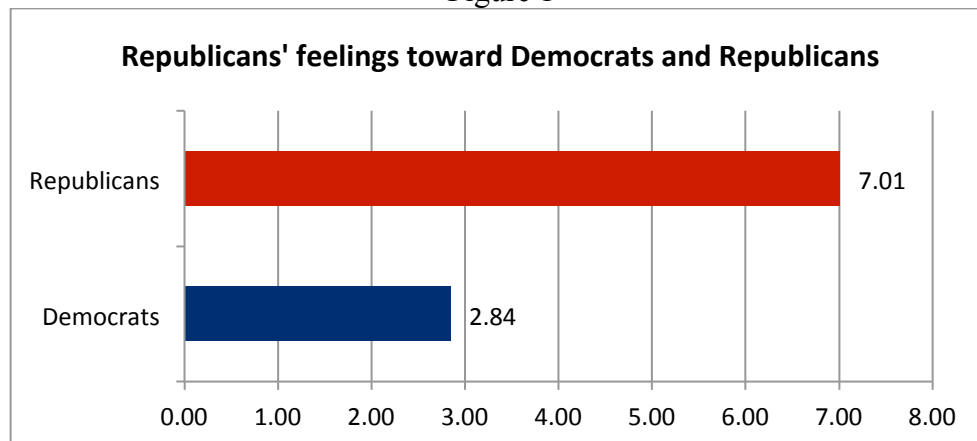
Results

To test my hypotheses and answer my research questions, I initially provide evidence of the different types of affective polarization. Then, using a series of ordinary least squares regression models, I consider the impact of our variables of interest on mediated social group comparison and then on affective polarization measured as a feeling thermometer gap, a positive traits gap, and a negative traits gap. I then consider whether issue extremity is affected directly and indirectly via affective polarization. Finally, I test whether the effect of mediated social group comparison happens by increasing affect for the ingroup, decreasing affect for the outgroup, or both.

Affective polarization

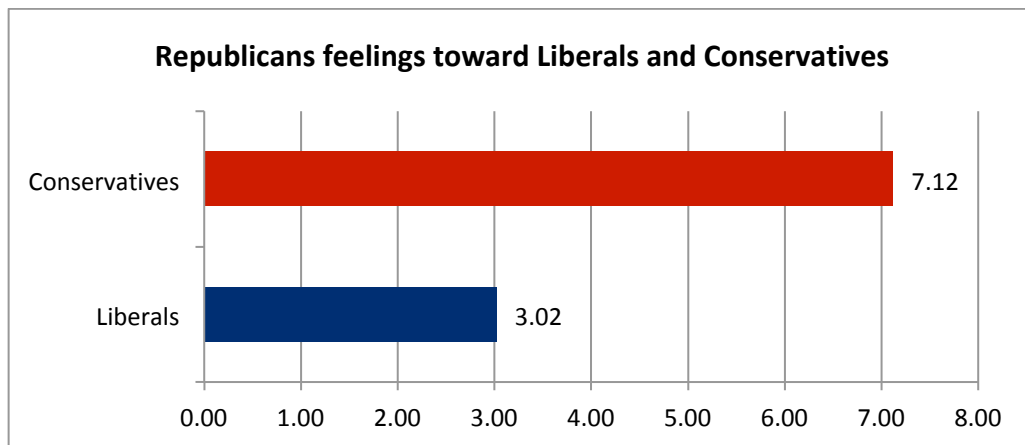
For Republican respondents (see Figure 1), there was a significant difference ($t(179) = -15.43, p = .000$) in their scores of warmth feelings towards Democrats ($M = 2.85, SD = 2.67$) and feelings toward Republicans ($M = 7.01, SD = 2.26$) conditions. These results indicate the presence of high levels of affective polarization. Specifically, these results suggest that Republicans' favorability ratings toward Democrats are uniquely different from their ratings toward those of their own party.

Figure 1



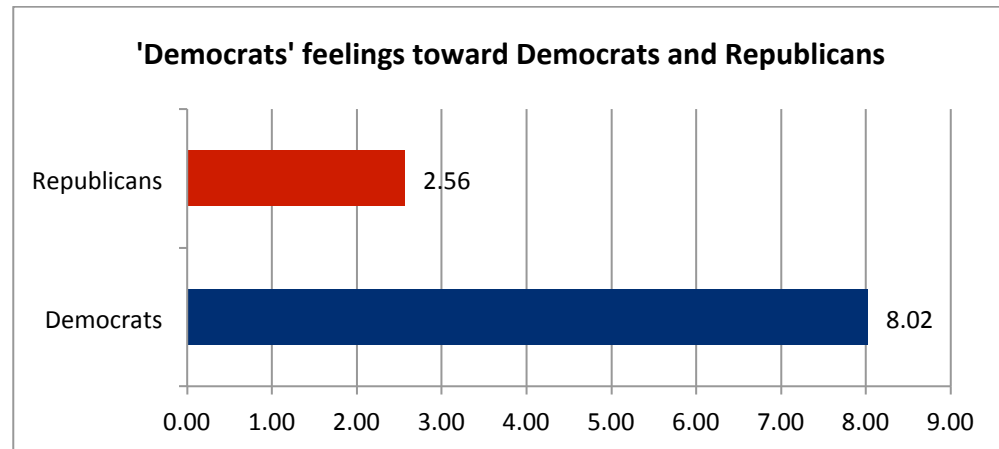
Furthermore, for Republican respondents (see Figure 2), there was a significant difference ($t(169) = -12.51, p = .000$) in their score feelings towards Liberals ($M = 3.02, SD = 2.92$) compared to their feelings toward Conservatives ($M = 7.12, SD = 2.25$). These results confirm the presence of affective polarization extending beyond partisanship to ideological characterizations. Specifically, these results suggest that Republicans' favorability ratings toward liberals are uniquely different from their ratings toward conservatives.

Figure 2



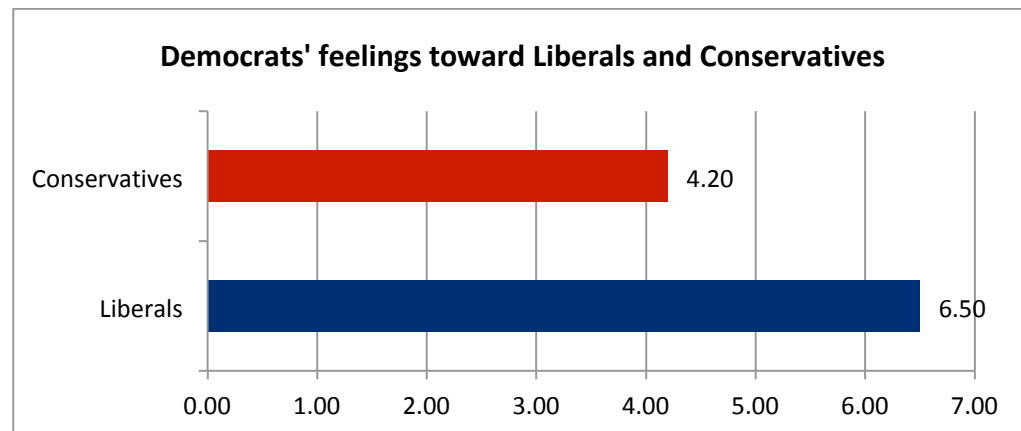
For Democrat respondents (see Figure 3), there was also a significant difference ($t(269) = 26.51, p = .000$) in their warmth feelings towards Democrats ($M = 8.03, SD = 1.95$) compared to their feelings toward Republicans ($M = 2.56, SD = 2.43$). These results confirm the presence of affective polarization and show that these happen on both sides of the political spectrum. Specifically, these results suggest that Democrats' favorability ratings toward Democrats are uniquely different from their ratings toward Republicans.

Figure 3



Similarly, for democrat respondents (see Figure 4), there was a significant difference ($t(265) = 9.02, p = .000$) in their feelings towards Liberals ($M = 6.5, SD = 2.46$) compared to their feelings toward Conservatives ($M = 4.21, SD = 2.84$). These results also suggest the presence of affective polarization, although not as pronounced as for the Republican Party. Specifically, these results suggest that Democrats' favorability ratings toward liberals are uniquely different from their ratings toward conservatives.

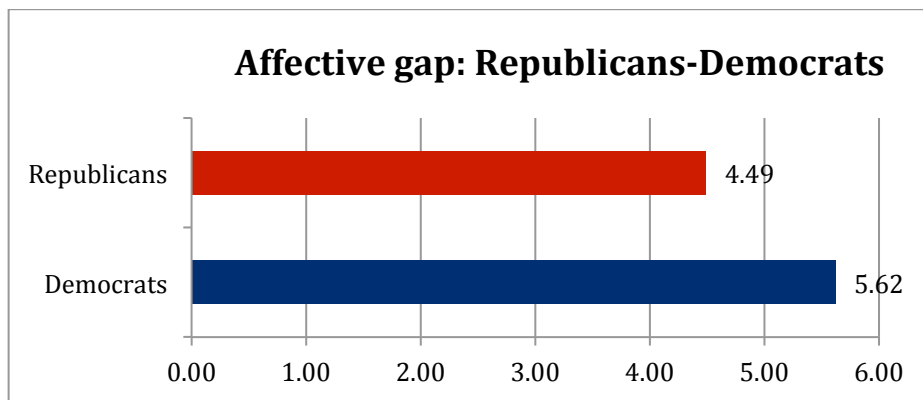
Figure 4



Overall, these findings support Hypothesis 1, according to which partisans would exhibit strong differential evaluations of in-group versus out-groups. That is, they are affectively polarized.

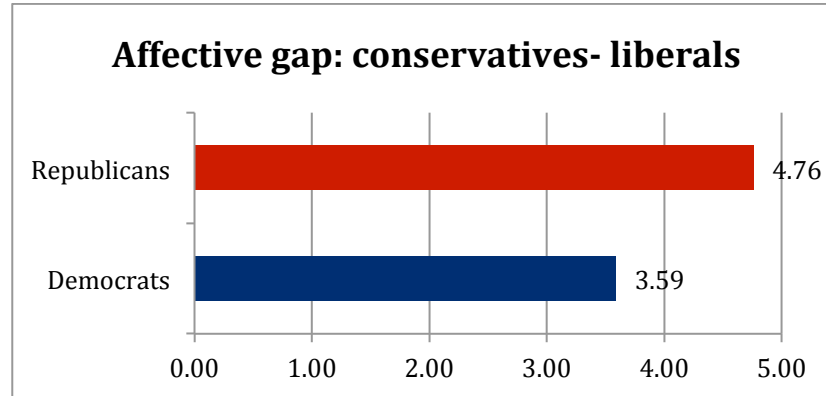
While not a formal research question proposed in this study, it is interesting to compare whether both political groups experience affective polarization at the same rate. To examine this, I ran an additional T test comparing the affective gap for Democrats ($M= 5.62$, $SD= 3.10$) and Republicans ($M= 4.49$, $SD= 3.19$). Results show (Figure 5) that the difference is statistically significant $t(448) = -3.72$, $p<.001$), so while both groups are affectively polarized, Democrats were more affectively polarized than Republicans in the context of the 2016 presidential election.

Figure 5



In addition, I ran an additional a T test comparing Democrats ($M=3.59$, $SD= 3.11$) and Republicans ($M= 4.76$, $SD= 3.52$) affective gap in their feelings toward liberals and conservatives. Results show (see Figure 6) that the difference is statistically significant $t(327.68) = 3.53$, $p<.001$). Again both groups are affectively polarized, but this time it's the Republicans that were even more affectively polarized than Democrats.

Figure 6



Mediated social group comparison

To understand who engages in mediated social group comparisons, I performed a series of OLS regressions that employ demographics, partisan strength, political interest, news consumption and political conversation as predictors of mediated social group comparisons.

Initial analyses (see Table 1), show that the amount of variance explained by the model is 47%. Some of the predictor variables, including news attention ($\beta=0.13$, $p \leq .01$) and election interest ($\beta=0.21$, $p \leq .001$), were significant, suggesting that respondents with higher attention to news and higher interest in the election are more likely to engage in mediated social comparison. The fact that partisanship strength is not significant is worth noting. This suggests that non-partisans are likely to encounter people on social media that share their political preferences. However, general Facebook use ($\beta=0.44$, $p \leq .001$) is strongly related with mediated social comparison.

Table 1. *Mediated Social Comparison and Facebook use*

	Block 1	Block 2	Block 3
Variable			
Sex	-.03	.06	.00
Race	.06	.02	.02
Education	.15**	.04	.05
Household Income	.12*	.00	-.01
Block 2			
Partisanship Strength		.03	.04
News		.29***	.13**
Election Interest		.35***	.21***
Block 3			
Talk Comfort Level			-.01
Talk Frequency			.08
Talk Diversity			-.03
FB use			.44***
R²			47%

Notes. Cell entries are standardized beta coefficients (Std. Beta) from ordinary least squares regression models. Model 1: N = 427. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

If instead of general Facebook use I employ the Facebook political use variable (see Table 2), the amount of variance explained by the model remains at 47%, but there are some changes in the model worth noting. News attention ($\beta=0.10$, $p \leq .05$) and election interest ($\beta=0.17$, $p \leq .001$), remain significant as well as using Facebook for political reasons ($\beta=0.49$, $p \leq .001$). However, political conversations that were not significant in the previous model become

significant and the relation is negative ($\beta = -0.04$, $p \leq .05$). Thus, people that talk less about politics directly seem to engage more in mediated social comparisons.

Table 2. *Mediated Social Comparison and FB political use*

	Block 1	Block 2	Block 3
Variable			
Sex	-.03	.06	.01
Race	.06	.02	.02
Education	.15**	.04	.05
Household Income	.12*	.00	-.01
Block 2			
Partisanship Strength		.03	.03
News		.29***	.10*
Election Interest		.35***	.17***
Block 3			
Talk Comfort Level			-.00
Talk Frequency			.05
Talk Diversity			-.04*
FB political use			.49***
R ²			47%

Notes. Cell entries are standardized beta coefficients (Std. Beta) from ordinary least squares regression models. Model 1: N = 427. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Social media and affective polarization

To test the effect of social media on our criterion variables, I performed a series of OLS regressions that control for demographics, partisan strength, political interest in the election, news attention and political conversation.

For party affective polarization (see Table 3), the amount of variance explained by the model was 29%. Some of the control variables, including sex ($\beta=0.09$, $p \leq .05$), partisanship strength ($\beta=0.46$, $p \leq .001$), and news attention ($\beta=-0.17$, $p \leq .01$), were significant, suggesting that stronger identification with a political party and more interest in the election leads to higher levels of affective polarization.

Table 3. *Affective Polarization and Social Media*

	Block 1	Block 2	Block 3	Block 4
Block 1				Std. Beta
Sex	.10*	.09*	.09*	.09*
Race	.03	.04	.04	.04
Education	-.02	-.07	-.06	-.07
Household Income	.11*	.05	.05	.05
Block 2				
Partisanship Strength		.46***	.46***	.46***
News		-.16**	-.16**	-.17**
Election Interest		.17***	.14**	.11#
Block 3				
Talk Comfort Level			.08	.08
Talk Frequency			-.01	-.02
Talk Diversity			.05	.05
FB use			.02	-.04

Block	
Mediated Group Comparison	.14**
R²	31%

Notes. Cell entries are standardized beta coefficients (Std. Beta) from ordinary least squares regression models. Model 1: N = 427. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

In addition, in this presidential election women were more prone to affective polarization than men. Conversely, attention to news served to reduce levels of affective polarization. In terms of our variables of interest, Facebook use is not related to affective political polarization, while mediated social group comparison was significantly related ($\beta=0.14$, $p \leq .01$). This indicates that the visibility of social media contacts preferred partisan group potentially increases levels of affective polarization.

If instead of Facebook general use I employ the Facebook political use variable (see Table 4) results don't change much. In this model the amount of variance explained by the model was 27%. Similar control variables, such as partisanship strength ($\beta=0.46$, $p \leq .001$); news attention ($\beta=-.17$, $p \leq .05$) and election interest ($\beta=.11$, $p \leq .05$). More importantly, the model shows no impact by Facebook political use, but again mediated social group comparison was significantly related ($\beta=0.14$, $p \leq .05$).

Table 4. *Affective Polarization and Political Social Media*

	Block 1	Block 2	Block 3	Block 4
Block 1	Std. Beta			
Sex	.10*	.09*	.09*	.09*
Race	.03	.04	.04	.04

Education	-.01	-.07	-.06	-.07
Household Income	.11*	.05	.05	.05
Block 2				
Partisanship Strength		.46***	.46***	.46***
News		-.15**	-.16**	-.17**
Election Interest		.17**	.14*	.11*
Block 3				
Talk Comfort Level			.08	.08
Talk Frequency			-.01	-.01
Talk Diversity			.05	.05
FB political use			.02	-.05
Block 4				
Mediated Group Comparison				.14*
R²				27%

Notes. Cell entries are standardized beta coefficients (Std. Beta) from ordinary least squares regression models. Model 1: N = 427. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

For positive trait polarization (Table 5), the amount of variance explained by the model was 13%. Among the control variables, partisanship strength ($\beta=0.31$, $p \leq .001$), news attention ($\beta=-0.17$, $p \leq .01$), were significant, suggesting that stronger identification with political party leads people to apply more positive traits toward members of their own party. In addition, attention to news reduces positive trait disparities. However, with respect to our variables of interest, neither the amount of Facebook use, nor mediated social group comparison were significantly related.

Table 5. *Affective Polarization Positive Traits and Social Media*

	Block 1	Block 2	Block 3	Block 4
Block 1				Std. Beta
Sex	.04	.03	.03	.03
Race	.02	.03	.04	.04
Education	.01	-.03	-.03	-.02
Household Income	.05	.01	-.00	-.00
Block 2				
Partisanship Strength		.31***	.32***	.31***
News		-.14**	-.16**	-.17**
Election Interest		.18**	.13*	.11
Block 3				
Talk Comfort Level			.08	.08
Talk Frequency			.00	-.00
Talk Diversity			.08	.09
FB use			.06	.03
Block 4				
Mediated Group Comparison				.07
R²				13%

Notes. Cell entries are standardized beta coefficients (Std. Beta) from ordinary least squares regression models. Model 1: N = 427. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

When using the Facebook political use variable instead (see Table 6), the amount of variance explained by the model was 13%. Similar control variables, partisanship strength ($\beta=0.31$, $p \leq .001$), news attention ($\beta=-0.17$, $p \leq .01$) were significant. These suggest that attention to news might reduce positive trait disparities; while partisanship strength could increase it. However, with respect to our variables of interest, again neither the Facebook use, nor mediated social group comparison were significantly related.

Table 6. *Affective Polarization Positive Traits and Political Social Media*

	Block 1	Block 2	Block 3	Block 4
Block 1				Std. Beta
Sex	.04	.03	.03	.03
Race	.02	.03	.04	.04
Education	.01	-.03	-.01	-.02
Household Income	.05	.01	-.00	-.00
Block 2				
Partisanship Strength		.31***	.31***	.31***
News		-.14**	-.16**	-.17**
Election Interest		.18**	.12*	.11
Block 3				
Talk Comfort Level			.08	.08
Talk Frequency			-.00	-.01
Talk Diversity			.08	.08
FB political use			.07	.03
Block 4				
Mediated Group Comparison				.07

R²	13%
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Notes. Cell entries are standardized beta coefficients (Std. Beta) from ordinary least squares regression models. Model 1: N = 427. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

For negative trait polarization (Table 7), the amount of variance explained by the model was 12%. Among the control variables, partisanship strength ($\beta=0.25$, $p \leq .001$), and election interest ($\beta=0.13$, $p \leq .05$), were significantly related, suggesting that stronger identification with political party and more interest in the election leads to people to associate more negative traits to members of the opposing party. In addition, talk diversity was related to more negative trait polarization ($\beta=.11$, $p \leq .05$). Conversely, attention to news ($\beta= -0.17$, $p \leq .01$) served to reduce applying negative traits toward members of the opposing party. Moreover, mediated social group comparison ($\beta= 0.11$, $p = .05$) is almost significant, which would suggest that exposure to social media contacts political preferences is related to more negative traits toward members of the opposing party.

Table 7. *Affective Polarization Negative Traits and Social Media*

	Block 1	Block 2	Block 3	Block 4
Block 1				Std. Beta
Sex	.05	.04	.04	.04
Race	.04	.05	.06	.05
Education	-.00	-.03	-.02	-.02
Household Income	.06	.02	.01	.01
Block2				
Partisanship Strength		.25***	.25***	.25***
News		-.15**	-.16**	-.17**
Election Interest		.17***	.15**	.13*
Talk Comfort Level			.04	.04
Talk Frequency			-.03	-.04
Talk Diversity			.11*	.11*
FB use			.05	-.00
Block 4				
Mediated Group				.11#

Comparison	
R²	12%

Notes. Cell entries are standardized beta coefficients (Std. Beta) from ordinary least squares regression models. Model 1: N = 427. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

When swapping general Facebook use for Facebook political use (see Table 8), the amount of variance explained by the model was 10%. Similar control variables, partisanship strength ($\beta=0.25$, $p \leq .001$), and election interest ($\beta=0.13$, $p \leq .05$), were significantly related. In addition, talk diversity was positively related to negative trait polarization ($\beta=.11$, $p \leq .05$). Conversely, attention to news ($\beta= -0.16$, $p \leq .01$) served to reduce applying negative traits toward members of the opposing party. Moreover, mediated social group comparison ($\beta= 0.13$, $p \leq .05$), this model better suggest that exposure to political preferences via social media is positively related increase to applying more negative traits toward members of the opposing party.

Table 8. *Affective Polarization Negative Traits and Political Social Media*

	Block 1	Block 2	Block 3	Block 4
Block 1				Std. Beta
Sex	.05	.04	.05	.04
Race	.04	.05	.05	.05
Education	-.00	-.03	-.02	-.02
Household Income	.06	.02	.01	.01
Block2				
Partisanship Strength		.25***	.25***	.25***
News		-.15**	-.15*	-.16**
Election Interest		.17***	.15*	.13*

Talk Comfort Level	.04	.04
Talk Frequency	-.03	-.04
Talk Diversity	.11*	.11*
FB Political Use	.03	-.03
Block 4		
Mediated Group Comparison		.13*
R²		10%

Notes. Cell entries are standardized beta coefficients (Std. Beta) from ordinary least squares regression models. Model 1: N = 427. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Turning my attention to issue polarization by examining the immigration issue (Table 9), the amount of variance explained was 7%. Among the control variables, only election interest ($\beta=0.20$, $p \leq .001$), was significant, suggesting those more interested in the election were also more extreme in their views toward immigration. In addition, talk diversity is related to less issue extremity ($\beta=-.14$, $p \leq .001$) indicating that people who to talk to less like-minded people about the election have less extreme views about immigration. With respect to our variables of interest neither contributed to issue extremity.

Table 9. *Issue Polarization and Social Media Use*

	Block 1	Block 2	Block 3	Block 4
Block 1				Std. Beta
Sex	.00	.03	.01	.02
Race	-.08	-.09	-.10#	-.10#
Education	.03	-.01	-.01	-.01

Household Income	-.05	-.09	-.07	-.07
Block2				
Partisanship Strength		.07	.07	.07
News		.02	.02	.03
Election Interest		.17**	.19**	.20**
Talk Comfort Level			.05	.05
Talk Frequency			-.05	-.05
Talk Diversity			-.14**	-.14**
FB Use			.00	.02
Block 4				
Mediated Group Comparison				-.04
R²				7%

Notes. Cell entries are standardized beta coefficients (Std. Beta) from ordinary least squares regression models. Model 1: N = 427. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

In addition to conceptualizing issue polarization as extremity, I also ran the model using a different conceptualization of issue extremity. Now as the gap between the mean response on the issue and a respondent's answer (Table 10), the amount of variance explained was 3%. Among the control variables, race ($\beta = -.11$, $p \leq .05$) and election interest ($\beta = 0.17$, $p \leq .01$), were significant, suggesting being a minority was related to greater distance from the population mean for the issue of immigration. Conversely, election interest was related to less distance from the population mean on the issue of immigration. In addition, talk diversity was related to greater distance from the population mean for the issue of immigration ($\beta = -.12$, $p \leq .05$) indicating that

people who to talk to diverse people was related to greater distance from the population mean for the issue of immigration. With respect to our variables of interest neither contributed to a gap from the population mean.

Table 10. *Issue Polarization and Social Media*

	Block 1	Block 2	Block 3	Block 4
Block 1				Std. Beta
Sex	-.00	.01	-.00	-.00
Race	-.11*	-.11*	-.12*	-.11*
Education	-.04	-.06	-.05	-.05
Household Income	-.05	-.07	-.05	-.06
Block 2				
Partisanship Strength		.06	.05	.06
News		-.04	-.05	-.04
Election Interest		.15**	.16*	.17**
Talk Comfort Level			.07	.07
Talk Frequency			-.07	-.06
Talk Diversity			-.12*	-.12*
FB Political Use			.02	.05
Block 4				
Mediated Group Comparison				-.06
R²				3%

Notes. Cell entries are standardized beta coefficients (Std. Beta) from ordinary least squares regression models. Model 1: N = 427. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

These results so far offer no support for hypotheses two, according to which social media use would lead to a) affective political polarization; and, b) issue polarization. In all the tests of affective polarization and the tests of issue polarization, general Facebook or political use were not significantly related to polarization.

With respect to hypotheses three, that stated that mediated group comparisons would lead to political polarization, we have mixed results. In four out of six tests the variable of interest is positively and significantly associated with affective polarization (hypothesis 3a), yet with respect to issue polarization (hypothesis 3b) results are not statistically significant.

To test whether social media might influence issue polarization indirectly through affective polarization, and answer research question 1, I included affective polarization into the model as an antecedent of issue polarization. In this new model of issue polarization (Table 11), the amount of variance explained was 6%. Among our control variables, election interest, ($\beta=0.18$, $p \leq .01$), was significant. In addition, we see that talk diversity continues to be significant ($\beta=-.15$, $p \leq .01$). Finally, Facebook use and mediated social group comparison did not lead to more issue extremity, yet affective polarization, ($\beta=-.12$, $p \leq .05$), is related to issue polarization. This suggests that while mediated social group comparison does not directly influence issue polarization, it may contribute indirectly through increased affective polarization

Table 11. *Issue Polarization, affective polarization and Social Media*

	Block 1	Block 2	Block 3	Block 4
Block 1				Std. Beta
Sex	.03	.05	.03	.02
Race	-.05	-.06	-.07	-.08
Education	.04	.00	-.01	.00
Household Income	-.06	-.10	-.08	-.09

Block2			
Partisanship Strength	.08	.08	.03
News	.03	.03	.06
Election Interest	.16**	.19**	.18**
Talk Comfort Level		.04	.03
Talk Frequency		-.05	-.05
Talk Diversity		-.14**	-.15**
FB Use		.02	.05
Block 4			
Mediated Group Comparison			-.07
Affective Polarization			.12*
R²			6%

Notes. Cell entries are standardized beta coefficients (Std. Beta) from ordinary least squares regression models. Model 1: N = 392. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

If instead of general Facebook use, I employ political Facebook use to predict issue extremity (see Table 12), the amount of variance explained by the model is 4%. Among the control variables, race ($\beta = -.10$, $p \leq .05$) and election interest ($\beta = 0.16$, $p \leq .05$), were significant, suggesting being a minority was related to issue polarization. Election interest was related to polarization. In addition, talk diversity was related to less issue polarization ($\beta = -.12$, $p \leq .05$) indicating that people who to talk to diverse people are less polarized on the issue of immigration. With respect to our variables of interest neither contributed. However, again the model shows that affective polarization is related ($\beta = .14$, $p \leq .05$).

Table 12. *Issue Polarization, affective polarization and Political Social Media*

	Block 1	Block 2	Block 3	Block 4
Block 1				Std. Beta
Sex	.01	.01	.00	-.01
Race	-.09	-.09	-.10	-.10*
Education	-.03	-.05	-.06	-.04
Household Income	-.06	-.09	-.07	-.08
Block2				
Partisanship Strength		.07	.06	.01
News		-.04	-.04	-.04
Election Interest		.15*	.17*	.16*
Talk Comfort Level			.06	.05
Talk Frequency			-.06	-.06
Talk Diversity			-.12*	-.12*
FB Political Use			.02	.06
Block 4				
Mediated Group Comparison				.09
Affective Polarization				.14*
R²				4%

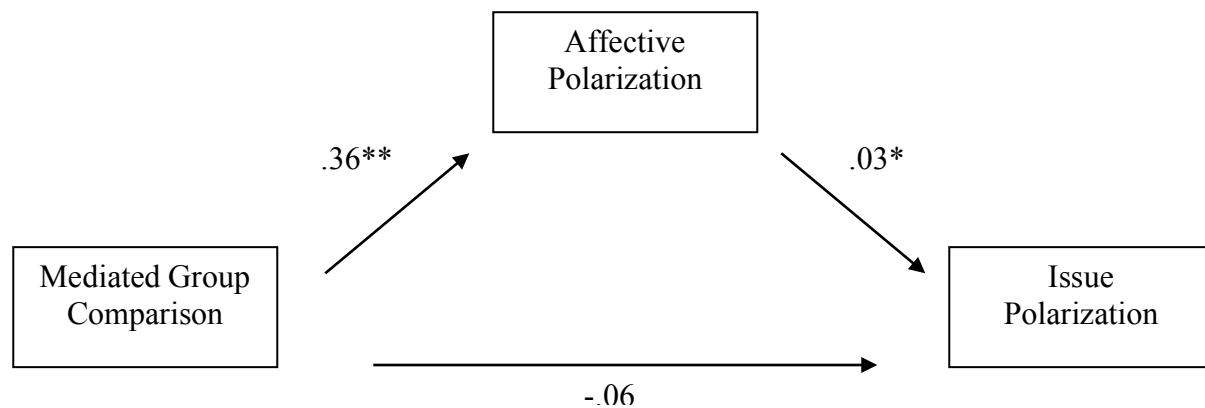
Notes. Cell entries are standardized beta coefficients (Std. Beta) from ordinary least squares regression models. Model 1: N = 392. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

To test if the relationship between mediated social group comparison and issue polarization being mediated by affective polarization I conducted a formal mediations test. As Figure 7 illustrates, the standardized regression coefficient between mediated social group

comparison and affective polarization was statistically significant. The standardized indirect effect was $(.36)(.03) = .01$. I tested the significance of this indirect effect using bootstrapping procedures. Unstandardized indirect effects were computed for each of 10,000 bootstrapped samples, and the 95% confidence interval was computed by determining the indirect effects at the 2.5th and 97.5th percentiles. The bootstrapped unstandardized indirect effect was .01, and the 95% confidence interval ranged from .001, .03. Thus, the indirect effect was statistically significant.

Figure 7

Model with affective polarization as a mediator of the relationship between social media and issue polarization



Note: $p < .05^*$, $p < .01^{**}$, $p < .001^{***}$ $n = 392$.

Additional analyses

Our tests on positive versus negative traits did not offer much clarity in terms of whether affective polarization as a result of mediated group comparison happens because of increased liking of the ingroup or disliking of the outgroup. Only one of the 4 tests was significant, suggesting that people who engage in the mediated group comparison attribute more negative traits to the out-group. In order to shed additional light on this issue, I decomposed the favorability gap, and instead use the model to predict ingroup and outgroup favorability.

For partisan in-group favorability (see Table 13), the amount of variance explained by the model was 35%. Some of the control variables, including sex ($\beta=0.10$, $p \leq .05$), partisanship strength ($\beta=0.41$, $p \leq .001$), news attention ($\beta=0.24$, $p \leq .01$), were significant, suggesting that stronger identification with a political party and attention to news is related to partisan in-group favorability.

In addition, how comfortable one was to talking about politics ($\beta=0.11$, $p \leq .05$) and talking to diverse people about politics ($\beta=0.13$, $p \leq .01$) was related to higher levels of in-group favorability. For the variables of interest, Facebook political use is not related to in-group favorability, but mediated social group comparison was significantly related ($\beta=0.04$, $p \leq .01$). This indicates that social media political revelations increase in-group favorability.

Table 13. *Partisan In-group favorability and Social Media*

	Block 1	Block 2	Block 3	Block 4
Block 1				Std. Beta
Sex	.04	.10*	.10*	.10*
Race	.07	.05	.06	.05
Education	.05	.05	-.03	-.04
Household Income	.14	.07	.05	.05
Block 2				

Partisanship Strength	.41***	.41***	.41***
News	.28***	.25***	.24***
Election Interest	.07	-.03	-.05
Block 3			
Talk Comfort Level		.11*	.11*
Talk Frequency		.02	.01
Talk Diversity		.12**	.13**
FB political use		.09	.03
Block 4			
Mediated Group Comparison			.04*
R²			35%

Notes. Cell entries are standardized beta coefficients (Std. Beta) from ordinary least squares regression models. Model 1: N = 335. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

For partisan out-group favorability (see Table 14), the amount of variance explained by the model was 12%. Some of the control variables, including partisanship strength ($\beta = -0.16$, $p \leq .05$), and election interest ($\beta = -0.17$, $p \leq .05$), were significant, suggesting that stronger identification with a political party and interest in the election were negatively related to partisan out-group favorability. Conversely, news attention ($\beta = 0.26$, $p \leq .001$) was related to higher levels of out-group favorability. In addition, comfort with talking about politics ($\beta = -0.16$, $p \leq .01$) was related to lower levels of out-group favorability. For the variables of interest, both Facebook political use and mediated social group comparison were not related to out-group favorability.

Table 14. *Partisan Out-Group favorability and Social Media*

	Block 1	Block 2	Block 3	Block 4
Block 1				Std. Beta

Sex	-.12*	.08*	-.09	-.09
Race	-.05	-.08	-.08	-.08
Education	.12*	.08	.07	.07
Household Income	-.02	-.03	-.02	-.02
Block 2				
Partisanship Strength		-.16**	-.16**	-.16**
News		.30***	.25***	.26***
Election Interest		-.19**	-.18**	-.17*
Block 3				
Talk Comfort Level			-.16**	-.16**
Talk Frequency			.06	.06
Talk Diversity			-.05	-.05
FB political use			.08	.11
Block 4				
Mediated Group Comparison				-.07
R²				12%

Notes. Cell entries are standardized beta coefficients (Std. Beta) from ordinary least squares regression models. Model 1: N = 335. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

In sum, there is some evidence here that the favorability gap is explained by positive feelings towards the ingroup, rather than negative feelings towards the out-group.

Chapter 7

Discussion

Overall, my findings show that partisans display a strong differential evaluation of political in-groups versus out-groups; that is, they are affectively polarized. This difference is expressed both in terms of party affiliation and ideology and while prevalent in both political parties in the United States, it was more pronounced among Democrats in the context of the 2016 presidential election. News consumption served to reduce levels of affective polarization, while general Facebook use was not related to affective or issue polarization. However, mediated social group comparison does contribute to affective polarization and negative trait differentiation of party ingroups versus outgroups. Moreover, while not a direct relation, mediated social group comparison leads to issue polarization indirectly via the affective polarization route.

The results of this dissertation illustrate a two-step process of a cognitive/affective process to polarization. In the first step, a social cue triggers political identity. In the context of this study, a Presidential election heightens the perception that one party will win and the other will lose; thus, making political identity salient. This competitive environment and salient political identity reinforces group identity when social media contacts express their political preferences leading to increased levels of affective polarization. The second step, involves how people respond to either the threat of the “other” party or the visibility of their own party. In this

case, the results indicated that affective polarization results in increased issue polarization. To sum up, learning others' political preferences trigger's partisan identity.

According to group consciousness theory, people feel threatened by the revelation that someone in their social network is *against* their group. This process serves as a catalyst for increased affective polarization. Secondly, once experiencing an adverse emotional reaction, in this case feeling threatened, to protect one's own group, people more actively support issues along partisan lines. On the other hand, exposure to social media contacts whose political preferences are congruent with one's own political leanings will theoretically evoke consideration of the "other" political party.

These results complement research that argues mass polarization among the public is more likely to take the form of affective polarization (Iyengar, et al., 2012). Indeed, even if people are not so ideological when it comes to thinking about political parties, their ingroup attachment to them is enough to strengthen partisan polarization (Lane, 1959; Converse, 1964; Iyengar, et al., 2012). Furthermore, affective polarization can be a gateway to becoming concerned about political issues and adopting a partisan line with respect to them. Nevertheless, I have to be cautious about extending my results on the role of social media in polarization. It may be that the findings reported in this dissertation were conditioned by the context and timing of the survey questionnaire. Future studies should replicated this study in a non-electoral context in order to test if mediated social group comparison would result in political polarization across party lines. The influx of partisan political information during a presidential election campaign floods social media spaces with political information increasing the probability that people will be exposed to their social media contacts political preference. This was likely the case for social media feeds in November 2016.

A key point in my findings is that social media use per se was not related to polarization, both general use and political use. Certain studies that find social media do not lead to polarization may be focusing more on the media and less on the social interactive component (Boxell, Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2017). The variable that increased polarization was mediated social group comparison. Meaning that the ability to be exposed to peers and their political views, whether similar or different, can trigger social group comparison and result in affective polarization. This finding undermines technological deterministic understandings of social media and politics. That is, the social media platform alone doesn't increase polarization, but social media creates a new social space that allows people to engage in social comparison.

Moreover, the results of this dissertation beg the question? Exactly what is the relationship between the social media contacts that know each other well enough to connect digitally, yet exposure to their political preferences can trigger affective polarization. A plausible explanation is that these relationships exist in the continuum between strong and weak ties. Granovetter's (1973) account of the distinction between strong and weak ties, where strong ties are characterized by higher degrees of time investment, emotional intensity, and support reciprocity (e.g. best friends, family, and spouses) and weak ties, on the other hand, are social relations that are less multi-dimensional (e.g. a job associate), suggests that strong ties tend to form enclaves while weak times can bind different primary groups together.

According to Granovetter (1973) the strength of weak ties, is that they help bind individuals to a larger over all community, creating more channels for diverse information to flow. Now the problem with weak times is that they can easily dissipate. Take for example, a college friend one has lost touch with, in the past, the relationship would fade and one would probably never hear or see that person again. On social media, however, unless one purposely

curates the social network, that tie remains connected. I think of these ties, as “gray” ties, because they do connect you to your primary social group, but they remain ever present as a latent connection. Social media allows for the permanence to past social ties. This dissertation suggests that these gray ties continue to have importance in identity building processes, and my future program of research will seek to better understand other political consequences of gray ties beyond their ability to exacerbate affective polarization.

The results of the study also suggest that in-group affiliations precede our understanding of political issues. In this context, affective polarization preceded issue polarization, suggesting that once political identity is made salient and in-group considerations take hold, people tend to reinforce the issues owned by their respective party. For all the complaints about bias in news media, it would seem that people are prone to operate based on bias. That is, information is only as good as it supports their in-group goals.

Contributions to polarization research

This dissertation suggests that social media can increase affective polarization by triggering social identity processes. Social media may serve as a catalyst for dimensions of affective polarization to manifest. Specifically, social media allows a space for what I’ve labeled mediated social group comparison and this online comparison influenced favorability ratings. Social media lead partisan identifiers to rate opposing partisans less favorable, while rating co-partisans more favorable. As for social distance, social media lead people to apply more negative traits to opposing partisans, than to apply positive traits to co-partisans. Social identity is salience enabled, meaning that the more salient people’s political preferences are, the more likely their political behavior will be in consideration to their political identity. My results contribute to understanding the contours of affective political polarization and how it may matter

for issue polarization, while reminding us about the importance of social processes in interpreting

Contributions to Network Studies

The results of this dissertation support research on both offline and online social networks. Through the basic tenets of the social categorization theory, the people that reveal their political preferences online are likely to serve as exemplars for the “other” political party or as paragons of the in-group. The research on egocentric publics, conceptualized as communication-enabled networks that transcend traditional boundaries of personal networks, situates people within their social context (Rojas, 2015). Applying the egocentric framework to political polarization, recent work shows that engaging one’s egocentric public online actually results in decreased issue polarization (Wojcieszak & Rojas, 2011), yet an increased perception of polarization (Yang, et al., 2016).

Rojas and colleagues (Rojas, 2015; Rojas, Barnidge & Puig-i-Abril, 2016; Rojas & Macafee, 2013) have posited that online social media, increases the public’s exposure to diverse political information, and in doing so tends to provide extreme or biased exemplars of the political “other”. Citing exemplification theory, Rojas explains how readily available examples become anchor points for making judgments. Since these examples are usually extreme, people develop perceptions of increased levels of polarization. My work in this dissertation advances this line of reasoning, showing that it is not only about being exposed to extreme informational exemplars, but also about “seeing” the political preferences of our contacts and how, eventually, via affective polarization issue polarization may arise.

Contributions to selective and incidental exposure research

Selective exposure, the idea that one selects information and communication encounters based on political predispositions (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 1944) has been studied with renewed interest in the Internet era (Sunstein, 2001; Prior, 2007; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Stroud, 2010). The controversy over social media, and its potential filter bubbles versus a more heterogeneous online information encounters seems to be settling around an understanding of a preference for homogenous information under constrained choice but increasing exposure to divergent views due to incidental and socially curated content. The results of this study support the notion that despite propensity for selective exposure, outside the laboratory people are unable to completely filter out divergent political information (Dubois & Blank, 2018). Instead socially relevant “grey” ties provide cues that make political identity salient and can contribute to ingroup-outgroup thinking, at least in the context of a presidential election. These findings seem more in line with polarization due to exposure to difference, than possible polarization as a consequence of filtering out difference

Limitations of this study

Before discussing some additional implications of this work, there are certain limitations in this study that are worth noting. First, the methodology used employs survey data, which included self-reports of social media behavior. Scholars have argued that attention to the actual social media feed is better predictor than self-reports (Edgerly, Thorson & Wells, 2018). Future research should attempt to capture mediated social comparison using the social media attention questions as well as employing non-survey study instruments.

In addition, it’s plausible that the findings of this study are unique to this specific election cycle. All election cycles are not equal; each has different personalities involved with varied

backgrounds that hope to mobilize enough of the public to win office. In this particular election, anti-establishment candidates, on the right, Donald Trump, and on the left, Bernie Sanders, made the 2016 election somewhat unique. More acute conflicts between candidates, even within the same party, might have increased the salience of political identity. Future research needs to establish whether in non-election cycles, or in less contested cycles, an awareness of our contacts political preferences is visible through social media and if under those conditions it continues to lead to affective polarization. It's also necessary to consider other peculiarities of this election cycle including the Russian interference with the election that sought precisely to exacerbate partisan animosity and Facebook's meek attempts to protect users from fake news and propaganda. While both issues are ongoing, and new revelations being made every day, it's nevertheless possible that our results are quite unique.

Finally, the indicator I created, i.e. mediated social group comparison, as a core variable needs further development. I asked how often on social media did people first learn about someone's preference for presidential candidate, learned that someone liked or followed a political candidate's social media, learned someone's political stance on political issues; or learned someone's political leaning. These items, while highly internally consistent, need to be explored more systematically in terms of concept explication.

Finally, while the path model suggests that mediated social comparison can drive affective polarization and indirectly issue polarization; it's worth noting that the causal relationship could possibly work in other directions. Being that the data is cross sectional, a panel study would help tease out the causal order better than the path model presented. But beyond that, it's important to note that social media posts and polarization cooccur naturally. People who are polarized politically are more likely to have social media contacts that would

make posts that publicly display their political preferences. In fact, at least from what is known about Facebook's algorithm, partisan Facebook users could "like" their social media contacts political posts more often; therefore increasing the propensity political posts made by people in their social media appear in their newsfeed. Finally, concerns over a political issue may very well drive this path analysis in reverse. Passion for a political issue, for example abortion or immigration, often generates emotional responses.

Possible explanations and future research

The results presented in this dissertation may be the outcome of different processes:

1. Blame the party. Either you blame the party for corrupting an old friend. Or you dislike the person and you ascribe the negative feelings for the person to the political party.

Considering the different pathways to learning someone's political orientations through social media may provide clues for the increase in affective polarization that I have outlined. One way to learn someone's political preferences on social media is to visit their social media page. Many social media include about me sections and people sometimes express political opinions in these sections. This is an active way of learning others' political preference. Alternatively, if members of your social network are posting, liking, or commenting about political information, you might incidentally come to learn about preferences that you otherwise would not know.

When one learns that a social media contact prefers a party that one dislikes, it's possible that people transfer more negative feelings to the opposing political party in order to avoid having negative feelings directed towards a friend. However, these negative feelings can also be transferred to the party if the social media contact is someone you don't like very much. For

example, if someone you don't like is frequently posting political information in support of the opposing party, this might be seen as obnoxious, and people may transfer these negative feelings not only to the person in their social media network, but also to the opposing political party. In addition, this person may become a negative stereotype of the disliked political party.

2. Dissonance reduction.

Another possible explanation for my findings might be that learning someone's political preference in one's own social media network can generate dissonance. For some social media networks, like Facebook, people connected online have usually met in person before forming an online connection. Prior offline experience occurs in a variety of social contexts, which can have nothing to do with politics or public affairs. In these offline non-political contexts, people can develop positive impressions, or to put it more directly – you consider this person a friend. Thus, learning that this friend supports, or not, Donald Trump's border wall is harder to dismiss or overlook. It's easier to dismiss the political other when you have no prior experience with them. This is especially true; when in many cases these relations did not form around politics. But someone posting a strong political opinion may generate dissonance and in the process of reducing this discomfort strong political expressions may trigger defensiveness that results in polarization.

3. Heightened threat to political identity increases levels of polarization.

Coming back to Tajfel and Turner's (1979) theory of intergroup conflict, the more intense intergroup conflict is, the more likely members of opposing groups will behave towards each other as a function of group membership, instead of by their individual characteristics. Learning someone's political preferences via social media may trigger this social identity process in a way that preserves group identity to the group that they already favored. As stated, social media exemplars of the political "other" tend to be extreme or an unflattering stereotype of group members. Exposure to these exemplars, likely heightens the perception of threat to one's in-group.

Future research needs to test these three mechanisms to understand which one, or what combinations of them are at work in my results.

4. Social media contact serves as an exemplar of the ideal archetype of the in-group

Explanations 1-3 are all premised on the assumption that a user's social media contacts have different political preferences. However, looking at the results, I found that mediated social group comparison is related to an increase for in-group favorability. Social groups tend to have prototypical or archetypical members that embody the ideals and norms of a social category, according to the clarity and prominence the prototype influences people to match the prototype as best as they can (Turner and Oakes, 1986). It's also likely, that exposure to different political preferences could increase support for one's own political group.

Conclusion

Does social media drive polarization? Many, both within academia and outside academia, have turned to social media as a scapegoat for increases in political polarization (Pariser, 2011, El Bermawy, 2016). But blaming the media for social problems is not new. In, fact, recent large-scale studies on polarization argue that social media and the Internet are not really culpable for

the increase in polarization (Boxell, Gentzkow, & Shapiro, 2016). That is, they find that gains in polarization occur similarly among populations that don't use online media as those that do. And in a way, this makes sense. While social media has changed the way people encounter information, the factors that serve as catalyst for polarization continue to impact how people make sense of politics. For example, elections are still moments of high competition between groups that evoke social identity. In addition, social media, like all media, is as much a reflection of public opinion as well as a shaping force of public opinion. This isn't to say that people aren't susceptible to distortions or untruths, but more that said distortions and untruths must relate to something that could be possible. For example, Donald Trump's supporters are likely to dismiss claims against the President, as partisan attempts to invalidate the Trump Presidency. So, Trump's claim that attacks against him are simply "fake news" is effective because for parts of the public the media is perceived as having a liberal bias to begin with.

In this dissertation I argue that discussions of polarization as simply "polarization" are not specific enough. Affective, issue or perceived polarization can be related to differing factors (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Iyengar, et al., 2012; Boxell, et al., 2016; Beam, Hutchens, & Hmielowski, 2018), in different contexts, and with differential effects depending on the facet of media that is explored. Ultimately, we have to be very careful about blanket statements on new media and political polarization.

But what's exactly at stake if the public is affectively polarized? Scholars and theorists alike have noted that communicating with peers is a basic building block of participatory and deliberative democracy (Habermas, 1984; Dewey, 1922; Carey, 2008; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995). Talking about politics is one of the core foundations for public opinion and its democratic potential. Empirical studies support this normative perspective of political talk and have found

that effect of news consumption on political behavior is heavily mediated by political talk (McLeod, Kosicki & McLeod, 1994). Underlying these studies of political talk is the notion of deliberative talk, where logic and careful consideration of options are prioritized. In the context of social media, this might not always be the case, but undoubtedly social media presents an everyday life platform in which problems can be articulated, and identities consolidated. While social media use per se may not result in the tolerance of opposing views, bolstering a democratic society (Sullivan and Transue, 1999; Sullivan, Pierson and Marcus, 1993), it sets a stage in which this can be achieved. It might be inevitable that people have negative feelings toward certain groups of people, yet a democratic society requires that we must still support their rights (Nelson, Clawson and Oxley, 1997; Hartman & Weber, 2009). Under certain conditions the social context created by social media amplifies the potential for negative feels toward members of the opposing political party. Hence overall, potentially decreasing how much tolerance they have toward does opposing political parties.

The basic question at the heart of this dissertation is a foundational question of all political communication research, which is, how do changes in flows of information influence the public, policy makers, and the news media. Naturally, innovations in communication technology change the nature of information flows. As such, researchers subsequently examine how these changes in the information channels influence the organization of political interests, collective action and the impact on political engagement, to name a few. For example, Bimber (2003) argues that the advent of the penny press and the U.S. post office helped society develop more coherent political identities. Likewise, similar claims, supported by research, surround the impact of radio, television, the Internet and now social media. Nevertheless, to conclude that the media technology alone is responsible for the changes in political culture is intellectually lazy

and absolves the public of their shared responsibility. Moreover, it perpetuates old hypodermic needle theories of mass communication, which argued that people were uniformly vulnerable to media effects.

On October 30, 1938, CBS aired a narrative reading of *War of Worlds* on the radio. For dramatic effect, the show began interrupting the regularly scheduled Sunday radio show with news bulletins describing an alien invasion. The realistic nature of the news bulletins, as the story goes, lead some people to panic and leave their homes for safety. While others, either knew it was a show or changed the station to double check another source. The *War of Worlds* radio panic is marked by many pioneers of mass communication research as the moment the research moved past the hypodermic needle theory of mass communication. It appears, however, that the public has not completely followed suit. Almost 100 years later, school shootings; seem to resuscitate discussions over violent video games effects. Likewise, Rap, Rock n Roll music and Pornography have all been found guilty in the court of public for having harmful effects on the public. Yet time and time again, research does not support these claims. In similar fashion social media has been shown to increase levels of depression, anxiety, loneliness and several other negative social impacts (De Choudhury, Counts and Horvitz, 2013). While these correlations are important, the public discussions surrounding these kinds of findings often employ pure technological determinism. But as illustrated in this dissertation, the media is only part of the explanation. Indeed, for all the grief Facebook has taken after the 2016 election over interference, it appears people are more than capable of doing their own damage to one another.

With that in mind, I turn to the question – does social media drive political polarization? And to that the answer is strictly no, but ultimately it is a contributing factor. What I mean is that to lay the cause of polarization strictly on the social media technology overlooks important

political factors, such as elite polarization and the public's inclination for creating in-group/ out-group differentiation; both of which were prevalent in society before social media. As such, in this dissertation, using social media is a key variable in affective polarization, but social media use alone does not drive this effect. That is, social media only drives polarization when social media users are able to compare and contrast their in-group with the out-group. This is key distinction that shows that technology alone is not responsible, but the social interactions between people through the technology are. How we shape these interactions in the future will also shape the future of democracy.

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Appendix A: Survey Questionnaire

Networked Community

Network Size¹

Thinking about the people with whom you discussed the news or talked about politics in the last 3 months:

How many family members have you talked to about these issues?

How many coworkers or classmates?

How many neighbors?

How many friends?

How many acquaintances?

Strong-tie & weak tie discussion frequency.

How often have you talked about politics or public affairs with the following:

	not at all				very frequently	
	0	1	2	3	4	5
family	0	1	2	3	4	5
friends	0	1	2	3	4	5
co-workers	0	1	2	3	4	5
classmates	0	1	2	3	4	5
acquaintances	0	1	2	3	4	5

Network Heterogeneity

Thinking about these people with whom you talk about politics, and using a scale where 0 means *very similar* and 5 means *very different*, how different are these people from you in terms of

	very similar				very different	
	0	1	2	3	4	5
Education	0	1	2	3	4	5
Political affiliation	0	1	2	3	4	5
Views on social issues	0	1	2	3	4	5

Network Density

¹ Items adapted from Rojas, H. (2008). Strategy versus understanding how orientations toward political conversation influence political engagement. *Communication Research*, 35(4), 452-480.

Still thinking about the people with whom you talk about politics, how much do you agree with the following statements? Here we will use a scale ranging from 0 to 5 on which 0 means *completely disagree* and 5 means *completely agree*.

The people I talk to about politics know each other

Completely Disagree Completely Agree
0 1 2 3 4 5

The people I talk to about politics are friends among themselves

Completely Disagree Completely Agree
0 1 2 3 4 5

The people I talk to about politics talk about politics among themselves

Completely Disagree Completely Agree
0 1 2 3 4 5

On a scale where 5 is the center, 0 the left and 10 the right, indicate how much to the left or the right is public opinion in the United States

Liberal Middle
Conservative
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Online strong-tie discussion/weak ties/grey ties frequency

How many contacts or friends do you have on Facebook?

How many contacts do you have on Twitter?

	Facebook	Twitter
How often have you interacted with friends about politics and public affairs	Never 0-1-2-3-4-5 Frequently	Never 0-1-2-3-4-5 Frequently
How often have you interacted with people you don't know very well about politics and public affairs	Never 0-1-2-3-4-5 Frequently	Never 0-1-2-3-4-5 Frequently
How often have you interacted about public affairs and politics on Facebook with people you	Never 0-1-2-3-4-5	Never 0-1-2-3-4-5

used to know well but don't see much anymore (e.g. high school friends, old teammates, past co workers)?	Frequently	Frequently
How often do you post to the following	Never 0-1-2-3-4-5 Frequently	Never 0-1-2-3-4-5 Frequently

Some people log in to their social media often while others log in less often; on a scale from 0 to 5 where 0 is not at all and 5 very frequently, how often do you log in to your social media accounts?

Not at all						Very frequently
0	1	2	3	4	5	

Some people post and share content a lot on social media while others prefer to browse social media rather than post; on a scale from 0 to 5 where 0 is mostly browse and 5 being frequent poster, which of the following are you:

Mostly Browse						Post and Share often
0	1	2	3	4	5	

Selective Exposure

On a scale of from 0 to 5, where 0 means not at all and 5 means very frequently, how much attention do you pay to the following type of news?

	Not at all					very frequently	
	0	1	2	3	4	5	
New York Times	0	1	2	3	4	5	
Wall Street Journal	0	1	2	3	4	5	
MSNBC	0	1	2	3	4	5	
CNN	0	1	2	3	4	5	
FoxNews	0	1	2	3	4	5	
Rush Limbaugh show	0	1	2	3	4	5	
NPR	0	1	2	3	4	5	
The Blaze	0	1	2	3	4	5	
Glenn Beck Program	0	1	2	3	4	5	
Sean Hannity Show	0	1	2	3	4	5	
Breitbart	0	1	2	3	4	5	
Buzzfeed	0	1	2	3	4	5	
Huffington Post	0	1	2	3	4	5	
Slate	0	1	2	3	4	5	

On a scale of from 0 to 5, where 0 means not at all and 5 means very frequently, how much attention do you pay to the following type of news?

	Not at all				very frequently	
	0	1	2	3	4	5
Wall Street Journal	0	1	2	3	4	5
MSNBC	0	1	2	3	4	5
CNN	0	1	2	3	4	5
FoxNews	0	1	2	3	4	5
Rush Limbaugh show	0	1	2	3	4	5
NPR	0	1	2	3	4	5
The Blaze	0	1	2	3	4	5
News from political elites or party leaders	0	1	2	3	4	5

In terms of news sources what is your preference:

Getting news from sources that share your point of view

Getting news from sources that differ from your point of view

Getting news from sources that don't have a particular point of view

On a scale where 5 is the center, 0 the left and 10 the right, indicate how much to the left or the right is political ideology of mainstream media in the United States

Liberal					Middle					
Conservative										
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

General Social Media Use

How do you use online social networks? On a scale from 0 to 5, where 0 means never and 5 frequently. How frequently do you the following activities on Facebook or Twitter?

	Facebook	Twitter
Post videos and photos	Never 0-1-2-3-4-5 Frequently	Never 0-1-2-3-4-5 Frequently
Post your thoughts about current issues	Never 0-1-2-3-4-5 Frequently	Never 0-1-2-3-4-5 Frequently
Share news stories	Never 0-1-2-3-4-5 Frequently	Never 0-1-2-3-4-5 Frequently
Read news articles posted by others	Never 0-1-2-3-4-5 Frequently	Never 0-1-2-3-4-5 Frequently
Encourage others to get	Never 0-1-2-3-4-5	Never 0-1-2-3-4-5

involved in social or political causes	Frequently	Frequently
Share entertaining content or stories	Never 0-1-2-3-4-5 Frequently	Never 0-1-2-3-4-5 Frequently
Engage in a discussion thread about a current issue	Never 0-1-2-3-4-5 Frequently	Never 0-1-2-3-4-5 Frequently
Saw posts about the Presidential election	Never 0-1-2-3-4-5	Never 0-1-2-3-4-5
Commented on posts about the election	Frequently Never 0-1-2-3-4-5	Frequently Never 0-1-2-3-4-5
Read comments other's posted but didn't get involved	Frequently Never 0-1-2-3-4-5 Frequently	Frequently Never 0-1-2-3-4-5 Frequently

Social media and political exposure

On a scale from 0 to 5, with 0 being not that often and 5 being very often, how often did you learn or saw the following about your online friends/connections from social media?

	Social Media
Learned about their preference for presidential candidate	Not that often 0-1-2-3-4-5 Very often
Saw that they signed up as a "friend" of a political candidate	Not that often 0-1-2-3-4-5 Very often
Learned about their political stance on key campaign issues	Not that often 0-1-2-3-4-5 Very often
Learned about their political orientation through social media	Not that often 0-1-2-3-4-5 Very often

How often do you disagree with the political opinions your online friends post on Facebook or other online social networks?

Not that often Very Often
0 1 2 3 4 5

How often do you hide someone's comments from your feed, because they do not share your political views?

Not that often Very Often
0 1 2 3 4 5

How often do your friends post articles from web sites you don't normally visit for news information?

Not that often Very Often
0 1 2 3 4 5

How often do you read articles posted by your friends from web sites you don't normally visit for news information?

Not that often Very Often
0 1 2 3 4 5

On a scale where 5 is the center, 0 the left and 10 the right, indicate how much to the left or the right is political ideology of your online social networks

Liberal Middle
Conservative
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Elite Cues

Think back to the primary season, who did you support or vote for

Hillary Clinton

Ted Cruz

John Kasich

Bernie Sanders

Donald Trump

Do you plan to vote in the general election this November?

On scale from 0 to 5, thinking about the two main political parties in the USA, Republicans and Democrat:

	Democratic Party	Republican Party
This party's policies are so misguided that they threaten the nation's well-being	Disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Agree	Disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Agree
How often would you say that Party leaders, like Hillary Clinton (D) and Paul Ryan (R), put aside differences with elected officials to work on policies?	Not Often 0-1-2-3-4-5 Very Often	Not Often 0-1-2-3-4-5 Very Often

Would you say that leaders of the Democratic Party, like Hillary Clinton (D) and Paul Ryan (R), *should* put aside differences with elected officials they disagree with, even if it may lead to policies you don't like?

Never 0-1-2-3-4-5 Frequently

Never 0-1-2-3-4-5 Frequently

Considering that this is an election year, on a scale of from 0 to 5, where 0 means does not describe me at all and 5 means describes me very well, please indicate how well the following statements describe your interest in the election

	Describes them very well		Does not describe them at all			
I pay attention to election information	0	1	2	3	4	
5						
I like to stay informed about the elections	0	1	2	3	4	5
I'm interested in election information	0	1	2	3	4	
5						
I actively seek out information concerning the elections	0	1	2	3	4	
5						

For this question consider the following list of political officials, please indicate if you follow or "like" their pages on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter?

Barack Obama	Yes	No
Joe Biden	Yes	No
Harry Reid	Yes	No
Nancy Pelosi	Yes	No
Hillary Clinton	Yes	No
Bernie Sanders	Yes	No
Elizabeth Warren	Yes	No
Reince Priebus	Yes	No
Mitch McConnell	Yes	No
Paul Ryan	Yes	No
Donald Trump	Yes	No
John McCain	Yes	No
Ted Cruz	Yes	No
Marco Rubio	Yes	No
John Kasich	Yes	No

Are you a member of your preferred political parties' email list?

Yes

No

Are you signed up to receive mail from your preferred political party?

Yes

No

Have you signed to up receive emails from a Presidential candidate?

Yes

No

Political identity

Please pick the choice that best describes the strength of your political party identification.

Strong Republican

Moderate Republican

Independent, Republican leaning

Independent

Independent, Democratic leaning

Moderate Democrat

Strong Democrat

On a scale where 5 is the center, 0 the left and 10 the right, indicate how much to the left or the right is your own political ideology:

Liberal

Middle

Conservative

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

On a scale from 0 to 5, how important is being a Democrat to you?

Extremely important

Not important at all

0 1 2 3 4 5

On a scale from 0 to 5, how important is being a Republican to you?

Extremely important

Not important at all

0 1 2 3 4 5

How well does the term Democrat describe you?

Extremely well Not very well
 0 1 2 3 4 5

How well does the term Republican describe you?

Extremely well Not very well
 0 1 2 3 4 5

When talking about Democrats how often do you use “we instead of “they”?

Not that often Very Often
 0 1 2 3 4 5

When talking about Republicans how often do you use “we instead of “they”?

Not that often Very Often
 0 1 2 3 4 5

To what extent do you think of yourself as being a Democrat?

A great deal Very little
 0 1 2 3 4 5

To what extent do you think of yourself as being a Republican?

A great deal Very little
 0 1 2 3 4 5

Affective Polarization

I. Social Distance Polarization

Using a scale from 0 to 5 in which 0 means “does not describe them at all” and 5 means “describes them very well,” how well do the following words describe Republicans:

	Describes them very well					Does not describe them at all				
Honest	0	1	2	3	4	5				
Patriotic	0	1	2	3	4	5				
Intelligent	0	1	2	3	4	5				
Open-minded	0	1	2	3	4	5				
Mean	0	1	2	3	4	5				
Hypocritical	0	1	2	3	4	5				
Selfish		0	1	2	3	4	5			

Using a scale from 0 to 5 in which 0 means “does not describe them at all” and 5 means “describes them very well,” how well do the following words describe Democrats:

	Describes them very well					Does not describe them at all	
Honest	0	1	2	3	4	5	
Patriotic	0	1	2	3	4	5	
Intelligent	0	1	2	3	4	5	
Open-minded	0	1	2	3	4	5	
Mean	0	1	2	3	4	5	
Hypocritical	0	1	2	3	4	5	
Selfish		0	1	2	3	4	5

On a scale from 0 to 5 where 0 means “very unhappy” and 5 means “very happy” how happy would you be if a son or daughter of yours were getting married to a supporter of the Republican Party?

Very unhappy Very happy
0 1 2 3 4 5

On a scale from 0 to 5 where 0 means “very unhappy” and 5 means “very happy” how happy would you be if a son or daughter of yours were getting married to a supporter of the Democratic Party?

Very unhappy Very happy
0 1 2 3 4 5

On a scale from 0 to 5 where 0 means “very unhappy” and 5 means “very happy” how happy would you be if one of your close personal friends became a supporter of the Democratic Party?

Very unhappy Very happy
0 1 2 3 4 5

On a scale from 0 to 5 where 0 means “very unhappy” and 5 means “very happy” how happy would you be if one of your close personal friends became a supporter of the Republican Party?

Very unhappy Very happy
0 1 2 3 4 5

On a scale from 0 to 5 where 0 means “very unhappy” and 5 means “very happy” how happy would you be if a supporter of the Democratic Party moved into a home on your street?

Very unhappy Very happy
0 1 2 3 4 5

On a scale from 0 to 5 where 0 means “very unhappy” and 5 means “very happy” how happy would you be if a supporter of the Republican Party moved into a home on your street?

Very unhappy						Very happy
0	1	2	3	4	5	

II. Favorability Polarization

Now for each of the following groups and people in politics, please tell me if your opinion of them is favorable or unfavorable on a scale from 0 to 100. 0 means very unfavorable and 100 means very favorable. 50 means you are neither favorable or unfavorable toward the group or person.

Democrats
 Republicans
 People who support the Democratic Party
 People who support the Republican Party
 Barack Obama
 Progressives
 Liberals
 Hillary Clinton
 Bernie Sanders
 Conservatives
 Donald Trump
 Black Lives Matter Movement
 Paul Ryan
 Tea Party Movement
 Elizabeth Warren
 John McCain

Spiral of Silence effect

On a scale from 0 to 5, with 0 meaning very uncomfortable and 5 meaning very comfortable, how comfortable are you expressing your opinion on the current election in the following context

	Very uncomfortable			Very comfortable		
At work	0	1	2	3	4	5
At a family dinner	0	1	2	3	4	5
On Facebook	0	1	2	3	4	5
On Twitter	0	1	2	3	4	5
People that share your political views	0	1	2	3	4	5

People that have
political views different from yours 0 1 2 3 4 5

Still thinking about current election, to what extent do you feel the following groups or people share your views on the candidates?

Your spouse or partner	Mostly disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Mostly agree
Other Family members	Mostly disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Mostly agree
Your close friends	Mostly disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Mostly agree
Your coworkers	Mostly disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Mostly agree
Your neighbors	Mostly disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Mostly agree
The people in your network on Facebook	Mostly disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Mostly agree
The people who follow you on Twitter	Mostly disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Mostly agree

Reduced Tolerance

Using a scale from 0 to 5 in which 0 means strongly support and 5 means strongly oppose, how much do you support or oppose the following:

Would you support allowing members of the Black Lives Matter movement to hold public rallies in your city?

strongly support 0 1 2 3 4 5 strongly oppose

Would you support allowing members of the Black Lives Matter movement to inconvenience your daily commute route so that they can hold a demonstration?

strongly support 0 1 2 3 4 5 strongly oppose

Would you support allowing members of the Tea Party Movement to hold public rallies in your city?

strongly support 0 1 2 3 4 5 strongly oppose

Would you support allowing members of the Tea Party Movement to inconvenience your daily commute route so that they can hold a demonstration?

strongly support strongly oppose
0 1 2 3 4 5

Would you support allowing Democratic Party supporters to hold public rallies in your city?

strongly support strongly oppose
0 1 2 3 4 5

Would you support allowing Democratic Party supporters to inconvenience your daily commute route so that they can hold a demonstration?

strongly support strongly oppose
0 1 2 3 4 5

Would you support allowing Republican Party supporters to hold public rallies in your city?

strongly support strongly oppose
0 1 2 3 4 5

Would you support allowing Republican Party supporters to inconvenience your daily commute route so that they can hold a demonstration?

strongly support strongly oppose
0 1 2 3 4 5

On scale, from 0 to 5, where 0 means Very Unwilling and 5 means Very Willing, who willing or unwilling would you be to have a Democrat as the following:

	Very Unwilling					Very Willing
Come work in the same place as you do	0	1	2	3	4	5
Marry into your family	0	1	2	3	4	5
As a close personal friend	0	1	2	3	4	5

On scale, from 0 to 5, where 0 means Very Unwilling and 5 means Very Willing, who willing or unwilling would you be to have a Republican as the following:

	Very Unwilling					Very Willing
Come work in the same place as you do	0	1	2	3	4	5
Marry into your family	0	1	2	3	4	5
As a close personal friend	0	1	2	3	4	5

On a scale from 0 to 5, where 0 means strongly disagree and 5 strongly agree, please note your level of agreement with the following statements:

|

Democrats should be able to express their political views freely	Strongly disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Strongly agree
Republicans should be able to express their political views freely	Strongly disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Strongly agree
The views of Democrats are not aligned with American society	Strongly disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Strongly agree
The views of Republicans are not aligned with American society	Strongly disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Strongly agree

On a scale from 0 to 5, where 0 means strongly disagree and 5 strongly agree, to what extent do you think Democrats:

Violate your core values and beliefs	Strongly disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Strongly agree
Take away societal resources from people like you	Strongly disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Strongly agree
Make our society less dangerous and less safe	Strongly disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Strongly agree
Strengthen the values, norms, and traditions that are important to you	Strongly disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Strongly agree
Do not hold moral values that are important to you	Strongly disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Strongly agree
Should have more influence in our society	Strongly disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Strongly agree
Hold too many positions of power and responsibility in our society	Strongly disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Strongly agree
Are not physically dangerous to people like you	Strongly disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Strongly agree
Endanger the physical safety of people like you	Strongly disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Strongly agree

Strongly disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Strongly agree

On a scale from 0 to 5, where 0 means strongly disagree and 5 strongly agree, to what extent do you think Republicans:

Violate your core values and beliefs

Strongly disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Strongly agree

Take away societal resources from people like you

Strongly disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Strongly agree

Make our society less dangerous and less safe

Strongly disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Strongly agree

Strengthen the values, norms, and traditions that are important to you

Strongly disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Strongly agree

Do not hold moral values that are important to you

Strongly disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Strongly agree

Should have more influence in our society

Strongly disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Strongly agree

Hold too many positions of power and responsibility in our society

Strongly disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Strongly agree

Are not physically dangerous to people like you

Strongly disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Strongly agree

Endanger the physical safety of people like you

Strongly disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Strongly agree

Strategic Communication

For each statement, please check the appropriate answer that best describes your feelings about that statement. The higher the number, the more you tend to *agree* with it; the lower the number, the more you tend to *disagree* with it.

Most political conversation is about gaining an advantage over another person

Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree
1 2 3 4 5

In political conversations, sometimes it's best not to express what you really think

Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree
1 2 3 4 5

People talk about politics in order to get others to do something they don't agree with

Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree
1 2 3 4 5

I talk about politics if I obtain some gain by doing so.

Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree
1 2 3 4 5

In political conversations, form is more important than the substance

Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree
1 2 3 4 5

It's better to avoid political discussion if you don't have enough information to win the debate

Deliberative Orientation

For each statement, please check the appropriate answer that best describes your feelings about that statement. The higher the number, the more you tend to *agree* with it; the lower the number, the more you tend to *disagree* with it.

	Democrats	Republicans
When talking about politics, it's important to listen carefully what others have to say	Disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Agree	Disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Agree
In political discussions, it's		

important to learn from what others have to say	Disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Agree	Disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Agree
In essence, politics seeks for us to reach agreements through conversation.	Disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Agree	Disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Agree
Through conversation, political interests can be put to work for the common good	Disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Agree	Disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Agree
Talking about politics lets me understand why others see things differently	Disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Agree	Disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Agree
When I talk about politics, I feel connected to the people I am talking to.	Disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Agree	Disagree 0-1-2-3-4-5 Agree

What is your gender identification?

Male

Female

Other _____

Were you born in the United States?

Yes

No

What is your race? Please check all that apply.

American Indian or Alaska Native

Asian

Black or African American

Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

White

Other _____

What is your ethnicity?

Hispanic or Latino

Not Hispanic or Latino

