

EFFECTS OF NEWS MEDIA CONSUMPTION ON POLITICAL PARTISANSHIP,  
IDENTITY AND ISSUE STANCES

By

Dalton T. Bouzek

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ABSTRACT  
EFFECTS OF NEWS MEDIA CONSUMPTION ON POLITICAL PARTISANSHIP,  
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Dalton T. Bouzek

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This research sought to identify to what extent news media consumption plays a role in forming an individual's political identity and their views on individual stances. The subsequent novel quantitative study asked students of various disciplines at Marquette University questions in regards to how much they pay attention to various news sources, to what extent they trust those news sources, and their views on individual issues as they relate to their chosen political identity. Results from the study found basic trends in regards to selected news sources and one's political disposition. Furthermore, stances on certain issues, like border security, were found to be more heavily shaped by media consumption patterns, showing the power of how news media frames issues. This study can be thought of as a precursor for more expansive research that could include a more representative sample of the American population.

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To name all responsible for helping put me in this position would be too expansive a list, as every man is a product of his entire support system. My family, friends and professors have all given me both the physical and emotional tools required to achieve this task. To whomever is reading this, I consider this an endorsement of my academic and personal work, as well as the general pursuit of knowledge as a whole, which makes this all the more worthwhile. For that, I thank you.

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## Introduction

The 2018 Midterm Elections presented a curious instance that is potentially not all that uncommon. While a so-called “blue wave” swept through many states, some states also re-elected conservative legislators. This practice is not so remarkable as the juxtaposition of these conservative legislators winning elections via the same voters that also passed ballot initiatives that, in many instances, were directly opposed by the winning politicians. In essence, voters were concurrently voting for and against policies they supported.

A specific example of this phenomenon in practice was in Missouri during the 2018 elections. Conservatives won six of the eight US House seats, and flipped the lone Senate contest from a Democrat to a Republican. At first glance, these results would suggest that conservatism had taken a firm hold in the state, and is even on the rise. However, the rest of the election results suggest otherwise. The same voters that helped give rise to conservative representatives concurrently also voted for and helped pass several measures that would be antithetical to conservative principles. For example, according to the political tracking site Ballotpedia.org, Amendment 1, a bill that would require more regulation of campaign finance, political lobbying, and redistricting, passed with 62% of the vote. Amendment 2, a bill to legalize medicinal marijuana, passed with 65% of the vote. Lastly, Proposition B, a bill to incrementally increase the state’s minimum wage to \$12 per hour by 2023, passed with 63% of the vote.

Of the politicians and lobbies that expressed a firm position on these three measures, conservatives generally opposed all three, with special emphasis on opposing

Amendment 1. Since these so-called “progressive” measures passed in a fairly overwhelming manner, one might expect the contests in which conservatives won to have been fairly close races. However, with the exception of District 2, Conservatives won each district by no fewer than 30 points, signaling generally widespread support. Similarly, in the Senate race, which all voters in the state were eligible for, Conservatives successfully flipped the seat by six points. Due to this vast disparity, we can notice a clear incongruence in the minds of the voters.

Of course, in the case above, the grander question is “why?” Why do voters, or even non-voters, seem inclined to support policy incongruent with their self-identified ideology? The first inclination a researcher might have in this instance is to question whether individuals even know what their true political identity is. For example, a widely shared article by VICE this past October asked the question, “Does anyone actually know what Socialism is?” This article, along with many others, show that Americans seem to conflate political ideologies, such as “socialism” and “democratic socialism,” with one another. At first glance, these nuances may not seem to carry any sort of real-world significance. However, as authors Christopher Achen and Larry Bartles explain, “even the most well-informed voters tend to vote based on partisan loyalties, rather than issues at hand.” Essentially, if voters align themselves with a party or group that they share little in common with, we are left with election results such as those during the 2018 Midterm Elections. Perhaps, the best way to correct this problem is not to push for more education on individual issues, but rather, to help educate the public as to what the labels they apply to themselves actually mean.



As will be discussed on in this study, the media is one of the most influential factors in helping individuals forge group identities, especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Currently, many news outlets, whether in print, digital, or broadcast, tend to specifically state their political spin. For example, far-right news outlet Breitbart, the 61<sup>st</sup> most visited website in the United States, has explicitly stated that they are the “platform for White Supremacy,” by its former head Steve Bannon (Nguyen, 2017). Moving leftward, the third most watched news network in the country, has also explicitly stated their political stance as “left-leaning” by their Senior Vice President Phil Griffin (Steinberg, 2007).

While news organizations have had general political affiliations for some time, it seems it is growing harder to find more politically neutral news. Even though this phenomenon is not inherently bad, as we will see, it has vast consequences for our political landscape. When citizens do not have access to factually accurate information, whether by their own choice, or as a result of an “anti-neutrality,” the identities they form as a result of their consumption of that media will undoubtedly produce identities with contradictory foundations.

These politically biased news organizations also seem to be redefining labels themselves. For example, MSNBC, which we have identified as generally left leaning, does not always espouse views congruent with typical “left” thought. In recent times, MSNBC anchors have criticized decisions to lift economic sanctions on North Korea, as well as removal of military troops from Syria. Traditionally, both of these actions are inherently leftist in nature (in terms of being anti-interventionist in economics and anti-imperialist). However, a regular MSNBC viewer may conflate military interventionism and economic austerity with leftist philosophy. In this case, leftist thought has been

usurped by corporate media in order to push a particular narrative, and in turn, has redefined popular “leftist” discourse in America.

Similarly, Fox News, which is generally conservative in its commentary, has also taken it into its own hands to redefine what is “acceptable right-wing thought and discourse.” Traditionally, conservative thought is embedded in individualism and isolationism (in terms of policy), and in America, constitutional absolutism. However, conservative networks like Fox News embrace ideas such as increased government surveillance and lowering barriers between religion and the state, both of which are inherently antithetical to philosophical conservatism. In the cases of Fox News and MSNBC (amongst others), one can see how not only are party and in-group identities reinforced, but once inside those groups, the foundational understanding of what it means to be on the “left” or “right” is being deliberately shifted.

Therefore, by understanding how media consumption, specifically, news media consumption, influences voters’ views on both issues and their own political label, we can begin to understand the problem, if it is pronounced as it may seem.

Exploration of how one identifies one’s self politically, which may in be in accord or contrast to their active beliefs or practices, can be analyzed through a myriad of concepts - namely cognitive dissonance, selective exposure, and social identity theory. Through the course examining precedents in this area of study, we can then construct a proper framework for proceeding and understanding what the results of this study might suggest. For the purposes of this study, this research sought to uncover whether individuals are prone to “misidentifying” themselves in terms of political affiliation by

examining if their held beliefs and subsequent actions align with the principles of each of the “identities” listed in the subsequent survey.

In order to flush out the extent to which the media contributes to our understanding, or lack thereof, of what it means to belong to a certain political group and what the subsequent ideals of that group entail, first a thorough understanding of basics of group and identity dynamics should be explored. In accord with group dynamics, one must also investigate the role of cognitive dissonance as it applies to seeking and attaining new political information, and how this process may also lead to selective exposure. With those ideas solidified, exploring them in practice, via a survey distributed to college students, which asks about their media habits and their political attitudes and ideologies, will help us to better understand if there is a link between certain political news exposure and incongruences in political identity and thought.

## Background studies

As a precursor and one of the inspirations for this study, Dreier (2017) noticed a dissonance between general attitude polls towards American social and economic issues, and the number of individuals who carry the labels of “liberal” and “conservative.” While this study looks to dig much further than the “liberal-conservative” binary, Dreier’s observations pointed to a general trend towards this dissonance that may be prevalent. The Gallup and Pew polls Dreier cited indicate that while roughly one-third of Americans “share both liberal and conservative views,” there seems to be an imbalance towards the left. For example, more than 70% of individuals surveyed indicated that they favor or support a variety of what are thought of as liberal causes, such as: abortion, environmental conservation, restrictions on firearms, corporate taxation, and solving economic inequality. While some of these figures undoubtedly are rooted in “single issue” crossover, the larger picture, and this subsequent study, may indicate that many individuals are at a crisis of identity.

In a similar vein, a recent Gallup poll showed that only about 59% of Americans actually identified as affiliated with a political party – with 25% being “Republican” and 34% identifying as “Democrat.” So, where does that leave the remaining 40 or so percent of Americans? According to the poll, the remainder of the populace generally identifies as “independent.” As will be discussed later, there exists a danger of conflating all political independents into one group. According to the survey, even though some 40% of the population calls themselves “independents,” they do still tend to vote for one of the two major parties, with Republicans being the biggest beneficiary. This prompts the question, “Why identify as an Independent if one consistently votes for one party time

and time again?” According to a 2018 Pew survey, one reason might be that there is a stigma in siding with a particular party, especially in times of perceived polarization. The survey also notes that many times, Independents claim to vote not necessarily *for* a particular party, but against another. One could draw two conclusions from this. On one hand, we could view potential party misidentification merely as a pragmatic practice, whereby individuals merely claim to be “Independent” in order to avoid stigma or ridicule, all the while actually supporting a given party or position. On the other hand, and my personal belief, is that individuals only adopt labels like “Independent” because they do not have a firm grasp on what it means to identify with a label such as “socialist” or “right-libertarian,” because they merely have not been educated on the various labels and ideological positions by both the education system, and more importantly, the media.

## Identification as a precursor for action

In-group identity and attitudes affiliated with those identities are important variables in terms of predicting political action. Underlining the importance of the purpose of this study as a whole, Becker, Taush, Spears, and Christ (2011) emphasize that one strong precondition for, in this case, political activism, is in fact an acknowledged affiliation with a social “in-group.” Furthermore, when an individual or group has their beliefs or values “violated” by their chosen social group, dissociation will likely follow, as noted by Glasford, Pratto and Dovidio (2008). Of course, as Monroe, Hankin and Van Vechten (2000) point out, identities that are learned through a more formal process, such as careful study of identities and stances on issues, are far more flexible than identities that are shaped primarily by social interaction. We may see individuals shed labels or attain them, based on their desired group’s perception of them. An example that could be applied from Isseroff (2003) would be a religious group denouncing extremist practices, including violence. This may lead to those who previously thought themselves to be a “purist” part of that group to shed the label, even if the majority of their beliefs coincide with the majority. This phenomenon may certainly be observed within political groups, wherein, a politician may rid themselves of a label or party, based on the actions of that party, either in general, or towards them. Take former California Congressional candidate Gil Cisneros, for example, who held many of the core principles that align with conservatism, except for his stance towards the Affordable Care Act. In that instance, Cisneros switched his political label to Democrat, which coincides with a “liberal” political stance (at least as we think of it in the American sense). The dissonance sought in this research and its prevalence in the American public is further

punctuated by cases like this. Cisneros, who now calls himself a “liberal,” in fact shares very little in common with the greater ideology. Of course, we may think that cases such as Cisneros’ are done so consciously out of political necessity. That is to say, candidates may recognize that often times understand that the label they apply to themselves are more important than the policies they actually support. However, as other researchers, have illuminated, this process may be done unconsciously or by virtue of media and social faculties.

Kerpelman (1969) explored differences in political activism when groups were divided by ideology. One of the general hypotheses of this study as a whole is that those who have higher levels of political knowledge will be less likely to misidentify themselves, and therefore, will be more likely to be active members of the political process. Kerpelman noted, “those who were considered ‘activists’ showed significantly higher levels of intelligence than those who were ‘non activists.’” This would allow one to perhaps suppose that those who are correctly able to identify themselves on the political spectrum would also be more likely to partake in political action. This would support the idea that in order for significant political change to occur, constituents would need to have higher levels of political education so that they could correctly identify their ideologies and act on behalf of the ideals of those groups.

### **Cognitive Dissonance's role in political identity crisis**

In his most famous work *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, Festinger's (1957) main thesis is that "individuals strive for internal psychological consistency." Consequently, Festinger argues that, "when there is psychological inconsistency, the individual becomes uncomfortable and ultimately tries to alleviate this discomfort." Generally, this means individuals might simply ignore or avoid new information in order to achieve a mental balance. More specifically, Festinger believes there are four steps in which individuals will undergo in order to avoid cognitive dissonance. First, Festinger explains that a person may actually change their behavior to match their mental faculties, beliefs and cognitions. If the person is not willing to, or unable to change their behavior, Festinger states that the person may "change the cognition," which could be exemplified in the political context if one were to support a law that some consider racist, with the justification laying in some other arena, such as economic impacts of the given law. If the person does not change their cognition, Festinger states that they may, "add cognition," which might be exemplified by believing a more serious situation can be rectified by undertaking a much less serious action. For example, if a municipality were to take measures to ban single-use plastics and assumed they were doing all they could to combat climate change, when in reality, the problem at hand would hardly be affected. Finally, and perhaps most importantly for the purposes of exploration of cognitive dissonance in political campaigns, Festinger stipulates that the individual "simply ignores or discredits the new conflicting information."

Building off of this, Festinger and his colleagues sought to uncover the conditions in which individuals and groups "harden" their beliefs when presented with contrary



information. In their book *When Prophecy Fails* (1956), Festinger and other researchers examined the factors that lead to increased “conviction” in beliefs amongst doomsday cult members. According to the authors, the first major factor is that “beliefs must be relevant to a believers actions.” In the political realm, this might manifest in a citizen voting for a border wall, despite evidence that a wall would not reduce harm, merely because they live near a national border. The second major factor is that “beliefs must have already produced actions that are difficult to undo.” This could play out politically by a citizen who voted for a border wall that was eventually made, despite evidence that it produces significant ecological damage, continuing to support its existence. Third, Festinger and his colleagues acknowledged that, “the belief must be sufficiently specific and concerned with the real world that it can be clearly disconfirmed.” A political example of this may include voicing support for the concentration camps sprouting up along the southern US border by making the issue an argument over semantics, rather than what is physically happening. The fourth factor identified by the researchers is, “the disconfirming evidence must be acknowledged by the believer.” For example, in order for a voter or constituent to “double down” on a claim, they must first acknowledge that a given point, such as “a border wall does not reduce the number of illegal immigrants,” is factually correct, before they will find other reasons to delve deeper into their beliefs. The final factor illuminated by the researchers is that, “The believer must have social support from fellow believers.” For example, a collective acknowledgement of a falsely held fact, will likely lead to further solidification of other beliefs that are also wrong, according to Festinger. In the political realm, we see this behavior reinforced often times by partisan media, which this study hopes to illuminate.

Festinger's theory has also helped cultivate the idea of "selective exposure," to explain media consumption habits in accord with cognitive dissonance. Klapper (1960) famously argued in his magnum opus that the media primarily exists as a tool to reinforce our beliefs and values. This idea of selective exposure also leads to what Klapper calls "selective retention," whereby an individual will either interpret a message in such a way that fits their predispositions, or simply discredits or discards information that does not fit their worldview. Important to this study, Stroud (2010) indicates that this selective exposure has led to the increased polarization that permeates American politics, since there are an abundance of readily available media options that can suit nearly any political dispositions.

The sheer number of available news sources may also play a key factor in the significance of selective exposure. According to Fischer (2008), when an individual has a plethora of information sources to choose from, they are more likely to select the source that holds information closest to their precognitions. Given the vastness and general availability of news outlets to the public, individuals have more options at their disposal than ever before – and therefore, they have a higher likelihood to pre-select news to confirm their biases. This theory is further solidified by measures related to self-identified partisanship amongst viewers of explicitly partisan news, such as Fox News. For example according to a Pew (2014) study entitled *Political Polarization and Media Bias*, 47% of Fox News viewers identify as "consistent conservatives." Similarly, those who identify as "consistent conservatives" also rate explicitly right-wing news outlets such as Breitbart, the Rush Limbaugh Show, and The Blaze, as "generally trustworthy." The study also shows that those who self-identify as being on the left also tend to

gravitate towards more left-leaning news sources, thus showing a clear example of selective exposure as a significant force in political news and discourse.

## Identity as ideology

As a plethora of researchers have pointed out, membership within a group may actually be a leading cause of attitudes, ideologies, and behaviors. The first phenomenon mentioned, with pertinence towards the research questions, is the observable disconnect between political identification and ideology. This second phenomenon is also quite noteworthy of exploration, as misinformation about a political affiliation or ideology would certainly lead to a dissonance in terms of label and personal stance on issues and attitudes. Through the scope of Social Identity Theory, we can begin to see patterns emerge in terms of how ideology may be constructed based off of a label, and vice versa.

Tajfel et al. (1974) explored the idea of “minimal group” paradigm, in which individuals who were arbitrarily placed in a group tended to favor other group members and their practices more favorably than those who were matched up with others, even if the “other” members had more in common with them in reality. In effect, that “group,” in Tajfel’s case, became the ideology of its members. Similarly, those in the political realm tend to experience the same phenomenon. Gerber, Huber and Washington (2010) sought to show that the relationship between political label and ideology is not necessarily mutual in terms of influence. While their study pertained to a rigid set of affiliations, in this case, Democrats and Republicans, they still were able to show general strengthening of ideology, simply by being reminded of their chosen political identity. On a larger scale, Huddy and Khatib (2007) observed that a more grandiose identity, such as a national identity, has direct influence over secondary identities, which ultimately influences ideology. For example, if an individual identifies as a “steel worker” primarily, and a “union member” secondarily, they may limit their union behavior based

on what they believe it means to be a “steel worker,” such as abiding by different codes of ethics or interactions with others. Of course, Huddy also notes that an incomplete or subjective understanding of a political affiliation or ideology leads to what amounts to a dissonance between the two. One such instance explored in this research is a problem observed by Citrin, Wong and Duff (2000), where individual’s understanding of what comprises a “true American,” affects what they deem as American values, leading to a disconnect in understanding over what is seemingly the same label. Similar to the last example, if one believes that a “true American” ought to be based on inclusivity and absolute freedoms, while another who identifies with the same label believes that label is grounded in patriotism and religion, the label itself loses value as it is being construed in various ways, leading to breakdowns in communication.

According to Greene (2004), Americans, specifically, may tend to maintain a more muddled political identity. For Greene, due to the strong emphasis placed on the idea of “independence” in the country, constituents may more often identify as “independents,” even when their ideologies are more or less attributable to another label. Greene also states that this phenomenon is exacerbated by news outlets “treating independents as a singular group.” Often, voters or constituents may understand “independent” to be politically center, however, this ignores the nuances that, say, a left-libertarian may have with a Marxist-Leninist in terms of ideology, which would make someone between those positions an “independent” as well by these same standards. Similarly, the media also tends to attribute politicians who are not in total accord with the rest of their political parties as “independent,” such as Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, for example, though, ideologically, he is clearly left of center (by American standards).

At the same time, Maine Senator Susan Collins is also labeled an “independent” by news outlets, even though she is ideologically right of center, according to the vote tracker on fivethirtyeight.com (2017). This conflation of what it means to be “independent” conveyed by the news media undoubtedly has an impact on how voters label themselves, as well. For example, if a politician or canvasser is speaking with an individual who labels themselves as “independent,” they may not know how to steer the conversation or how to relate to the voter, given the polarized definition of what it means to be “independent.”

## Media as ideology

We have discussed the relationship between group identity and ideology, but crucial to this study is the role the media plays in both forging and maintaining this relationship.

Litt (1963) commented on the role of media and education acting as an “indoctrinator” for the state, in terms of political values and ideals. Of course, as numerous commentators, such as Chomsky have noted, when an ideology can run contrary to the state’s position, this may relay to misconceptions about those ideologies, and a strengthening of the “desired” valuative outcomes. For example, if an ideology like socialism or collectivism were to spread in popularity in the United States, likely what would follow would be a campaign of misinformation about that ideology in order to gain more support for rebuking it. In essence, there is a great incentive for the government, media and education institutions to misinform the public about general political issues and happenings, as more education would likely have an adverse effect on the status quo.

Sociologist William Gamson (1988) examined how muddled political discourse, shaped by the media, seems to lead to confused ideological stances amongst the populace. Gamson states, “Public discourse draws on a catalogue of metaphors, catch-phrases, and appeals to principle...elements within these catalogues are clustered, and therefore, we encounter discourse in terms of not individual items, but packages.” Essentially, Gamson is eluding to the idea that by referring to events and ideas through frames that would generally be incompatible for one another (he uses the phrase “Peace through Strength” as an example), the media does not lay a proper foundation for the public to discuss and become educated about relevant issues. For example, Fox News has

reported on a so-called “War on Christmas,” where their commentators believe that Christian values are under attack. In this case, there is no “war,” and “Christmas” is the stand-in for all of the values they hold dear. However, this metaphor may confuse the viewer into believing there is an actual assault on Christians and Christian values are at real danger of being phased out. Of course, this is not wholly true, yet politicians still use this fear mongering rhetoric in order to appeal to voters and constituents, since the media has conditioned them to speak in these false terms. We see this exemplified during campaign rallies for now President Donald Trump, where he exclaims, “You can finally say ‘Merry Christmas’ again!” when in fact this tradition had never ceased (.

Similarly, Gamson notes that the media generally borrows metaphors and motifs from non-traditional political discourse and injects them into the popular discourse. For example, Gamson points to the phenomenon of automation and its political ramifications being framed as a “loss of self-reliance” by the media, since American culture is very much based on valuing individualism. Examples like these, where Gamson has shown the media to appeal to generalized values and conflating them with events that have real-world consequences, media viewers, and Americans, especially, are at a significant disadvantage of forming a fact-based political ideology. As we will see, when individuals do not have a proper ideological foundation, they will continue to perpetuate the cycle of misinformation or ignorance through devices such as selective-exposure.

Taber and Lodge (2009) explored the nature of individuals’ news-seeking habits as it pertained to their self-identified political label. Their study determined that individuals were not only more likely to select information on a given topic from a source that they agreed with, but they also were more likely to rate opposing arguments for the



same issue to be “weaker,” so long as it came from an adversarial source, regardless of logical merit. This phenomenon mentioned by Taber and Lodge harkens back to Kunda’s (1990) idea of “motivated skepticism,” wherein an individual will apply their preconceived beliefs and attitudes in the search or confirmation of those beliefs when alternative information is presented.

With this information in mind, it is important to consider to what extent individuals and groups’ identities are influenced by the media and the information they gather from it. A Pew News Attitudes Survey (2013) indicates that 63% of self-identified Democrats listed CNN as their primary news source. Conversely, the same study indicated that 63% of Republicans use Fox News as their primary news source. Given the overtly partisan nature of those two networks, we can observe a fostering of ideals that cater to the bases of each of those two groups, by the network. The aforementioned example of Fox News pandering to the “War on Christmas” also fits this mold. Given that Fox News has identified their audience to be both staunchly conservative and Christian, the language used by their commentators to stir up fear that its audience’s way of life is under attack is utilized in a manner to push the audience further to the periphery of the political spectrum. An even more current example of this at play is the coverage of the New Zealand mosque shootings. While other news outlets like MSNBC expressly labeled the shooter as a terrorist, Fox News shifted the conversation towards mental health, since they were reluctant to label a Caucasian who killed Muslims a “terrorist,” since that label would be counter to the prevailing narrative of who terrorists are.

To state the obvious, knowledge of history, as well as a certain amount of political literacy are essential in molding the political outlook of an individual and groups. Oswald

(2009) points out that, “Media only cover established values and conventional perspectives that uphold the status quo.” Regardless of political affiliation and preferred news source, both of the aforementioned networks report news in such a way that upholds the “conventional” perspectives held by both liberal and conservative ideologies as a whole. Those perspectives, one could argue, are still very much the same, with only superficial differences, and still exist in a way that seeks to uphold the status quo. This status quo is propped up with help from both liberal and conservative ideologies being hostile to others. Hostility in this regard, as it relates to news consumption and shaping of ideology leads to misinformation amongst the citizenry. This is not exclusive to certain subjective ideals, but for verifiable facts and definitions, as well. For example, a Gallup Polling Matters Survey (2018) reported that Americans had a very uneducated view of what the word “Socialism” meant. In that survey, 28% of respondents did not even know what “socialism” meant, while 46% expressed minimal to no understanding of the term nor concept. It goes without saying that the misinformation that is attached to certain terms with fixed, verifiable meanings, like “socialism,” have a significant impact on the shaping and reforming of an individual’s political alignment. This gap in knowledge then opens the door for mainstream media outlets to cultivate an idea of what a term like “socialism” means, which may make its viewers even more hostile to that ideology. For example, Fox News has labeled newly elected New York representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez as a “socialist,” and attributes various out-of-context soundbytes and misinterpretations of her ideals to be tenants of socialism. When this happens, viewers of networks like Fox News (though others like MSNBC are also guilty of the same practice) end up believing that “socialism is when we do not get to eat meat,” and “socialism is

where everyone gets half of your income.” Of course, to a politically literate individual, these assertions are obviously untrue. However, to a person that solely relies on a cable news network for political information, these assertions are taken literally, and that person may be irrationally hostile to that given political ideology.

If we use Chomsky (1988) for guidance as to why this phenomenon exists, we would find that misinformation of this nature exists for the explicit reason to uphold the status quo, and mold citizens to be of similar mindsets that are not hostile to the state. As argued with this research, even the extent that this misinformation is disseminated by each of the individual news networks is of the utmost importance in determining one’s assumed political affiliation and the implications of society at-large.

Media illiteracy, coupled with misinformation passed off as fact by the media, can also affect people’s ideology and their propensity to engage with politics. Ugland (2019) alludes to the notion that even though media and information is accessible to more people now than ever before, media illiteracy has a substantial impact on people’s ability to critically reason, and subsequently, form a coherent ideology. While one might assume that current 18-24 year-olds are more media literate than the same cohort was in previous periods, and are therefore more likely to responsibly consume news and to engage politically, that is not the case. Ugland mentions that only 40% of 18-29 year olds were politically active (in terms of voting in national elections), although deciding on what candidate to vote for should theoretically be easier than ever before. This gap in information as it relates to real-world action is likely indicative of a lack of political efficacy, but where does this sentiment come from? One might conclude from this research that because many are not well-versed in media and civic terms (and their

consequences), perhaps news media fills a void in terms of setting attitudes to have toward government. While this thesis focuses on college students, who are likely more media literate than the average of this age demographic, perhaps certain parallels will remain in terms of sentiment towards government and ideological dissonance due to their media consumption habits.

## News Media Consumption Trends

To serve as a proper basis for understanding exactly what news media is having the most profound impact on the American public, in terms of swaying one's political ideology, we must first consider the greater general trends in news media consumption.

According to the Pew Research *State of the Media* report (2018), cable news networks experienced a relatively sharp 12% decrease in primetime viewership to about 1.2 million combined viewers across three major networks of CNN, MSNBC and FOX over the past year. Similarly, network news (as defined by over-the-air broadcasts, rather than cable) experienced a 7% decrease in viewership over the past year, with approximately 5.8 million viewers per night combined. Local news networks experienced essentially the same trends as national network news as well. Despite the sharp declines in viewership, the report still maintains that television is the primary news source for most Americans.

If television news consumption is declining, we must turn our attention to the fastest growing medium for news consumption, digital media. According to the report, approximately 93% of Americans consume news from an online platform. For the purposes of Pew's report, digital media was defined as "a digitally native news service," which means that the organization was founded online, rather than being a spin-off of an existing media company. The report stated that there were 35 websites that generated at least 10 million visitors each month, contributing to a massive diversity in terms of sources and ideologies woven into news coverage. Of these 35 sites, majority of them also had a presence on aggregator services, such as Apple News, and nearly all of them

had social media accounts across platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, which allows more access points for the public to consume news.

As we can see from this report, Americans are getting their political news from a more vast field than ever before. While television continues to be the primary platform for news consumption, the emergence of digital-native news companies, which often times fill a niche market in terms of political ideology, is generating a landscape where Americans can get news tailored to their political preferences. Conversely, Americans may also have their political identities altered by hyper-partisan media, which makes for a more complicated political arena as a whole.

Overall, the effects of cognitive dissonance, selective exposure and social identity theory, all seem to be driving forces of not only our political identities, but our political misinformation as well. As evidenced by the 2018 elections, inconsistencies in ideology and voting patterns have not gone away, despite a plethora of information being available to prospective voters. This thesis attempted, first, to uncover the extent to which the media is responsible for misinforming voters to the point where they fail to possess consistency within their ideology, and, second, to understand the extent to which this phenomenon leads to inaction or political cynicism.

## Research Questions

In this research, the following questions were explored:

Q1: Is there a relationship between what media sources individuals pay the most attention to and their attitudes toward individual ideological positions?

Q2: Is there a relationship between an individual's feelings of political efficacy/action and their ideology score? Furthermore, is there a relationship between trust placed in media and one's feelings of political efficacy?

Q3: To what extent do individuals accurately label themselves politically?

## **Methodology**

### *Participants*

The participants in this study consisted of college students of various disciplines. By targeting college students rather than the general population, this study has a novel focus. These student participants are of different disciplines in order to get a better gauge on overall media consumption habits and their ideological effects. One would assume today's youth are more media savvy than previous generations, and therefore, a more unique circumstance exists where college students may be less likely to accept news media information at face value. Therefore, this potential skepticism will certainly affect how these individuals identify politically and their level of ideological consistency, as this survey tried to explore.

In total, there were roughly 300 respondents for this survey. Of this population, approximately 200 were Communication students, while roughly 100 were Psychology students. Students who participated in this anonymous survey received extra credit for the course in which the survey was offered. In order to ensure anonymity of the participants, the survey did not require participants to list their name or student identification number on the survey itself. Instead, they submitted a screenshot of the completion screen of the survey and submitted that to an online Dropbox. This ensured that participants were compensated while maintaining their anonymity.



## *Survey*

The survey for this research consists of three parts. The first asks general media usage questions, such as ranking various media outlets in order of trustworthiness, and asking how much time the participants spend consuming news. This section also asks important political identity and efficacy questions, which may serve as predictors of ideological consistency when coupled with other variables, such as preferred news outlets.

The second section of the survey is based off a pre-existing survey from Chaffee and Schleuder (1985). This segment asks participants how much attention they pay to different political news media when seeking political information. For example, participants are asked on a scale of “1 to 5” (with 1 being the highest and 5 being none) how much attention they pay to national newspapers, national political talk shows, and social media accounts of political commentators when seeking reliable information.

The final section of the survey is composed of various “level of agreement” statements to gauge the respondents’ ideological leanings on specific issues. Some of these questions are borrowed from the Pew Ideological Consistency Scale; however, many of them are new additions or are modified for clarity. For the sake of consistency and ease of coding, the statements are all from a far-right ideological perspective, so that responses can help determine an aggregate score to determine where the participant falls along the political spectrum.

In order to help determine the effects of media consumption on perceived political ideology, a quantitative survey asking about participants’ views on certain ideological

positions, juxtaposed against their media consumption habits, gave some insight about the extent to which media consumption can shape political identity.

Due to the purpose of this study, which seeks to cover a more complete political picture, existing political scales were inadequate. Given that the main two ideologies that individuals in the United States identify with are “liberal” and “conservative,” most of the scales merely reflected this binary. However, there are many problems with this dichotomy. First, the definitions of “liberal” and “conservative” used in common political discourse are imprecise. Historically, “liberal” was used to merely describe someone who placed individualism and personal liberty above all else, as political philosophers, such as Locke, described. Today, many think of the term “liberal” as exclusively on the left, though many supposed “liberal” politicians have views that more closely align with right-wing policy. For example, Democratic primary candidate Beto O’Rourke is generally described as “liberal,” though, he has various right-wing views. According to political fact-checking website On The Issues (2019), O’Rourke supports military expansion, opposes single-payer healthcare, and has a record of opposing housing for low-income individuals – all of which rebuke a left-wing ideology.

We also see examples of this inaccurate binary presented in contemporary research. The Pew *Ideological Consistency Scale* asks questions designed to characterize people as “liberal” or “conservative.” One question, for example, asks participants to select which these two statements most closely aligns with their ideology: “Government is always inefficient,” *or* “Government does a better job than people give it credit for.” Because these are not necessarily opposing viewpoints, nor does the “liberal” answer represent a true leftist position, it is hard to ascertain where someone truly lies on the

ideological spectrum. With this in mind, one can see that a dichotomy between liberal and conservative ideologies is a false one, because their views are not necessarily opposite of one another. Since “liberal” versus “conservative” does not produce a true dichotomy, it is important for the purposes of this study to produce a scale that more fully represents the political spectrum. Therefore, using truly opposite terms, such as “Solid-left” and “Solid-right,” allowed for a better distinction between ideologies.

Due to the participant pool of this study being college students, simplifying the range of choices in terms of political identity they have was beneficial as they may not all have adequate political knowledge. Therefore, where respondents are asked about their political ideology, they have the option to enter their preferred labels, which could include anything from “anarchist” to “libertarian,” respondents could also choose from a list of more generic choices: “solidly left,” “lean-left,” “centrist/moderate,” “lean right,” and “solidly right.” While these labels may or may not correspond with the more specific labels political scholars may use, these choices gave participants more clearly identifiable labels, that could then be essentially translated into different labels, based upon the answers given. In addition, what it means to be “far-left” and “far-right” are more easily understood and agreed upon, as opposed to attempting to parse through the intricacies of the various strains of Marxism, for example.

The set of “level of agreement” questions are a combination of affirmations taken from the Pew Ideological Consistency survey, as well as textbook definitions of far-right positions and ideologies. For example, questions borrowed from the Pew survey ask questions such as “Should homosexuality be promoted?” as well as “Does too much government regulation of businesses hurt economic development?” With these

standardized questions, a certain measure of validity in the responses can be counted on, since they have been used in prior research. In addition, questions that ask about issues that are pertinent in today's political landscape are phrased from a far-right perspective in order to have a consistent level of measurement to work from. For example, the survey asks, on a Likert scale, to what extent participants agree with the statements, "Strong enforcement of national borders are necessary for security," as well as, "Government surveillance of individuals is necessary to protect our safety." The responses to these statements are not only telling about an individual's political leanings, but they are also important because they are tests of how much of a role media plays in shaping ideologies, since these are very contemporary issues, given that the participants do not have fully self-formed positions on them. Lastly, level of agreement statements are asked, in which the participants evaluate far-right positions, such as, "My culture is superior to others," and "Worker's unions impede economic progress." The aggregate of these scores likely provided a fair insight as to the participant's positioning along the political spectrum, which was then be compared to where they initially placed themselves in the question about political self-identification. These two items were used to gauge the extent of any cognitive dissonance.

Beyond uncovering whether what media consumption habits lead to ideological dissonance, this study also helped illuminate to the extent to which media consumption habits affect certain political beliefs. Given that the questions in the "level of agreement" section all deal with contemporary issues or topics, there may be an association between, say, heavy cable news consumption in general, and strong anti-immigrant sentiment, regardless of the individual's political party affiliation. Similarly, if one is more

passionate in regards to a specific issue, like LGBT rights, those individuals might tend to gravitate to a certain news sources or platforms because of their coverage or spin of that issue.

### *Data Collection/Analysis*

Primarily, most of the data collected was quantitative. This data was in the form of numbers derived from participants' answers to the "level of agreement" statements, ranging from "-2" to "2," with -2 being farther left and 2 being farther right along the political spectrum. These numbers were aggregated to give the participant a total score in order to place them along the political spectrum. For example, since there are 18 level-of-agreement questions, the maximum score would be 36, which would place the participant at the farthest right edge of the political spectrum. If the participant were to score a 14, for example, they would be slightly on the left side of the political spectrum. These scores were then be compared to how they self-identified, in order to determine a level of ideological consistency.

One answer necessitates qualitative data: where participants were asked to key-in any specific political label they use to describe themselves politically. This response allowed the participant to more accurately detail their chosen position along the political spectrum, which also allowed for an even more accurate comparison of their ideology and their actual beliefs.

Other patterns were analyzed from the data collected, such as if a participant heavily favors one news source over another in terms of "trustworthiness," and its association to views on a given issue, as well as the frequency they rely on a news source for political information. Similarly, participants were asked if they have voted in either of the prior two national elections, in order to help gauge political activity. Given the generally youthful demographic to be surveyed in this study, some new insight could be gathered as to whether this generation's sense of political efficacy, their level of political

engagement, and their political ideologies correlate with their media consumption patterns.

### *Challenges*

In terms of challenges that this particular research may face, the first may be the validity of the answers produced by some of the questions. For example, while some questions are based off of prior academic surveys, others are based off of more non-traditionally academic sources, such as the Pew Research questions. Similarly, other questions in the “political ideology” section are based off of generally agreed upon features and positions regarding one’s political ideology, rather than being utilized directly from another source. While not all of the questions are necessarily grounded in prior studies or scholarship, this may also prove to benefit the study in terms of adding a layer of precision, if these questions yield any significant results.

This research may also be complicated if a significant group of participants do not understand some of the political terminology used in the questions, or if they are not familiar with the various news media organizations named in the media consumption questions. While these potential problems may be somewhat mitigated by giving participants multiple selections to choose from, these questions are in operation under the assumption that the participants are at least generally aware of the nature of the news and the manner in which that news is presented by the various media outlets. While the survey asks participants about both political party affiliation and if they have another political ideology they identify with, if the participants have limited knowledge of the parties, or any of the ideologies they have to choose from (though an option for “other,” with the ability to type in one’s own answer exists in the same question), the answers they give may not provide the proper information needed.



One limitation present in this research was the population/sample, which consisted of college students. In this case, college students are likely more politically and media savvy than the rest of the general population, which undoubtedly skews some of the data. However, general trends present in the data point to larger phenomena, making this research a sort of pre-test.

### *Ethical Considerations*

Various precautions were taken to ensure the anonymity of the participants and their answers to this survey. The survey did not require the participant to record their name, age, or gender anywhere on the survey. Furthermore, the survey itself did not require the participants to sign-up for an account of any kind, nor did Qualtrics, the survey tool used for distribution of this survey, ask for any identifying information. Instead, a link directly to the survey was provided to a large sample size of potential participants, who are then able to decide whether they are willing to participate or abstain (of which there is no penalty). Participants in this survey were communications students at Marquette University. The assisting professors of these students made the survey available to their students via a link on their courses website, and allowed students to obtain course credit while maintaining anonymity.

Since the questions in the survey are asking about general attitudes and sentiments common in political or social discourse, it is highly unlikely that answering them would lead to any distress on the behalf of the participants. Respondents also have the ability to skip any question in the survey, so they can skip anything that might make them uncomfortable. The answers recorded from the survey were not tied to the individual participant in any way, which ensures that they need not be fearful of truthfully answering any question in any manner.

### *Usefulness in Contemporary Scholarship*

Given that the political landscape is constantly in flux, this research not only served to reinforce existing research, but possibly shed light on new and interesting associations between media consumption, political ideology (and disconnect), and willingness to engage in politics amongst the nation's newest voters. In addition, new patterns in media consumption as they relate to specific contemporary issues may also emerge. Lastly, the results of this survey may highlight a need to further media literacy programs in order to increase political participation and general feelings of political efficacy.

*Summation*

Ultimately, this research aims to serve as a pre-test in order to help determine to what extent the media fosters political action and ideological incongruence. While the conclusions are not necessarily generalizable for the whole population, the trends observed can help focus research efforts in the future in order to uncover the extent of the media's influence on our political beliefs.

## Data and Analysis

### *General results*

After gathering the data, SPSS was used in order to first aggregate general trends in the survey. Among the important frequency tests ran, the “ideological score,” when compared to where each participant placed themselves along the political spectrum was the most helpful to affirm one of the core theses of this research. First, in order to calculate the “ideological score,” each participant’s answers for the Likert scale questions were coded where a “-2” represented the most leftist position on the issue, and a “2” represented the most right-wing position on the issue. The numbers in between represented the remainder of the political spectrum. For example, if participants answered with a “-2, 0 and 1,” on three given questions, their score would be a “-1” or lean left. For this study, all 17 Likert scale questions were added for each participant to give them their own unique Ideology Score.

Because one of the main premises of this study was to determine to what degree individuals misidentify themselves politically, comparing the participants’ ideology scores to their chosen place along the political spectrum. While one could make these comparisons on each individual participant, a much more time-efficient method is to compare the frequencies of the scores, as well as where most participants placed themselves along the political spectrum.

Of the 309 participants, 305 of them responded to the Ideology score questions. The ideology scores from the participants ranged from “-32,” which would be almost extreme left-wing, to “36,” or extreme right-wing. In order to merge the Ideology score

scale and the political spectrum placement score on the same scale for comparison, the parameters for the scale are as follows: Solid left would be comprised of scores ranging from “-36” to “-18.” Lean left would be comprised of the scores of “-18” to “-9.” Centrist would be comprised of the scores “-9” to “9.” Lean right would be comprised of the scores 9 to 18. Finally, Solid right would be comprised of the scores 18 to 36. Alternatively, we could also consider scores from -18 to -1 to be Lean left and scores of 1 to 18 to be Lean right.

The dispersion of those scores can be matched up and compared to how participants identified themselves on the political spectrum. 11.5% of participants identified themselves as Solid left, whereas 9.5% of participants actually answered in a manner consistent with being solid left. 29.2% of participants self-identified as Lean left, whereas 27.7% displayed Lean left tendencies in the survey. 34.1% of participants identified themselves as Centrist, while 56.7 % answered questions in the survey consistent with centrism. 20% of participants identified as Lean right, though only 3.7 had scores between 9 and 18. However, 24.6% of participants had scores between 1 and 18. Finally, 5.2% of participants self-identified as Solid right, though only 2.4% answered the survey in a manner consistent with right-wing thought.

Furthermore, a regression model was run with participants’ self-declared political position constant, and their ideology score was dependent. The model showed a significant relationship between the two ( $p < .001$ ,  $b = 5.918$ ), meaning that participants, in general were fairly accurate in their self-placement along the political spectrum in relation to their views. In addition, a Pearson’s correlation model was performed using these same variables, which also showed that there is indeed a correlation ( $p = .623$ )

between participants' self-assessment on the political spectrum and their corresponding views, thus, answering RQ3.

From these comparisons, a few general conclusions can be reached. Overall, against one of the central research questions, participants were actually fairly accurate in self-identifying their political labels. Perhaps the population used in this study was a key factor in this dispersion. Because the participants were from fields other than Political Science, their views on politics remained more neutral, possibly because they were not as well-versed on these issues as those from other disciplines. One might also suggest that because of the polarized climate of politics in America, participants may have felt more inclined to choose either a left-wing or right-wing label, rather than identifying as a centrist, where a significant amount of participants ended up in terms of ideology score. While the results of making these general comparisons were not as skewed as previously theorized, we can see other significant relationships at play in regards to media consumption and participants' ideological scores.

#### *Ideological score as it relates to political satire shows*

The level of attention paid to certain media forms had a significant impact on participants' ideological scores. Regression models found a strong association ( $p < .001$ ,  $b = 1.656$ ) between paying more attention to political satire shows, such as Last Week Tonight with John Oliver, and having more leftist beliefs. Perhaps this is not surprising, given that there is a dearth of right-leaning political satire shows, so those with right-wing beliefs likely shy away from these types of shows. One may also conclude that

viewers that would otherwise be neutral have gravitated towards these shows, and their ideologies have been shaped by repeated viewership.

*Ideological score as it relates to political talk radio*

The level of attention paid to political talk radio had a positive association to one's ideological score, according to regression models ( $p < .001$ ,  $b = -2.246$ ). That is to say, the more attention one pays to political talk radio, the more conservative they answered the ideological questions. Of course, political talk radio has generally become more conservative. Shows hosted by the likes of Al Franken are long defunct, and instead, prominent figures such as Rush Limbaugh dominate the airwaves. Often times, these shows do not make their intentions ambiguous, as they cater to a right-wing audience, which likely helps solidify a conservative identity for that group of listeners.

*Ideological score as it relates to cable news*

While not as high of a degree of association as political satire and talk radio shows, the amount of attention one pays to cable news networks has a fairly high degree of association to one's ideological score ( $p = .051$ ,  $b = -1.045$ ). That is to say, the more one relies on cable news for political information, the more likely they are to have conservative tendencies. While it is well-known that Fox News, a conservative network, is among the most highly watched stations in America, there is a higher variation of prominent cable news networks that span the political spectrum than satirical and talk radio shows. Therefore, this result is at least mildly telling, in that right-leaning cable



news networks seem to have more influence. One point of note, given the population, is that college students generally watch the least television of any age demographic. What that means for this data, is that perhaps those with conservative tendencies choose to seek out information from networks like Fox News, rather than stumbling upon them and having their views subsequently shaped.

### *Ideological score as it relates to other mediums*

While the three aforementioned mediums were found to have statistical significance in relation to the attention paid them and one's ideological score, the other mediums did not. Participants in the survey reported using the Internet as their primary preferred medium to access news far more than any other (television, print, radio). Therefore, one might have expected commentary from web-based sources to have a more significant impact on one's ideology, however with high scores in the regression model ( $p=.261$ ,  $b=-.530$ ), we see this is not the case. Perhaps with this more media savvy and literate population, participants may not be as prone to pay as much attention to these sources if they are seen as less credible than traditional news sources.

Attention paid to national newspapers for political news was also not found to have a significant impact on one's ideology ( $p=.319$ ,  $b=.471$ ). The age demographic represented in the study's population was likely to not read newspapers on any regular basis. Also, at a time when rhetoric declaring traditionally credible news sources as "fake news" has become en vogue, perhaps trust has eroded for this particular age demographic, leading fewer individuals to pursue information via newspapers.

Lastly, gathering political information from political fact-checking or candidate websites was found to have the least significant impact on one's ideology ( $p=.920$ ,  $b=-.060$ ). One might hypothesize that those who regularly check fact-checking sites for information would have their ideology experience larger shifts due to concrete evidence being levied against misconceptions. However, as we have reviewed in previous literature, confirmation and selectivity bias likely would mitigate any significant impact that these websites would generate. Perhaps it is no surprise that political candidate websites had the least amount of sway on one's ideology, given that these websites often lack any real substance in terms of policy information or news. In addition, one would assume that most information seekers would not visit the website of a candidate that had opposing views to that of the information seeker, and therefore, there would be little chance of any of these sites shifting or shaping one's ideology.

*Ideology score as it relates to news consumption time*

Another surprising result from this study was that the total amount of time one spends consuming news does not have a significant impact on participants' ideological scores ( $p=.842$ ,  $b=.180$ ). One might assume that the more time spent gathering information, in general, would have an impact on ideology. Considering the population of the study, which likely has higher critical thinking and reasoning skills than the general population, one might assume that regardless of their preferred news sources, they would be able to parse and reason with information from any source in order to transform their ideology. However, regression models run with this data did not find this to be the case. Instead, the model found that the amount of attention paid to national television news,

political satire shows, and political talk radio, had more impact as opposed to raw news consumption time. This phenomenon may be attributed to the perceived lack of substantive political information in the media, in general, therefore, individuals may gravitate towards the aforementioned three mediums for actual information, and browse the others without much thought directed at the information presented to them.

#### *Relationship between voting and ideology score*

Regression models found a significant association between one's political efficacy and their ideology score ( $p < .005$ ,  $b = -3.494$ ). Those who reported having voted in a national election were significantly more likely to have a lower ideology score, meaning they have more leftist tendencies. Conversely, those who reported never voting in a national election were found to have a higher ideological score, meaning they have more conservative tendencies. Interestingly, the same model found that one's ideas of political efficacy did not have a significant impact on ideological score ( $p = .598$ ,  $b = -.315$ ). That is to say, believing that an individual does not have the ability to influence government in any meaningful way is not a significant component of one's political ideology. However, the relationship between one's political activity in the method of voting and one's ideology should not be ignored. This shows us that the less conservative one's beliefs are, the more likely they are to vote. This is further evidenced by greater numbers of individuals voting for the Democratic Party in previous elections.

### *Relationship between ideology score and trust in media*

Regression models also found a significant relationship between one's level of trust in the media to report news fully, fairly and accurately, and one's ideology score ( $p < .05$ ,  $b = -2.205$ ). The more a participant reported trusting the media, the lower their ideology score, meaning they had more leftist tendencies. Conversely, the more distrust reported by participants, the more likely they were to display conservative tendencies. As previously discussed, rhetoric on the political right regarding the prevalence of "fake news" likely allows for more rampant cognitive dissonance, leading otherwise trustworthy sources to be distrusted.

Furthermore, in order to answer RQ2, a regression model was performed to determine if there is a relationship between trust placed in news media and political action. While not showing extremely significant results, the model did show somewhat of a relationship between both trust in media and voting ( $p = .098$ ,  $b = .075$ ), as well as trust in media and feelings of political efficacy ( $p = .163$ ,  $b = -.133$ ). Therefore, we can say that the level of trust one places in the media has at least some impact upon political efficacy and action.

### *Relationship between individual issues and media selectivity*

We can also observe significant relationships between amount of attention paid to certain news sources and one's position on various individual issues. In these results, which help answer RQ1, we can see just how significant of an impact the media has on framing and presenting political topics and information:

### *Border security*

Regression models found a significant relationship ( $p=.014$ ,  $b=-.145$ ) between the amount of attention one pays to national network television news and their stance on border security. Data analysis shows that the more attention one pays to national network news, the more likely they are to identify border security as a major pressing issue. Given that this study has also found that conservatives are more likely to watch national network news, they are more likely to have their views of border security shaped by those sources. Since networks like Fox News often prominently feature stories about border walls and illegal immigration, the commentary that those stories generates is likely to influence its viewers. Because networks like Fox News frame those issues as grave national security threats, it is not surprising that its viewers adopt the same stance. Interestingly, the same model found that while border security was likely to be identified as a pressing issue by national network news viewers, the related topic of illegal immigration was not as likely identified as a pressing issue.

### *Climate change*

One interesting note from this data is the idea that perhaps there are certain issues that have become so entrenched in popular discourse, that media selection plays no role in influencing one's position. Regression models found that regardless of one's propensity to watch cable news networks for political information, views on issues like climate change remained constant ( $p=.153$ ,  $b=-.074$ ). One might hypothesize that if an individual is a regular cable news viewer of networks such as Fox News, they may be

more likely to brush off climate change as a non-salient issue. However, the data showed no significant relationship between the two. Given that roughly 83% of all respondents identified climate change as at least a somewhat pressing issue, we might conclude that certain issues hold generational significance. Even if one is an avid conservative news consumer, perhaps certain stances on issues are shaped more by popular discourse with peers, as well as real-world interactions, rather than agendas set by the news.

### *Income inequality*

Roughly 69% of respondents reported income inequality to be at least somewhat of a pressing issue, while only about 15% did not believe that it is. We are able to see that consumers of certain news types made up the overwhelming majority of that 15% who do not see economic inequality as a relevant issue. For example, regression models found a significant relationship between talk radio selectivity and the view of economic inequality not being a relevant topic, with a confidence interval of ( $p < .05$ ,  $b = -.151$ ). While not proven to be statistically significant, the same models found a relatively noticeable relationship between cable news viewership and negative views towards the relevance of income inequality ( $p = .118$ ,  $b = .085$ ). Again, with these two examples, we are able to see the agenda setting and opinion shaping power set forth by media, especially conservative-leaning media.

### *Other findings*

With the rise of social media consumption, one might have expected to find that commentators on various platforms would have a higher level of influence on certain issues. Whether right or left-leaning, most corporate media seem to not take radical stances on topics such as police brutality, military imperialism, and capitalism. However, because not all prominent social media commentators and influencers are tied to these corporate media entities, they often are able to freely adopt and express views that might otherwise be controversial. For example, a fairly prominent political commentator on Twitter is “Existential Comics” (@existentialcoms), has roughly 300,000 followers, and according to the Twitter analytics platform POPSTERS.us, those followers are primarily in the same age bracket as respondents of this study. This account regularly espouses views against capitalism and military interventionism, as well as other establishment ideas. Given that one does not have to necessarily expressly follow an account in order to come into contact with its tweets, one may assume that individuals may, with at least some regularity, be exposed to opposing viewpoints, such as these. Since 59% of respondents reported paying at least some attention to political commentators on social media, one might hypothesize that exposure to more controversial positions on these topics might lead followers to adopt similar stances, at least in a general sense. However, regression models found no significant association between paying attention to social media accounts for political information and stances on any given issue in the survey. Since this survey consisted of participants who are generally media savvy, perhaps this means a certain level of credibility must be perceived by these types of news consumers in order for them to adopt views espoused in media. The editorial and opinionated nature

of social media commentators might be a turn-off for those more well-educated, and therefore, may be less likely to have an influence, as opposed to those less media savvy and less educated.

One final surprising result of this study was that participants almost wholly shied away from picking a political label other than a party affiliation. A question in the survey gave participants the option to choose a write in a label to describe their political ideology, or choose from a list that contained terms such as “anarchist” and “neoliberal.” Roughly 75% of respondents abstained from choosing any of the provided labels, or providing their own label. Of the few labels written in by respondents, “Socialist” or “Democratic Socialist” were the most popular with two apiece. The absence of label selecting by participants may be evident of a few factors. For one, perhaps these respondents were potentially not politically literate enough to understand either what the preselected labels meant, or did not have enough information to label themselves. Another possibility is that perhaps these labels simply do not carry enough meaning to warrant selection. Given that roughly 83% of respondents identified themselves as either Republican or Democrat, we can clearly see that there is some semblance of identity formation present. Since 75% of participants abstained from choosing any ancillary label at all, this may be evidence that other political distinctions are not important to individuals. This phenomenon may be a symptom of the establishment two-party system in American politics, where other labels and parties are generally dismissed as “fringe” ideas.



### **What conclusions could not be reached?**

While this study provided us a more clear insight into the media's influence on political identity and issue stance, several questions remain unanswered due to many factors. The most glaring question remaining is to what extent do individuals misuse political labels? One of the core research questions in this study aimed at illuminating potential misunderstandings of what certain political labels mean. For example, this could have been tested in this study by having a sizable portion of the respondents select one of the preset labels, and comparing that label to their ideology score in order to see if they had a full understanding of what their chosen political label meant. However, due to the overwhelming majority of participants abstaining from this section of the survey, coupled with somewhat neutered questions and content in the rest of the survey, the extent of this problem could not be determined.

The heavily localized population used in this study also may have hampered potential findings. Because the population only consisted of a very specific demographic, we are not able to make broad generalizations in regards to the findings. Perhaps a more representative population sample would have yielded a broader range of political labels and news consumption habits to compare, however, due to budgetary restrictions, the survey was focused on a very specific, convenient population.

Finally, the question of whether individuals gravitate towards certain news sources for information due to a perceived ideological consistency, or if they have their views shaped by these news sources simply via exposure, remains unsolved. Perhaps questions in the survey that focused more specifically on habitual or affable attitudes

towards certain news sources, or asking participants what news sources they use to learn about specific issues would have yielded more substantial results to this question.

## Overall findings

The results of the survey, while not wholly generalizable, yielded the following significant results:

There are significant associations between one's ideology and what type of media they pay the most attention to:

- Those with leftist tendencies tend to pay more attention to satirical news sources
- Those with more right-wing ideals tend to pay more attention to national network news and talk radio for news

This could mean either, individuals with these tendencies gravitate to these news sources because of their perceived ideological nature, or, these sources shape their views.

Generally speaking, participants had more centrist tendencies, and they were reasonably accurate in identifying this.

- There was not a large discrepancy between the range of participants' ideological scores and where they self-identified along the ideological spectrum
- Though a simple majority of participants had negative ideological scores, they were typically only within a few points of zero, indicating generally centrist tendencies, even if they identified as "lean left," which could be categorized as essentially the same.

Raw news consumption time does not impact one's ideological score, rather, amount of attention paid to certain sources does.

- As previously mentioned, attention paid to national network news, talk radio and political satire shows has a greater impact on one's ideology than total time spent consuming news.

Stances on individual issues are more significantly shaped by certain news sources

- Stances on issues like border security and economic inequality are more likely to be impacted by one's media consumption than other issues
- Certain stances on issues, especially climate change, remain constant regardless of media selectivity or political affiliation

Level of trust in media is correlated with one's ideological score

- The lower your ideological score is, which is affiliated with leftist tendencies, is generally emblematic of a higher trust in the media to report news fully, fairly, and accurately.

### *Potential research flaws*

While this study utilized a semi-sizable population, the inherent limitations caused by the localized population certainly may have hampered the overall research. If there had been a greater level of funding for this research, a greater, more diverse population could have been reached in order to provide a truer sense of political attitudes.

Another potential flaw in this research may have been that the participants were not as well versed in political topics and labels, which certainly would have effected how they identified themselves, as well as their attitudes on issues. The striking lack of diversity in political labels may be a cue that may college students simply do not have enough political knowledge to pick a label for themselves other than “liberal” or “conservative.” Initially, one of the premises of this research was to identify if a great number of individuals’ political identities were warped by their media consumption. In order to test this, participants would have had to have chosen a varying degree of political labels, which was not the case in this research.

### *Potential for future research*

While this research helped to provide a baseline of political attitudes for college students as they relate to their media habits, perhaps this study could be considered a precursor to a more grandiose project. Some of the general trends observed in this study are encouraging in that we are starting to notice exactly what issues are shaped by various news media consumption, therefore subsequent projects may use some of these measures

to sample a greater population in order to gather a greater sense of just how influential news media is in regards to political identity and issue stances.

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