




# Partisan Media Selectivity and Partisan Identity Threat: The Role of Social and Geographic Context

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There is growing concern about the polarizing impact of citizens primarily choosing sources of political information consistent with their existing partisan perspective. Although research has begun providing answers about the consequences, questions remain about what factors drive such selective use of political media. This study conceptualizes partisanship as a social identity and the decision to selectively use like-minded political media as a method for maintenance of that identity. Using the logic of the reinforcing spirals model (Slater, 2007, 2015), we investigated partisan media selectivity as a response to identity threat. We argue the partisan composition of one's geographic locale and the presence of partisan difference in one's interpersonal network

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are common causes of identity threat, which we predict will be associated with compensatory use of partisan media. Results from national survey data generally provide support for the assertion that greater partisan media selectivity is associated with the presence of various forms of identity threat, especially for strong partisans.

Research on selective exposure to political media has transitioned from decades of debate over its existence (Freedman & Sears, 1965) to broad acceptance of the phenomenon (e.g., Stroud, 2008). Partisan media selectivity has been implicated as a causal factor in several of democratic society's ailments: ideological polarization (Levendusky, 2013; Stroud, 2010), diminished views of out-party members (Garrett et al., 2014), perceptions of media bias (Arceneaux, Johnson, & Murphy, 2012), and uncivil discussion (Gervais, 2014). This research has occurred in an atmosphere of general concern over the possibility that communication technologies, among other factors, could lead to an increasingly fragmented and adversarial society (e.g., Sunstein, 2001). Despite newfound clarity about the existence of selective exposure in political contexts, its cognitive underpinnings, and some of its effects, basic questions remain about its contextual causes.

The present study expands upon the role of partisanship, which is the antecedent of selective exposure to partisan media with clearest support in prior research (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Stroud, 2008). The reinforcing spirals model (RSM; Slater, 2007, 2015) is well suited to address concerns about behaviors that under some circumstances tend to become increasingly extreme over time, a concern that has motivated a great deal of selective exposure research. The RSM is based on a systems theory logic that specifies the conditions under which one would expect something such as partisan selectivity to increase or decrease. A core assertion of the theory is that media use is driven by a need to maintain social identities. It argues that when an individual is sufficiently secure in a given social identity, identity-relevant media use would tend to be, in part, displaced by media use supporting other social identities or interests. Conversely, when a social identity is under greater threat, identity-relevant media use should increase. Although political party affiliation is driven partly by rational evaluations of policy positions and governing performance, a growing line of work has shown partisanship to be primarily a social identity (Green, Palmquist, & Shickler, 2004; Huddy, Mason, & Aarøe, 2015; Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012). Our general expectation is therefore that selective exposure to partisan media will be driven by the presence of external threats to partisan identity in the social environment, and the strength of partisan identity will amplify this relationship. Our results, based on national survey data employing more advanced measures of partisan media use than in most prior survey studies, largely support these expectations.

## SELECTIVE EXPOSURE TO POLITICAL MEDIA

Political communication researchers have investigated selective exposure since prior to the dawn of the television age, leading to the finding that many citizens encountered rather one-sided information (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948). A revival in interest in partisan selective exposure has been driven in part by normative concerns over the way cable television and the Internet could facilitate both selective approach (seeking sources that comport with one's views) and avoidance (actively avoiding information that is hostile to one's views) on a scale previously not feasible (Bimber, 2003; Sunstein, 2001). Previous work has yielded strong experimental demonstrations of the process (Garrett & Stroud, 2014; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009) and the consequences of partisan selective exposure on outcomes like political polarization (Garrett et al., 2014; Levendusky, 2013; Stroud, 2010) and participation (Dilliplane, 2011; Wojcieszak, Bimber, Feldman, & Stroud, 2016). In other words, there is little doubt about the fact that people generally do engage in partisan selective exposure, and this has a number of appreciable effects on the political environment.

Scholars have made progress on identifying the psychological causes of selective exposure, a concept formalized in research on cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) before political communication researchers gained interest. One recent effort to tease them out found a role for anxiety, but only in circumstances in which selectivity would be useful to reduce anxiety (Valentino, Banks, Hutchings, & Davis, 2009). Another is the work of Taber and Lodge (2006), who found evidence of confirmation bias—the deliberate search for evidence in support of one's existing attitudes—in political information searches in an experimental setting (see also Knobloch-Westerwick, Johnson, & Westerwick, 2015). The present study, on the other hand, investigates the social contextual causes of partisan media selectivity. That is, we explore the aspects of one's social environment that contribute to selective partisan media use.

## REINFORCING SPIRALS, IDENTITY, AND THREAT

One concern about selective exposure is a belief that with the affordances of modern communication technology, the sorting of political media audiences into partisan camps will only intensify. Sunstein (2001) described “echo chambers” in which copartisans speak only to one another, serving to amplify and reinforce shared views to the exclusion of all others. Research on political polarization, which is often attributed in part to partisan media (Stroud, 2010), shows a trend of increased partisan differences when it comes to policy positions (e.g., Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008) and/or interparty animosity (e.g., Iyengar

et al., 2012) that has persisted for nearly a half century. The question, then, is, What stops these processes from spinning out of control?

The RSM (Slater, 2007) can be used to address these concerns by reference to the logic of systems theory. The possibility of an unchecked path toward specificity and extreme views could otherwise be called “positive feedback loops,” processes that are not self-regulating and therefore continue increasing or decreasing until some external force intervenes. Continuing with systems theory concepts, a closed system—one free of external forces—fosters an environment in which positive feedback loops are likely to occur. In the RSM, the extent to which the systems of interest are open is determined by the presence of “competing social, psychological, and environmental variables” (Slater, 2007, p. 288). The model’s explicit consideration of the various social influences an individual may face, and how these relate to media consumption, makes the approach particularly useful for our present goals.

As just one example of this approach, a study found support for the RSM in the context of global warming by observing that beliefs about global warming predicted exposure to partisan media, which then produced an impact on those beliefs, which in turn predicted further partisan media exposure (Feldman & Johnston, 2014). The language and logic of systems are helpful for understanding the importance of broad elements of social context in conjunction with political orientations and behaviors.

## Social Identity

Self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) puts social comparison at the forefront of understanding social identity. Intergroup contact increases the salience of a given identity because the presence of the other group calls for comparison. Furthermore, salience is particularly high when the groups being compared are most different. When multiple categorizations are applicable, the one for which differences are largest is expected to become salient. For instance, a mixed group of European men and women will likely find their gender identity salient when the topic of conversation is sports, but nationality becomes salient if instead prompted to discuss the European Union (Lea, Spears, & Watt, 2007). This example also makes clear another important feature of the self-categorization approach to social identity, namely, that an individual typically holds many different identities and the one that is at top of mind at any given moment will be, in part, a product of circumstances. The chronic, context-independent accessibility of a given identity will be a mixture of personal importance and alignment with core values along with the frequency that everyday contexts force an identity to become salient.

A recent line of research treats partisan political affiliation as a social identity from this framework. Greene (1999) pointed out that the conceptualization of partisanship

in *The American Voter* (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960) is largely consistent with social identity theory, which was formally developed in social psychology nearly two decades later (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Iyengar and colleagues have applied the social identity approach to partisanship to inform the academic debate on polarization (Iyengar et al., 2012; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). Huddy et al. (2015) investigated the psychometric properties of measures of partisan identity and found the typical approach—a placement on a scale ranging from pure independent, leaning, not very strong, and strong affiliate with each party—taps a social identity.

### Identity Threats and Partisan Media Use

The RSM argues that identity-relevant media use serves as a counterbalance to the competing points of view that are unavoidable in an open system. In other words, media use is part of a process designed to promote homeostasis or identity maintenance (Slater, 2007). Although one would rightly be skeptical of claims that exposure to some subset of widely available media sources inevitably leads to positive feedback loops, it is clear to anyone paying attention to American politics that a small number of people do indeed use media in a way consistent with a positive feedback loop. The RSM makes predictions about when such spiraling processes may occur. Consistent with systems theory, the fundamental question has to do with system openness. People are not embedded within entirely closed or open systems, and their media use behavior and attitudes are not simply extreme or nonextreme; they vary along a spectrum.

The RSM predicts that identity threats may drive highly selective media use. Just as moderate selectivity would be expected in the face of moderate threat to maintain one's social identity, a strong identity threat may drive more strongly reinforcing behavior. That is, if one's identity faces a threat, then a predictable response is to find ways to validate the identity. Of particular interest here is the use of media to do so. In the political domain, this may be where selective exposure to identity-consistent political media plays a role. Generally speaking, RSM predicts that increases in identity threat will result in corresponding increases in identity-consistent media use.

### Contexts, Networks, and Identity Threats

For the present analysis, we consider the implications of politically fitting in, or not, with one's local area. A Republican who lives in a Republican-dominated county would be an example of someone who faces no identity threat in this regard. A Democrat in the same place, however, does face an identity threat by having his or her in-group outnumbered. Identity salience is expected to be higher among those in the political minority due to the persistent presence of out-group members. Further, in the political context it also generally means

elected officials at the local level will be out-partisans, putting the minority member's preferred party in a less powerful position.

One plausible prediction might be that social influence processes may have a persuasive effect, pushing everyone's attitudes toward the local consensus and thereby reducing a minority party member's interest in in-party media. However, all else being equal, the expectation from the RSM is that individuals would respond to this threat by selecting in-party media sources to protect a valued identity—in this case, party identification. One obvious way of doing so would be to seek out confirmatory information and avoid disconfirmatory information. In effect, the response to identity threat would be to construct a protective cocoon around oneself, a cocoon that would not have been so necessary in the absence of identity threat.

Berry and Sobieraj (2014) argued that partisan media in particular are well suited for identity maintenance, offering content that is often emotional and experienced by consumers as something not unlike a social gathering (similar to parasocial relationships; e.g., Horton & Wohl, 1956). Work on affective polarization (e.g., Iyengar et al., 2012) also theorizes that negative affect toward outgroups is a product of a social identity mechanism. Huddy and colleagues (2015) experimentally induced identity threat and found that partisans reacted with more anger than nonpartisans. Anger, in particular, is associated with biased information seeking and processing (Parker & Isbell, 2010; Weeks, 2015), and Song (2017) found anger to be associated both with decreases in out-party partisan media use and increases in in-party partisan media use. Therefore, we predict the following:

- H1: There will be a positive relationship between county-level partisan identity threat and partisan media selectivity.

Living in a county in which one's political identity is in the minority can be threatening to that identity. The nature of one's political discussion network, a context with even closer psychological proximity and higher contact frequency, may be even more important in terms of identity threat. Interpersonal discussion networks can be adjusted by individuals, through selection processes, to provide identity-consistent tendencies. Further, evidence suggests that most people do in fact have networks that tend toward political homophily (Mutz, 2006). Even the lonely Democrat in rural Kansas may be likely to find kindred spirits with whom to talk politics and may prefer to confine discussion to weather, children, sports, and farm prices with politically dissimilar others as much as she can.

Nonetheless, one's political discussion networks are not entirely under one's control, because they are contingent upon the more general opportunity structures in which people are embedded (Song, 2015). Therefore, many individuals also experience political disagreement in their personal discussion networks (Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague, 2004), and if we look beyond close ties to those

encountered in voluntary associations, maybe even more than most have suggested (e.g., see Eveland & Kleinman, 2013). The presence of out-partisans (members of a party other than that identified with by the respondent) in one's political discussion network should lead to identity threat, with greater threat experienced as the proportion of one's network that is inconsistent with one's identity increases. In other words, experiencing difference within one's interpersonal network is likely to operate in much the same way as being a political minority in one's broader community. The threat need not come from explicit disagreement in those discussions. Awareness of party affiliations leads to awareness of many of the probable areas of disagreement. Again, such identity threat is likely to lead to a response to protect one's identity, and partisan news selectivity is one response easily in the control of individuals experiencing identity threat resulting from difference in political viewpoints in their interpersonal discussion networks. We are not aware of political network disagreement having been used to operationalize identity threat in the past, evidence of its effects on related outcome variables such as overall media use (Klofstad, Sokhey, & McClurg, 2013) and participation (Mutz, 2002, 2006) is not uncommon. Our reasoning is consistent with Berry and Sobieraj (2014), who have argued that partisan media offer some of the social benefits of conversation (e.g., feeling a part of a group) without the considerable risks of conflict, embarrassment, and alienation that arise in interpersonal political discussions. We therefore predict the following:

- H2: There will be a positive relationship between political discussion network identity threat and partisan media selectivity.

### Strength of Identity

Research on social identity has not sufficiently developed theory on the effect of the strength of identity (Huddy, 2001). However, there is evidence to suggest that those who are strongly attached to their social identity may react differently—either in degree or kind—to identity threats than do the weakly affiliated. Wann and Branscombe (1990) found that “fair-weather fans” of sports teams were more likely than “die-hards” to respond to team losses by reducing their identification with the preferred team. Fans with high degrees of affiliation were also more likely to have aggressive reactions when their team lost than were weak identifiers. Similarly, Ethier and Deaux (1994) followed Hispanic students as they enrolled in predominantly non-Hispanic schools for the first time and found the students followed one of two paths. Those strongly identified with their ethnic group performed identity maintenance by engaging in Hispanic cultural activities. Those who were initially weakly identified continued to recognize their ethnic difference from their peers throughout the duration of the study but did not

pursue identity-affirming activities and subsequently lowered their strength of identification. In one of the few studies considering both partisan social identity and threat, strength of partisan identity predicted increases in campaign involvement and state anger in response to identity threat (Huddy et al., 2015).

These findings lead us to anticipate a moderating effect of strength of partisan identification on the relationship between the experience of various forms of identity threat and identity reinforcement efforts such as partisan media selectivity. This could take one of two related forms. On one hand, a strongly held identity may be a necessary condition for one to engage in identity-protective behaviors in response to threat. Perhaps the weakly identified respond to threat without changing those behaviors, or even by reducing them. On the other hand, identity strength may simply contribute to the intensity of identity-protective behaviors in which both weak and strong identifiers engage. In either case, identity strength should be associated with a greater amount of identity-protective behavior, such as partisan media consumption, as identity threats grow stronger. Therefore, we predict the following:

- H3: The relationship between county-level partisan identity threat and partisan media selectivity will be stronger among those with strong partisan identification.
- H4: The relationship between political discussion network identity threat and partisan media selectivity will be stronger among those with strong partisan identification.

## METHODS

Data were gathered from a nationally representative sample ( $N = 800$ ) by YouGov between April 29 and May 7, 2015. The current analysis also includes 200 additional respondents who were part of a Black oversample in the same survey, for a total of 1,000 observations.<sup>1</sup> YouGov uses a matching technique that involves creating a conventional sample from a population frame and then choosing the most similar member of their panel to the conventional sample based on a “propensity score” that factors in demographic and other social factors (Rivers, 2007).

The survey asked respondents to report their year of birth, which was subtracted from 2015 (the year the survey was conducted) to arrive at age ( $M = 49.08$ ,  $SD = 16.90$ ). Education was measured as an ordinal variable with six categories

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<sup>1</sup> Weights are not used in analyses in order to have more efficient estimates (Bollen, Biemer, Karr, Tueller, & Berzofsky, 2016). To ensure this did not bias coefficients, the tests described by DuMouchel and Duncan (1983) and by Pfefferman and Sverchkov (1999) were used, revealing no significant difference in the coefficients of any variable in any model when weights are used, meaning the models are specified correctly without the weights.



ranging from 1 (*not graduating from high school*) to 6 (*holding a college degree beyond the bachelor's degree*;  $Mdn = 3.00$ ,  $M = 3.28$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ). The portion of the sample analyzed was 45% male with dummy coding such that 1 signifies male in the analyses. A majority (59%) identified as White, 31% as Black (due to the incorporation of the Black oversample), 8% as Latino/a, and 5% another race in a measure that allowed for multiple selections. In later analyses, dummy variables for whether the respondent identified as Black and Hispanic were used.

To measure partisan identification, respondents were initially asked whether they identify as a Republican, Democrat, "Independent," "Other," or "Not sure." Those who did not choose either Republican or Democrat were asked in a follow-up question whether they "lean Republican," "lean Democrat," or "neither." Those who did not state a party identification or lean even after this prompt ( $n = 201$ ) were excluded from further analysis because variables such as "partisan media selectivity" have no meaning for nonpartisans.<sup>2</sup> If the respondent chose Republican or Democrat in the initial question, a follow-up asked whether they considered themselves a "strong" or "not very strong" Republican/Democrat. Following convention, a measure of *strength of partisan identification* was constructed by grouping (regardless of party) strong partisans (3), not strong partisans (2), and partisan leaners (1;  $M = 2.29$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ).

*Partisan media selectivity* was derived from a checklist of 67 TV and radio shows as well as websites, a method known as the "program list technique" (Dilliplane, Goldman, & Mutz, 2013). The list of sources was based on those in Dilliplane et al. (2013) and the 2012 American National Election Time Series Study with updates for sources that had since gone off the air or changed names. Respondents were asked simply whether they watched/listened to/read the source "regularly." Each source was coded as either left-leaning, right-leaning, or nonpartisan for the present analysis (see Table 1). To categorize each source as partisan or nonpartisan, a survey was distributed to five communication researchers not involved in or aware of the specific hypotheses of this article. They were asked to rate each source—with consideration of whether the source would meet disciplinary norms for partisan media exposure—as conservative/Republican leaning, liberal/Democratic leaning, or nonpreferential. Raters were additionally given options to rate a source as "not a political source" and to state they did not know enough to make a rating. If more than half of the raters agreed on a rating, the majority choice was used for categorization. When not, an alternative procedure adapted from Dilliplane (2011) was used.<sup>3</sup> For each participant, the proportion of

<sup>2</sup> Descriptive statistics reported from here forward describe only the portion of the sample included in analysis.

<sup>3</sup> This involved searching LexisNexis for the name of the show or its host and restricting results to those in which one of the words "liberal," "Democrat," "conservative," and "Republican" appeared within 10 words of the target term. The authors then examined the results, discarding examples when the words did not refer to the show or host. If each of the first five descriptions of the show or host were unanimous, that categorization was accepted. If none of the first 50 results described the show or its host as partisan, the show was treated as nonpartisan.

TABLE 1  
Classification of Media Sources into Partisan Categories

<i>Democrat Leaning</i>	<i>Republican Leaning</i>	<i>Nonpartisan</i>
<p>Television</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>All In with Chris Hayes</i></li> <li>• <i>Anderson Cooper 360</i></li> <li>• <i>Chris Matthews Show</i></li> <li>• <i>The Daily Show with Jon Stewart</i></li> <li>• <i>Dateline NBC</i></li> <li>• <i>The Ed Show</i></li> <li>• <i>Erin Burnett Out Front</i></li> <li>• <i>Hardball with Chris Matthews</i></li> <li>• <i>The Last Word with Lawrence O'Donnell<sup>a</sup></i></li> <li>• <i>Meet the Press</i></li> <li>• <i>Politics Nation with Al Sharpton</i></li> <li>• <i>The Rachel Maddow Show</i></li> <li>• <i>Saturday Night Live</i></li> <li>• <i>Tavis Smiley</i></li> </ul> <p>Radio</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The Ed Schultz Show<sup>a</sup></i></li> <li>• <i>The Power (Joe Madison)<sup>a</sup></i></li> <li>• <i>The Thom Hartmann Show<sup>a</sup></i></li> </ul> <p>Websites</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Huffington Post</i></li> <li>• <i>Los Angeles Times</i></li> <li>• <i>MSNBC</i></li> </ul>	<p>Television</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The Five</i></li> <li>• <i>Fox Report</i></li> <li>• <i>Hannity</i></li> <li>• <i>Huckabee</i></li> <li>• <i>The Kelly File</i></li> <li>• <i>The O'Reilly Factor</i></li> <li>• <i>On the Record with Greta Van Susteren</i></li> <li>• <i>Special Report with Bret Baier</i></li> </ul> <p>Radio</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The Dave Ramsey Show</i></li> <li>• <i>Glenn Beck Program</i></li> <li>• <i>The Laura Ingraham Show</i></li> <li>• <i>The Mark Levin Show<sup>a</sup></i></li> <li>• <i>The Neal Boortz Show<sup>a</sup></i></li> <li>• <i>The Rush Limbaugh Show</i></li> <li>• <i>The Savage Nation (Michael Savage)</i></li> <li>• <i>The Sean Hannity Show</i></li> </ul> <p>Websites</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Fox News</i></li> <li>• <i>Drudge Report</i></li> <li>• <i>Forbes</i></li> </ul>	<p>Television</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>20/20</i></li> <li>• <i>60 Minutes</i></li> <li>• <i>ABC News Nightline</i></li> <li>• <i>ABC World News Tonight</i></li> <li>• <i>CBS Evening News</i></li> <li>• <i>Face the Nation</i></li> <li>• <i>Frontline</i></li> <li>• <i>NBC Nightly News</i></li> <li>• <i>Sunday Morning<sup>a</sup></i></li> </ul> <p>Radio</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>All Things Considered (NPR)</i></li> <li>• <i>Fresh Air (NPR)</i></li> <li>• <i>Morning Edition (NPR)</i></li> <li>• <i>Talk of the Nation (NPR)</i></li> </ul> <p>Websites</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>ABC News</i></li> <li>• <i>CNN</i></li> <li>• <i>Google News</i></li> <li>• <i>New York Times</i></li> <li>• <i>USA Today</i></li> <li>• <i>Washington Post</i></li> <li>• <i>Yahoo News</i></li> </ul>

<sup>a</sup>Sources that were classified by the alternative method.

political media sources that were partisan consistent was calculated by dividing the number of sources classified as leaning toward the respondent's party ( $M = 2.78$ ,  $SD = 3.44$ ) by the total number of political media sources used by the respondent ( $M = 5.96$ ,  $SD = 6.06$ ). The average respondent included in analyses had in-party partisan media sources account for 36% of their total political sources.

Two variables assessing the presence of identity threat were developed. First, we used self-reported ZIP codes to compare respondent partisan identification (Democrat vs. Republican) to the proportion of voters in their county who voted for the presidential candidate of the opposing party.<sup>4</sup> County-level voting data from the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections were used to create a continuous measure of partisanship at the county level. The average percentage vote share of the respondent's nonpreferred party is used as an indicator of the level of *county-level partisan identity threat*, where positive values indicate greater threat as a greater portion of opposite-party votes ( $M = 46.03$ ,  $SD = 14.97$ ). Although presidential votes are not an official declaration of party affiliation, they represent something close to a forced choice and therefore provide insight into the leanings of those who do not explicitly affiliate one way or the other, akin to many measures of partisanship. We opt for county presidential vote due both to the analytic simplicity (the same mainstream candidates appear in all counties' ballots in the same election years) and the conceptual clarity in taking a measure in which the same candidates are considered no matter where the respondent lives. In municipal and state elections, local political dynamics often result in candidate defections from party norms and wide disparities in terms of candidate seriousness and campaign effort from each major party from one locale to another. By using federal election results, the measure of each county reflects the same political targets (the presidential candidates) who are broadly standard-bearers of their political parties. Party identification and presidential vote choice are very highly correlated (Miller, 1991) and more highly correlated than partisanship with down-ballot races (Bartels, 2000). Previous work has used vote share in national elections as a measure of the partisan environment (e.g., Gallego, Buscha, Sturgis, & Oberski, 2016; Gimpel, Dyck, & Shaw, 2004).

To assess their political discussion networks, respondents were first given a working definition of political conversations in the survey item's prompt, which said, "When we say political conversations, we mean talk online (email, discussion forums, social media), via phone, or face-to-face about elections, politicians and candidates, and the performance of local, state, and national government." They were then asked (see Eveland, Hutchens, & Morey, 2013), "How many different people did you talk with about politics during the past month?" ( $M = 6.03$ ,  $SD = 12.48$ ) to prompt respondents to think broadly beyond their core networks. Those who responded with a nonzero number were then asked, "Of these people, about what percentage do you think support or identify with each of the following parties?" with choices of Democratic Party, Republican Party, "some other party (please specify)," or "no political party preference." The survey forced responses to sum to 100%. Our measure of *political discussion*

<sup>4</sup> Twenty-two respondents either did not provide a valid ZIP code or lived in a ZIP code that crosses county lines. They were not included in analyses.

*network identity threat* was created by taking the portion of discussion partners that were members of any opposing party ( $M = 17.32$ ,  $SD = 23.52$ ). Those who provided no discussion partners were given a value of zero. A subsequent question asked, “How many days per week, on average, do you engage in political conversations?” This item forced respondents to enter a value from 0 to 7 ( $M = 2.37$ ,  $SD = 2.38$ ).<sup>5</sup>

### Plan for Analysis

A series of regression models were estimated with partisan media selectivity as the outcome variable. Because the dependent variable is discrete and bounded at 0, a Poisson regression model is more appropriate than, for instance, ordinary least squares. Because the goal is to understand not just the total number of partisan sources but the extent to which partisan sources are chosen to the exclusion of others, careful specification is needed to avoid confusing the two. The total number of media sources used is included in the model as an important control to avoid mistaking the number of partisan sources for selectivity among those who simply consume a great deal of political media and vice versa.<sup>6</sup> Because the models exhibit modest overdispersion of the dependent variable (the dispersion parameter is estimated as 1.60 in Models 1 and 2 and 1.59 in Model 3), quasi-likelihood estimation is used (Gardner, Mulvey, & Shaw, 1995). This principally has the effect of correcting—typically, increasing—the standard errors, thereby reducing the Type 1 error rate.

Models included all participants who reported a partisan affiliation or lean, had valid geographic data, and responded to each item ( $n = 776$ ). Each model included age, sex, dummy codes for Black and Latino race/ethnicity, a Christian religion dummy code, number of days per week of political discussion as a proxy for political interest, strength of partisan identification, and a Republican dummy variable as controls, as well as the two measures of identity threat as tests of H1 and H2. Because respondents could have a value of zero for network-level identity threat for two reasons—respondents could talk to people, but none from opposing parties, or respondents may not discuss politics with anyone—a binary indicator of respondents with network size greater than zero ( $M = 0.76$ ,  $SD = 0.43$ ) is included.

Subsequent models tested H3 (Model 2) and H4 (Model 3) by adding product terms between strength of partisan identification and each of the two identity threats,

<sup>5</sup> The lone respondent who skipped this item is omitted from analyses.

<sup>6</sup> This variable is not used as an offset, as is sometimes done in Poisson models, because we find it unlikely that total political media consumption is exogenous to partisan media consumption, a key assumption of using the offset (Winkelmann, 2008). Instead, we include it as a predictor and let the data determine the relationship between total sources and partisan sources.

with one product term in each model to reduce multicollinearity. Before being entered into the model, each predictor was mean-centered, and all continuous predictors were divided by 2 *SD* to make their coefficients comparable to one another and to make the scale roughly equivalent to the binary variables (Gelman, 2008). These transformations have no bearing on statistical tests but simply aid interpretability by making a one-unit change equivalent to a 2 *SD* change on the original scale (for continuous variables), which is consistent with the usual interpretation of binary variables. When probing the interactions, the variables involved in the interaction are discussed in their original scale for clarity.

## RESULTS

Details of the regression analyses are included in Table 2. H1, which predicted there would be a positive relationship between county-level partisan identity threat and partisan media selectivity, was supported ( $b = 0.18, p = .003$ ). For a more intuitive interpretation, the incidence rate ratio (IRR) associated with a coefficient of 0.18 is 1.19, 95% CI [1.06, 1.34], meaning a one-unit (2 *SD* in our coding) change in county-level partisan identity threat is associated with a 21% increase in predicted partisan media selectivity. H2, that there would be a positive relationship between political discussion network identity threat and partisan media selectivity, was not supported ( $b = -0.04, p = .52$ ; IRR = 0.96), 95% CI [0.86, 1.08].

H3 predicted the relationship between county-level partisan identity threat and partisan media selectivity would be greater among those high in partisan identification. The interaction was statistically significant in the test of the product term ( $b = 0.25, p = .03$ ; Model 2, Table 2). Figure 1 (top-left pane) visualizes this interaction effect, showing a slope that becomes more positive as strength of partisanship increases. In other words, although partisan media selectivity does not vary greatly as a function of threat for the weakest partisans, it does vary with threat for stronger partisans. Simple slopes analysis (see Table 4) shows a slope of 0.27 of county-level threat for strong partisans ( $p < .001$ ), 0.12 for not strong partisans ( $p = .07$ ), and  $-0.04$  for leaning partisans ( $p = .74$ ). The IRR of the interaction term was 1.28, 95% CI [1.03, 1.60], meaning the additive positive effects of a one-unit increase in strength of partisanship and county-level threat is associated with an estimated 28% increase in partisan media selectivity when the two predictors increase concurrently.

H4 predicted that the positive relationship expected in H2 between political discussion network identity threat and partisan media selectivity would be greater among those with stronger partisan identification. This hypothesis was supported in the test of the interaction term ( $b = 0.26, p = .01$ ; Model 3, Table 2). Although the main effect predicted in H2 was absent, the result of

TABLE 2  
Results of Regression Models Predicting Partisan Media Exposure

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Out-party vote share (H1)	.18 (.06)*	.16 (.06)*	.18 (.06)*
Out-party discussion (H2)	-.04 (.06)	-.04 (.06)	-.03 (.06)
Partisan identity strength	.00 (.06)	-.01 (.06)	-.02 (.06)
Out-Party Vote × Partisan Strength (H3)	—	.25 (.11)*	—
Out-Party Discussion × Partisan Strength (H4)	—	—	.26 (.11)*
Republican	.13 (.07) <sup>†</sup>	.13 (.07)*	.13 (.07) <sup>†</sup>
Any discussants (> 0)	.24 (.11)*	.24 (.11)*	.25 (.11)*
No. of media sources	.87 (.03)*	.87 (.03)*	.87 (.03)*
Days/week political discussion	.39 (.06)*	.39 (.06)*	.39 (.06)*
Religion (Christian)	.08 (.06)	.09 (.06)	.08 (.06)
Race/ethnicity (Black)	-.12 (.07)	-.11 (.08)	-.12 (.07)
Race/ethnicity (Hispanic)	.03 (.12)	.03 (.12)	.02 (.12)
Education	.05 (.06)	.05 (.05)	.05 (.05)
Age	.54 (.06)*	.54 (.06)*	.54 (.06)*
Sex (male)	.22 (.06)*	.23 (.06)*	.22 (.12)*
Constant	.68 (.04)*	.68 (.04)*	.69 (.04)*
McFadden's Pseudo-R <sup>2</sup>	.372	.374	.374

Note: Values above are Poisson generalized linear regression coefficients, standardized as described previously, with standard errors in parentheses.

\* $p < .05$ . <sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ .

the interaction test is consistent with the predicted direction of the moderated effect. The plot of the interaction (see the top-right panel on Figure 1) reveals the same pattern as with H3 with more positive slopes for identity threat for stronger partisans. For strong partisans, as the proportion of one's out-party discussion partners increased, so did partisan media selectivity. For the weakest partisans, the slope is negative. A simple slopes analysis shows a slope of 0.09 for network-level threat for strong partisans ( $p = .25$ ),  $-0.08$  for not strong partisans ( $p = .22$ ), and  $-0.24$  for leaning partisans ( $p = .02$ ). This means that although the difference between strong partisans and leaning partisans in selectivity as a function of network threat is significant, the rate of increase in selectivity for strong partisans is not itself distinct from 0, providing just modest support for the hypothesis. The estimated IRR of 1.30, 95% CI [1.06, 1.60], suggests a 30% increase in partisan media selection when both partisan strength and network-level threat are high, yet no effect when network threat is held at its mean value (due to the lack of main effect) and a reduction of partisan media selection of equivalent magnitude when both threat and partisanship are low.

Because we suspected upon seeing the results that our strength of partisanship measure may not have linear effects—it is not clear that “not strong”

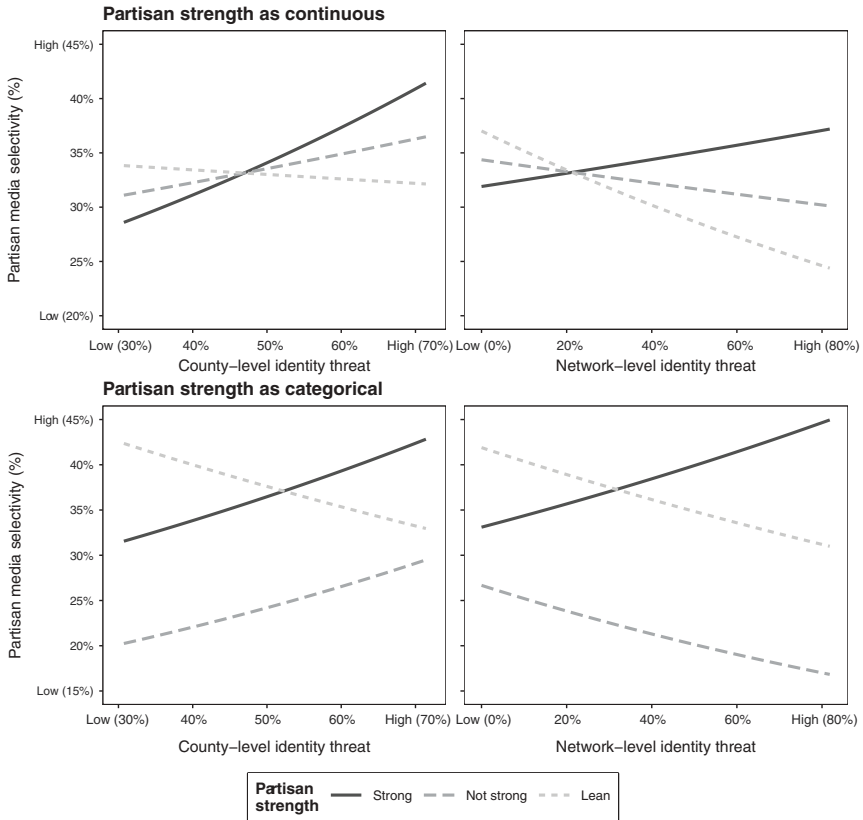


FIGURE 1 Predicted values of partisan media selectivity by level of threat and partisan strength.  
*Note.* Although the model predicts a number of partisan media sources, the y axis is labeled as a proportion of the mean level of total sources for ease of interpretation.

partisans are really more strongly identified than those who lean—we performed the preceding analyses again while treating partisan strength as an unordered, categorical variable. Full results are reported in Table 3 and plotted in the lower two panes of Figure 1. In short, the substantive conclusions still hold. We still see a main effect of the county-level identity threat ( $b = 0.15$ ,  $p = .01$ ) and not for network level threat ( $b = -0.00$ ,  $p = .99$ ). Omnibus tests of model change are  $F(2, 759) = 4.95$ ,  $p = .01$ , for the addition of the county-level interaction terms and  $F(2, 759) = 5.86$ ,  $p = .003$ , for the addition of the network-level terms. Strong partisans, who comprise more

TABLE 3  
Results of Regression Models Using Categorical Partisan Strength

Variable	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Out-party vote share (H1)	.15 (.06)*	.28 (.12)*	.15 (.06)*
Out-party discussion (H2)	-.00 (.06)	.03 (.06)	-.27 (.15) <sup>†</sup>
Lean partisan	.49 (.09)*	.50 (.09)*	.49 (.09)*
Strong partisan	.42 (.08)*	.42 (.08)*	.38 (.08)*
Out-Party Vote × Lean Partisan (H3)	—	-.46 (.17)*	—
Out-Party Vote × Strong Partisan (H3)	—	-.05 (.14)	—
Out-Party Discussion × Lean Partisan (H4)	—	—	.09 (.18)
Out-Party Discussion × Strong Partisan (H4)	—	—	.44 (.17)*
Republican	.16 (.07)*	.18 (.07)*	.17 (.07)*
Any discussants (> 0)	.22 (.10)*	.21 (.10)*	.25 (.11)*
No. of media sources	.88 (.03)*	.90 (.04)*	.90 (.04)*
Days/week political discussion	.33 (.06)*	.32 (.06)*	.32 (.06)*
Constant	.01 (.12)	-.00 (.12)	.02 (.12)
McFadden's Pseudo-R <sup>2</sup>	.385	.388	.389
F(2, 759) for R <sup>2</sup> change	—	4.95*	5.86*

Note. Values above are Poisson generalized linear regression coefficients, standardized as described previously, with standard errors in parentheses. Coefficients for demographic controls are included in the models, but not reported here.

\**p* < .05. <sup>†</sup>*p* < .10.

TABLE 4  
Simple Slopes of the Focal Predictors at Key Values of Partisan Strength

Value of Partisan Strength	Slope of County-Level Threat	Slope of Network-Level Threat
<i>Continuous operationalization</i>		
Strong	.27 (.07)*	.09 (.08)
Not strong	.12 (.07) <sup>†</sup>	-.08 (.06)
Lean	-.04 (.12)	-.24 (.10)*
<i>Categorical operationalization</i>		
Strong	.23 (.07)*	.18 (.08)*
Not strong	.28 (.12)*	-.27 (.17) <sup>†</sup>
Lean	-.19 (.12)	-.17 (.10) <sup>†</sup>

Note. Values above are Poisson generalized linear regression coefficients, standardized as described previously, with standard errors in parentheses. Coefficients for demographic controls are included in the models, but not reported here.

\**p* < .05. <sup>†</sup>*p* < .10.

than half of the sample analyzed, continue to have a pattern of increased partisan media use with higher levels of both measures of identity threat (see Table 4 for simple slopes). Leaners have a positive slope in the case of network-level threat and negative for the county level (though the simple



slopes are both  $p > .05$ ), whereas that pattern is reversed for not strong partisans.

## DISCUSSION

Our study sought to better understand the tendency to embed oneself in a partisan media environment. Our general hypothesis was that partisan media selectivity is in part driven by a desire to protect and enhance one's identity. Thus, threats to identity should lead to a corresponding effort to offset those threats. We considered identity threats in two forms—from geographic context and one's interpersonal discussion network. We also expected that this effect would vary depending on the strength of partisan identification, being stronger for those who are more strongly identified. Our findings provide overall support for these predictions of the RSM but also considerable nuance that provides grist for theorizing and future empirical research. We begin our discussion by laying out the common threads but then probe more deeply into inconsistencies and consider potential reasons for them, which helps set an agenda for next research steps.

First, the community context indicator of identity threat had a direct association with partisan media selectivity. The more hostile an individual's county was to his or her identity, the more likely she or he was to have a higher proportion of partisanship-consistent media sources. H1 was (modestly) qualified, however, by the findings for H3, which predicted that the relationship would be stronger among the strongly identified than the weakly identified. The evidence supports H3. An examination of regression plots suggests that H1 is supported among strong and not so strong partisans, but not among partisan leaners.

The findings followed the same general pattern when we examined political discussion network identity threat, but with some meaningful differences. First, H2—that political discussion network identity threat would positively predict partisan media selectivity—was not supported. However, an examination of H4 helps us understand why, and in such a way that to some degree replicates our findings for H3 regarding community-level threats. H4 presents a transverse interaction—a finding of offsetting effects across subgroups—that led to the failure to support H2. That is, it is not that there are no effects of political discussion network threat but rather that it affects partisan leaners and strong partisans in opposite directions, canceling one another out in the aggregate (and thus a nonsignificant test for H2). The pattern of effects for community-level threat among strong partisans in H3 was replicated in our test of H4. Strong partisans, faced with increasing opposition in their political discussion networks, increase their level of partisan media selectivity. In this sense, H2 was supported, but only among strong partisans. Of interest, whereas community-level threat had no apparent impact on partisan leaners, network-level identity threat actually

had an opposite effect on partisan leaners compared to strong partisans. Leaners reduced their proportion of partisan media use when faced with an increasingly oppositional network, and there was a tendency for the same response (to a lesser degree) among not strong partisans.

So, from a bird's-eye view, the predictions of the RSM regarding the response of partisans to community- or network-level identity threat by increasing partisan media selectivity is consistently supported among strong partisans (51% of this sample during a nonelection year) for whom the social identity threat associated with exposure to divergent viewpoints should be greatest. Note that weak partisans respond to community-level threat in a manner similar to strong partisans, but weak partisans respond differently to network-level threat than strong partisans. These findings, which are in some cases contradictory to our expectations, need to be further reconciled with the RSM, the theory on which those predictions were based. Potential explanations are both theoretical and methodological. We begin with a discussion of the concept of identification.

We examined partisan identification by asking respondents if they identified with the Democratic or Republican party, were Independent, and offered additional options of "other" or "not sure." Those eventually classified as "not strong" and "strong" partisans initially chose a major party outright. However, leaners initially—for whatever reason—declined to report an identification with a major party, and only later (grudgingly, perhaps) noted that they leaned toward one party or another when prompted to try to pick sides. There is a valid argument for questioning, then, whether leaners really have "identified" with a party. It is possible that following the standard approach that encourages respondents to identify with a major party, we have pushed them into being an identifier. However, such a critique is not so straightforward. Some evidence suggests that at least a significant portion of leaners are in fact "closet" partisans (e.g., Keith et al., 1992). In fact, leaners often act more like strong partisans than they do weak partisans, including in their intensity of media use and political engagement (Petrocik, 1974, 2009). This is all to say that considering leaners as the lowest level of identification could be both overstating the identification of some leaners (those who were coerced by questionnaire design to pick a party but who truly do not "identify" with any party) and understating other leaners' identification (those who were motivated to present themselves otherwise but who ideologically and behaviorally act much like strong partisans). Describing oneself initially as "Independent" may indicate another, not mutually exclusive identity (Klar, 2014), especially for those who wish to signal that they know politics well enough to choose candidates without a party telling them what to think (Petrocik, 2009). Recent research using implicit measures (Theodoridis, 2017) suggests that although those who are "strong" partisans with the same measure used in this study are the most attached to their party, leaners may be

more strongly affiliated than are “not strong” partisans. In the case of Republicans, leaners are just as attached as strong partisans.

One way to sort this out is to reconsider the ordering of the levels of partisan strength, which we do in post hoc analyses reported in [Tables 3](#) and [4](#), as well as the lower portion of [Figure 1](#). Treating our three-level measure as unordered reveals slight shifts in our findings based on revised interaction plots but regression results, formal hypothesis tests, and practical interpretations are not substantively changed. What is illuminating about this specification is that the main effect of being a leaner is positive. In other words, the model (and simple cross-tabulated means) shows that leaners in these data are as selective and attentive as strong partisans when it comes to their media choices. That may be a residual effect of leaners being, as a group, politically engaged and high in political self-efficacy (Petrocik, 1974, 2009). This ambiguity in the meaning of identity strength in the context of politics—or at minimum in the context of this ubiquitous measure that pushes respondents to make a single choice when either none or multiple options (both a major party and independent) may be appealing—leaves open an opportunity for future research to replicate our findings with alternative measures of partisan identity (see Huddy et al., 2015, for one such measure).

Another possible explanation for our somewhat inconsistent findings across forms of identity threat relates to the nature of the threats themselves and how they are measured. On one hand, our measure of community-level threat is precise and objective if somewhat outdated relative to the timing of our survey. However, it is not subject to inaccuracies or biases that are inherent in self reports. On the other hand, threat is inherently a subjective phenomenon. The extent to which an individual can consciously access and report his or her own sense of identity threat, though, is unclear. Identity threat may operate on an explicit level in which people feel a clear sense of threat and act accordingly, or they may feel subtler impulses and emotions that result in the pattern of findings presented. It is an open question, then, whether the findings with regard to county-level threat are because of, or in spite of, the nature of our measure.

Our network-level measure differs in its relative strengths and weaknesses. Here, we are clearly dealing with a perceptual measure, and our findings are somewhat less consistent with the theory. It may be that the measure does not accurately reflect the partisanship of the respondents’ networks because they misperceive the opinions of the people they speak with (see Eveland & Hutchens, 2013). Clearly, asking respondents to estimate the proportions of their network that are Republican, Democrat, and otherwise could be fraught with imprecision, even if random. A more careful and thorough means of measuring the network partisanship—such as enumerating each discussion partner individually, followed by the perception of that network member’s partisanship (see Eveland & Kleinman, 2013)—could have produced a more accurate measure. Of course, this would have been at the expense of considerably greater

effort and time on the part of the respondent. Future research should do more to precisely tap presence and perceptions of threats within the discussion network.

Although we had no theoretical reason related to the RSM to expect a priori that being Republican would be a predictor of partisan media selectivity, it nonetheless is unsurprising to see that it is. This could be a selection bias on our part—perhaps there is something special about the right-leaning program choices offered in the survey compared to the left-leaning and nonpartisan ones—or more broadly a fact of the American media system that arguably has a more vibrant, economically successful set of outwardly right-leaning partisan outlets than it does for the Democratic side. Further, recent research suggests the typical Republican has a stronger affiliation than the typical Democrat when using implicit measures of partisanship (Theodoridis, 2017); this latter explanation would be consistent with the RSM. Berry and Sobieraj (2014) argued that partisan media are particularly useful for conservatives because they are fearful of being accused of racism or misogyny in interpersonal political discussion. Such charges apply to a person more deeply than merely holding wrong or contentious political views. Partisanship did not interact with any of our focal predictors. Because we did not hypothesize any such relationship, we do not report models including interactions with party affiliation.

A strength of this study's design is in the measurement of the dependent variable, partisan media use. Research in the study of partisan selectivity more often than not relies on a small number of scale items asking about broad categories of political sources (e.g., Garrett et al., 2014). This study uses the program list technique (Dilliplane et al., 2013), which both helps to address some of the well-known pitfalls of self-reported media use measures (Prior, 2009) and allows for a more granular understanding of the variations that exist across the types of sources (i.e., partisan vs. nonpartisan) respondents use. Respondents are not required to make difficult judgments about frequency of use and are given a large group of sources to choose from rather than having to make their own potentially idiosyncratic assessments of groups of news sources that lean in one direction or another. The method used in this study does require human coding of media sources into partisan and nonpartisan categories, but it offers the considerable advantage of allowing for each source to be treated the same way across respondents rather than relying on each individual to intuit how their media use patterns fit into those categories. The measure is not perfect; for instance, there are relatively few online sources included in our measure compared to TV and radio, although those TV and radio sources themselves also have an online presence that likely matches the partisanship of the more traditional media form. As more citizens turn to the Internet for political information, more focus on measuring online-only sources will be needed. Given that our theoretical framework is one that envisions the media user as actively choosing his or

her sources, we assume more thorough measures of Internet sources would only further clarify the results obtained in this study.

It is important to note that our lack of longitudinal data presents problems for inferences of causality and could have played a role in our somewhat different findings across identity threat measures. The RSM in particular, and systems models in general, focus on simultaneous causal systems. Our data cannot distinguish between our predicted causal direction and the reverse: partisan news selectivity leading individuals to alter the political composition of their interpersonal networks and/or move to more congenial geographic areas. Although migration as an outcome of media use is possible, it would seem far less likely than the causal logic we propose. Given the more obvious exogeneity of geographic location, it is not surprising that its effects are more clearly demonstrated by the data. The modification of political discussion networks in response to a heavy partisan news diet, on the other hand, is entirely possible. The question instead is which causal direction predominates. Existing evidence suggests that the relative agreement within networks is rather stable over time (Sokhey, Baker, & Djupe, 2015). With that said, we find it theoretically unlikely that like-minded media use would lead to *more* disagreement in discussion networks (which is what our results would imply if a reverse causal logic was employed), if there is a reverse causal effect at all. Strength of partisanship may also change in response to threats, but partisanship is likely to be the most stable of the constructs considered here (Bartels, Box-Steffensmeier, Smidt, & Smith, 2011), other than perhaps geographic location (but see Cho, Gimpel, & Hui, 2013).

The ease with which network identity threats could be addressed not by partisan media exposure but rather by altering the network itself—addressing the threat at its source, so to speak—is an additional difference between the network-level threat and the community-level threat. The only way to directly address the community-level threat is to change the political leanings of the community (a Herculean feat) or to migrate out of the community (economically and pragmatically difficult if not impossible for most people most of the time). Altering one's political discussion network is usually much simpler. One might alter one's network when it becomes threatening—by, for instance, defriending some out-partisans on Facebook (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015) or choosing to avoid certain people when talking politics—and thus extinguishing the threat rather than ramping up partisan media consumption as a counterbalance. It is possible that future research may be able to tease out the extent to which the effects of network threats vary by how easily individuals can sever ties with the threatening network members. It takes little effort to avoid responding to diffuse political posts by out-partisan “friends” on social media, but it is difficult to extricate oneself from political discussions initiated by out-partisans in face-to-face settings, especially if those individuals are part of long-standing relationships including within the family or workplace.

Panel data, particularly designs with three or more time points, would potentially answer several questions. First and foremost, the time ordering of the processes could be examined, enabling a much less ambiguous picture of which behaviors, attitudes, and contexts are causing others. Although the RSM explicitly predicts some reciprocal causation between identity strength and media use, it is not as clear from the theory whether social networks are more of a context, as is implicit in this study's design, or an outlet for selective and identity-reinforcing communication. Because RSM theorizes that people seek homeostasis, we do not necessarily expect increases in media selectivity over time for partisans unless the identity threat is new (e.g., the person moves to a new area, the area experiences migration that alters the political homogeneity, or political dynamics change quickly) or becomes more intense as time goes on. An interesting possibility, however, is that certain partisan media sources may themselves induce identity threat (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014), which could be a clue about the circumstances in which positive reinforcement—and therefore increasingly selective media use and extreme attitudes—may occur.

It is also possible, though challenging, to have more granular measures of geography with a national sample. States and counties vary in the extent to which they have voters register with parties and how they report data about voters. Many geographic indicators that are narrower than the county (e.g., ZIP code, city) do not correspond with units at which votes are tabulated and reported. These issues are likely most easily sorted out in samples that are restricted to states or other regions in which there is consistently available data to enable granular estimates of geographic partisanship, or measures that might track with perceptions of partisanship within a community, such as the display of political yard signs (Makse & Sokhey, 2012).

Nonetheless, our study has employed a national sample and an optimized measure of partisan news selectivity, in conjunction with detailed measures of county context plus interpersonal network composition, to demonstrate not only that identity threat relates to partisan news selectivity but also that this takes place most strongly among those with strong partisan identification. This has normative implications in that strong partisans may be savvy users of media for avoiding shifts in party affiliation in the face of opposing viewpoints, lending insight into the polarization phenomenon. Further, our findings provide more evidence that partisanship is, in large part, a social identity (Huddy et al., 2015), and theoretical predictions about social identity and media use (Slater, 2007) are applicable to political communication as well.

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