

PARTISAN MEDIA AND POLARIZED POLITICS: A META-ANALYSIS OF THE
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARTISAN SELECTIVE EXPOSURE AND POLITICAL
POLARIZATION

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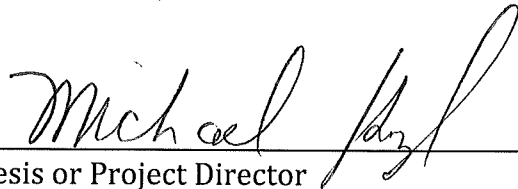
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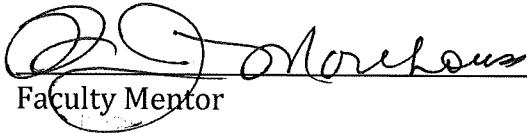


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Abstract

The increasing levels of political polarization in America have communication scholars, political scientists, and media pundits alike examining the causes of this trend, many of whom look to blame the proliferation of partisan media for this societal ill. An abundance of research exists on the effects of selective exposure to partisan media and the rise of political polarization in America today; thus, this thesis explores how partisan selective exposure and political polarization are related through a modified qualitative meta-analysis of existing research on these two topics. The social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and social comparison (Festinger, 1954) theories provide the theoretical framework for this study. Central to the relationship are four main themes: 1) Evidence suggests that partisan selective exposure contributes to political polarization; 2) American political elites are polarized; 3) Most Americans are tuned to something other than the news and thus, are not politically polarized by partisan media; 4) Politically engaged partisans, those who occupy the fringes of the American electorate and yet, wield immense political influence, are the most polarized by selective exposure to partisan media. The findings of this meta-analysis suggest that increased polarization of politically engaged partisans due to these factors has serious implications for our nation's democratic processes. Further research is needed to explore the effects of a tuned out American electorate and how to re-engage them in a national political conversation.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Importance of the Study

Historically, the American news media have been called the fourth estate for their independent role in ensuring our nation's democratic processes. The importance of this role, secured by the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, has not diminished over time. Today, the news media still exists as the fourth estate; however, the media landscape is increasingly changed and fragmented. From the evolution of network-dominated television and print newspapers to the rise of 24/7 cable news channels and the proliferation of digital media in the diverse news media environment of today, Americans are faced with more choices than ever when it comes to news consumption. According to Dilliplane (2011), "Deciding where to get news in the current media environment is becoming more and more like shopping in the cereal aisle: There is something for all tastes and preferences" (p. 288). The expanding media landscape thus means that a greater diversity of sources is available to news consumers, which in turn makes it easier for people to engage in partisan selective exposure to ideologically oriented media (Dilliplane, 2011; Holbert, Hmielowski, & Weeks, 2011; Smith & Searles, 2014; Stroud, 2008).

The First Amendment protects the freedom of the press and thus, media outlets that report the news with a political slant are fully within their rights, as are the American citizens who choose to consume it. Objectivity is not one of the six principles outlined by the American Society of Newspaper Editors in its *Statement of Principles*; however, according to Potter (2013), "the general public still thinks of this as the fundamental criterion of journalism" (p. 168). While Potter (2013) believes a strong ethic of objectivity exists in American journalism, there are a number of ways a news organization can report a story that lacks objectivity without

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fabricating it -- namely, by reporting with bias, either in which stories the news organization chooses to cover or from which political viewpoint the reporter covers it from. According to Potter (2013), “a survey by the American Society of Newspaper Editors found that most people believe the media have political leanings” (p. 170). A separate Gallup poll found that more than half of Americans believed the news media to be influenced by corporations, political parties, advertisers, the federal government, and the military (Potter, 2013).

Thus, it is not surprising that research revealed Americans gravitate toward news that reinforces their political beliefs. This, in and of itself, is not necessarily a bad thing. However, research has linked partisan selective exposure to increased levels political polarization (Holbert, Garrett, & Gleason, 2010; Levendusky, 2013b; Stroud, 2010; Sunstein, 2007). Therefore, for a democracy that depends on the free exchange of ideas, debate, and compromise for its continued existence, the effects of partisan selective exposure on political polarization need to be determined and taken seriously. This study analyzes and synthesizes existing research on partisan selective exposure as it relates to political polarization, identifies major themes, and draws holistic conclusions as to how partisan selective exposure is related to political polarization. Up to this point, existing research has been as fragmented as the media landscape itself; and in order to accurately assess this issue, a study that encompasses all existing research needs to be conducted.

Statement of Purpose

Political polarization is a very real challenge facing our democracy today. The full extent that Americans’ selective exposure to partisan media contributes to political polarization, both during presidential and non-presidential election years, remains to be seen and demands further academic study. As such, this study seeks to encapsulate all existing research on partisan

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selective exposure as it relates to political polarization in order to provide an assessment of its effects on and challenges to our nation's democratic processes.

Definition of Terms Used

Echo Chambers. The amplification or reinforcement of a political belief or ideology through the consumption of likeminded news media.

Partisans. Members of the American electorate belonging to a particular political party.

Partisan Media. Media outlets that report the news with a particular political bias.

Partisan Selective Exposure. The choice that people make to selectively consume news that corresponds to their political predispositions and beliefs (Stroud, 2008).

Political Elites. A small subset of the electorate who wield a tremendous amount of political power; includes high-ranking appointed and elected government officials, powerful lobbyists, political interest group leaders, political opinion leaders.

Politically Engaged Partisans. A small subset of the electorate who are politically active members of a particular political party; this population segment is the most likely to donate to political campaigns, vote in primary elections, write letters to elected officials, and volunteer for political causes.

Political Polarization. The separation between groups in their issue preferences and the clustering of these groups around the ideological poles (Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope, 2011).

Organization of the Remaining Chapters

This study is divided into four remaining chapters. The second chapter presents the philosophical underpinnings and theoretical basis for the study, as well as a comprehensive review of the existing scholastic literature on this topic and rationale for the study. The scope of the study and the methodology employed are detailed in the third chapter. The fourth chapter

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presents the results of the study, accompanying analysis, and discussion of the implications.

Conclusions, limitations of the study, and recommendations for further study comprise the final chapter.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Philosophical and Ethical Assumptions

The philosophical and ethical assumptions of this study are based on the works of John Stuart Mill and Aristotle. Grounded in the conviction that sincere political discourse among disparate parties enlivens our democratic nation, Mill's (1869) belief in an individual's right to his own opinion against the "tyranny of the majority" (p. 13) is a philosophical truth assumed in this study. In his treatise *On Liberty*, Mill observes

The "people" who exercise the power are not always the same people with those over whom it is exercised.... The will of the people, moreover, practically means the will of the most numerous or the most active *part* of the people. (p. 12)

Thus, he argues that it is imperative that the governing majority and society do not stifle individual opinions. Mill (1869) warns that society can be just as oppressive since "it leaves fewer means of escape, penetrating much more deeply into the details of life" (p. 13). According to Mill (1869), individuals tend to place "implicit trust on the infallibility of 'the world' in general" (p. 35). The world in which they place great trust, Mill says, is the world in which they come in contact with, the groups to which they associate with, the societal class they belong to, the religion they follow. Yet, for all the similarity of opinion that individuals are likely to face in their worlds, Mill (1869), as the advocate for the freedom of thought and opinion, strongly believed that "people are more happily situated, who sometimes hear their opinions disputed" (p. 35) and warned of the "peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion" (p. 33). He argued, "If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error" (p. 33). Ethically, Mill believes citizens

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should be afforded this right, as he placed great value on the exchange of ideas through communication.

Thus, out of Mill's philosophy stems our American belief that a free marketplace of ideas in which people are faced with diverse opinions that challenge their own best serves our democratic state. This belief in the freedom of speech and the right to a dissenting opinion leads to the second philosophical and ethical assumption that undergirds this study, Aristotle's Golden Mean. This tenet of Aristotle's (350 BC/trans. 2000) philosophy, as explained in his work *Nicomachean Ethics*, expounds on the importance of striking a balance between two extremes. In the case of this study, Aristotle's philosophy provides the foundation for the assumption that citizens who find the balance between political apathy and political zealotry are necessary for our nation's democracy to function properly. In the words of Aristotle (350 BC/trans. 2000), "So much, then, is plain, that the intermediate state is in all things to be praised, but that we must incline sometimes toward the excess, sometimes towards the deficiency; for so shall we most easily hit the mean and what is right" (Book 2:9). However, even Aristotle (350 BC/trans. 2000) admits, "for in everything it is no easy task to find the middle" (Book 2:9).

Theoretical Basis

The social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and social comparison (Festinger, 1954) theories form the theoretical framework for this study of partisan selective exposure and polarization. Grounded in intergroup theory, social identity theory (SIT) posits that people identify themselves by both their personal identity, i.e. their unique characteristics, and their social identity, i.e. the groups to which they belong (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Tajfel and Turner (1986), the pioneers of this theory, believe that from the social identity perspective, individuals see themselves as part of an in-group, and thus, better than and different from out-groups, which

are groups to which they do not belong (Harwood, Giles, & Palomares, 2005). According to Harwood, Giles, and Palomares (2005), communication plays “an important role in constructing the nature of group memberships and group categories” (p. 6), and that, in turn, group memberships affect the way people receive and transmit messages. Harwood et al. (2005) claim, “individuals categorize their social worlds, categorize themselves into in-groups and others into out-groups, and engage in social comparisons between those groups” (p. 7).

Thus, the social comparison theory originally posited by Leon Festinger in 1954 provides the framework for this study as well in that it explains how groups become polarized. Festinger (1954) maintains that people, driven by the need for self-evaluation, determine their opinions by comparison to the opinions of others, and, primarily, through the comparison of opinions that are similar to one’s own. According to Festinger (1954), “The subjective feelings of correctness in one’s opinions...are some of the satisfactions that persons attain in the course of these associations with other people” (p. 135-136). His theory maintains that people selectively choose to expose themselves to like opinions because they seek affirmation of their own opinions. When there is a discrepancy between an individual’s opinion and the dominant group opinion, Festinger (1954) postulates that members of a group will adjust their individual opinions to suit the dominant group opinion so as to be perceived well by the group. According to Festinger (1954),

Those who discover that most others in the group disagree with them become relatively less confident that their opinion is correct and a goodly portion change their opinion.

Those who discover that most others in the group agree with them become highly confident in their opinion and it is extremely rare to find one of them changing his opinion. (p. 122)

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This theory explains group polarization in that as group members are exposed to persuasive arguments favoring the group's dominant opinion, their individual opinions will shift in favor of that opinion, thus becoming more polarized (Isenberg, 1986). Huckfeldt, Mendez, and Osborn (2004) found that people who discuss politics with those who have likeminded political perspectives have more politically polarized attitudes in comparison to people who discuss politics with others who have differing political views. Isenberg (1986) maintains that from the social comparison perspective "people are constantly motivated both to perceive and to present themselves in a socially desirable light" (p. 1142). Research by Stroud (2010) supports this, as it suggests that people belonging to homogenous groups seek congenial information because "this information has social utility – people may want their discussion partners to think they are well informed or they may feel that it is expected that they contribute to the group's argument pool" (p. 558).

The Literature

Selective exposure. The concept of selective exposure (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948), which maintains that people selectively consume information akin to their own personal beliefs, became a topic of academic research in the mid-twentieth century. After conducting a study that examined the media's impact on how Americans intended to vote in the upcoming presidential election, Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1948) concluded that due to selective exposure, the media merely served to reinforce people's existing political beliefs. The principle of selective exposure - defined at this time both by selectively seeking congenial information and selectively avoiding dissonant information - became a topic of much scholarly debate (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948). Klapper (1960) claimed, "The tendency of people to expose themselves to mass communications in accord with their existing opinions and interests and to avoid unsympathetic

material, has been widely demonstrated” (p. 19-20). However, research presented by Freedman and Sears (1967) unequivocally stated, “In no way can the available evidence be said to support the contention that people generally seek out supportive information and avoid nonsupportive information” and instead attributed evidence of selectivity to *de facto* selective exposure (p. 212).

While the argument posited by Freedman and Sears definitively slowed further research on selective exposure for a time, the changing media environment in the following decades necessitated that research resume on this topic. It should be noted, however, that post-1965 research on selective exposure is primarily focused on selectively seeking, not avoiding information, as evidence consistently did not support the latter (Frey, 1986). Frey’s assertion is confirmed in recent research as well. Results from a 2009 national telephone survey indicated people selectively consume media with similar political views to justify their own opinions, but they do not actively avoid media that presents opposing views (Garrett, 2009). A study conducted by Holbert, Garrett, and Gleason (2010) produced evidence that while people prefer politically likeminded news, they do not actively avoid news from a politically conflicting viewpoint as well. According to Sunstein (2007), “there is a natural human tendency to make choices with respect to entertainment and news that do not disturb our preexisting view of the world” (p. 51).

The media, fragmented and partisan. In the United States where the media environment is one of ever-expanding choice, selective exposure is again a topic of much scholarly debate; and contemporary research reveals it is no less divisive than it was in the 1960s. The media landscape is increasingly fragmented, as people are no longer relegated to a handful of channels or a select number of newspapers. With hundreds of channels and electronic

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sources to choose from at people's fingertips, news media outlets - and specifically cable news outlets - are becoming more partisan as they seek to differentiate from one another and competing entertainment options in order to attract viewers. Arceneaux, Johnson, and Murphy (2012) claim, "In the era of fragmented media, cable television *is* partisan" (p. 174). Levendusky (2013b) defines partisan media as, "opinionated media: media that not only report the news but offer a distinct point of view on it as well" (p. 612). This assertion has support as according to a Gallup poll conducted in 2011, 60 percent of Americans polled perceived bias in the media – 47 percent thought the media were too liberal and 13 percent said the media were too conservative – and 55 percent of those polled had little to no trust in the media at all (Morales, 2011).

Partisan selective exposure. Sunstein (2007) claims, "when options are so plentiful, many people will take the opportunity to listen to those points of view that they find most agreeable" (p. 51). Research (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Dilliplane, 2011; Garrett, 2009; Hollander, 2008; Levendusky, 2013a; Mutz, 2006; Smith & Searles, 2014; Stroud, 2008, 2010) suggests the proliferation of partisan media allows people to choose news that corresponds to their political beliefs. Thus, the concept of partisan selective exposure (Frey, 1986; Sears & Freedman, 1967) - the selective consumption of media found to be consistent with one's political beliefs - has become a focus of contemporary communications research. Stroud (2008) produced clear evidence that people's political predispositions correspond to their media exposure and thus, motivate their media use patterns. Empirical data revealed that 64 percent of conservative Republicans consume at least one conservative media outlet compared to 26 percent of liberal Democrats and, conversely, 43 percent of conservative Republicans consume at least one liberal outlet while 76 percent of liberal Democrats consume at least one liberal outlet (Stroud, 2008).

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Thus, Stroud (2008) concluded, “political beliefs play an important role in determining where people turn for political information”(p. 360).

Research findings by Dilliplane (2011) produced similar evidence that people engage in partisan selective exposure; according to the results of her experiment, approximately 28 percent of people watched zero likeminded news programs, approximately 47 percent watched zero conflicting news programs, approximately 20 percent watched zero neutral news programs, and approximately 10 percent watched zero television news at all. Research by Iyengar and Hahn (2009) found, more specifically, that Republicans overwhelmingly chose Fox News over CNN and NPR, whereas Democrats made exactly the opposite choices, choosing CNN and NPR over Fox News, thus leading to the conclusion that partisan selective exposure creates an echo chamber effect in which “the news serves to reinforce existing beliefs and attitudes” (p. 34). Their results were just as strong when partisanship was interchanged with ideology.

A Gallup poll conducted in 2013 supports Iyengar and Hahn’s (2009) research. Results showed Fox News as a top news source for Republicans, while Democrats leaned toward CNN and other outlets (Saad, 2013). A recent survey conducted by the Pew Research Center (2014b) produced similar findings. Survey results revealed that 47 percent of consistent conservatives and 31 percent of respondents with mostly conservative views reported Fox News to be their main source of political news. In comparison, consistent liberals and those with mostly liberal views did not coalesce around a singular source, but rather named CNN, NPR, MSNBC, and *The New York Times* as top sources of political news.

Effects of partisan selective exposure. While the abovementioned research provides solid evidence that the partisan selective exposure phenomenon exists, extensive research regarding its effects exists as well. Research findings suggest that partisan selective exposure

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affects people's attitudes with regards to the media. The Pew Research Center (2014a) reports that 74 percent of consistent conservatives found Fox News to be favorable, while 73 percent of consistent liberals found it to be unfavorable. Only 45 percent of consistent liberals, on the other hand, found MSNBC to be favorable, while 71 percent of consistent conservatives found the channel to be unfavorable. Research by Arceneaux et al. (2012) lends credence to these findings as well. A series of forced exposure studies produced evidence that people who viewed politically likeminded news found it to be more fair, friendly, good, and cooperative than politically dissimilar news, which they found to be more unfair, hostile, bad, and quarrelsome. However, in subsequent experiments that allowed participants limited choice over what they watched and how much time they spent watching, the results suggested that oppositional media hostility (Arceneaux, Johnson, & Murphy, 2012), which is defined as a distrust of news media that is driven by new sources that espouse politically dissimilar views, is muted by selective exposure because people either choose to watch politically likeminded news programs or tune out altogether rather than watch news that espouses politically dissimilar views.

Like Arceneaux et al. (2012), Smith and Searles (2014) provide evidence in their research that partisan media affects viewers' attitudes; however, their research narrows the effects to coverage of the opposition's candidate during a presidential election. A media content analysis of news coverage in 2008 conducted by the Project for Excellence in Journalism as well as analysis of the 2008 National Annenberg Election Survey data led Smith and Searles (2014) to conclude that "partisan media effects stem more from beating up the out-party candidate than from singing the praises of the like-minded candidate" (p. 85). A series of experiments conducted by Levendusky (2013a) affirms this as well. Levendusky (2013a) found that viewers had more negative feelings toward the opposition and less support for bipartisanship as a result of

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consuming media consistent with their political beliefs. Research by Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes (2012) also found that partisans increasingly dislike their opponents. Results from a Pew Research Center (2014a) study support the research by Iyengar et al. (2012), Levendusky (2013a), and Smith and Searles (2014). According to its polling data, two decades ago only 17 percent of Republicans had very unfavorable opinions of the Democratic Party and only 16 percent of Democrats had very unfavorable opinions of the Republican Party. These extremely negative opinions have more than doubled since 1994; polling data from 2014 reflected that 43 percent of Republicans and 38 percent of Democrats now have very unfavorable opinions of the other party (Pew Research Center, 2014a).

Partisan selective exposure and political polarization. Beyond merely affecting news consumers' attitudes, there has been a recent proliferation of research that suggests selective exposure to partisan media contributes to higher levels of political polarization (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Hollander, 2009; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012; Levendusky, 2013b; Smith & Searles, 2014; Stroud, 2010). The Pew Research Center reports Americans are "more polarized along partisan lines than at any point in the past 25 years" (Pew Research Center, 2012). A study by Iyengar et al. (2012) examined affective polarization, defined as "the extent that party identification represents a meaningful group affiliation" (p. 406), because they believed it to be a more accurate determination of polarization than ideology; results based on their research concluded that Americans are affectively polarized, meaning they are polarized along partisan lines.

Stroud's (2010) study based on analysis of data from the 2004 National Annenberg Election Survey conducted that year throughout the presidential election campaign demonstrates that by engaging in partisan selective exposure and consuming partisan media, people are

becoming more politically polarized (p. 569). Stroud's (2010) regression analyses of the data demonstrated that liberal Democrats consuming news from more liberal media outlets held more polarized views relative to other liberal Democrats, and conservative Republicans consuming news from more conservative media outlets held more polarized views relative to other conservative Republicans (p. 566). Stroud (2010) found that partisan selective exposure had a "significant contemporaneous effect on polarization – on any given day, the mean level of polarization [was] related to the mean amount of partisan selective exposure" (p. 569).

Polarization of partisans and political elites. Levendusky's (2013b) research also found evidence that partisan media contributed to attitudinal political polarization. However, his results demonstrated that partisan media does not cause moderates to become more politically polarized, but rather it makes those who are already polarized more extreme in their views (Levendusky, 2013b). Research by Prior (2005/2013) and Mutz (2006) draws the same conclusion. Based on the analysis of five random national telephone surveys administered by the Pew Center for the People and the Press every two years between 1998 and 2006, Hollander (2008) suggests that due to the significant amount of choice in the media today, centrist viewers are more inclined to consume entertainment media than news media; accordingly, "Once exposed to news content almost by default, these less partisan viewers and readers left behind a polarized news audience that resembles the 'red state, blue state' divide so often seen in recent U.S. presidential elections" (p. 33). Research by Bennett and Iyengar (2008) supports this as well; "The end result [of partisan selective exposure] will be a less informed and more polarized electorate, with the political communications game aimed at those who have largely tuned out" (p. 724). They claim, "For a growing majority of citizens, the news is less a habit than an afterthought" (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008, p. 723).

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The political polarization of this small segment of the American population is significant. Research by Prior (2013) revealed there is strong evidence for attitudinal polarization among the “most politically engaged, most partisan Americans” (p. 106). According to Prior (2013), “Ideologically one-sided news exposure may be largely confined to a small, activist segment of the population, but this segment has disproportionate political influence. Activists shape the political choices of the American public” (p. 123). Research findings by Iyengar et al. (2012) demonstrate that citizens who are politically engaged are more polarized than the average citizen as well, and that the number of political activists has increased from an average of 5 percent in the last twenty years to an average of 8.5 percent over the course of the last two presidential elections (p. 414).

Levendusky’s (2013b) research also supports the argument that though partisan media only reaches a small audience within the American population, its effects on American politics are broad due to this small audience’s high level of political engagement. Evidence provided by Dilliplane (2011) indicates that over time people who watched a greater proportion of politically likeminded news were increasingly more active in political campaigns than those who watched more politically dissimilar news (p. 299). Research by the Pew Research Center (2014a) on political polarization in the American public found that those with consistently ideological views – conservative or liberal – were far more likely to be politically engaged. Based on data gathered during a nationwide telephone survey of 10,000 Americans, researchers from the Pew Research Center (2014a) concluded, that consistent partisans have disproportionate influence on American politics because “they are more likely than those with mixed views to vote regularly and far more likely to donate to political campaigns and contact elected officials” (sec. 1).

Mass polarization. While existing research supports the claim that the polarization of the American partisans and political elites is caused, in part, by partisan selective exposure, it also suggests that partisan selective exposure is not causing the average American to become more politically polarized. Mutz (2006) categorically states, “Be that as it may, data demonstrating that selective exposure to media is responsible for mass polarization does not yet exist” (p. 229). According to evidence provided by Prior (2013), “most Americans remain politically moderate or indifferent, and their news exposure reveals nonideological patterns” (p. 122). Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope (2011) claim, “for better or for worse, we are truly the ‘so-so’ nation” (p. 165) and liken Americans to “the unfortunate citizens of some third-world countries who try to stay out of the crossfire while left-wing guerrillas and right-wing death squads shoot at each other” (p. 8).

Empirical findings by Arceneaux et al. (2012) reveal, “by selecting out of watching political news, people dilute the effects of polarizing media” (p. 185). These findings are supported by research by Prior (2005, 2007, 2013), Hollander (2008), and Mutz (2006). Research by Holbert, Hmielowski, and Weeks (2011) conducted by phone survey in a Midwest political battleground state in 2009 and 2010 suggests that while political ideology drives the consumption of partisan media, the fact that people consume partisan media of varying ideological orientation and not solely likeminded partisan media means that “we should not be too quick to assume people are proactively weaving their own ideological media cocoons” (p. 15). Furthermore, Dilliplane’s (2011) research also found that while partisan media consumption correlated to increased political campaign activity, it did not affect overall voter turnout.

Fiorina et al. (2011) point out that polarization of the political elite is nothing new, and provide evidence that it is not an indicator of polarization within the American electorate.

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Further, Fiorina et al. (2011) point out that as a result of both political parties moving further from the center, “voters will be less enthusiastic about their choices and about election outcomes than previously, but given a choice between two extremes, they can only elect an extremist” (p. 169). Hetherington (2009) argues that while elite polarization in America is indisputably strong, there is little evidence of mass polarization. Republicans and Democrats “achieved complete ideological separation” in the 109th Congress, a trend that has continued; thus, Hetherington (2009) concludes that the electorate is “increasingly well sorted” (p. 17), yet not ideologically polarized. Prior (2013) echoes this point, “Having more ideologically coherent parties to choose from does not make you more partisan, just as buying tofu when the store is out of meat does not make you a vegetarian” (p. 106).

However, not all scholars are in agreement on this issue. While Abramowitz and Saunders (2008) acknowledge elite polarization exists, according to their study based on analysis of data from the American National Election Studies and national exit polls, they conclude, “the high level of ideological polarization evident among political elites in the United States reflects real divisions within the American electorate” (p. 554).

Though the conclusions drawn from existing research often differ, media and political science scholars alike recognize the need to further explore this topic and are increasingly studying the connection between partisan selective exposure and political polarization.

Rationale

Recent research (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Hollander, 2008; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Iyengar et al., 2012; Levendusky, 2013a, 2013b; Prior 2013; Smith & Searles, 2014; Stroud, 2008, 2010) illuminates the concepts of partisan selective exposure and political polarization by revealing empirical evidence that in the United States today people can, and do, choose to

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consume partisan media based on their political leanings, and consequently, some become more politically polarized for doing so. Fears abound in this realm of academic research and in the journalistic community that partisan media, selective exposure, and polarization will negatively impact the nature of democracy in our country. Thus, further research into partisan selective exposure and polarization is called for because of its potential effects on and challenges to our nation's democratic processes (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2013; Dilliplane, 2011; Holbert et al., 2011; Hollander, 2008; Iyengar et al., 2012; Levendusky, 2013a, 2013b; Mutz, 2006; Smith & Searles, 2014; Stroud, 2008, 2010; Sunstein, 2007).

Dilliplane (2011) argues that “a healthy democracy requires a citizenry that is exposed to and engages with diverse viewpoints” (p. 288) for the sake of increased political discourse that produces more informed and tolerant political attitudes and behaviors. Mutz and Martin (2001) claim “there is near unanimous agreement that exposure to diverse political views is good for democracy and should be encouraged” (p. 97). Their research suggests that the media play a far more integral role in exposing Americans to dissimilar views than interpersonal networks do and therefore “have the potential to make an extremely important contribution to awareness of diverse political perspectives and thus to national political integration” (Mutz & Martin, 2001, p. 109-110). Sunstein (2007) echoes the need for a diversity of views in a democracy and warns, “there are serious dangers in a system in which individuals...restrict themselves to opinions and topics of their own choosing” (p. 12).

Levendusky (2013b) points out that America's constitutional system requires compromise in order to function effectively (p. 611). In a separate study conducted by Levendusky (2013a), results suggest that partisan media cause Americans to be distrustful of the

opposition party and less supportive of bipartisanship. Research by Mutz (2006), and Smith and Searles (2014) support Levendusky's research as well.

Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly so, it is imperative that those who are exposed to diverse political viewpoints are the citizens who participate politically in our nation's democratic processes (Dilliplane, 2011). Abramowitz and Saunders (2008) attribute dysfunction and gridlock in the political system to those who are politically polarized. Evidence produced by Levendusky's (2013b) research supports this, suggesting that partisan media do contribute to creating gridlock in our political system by further polarizing an engaged and politically active segment of the citizenry - those who are already considered to be to the right and left of the political center (p. 612). Research by Smith and Searles (2014) links partisan media exposure to increasing hostility in the electorate after elections, which serves to make it harder for elected officials to bridge the gap after a contentious election and thus stymies our democratic processes. Similarly, Sunstein (2007) acknowledges, "If diverse groups are seeing and hearing quite different points of view...mutual understanding might be difficult, and it might be increasingly hard for people to solve problems that society faces together" (p. 56).

Stroud (2008) raises another concern that media outlets will become increasingly more partisan if partisanship proves to be a lucrative business strategy for media corporations. Her research suggests that it should, "at a minimum, raise the eyebrows of those concerned with the non-commercial role of the press in our democratic system, its role in providing the public with the tools to be good citizens" (Stroud, 2008, p. 361). Fiorina et al. (2011) echo this concern,

For despite pious pronouncements about the role of the media as the guardian of democracy, the media consist largely of profit-sector enterprises that will continue to

behave as such.... The commercial success of the newspapers and news shows depends on good story lines, and conflict is a good story line. (p. 209)

Research by Hollander (2008) claims that because of a high-choice media environment there is less chance of casual exposure to news, which results in less political knowledge and a decreased inclination to vote or be politically engaged.

However, much of the existing research today (Dilliplane, 2011; Smith & Searles, 2014; Stroud, 2008, 2010) has its limitations, especially with regards to generalizability as it is primarily based on survey data from the presidential elections in 2004 and 2008. Thus, this study contributes to existing research by holistically examining the relationship between partisan selective exposure and political polarization in more general terms and exploring whether a link between partisan selective exposure and political polarization exists both during presidential election years and non-presidential election years.

Further limitations as to the existing research include the reliance on self-report surveys (Prior, 2013), which are indicative of how people may feel, but not necessarily reflective of how those feelings may impact their actions. For example, while people may feel they watch more Fox News than other channels, a margin of error exists between how much they report to watch and the statistics pulled from Nielsen ratings that show how much they actually watch. Another limitation as to the existing research on this topic surrounds the real-life applicability of experiments conducted in a laboratory-controlled environment (Mutz & Martin, 2001; Prior, 2013).

Nonetheless, the existing research provides valuable, diverse insights into the relationship between partisan selective exposure and political polarization. By comprehensively examining the existing research, this modified meta-analysis contributes to this field of study by providing a

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concise, synthesized look at the relationship as it stands, explaining the implications it has for our democracy, and identifying opportunities for further research in this area of study. Thus, this study proposes the following research question

Research Question. How is selective exposure to partisan media related to political polarization during presidential election years, as well as non-presidential election years?

Chapter 3: Scope and Methodology

Scope

Extensive research exists on selective exposure and polarization as mutually exclusive fields of study. For the purposes of this thesis, it is necessary to narrow the scope in order to contribute meaningfully to existing research. Therefore, this meta-analysis specifically seeks to examine how partisan selective exposure relates to political polarization in the U.S. The U.S. is currently experiencing a high degree of political polarization as evidenced by the federal government shutdowns, lack of political compromise, and the complete ideological separation of the Republican and Democratic parties in Congress (Pew Research Center, 2012). While partisan sorting not an altogether new trend, the Pew Research Center (2012) reports increasing political polarization during the presidencies of George W. Bush and Barack Obama and notes, “the Obama presidency has witnessed the most extreme partisan reaction to government in the past 25 years” (p. 2). Thus, in order for this study to be relevant, it will only include research on partisan selective exposure and political polarization that has been conducted in the last 15 years, both during presidential election years and non-presidential election years.

Methodology

A meta-analysis “examine[s] trends in the literature or in the results of research studies” (Rubin, Rubin, Haridakis, & Piele, 2010, p. 214). For this thesis, a modified meta-analysis was conducted to “identify major findings across many studies” (Neuman, 2011, p. 125). Existing research in this field of study was fragmented and multi-faceted; therefore, this meta-analysis examined and synthesized existing quantitative and qualitative research in order to identify major themes and draw holistic conclusions as to the current overarching relationship between partisan selective exposure and political polarization. Quantitative and qualitative research was included as part of this meta-analysis so as to allow for a more interpretive approach in order to give the

truest assessment of the relationship between partisan selective exposure and political polarization in the U.S. today.

Based off the methodology of a published qualitative meta-analysis conducted by Fengfeng Ke (2008) and the description outlined by Neuman (2011), the meta-analytic process was as follows.

Data collection. Existing research was gathered by searching Internet-based academic databases Academic Search Complete, Communication Source, ProQuest, JSTOR, and Google Scholar, as well as the Pew Research Center's online database, using a combination of the keywords *selective exposure*, *partisan media*, *partisan selective exposure*, and *political polarization*. Multiple searches identified more than 500 research articles pertaining to the keywords. The articles were then perused for title and keyword relevancy. Once major studies, papers, and reports were identified, their reference lists were then cross-referenced to identify other major works pertaining to partisan selective exposure and political polarization. In total, 70 research articles, papers, books, and studies were identified for potential use.

The research was then assessed for adherence to the following criteria:

1. Content relevancy: Did the research focus on partisan selective exposure and political polarization in the United States?
2. Data collection: Was the research conducted between 2000 and 2015? Did the researcher collect data or use data collected during that timeframe?

Data coding and analysis. Published research from 31 sources was selected using the abovementioned criteria and was then coded through an open coding procedure. As part of the open coding process, data was sorted into preliminary analytic categories or codes (Neuman, 2011). A coding matrix was established as a way to manage, evaluate, and re-evaluate the coding

process by the researcher. The data then underwent axial coding, the second stage of the coding process in which the initial codes were organized into key analytic categories, major themes were identified, and relationships between these themes were examined (Neuman, 2011). In the final stage of the coding process, selective coding, the data was perused a third time to identify cases that illuminated the aforementioned themes (Neuman, 2011).

The coded data was then synthesized and due to the number of major themes that emerged, it was then re-evaluated for pertinence to the research question. As a result, published research from 17 sources was selected for final inclusion in this modified meta-analysis. The excluded research, while providing the researcher with necessary background information, was filtered out because it pertained exclusively either to partisan selective exposure or political polarization. The major themes that emerged from the existing research are reported in the next chapter.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher has an ethical responsibility to analyze and interpret the data in such a manner that avoids wrongful interpretation and misleading analysis. Qualitative research is more interpretive than quantitative research and thus, it is imperative that the researcher's analysis and interpretation are supported by the data. Misinterpretations and misleading analysis lead to fraudulent research, which harms the field of study and the academic research community as a whole. This is the primary ethical consideration for a study that is qualitative in nature like this one, as the method does not involve human participants.

Chapter 4: The Study Results and Analysis

Results of the Study

Four key themes emerged from the results of this modified meta-analysis that illuminate the current nature of the relationship between partisan selective exposure and political polarization: 1) Partisan selective exposure contributes to political polarization; 2) American political elites are polarized; 3) Most Americans are tuned to something other than the news and thus, are not politically polarized by partisan media; 4) Politically engaged partisans, those who occupy the fringes of the American electorate and yet, wield immense political influence, are the most polarized by selective exposure to partisan media.

Partisan selective exposure contributes to political polarization. Research from 15 of 17 sources included in this meta-analysis suggests that partisan selective exposure contributes to increased political polarization. This affirms, although not unanimously, that the two concepts are related. Of the two studies that did not produce evidence of a positive association between the two concepts, LaCour (2013) concludes that partisan selective exposure “does not occur on a sufficiently broad scale to affect polarization” (p. 36). Garrett (2009) presents empirical evidence that although partisans may selectively choose likeminded news, they do not actively avoid news of differing political opinions; thus, he argues that partisan selective exposure does not contribute to increased polarization because the high-choice media environment causes exposure to a variety of political views (p. 695). However, without exposure to differing opinions, Garrett (2009) acknowledges that society risks becoming more polarized (p. 692).

These arguments notwithstanding, evidence suggesting that partisan selective exposure contributes to political polarization is a major theme in this analysis. Stroud (2010) presents the strongest case of empirical evidence for the relationship between the two concepts in a three-part

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analysis of data from the 2004 National Annenberg Election Survey. Regression analyses demonstrated a cross-sectional relationship between partisan selective exposure and polarization, and accompanying panel analyses provided evidence that partisan selective exposure leads to higher levels of political polarization (Stroud, 2010, p. 566-569) Finally, a longitudinal analysis confirmed the relationship by providing evidence that “higher values of partisan selective exposure on a prior day contribute to higher levels of polarization on subsequent days” (Stroud, 2010, p. 569), which demonstrates that partisan selective exposure is a contributing factor to increased political polarization.

Polarized elites. American political elites are increasingly polarized, as is evidenced by the complete ideological separation between Republicans and Democrats in Congress today. This is a widely accepted theme that emerged during the coding phase. There is little disagreement in the academic community over this dynamic (Pew Research Center, 2014a; Prior, 2013; Stroud, 2011; Sunstein, 2007); however, evidence produced by this meta-analysis demonstrated there is disagreement over the nature of the relationship between partisan selective exposure and elite polarization. Levendusky’s (2013b) experiment results suggest that selective exposure to partisan media fuels elite polarization; however, Arceneaux, Johnson, and Cryderman (2013) argue that partisan selective exposure is a symptom of elite polarization. Stroud (2010, 2011) and Sunstein (2007) argue that media are the mouthpiece of the political elite and contribute to polarization among those who selectively choose news outlets based on their political predispositions. Based on evidence considered in this meta-analysis, the nature of the relationship is convoluted and requires further research.

The American masses are tuned out. There was no empirical evidence in any of the 17 sources of research included in this meta-analysis suggesting that the partisan selective exposure

phenomenon contributes to mass political polarization in the United States. Six studies addressed this specifically, and all concluded that the majority of Americans do not selectively expose themselves to likeminded news and, as a result, are not politically polarized by partisan media (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2010; Arceneaux, Johnson, & Cryderman, 2013; Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; LaCour, 2013; Mutz, 2006; Prior, 2013). All six studies acknowledge the partisan selective exposure phenomenon exists, but the results suggest that polarization due to partisan selective exposure does not occur at the mass level because its effects are limited due to the high-choice media environment of today. Most Americans are not choosing to watch a news program for its partisan slant; they are choosing not to watch at all (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2010; Arceneaux et al., 2013; Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; LaCour, 2013; Mutz, 2006; Prior, 2013).

Arceneaux et al. (2013) provide the strongest case in support of this conclusion. Through a series of innovative experiments, Arceneaux et al. (2013) produce empirical evidence that while partisan selective exposure leads to polarization in a forced exposure setting, media fragmentation gives people the choice to opt out of consuming news altogether, which thus dilutes the effects of partisan media. Arceneaux et al. (2013) observe, “Political news shows cannot directly affect those who refuse to watch them” (p. 29).

Partisan selective exposure and the polarization of politically engaged partisans.

Thirteen research sources considered for this meta-analysis provide evidence that politically engaged partisans are more likely than the average American to engage in partisan selective exposure, and consequently, become more polarized for doing so (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2010; Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Lawrence, Sides, & Farrell, 2010; Levendusky, 2013a, 2013b; Mutz, 2006; Pew Research Center, 2014a, 2014b; Prior, 2013; Stroud, 2010, 2011; Sunstein, 2007; Taber & Lodge, 2006). This recurring theme is at the core of the

relationship between partisan selective exposure and political polarization. It should be noted, however, that selective exposure to partisan media is one of many factors contributing to increasing political polarization within this population segment that comprises less than 20 percent of the American populace (Pew Research Center, 2014a).

Research by Levendusky (2013b) illustrates this theme through a series of original experiments that provide empirical evidence that partisan media polarize by taking “viewers who are already polarized and make them *even more* extreme” (p. 611-612). Levendusky (2013b) found that the effects of consuming likeminded partisan media were “concentrated among the more informed, engaged, and extreme segments of the populace who regularly watch partisan media programs” (p. 620) that reinforced their political predispositions.

In another case, Taber and Lodge (2006) found “substantial polarization among participants who processed information in a biased manner” (p. 765). The results from Taber and Lodge’s (2006) two experimental surveys demonstrated that people were most likely to seek out and accept likeminded information uncritically, whereas they were more critical and apt to offer counter arguments to contrarian information. This effect was greatest among those who held strong opinions and possessed a high level of political knowledge prior to the survey (p. 755).

Lawrence, Sides, and Farrell (2010) present a case that exemplifies this theme using a form of new media. Lawrence et al. (2010) argue that political blog readers epitomize the politically engaged citizen, as they are partisan, politically involved, and “behave as highly motivated and politically interested citizens would be expected to behave: they tend to select political blogs that dovetail with their ideological views” (p. 149). Based on data from the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, Lawrence et al. (2010) found that 94 percent of political blog readers only read blogs that correspond with their political views and that “left-

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wing blog readers are overwhelmingly liberal and Democratic, and right-wing blog readers are overwhelmingly conservative and Republican” (p. 146-147). Consequently, Lawrence et al. (2010) infer that those engaging in partisan selective exposure in the political blogosphere are already polarized and only become more polarized as a result of their consumption of political blogs.

The Pew Research Center’s report on polarization in America is another case that demonstrates partisan selective exposure predominately polarizes politically engaged partisans. According to survey data from a nationwide telephone survey (Pew Research Center, 2014a), 38 percent of politically engaged Democrats today are consistent liberals, which is a significant increase from 8 percent in 1994. In 2004, only 10 percent of Republicans considered themselves to be consistent conservatives, whereas today that number encompasses 33 percent of politically engaged Republicans. The Pew Research Center (2014a) concludes

Many of those in the center remain on the edges of the political playing field, relatively distant and disengaged, while the most ideologically oriented and politically rancorous Americans make their voices heard through greater participation in every stage of the political process. (p. 1)

Today, partisanship goes hand in hand with political ideology and media habits. According to the report, Americans with consistently conservative or liberal views are far more likely to pay attention to political news than are Americans with mixed ideological views and far more likely to choose news sources that are in line with their political views (Pew Research Center, 2014b). As a result, the report declares that Americans are now more polarized along partisan lines than at any point in the last two decades (Pew Research Center, 2014a). This is yet

another case in which selective exposure to partisan media reinforces the views of politically engaged partisans and contributes to further political polarization.

Discussion

Polarized partisans. The relationship between partisan selective exposure and political polarization is multi-faceted; however, the four main themes that emerged as a result of this study provide clarity as to how partisan selective exposure and political polarization are related. The central theme identified by this study – partisan selective exposure has the greatest polarizing effect on politically engaged partisans – is the key to understanding this multi-faceted relationship. Partisan selective exposure contributes to political polarization in America by further polarizing politically engaged partisans, the small segment of the American electorate that chooses to watch partisan media. Research suggests it is possible that political elites both influence partisan media as political opinion leaders and are influenced by the polarized politically engaged partisans to take extreme right wing or left wing positions. Thus, the web of partisan media influence is woven between politically engaged partisans and the political elites, both of which are small, but influential, segments of the American electorate.

These results are not altogether surprising, given the underlying theoretical basis for this study. Politically engaged partisans identify as members of either the Republican or Democratic parties and, according to the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), group memberships like these comprise an individual's social identity and are part of the lens through which they see the world. According to the social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), partisans engage in social comparisons, they seek out likeminded opinions from the media and their own interpersonal networks for affirmation of their own views and acceptance from other party members. In striving for acceptance and affirmation, an individual who strongly identifies with a

group is more likely than not to shift his or her opinion to agree with the dominant group opinion. Thus, the theoretical groundwork of this study reinforces the results as it is clear from the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and the social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) how politically engaged partisans become more polarized as a result of selective exposure to partisan media.

Mass polarization. Choice becomes a key word when analyzing the relationship between partisan selective exposure and political polarization on a mass level. While evidence produced by forced exposure experiments (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2010; Arceneaux et al., 2013; Levendusky, 2013b) demonstrates that selective exposure to partisan media has the potential to cause political polarization on a mass level, choice comes in to play in a real world setting and negates the polarizing effects of partisan media on the majority of the American electorate. The results of this study demonstrate that the majority of Americans are not strict ideologues or down-the-line partisans; rather they tend to be more centrist and have mixed political views (Pew Research Center, 2014a) and, given the choice, they prefer entertainment media over partisan news (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2010; Arceneaux et al., 2013; Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; LaCour, 2013; Mutz, 2006; Prior, 2005, 2007, 2013). Accordingly, the option to choose from a multitude of media options across a variety of mediums effectively assures that partisan media will never cause polarization on a mass level so long as Americans have the choice to tune out.

Democratic implications. The findings of this meta-analysis do not suggest that the business of government will grind to a halt because of a partisan media-induced mass political polarization of the American electorate. Rather, the results paint an altogether different picture, but a grim one nonetheless. The high-choice media environment means that the American electorate misses out on the “common conversation about politics” (Arceneaux et al., 2013) that

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evening news broadcasts delivered in the past when the Fairness Doctrine demanded that all sides receive equitable airtime. Like Mill (1869) espoused, political debate over differing viewpoints is a crucial part of democracy. Therefore, the potential for the echo chamber effect caused by partisan selective exposure is not as much of a concern as is the reality that only the fringes of the American electorate are paying attention while the rest of America is tuned out. According to Prior (2013), “the main danger of this more partisan media environment is not the polarization of ordinary Americans but a growing disconnect between increasingly partisan activists and largely centrist and modestly involved masses” (p. 123). Like Aristotle, who spoke to the benefit of finding the Golden Mean, Prior speaks to the danger that lies in the extremes of political zealotry and political apathy.

The implication is that while the rest of America is tuned to the latest reality television show, there is a small politically engaged segment of the population becoming increasingly polarized, in part by the partisan media, that has a sizable effect on how the country is run. This population segment is the most likely to donate to political campaigns, vote in primary elections, write letters to elected officials, and volunteer for political causes, all of which amplifies the effect of the opinions of politically active right wing and left wing partisans. (Pew Research Center, 2014a, 2014b). According to Levendusky (2013b), “even though the audience for partisan media is quite small, its effects on American politics are not” (p. 612). These politically engaged partisans contribute more to political polarization and gridlock in the U.S. than their numbers suggest and are detrimental to the consensus and compromise needed in a functional democracy. Mill’s (1869) observation made nearly 150 years ago reverberates today

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The “people” who exercise the power are not always the same people with those over whom it is exercised.... The will of the people, moreover, practically means the will of the most numerous or the most active *part* of the people. (p. 12)

Thus, the challenges become how to engage the unengaged and bring back politics as a common conversation.

Chapter 5: Summaries and Conclusions

Limitations of the Study

First and foremost, this study is inherently limited by nature of it being a modified meta-analysis. The time and resources needed to conduct a full-scale meta-analysis on this topic were beyond the scope of this thesis. The second major limitation of this study is the subjective nature of this qualitative research method, particularly in the coding and synthesizing phases. Coding and synthesizing the data necessitated subjective inferences to be made by the researcher, as research terminology and methods often differed depending on the source of the existing research. The researcher attempted, to the best of her ability, to accurately capture the nature of the relationship between partisan selective exposure and political polarization despite the disparity of existing research on the topic. Finally, the research examined as part of this modified meta-analysis was fraught with its own limitations. The majority of the information gleaned from existing research was a result of self-report surveys and lab-controlled experiments, both of which are considered limitations in this field of research. Self-report surveys often provide an inflated view of an individual's media habits (LaCour, 2013; Prior, 2013) and thus can be problematic in determining the effect of selective exposure to partisan media on political polarization. Lab-controlled experiments have limitations as to real world applicability (Levendusky, 2013a, 2013b). Researchers continue to explore innovative research designs to minimize the impact of these limitations.

Recommendations for Further Study

This study illuminated a myriad of areas of future study. Namely, research on how to re-engage Americans into a “common conversation about politics” (Arceneaux et al., 2013) would be most beneficial to our democratic society. Most beneficial to this field of study, however, would be further research into the effects of partisan selective exposure on political engagement

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and the implications of a politically disengaged American electorate (Arceneaux et al., 2013). In keeping with the ever-changing media environment and the current digital age, further research into the effects of partisan selective exposure across all media platforms is also needed (LaCour, 2013). Research into the relationship between the partisan media and political elites is another area of research that could contribute to a better understanding of the overall relationship between partisan selective exposure and political polarization. Finally, a consensus on the definition of common terms would also benefit researchers in this field.

Conclusions

To listen to the pundits on Fox News or MSNBC, one might conclude that our nation seems to be facing a crisis of epic proportions when it comes to increasing polarization in American politics. Stories of political wrangling, legislative gridlock, and ensuing government shutdowns all receive ample coverage on cable news channels and in other partisan media sources, like political blogs. Accordingly, one might deduce that American voters must be as polarized as the politicians they elect and that the partisan media plays an influential, polarizing role. However, based on the results of this modified meta-analysis, this only holds true for a small segment of the American electorate, the politically engaged partisans who make up less than 20 percent of the population. As for the rest of the American electorate, it is like Prior (2013) says, “Having more ideologically coherent parties to choose from does not make you more partisan, just as buying tofu when the store is out of meat does not make you a vegetarian” (p. 106).

While the research examined as part of this study revealed that selective exposure to partisan media is not polarizing the American masses, the results are concerning on many levels. Partisan selective exposure contributes to the polarization of politically engaged partisans by

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reinforcing their views and causing them to become even more extreme (Levendusky, 2013b). It is not the sole polarizing factor; however, the polarization of politically engaged partisans, due in part to partisan selective exposure, has serious implications for our nation's democratic processes. Politically engaged partisans are powerfully influential in driving their respective parties and representatives toward the right and left ideological poles, as opposed to driving them toward the center and political compromise. Because this population segment is politically active and more likely to get involved in political campaigns, vote in primary elections, donate money to a particular candidate, and write letters to elected officials (Pew Research Center, 2014a), its voices drown out those who are more centrist in nature.

The majority of the American electorate is centrist and values political compromise (Pew Research Center, 2014a); they are not ideological partisans. However, instead of adding their centrist voices to the national political conversation, research suggests they are mostly disengaged (Pew Research Center, 2014a). Research compiled in this modified meta-analysis suggests that given the high choice media environment of today, the majority of Americans are also not consuming partisan media, opting for entertainment media instead. And thus, as Mill (1869) forewarned, "The will of the people, moreover, practically means the will of the most numerous or the most active *part* of the people" (p. 12), which in this case means the politically engaged partisans who are increasingly polarized, in part, by partisan selective exposure. It will be a great challenge to re-engage the centrist voices of the American electorate in the high-choice, partisan media environment of today; however, it is a cause worthy of further research. Our democratic state needs centrist voices to encourage sincere political discourse and balance the politically engaged partisans who drive the American political conversation to extremes.

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