

How Partisan Media Polarize America⁺

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Forty years ago, viewers who wanted to watch television news had few choices, and could only select among the major broadcast networks. All three network news broadcasts presented the events of the day in a neutral format, emphasizing reporting the facts without favoring any particular point of view. Today viewers have a much broader array of news choices, especially on cable television, and some of those cable channels offer a partisan take on the news. Viewers can, therefore, choose to get their news from a source that aligns with their partisan and ideological outlook. Republicans and conservatives can watch programs on Fox News (like *Hannity*), while Democrats and liberals can watch programs on MSNBC (like *The Rachel Maddow Show*). Watching such shows, viewers hear an “echo” of their own beliefs, receive congenial messages and avoid counter-attitudinal ones.

Partisan media programs have become increasingly popular in recent years and this trend has potentially important consequences. America’s constitutional system, with its multiple veto points and separation of powers, requires compromise and consensus. If citizens only hear one side of the issues, and avoid differing views, this may harden their beliefs and make them less willing to compromise with those representing the other side. When that happens, it becomes more difficult for the nation to come together and solve important problems. Our contemporary political discourse is filled with claims that Americans—both masses and elites—are increasingly unwilling to compromise, build a consensus, and find solutions. Do partisan media bear part of the blame for this division? Do partisan media make it more difficult to govern in contemporary America? My book tackles these broad questions. In particular, I focus on partisan media’s effects on three broad areas—citizens’ issue positions, their attitudes toward the other party and willingness to compromise with them, and their voting behavior.

Drawing on work in political psychology and political communication, I develop a set of hypotheses that explain when partisan media will, and will not, affect impact citizens’ behavior and how those effects will differ depending on the context and the viewers’ attributes. I then test these hypotheses using a variety of original experiments, as well as panel data collected during the 2008 election. In brief, I show that partisan media exposure has substantively important consequences for American politics. Partisan media polarize attitudes, shape vote choice, and influence how citizens’ understand and make sense of election outcomes. They also make citizens dislike and distrust the opposition, and consequently make viewers less willing to compromise with the other side to find bipartisan solutions to the nation’s problems.

In short, my findings illustrate how partisan media have changed the American political landscape. Exposure to partisan media contributes to the difficulty of governing. These outlets make citizens more extreme, more polarized, and less willing to trust and compromise with those

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who do not share their partisan identity. This has important implications for contemporary American politics, as evidenced by the recent debates over the debt ceiling and President Obama's efforts to reform health care. It is certainly true that only a small segment of the U.S. population watches partisan media programs, and many Americans tune out these shows (as evidenced by their modest ratings). But my results show that those who do watch are more involved and engaged politically and why, therefore, the impact of these programs is far-reaching.

Chapter Outline for How Partisan Media Polarize America

Chapter 1 introduces the book's research question and argument. I explore how changes in the media over the past few decades have reshaped the American political landscape. I outline the broad normative question posed by the book: does the rise of partisan media contribute to the gridlock and dissensus that plague U.S. politics? Do partisan media contribute to the difficulty of governance in contemporary America? I explain how I will address this normative concern by focusing on three related empirical questions: (1) Can partisan media polarize viewers? (2) Can partisan media shape viewers' willingness to support bipartisanship and compromise? (3) Can partisan media shape viewers' electoral choices? Together, these three empirical questions help me address the larger concern about the partisan media's effect on the American political system. This chapter also provides important baseline information about the history of partisan media, the audience for these programs, and an explanation of why these shows matter, as well as how my work fits into the broader literature on media effects generally and related work on partisan media specifically.

Chapter 2 presents in-depth content analysis that I conducted to document how partisan shows slant their presentation of the news. I focus on three key areas: how they cover a range of policy issues (because this coverage shapes their ability to polarize viewers' attitudes), how they discuss the other party, compromise, and bipartisanship (because this has the ability to shape viewers' attitudes toward the other party and hence their willingness to support bipartisanship), and how they cover elections (since this has the potential to shape viewers' electoral decisions). This content analysis demonstrates that partisan media do in fact, slant their coverage of the news in each of these respects.

Chapter 3 offers a theoretical explanation for the partisan media's effect on voters. Drawing on theories of motivated reasoning, as well as social identity theory, I explain when and why the one-sided messages from these outlets shape viewers' attitudes and beliefs in each of the three key areas at the heart of my argument (attitude polarization, support for compromise and bipartisanship, and voting behavior). While partisan media is typically expected to have relatively large effects in all three areas, the size of these effects depends critically on a set of moderating variables—most notably the slant of the media (whether it reinforces or cuts against the viewer's prior beliefs) and the viewers' attributes (the strength of their pre-existing attitudes). This theoretical framework yields a set of more specific hypotheses to test the power of partisan media.

The next three chapters form the empirical core of the book. Chapter 4 examines the effects on attitudinal polarization and certainty (The article-length version of this chapter has been accepted

at the *American Journal of Political Science*). Using a series of original experiments, this chapter presents four important empirical findings. First, I demonstrate that partisan media do polarize viewers, particularly when subjects watch like-minded media (media that reinforce their prior beliefs, such as when a Republican watches Fox News). I also demonstrate that when subjects watch cross-cutting media (media that cut against their prior beliefs, as when a Democrat watches Fox News), on average, there is no effect. But this is because cross-cutting media polarize some subjects (those with strong prior attitudes), and depolarize others (those who find cross-cutting media to be highly credible), highlighting the importance of accounting for moderating variables. Second, I use novel experimental techniques to explore which viewers are most affected by these treatments. I show that the largest effects are concentrated among those who watch partisan media regularly. Although these viewers come to the experiment with somewhat more extreme views already, watching partisan media makes them *even more* extreme. Thus, partisan media polarize the electorate not by making moderates into extremists, but rather by moving those already somewhat extreme further toward the ideological poles. Third, I show that the polarizing effects of partisan media endure, at least for several days after exposure. While a typical concern with media-exposure experiments is that the effects are transitory and ephemeral, my results show that effects of partisan media are more stable. Finally, I demonstrate that like-minded media also make subjects more certain that their beliefs are correct—like-minded media increases attitudinal certainty. Thus, not only do subjects become more extreme, they also become more convinced that their beliefs are the correct ones.

Chapter 5 shows how partisan media help to breed dislike and mistrust of the other party (the article-length version of this chapter has been accepted for publication at *Political Communication*). Partisan media present a skewed picture of the other party, consistent with their ideological outlook—right wing shows portray Democrats as deeply flawed, and left wing shows do the same for Republicans. Using a series of original experiments, I show that this biased portrait of the other party decreases affect for them, and makes subjects think that the other party's leaders are incompetent, especially for subjects who watch like-minded media. As a result of this affective shift, viewers become less likely to trust the opposition, and less willing to support bipartisanship and compromise with them. Partisan media make viewers reject middle-ground solutions, foster distrust and gridlock, and make compromise and consensus more difficult to achieve.

Chapter 6 indicates how partisan media consumption impacts elections. Using panel data collected during the 2008 election, I show that viewers who watch like-minded media are more likely to vote for their party's candidate and that this relationship is quite robust to a variety of different estimation techniques and methods. I demonstrate that this effect is due to the partisan media's effect on how viewers feel about candidates, consistent with the affect-based findings discussed in chapter 5.

Chapter 6 also explains how partisan media influence the way citizens interpret election outcomes. In the aftermath of an election, media and political elites take to the airwaves to explain the results. Their explanations matter because they can help to legitimize or delegitimize a candidate. If citizens come to believe a candidate won for illegitimate reasons, it can undermine support for the candidate's policies and administration, undercutting his/her ability to govern. I show that partisan news outlets (particularly Fox News) led Republicans to adopt

nefarious interpretations of the 2008 elections based on media bias and vote fraud, which in turn delegitimized the president for these voters. Partisan media not only shape how citizens vote, they also help shape the implications for the political outcomes that follow an election.

Chapter 7 concludes by pulling together and expanding upon these empirical findings and documenting the broader consequences of partisan media for American politics. Chapters 4-6 show that partisan media have a large effect on those who watch these programs. But if the partisan media's audience is relatively tiny, numbering only a few million viewers per evening in a nation of 300 million Americans, why should we believe that they have a profound effect on the nation's politics?

I argue that partisan media matter for America as a whole because they affect impact *even those who never actually watch these programs*. They do so in at least two ways. First, partisan media sources help to shape the issues and discourse used to discuss events in the mainstream media. For example, partisan media outlets played a key role in promulgating stories like the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, the ACORN prostitution scandal, and the Shirley Sherrod story. So far from being a fringe part of the media environment, partisan media help to drive the agenda on mainstream outlets. These findings have implications for how scholars think about the role of partisan media in the overall media environment, as well as how candidates and their campaigns use the media to communicate with citizens.

Second, and more importantly, partisan media matter even for non-viewers because of their effect on governance. By polarizing viewers, making them more certain of their beliefs, and making them distrust those with different views, partisan media make identifying consensus solutions more difficult. They engender an uncompromising frame of mind that endorses partisan gridlock and makes it harder to solve important problems. These effects are significant because the partisan media audience is more politically engaged and involved. While the partisan media audience is relatively small, because it is more politically engaged the effects multiply. These partisan media consumers are the ones who make their voices heard in the halls of power, magnifying the effects of partisan media outlets throughout the political system. As a result, all citizens live with the effects of partisan media on American politics today, whether or not they are part of its relatively limited audience.

Central Contributions of How Partisan Media Polarize America

This book makes two significant contributions to the literature. First, it documents the effects of partisan media on a wide range of beliefs and attitudes: including not only attitudinal polarization, but also willingness to cooperate and compromise with the other side, and vote choice. This is an emerging literature, and much of the existing work on this topic relies on observational data where it is extremely difficult to disentangle selection and treatment effects. My use of original experiments puts me on much stronger ground in assessing causality and determining that it is partisan media exposure itself that generates these wide-ranging effects.

Second, and more importantly, my work explains how a set of programs with a very limited audience is able to have such wide-ranging consequences for American politics. Only a few million Americans tune to Fox or MSNBC in a given night—a tiny fraction of the electorate in a

nation of 300 million people. But because the partisan media audience is a deeply engaged and politically active audience, these shows are surprisingly consequential. Fox and MSNBC shape American politics not by attracting large audience, but by affecting a politically active and influential audience.