

# Why Do Partisan Media Polarize Viewers?

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*The recent increase in partisan media has generated interest in whether such outlets polarize viewers. I draw on theories of motivated reasoning to explain why partisan media polarize viewers, why these programs affect some viewers much more strongly than others, and how long these effects endure. Using a series of original experiments, I find strong support for my theoretical expectations, including the argument that these effects can still be detected several days postexposure. My results demonstrate that partisan media polarize the electorate by taking relatively extreme citizens and making them even more extreme. Though only a narrow segment of the public watches partisan media programs, partisan media's effects extend much more broadly throughout the political arena.*

America's constitutional system, with its multiple veto points and separation of powers, requires compromise and consensus to function effectively.<sup>1</sup> Citizens can passionately advocate for their beliefs, but they must also be willing to find a middle ground if American government is to function effectively (Gutmann and Thompson 2012). Many now claim, however, that such compromise is increasingly out of reach in American society, with deleterious consequences for our politics (Gutmann and Thompson 2012). One potential partial culprit for this lack of consensus is partisan media outlets, such as Fox News. Such outlets provide viewers with an "echo chamber" of their own beliefs, which may in turn polarize them (Sunstein 2009). As citizens move to the poles and harden their beliefs, it becomes more challenging to find consensus solutions, and compromise becomes more difficult and elusive. Do partisan media outlets bear part of the blame for the gridlock in contemporary America? Do they make governance more difficult?

The article takes up these broad questions by asking if partisan media polarize their audience, and if so, how they do it. Drawing on theories of motivated reasoning, I offer a theoretical account of when and why partisan

media will polarize viewers. Previous work explains how balanced sets of arguments can generate attitudinal polarization (Taber, Cann, and Kucsova 2009; Taber and Lodge 2006). I extend this logic to show how the unbalanced presentation of the facts on partisan outlets will generate even more marked levels of attitudinal polarization. I further demonstrate why these programs affect some viewers much more strongly than others, and why these polarizing effects endure, at least in the short term.

While I am not the first to suggest a link between partisan media exposure and polarization (i.e., Stroud 2010; Sunstein 2009), previous work has relied on observational data, rendering it unable to directly identify the effects of media exposure. In contrast, I use a set of original experiments that allow me to isolate the impact of partisan media on viewers' attitudes. Consistent with my argument, I show that partisan media polarize viewers. Further, these effects do not fade away immediately after treatment, but can still be detected several days postexposure. I also show that my experimental effects are largely confined to a relatively small subset of the population: those who actually watch partisan media programs in the real world. My results show that these programs take viewers who are already polarized and make them *even*

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*more* extreme. Partisan media therefore heighten mass polarization not by turning moderates into extremists, but rather by further polarizing those who are already away from the political center.

This, in turn, illustrates that partisan media do contribute to the difficulty of consensus in American politics. While partisan media only reach a small segment of the public, because that segment is more extreme and engaged, they have an outsized political role (Bai 2009; Jamieson and Cappella 2008). By affecting a more engaged and influential segment of the mass public, partisan media impact American politics quite broadly. Even though the audience for partisan media is quite small, its effects on American politics are not.

## Studying the Effects of Partisan Media

Scholars differentiate mainstream or detached media outlets, which prize balance, fairness, and objectivity, from partisan outlets, where stories are “framed, spun, and slanted so that certain political agendas are advanced” (Jamieson, Hardy, and Romer 2007, 26). Partisan media are opinionated media: media that not only report the news but offer a distinct point of view on it as well. One could certainly characterize these shows as biased in favor of one party and political viewpoint—they create a coherent liberal or conservative vision of the news. The hosts package the news in a way to help people make sense of the world, creating a “self-protective enclave” of consistent messages and a framework to understand the day’s events (Jamieson and Cappella 2008, x). These shows also engage in a biased story selection, reporting more heavily on topics that favor their sides and downplaying stories that harm their points of view (Baum and Groeling 2008, 2010). To the extent they discuss the “other side,” they do so in a straw-man fashion, one better suited for easy dismissal than serious debate. Partisan news programs are not primarily about conveying facts; they are about helping people make sense of the world given particular predispositions (Rosensteil 2006, 253). These one-sided messages give viewers an easily digestible version of an otherwise confusing political world.

These partisan media programs are typically *not*, however, the “shout shows” lamented for their incivility (Mutz 2007). These shows are not about argument: the arguing is done, and one side has clearly won—at least in the mind of the host (Rosensteil 2006). While the clips of Bill O’Reilly shouting at Democratic Congressman Barney Frank are legendary, they are also relatively

rare. Agreement with the host’s viewpoint is the norm here.

One might be tempted to dismiss these programs as insignificant because their audience is relatively limited and partisan, but this claim is shortsighted on several levels. First, at the most basic level, even if these shows only reach a small segment of the market, this is a deeply politically engaged audience, with many influential citizens who will make their voices heard in the halls of power (Bai 2009; Jamieson and Cappella 2008). In this instance, limited numbers do not mean limited influence.

Further, the over-time data suggest that the audience for partisan media programs has grown dramatically in recent years. While it is true that the audience for partisan media shows is smaller than the audience for nightly network news, the audience for partisan shows is growing while the broadcast audience is shrinking (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2009). For example, Fox News did not exist until 1996, and only 20% of American municipalities had Fox by the year 2000, but today nearly all markets have access to the station—quite remarkable growth over a 15-year period (DellaVigna and Kaplan 2007). The over-time data on audience size suggest that these kinds of shows and networks are likely to continue to grow apace (Pew Center for the People and the Press 2010; Project for Excellence in Journalism 2009). These over-time audience trends need to be understood in the broader context of a postbroadcast media environment. Gone are the days of one “mainstream” message coming from the major broadcast networks; today’s media environment is characterized by a proliferation of news sources, many matched to viewers’ partisan predispositions (Prior 2007). Indeed, partisan media sources are simply one example of this broader trend of seeking out like-minded information, albeit a relatively extreme one (Bennett and Iyengar 2008; Iyengar and Hahn 2009). Given this new reality, scholars need to understand its consequences.

Many older media studies concluded that media exposure had a muted effect on attitudes (the “minimal effects” hypothesis), but if anything, media exposure reinforced attitudes (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Klapper 1960). More recent scholarship, however, suggests that the media may have a stronger influence than scholars initially suspected. In particular, media slant influences attitudes and vote choice (i.e., Barker 1999; Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeldt 1998; DellaVigna and Kaplan 2007). One might therefore expect partisan media to polarize viewers, at least when they expose viewers to like-minded, proattitudinal information (though see Mutz 2006).

But there are two important limitations to previous research. First, drawing any sort of firm causal inference from the existing literature is extremely difficult. Viewers typically self-select into media sources, so it is very difficult to determine if media slant impacts voters or if viewers choose sources that reflect their preferences (Mutz 2006). While the slant of an outlet impacts its audience, the audience's preferences also drive the outlet's slant (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2010; Mullainathan and Shleifer 2005). Previous studies relying on observational data cannot differentiate selection from treatment effects. Clearly determining the effect of exposure to a particular medium independent of the selection effect is extremely difficult, a point that becomes even more pronounced in the contemporary high-choice media environment with its larger range of choices.<sup>2</sup>

Further, and more importantly, scholars know little about the mechanisms through which these shifts occur or which viewers will be affected by the treatments. Are certain types of partisan media more effective at polarizing viewers than others? Are certain viewers more responsive? For example, not all subjects will willingly watch news programs, particularly partisan news programs, so the effects of these shows will be very unevenly distributed throughout the population. It is not simply enough to say that media can reinforce attitudes; we need to know under what circumstances, how, and for whom these effects occur. Understanding these sorts of moderators is crucial to advancing our understanding of the effects of partisan media.

## How Partisan Media Polarize Viewers

I start from the premise that humans are motivated reasoners (Kunda 1990). Humans have two broad classes of goals: accuracy goals (the desire to reach the correct conclusion) and directional goals (the desire to reach the preferred conclusion, i.e., the conclusion that supports our existing beliefs). Human reasoning relies on both, but directional goals have an especially strong effect: we process information so that it fits with our existing beliefs. When citizens hear a news story about (say) President Obama, simply upon hearing his name, their attitudes and feelings toward him come to the fore, even without any conscious thought (a process known as “hot cognition”; see Lodge and Taber 2005; Morris et al. 2003). These

thoughts and feelings about the president then shape how citizens interpret the evidence provided in the story. If the information suggests President Obama is ably handling his job, supporters of the president will uncritically accept the news, while his critics will counterargue and challenge it (a process known as disconfirmation bias; see Ditto and Lopez 1992). As a result, even balanced sets of arguments can generate attitudinal polarization (Taber, Cann, and Kucsova 2009; Taber and Lodge 2006).

Partisan media programs intensify this motivated reasoning because of their slanted presentation of the news. Consider first how this process occurs when subjects watch like-minded media—that is, proattitudinal media that reinforce their existing beliefs, such as when a conservative Republican watches Fox News. Such programs heighten motivated reasoning for two reasons. First, these programs broadcast one-sided, proattitudinal messages to viewers, which they will uncritically accept (Taber, Cann, and Kucsova 2009; Taber and Lodge 2006). But absent any competing message, this general tendency to accept proattitudinal information becomes even stronger: because it lacks a counterargument of any sort, this information (implicitly) seems stronger and even more persuasive (Klayman and Ha 1987; Lodge and Taber 2001; Zaller 1996). Subjects will therefore move in the direction of the evidence and become more extreme (Moscovici and Zavalloni 1969). The type of “echo chamber” environment found in like-minded media will push viewers toward the ideological extremes, thereby polarizing their attitudes.

But there is another reason why like-minded content will magnify the tendency toward attitudinal polarization. These shows present the day's news as a partisan struggle, with clear references to the political parties and their positions. This primes citizens' partisanship, strengthening the degree to which they see the world through partisan-colored glasses (Campbell et al. [1960] 1980; Goren, Federico, and Kittleson 2009; Price 1989). Priming this sort of salient identity increases viewers' directional goals—it heightens their desire to reach a conclusion in line with their partisanship, thereby strengthening their biases toward attitudinally congenial information. Cueing partisanship increases its ability to slant how subjects see the world by strengthening the desire to engage in the motivated reasoning described above. This is consistent with work in social psychology demonstrating that priming relevant group identities, such as partisanship, increases attitudinal polarization (Abrams et al. 1990; Lee 2007). So while there is a general tendency toward attitudinal polarization in political settings simply because humans are motivated reasoners, the unique environment of like-minded partisan media—with its one-sided content and

<sup>2</sup>There are important rare exceptions, however (Ladd and Lenz 2009). There are also experimental designs that address self-selection (Arceneaux and Johnson 2010; Gaines and Kuklinski 2011), but that is a separate question from my focus here.

partisan primes—should be especially likely to generate attitudinal polarization. This leads me to state my first hypothesis:

*H1:* Exposure to like-minded partisan media will polarize attitudes (i.e., increase attitudinal extremity).

But what happens when subjects watch cross-cutting media that present them with counterattitudinal messages (i.e., when a Democrat watches Fox News)? Here, subjects' preferences are challenged rather than reinforced. When presented with information running counter to their prior beliefs, subjects will attempt to discredit and counterargue it (Ditto and Lopez 1992; Taber, Cann, and Kucsova 2009; Taber and Lodge 2006). Subjects will therefore believe they have refuted this information, which makes the evidence supporting their own side even more persuasive, pushing them toward greater attitude extremity (Redlawsk 2002; Taber and Lodge 2006). Cross-cutting media therefore increase attitude extremity and polarization, a “boomerang” effect.

*H2:* On average, cross-cutting media will polarize attitudes.<sup>3</sup>

While on average there should be a polarizing effect of cross-cutting media, that effect should be especially pronounced for a particular subset of the audience. Polarization here stems from counterarguing these cross-cutting messages, but not all viewers are equally equipped to do this—subjects need to be informed about the issue, and to care deeply about it, to effectively generate these counterarguments (Taber and Lodge 2006). The ability to do this comes from holding strong attitudes. Strong attitudes are ones where the subjects know more about the issue, and hence can more easily generate counterarguments, and the issue is more central and important to them, so they will be more motivated to generate counterarguments (Krosnick and Petty 1995). Strong attitudes therefore help subjects polarize in response to cross-cutting media (Pomerantz, Chaiken, and Tordesillas 1995; Taber and Lodge 2006; Zaller 1992).

*H3:* Exposure to cross-cutting media will especially increase attitude extremity for viewers with strong prior attitudes.

<sup>3</sup>I draw on theories of motivated reasoning here because they offer the most complete and compelling account of this process. One could also derive similar predictions from a variety of other theoretical models, such as group polarization theories (Isenberg 1986) or theories of source credibility (Lupia and McCubbins 1998).

## How Long Do These Effects Last?

One enduring concern with media persuasion studies is that such effects rapidly fade away (Druckman and Nelson 2003). But given the theoretical mechanism driving these partisan media effects, there is good reason to suspect that these effects endure, at least in the short term. While citizens use both memory-based and online processing to update their beliefs (Redlawsk 2001), online processing is more central when subjects are utilizing affect-laden motivated reasoning processes (Taber and Lodge 2001). So, for example, when citizens watch a partisan media program about gun control, they bring to mind their attitude toward gun control, update it on the spot using the new information in the segment, and then store this updated attitude in long-term memory (Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1991). Later on, viewers may not remember the specific arguments from the partisan media host that caused them to update their opinions, but they should remember their overall attitude—the details fade away, but the summary attitude remains (Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995). Attitudes updated in response to partisan media, then, should not immediately fade away.

*H4:* The polarizing power of partisan media will endure for several days postexposure.

## Research Design

To test these hypotheses, I conducted a series of original experiments. All of the experiments follow one of two basic protocols. In study 1, subjects were recruited to take part in a study about how individuals learn about politics from the news; the study took place in the decision-making laboratory of a private urban university. After reading some basic instructions, subjects completed a pretest questionnaire to measure their baseline attitudes and opinions. They then completed a brief distracter task (a series of items from an IQ test), watched the stimulus (see below), and then completed the posttest battery of attitudinal items. Study 1 therefore allows me to measure pretest attitudes and attitudinal strength to test Hypothesis 3, as well as directly measure attitudinal change in response to the stimuli.

In the remaining studies, subjects were recruited online to take part in a study of how individuals learn about the news. In these experiments, subjects began by answering a few background items, then were exposed to the stimulus, and finally completed the posttest attitudinal assessment (so these experiments are posttest-only designs,

whereas experiment 1 is a pre-post design). While the pre-post design has the advantage that one can measure pretest variables and directly measure within-person change, it has the disadvantage that subjects might remember their pretest answers when completing the posttest, even with a distracter task in place. Using both the pre-post and posttest-only designs ensures that my design does not overly influence my results. Additional details on the experiments are given in the appendix.

In all experiments, subjects were exposed to the same type of stimulus: a series of video clips from like-minded, cross-cutting, or neutral media programs (treatment assignment is held constant for each subject in each experiment). These video clips came from actual news programs and cover issues discussed during the first 18 months of the Obama presidency.<sup>4</sup> I selected like-minded and cross-cutting shows by using external judgments about the slant of their news coverage. For all subjects, neutral clips came from the *PBS News Hour*, considered to be one of the most balanced shows on TV (Groseclose and Milyo 2005). For Republicans (Democrats), like-minded (cross-cutting) programs came from Fox News (*Hannity* and *The O'Reilly Factor*); cross-cutting (like-minded) programs came from MSNBC (*Countdown with Keith Olbermann*).<sup>5</sup> I selected Fox News as the right-wing source as it favors Republicans/conservatives (Jamieson and Cappella 2008); likewise, I selected MSNBC as the left-wing source for parallel reasons (Steinberg 2007). The particular programs selected are among the most popular shows on each network, making them suitable choices that subjects should perceive as highly realistic.

In each experiment, subjects across all treatment conditions hear information about the same issue(s); the difference among conditions is the partisan bias of the source. My manipulation, then, estimates the effects of exposing subjects to partisan media (with a like-minded or cross-cutting message), relative to a control baseline of neutral media (which provide information without any particular partisan bias).<sup>6</sup>

To ensure that subjects could detect the differences in partisan bias across sources, each experiment included

<sup>4</sup>To ensure that the results do not hinge on a particular issue, each experiment uses a slightly different mix of issues; see the appendix for the issues used in each experiment as well as a transcript of the segments used.

<sup>5</sup>Partisan leaners are treated as partisans (Keith et al. 1992); pure Independents (those who do not lean toward either party) are dropped from the analysis. Including them does not change the substantive results (see the appendix).

<sup>6</sup>An alternative specification would be to estimate the effects of partisan media relative to an apolitical control condition; doing so would not change the substantive results reported here (see the appendix for more discussion).

a manipulation check item asking subjects to assess the partisan tilt of the segments they watched. In every experiment, subjects had no difficulty discerning the slant of the sources (see the appendix), supporting my claim that it is in fact the partisan biases that drive the results below.

Given that these are real-world clips, and not manufactured stories, however, there may be some unmeasured difference between the sources that could affect the results in some manner. I use real-world clips to gain greater verisimilitude, even at the expense of having less control over the sources. But to ensure that this decision did not bias my results, I conducted a follow-up study where I used manufactured newspaper editorials as the treatment stimuli. Here, I gain greater control over content (and more internal validity) at the expense of realism (and hence lower external validity). The results from this follow-up experiment replicate the main findings discussed here, which should bolster the reader's confidence in the results I report below (see the appendix for details).

Note that this design also allows me to synergize previous related work. Taber and Lodge (2006) study a similar theoretical process, but in a more stripped-down, abstract experimental context. On the other hand, Stroud (2010) studies the potential polarizing power of partisan media, but using real-world observational data. By using an experiment featuring real-world partisan media clips, I combine the strengths of both approaches. My findings are valuable in their own right but also offer a unique perspective on these earlier results.

## Data and Analyses

To examine whether partisan media polarize viewers, each posttest includes a series of questions designed to elicit respondents' attitudes. To measure polarization, I look specifically at attitude magnitude, with larger magnitudes indicating greater polarization: respondents are more polarized when they "strongly agree" with a policy versus when they "agree" with it. The items asked in each posttest focus on the issues discussed in the stimuli: so, for example, if the stimuli focused on the Bush tax cuts, then subjects answered items about the Bush tax cuts. This means that my results here can only speak to issue polarization (i.e., changes in polarization related to the specific issues discussed on the segments), rather than more general ideological polarization, which I leave for future work.

Each experiment includes a battery of items which are combined to form an index of opinion on the issue that serves as the dependent variable in the analyses below;

see the appendix for the specific items used and the scale construction. To simplify the interpretation of the results presented below, I rescale the dependent variable in each model to lie in the  $[-1,1]$  interval. This makes it easier to intuitively understand the treatment effects in each regression, since they are reported on a common scale.<sup>7</sup> I analyze folded versions of the dependent variable, so that higher values indicate stronger agreement with a subject's party's position (i.e., Democrats with higher scores take more liberal positions, and Republicans with higher scores take more conservative positions). This folding assumes that the process is equivalent across parties (e.g., that the mechanisms work the same way for Democrats and Republicans). I enforce this constraint here because a more flexible model (where the effect differed by party) found no significant differences by party (see the appendix for more details and results).

I begin by testing the effects of like-minded and cross-cutting media on attitudinal polarization using the data from experiment 1. I estimate:

$$\begin{aligned} (y_{i,j}^{post} - y_{i,j}^{pre}) = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 LM_i + \beta_2 CC_i \\ & + \beta_3 Z_i + \phi_i + \varphi_j + u_{ij}, \end{aligned}$$

where  $y_{i,j}^{pre}$  is respondent  $i$ 's pretest attitude on issue  $j$ ,  $y_{i,j}^{post}$  is the equivalent posttest attitude,  $LM_i$  and  $CC_i$  are indicators for whether respondent  $i$  was assigned to the like-minded or cross-cutting conditions (respectively),  $Z_i$  is a vector of demographic control variables,  $\phi$  are the respondent-specific random effects, the  $\varphi$  are issue-specific fixed effects, and  $u$  is a stochastic disturbance term. I include the respondent random effects and issue fixed effects because experiment 1 exposes subjects to information about four different issues, so the data from experiment 1 are in a panel format.<sup>8</sup> As an additional guard against heterogeneity, I also cluster the standard errors by respondent in the analysis reported below.<sup>9</sup>

If Hypotheses 1 and 2 are correct, I should find that like-minded media exposure and cross-cutting media exposure both have a positive and significant coefficient, indicating that, on average, those assigned to watch like-minded and cross-cutting media become more extreme.

<sup>7</sup>For descriptive statistics on the dependent variable from each experiment, see the appendix.

<sup>8</sup>To be clear, in experiment 1, the stimulus discusses four different issues, so there are four issue-specific scales (each  $y_{ij}$  is a scale specific to a particular issue). I analyze the data in a panel format for simplicity, since my focus is on the average effect across issue rather than the results for any particular issue. I note, however, that I would reach the same conclusion if I analyzed the items separately by issue.

<sup>9</sup>Omitting these subject/item effects (or clustering) would not change my substantive conclusions reported here.

**TABLE 1 Effects of Partisan Media on Attitude Extremity, Experiment 1**

Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Like-Minded	<b>0.14</b>	<b>0.13</b>	<b>0.14</b>	<b>0.13</b>
Treatment	<b>(0.04)</b>	<b>(0.04)</b>	<b>(0.04)</b>	<b>(0.04)</b>
Cross-Cutting	-0.03	-0.03	-0.05	-0.05
Treatment	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Strong Attitude			-0.04	-0.04
			(0.06)	(0.06)
Like-Minded			0.03	0.03
Treatment*Strong Attitude			(0.08)	(0.09)
Cross-Cutting			<b>0.22</b>	<b>0.23</b>
Treatment*Strong Attitude			<b>(0.08)</b>	<b>(0.09)</b>
Partisanship		0.01		0.01
		(0.01)		(0.01)
Male		0.00		0.01
		(0.03)		(0.03)
Student		<b>0.08</b>		<b>0.07</b>
		<b>(0.05)</b>		<b>(0.05)</b>
White		-0.04		-0.03
		(0.03)		(0.03)
Age		0.01		0.01
		(0.00)		(0.00)
Intercept	-0.06	<b>-0.32</b>	-0.06	<b>-0.31</b>
	(0.04)	<b>(0.11)</b>	(0.04)	<b>(0.12)</b>
N	720	720	720	720
Number of Subjects	164	164	164	164
R-Squared	0.05	0.06	0.05	0.06

*Note:* Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients based on the model above with robust standard errors in parentheses (fixed effects for issue and random effects for respondents are included in all models but are not reported). Coefficients that can be distinguished from 0 ( $\alpha < 0.10$ , one-tailed) are given in bold. Note that the excluded baseline group in the analysis is subjects assigned to the neutral (PBS) condition. For details on variable construction, see the appendix.

Table 1 presents the results. The results strongly support Hypothesis 1: like-minded media make subjects more extreme (relative to subjects assigned to the neutral media condition). Following like-minded media exposure, subjects become approximately 8% more extreme. Exposure to like-minded media increases polarization.

Note, however, that in columns 1 and 2 in Table 1 there are no effects for cross-cutting media—the effect is statistically insignificant and close to 0, indicating that voters simply seem to “tune out” cross-cutting messages. But perhaps the effect of cross-cutting media is heterogeneous, with viewers with strong attitudes more

likely to polarize in response to this content, as I argued in Hypothesis 3. Column 3 of Table 1 tests Hypothesis 3, interacting pretest attitude strength with treatment assignment. The results here support this hypothesis. While the overall effect of cross-cutting media is not statistically significant, the interactive effect of cross-cutting media and strong pretest attitudes is significant.<sup>10</sup> Cross-cutting media have the *potential* to polarize viewers, but not all seize that opportunity: only those with strong attitudes actually polarize in response to these messages.<sup>11</sup>

In contrast, there is no interactive effect of attitude strength for like-minded media. This fits with the theoretical mechanism offered above: cross-cutting media increase extremity only among those with strong attitudes because those are the respondents with the cognitive resources to resist persuasion. In contrast, for like-minded media, attitude strength is irrelevant, because there is no need to counterargue the message. Given this, the lack of a moderating effect of attitude strength on like-minded media should not be surprising.

### Are These Results Externally Valid?

The results from experiment 1 demonstrate that partisan media can polarize viewers. But because humans are motivated reasoners, one might be skeptical of these results. Motivated reasoning not only predicts how subjects will respond to new information (as I argued above), but it also predicts the type of information subjects will prefer. Motivated reasoning leads subjects to seek out more like-minded content both generally (Druckman, Fein, and Leeper 2012; Taber and Lodge 2006) and specifically in the

<sup>10</sup>Here, attitude strength is measured as an additive index of attitude certainty, importance, and (self-perceived) knowledge about the issue; see the appendix for more details. To simplify the interpretation of the results, I dichotomized strength in the analysis in Table 1, counting those in the top decile as having “strong” attitudes. One can obtain similar, albeit weaker, results using those in the top half of strength, suggesting that much of the effect is concentrated among those with the “strongest” attitudes.

<sup>11</sup>One concern with these sorts of moderator effects, however, is that they might be picking up other differences between subjects: for example, maybe those with stronger attitudes are simply more interested in politics and hence pay closer attention to the stimuli and the resulting questions, generating the effects seen in the text. I can never completely rule out this possibility, but I can offer a test of the underlying idea. I can interact the treatment with both attitude strength and a measure of political interest/attentiveness. If attitude strength is just a proxy for general interest/engagement, then the attitude strength results should go away once I include the interaction with the interest/engagement measure. When I do this, my results survive, suggesting that strength (and not just interest/engagement or some other factor) drives these results.

case of partisan media (Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Stroud 2011). Therefore, the sort of forced assignment design used here might potentially give misleading results: because of motivated reasoning, subjects prefer like-minded content, so it is unclear how experiment 1 maps into the real world.

This is potentially a serious challenge to my results: as experiments, they have high internal validity, but they might have limited external validity precisely because of my proposed theoretical mechanism. To help address this point, I conducted what is known as a patient preference trial (Torgerson and Sibbald 1998). This is a standard random-assignment experiment with one small twist. In the pretest, I solicit subjects’ preferred treatment: if they had to choose, would they prefer a like-minded, cross-cutting, or neutral news source.<sup>12</sup> I can then condition on this preference to examine if those who would actually want to watch these shows respond differently to them than other respondents. This allows me to determine whether my results have at least some external validity: do those who actually want to watch these shows respond to them as my theory predicts? Or does showing respondents a segment they would never actually watch in the real world drive the earlier results? While this analysis has slightly lower internal validity (given that it involves conditioning on an observed variable), its external validity nicely complements experiment 1.

But for this approach to succeed, I need to know that my preference measure is actually a valid way to estimate real-world viewing habits. To do so, I conducted a follow-up study where I asked subjects about their preferences for different types of media, as well as their actual media consumption. I find that viewer preferences are very strongly related to actual media consumption. For example, 48% of those who prefer like-minded media watch it daily versus 5% for those who prefer another type of media. On average, those who prefer like-minded media watch it at least weekly versus only a few times a year for those who prefer other types of media (see the appendix for more details). Preferences actually measure viewing habits, and my measure therefore allows me to examine how viewing habits condition the effect of the treatment.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup>To make the item as easy to understand as possible, subjects are asked if they would prefer a show from Fox News, MSNBC, or PBS, with appropriate examples from each network (i.e., the labels “like-minded,” etc., are not used); see the appendix for the specific question wording.

<sup>13</sup>My setup only solicits preferences over political media, not apolitical media. My work establishes what happens in a political media context, but an important next step will be to consider what happens when apolitical media are added to the mix (see Arceneaux and Johnson 2010).

These preferences should strongly shape how viewers respond to the treatment. I expect that much of the polarization in response to like-minded media will be concentrated among those who prefer to watch like-minded programs. Citizens with stronger directional goals and more cognitive resources are more likely to demonstrate the biased processing characteristic of motivated reasoners (Taber and Lodge 2006). Both of these descriptions—strong directional goals and highly cognitively skilled—apply to those who prefer like-minded content. Like-minded media viewers are more strongly partisan and ideological (Baum and Groeling 2010; Jamieson and Cappella 2008; Stroud 2011) and hence have greater incentives to react strongly to the partisan framing of these programs, resulting in stronger directional goals. Further, these subjects also possess more of the cognitive skills needed to process these sorts of messages: they are more politically engaged, better informed, more active in politics, and so forth (Baum and Groeling 2010; Jamieson and Cappella 2008; Stroud 2011; see also the appendix). Citizens who choose to watch like-minded programs will therefore be more likely to engage in motivated reasoning and hence will be more likely to polarize in response to like-minded content. Put slightly differently, like-minded media should primarily polarize those who want to watch it.

In contrast, I expect those who prefer cross-cutting media to become less polarized in response to cross-cutting messages. These individuals are quite out of step with their parties, more likely to defect from them, and feel psychologically closer to the opposing party—the desire to consume cross-cutting media signals that they are “odd” partisans (Holbert, Garrett, and Gleason 2010). They therefore have more motivation to respond to the cross-cutting cues. As a result, I expect them to move toward the cross-cutting source’s position and thereby hold more moderate (less polarized) attitudes.<sup>14</sup> Subjects’ reaction to other types of programs (i.e., how those who prefer like-minded media will respond to cross-cutting media) is less clear, and I correspondingly have no *ex ante* directional expectations in these cases.

Table 2 estimates how these preferences impact the treatment effects.<sup>15</sup> The analysis here parallels the analysis of experiment 1, but I interact treatment assignment and these preferences:

<sup>14</sup>An important extension for future work, however, will be to more carefully consider which subjects opt into consuming cross-cutting media and why they choose to do so. Doing so will require a more general theory of cross-cutting media.

<sup>15</sup>In the data from experiment 2 used here, 32% of subjects prefer to watch like-minded media (versus 18% for cross-cutting media and 50% for neutral media).

**TABLE 2 The Role of Viewer Preferences, Experiment 2**

Variable	Estimate
Like-Minded Treatment	−0.05 (0.12)
Cross-Cutting Treatment	0.08 (0.12)
Prefer Like-Minded Media	−0.07 (0.14)
Prefer Cross-Cutting Media	−0.22 (0.18)
Like-Minded Treatment*Prefer Like-Minded Media	<b>0.28</b> <b>(0.19)</b>
Like-Minded Treatment*Prefer Cross-Cutting Media	−0.17 (0.26)
Cross-Cutting Treatment*Prefer Like-Minded Media	−0.08 (0.20)
Cross-Cutting Treatment*Prefer Cross-Cutting Media	− <b>0.31</b> <b>(0.23)</b>
Constant	<b>0.21</b> <b>(0.08)</b>
N	163
R-Squared	0.14

Note: Cell entries are OLS coefficients with associated standard errors; see Table 1 for additional details.

$$y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 LM_i + \beta_2 CC_i + \beta_3 PL_i + \beta_4 PC_i + \beta_5 LM_i * PL_i + \beta_6 CC_i * PL_i + \beta_7 LM_i * PC_i + \beta_8 CC_i * PC_i + u_i,$$

where  $y$  is respondent  $i$ ’s posttest attitude extremity,  $PL$  and  $PC$  are indicators if respondent  $i$  prefers like-minded or cross-cutting media (respectively), and all other terms are as defined above. Note that in experiment 2 (and experiment 3 below), subjects are only asked about one issue, so there is no need for a panel analysis as in experiment 1. In the analysis of model (2), interest centers on the  $\beta_5$  and  $\beta_8$  terms, which explore how preferences condition the effectiveness of the assigned treatments. If my arguments above are correct, then I expect to find a positive and significant  $\beta_5$  (indicating greater polarization) and a negative and significant  $\beta_8$  (indicating greater moderation).

Table 2 shows strong support for my predictions—the effect of partisan media is conditional on preferences. Like-minded media polarize viewers, but only for subjects who actually want to watch like-minded media. Likewise, cross-cutting media moderate attitudes only for those who want to watch these programs. For example, subjects

who want to watch like-minded media and are assigned to watch them take positions that are 13% more extreme than those who prefer another type of media (but are assigned to see like-minded media). Preferences over media types strongly condition the effectiveness of these experimental treatments.<sup>16</sup>

These findings have important implications for at least two reasons. First, they show that my results are not simply the product of randomization bias (Heckman and Smith 1995). One concern in a postbroadcast media environment is that the results in experiment 1 stem simply from showing subjects clips they never would watch in the real world. But Table 2 illustrates that this is the *exact opposite* of what actually happens: it is regular viewers who polarize in response to these programs. This demonstrates that my findings have a clear real-world analogue.

Second, and more importantly, they suggest an important substantive conclusion about the polarizing power of like-minded media. Those who prefer like-minded media are more politically informed and engaged and also more *ex ante* attitudinally extreme (Jamieson and Cappella 2008; Stroud 2011). This is consistent with the well-known result that the more informed and engaged are more extreme (Abramowitz 2010). Thus, like-minded media take people who are already somewhat extreme and make them *even more extreme*. Partisan media increase issue polarization not by polarizing moderates, but rather by increasing polarization among those already away from the political center. This has particular substantive relevance since these more extreme individuals are likely to make their voices heard in the political process and are therefore likely to have considerable influence, a point I return to below. The effects of partisan media are heterogeneous, and that heterogeneity is quite politically consequential.

That said, however, like any moderator-based analysis, these findings also have real, and significant, limitations. My results are consistent with the theoretical argument above about why preferences shape the impact of the treatment, but they cannot definitively establish the mechanisms driving these effects—I cannot prove that these effects occur because of these subjects' differential motivation and cognitive skills. Future work will be needed to more carefully explore these mechanisms in more detail, though my findings represent an important initial finding.

<sup>16</sup>An important topic for future work, however, will be to replicate experiment 2 using different measures of media preferences and different designs (such as pre-post designs) to probe the robustness and limits of these findings.

**TABLE 3 Duration Effects of Partisan Media, Experiment 3**

	Time 1 (All Respondents)	Time 1 (Compliers)	Time 2
Like-Minded Treatment	<b>0.26</b> ( <b>0.10</b> )	<b>0.23</b> ( <b>0.10</b> )	<b>0.24</b> ( <b>0.10</b> )
Cross-Cutting Treatment	0.08 (0.10)	0.01 (0.11)	0.03 (0.10)
Constant	<b>0.11</b> ( <b>0.07</b> )	<b>0.14</b> ( <b>0.07</b> )	<b>0.17</b> ( <b>0.07</b> )
N	101	83	78
R-Squared	0.07	0.07	0.09

Note: Cell entries are OLS coefficients with associated standard errors underneath; see Table 1 for additional details. Results for time 1 labeled “compliers” show the results only for those who completed the wave 2 survey.

### Are These Just Temporary Artifacts?

Finally, I also investigate the duration of these partisan media effects. Hypothesis 4 argues that because subjects use online processing to update their attitudes, the polarized attitudes resulting from partisan media exposure should be detectable several days postexposure. I designed experiment 3 to test this idea. The first wave of experiment 3 follows the standard posttest-only protocol described earlier. At the close of the experiment, subjects were asked if they would take part in another survey (wave 2) in exchange for an additional cash payment. In wave 2, subjects were not shown any additional experimental stimuli and were simply asked to complete the posttest portion of the initial study again (the wave-1 attitude items were repeated in wave 2). Wave 2 took place two days after the initial study, so it can only examine whether these effects last that long.<sup>17</sup> That said, given that the stimuli are brief news segments, finding any effect even two days later constitutes important evidence for duration.

Table 3 provides estimates of the immediate effect of the treatment (measured just after the stimulus was administered), and the effect in wave 2 a few days later. Like-minded media have an immediate effect on attitudes (i.e., there is a positive and significant treatment effect in wave 1), but consistent with Hypothesis 4, that effect can still be detected two days later. Indeed, not only is the result statistically significant at time 2, but also the two estimates cannot be distinguished from one another (though

<sup>17</sup>Subjects were sent two requests for participation via email. All subjects who completed the study did so within two days of the request, with the majority (83%) doing so on the first day (i.e., two days after the original study).

not surprisingly, the effect at time 1 with the entire sample is larger than the effect for compliers only at time 1). This is quite striking: the effect of watching a short video stimulus is basically the same two days later as it is the day subjects watch it.<sup>18</sup> Consistent with an account stressing online processing, partisan media engage viewers in a way that has effects postexposure, even several days later. The effects of partisan media are not simply blips that fade away immediately after the treatment, but rather are messages that stay with respondents, at least in the short term.<sup>19</sup>

## Discussion and Conclusions

This article explores partisan media's effects on attitudinal polarization. I argue that viewers' use of motivated reasoning, combined with the slanted nature of these programs, generates issue polarization. The results of my original experiments bear out this theoretical expectation. When viewers watch like-minded media that reinforce their attitudes, they become more extreme, and these effects persist for at least several days. Further, these effects are concentrated among the more informed, engaged, and extreme segments of the populace who regularly watch partisan media programs. Like-minded media take subjects who are already extreme and make them *even more* extreme. Thus, like-minded media polarize not by making moderate viewers more extreme, but rather by affecting those already away from the political center.

In contrast, cross-cutting media can either polarize attitudes—for those with strong attitudes—or moderate them, for those who prefer to watch cross-cutting media. These different reactions highlight the crucial role a viewer's abilities and preferences play in how she reacts to this type of media. My findings suggest that more work is needed to unpack and explore the heterogeneity in which viewers choose to watch cross-cutting media, as well as the consequences of that exposure.

At one level, this sort of media-driven reinforcement is nothing new: research on it dates back a half century to canonical media studies (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Klapper 1960). The difference with my

findings, however, is that who is doing the activation, and to what end, is quite distinct. Relatively extreme partisan media hosts are not just priming citizens' underlying predispositions but are also making them more extreme and divided. These consequences separate out this type of partisan media effect from earlier studies of attitude reinforcement. There is continuity with earlier findings but also a real difference with this new type of media. Further, my illustration of the heterogeneity of these findings, and the political ramifications of these heterogeneous effects, is another novel contribution.

More broadly, my findings suggest how partisan media might contribute to gridlock in American politics. For example, my findings demonstrate how partisan media might help to exacerbate *elite* polarization. Active and engaged like-minded viewers are pushed even further to the extremes on the specific issues discussed on partisan media. If these viewers watch regularly, and are moved across a host of issues,<sup>20</sup> then this can put pressure on candidates to take more extreme positions on a number of issues (Layman et al. 2010), which can have real electoral and policy consequences, especially given a system of primary elections (Brady, Han, and Pope 2007). For example, Fox News helped energize Tea Party supporters in 2010, which was a key factor in a number of Republican primary elections, and has generated policy consequences in Congress (Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin 2011). Partisan media polarize active and engaged citizens, who in turn help to fuel elite polarization. Even though most voters are moderate (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2005) and never hear partisan media messages, by affecting a more extreme group of individuals, the consequences of partisan media extend quite broadly.

Of course, elite polarization in and of itself need not be a bad thing: if there is no clear "best" policy, then a spirited debate can be a positive development rather than a negative one. But because America's constitutional system rests on compromise, too much gridlock and debate makes governing extremely difficult (Price 2010). Partisan media consumers can put pressure on elected officials to take extreme positions and eschew bargaining with the other side. Some Republican opposition to President Obama's health care reform legislation was partially driven by antireform screeds from partisan media hosts like Rush Limbaugh—and their listeners—urging Republican officials to "just say no" (Kurtz 2010; Starr 2010). This kind of message from a key group of supporters makes it more difficult for legislators to reach

<sup>18</sup>One concern is that subjects might simply remember the items from time 1 to time 2, making the effects here more about memory than duration. I designed another experiment to rule out this possibility by only asking the attitude items at time 2. Even here, I find duration effects (see the appendix).

<sup>19</sup>Future research should explore how processing style impacts these effects (Chong and Druckman 2010) as well as how these effects decay over longer periods of time (Gerber et al. 2011).

<sup>20</sup>This raises the interesting possibility that the issue polarization I find here might spill over into more general kinds of *ideological* polarization, though this is a topic for future work.

across the aisle and strike deals. Indeed, these sorts of divisions occur not only on significant and divisive issues like health care reform or increasing the debt ceiling, but also on seemingly prosaic and nonpartisan ones like flu vaccines (Baum 2011) and evidence-based medicine (Gerber and Patashnik 2010). Solving problems becomes less about what is best for the country and more about what is politically and ideologically expedient (Fiorina 2006). While partisan media alone do not cause these effects, they certainly exacerbate broader trends toward division, gridlock, and dissensus. They accelerate the move toward the “uncompromising mind” that seeks out gridlock and partisan advantage rather than compromise and consensus solutions (Gutmann and Thompson 2012). In this context, the negative consequences of this sort of media-induced polarization likely outweigh the positive ones.

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## Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's web site:

### Online Appendix: "Why Do Partisan Media Polarize Voters?"

- **Table A1:** Descriptive Statistics, Dependent Variable, by Experiment
- **Table A2:** Testing For Differential Treatment Effects by Party, Experiment 1
- **Table A3:** Fully Saturated Model, with Independents
- **Table A4:** Validating the Measure of Media Preferences
- **Table A5:** Partisan Media, Attitude Extremity, and Participation
- **Table A6:** Partisan Media Consumption and Political Information, Pew Data
- **Table A7:** Political/Campaign Interest, NAES 2008 Data
- **Table A8:** Effect of Partisan Media on Attitude Extremity, 2008 NAES Data
- **Table A9:** Effects of Partisan Media Relative to an Apolitical Control
- **Table A10:** Editorial Experiment Results
- **Table A11:** Attitude Durability over Three Days