

Ideologically Aligned News and Affective Polarization: The Mechanisms of
Mobilization

Sabbatical Application

California State University Chico

Jennifer Brundidge

Brief Summary

Ideologically aligned news has come to shape and dominate journalistic coverage of U.S. elections, especially presidential elections. In many respects, ideological news functions as an extension of political campaigns, which mobilize partisan supporters by helping them to maintain the perception that electorally oriented political participation efforts, such as voting, volunteering, and donating money, are worthwhile endeavors (e.g., Campbell, Gurin, & Miller, 1954; Converse, 1972). And a growing body of research demonstrates that use of ideologically aligned news is generally politically mobilizing (Brundidge, Garrett, Rojas, & Gil de Zuniga, 2014; Gil de Zúñiga, Puig-I-Abril, & Rojas, 2009; Lawrence, Sides, & Farrell; Stroud, 2011).

Little is known however, about the psychological mechanisms that make it mobilizing, or in some cases, demobilizing. Furthermore, relative to traditional predictors of political engagement, including education and political knowledge, it is unclear how significant the mobilizing effect might be.

The proposed study would examine the influence of ideological news on “affective polarization,” (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012). Affective polarization is a kind of emotional polarization rooted in social identity processes (e.g., Tajfel, 1970; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). When people are affectively polarized, not only do they disagree with a perceived ideological out-group, they actively hate it. At the same time, they have universally positive views of their perceived in-group. Affective polarization should, in turn, be a mobilizing psychological mechanism that could explain the established link between ideological news and political participation. In this case, people would vote mainly out of group loyalty.

The 2016 election cycle, which by most accounts, was uniquely vitriolic, provides fertile ground on which to test the relative mobilizing influence of affective polarization. Through the use of nationally representative panel survey data, the proposed study examines these mechanisms as they occurred over the course of the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election cycle.

Background

Drawing on social identity theory (e.g., Tajfel, 1970; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which suggests that ideologically aligned news use acts as a mechanism for reinforcing positive (and potentially mobilizing) feelings about one’s social identity and the “winningness” of one’s in-group, I propose that pro-attitudinal news use is mobilizing, by contributing to

affective polarization and the perception that one's own candidate is winning, but that counter-attitudinal news use is relatively demobilizing, by contributing to affective-depolarization and the perception that one's candidate could lose.

The Major Project

I propose the following hypotheses:

H1. Pro-attitudinal news use increases certainty that a preferred candidate will win the election.

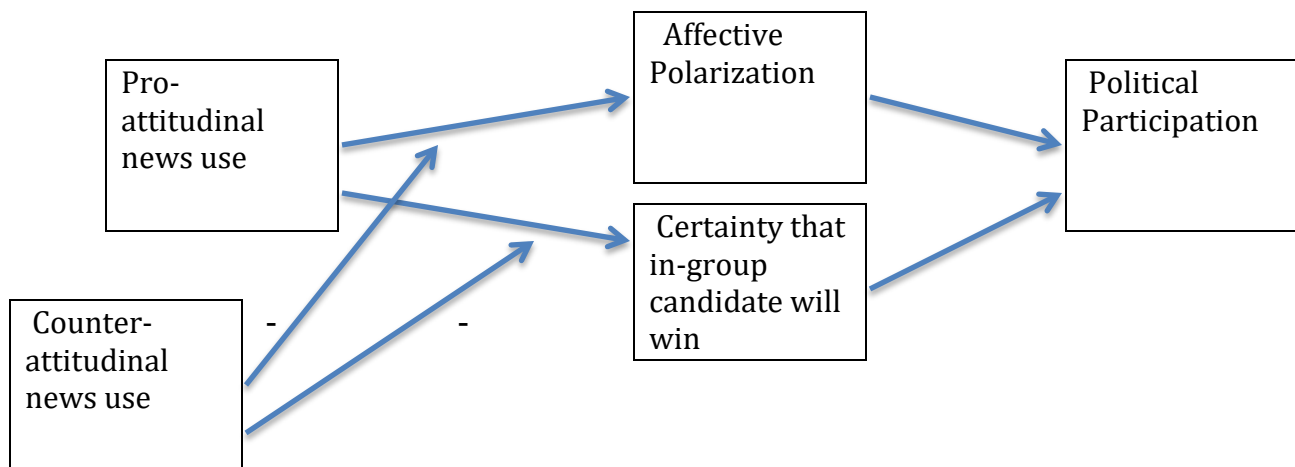
H2. The perception that a preferred candidate will win the election is positively related to political participation, thus mediating the relationship between pro-attitudinal news use and political participation.

H3. Pro-attitudinal news use leads to affective polarization (negative perceptions about the partisan out-group + positive perceptions about the partisan in-group).

H4. Affective polarization is positively related to political participation, thus mediating the relationship between pro-attitudinal news use and political participation.

H5. Counter-attitudinal news use moderates the influence pro-attitudinal news use on (a) social identity complexity and (b) the perception that an in-group candidate will win.

The proposed theoretical model looks like this:



To test this model, I will use nationally representative longitudinal panel data collected at three different times over the course of the 2016 presidential election cycle. Kelly R. Garrett, Professor of Communication at The Ohio State University was the principal investigator for this survey. Kelly R. Garrett and I plan to co-author the proposed research. He has given me access to the data.

If the study proposed here is successful, I would additionally like to compare the results of this study to previous election cycles to analyze the relative strength of affective polarization as a predictor of political participation over time. One possibility is that traditional models of political participation and conceptions of the good citizen as the “informed citizen,” which have hypothesized an informed and education citizen as the most participatory, are being somewhat subverted by what we might call “the angry citizen,” who votes based in-group loyalties and out-group hostilities. Kelly R. Garrett has agreed to give me access to his data collected during the 2012 and 2008 election cycles, which would allow me to make comparisons.

Urgency of Sabbatical Time to Complete Project

As the 2016 election data ages, studies related to it will decline in impact and significance. The proposed sabbatical time of a semester would allow me the time to complete my project in a timely manner and publish my findings in prominent journals. It would also allow me access to data that if I take too long to analyze, might be “scooped” by other researchers.

Significance

A good deal of research suggests tensions between “deliberative” and “participative” models of democracy (e.g., Mutz, 2006). Yet most of this research focuses on face-to-face political discussion. While research suggests that ideological news is mobilizing, there is little understanding about the psychological processes involved. This study would address the substantial gap in the literature.

Relationship of the Proposed Project to Long-Term Research Plans

A major portion of my research trajectory has focused on the contribution of the contemporary news environment to the public sphere and deliberative forms of democracy (e.g., Brundidge, in press; Brundidge 2010a; Brundidge 2010b; Brundidge 2010c; Brundidge et al., 2014; Brundidge & Rice, 2009). The proposed study builds on this tradition.

Expected Results or Outcomes

The most immediate outcome of this particular study would be at least one research article, which I expect would be appropriate in several prominent peer review journals. Over the long term, the proposed comparison across election cycles could result in a number of journal articles and even a book.

References

- Brundidge, J. (2015). The psychosocial basis for “communicative action” in the contemporary public sphere. In H. Gil de Zuniga (Ed.), *New technologies and civic engagement: New agendas in communication*. New York: Routledge.
- Brundidge, J. (2010a). Encountering “difference” in the contemporary public sphere: The contribution of the Internet to the heterogeneity of political discussion networks. *Journal of Communication*, 60, 680-700.
- Brundidge, J. (2010b). Toward a theory of citizen interface with political discussion and news in the contemporary public sphere. *International Journal of Communication*, 4, 1056-1078.
- Brundidge, J. (2010c). Political discussion and news use in the contemporary public sphere: The “accessibility” and “traversability” of the Internet. *Javnost—The Public*, 17, 62-83.
- Brundidge, J., & Rice, R. E. (2009). Political engagement and exposure to heterogeneous political discussion: Do the (information) rich get richer and the similar get more similar? In A. Chadwick & P. N. Howard (Eds.) *The handbook of internet politics*. New York: Routledge.
- Brundidge, J., Garrett, R. K., Rojas, H., & Gil de Zúñiga, H. (2014). Political participation and ideological news online: “Differential gains” and “differential losses” in a presidential election cycle. *Mass Communication and Society*.
- Campbell, A., Gurin, G., & Miller, W. (1954). *The voter decides*. Row Peterson: Evanstone.
- Converse, P. E. (1972). Change in the American electorate. In A. Campbell, & P. E. Converse (Eds.), *The human meaning of social change* (pp. 263–337). New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Gil de Zúñiga, H.; Puig-I-Abril, E.; & Rojas, H. (2009). Weblogs, traditional sources online and political participation: An assessment of how the Internet is changing the political environment. *New Media and Society*, 11, 553-574.
- Iyengar, S, Sood, G., Lelkes, Y. (2012). Affect, not ideology: A social identity perspective on polarization. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 76, 405-431.
- Lawrence, E., Sides, J., & Farrell, H. (2010). Self-segregation or deliberation? Blog readership, participation, and polarization in American politics. *Perspectives on Politics*, 8, 141-157.
- Stroud, N. J. (2011). *Niche news: The politics of news choice*. New York: Oxford University.
- Tajfel, H. (1970). Experiments in intergroup discrimination. *Scientific American* 223, 96–102.
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp.33-47). Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Statement of Benefits to the University/ Statement to the Dean

Benefits to Teaching and Service

Many of the courses I teach revolve around politics, the media, and public opinion. These include: Politics and the Media (CMST 424), Public Opinion and Propaganda (CMST 428), and the Internet and Politics (CMST 698). Since this project looks squarely at these topics by examining connections between media use (ideological news use), public opinion (affective polarization), and political participation, the “teacher-scholar” benefit is clear and robust.

I am also Graduate Coordinator, which frequently requires me to advise and mentor students on research. The proposed research speaks directly to these teaching and service roles, by enhancing my expertise in my subject matter and by more deeply connecting me to the actual practice of research. For example, I am currently advising an MA student in our department on her thesis, which is on a topic that is very similar to the one I am pursuing with the proposed study.

Benefits to the Strategic Plans of the Department, College, and University

Although a sabbatical can potentially be challenging to the work of a department and college, I do not believe my sabbatical would be especially problematic. The courses I teach can and have been taught by other faculty, who share expertise in the areas I teach. Moreover, I believe that any short-term challenges caused by my sabbatical, will be outweighed by its long-term contribution to the strategic plans of the department, college, and the university.

The proposed research speaks to the Department’s goals of “promoting ethical, responsible, and effective communication and to preparing students for their roles as citizens in a democratic society and as citizens of the world” as well as the Colleges stated interest in promoting environments where diversity can thrive. My general research agenda speaks to the ways in which communication can and should be used to promote greater equality and diversity in democracies. The proposed study speaks to this broader interest by examining the perils of the contemporary media environment that may detract from these democratic aims. Understanding these perils may help democracies to imagine improved communication environments.

The proposed research would also contribute to University goals related to professional development. The publications that will likely result from the proposed research would lend prestige to the University, which will help with the continued recruitment of top notch faculty and students.