

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Partisan media exposure, polarization, and candidate evaluations in the 2016 general election

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Abstract

Objective: This study aims to examine the influence of Republican and Democratic partisan television news on attitudes toward candidates for president immediately following the 2016 general election.

Method: Using two waves of the 2016 American National Election Study, we examine feelings toward Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton before and after the election.

Results: Exposure to Republican partisan media did have a significant negative effect on feelings toward Hillary Clinton, even when controlling for party identification, ideology, and feelings toward Clinton before the election. Consumption of Democratic partisan television, however, had no influence on feelings toward Donald Trump.

Conclusion: Further fragmentation and the expansion of partisan media has—and will continue to—benefit Republicans over Democrats.

KEYWORDS

media effects, cable news, public opinion

Evidence of political polarization in America has been mounting for the last few decades. Some have pointed to growing regional differences and geographic sorting (Bishop 2009; Black and Black 2007; Cho et al. 2013; Francia and Baumgartner 2006; Gimpel and Hui 2017). Many scholars subscribe to the notion that the masses are becoming more ideologically divided, as there is a disappearing middle in the left/right continuum (Abramowitz 2010, 2018; Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Campbell 2006; Schier and Eberly 2016). Others point toward the process of ideological and partisan sorting. Levendusky (2013) describes sorting as a process where elites move away from the ideological middle ground, and the masses follow suit by solidifying partisan allegiances (also see Fiorina and Levendusky 2006). In this sense, mass political ideology has changed little in comparison to that of political elites, but partisanship is on the rise across the board (see Hetherington 2009).

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For many, partisan polarization stems not from ideology but from life-long social attachment to party labels themselves, much like connections to sports teams (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2004; Huddy et al. 2015; Iyengar et al. 2012; Kane 2019; Kinder and Kalmoe 2017; Mason 2013, 2015, 2018; Westwood et al. 2018). Relatedly, recent work has found evidence of strong partisan affects, where emotions toward one's in-group and the out-group go beyond simple disagreement and spill into hostility (Abramowitz and Webster 2018; Hetherington and Rudolph 2015; Hetherington and Weiler 2018; Hetherington et al. 2016; Iyengar and Krupenkin 2018; Lelkes et al. 2017). Indeed, this dislike has moved out of the political realm and into personal lives where partisan loyalties have led to fewer friendships and less dating across party lines (Huber and Malhotra 2016; Iyengar et al. 2012). In this current political environment, partisans resist deliberation and compromise (Gutman and Thompson 2010). Indeed, Stricker (2018) finds evidence of "social partisanship," where mutual respect and good faith discussion is mostly "within partisan enclaves," while engaging with out-group partisans is akin to consorting with the enemy (p. 15).

With perhaps the exception of the U.S. Congress, political polarization is most prevalent in the growing partisan *media* environment, where the audience seeks out like-minded political perspectives on television and online, which help reinforce their preconceived notions (Iyengar and Hanh 2009; Lawrence, Sides, and Farrell 2010; Stroud 2008, 2011). This theory, selective exposure, predates modern media but is grounded in the notion that news consumers prefer to forgo counterattitudinal messages (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954), thus making political information easier to process and organize (Festinger 1957). But how does selective exposure influence viewers? Some have contended that only a scant number of extreme partisans seek out partisan news, and there are minimal consequences on political attitudes and discourse (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Dubois and Blank 2018), while others see a more significant impact on the public—particularly regarding polarization (Levendusky 2013; Sunstein 2017, 2007).

Are all partisan media created equal, though? More importantly, are the effects on the audience the same? Mutz (2015) shows that the medium matters, and high-conflict partisan televised media carries both attitudinal and emotional consequences for viewers. Similarly, conservative talk radio has persuasive power for listeners on the left and serves as a "pseudo community" that solidifies attitudes among those on the right (Barker 2002; Barker and Lawrence 2006). While the effects of partisan media are often conflated (Dilliplane 2011; Hyun and Moon 2016; Stroud and Collier 2018), Republican-friendly partisan media sources dominate their Democratic competition on television and especially on talk radio (Hemmer 2016). Also, several studies have shown Republican media to be more impactful on the viewers than their Democratic counterparts (Feldman et al. 2012; Martin and Yurukoglu 2017; Morris 2007; Morris and Francia 2010). Recently, Young (2020) made the compelling case that the psychological elements of modern political conservative media feeds Republican partisan outrage, whereas Democrats are less influenced by the liberal brand of partisan media.

To address these questions, we examine the influence of Republican and Democratic partisan television news on attitudes toward the candidates for president immediately following the 2016 general election. Using two waves of the 2016 American National Election Study, we examine feelings toward Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton before and after the election. Our findings indicate that exposure to Republican partisan media did have a significant negative effect on feelings toward Hillary Clinton, even when controlling for party identification, ideology, and feelings toward Clinton before the election. Consumption of Democratic partisan television, however, had no influence on feelings toward Donald Trump. We discuss the implications.

PARTISAN MEDIA AND PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES

Partisan media are not just opinionated political observations sprinkled around traditionally formatted anchor-based news, nor is it an editorial portion of a broadcast. Partisan media are oriented around covering politics from a single point of view, usually with a permanent host (or hosts) and a steady stream of guests who largely tend to agree with the hosts' talking points. This is a departure from many debate-oriented relics of the Sunday Morning political talk shows or the much less civil afternoon/prime-time cable programs such as CNN's *Crossfire* and Fox News' *Hannity and Colmes*, where the exchange of

competing ideas (i.e., reasoned argument) was emphasized. In the current partisan media environment, there is little interest in pursuing fact discourse. Instead, the main purpose is to present a “framework” that viewers can use to make sense of politics in a way that conforms to their own preconceived notions (Jamieson and Cappella 2008; Levendusky 2013).

At this point, it is important to highlight that our definition of partisan media is stricter than that of previous researchers. Most studies have identified partisan media on cable news by *channel* rather than *program*. We contend that the programming that occurs on Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC during the day is much different than what is presented in the evening hours and, in some rare cases, in the morning. Daytime programming on cable news follows standard talking-head broadcast television news. The truly partisan shows come out at the end of the day. Current examples include Hannity, Tucker Carlson Tonight, Fox and Friends, and The Ingraham Angle on Fox News; Hardball with Chris Matthews, All In with Chris Hayes, The Rachel Maddow Show, and The Last Word with Lawrence O’Donnell on MSNBC; and The Lead with Jake Tapper, Erin Burnett OutFront, Anderson Cooper 360, and CNN Tonight with Don Lemon, and Cuomo Prime Time on CNN.

The evidence of partisanship slant on broadcast network television, newspapers, and magazines is scant (Agirdas 2015; Barrett and Peake 2007; Buter and Scholfield 2010; D’Alessio and Allen 2000; Niven 2002, 2003; Soroka 2012). The evidence of partisan bias on the cable television channels listed above, on the other hand, is overwhelming (Aday 2010; Groeling 2008; Morris and Francia 2010; Muddiman et al. 2014; Rafail and McCarthy 2018; for an opposing view, see Groseclose and Milyo 2005). Very few debate the partisan agenda of the producers, hosts, and guests. Some work has focused on how political issues are presented in a biased format, such as global warming (Feldman et al. 2012) or the Iraq War (Aday et al. 2005). However, promoting a partisan agenda is only one aspect of partisan media. Equally important is delegitimizing the political opposition through the creation of unbalanced straw-man arguments that create an environment of “us versus them” (Kane 2019; Levendusky 2013).

A great deal of research has looked at coverage of the president and presidential elections in the partisan media. Eshbaugh-Soha and McGuavran (2018) found strong partisan slants regarding presidential speech coverage on MSNBC and Fox News, and Smith (2016) showed that exposure to Fox News coverage of Barack Obama had an influence on attitudes toward Obama. Other researchers have demonstrated bias in presidential campaign coverage on cable news as well (Farnsworth and Lichter 2011; Hyun and Moon 2016; Morris and Francia 2010).

It is evident that the partisan media are now ingrained as part of the presidential election process. On television, the partisan media heavily covered the primaries and the general election (Stroud and Collier 2018). Candidates were frequent visitors to friendly partisan media programs and almost completely avoided opposing venues. Candidate Donald Trump, most notably, was given unprecedented exposure on Fox News with scores of sit-down interviews and sometimes entire time blocks to call into the morning show *Fox and Friends*. During the general election, both Trump and Clinton were covered frequently and negatively on a daily basis in the partisan media (Kass 2016; Stewart 2016; Patterson 2019).

UNIQUE ECHO CHAMBERS, DIFFERENTIAL RESPONSES

The existence of partisan media and concomitant agendas is evident as discussed above. The larger question, then, is whether partisan cable television coverage has an influence on the audiences, especially when it comes to candidates for president. Some researchers have pointed to the process of partisan selective exposure to argue that attitudinal effects are weak (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Arceneaux, Johnson, and Cyderman 2013; Bennett and Iyengar 2008). Others have noted that media diets are more diverse than assumed, and partisan media effects are largely mitigated (Dubois and Blank 2018; Garrett 2009; Weeks, Zsiazek, and Holbert 2016). Of course, only a relatively small percentage of the mass public follows partisan media, as many choose entertainment over public affairs (Prior 2007). Even among those viewers who actively seek partisan news, opinions are less malleable than the nonviewing public (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Zaller 1992).

Nevertheless, evidence of echo chambers among like-minded partisans is compelling, with research demonstrating polarizing and persuasive effects (Dilliplane 2011; Levendusky 2013; Sunstein 2017, 2007). For example, Stroud (2011) shows a strong connection to partisan media exposure and commitment to a presidential candidate. Drawing from the theory of selective exposure, Stroud shows that partisans who watch cable news seek partisan-oriented programming, and the effects have been noted. Yet, as mentioned above, the messages and effects from conservative and liberal partisan media have displayed important differences.

It is unclear why this is the case. At first glance, partisan media on the left and right mirror each other. Rachel Maddow can be found nightly on MSNBC detailing the corruption of Donald Trump and the cowardice of his supporters in Congress, while Sean Hannity is on Fox News during the same time slot accusing Democrats in Congress—and the liberal “deep state” media—of treason. Are these not simply antithetical images of a political world? Why would audiences react differently?

Theoretically, we can look to Klapper’s (1960) theories on media selectivity. Not just selective exposure but also selective perception and selective retention. Individuals not only are drawn to like-minded political information but that information also serves to reinforce psychological predispositions. Specifically, the message from the Republican media has been more coordinated and grounded in outrage against the opposition as well as social change (Brock 2005; Collins 2004; Hacker and Pierson 2005; Hemmer 2016; Jamieson and Cappella 2008; Kitty 2005; Sobieraj and Berry 2011; Young 2020). Put differently, partisan media on the right displays more outrage than their counterparts. In Sobieraj and Berry’s analysis of outrage, they concluded the following:

Is one side really worse than the other? In a word, yes. Our data indicate that the right uses decidedly more outrage speech than the left. Taken as a whole, liberal content is quite nasty in character, following the outrage model with emotional, dramatic, and judgment-laden speech. Conservatives, however, are even nastier. (2011, p. 30)

Research has also shown that those on the right side of the political spectrum show more of a proclivity toward outrageous political talk than the left (Hemmer 2016; Sobieraj, Berry, and Connors 2013). Additionally, compared to the left, attitudinal reactions are more salient (Feldman et. al 2012; Martin and Yurukoglu 2017; Morris 2007; Morris and Francia 2010). In other words, partisan media appears to be a better fit for the Republican mind than the Democratic one.

The idea that the left and right have different psychological and neurological attributes is relatively new but no longer novel. Alford, Funk, and Hibbing (2005) first proposed the notion that political tendencies have a strong genetic component. Specifically, they examined fraternal versus identical twins and found ideological belief systems to be more closely aligned among the identical twins (sharing 100 percent DNA) than nonidentical twins. They note that “the substantive findings we present here offer a direct challenge to common assumptions and interpretations that political attitudes and behavioral tendencies are shaped primarily or even exclusively by environmental, especially familial, factors” (p. 165).

Later work on biology and politics found that conservatives are more likely than liberals to dwell on potential danger and are more sensitive to threats (Hibbing, Smith, and Alford 2014). Hetherington and Weiler (2018) draw from psychology to characterize the political right as “fixed” (having a need for order and closure) and the left as “fluid” (tolerance for ambiguity). Most recently, Young (2020) applied a similar psychological differentiation to explain the success of Republican partisan media (television and talk radio) over Democratic counterparts and, conversely, the success of liberal political satire, compared to the absence of political humor that leans to the right.

PARTISAN MEDIA AND ATTITUDE CHANGE IN THE 2016 GENERAL ELECTION

Thus far, we have referenced the literature on polarization, partisan tribalism, and differing biological/psychological predispositions to demonstrate a stark divide in the media. Also, we have discussed how the conservative mind is possibly more amendable to partisan media. Mostly, however, research has

focused on the political news content and the opinions of audiences. Some research, such as Stroud (2008, 2011), has documented attitudinal changes over time, with some experimental work that followed participants over time demonstrating persisting effects of these changed attitudes (Levendusky 2013). Our study, as far as we know, is the first to examine whether the usage of partisan media—as we have defined it—in the 2016 general election campaign had a significant effect on feelings toward the candidates.

Historically and theoretically, the weeks and months after an election are periods of “postelection depolarization” (Cigler and Getter 1977; Gutmann and Thompson 2010; Grewal and Cebul 2018). Research into postelection depolarization shows that satisfaction with the political system increases among voters, especially those who voted for the winner (Anderson and Guillory 1997; Nadeau and Blais 1993). Also, negative feelings toward the losing candidate tend to soften among supporters of the winner.

But what was the case in the 2016 presidential election, one which was characterized as one of the most highly partisan elections in recent memory (Pew Research Center 2016)? More specifically, did feelings toward the candidates soften or harden after the election among those who followed the campaign in the partisan media? Based on our discussion above, we suspect that consumers of conservative partisan media will be more susceptible to negative messaging than their liberal partisan media audience and thus demonstrate a reduction in positive feelings toward the election loser, Hillary Clinton.

DATA AND METHODS

To address our research question, we used the preelection and postelection American National Election Studies (ANES) 2016 Time Series Study to predict how watching partisan news is related to attitudes about presidential candidates immediately following a presidential election. ANES was conducted by researchers at the University of Michigan and Stanford University between September 7 and November 7, 2016 (preelection data) and November 9 and January 8, 2017 (postelection data). The data set has a total sample size of 4271, with 3090 online respondents and 1181 face-to-face respondents. Respondents were dropped from the study if they did not have data on both of the dependent variables, resulting in a sample size of 3587 respondents for our analysis.

Dependent variables

Our two dependent variables are the postelection feeling thermometer ratings for the Republican presidential candidate, Donald Trump, and the postelection feeling thermometer for the Democratic presidential candidate, Hillary Clinton. Respondents were informed of the candidates' name and asked to rate the candidate on a scale of 0 to 100. On the scale, a score of 0 to 50 signifies colder or unfavorable feelings toward the candidate, and a score of 50 to 100 signifies warmer or favorable feelings toward the candidate. The 50-degree mark is intended for the respondent who feels neither cold nor warm toward the person.

Independent variables

Our primary independent variables under analysis are two measures of partisan television consumption from the ANES preelection survey. ANES asked each respondent which television shows they watched regularly (i.e., on at least a monthly basis). Three television news shows were considered obviously conservative: Hannity with Sean Hannity, The O'Reilly Factor with Bill O'Reilly, and the Kelly File with Megyn Kelly. If respondents watched none of these shows, they were coded 0. If they watched one show, they were coded 1, two shows = 2, and three shows = 3. Four television news shows were considered obviously liberal: All in with Chris Hayes, Hardball with Chris Matthews, The Rachel Maddow Show, and AC360 with Anderson Cooper. If respondents watched none of these shows, they were coded 0. If they watched one

show, they were coded 1, two shows = 2, three shows = 3, and four shows = 4. The variables were placed in regressions by dummied out each category with zero as the referent.

Two additional important independent variables included in our analysis are the preelection feeling thermometer ratings for Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. We use this variable as a control for feelings about the candidate before the election so that our measures hold constant attitudes about the candidate prior to the election and capture changes in ratings from Time 1 (preelection) to Time 2 (postelection).

An array of control variables were also added to the analysis, including a 7-point scale of political ideology (1 = *extremely liberal*, 7 = *extremely conservative*), dummied party identification (Democrat [referent], moderate, Republican), age, dummied race/ethnicity (white [referent], black, Latino/a, another race), gender (1 = male, 0 = not male), dummied educational attainment (less than high school degree [referent], high school degree, some college or associate's degree, bachelor's degree, graduate degree), and an ordinal variable measuring household income with 28 income categories ranging from 1 = under \$5000 to 28 = \$250,000 or more.

To account for the potential problems caused by missing data, we used multiple imputation (MI) with 20 imputed data sets. MI uses all variables in the models to create regression equations that estimate missing values and was used to impute missing data for all independent variables so that all cases and their data could be included in our analyses. MI is currently regarded as the best approach for handling missing data in regression-based models and is recommended when even a small amount of data is missing (Enders 2010). As a robustness check, we also ran our models using the unimputed data set, and the results were nearly identical with no meaningful differences between the two sets of results.

RESULTS

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics for each dependent and independent variable used in our analysis. Within the overall sample, there is a slight increase in warmth for Clinton and a more noticeable increase in warmth for Trump between the preelection and postelection studies. This makes sense given that the adversarial nature of the election was over, Clinton likely garnered sympathy as a vanquished opponent or valiant but unsuccessful liberal champion, and Trump became the leader of the nation holding the position of president-elect of the United States. However, it should be noted that neither Clinton nor Trump eclipsed a rating of 50 in either survey, indicating that, on average, they were both seen in an unfavorable light before and after the election. Table 1 also indicates that about 20 percent of the population regularly watches partisan news television, with 17 percent of the sample watching at least one conservative news program and 20 percent watching at least one liberal news program.

Table 2 displays the results from our ordinary least squares regression analysis. Controlling for how respondents felt about Clinton prior to the election, regularly watching two or more conservative news programs is associated with colder feelings toward Clinton, compared to those who do not watch any such programs. This suggests that, regardless of your favorability ratings toward Clinton just before the election, watching more conservative news inhibits a person's ability to warm up to a vanquished opponent who no longer poses an immediate and apparent threat of election to political office.

Interestingly, when we look at the model controlling for how respondents feel about Trump prior to the election, there is no liberal news program effect. Regularly watching liberal news, regardless of the number of programs watched and how one felt about Trump prior to the election, is not statistically related to one's level of warmth toward Trump. Watching a high number of liberal news shows is related to increased favorability of Clinton after the election, just as watching conservative news shows is related to increased favorability of Trump. But only the regular viewership of conservative television news programs is statistically linked with the reduced favorability of a candidate.

These results suggest that although candidate favorability increases after elections, partisan news can slow that increase in favorability—but only when watching partisan news that emanates from conservative outlets. Partisan news has been referred to as an outrage machine (Brock 2005; Collins 2004; Hacker and Pierson 2005; Hemmer 2016; Jamieson and Cappella 2008; Kitty 2005; Sobieraj and Berry 2011;

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics

Variables	Means and proportions	SD	Min	Max
Dependent variables				
<i>Clinton Feeling Thermometer (T2)</i>	43.789	34.251	0	100
<i>Trump Feeling Thermometer (T2)</i>	42.058	34.922	0	100
Independent variables				
<i>Clinton Feeling Thermometer (T1)</i>	42.403	34.295	0	100
<i>Trump Feeling Thermometer (T1)</i>	36.601	34.777	0	100
<i>Conservative News Watching</i>				
<i>Watches Zero Shows</i>	0.826	0.379	0	1
<i>Watches One Show</i>	0.070	0.256	0	1
<i>Watches Two Shows</i>	0.055	0.229	0	1
<i>Watches Three Shows</i>	0.046	0.211	0	1
<i>Liberal News Watching</i>				
<i>Watches Zero Shows</i>	0.804	0.396	0	1
<i>Watches One Show</i>	0.129	0.335	0	1
<i>Watches Two Shows</i>	0.030	0.173	0	1
<i>Watches Three Shows</i>	0.020	0.143	0	1
<i>Watches Four Shows</i>	0.0149	0.121	0	1
<i>Political Ideology</i>	4.189	1.479	1	7
<i>Party Identification</i>				
<i>Democrat</i>	0.463	0.498	0	1
<i>Moderate</i>	0.129	0.336	0	1
<i>Republican</i>	0.407	0.491	0	1
<i>Age</i>	49.370	17.545	18	90
<i>Male</i>	0.468	0.499	0	1
<i>Race and Ethnicity</i>				
<i>White</i>	0.726	0.445	0	1
<i>Black</i>	0.093	0.290	0	1
<i>Latino/a</i>	0.102	0.303	0	1
<i>Another Race</i>	0.077	0.267	0	1
<i>Educational Attainment</i>				
<i>Less than HS Degree</i>	0.062	0.242	0	1
<i>High School Degree</i>	0.185	0.389	0	1
<i>Some College or AA</i>	0.349	0.476	0	1
<i>Bachelor's Degree</i>	0.234	0.423	0	1
<i>Graduate Degree</i>	0.167	0.373	0	1
<i>Household Income</i>	15.479	8.005	1	28

Note. N = 3587. T1 = Time 1, T2 = Time 2.

TABLE 2 Feeling thermometer ratings of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump (0–100 with higher numbers indicating more warmth) immediately after the 2016 election

	Clinton feeling thermometer (T2)		Trump feeling thermometer (T2)	
	B	SE	B	SE
Clinton Feeling Thermometer (T1)	0.714***	(0.017)		
Trump Feeling Thermometer (T1)			0.711***	(0.019)
Conservative News Watching				
<i>Watches One Show</i>	−1.540	(1.477)	1.854	(1.557)
<i>Watches Two Shows</i>	−2.060*	(1.182)	3.227*	(1.303)
<i>Watches Three Shows</i>	−3.124*	(1.303)	5.605***	(1.192)
Liberal News Watching				
<i>Watches One Show</i>	0.276	(1.054)	−0.246	(1.100)
<i>Watches Two Shows</i>	0.158	(2.231)	−1.261	(2.311)
<i>Watches Three Shows</i>	2.240	(1.769)	−1.137	(2.086)
<i>Watches Four Shows</i>	6.048**	(2.150)	−1.407	(2.274)
Controls				
<i>Political Ideology</i>	−1.302***	(0.315)	2.335***	(0.387)
<i>Party Identification</i>				
<i>Moderate</i>	−6.290***	(1.420)	3.145*	(1.421)
<i>Republican</i>	−8.800***	(1.316)	7.743***	(1.484)
<i>Age</i>	0.006	(0.020)	0.007	(0.022)
<i>Male</i>	−2.115**	(0.719)	−0.458	(0.776)
<i>Race and Ethnicity</i>				
<i>Black</i>	6.437***	(1.463)	−2.121	(1.572)
<i>Latino/a</i>	4.681***	(1.401)	−2.954	(1.570)
<i>Another Race</i>	3.351*	(1.409)	−0.536	(1.621)
<i>Educational Attainment</i>				
<i>High School Degree</i>	−1.033	(1.659)	−2.772	(2.017)
<i>Some College or AA</i>	−0.553	(1.539)	−4.122*	(1.859)
<i>Bachelor's Degree</i>	−0.122	(1.597)	−5.834**	(1.935)
<i>Graduate Degree</i>	1.091	(1.698)	−7.818***	(2.030)
<i>Household Income</i>	−0.016	(0.052)	−0.173**	(0.057)
<i>Intercept</i>	23.438***	(2.575)	10.095***	(2.506)
<i>R-squared</i>		0.767		0.755

Note. Models are ordinary least squares regressions with probability weights (V160102) to more accurately represent the U.S. population. T1 = Time 1. Political ideology (1 = *extremely liberal*, 7 = *extremely conservative*). Referents: News Watching (Zero Shows), Party Identification (Democrat), Race (White), Educational Attainment (Less Than High School Degree). $N = 3587$.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$ (one-tailed).

Young 2020), but it appears that only conservative television news programs are able to continue the outrage over a candidate after an election. Whereas liberal news-watchers do not differ from nonwatchers in their dislike of Donald Trump after the election, regular conservative news-watchers do differ from nonwatchers or limited watchers in their dislike of Hillary Clinton. This confirms our suspicion that

audiences do indeed have differential reactions to partisan news and that Republican partisan news consumers sustain outrage more than their Democratic counterparts.

CONCLUSION

In 1998, Roger Ailes, the Chief Executive Officer of Fox News, revolutionized television by presenting a news product that appealed directly to partisans. While Ailes refused to label his channel as partisan or ideological, he claimed he was providing a “fair and balanced” alternative to a liberally biased mainstream news media (Collins 2004). This created a new “conservative media establishment” that those on the political opposition failed to match (Jamieson and Cappella 2008). Not only does Fox News consistently outpace MSNBC and CNN in the ratings, but research has also shown that the appeal of Fox News has been strong enough to swing presidential elections in favor of the Republican candidate (DellaVigna and Kaplan 2007; Martin and Yurukoglu 2017). While it has been argued that the new age of political humor and satire has been the left’s political counterpunch (Young 2020), it seems that the expansion of partisan media has—and will continue to—benefit Republicans over Democrats. Our findings are clear: Republican partisan media exposure had a significant impact on how the audience felt about Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, while Democratic partisan media barely made a dent.

It is important to reemphasize our definition of partisan media on cable news. We did not wish to include the person who tunes in from time to time during the day or early evening to catch the news on cable. Instead, we wanted to look at the people who seek out the most notorious and rabid partisan news personalities. At first blush, it would seem that these viewers are already at the edges of the partisan spectrum in the month preceding an election, and feelings toward the candidate of choice and the opposition are fairly solidified, with an inevitable “postelection depolarization” afterward. This was not the case for the Fox News partisan audience in 2016. They sustained the outrage.

It is important to note, of course, that the partisan media audience on cable is small. On a typical evening, about 10 million viewers will watch at least one of these programs (Joyella 2019). This is a limitation of our study. But previous work has demonstrated that partisan media creates vitriol that can spill over into national political discourse (Levendusky 2013). This process should be kept in mind as the next election campaign approaches.

Our study is limited to changes in feelings toward the 2016 major party candidates for president. Some recent work has examined the growth in negative affect over time (Iyengar and Krupenkin 2018; Christenson and Weisberg 2019), and some older work has looked at how evaluative distances have changed in pre/postelection feelings toward presidential candidates (Beasley and Joslyn 2001). Most of this work has focused on feelings toward the opposition with an emphasis on polarization and negativity. It would likely benefit future work to examine partisan media’s effect on support for an individual’s candidate of choice and whether the effects spill over into other political and social activities.

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