

News from the Other Side: How Topic Relevance Limits the Prevalence of Partisan Selective Exposure

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Prior research has demonstrated a preference among partisans for like-minded news outlets, a key mechanism through which the media may be polarizing Americans. But in order for source reputations to cause widespread selective exposure, individuals must prioritize them above other competing attributes of news content. Evaluating the relative influence of various contributors to media choice is therefore critical. This study pits two such factors, source reputation and topic relevance, against one another in conjoint survey experiments offering randomly paired news items to partisans. Making a news source's reputation politically unfriendly lowers the probability that an individual chooses an item, but this negative effect is often eclipsed by the positive effect of making a news topic relevant to the individual. In many popular modern news consumption environments, where consumers encounter a diverse mixture of sources and topics, the ability of source reputations to contribute to polarization via partisan selective exposure is limited.

Rapid changes in the way news content is produced and disseminated have led to widespread concern that partisan selective exposure—the tendency to restrict one's news diet to politically agreeable sources—will increase to alarming levels, a phenomenon that some argue is already contributing to mass polarization (Levendusky 2013a; Sunstein 2001). A robust finding fueling this concern is that partisans tend to prefer news outlets with reputations that comport with their own political points of view (e.g., Stroud 2010). So long as partisans prefer like-minded news sources and have the technology to personally tailor their news intake, many have predicted they may increasingly restrict themselves to partisan echo chambers (e.g., Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Sunstein 2001).

But while evidence for source preferences is strong, it is insufficient to demonstrate that rates of partisan selective exposure will increase. The reason is that the relative importance of source reputations when compared with other important attributes of news remains unclear. Just because source reputations exert marginal effects on the probability of consuming a news item does not mean they are strong enough to be substantively consequential in a multivariate news consumption environment. Put another way, if source reputations exert relatively modest effects compared to other

countervailing forces, then the chances of them causing widespread partisan selective exposure are remote. Quantifying the relative influence of various aspects of news on media choice is therefore critical to assessing whether the rise of partisan news outlets will translate to meaningful changes in media consumption patterns and, in turn, political opinion.

To better understand the way partisans prioritize different aspects of news, this study features a novel experiment that measures the relative influence of two widely studied factors in news consumption: source reputation and topic relevance. A large body of prior work has demonstrated that individuals are more likely to consume news on topics about which they care passionately (Krosnick 1990), concern a group with which they strongly identify, or directly affect their well-being (Atkin 1973; Bolen and Leeper 2013; Boninger, Krosnick, and Berent 1995; Iyengar et al. 2008). Although previously studied individually, partisan and issue-oriented news selectivity have rarely been pitted against one another—especially in experimental settings—partly due to the well-known methodological concern known as the “curse of dimensionality” (Ho et al. 2007). That is, simultaneously randomizing both the relevance of content (by offering news items on several topics) and partisan source

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reputations in a traditional factorial experiment would greatly expand the number of experimental conditions and quickly lead to underpowered hypothesis tests in the absence of a very large sample.

With these concerns in mind, this study employs a conjoint experimental design in which partisan survey respondents were asked to engage in repeated choice tasks between pairs of news items with independently randomized topics and sources that span a range of partisan reputations. This design is well suited for the question at hand, since the repeated observations on subjects provide ample power to estimate multiple treatment effects and because the technique has long been used in other disciplines to examine the effects of competing product attributes on consumption (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto 2014). By offering partisans news items that vary in both topic and outlet simultaneously, this design also mimics several key features of news consumption environments that are increasingly common in the digital age. Recent work has shown that at least half of Americans now get their news online (Beujon 2012), where opportunities for incidental exposure to cross-cutting information on a range of issues are abundant (Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic 2015; Gentzkow and Shapiro 2011; Messing and Westwood 2012).

The results, replicated across two large samples,¹ show that, all else equal, partisans are averse to politically unfriendly news sources but that making a news topic relevant to an individual often exerts a far larger positive effect on the probability of news selection. For example, if a politically neutral source offers two news items to seniors, one on an irrelevant topic and one concerning Social Security, the mean rates of selection are 0.49 and 0.75, respectively—evidence for a massive, positive topic relevance effect. But if we took the same article on Social Security and changed the politically neutral source to one that is politically unfriendly, the rate of selection only drops to 0.74, on average. Thus, because of the relatively large positive effects of topic relevance—between 9 and 30 percentage points across subgroups, compared with source effects that range between roughly 3 and 8 percentage points—the probability of consuming relevant news items is very likely to be high in a variety of scenarios regardless of the source offering it. While partisan source reputations may be an important influence on news selection, the strength of topic relevance often prevents sources from being consequential in the selection decision. Such patterns reveal a severe limitation on the ability of source reputations to cause partisan selective exposure,

and they also offer a plausible explanation for why, despite the ability and preference to consume news from agreeable sources, recent observational studies using an array of measurement techniques have concluded that most partisans consume an ideologically mixed diet of news (Bakshy et al. 2015; Garrett, Carnahan, and Lynch 2013; Gentzkow and Shapiro 2011).

THE POWER OF PARTISAN SOURCE CUES

As Iyengar and Hahn (2009) note, the idea that individuals seek to minimize their intake of dissonant information was presented by communications scholars over half a century ago (Festinger 1957; Mills 1965), and early tests of the political implications of this theory found that people tended to report greater levels of exposure to campaign communications from their preferred candidates and parties (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948; Schramm and Carter 1959; Sears and Freedman 1967). The recent explosion of media outlets that cater to niche audiences with particular points of view (Hamilton 2005; Mullainathan and Shleifer 2005; Prior 2007; Stroud 2010) has led many scholars to worry that the days of incidental exposure to diverse opinions are at an end, a pattern that, some assert, is already leading to a less informed and more polarized electorate (Levendusky 2013a, 2013b; Sunstein 2001).

Given these changes to the news landscape, it is perhaps unsurprising that individuals are now more likely to view certain outlets as having biased coverage and political agendas (Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Pfau, Houston, and Semmler 2007). Consumers of Fox News content are not only fed a steady diet of conservative viewpoints (Groeling and Baum 2007), they are also consistently reminded by commentators of the bias that exists in “liberal” outlets such as *The New York Times*. Likewise, MSNBC frequently makes reference to the slanted reports emanating from the other side of the aisle. In turn, the partisan reputation of news sources has come to be viewed as an important heuristic in partisan news consumption.

In addition to substantial observational research on this tendency (see Stroud [2008] for a review), experimental studies have also shown evidence of partisan source effects. In Iyengar and Hahn (2009), online survey respondents were shown a collection of news headlines with randomly assigned sources. The study found that the Fox News label significantly increased the probability that Republicans would select a given article, all else constant, while Democrats showed an aversion to Fox. These preferences lead the authors to conclude that “although an infinite variety of information is available [online], individuals may well limit their exposure to news or sources that they expect to find agreeable. Over time, this behavior is likely to become habituated so that users turn

1. See tables A12 and A13 in the online appendix for replication results.

to their preferred sources automatically no matter what the subject matter" (34).

THE ROLE OF TOPIC RELEVANCE

Despite the recent prominence of partisan selectivity, a long line of research has characterized news selection as being driven by many competing factors, including the relevance of news topics to individuals (Atkin 1973; Iyengar et al. 2008; Johnson, Bichard, and Zhang 2009; Rubin 2009; Stroud 2008). "The individual," Atkin (1973) notes, "desires to formulate precise cognitive orientations toward those stimuli that potentially or currently impinge on his well-being" (cited in Knobloch, Carpentier, and Dolf Zillmann 2003, 94). In line with this idea, several studies have since found evidence that individuals select news content that is more likely to provide them with "instrumental utility," which can be defined as information that "affords individuals a better orientation in, as well as more effective means of acting on, their physical and social environments" (Knobloch et al. 2003, 92). For example, both Knobloch-Westerwick and Alter (2007) and Tewksbury (2005) show that demographic traits correlate with the type of news consumed. Similarly, Bolen and Leeper (2013) found that women were far more likely than men to report following women's health issues in the news, while Campbell (2003) showed that senior citizens are especially attentive to issues like Social Security. In addition, a large literature on "issue publics" examines individuals who, for whatever reason, care passionately about certain topics and therefore consume more news on them (Feldman et al. 2013; Iyengar et al. 2008; Krosnick 1990; Stroud 2011).

PARTISAN SELECTIVE EXPOSURE

IN THE DIGITAL AGE

While previous scholars have shown the tendency of most TV viewers to tune out news altogether (Arceneaux et al. 2012; Prior 2007), news online is often thrust into the view of consumers, imposing a consumption decision. The mix of viewpoints that reach partisans online also appears to differ from other mediums in important ways. Several studies suggest that incidental exposure to dissonant news outlets is common online, especially in two highly trafficked news arenas the present experiment mimics: news aggregator sites and social network sites (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2011; Messing and Westwood 2014). Sites like Google News offer items that range in both topic and source because "most aggregation services do not consider political slant when collecting content" (Hampton et al. 2009; Messing and Westwood 2014, 1045). Facebook news feeds include similar content when it is shared by members of one's social network (Messing and Westwood 2014; Mutz and Mondak 2006). As Bakshy et al. (2015) show, such networks are not merely made up of like-

minded friends. Rather "on average more than 20 percent of an individual's Facebook friends who report an ideological affiliation are from the opposing party, leaving substantial room for exposure to opposing viewpoints" (1131).

In some cases, consumers in these high-choice digital environments may encounter optimal news items concerning a relevant topic and offered by a preferred source. But in many (if not most) other cases, consumers are presented with some other permutation. To understand how partisans navigate this increasingly common scenario, quantifying the relative importance of various drivers of news selection becomes critical. If source cues act as a litmus test for consumers, no factor will be powerful enough to convince the consumer to read a report from a dissonant source. But if the power of source cues is relatively weak, there may be a number of common situations in which source reputations are not determinative in the news consumption decision, limiting their ability to cause widespread selective exposure.

DATA AND METHOD

The data for the primary analysis in this study were collected from an online survey administered by Survey Sampling International (SSI) in June of 2014. The goal was to collect a representative sample of Democrats and Republicans based on the mean levels of gender, age, and racial categories found in the population-weighted 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), a widely used survey for studying partisan preferences (Anscombe and Schaffner 2013). SSI targeted members of its large online panel in order to hit within-party demographic quotas based on the CCES. As table 1 shows, the 1,059 partisans in the SSI sample are nearly identical to the partisans in the CCES sample in terms of gender, race, and age.

The present study employs a conjoint experimental design. Conjoint experiments have long been used in marketing studies seeking to measure the relative influence of various product attributes on rates of consumption, making this design ideally suited for the questions at hand (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014). Conjoint experiments differ from traditional vignette-style factorial experiments in key ways. For one, a typical conjoint experiment increases the statistical power of hypothesis tests for a given sample size by recording repeated responses from each participant. Second, rather than having respondents only view one experimental condition at a time, conjoint experiments frequently offer respondents multiple profiles to compare simultaneously—in this case, multiple news items—and ask them to register their preference for one profile over the other. In such forced-choice conjoint experiments with head-to-head comparisons, the unconditional probability of selecting a given profile is 0.5. While this feature may be unconventional,

Table 1. Means in Demographic Categories by Party

Variable	Democrats		Republicans	
	Democrats SSI	CCES 2012 (Weighted)	Republicans SSI	CCES 2012 (Weighted)
Female	.57	.58	.54	.51
Non-Hispanic white	.54	.57	.85	.87
Non-Hispanic black	.21	.24	.01	.01
Hispanic/Latino	.12	.13	.09	.07
Other race	.13	.06	.05	.05
Age (years)	44.58	45.26	48.70	49.14
Median household income (\$1,000s)	45.00	45.00	55.00	55.00
Has BA	.40	.27	.40	.27
Student	.22	.07	.14	.06
Senior (over age 55)	.30	.32	.42	.41
Smoker	.27		.21	
Trying to lose weight	.58		.55	
Uninsured/health care worker	.21		.20	
N	527	21,040	532	15,751

there is evidence that the comparative nature of the exercise actually leads to more externally valid estimates of treatment effects than traditional designs, likely because such choice exercises foster respondent engagement and discourage satisficing (Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Yamamoto 2015, 2399).

In the present conjoint design, each of the 1,059 partisan respondents was presented with 12 choice tasks featuring two news items labeled “News Selection A” and “News Selection B” (see fig. 1). For each choice task in this experiment, the sources and headlines that populate the matrix in figure 1 were independently randomized.² After each choice matrix was displayed, respondents were asked, “Would you prefer to read News Selection A or News Selection B?” The response of each individual to each of the 12 choice tasks enters into the estimation data as two observations: one indicating a positive response to the profile that was selected and one indicating a negative response to the profile that was not selected, along with the levels of the attributes associated with each profile. The result is a pooled estimation data set with $1,059 \times 12 \times 2 = 25,416$ observations.³

2. To avoid ordering effects, the placement of source and headline rows was randomized between respondents but fixed within respondents. Respondents were initially told that at the end of the survey they would be asked to read a news article in full based on their selections, a minor deception to help avoid satisficing. All participants were debriefed at the close of the survey.

3. See the “Checking the ‘No Carryover’ Assumption” section of the online appendix for robustness checks relevant to this pooling strategy.

Following recent applications of this method, treatment effects and predicted outcomes given various attribute combinations are estimated using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014). Specifically, within each subgroup, an indicator for whether or not a given news item was selected was regressed on indicators for whether that item was relevant to the individual, an indicator for whether the item’s source was politically friendly (given the individual’s party identification), and an indicator for whether the source was politically unfriendly.⁴ Indicators for irrelevant content and neutral sources were omitted from the models as reference categories.

MEASURING TOPIC RELEVANCE

There are several plausible ways to conceive of a topic being “relevant” to a consumer and to measure relevance empirically. One option is to ask people directly what topics interest them most (e.g., Stroud 2011, 73–77). While intuitive, this approach has drawbacks given the construct of the current study. For one, self-reported measures are likely to be inaccurate (Prior 2009). Self-reported interest measures would also be so similar to the conjoint choice tasks presented in the experiment that any observed correlations between them and treatment assignments would be uninformative. This study therefore does not attempt to measure “interest,” and instead attempts to capture the afore-

4. All irrelevant headlines are pooled into a single condition. See figure A2 in the appendix for individual headline effects.

	News Selection A	News Selection B
Source:	USA Today	Fox News
Headline:	"Obamacare enrollment numbers called into question"	"Congress weighs cuts to Social Security"

Would you prefer to read News Selection A or News Selection B?

News Selection A



News Selection B



Figure 1. Randomly generated choice task

mentioned concept of “instrumental utility” (Knoblock et al. 2003)—a self-interest-based conception of topic relevance centering on issues that have a direct impact on groups’ financial or physical well-being. Membership in these “Affected Publics” (hereafter APs) is often tied to more objective indicators of individual circumstances and is therefore often easier to validly measure. For example, to determine whether someone is especially affected by the Equal Pay Act, legislation designed to close a persistent wage gap between men and women, a standard item asking the respondent’s gender can be used. Similarly, determining whether someone is close to retirement age can indicate whether topics like Social Security are especially relevant. Such demographic items are subject to only limited interpretation by respondents, and they were therefore used to code membership in APs (see the appendix, available online, for details).⁵

SURVEY CONTENT

Pretest results showed bipartisan agreement that MSNBC and Fox News inject substantial partisan bias into their news coverage in the Democratic and Republican directions, while *USA Today* is seen as supplying relatively middle-of-the-road content (see fig. A3 in the online appendix). Fox, MSNBC, and *USA Today* were therefore chosen to serve as the Republican-leaning, Democratic-leaning, and neutral news source treatments, respectively. Pretest data also revealed which groups could be plausibly sampled. Six APs were identified, several of which have been examined in prior work on issue publics and self-interest. The groups (and corresponding topics) are displayed in table 2 and include women (Bolsen and Leeper 2013), smokers (Green and

Gerken 1989), current students, those near or above retirement age (Campbell 2003), the uninsured/health care workers (Iyengar et al. 2008), and those trying to lose weight. In order to maximize statistical power, the three news topics targeted at women—abortion, the Equal Pay Act, and breast cancer research—were collapsed into a single treatment condition in the subsequent analyses. Topics that might appeal to entertainment seekers (e.g., the upcoming NFL season and celebrity dating mishaps; Prior 2007) and a general politics item concerning the 2016 presidential election were also added in order to better mimic the mix of topics found on popular news aggregator sites. The full headlines pertaining to each of these topics are also displayed in table 2.⁶

HYPOTHESES

Given the aforementioned literature, several patterns should be apparent in the data analyzed below. For one, we should still expect the partisan reputations of sources to influence selections. That is:

H1. All else equal, partisans should be more (less) likely to choose news content if the source of the content is perceived as friendly (unfriendly) to their preferred party, relative to a source that is perceived as politically neutral.

Second, given prior work on issue publics and self-interest, it is anticipated that:

H2. Relative to other topics, members of APs should select news content at greater rates if it concerns a topic relevant to their group.

5. See the “Alternate Coding Scheme Results” and “Post-Treatment Bias Check” sections of the online appendix for additional robustness checks.

6. In order to avoid the unrealistic scenario of seeing identical headlines attributed to multiple sources, three versions of each topic’s headline were constructed and later pooled within topic for analysis. See the “Headline Versions” section of the appendix for more details.

Table 2. Affected Publics and Relevant Headline (Topic) Treatments

Topic	Headline	Affected Public
Abortion restrictions	"Federal court puts abortion restrictions back in place"	Women
Equal Pay Act	"Senate votes against bill that would ensure equal pay for women"	Women
Breast cancer study	"Study finds potential cause of breast cancer"	Women
Health study on smoking	"Smokers who quit may cut heart risk faster than had been thought, study finds"	Smokers (reports smoking one pack per week or more)
Social Security cuts	"Congress weighs cuts to Social Security"	Seniors (over age 55)
Student debt tips	"How to drop all that student loan debt"	Current students
Health care	"Obamacare enrollment numbers called into question"	Uninsured/health care workers
Weight loss tips	"Weight-loss tips that make a difference"	Currently trying to lose weight
Fantasy football performers	"Fantasy Football 2014 Forecast"	
Celebrity gossip	"Celebrity dating fails"	
Campaign news	"Did bridge scandal kill Christie's 2016 bid?"	

It is also possible that topic relevance could be appealing enough to mute the impact of source cues. This suggests a third hypothesis:

H3. Among members of APs, the presence of relevant content should significantly reduce the effect of source reputations.

There is little prior work on which to base expectations about the relative effect sizes of topic relevance and source reputations, and the question will therefore be assessed empirically below.

RESULTS

When offered an array of news items that varied in both topic and source, how did partisans respond? To assess this, we can first examine the rates of selection of news items across all experimental conditions. These are displayed in figure 2 for each AP (see the online appendix for intraparty results). As the figure makes clear, for a variety of subgroups, relevant topics are widely preferred, even when source reputations are suboptimal. Consider the scenario of seniors encountering news items on topics other than Social Security. In those cases, the items were selected at rates 0.40, 0.49., and 0.52 when offered by a politically unfriendly, neutral, or politically friendly source, respectively. However, when an item on Social Security was offered to the same group, even in the case where the source is politically unfriendly, the item was selected 74% of the time.⁷ Women and smokers display similar consumption patterns:

unfriendly sources tend to be less preferred, but the popularity of relevant topics is more than strong enough to counteract negative source reputations.

These average rates of consumption are revealing, but to characterize results in terms of effect sizes, table 3 displays estimates from separate models of news selection for each AP. The results indicate partial support for hypothesis 1. While sources with politically dissonant reputations impose a fairly consistent penalty on the probability that a news item is chosen—typically around a -4 percentage point effect—making an item politically friendly rarely results in a statistically significant increase in the probability of selection (though among smokers and seniors this treatment exerts discernible 3.8 and 3.6 percentage point effects, respectively). This result is in line with prior work positing that avoidance of dissonant information is driving partisan selective exposure (Bennett and Iyengar 2008; but see Garrett 2009), and it also replicates prior research on the effects of source reputations, lending face validity to the experimental design.

Hypothesis 2 stated that relevant content would be selected at greater rates than content concerning other topics by members of APs. Table 3 shows resounding support for this hypothesis. In five out of six of these subgroups, respondents chose relevant content at significantly higher rates than items on other topics, with effect sizes ranging from 7.7 percentage points among those trying to lose weight to a staggering 30 percentage points among seniors. In most cases, these effects are far larger than any effects exhibited by source cues, and further tests demonstrate that the differences in the effects of topics and sources are themselves often statistically significant (see "Differences in Treatment Effects" in the online appendix). While disso-

7. Topic relevance effects are larger among AP members than their counterparts. See figure A6 in the appendix.

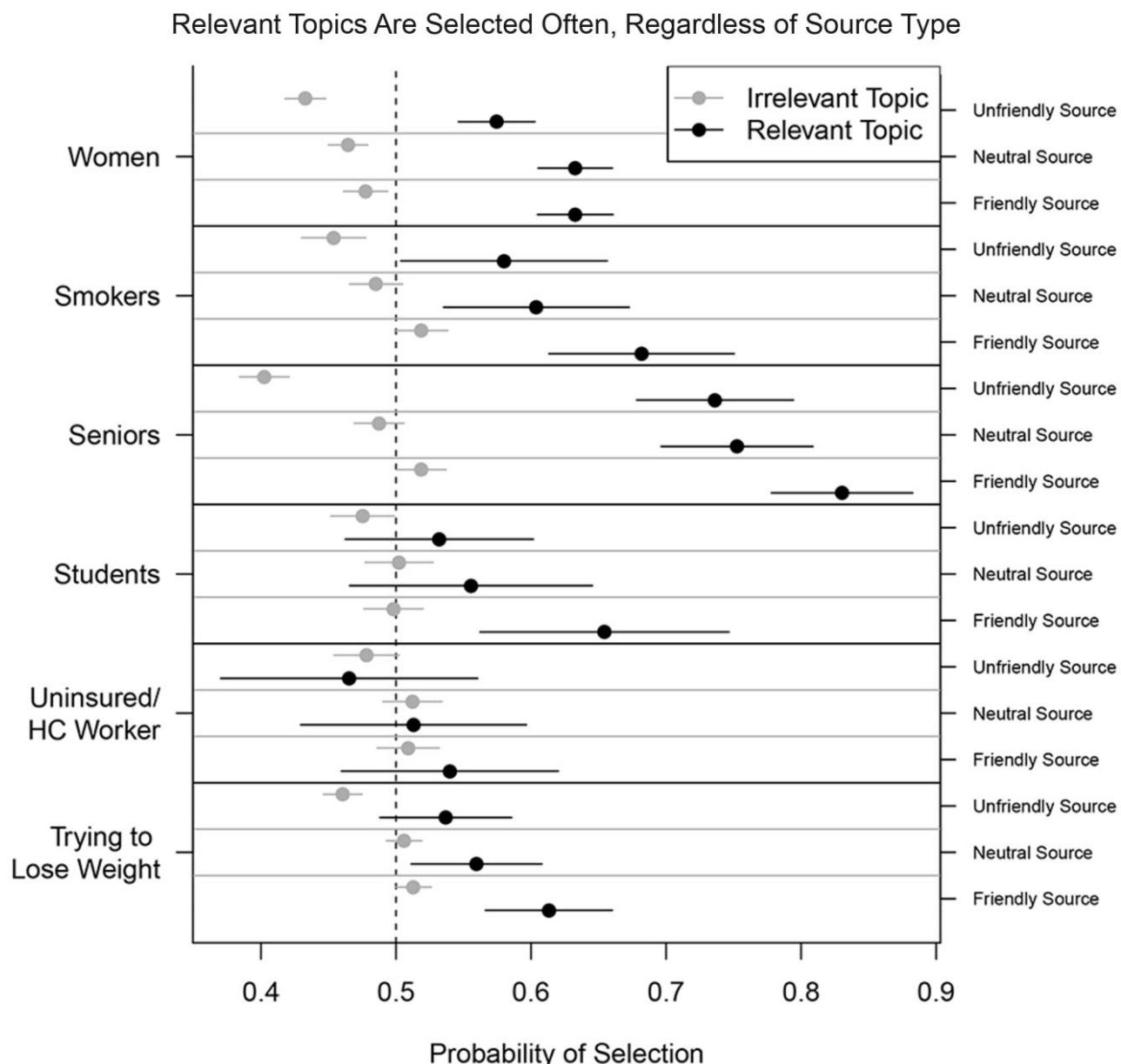


Figure 2. Rates of selection for a given news item by the item's source type and topic type for each Affected Public. Estimates were generated by the models in table 4. Shapes denote point estimates, bars denote 95% confidence intervals on mean predictions.

nant sources impose a slight penalty on news items, making a topic relevant causes a massive increase in the probability of selection.

DO SOURCES AND TOPICS INTERACT?

The previous results demonstrate the strong influence of topics on news selection. But can topics significantly reduce the effects of sources, as hypothesis 3 posits? To test this, additional models were estimated in which indicators for source and topic types were interacted (table 4).

We can first consider the interaction between topic relevance and politically friendly sources. Out of the six sub-

groups, the marginal effect of a friendly source was positive and statistically significant (when content was irrelevant) among smokers and seniors (the effects were 3.4 and 3.1 percentage points, respectively). In those two groups, the interaction between topic relevance and friendly sources shows that seeing relevant content increased the marginal effect of a friendly source further by 4.4 and 4.7 percentage points, suggesting that friendly content from a relevant source represents an optimum scenario for consumers. However, the standard errors on these interaction terms were quite large, and the estimates therefore not statistically discernible from zero.

Table 3. Treatment Effects Estimated via Ordinary Least Squares

	Women	Smokers	Seniors	Students	Uninsured/Health Care Workers	Trying to Lose Weight
Intercept	.468*	.483*	.484*	.499*	.512*	.504*
	(.008)	(.012)	(.009)	(.013)	(.012)	(.007)
Relevant topic	.155*	.136*	.303*	.087*	.007	.077*
	(.011)	(.024)	(.018)	(.030)	(.031)	(.017)
Friendly source	.009	.038*	.036*	.005	-.000	.011
	(.011)	(.016)	(.013)	(.019)	(.017)	(.011)
Unfriendly source	-.039*	-.031	-.078*	-.027	-.035	-.043*
	(.011)	(.018)	(.014)	(.020)	(.019)	(.011)
N	14,088	5,904	9,072	4,560	5,232	14,280

Note. Standard errors were computed in two ways, (a) conventional (homoscedastic) and (b) clustered by respondent. In order to be conservative, the larger of the two standard errors was used to determine statistical significance.

* $p < .05$.

We can also examine the ability of topic relevance to neutralize the effect of unfriendly sources, which had a statistically significant negative effect among women, seniors, and those trying to lose weight when content was irrelevant, (the effects are -3.2 , -8.5 , and -4.5 percentage points, respectively). To neutralize these effects, the coefficient on Relevant \times Unfriendly would have to be equally as large in the positive direction. Among women and those trying to lose weight, relevant content changes the marginal effect of an

unfriendly source by -2.7 and 2.3 percentage points, though the coefficients are not statistically significant. Among seniors, there is some evidence of a substantively meaningful interaction—the marginal effect of an unfriendly source increases by roughly 7 percentage points when content is made relevant—though again the result is imprecisely estimated.

Setting aside statistical significance, the point estimates on these interaction terms only exhibit the necessary direction and magnitude to neutralize (or enhance) source

Table 4. Interactive Ordinary Least Squares Models of News Selection

	Women	Smokers	Seniors	Students	Uninsured/Health Care Worker	Trying to Lose Weight
Intercept	.464*	.485*	.487*	.502*	.512*	.506*
	(.008)	(.012)	(.009)	(.014)	(.013)	(.008)
Relevant topic	.168*	.119*	.265*	.053	.001	.054*
	(.017)	(.037)	(.030)	(.049)	(.046)	(.026)
Friendly source	.013	.034*	.031*	-.004	-.003	.007
	(.012)	(.017)	(.014)	(.020)	(.018)	(.011)
Unfriendly source	-.032*	-.031	-.085*	-.027	-.034	-.045*
	(.012)	(.019)	(.014)	(.021)	(.020)	(.012)
Relevant \times friendly	-.013	.044	.047	.103	.030	.047
	(.023)	(.053)	(.041)	(.063)	(.061)	(.036)
Relevant \times unfriendly	-.027	.007	.069	.004	-.014	.023
	(.023)	(.054)	(.043)	(.060)	(.062)	(.035)
N	14,088	5,904	9,072	4,560	5,232	14,280

Note. Standard errors were computed in two ways, (a) conventional (homoscedastic) and (b) clustered by respondent. In order to be conservative, the larger of the two standard errors was used to determine statistical significance.

* $p < .05$.

effects sporadically. It appears that these two treatments do not meaningfully interact. The fact that these treatments operate largely independently has important implications for the likelihood of partisan selective exposure. Topic relevance, though a substantial determinant of news consumption, does not diminish the modest effects of source cues. However, the inverse is also true. That is, regardless of the political reputation of a news source, topic relevance exerts massive effects on consumption. This is a useful discovery, especially given the extensive literature on partisan motivated reasoning arguing that individuals assign immense weight to party cues when interpreting new information (see, e.g., Bolson, Druckman, and Cook 2014; Cohen 2003; Slothuus and Vreese 2010). Source reputations appear to do little to prevent consumption when topics are relevant.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Well-documented preferences for politically agreeable news sources have led many scholars to assert that rates of partisan selective exposure would climb to alarming levels and in turn serve to polarize the mass public. But such preferences will only result in widespread selective exposure if they are strong enough to overcome myriad countervailing drivers of news selection when partisans make news consumption decisions. While a large body of prior work has identified several attributes of news items as being influential, these competing factors have rarely been evaluated simultaneously, leaving the ways in which consumers prioritize various aspects of media content largely mysterious.

The present study employed a novel experimental design to test the relative strength of two important factors in news selection: partisan source cues and topic relevance. The results indicate that while both factors influence consumer decisions, the effects of negative source cues are often dwarfed by the massive countervailing effects of topic relevance. Across a range of subgroups of partisans, topic relevance drastically increased the probability of selecting news items even when sources were politically dissonant. In several cases, the subgroups under examination represent demographically and politically significant portions of the electorate, such as women and seniors, and the topics relevant to these groups—including abortion rights and Social Security—have been fixtures of American news coverage for decades. The scenarios simulated here are likely common ones, and the results offer insight into the observed disconnect between preferences for like-minded sources revealed in prior experiments (e.g., Iyengar and Hahn 2009) and observational work that shows partisan news diets to be heterogeneous (e.g., Gentzkow and Shapiro 2011).

These findings have important implications for the ability of media to polarize consumers via selective exposure, es-

pecially in the digital age. As previously noted, at least half of Americans now consume news online (Beaujon 2012), and previous research has shown that some of the most highly trafficked venues for online news expose partisans to an array of cross-cutting items (e.g., Messing and Westwood 2014). In some cases, partisans may encounter news items on relevant topics offered by preferred sources, but in many other circumstances they are presented with some other permutation of source reputation and topic. In such instances, source cues will only lead to widespread selective exposure if their effects are large enough to be determinative in the news consumption decision. According to the results above, the effects of source cues are relatively minor. Overall, these results expose a serious limitation on the ability of source cues to exacerbate mass polarization via partisan selective exposure—when relevant content is encountered, source effects are not typically large enough to dissuade partisans from consuming news from dissonant sources.

While compelling, there are important limitations to the present set of findings. Some may argue that relevant content may be infrequently encountered by most consumers. Indeed, the prevalence of relevant content for the typical partisan news consumer is hard to quantify. But even in the admittedly simplified environment of this experiment, in which a host of topics and Affected Publics are not included, 96% of the 1,059 partisans surveyed belonged to at least one AP. If we take into account the fact that individuals can consider multiple topics relevant, and if other frequently covered news topics important to other Affected Publics were added to the mix—such as racial and economic inequality or second amendment rights—the number of opportunities for Americans to encounter relevant content would quickly expand. This experiment also only contained three sources and 11 topics and two alternatives per choice task. While these design features limit external validity to a degree, they also served as a tough test for the hypothesis that topic relevance matters, since having such a low number of topics increased the probability that many respondents would not consider any topic relevant.

These results also highlight opportunities for further research. Future studies should endeavor to add complexity to experimental designs to test whether the high predicted probabilities for consuming relevant content recovered here are robust to choice environments containing more options. The conjoint framework presented above could also facilitate additional experiments that incorporate other news item attributes, such as pictures, ideologically slanted headlines, and variation in location on a web site. Additional observational work is necessary as well. While prior work has tracked the sources consumed by partisans online (e.g., Gentzkow and

Shapiro 2011), future research should track news topics as well and collect the individual-level covariates necessary to code membership in APs. A focus on characterizing individuals' behavior on politically dissonant news sites would also illuminate whether consuming an initial relevant item leads to consumption on other topics from the dissonant source.

As scholars of the political implications of media choice tackle outstanding questions, the results reported here should prompt a reassessment of the power of partisan treatments to explain patterns in news consumption. Although news outlets may be growing more partisan in nature, widespread coverage of topics partisans deem relevant to other facets of their lives may be fending off the emergence of large and tightly sealed partisan echo chambers.

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