Political Science 146 – Public Opinion and Mass Media: Citizens’ Democratic Basics

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Media Fragmentation

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▶ Reason – politics sparks emotions and feelings of self-identity
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- Democrats more likely to name CNN/MSNBC as their main television sources.
- Republicans more likely to name Fox News.
- Moreover, research indicates that political leanings help predict which newspapers people read, radio shows they listen to, as well as websites they like.
Partisan Selective Exposure

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- Studies: People vary in their likelihood to read news articles just based on whether the source is Fox News, vs NPR vs CNN

However, one study has demonstrated that some people who surf internet articles enjoy reading both left and right-leaning news.

But multiple other studies have demonstrated that Internet users tend to gravitate towards like-minded political information.

Social Media: Some evidence of ideological clustering on college students’ Facebook pages.

Pew Research Center found that 9% of adults have blocked, unfriended, or hidden someone because they posted something about politics/issues they disagreed with or found offensive.

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Psychological Basis for Selective Exposure

- Theories: Cognitive dissonance, cognitive misers, information quality

  - Cognitive Dissonance (CD): People can experience discomfort when they hold two ideas that conflict. Everyone has experienced this at some point – you probably recall an incident where you've learned something that didn't square well with ideas you held to be true.

  - When people experience CD, they are typically motivated to reduce this feeling. Selective exposure is one strategy.

  - Cognitive Miser (CM): SE result of desire to minimize use of our cognitive resources. Learning about politics takes time, resources (money), and energy. Few people do this, almost everyone takes shortcuts. We can rely on partisan labels, polling data, endorsements.

  - Engaging counter-attitudinal information is mentally taxing. Coming up with counter-arguments requires careful thinking.

  - Like-minded information fits well with existing thought processes. No need for counter-argument. SE is easier – we're lazy!
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Like-minded sources seem to fit much better with our current understanding of the world. Since the information seems more correct, we infer that these sources are higher quality.

People who view like-minded news see it as less biased than news that counters their partisan beliefs. Thus, conservatives see more bias in CNN than Fox News, and liberals see the opposite.
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Outcomes of Partisan Selective Exposure

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- In sum, evidence shows strong relationship between partisan selective exposure, early vote choice, and high political participation.
Information and Partisan Selective Exposure

▶ Does using like-minded news facilitate or hamper citizens’ learning about politics?

▶ One study (based off 2004 data) found no difference in knowledge of political candidates between people who use like-minded news and people who did not use like-minded news.

▶ Thus, factual political knowledge about presidential candidates may not be at risk when people use like-minded media.

▶ But, misinformation about other political facts exist:

▶ San Diego residents who listened to conservative talk radio believed more false info about issues such as: teen pregnancy, unemployment, and illegal immigration compared to those who listened to moderate talk radio.

▶ Fox News viewers more likely to [falsely] believe Iraq had weapons of mass destruction and close links to al Qaeda before Iraq war vs. people who listened to NPR/watched PBS.

▶ When facts are contested, Democrats, Republicans usually rely on different sources – the media people use are related to what they believe.
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