The Role of Social Media on Political Polarization

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ABSTRACT

This project examines the role social media has on political polarization. Despite some research stating how the amount of polarization has barely changed from the 1970s, many in the American public believe that polarization is increasing. As we currently live in a time where social media has become the primary way we view politics, I seek to prove that social media makes people believe there is more polarization than there actually is. To test this hypothesis, I created four different simulations of typical social media posts with three, being political. While there was some evidence of polarization, an angry political exchange was shown to increase polarization and be more trusted as an accurate representation of American political discourse.

INTRODUCTION

- Polarization is most commonly defined as either ideological constraint or ideological divergence.
- Ideological Constraint - the degree to which party identity matches the ideology (Lelkes 2016)
- Ideological Divergence - the contrast between the beliefs of those with opposing ideologies
- Lilliana Mason highlights how social polarization (increased level of partisan bias, anger, activism) is increasing within the public and is driven by partisan identity; much of which is what we see on social media.
- **Thesis:** Social media makes people believe there is more polarization than there actually is.

METHODS & DESIGN

- This experiment was a survey created on Qualtrics to simulate the various exchanges that can be found on political social media posts
- **Subjects*:** N=456 members of the Political Science Department who were enrolled in an introductory political science course (age 18 and above)
- **4 Exchanges:** a control/non-political, anger, peaceful, and neutral treatment
- Respondents were randomly assigned a treatment. Then, they were asked to place the Democratic and Republican parties on a scale based on several issue positions from 1 (most liberal) to 7 (most conservative). Afterward, respondents were asked whether their exchange was an accurate portrayal of American political discourse, how they felt about the parties, and how polarized they think the U.S. currently is.
- Polarization was measured by how far apart the respondents placed the Democratic and Republican parties on various party issues

*number of participants changed based on the questions that were asked as some respondents may have skipped certain questions

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Outcome 1: To see a significant difference in the display of polarization between the respondents who experienced the control compared to each treatment: the peaceful, anger, or neutral treatment.
Outcome 2: To see a significant difference in polarization levels between the two most "extreme" treatments: the anger and peaceful treatment.

RESULTS

- To calculate this polarization, I used the absolute value of the difference between the two parties.
- Statistical significance was defined as a p-value of less than .05.
- To see how polarization changed depending on what treatment the respondents saw, I compared each treatment group to the control to see if there is a difference between their average partisan distance of the two parties based on each policy issue.

Table 1: Difference on Party Government Spending

	Difference on Party Government Spending Positions:
Comparison 1:	
Control Group	2.65
Anger Group	2.75
Difference:	0.11 (p=0.35, not significant)
Control Group	2.65
Peaceful Group	2.15
Difference	-0.49 (p=0.04, significant)
Control Group	2.65
Neutral Group	2.35
Difference	-0.29 (p=0.14, not significant)
Comparison 2:	
Anger Group	2.75
Peaceful Group	2.15
Difference	-0.60 (p=0.01, significant)

Table 2: Feelings Toward Accurate Portrayal of Particular Treatment

	This is the average response on that measure (higher value means closer to "not at all")
Comparison 1	
Control Group	3.72
Anger Group	2.64
Difference:	-1.07 (p=0.01, significant)
Control Group	3.72
Peaceful Group	3.58
Difference	-0.14 (p=0.37, not significant)
Control Group	3.72
Neutral Group	3.23
Difference	-0.49 (p=0.01, significant)
Comparison 2	
Anger Group	2.64
Peaceful Group	3.58
Difference	0.94 (p=0.01, significant)

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

- **Table 1** shows a significant difference in polarization between the control and peaceful group as well as the anger and peaceful group. The anger group had the highest average partisan difference and that may be because people are more likely to purposefully look for things that anger them in order to find members of the same ideological group.
- **Table 2** shows how those who experienced the neutral treatment felt that their treatment was a more accurate representation than those in the peaceful treatment. Those in the anger group had the lowest value which meant that they believed their exchange to be a significantly more accurate representation.
- Perhaps anger was the main emotion that influenced respondents to be more polarized than they actually were. While some results (not listed here) did not show any polarization, many still believed the anger treatment to be more representative of political discourse than any other treatment especially the peaceful one.
- **Conclusion:** Anger was a very pertinent, contributing factor to polarization. There is weak evidence that the peaceful treatment makes people feel a little better about the parties. Additionally, people think that the anger treatment is the real state of the world and trust it more than the peaceful treatment.

IMPLICATIONS

- While this study was not representative of the nation, more research needs to be done when it comes to the effects social media has on polarization and emotions like anger.
- Furthermore, I hope this research will be the start of recognizing that the polarization one sees on social media can seriously distort the way they view politics and political parties.

KEY REFERENCES

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