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Does Media Coverage of Partisan Polarization Affect Political Attitudes?

MATTHEW LEVENDUSKY and NEIL MALHOTRA

The past decade has witnessed an explosion of interest in the partisan polarization of the American electorate. Scholarly investigation of this topic has coincided with the media's portrayal of a polity deeply divided along partisan lines. Yet little research so far has considered the consequences of the media's coverage of political polarization. We show that media coverage of polarization increases citizens' beliefs that the electorate is polarized. Furthermore, the media's depiction of a polarized electorate causes voters to moderate their own issue positions but increases their dislike of the opposing party. These empirical patterns are consistent with our theoretical argument that polarized exemplars in journalistic coverage serve as anti-cues to media consumers. Our findings have important implications for understanding current and future trends in political polarization.

Keywords polarization, media coverage, perceptions of polarization

There has been an explosion of scholarly debate over the extent of mass partisan polarization in the United States over the past decade. Despite the plethora of studies on this topic (for a review, see Fiorina and Abrams, 2008), an important, related concept has received less attention from scholars of political communication: how the mass media discuss polarization. Since the contentious 2000 presidential election, the media have portrayed the public as deeply, perhaps irrevocably, divided (Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope, 2005). What effects does this depiction have on citizens' political attitudes? Does media coverage of mass polarization itself polarize the public?

We argue that such media coverage has complex effects on mass opinion; it moderates the public with respect to issue positions, but increases affective partisan polarization. When citizens read or watch news stories about polarized politics, they think the mass public is more polarized. They react negatively to this depiction of a deeply divided society (e.g., Klar & Krupnikov, 2013), and they view these polarized positions as an “anti-cue.” As a result, they *moderate* their issue positions. However, this same media coverage simultaneously affectively polarizes the public. When citizens are exposed to media coverage depicting mass polarization, they dislike members of the opposition more, and rate them more negatively on a number of dimensions. Our findings are among the first to document the political consequences of media coverage of polarization, and as we explain in the conclusion, they help contextualize the broader polarization debate.

Matthew Levendusky is Associate Professor, University of Pennsylvania. Neil Malhotra is Professor, Stanford Graduate School of Business.

Address correspondence to Matthew Levendusky, University of Pennsylvania, Department of Political Science, 208 S. 37th Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA. E-mail: mleven@sas.upenn.edu

How Do the Media Discuss Polarization?

Fiorina et al. (2005) argue that the mass media depict ordinary Americans as polarized. Yet no study has systematically documented this pattern; previous research has instead relied on particularly colorful examples. Accordingly, we conducted a content analysis of how the media have discussed political polarization since 2000. This content analysis serves both to provide descriptive detail on the mass media's treatment of polarization and to enrich our theorizing about how this coverage shapes attitudes and beliefs.

We searched U.S. newspapers for the word "polarization" (and variants thereof) in midterm and presidential election years between 2000 and 2012.¹ This yielded a population of 1,522 articles across all years. We instructed a research assistant to hand code each article along a number of dimensions, as discussed later. In 2000 and 2002, there were only a few dozen articles, so we had our research assistant hand code every article. Starting in 2004, however, there were several hundred articles per year, far too many to code by hand. To make the content analysis manageable, we used a random number generator to select 50 articles from each year; our research assistant then coded that random sample. Our overall sample therefore contains 328 total articles across all years. To confirm that our coding rules were sensible and replicable, we instructed a second research assistant to code 20 randomly selected articles (blind to the codings from the first research assistant). We found strong agreement between coders, increasing our confidence in the coding procedures.²

Our first claim, consistent with Fiorina et al. (2005), is that discussion of mass polarization has increased substantially over time. To test this claim, our research assistant coded each article to determine if it actually discussed U.S. political polarization. Because our search, like any other, will yield some "false positive" articles (e.g., articles that mention polarization in reference to polarized lenses), a simple story count can be misleading. The upper left panel of Figure 1 shows the percentage of stories containing variants of the word "polarization" that actually discuss partisan political polarization in the United States.

Over time, the word "polarization" has become synonymous with "partisan political discord." In 2000 and 2002, fewer than half of the stories using the word polarization were about politics. By 2012, nearly 8 out of 10 discussed politics. In addition, because the word has become so much more common, this means that the total number of relevant stories has also increased. The sample proportions imply that while there would have been only a few such stories in 2000, there were more than 300 in 2012 (even after removing false positives). In sum, media attention to polarization has increased considerably over time.

We also investigated whether polarization in the media is discussed with reference to only a few issues (such as abortion or gay marriage), or whether such discussions treat polarization as a broader phenomenon extending across a host of issues. The upper right panel of Figure 1 shows the percentage of relevant articles that discuss polarization broadly, rather than with respect to just one or two issues.³ In 2000 and 2002, about one-third of articles that discussed polarization referred to one or two issues. But since 2004, most articles (and in recent years, more than 8 out of 10) have discussed polarization more broadly, implying that it is a general phenomenon.

Consistent with recent scholarly arguments that polarization is not simply issue-based, but also contains an affective component of dislike for the opposition (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012; Mason, 2012), we also expect articles discussing polarization to increasingly include more examples of uncivil discourse about the other party (such as rude and disparaging remarks about the other side).⁴ The lower left hand of Figure 1 shows this trend. Approximately one-quarter of articles contain uncivil or disparaging remarks about the

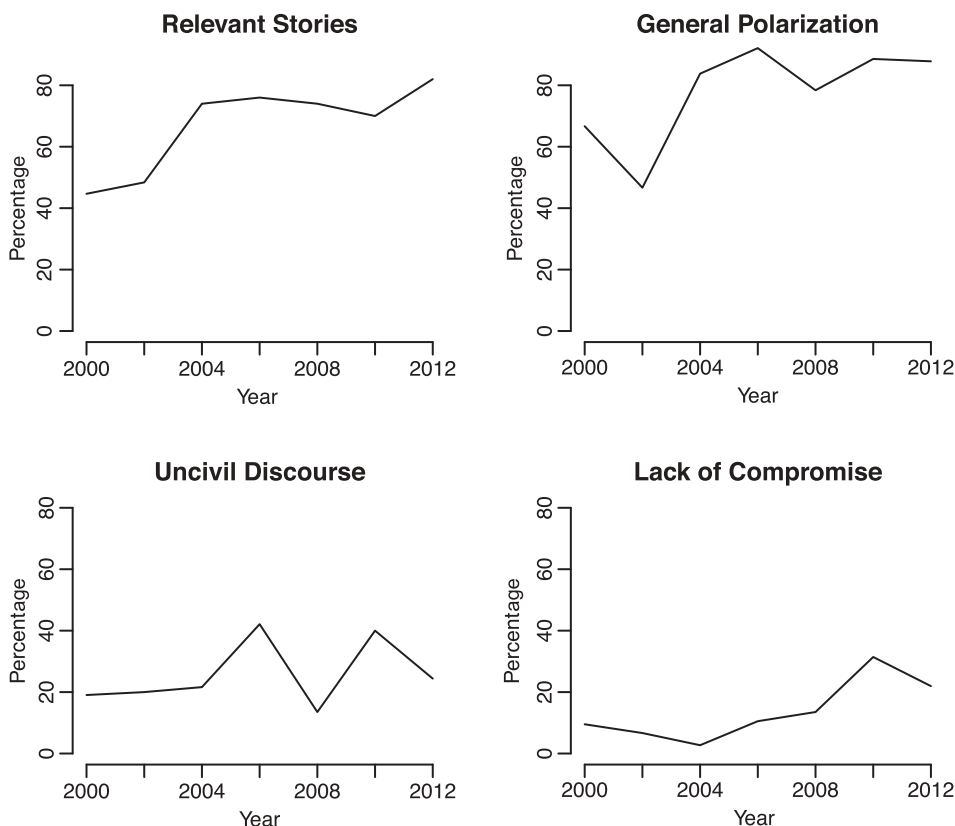


Figure 1. Content analysis of mass media discussions of polarization: 2000–2012. Panels show (1) the percentage of stories that use the word polarization to actually discuss partisan political polarization, (2) the percentage of stories that refer to polarization broadly across issues, rather than simply one or two issues, (3) the percentage of stories that use uncivil discourse to discuss the opposing party, and (4) the percentage of stories that discuss a lack of political compromise.

opposition, and while that trend is somewhat higher in midterm elections, the general finding still holds in presidential election years as well. The only significant outlier is in 2008, which seems to reflect the unique nature of Obama's candidacy. But, overall, it is common to find incivility accompanying discussions of polarization, and these references have been increasing over time.

Furthermore, we investigate whether discussions of polarization now also bemoan of a lack of compromise. While polarization and a lack of compromise (gridlock) are not the same thing, they are closely related. The lower right panel of [Figure 1](#) shows once again that discussions of this point have increased apace, more than doubling from the low in 2004. So over time, as polarization has come to be seen as a more significant part of the political landscape, and gridlock has increased, there have been an increasing number of calls for greater compromise.

Finally, we assess whether reporters writing about polarization do so via exemplification—that is, do they report on polarization by discussing the beliefs/experiences of particular individuals (the exemplars)? This is in contrast to reporting general patterns of polarization using statistical data, closer to what Iyengar

(1991) would call thematic coverage. Exemplification is a very common technique in journalism, and studies have found that the vast majority of news stories use exemplars to illustrate their arguments (Zillmann & Brosius, 2000). Because humans intuitively have a poor grasp of statistical relationships, journalists rarely rely primarily on quantitative data to bolster their claims. Instead, they typically support their arguments by discussing stories of individual people (Iyengar 1991). Even when statistical information such as polling results are presented in an article, readers are more strongly swayed by the descriptions of the exemplars (Zillmann, Gibson, Sundar, & Perkins, 1996).

We find a similar pattern with respect to media coverage of partisan polarization. While we did not initially code the articles for examples of exemplification, after the original content analysis, we went back and re-coded a subsample of articles to see if they too employed exemplification. Among news articles, nearly 70% contained examples of exemplification.⁵ For example, stories discussing the state of the electorate not only report statistics on voter attitudes, but they also interview people, and allow them to explain in their own words why they hold their positions on the issues or why they support or oppose particular candidates (Schneider, 2000; Sterngold, 2000). As elsewhere in the media, when citizens read about polarization, they typically hear about individual citizens' attitudes and beliefs.

Overall, then, our content analysis shows several important patterns and trends in political coverage over the past 15 years. The discussion of political polarization has increased dramatically since 2000. Furthermore, the mass media depict polarization as widespread, occurring across many issues, and accompanied by incivility and dislike of the opposition, not simply issue-based disagreement. Discussions of polarization also lament the lack of compromise and consensus in the contemporary political sphere. Finally, the media discuss polarization not via abstract statistics, but through the experiences of particular people. As we explain next, these features of how journalists cover polarization shape how citizens respond to it.

How Does Media Coverage of Polarization Shape Political Attitudes?

We hypothesize that this media depiction of polarization powerfully shapes how citizens perceive the political world (and, in turn, their attitudes). At the most basic level, we expect that media coverage of a polarized America will increase perceptions that Americans are, in fact, polarized. The mass media is an important vehicle through which ordinary citizens learn about where broad collectives like "Democrats" or "Republicans" stand (Mutz, 1998). Mass media depictions of polarization will therefore increase *perceptions* of partisan issue polarization.⁶ When citizens read media coverage claiming that the electorate is polarized using exemplars, they will think that voters are more divided on the issues.

H1: Press coverage suggesting the electorate is polarized will increase perceptions of partisan issue polarization in the mass public compared to press coverage suggesting that the electorate is moderate.^{7,8}

When citizens read or watch stories about polarized politics, they observe individuals who are divided and take extreme positions, who eschew compromise, and display incivility toward one another (see the content analysis presented earlier). This contrasts sharply with broad-based (although not universal) American norms promoting bipartisanship, compromise, and consensus. For example, in recent survey data, even a majority of Tea Party supporters recognized the importance of compromise and consensus on critical issues

(Gutmann & Thompson, 2012, pp. 26–27). Moderation, open-mindedness, and independence are considered positive traits by Americans, and people like thinking of themselves in these terms (Dennis, 1988; Klar & Krupnikov, 2013). Most citizens see these concepts as important American ideals, and all but the strongest partisans react negatively to breaching them (Harbridge & Malhotra, 2011).

Consequently, citizens reading about polarized politics have two reasons to dislike the exemplars discussed in the articles, and by extension, the parties. First, the exemplars are presented as deeply divided, violating norms of moderation. Second, they associate exemplars with incivility and a lack of compromise. For both reasons, the polarized exemplars presented in the media become a contrast point—an “anti-cue” that instructs ordinary citizens what *not* to believe (Brady & Sniderman, 1985; Ledgerwood & Chaiken, 2007; Nelson, Gwiasda, & Lyons, 2011). Citizens move away from the polarization seen in the media, and consequently moderate their attitudes.

H2: Press coverage suggesting the electorate is polarized will make issue positions less extreme compared to press coverage suggesting that the electorate is moderate.⁹

The effects of media coverage of polarization extend beyond issue positions. Portrayals of a polarized and uncivil America unwilling to compromise paint the opposing party in a negative light. This should decrease positive affect for members of the opposing party and increase affective polarization, or a personal dislike of the opposition (Iyengar et al., 2012; Iyengar & Westwood, in press; Mason, 2012, 2015). The logic here directly parallels the reasoning behind *H2*: Because depictions of polarization violate norms of compromise, consensus, and civility, the polarized exemplars will be seen in a more negative light and be taken as examples of their parties more generally.

By the logic of our argument, individuals should also negatively react to their own party after being exposed to polarized media coverage. However, increased negative affect should be especially pronounced when people are evaluating the opposing party. Because stories about polarization generally discuss the positions of both Democrats and Republicans, this will implicitly prime their partisan identities, promoting in-group/out-group thinking. They should be especially willing to punish out-group partisans, consistent with theories of group behavior (Brewer & Brown, 1998).¹⁰

H3: Press coverage suggesting the electorate is polarized will increase affective polarization compared to press coverage suggesting that the electorate is moderate.

H2 and *H3* might seem to conflict with each other: How can media coverage moderate issue positions but polarize affect? The key is the causal logic spelled out earlier. The polarized exemplars depicted in the media violate norms of moderation, compromise, and civility, and hence are seen in a negative light. As a result, people reject their polarized positions and dislike them more on a personal level.¹¹

An Experimental Test of Our Argument

Testing our hypotheses about the effects of media coverage of polarization using observational data is extremely difficult given that subjects self-select into different levels of media coverage (and hence into different levels of exposure to media coverage suggesting the

electorate is polarized). To overcome this limitation, we conducted an original experimental study where we randomly assigned subjects to different media treatments.

More formally, we designed and conducted a three-condition, between-subjects experiment. Subjects were randomly assigned to read one of three newspaper articles: an article describing the electorate as deeply polarized and divided (the polarized condition), an article depicting the electorate as relatively moderate and centrist (the moderate condition), and an apolitical article about a popular television program (the control condition). The text of the articles (and accompanying visual information shown to respondents) is presented in the supplemental material (Appendix 1).

To enhance ecological validity, we told respondents that the article appeared in *USA Today* (in a debrief at the conclusion of the study, respondents were told that the article was written by the researchers but was similar to articles that appeared in major national newspapers). The polarized treatment draws on the findings of the content analysis: It depicts polarization as not simply issue-based disagreement, but also includes incivility and hostility toward the opposition, an unwillingness to compromise, and so forth. This makes the polarized article similar to those that appeared in print (e.g., Horner, 2012; Thomma, 2012), so subjects should perceive them as realistic (we confirmed this with a survey question as discussed later). Because our treatment combines these features together under the rubric of polarization, we accept as a necessary limitation that we cannot differentiate the effects of, for example, issue-based disagreement from incivility. Answering such questions would require a different research design and we accordingly leave them for future work.

The experiment was embedded within a survey administered over the Internet to a nationally representative probability sample of the U.S. population recruited via random digit dialing and address-based sampling methods. The survey was administered to 1,587 respondents by GfK (formerly known as Knowledge Networks). The survey completion rate was 64.5% and the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) cumulative response rate (CUMRR1) was 6.3%. As one would expect with random assignment, distributions of pre-treatment covariates did not significantly differ across conditions (see supplemental material [Appendix 3]). Subjects in GfK's Knowledge Panel complete surveys (such as ours) in exchange for various forms of compensation. Such data have been widely used throughout political communication, and have been shown to be of extremely high quality (Chang & Krosnick, 2009). Our data therefore have the benefits of both high internal validity (arising from random assignment in the experiment) as well as high ecological validity (our estimates generalize to the nation as a whole, unlike most convenience samples).

After reading the experimental stimulus, subjects were asked a set of questions about the article, as well as a series of items to measure both issue-based and affective polarization (see supplemental material [Appendix 2] for full question wordings). We first asked respondents, "How often do you see these sorts of stories reported in the news?" (response options: "all of the time," "often," "sometimes," "not too often," "never"). The chi-square test of the contingency table between response to this question and treatment condition is highly significant ($\chi^2(8) = 175.94, p < .001$). A total of 39.4% respondents said that they saw the polarized article "all of the time" or "often" while only 9.0% said the same about the moderate article. Hence, consistent with the content analysis presented earlier respondents perceive that the media discuss political polarization quite frequently. This also demonstrates that our article is typical of the media content subjects actually encounter in the real world.

To assess subjects' own attitudes, we asked them to place themselves on a series of standard Likert scales on a set of policy issues. For example, subjects were asked to provide their opinions on capital gains tax rates using the following item:

The tax rates on the profits people make from selling stocks and bonds, called capital gains taxes, are currently lower than the income tax rates many people pay. Do you think that capital gains tax rates should be increased, decreased, or kept about the same?

Respondents were provided a 7 point scale presented horizontally similar to the American National Election Studies questions on ideological placement. The scale was fully labeled; the response options were "increased a lot," "increased somewhat," "increased a little," "kept the same," "decreased a little," "decreased somewhat," and "decreased a lot." This and all items were recoded to lie between 0 and 1 with the most liberal response coded as "0" and the most conservative response coded as "1."

In addition to placing themselves on the scale, they also placed the typical Republican and Democratic voters:

What do you think the TYPICAL [DEMOCRATIC/REPUBLICAN] VOTER would want to happen to capital gains tax rates?

Respondents were provided the same 7-point scale. The order of the Democratic/Republican questions was randomized. In addition to capital gains tax cuts, we also asked all subjects to report their attitudes (and their perceptions of the typical Democratic and Republican voter) on immigration. We also asked respondents for their opinions (and their perceptions of the opinions of the typical Democratic and Republican voter) on one of two other issues: public election financing and free trade.¹² These issues are all of moderate salience: we would expect subjects to have some prior opinions about them, but not such strong priors that our treatment would have no discernable effect. Such a choice is consistent with a long line of previous experimental work studying attitudes (e.g., Druckman, Peterson, & Slothuus, 2013; Lupia & McCubbins, 1998). Our findings still have implications for more prominent issues such as abortion and gay marriage, however—in the real world, people are repeatedly treated with coverage of a polarized electorate, so over time, even these salient issues might shift in response to the effects we explore here. Furthermore, by studying less salient issues, our results illustrate how issues not currently on the national agenda may evolve to become politicized and polarized in the future (Bartels, 1993).

The public financing and free trade issues contained a party cue, or the positions of the parties on these issues in recent years. We included these party cues to examine the robustness of the results to including party labels given the increased attention to these heuristics in the political science literature in recent years (Bullock, 2011; Druckman et al., 2013; Nicholson, 2012). The party cues could either enhance or suppress the treatment effects—they may provide a guide for people to align their positions with the parties, or alternatively, they may overwhelm any effect of information about mass polarization.

Finally, we asked subjects three items measuring affective polarization, allowing us to test H3 (the items used here come from Iyengar et al. [2012]). First, we asked respondents to provide their ratings of the other party on a standard 100-point feeling thermometer. Second, we asked respondents to independently list in text boxes up to six things they disliked about the other party, as expending effort to list an independent set of dislikes reveals

antipathy toward the opposite party.¹³ Third, we asked, “How comfortable are you having close personal friends that are [Democrats/Republicans]?” on a three point scale (target of evaluation was the opposite party; the item originally comes from Borgardus, 1947).

Results

We first test H1, which posits that reading the polarized article should increase perceived polarization in the mass public.¹⁴ We operationalize perceived polarization as the absolute value of the difference between the perceived position of the typical Republican voter and the typical Democratic voter on the 7-point scales. The range of this variable is therefore 0 to 6, which is then recoded to lie between 0 and 1.

As illustrated in Figure 2, we find that the difference between the polarized and moderate conditions is statistically significant on average across all issues.¹⁵ The polarized article increased perceived polarization by about 3.6% compared to the moderate condition ($p = .06$).¹⁶ Figure 3 shows that those in the polarized condition perceive the highest levels of polarization between Democrats and Republicans across the four issues. For each of the four individual estimates, the coefficient estimate is in the expected positive direction,

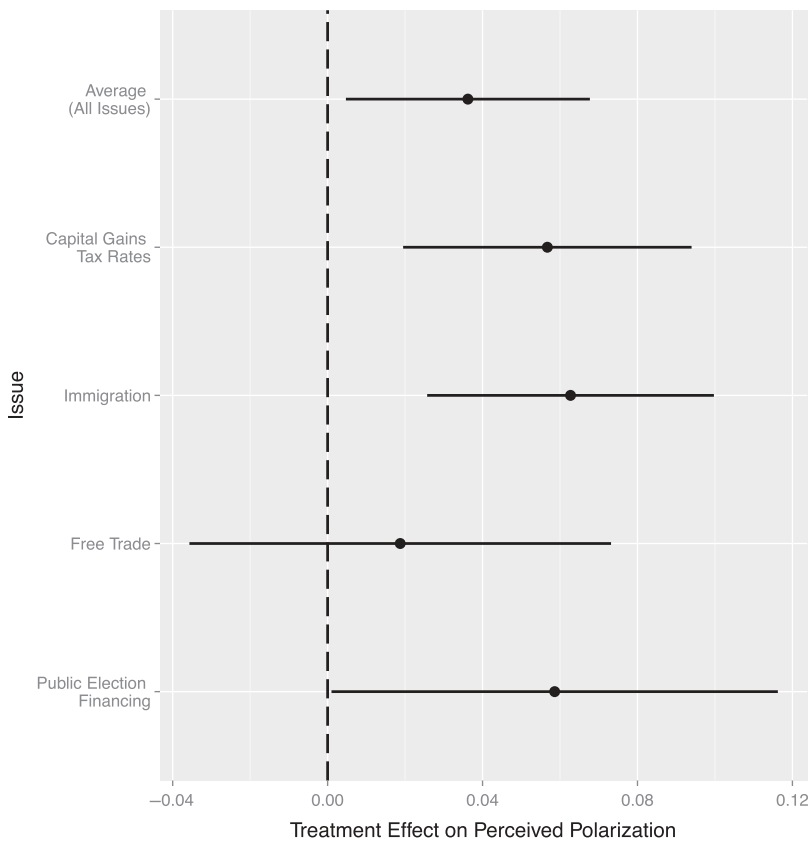


Figure 2. Media coverage of mass polarization increases perceived polarization. Differences in perceived polarization between the polarized and moderate conditions (the dark circles are point estimates and the thin lines are 90% confidence intervals).

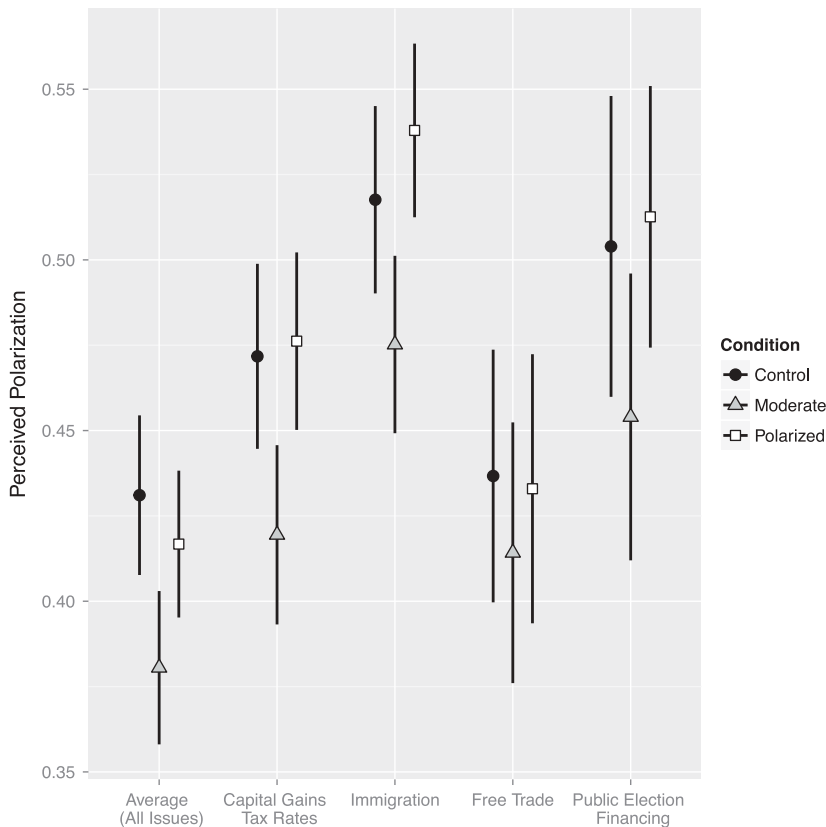


Figure 3. Media coverage of mass polarization increases perceived polarization. Average levels of perceived polarization by treatment condition (the shapes are point estimates and the thin lines are 90% confidence intervals).

indicating that reading about a divided electorate increased perceived polarization. The strongest treatment effects were for the capital gains taxes and immigration issues, with effect sizes of about 6%.¹⁷ This provides empirical support for our claim that press coverage depicting Americans as deeply politically divided increases perceived polarization in the public.

We next test H2—that media coverage of polarization *moderates* respondents' issue positions. We hypothesize that because individuals want to see themselves as centrist and willing to compromise, reading about polarized politics will cause them to react negatively to the article and move away from the polarized positions depicted therein. We operationalize attitude extremity by folding the 7-point issue scale into a 4-point scale ranging from the most moderate position (1) to the most extreme position (4).

As shown in [Figure 4](#), on average across issues, relative to those in the moderate condition, respondents in the polarized condition are 4.5% lower on the issue extremity scale ($p = .016$), or about 0.14 units on the 4-point extremity measure. This represents nearly 20% of the standard deviation of the average issue scale. Generally, the results from the individual issues also exhibit a similar relationship.¹⁸ The means of the dependent variable across experimental conditions are presented in [Figure 5](#). When the media depict the mass public as polarized and divided, citizens moderate their issue positions.

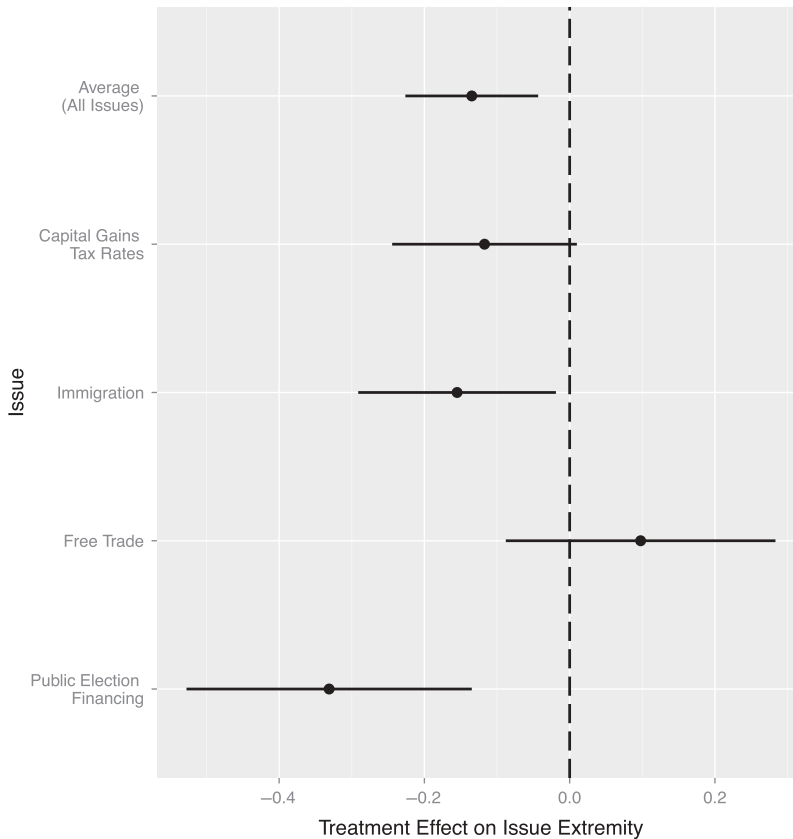


Figure 4. Media coverage of mass polarization moderates issue positions. Differences in issue extremity between the polarized and moderate conditions (the dark circles are point estimates and the thin lines are 90% confidence intervals).

According to H3, media coverage of polarization should increase dislike of the opposing party (i.e., affective polarization). When subjects see the polarized exemplars, they should respond to them negatively and decrease their affect for the parties. As shown in Figure 6, subjects in the polarized condition rated opposing partisans about 3.6 degrees lower on the feeling thermometer compared to those in the moderate condition ($p = .009$).¹⁹ In addition, they were 7.3% more likely to rate opposing partisans as a 0, (the lowest possible value) on the feeling thermometer ($p = .017$). Moreover, respondents in the polarized condition were about 0.11 units lower on the 3-point item about comfort being friends than those in the moderate condition ($p = .032$). Finally, people exposed to the polarized article listed 0.32 more dislikes of the other party than those who read the moderate article ($p = .045$). Differences across treatment conditions are illustrated in Figure 7. While subjects moderate their issue positions in response to media coverage, their evaluations of the other party become more polarized.

Unpacking the Mechanisms

We showed that media coverage portraying the electorate as polarized (relative to coverage depicting the electorate as moderate) increases perceptions of polarization, moderates issue

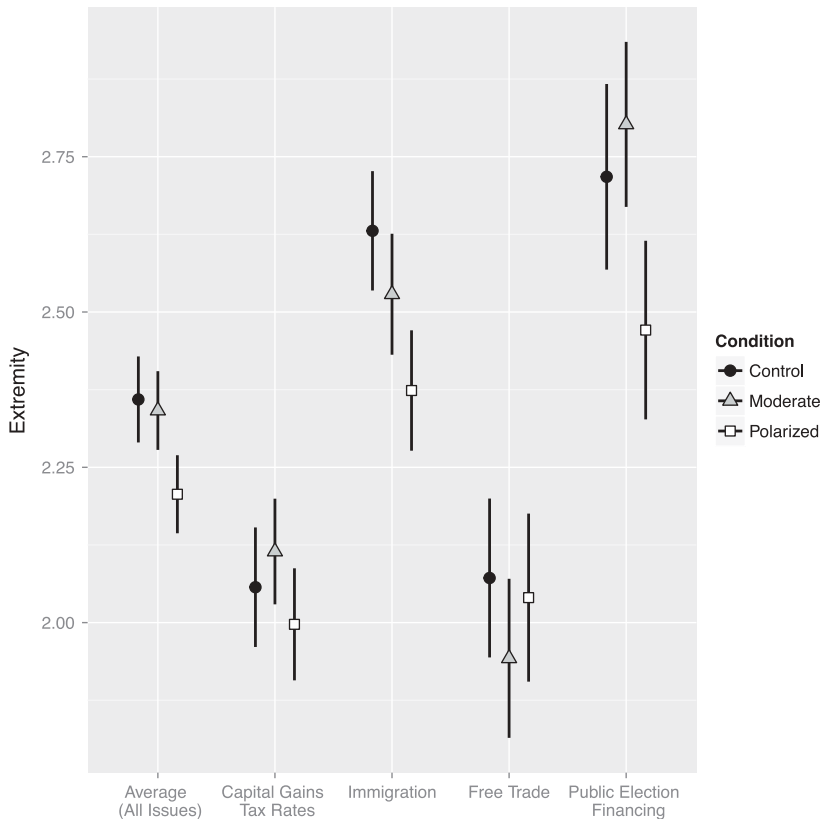


Figure 5. Media coverage of mass polarization moderates issue positions. Average levels of issue extremity by treatment condition (the shapes are point estimates and the thin lines are 90% confidence intervals).

positions, and heightens negative affect toward the other party. This evidence is consistent with our theoretical account, but we have not said much about the hypothesized mechanisms underlying these effects. To do so, we conducted a follow-up experiment to explore how citizens respond to the media exemplars, following the design-based mediation approach of Gerber and Green (2012). To be clear, all of the evidence we present here can only suggest a particular mechanism rather than definitively prove it (Bullock, Green, & Ha, 2010). That said, we present these results to buttress our arguments.

Given our theory, there are several related effects that we would expect to find. First, if polarized exemplars serve as an “anti-cue,” respondents should see themselves as less similar to the exemplars. Respondents should perceive these individuals as extreme, divided, and unreasonable (violating the norms of moderation, compromise, and so forth), while they consider themselves to be moderate, independent-minded, and willing to compromise. Second, they should also be seen as more typical of ordinary Democrats and Republicans, who they perceive to be highly polarized (recall that the polarized article increases perceived polarization; see Figure 2). Finally, consistent with H3, subjects should exhibit negative emotional reactions to the polarized exemplars, especially those from the other party.

We test these predictions in a follow-up study where subjects were randomly assigned to read either the moderate or polarized article (the same ones used in the GfK study; we

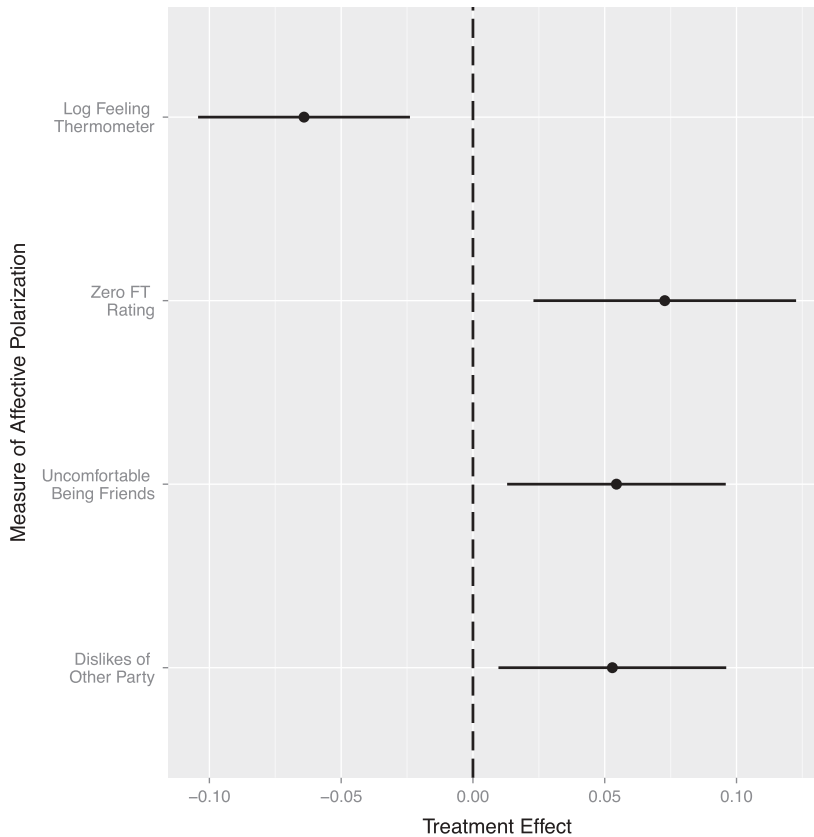


Figure 6. Media coverage of mass polarization increases affective polarization. Differences in the affective polarization measures (rescaled to lie between 0 and 1) between the polarized and moderate conditions (the dark circles are point estimates and the thin lines are 90% confidence intervals).

did not include the control condition here in the interest of simplicity).²⁰ Subjects then answered a series of questions about their self-reported emotional reactions to the people described in the articles, as well as their evaluations of how typical those people are as representatives of their party, and their similarity to the respondent's own political dispositions (see supplemental material [Appendix 2] for full question wordings). Given our expectations, subjects in the polarized condition should report feeling more negative emotional reactions, think these individuals are more typical of the parties, and less like themselves politically.

As shown in Figure 8, subjects in the polarized condition report seeing both their own party's exemplar and the opposing party's exemplar more negatively; subjects in the polarized condition are made angrier, sadder, and less hopeful by both individuals. We averaged the three emotional items into a single index (reverse coding hopefulness so that it was positively correlated with both anger and sadness). Relative to the moderate condition, the polarized condition increased negative emotions toward the out-party exemplar by about 1.4 points (on the 4-point scale), a substantively large effect ($p < .001$). The polarized condition also increased negative emotions toward the same-party exemplar by about 0.4 points ($p < .003$); the results are similar if we analyze each emotional self-report separately.

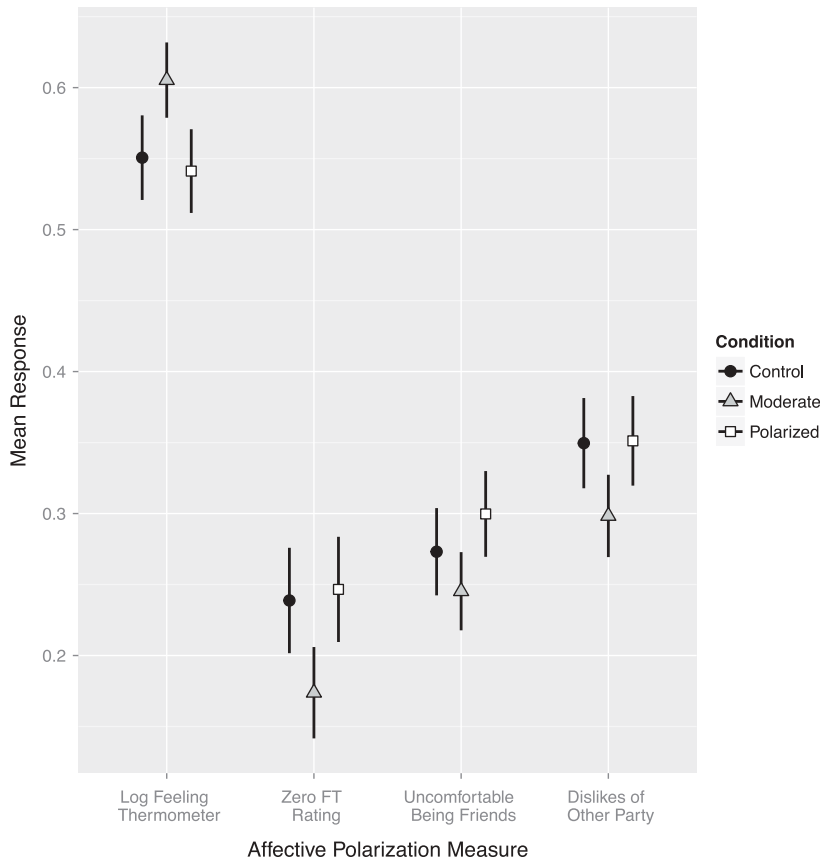


Figure 7. Media coverage of mass polarization increases affective polarization. Average levels of the affective polarization measures (rescaled to lie between 0 and 1) by treatment condition (the shapes are point estimates and the thin lines are 90% confidence intervals).

While subjects respond negatively to *both* same-party and opposite-party exemplars, the effects are substantially larger for the opposite party.

Figure 9 illustrates that the polarized article led people to view the individuals described in the articles as more typical of the parties (which they perceive to be polarized). People rated the partisan exemplar a more typical Republican/Democrat than the compromising exemplar (1.1 units on a 4-point scale) when evaluating the out-party ($p < .001$). The 0.5-unit treatment effect is smaller for the same-party exemplar but still substantively large and significantly greater than 0 ($p = .001$). The polarized article condition decreased perceptions that the exemplars were similar overall to the respondent (0.45 units on a 4-point scale, $p < .001$) and that they shared a similar political disposition (0.39 units on a 4-point scale, $p = .006$).

All of these effects together support our underlying theoretical account. The citizens in the polarized article are seen in a negative light (less like the respondents, more typical of the polarized parties, and so forth) as a result of violating implicit norms of compromise and consensus. Consequently, subjects respond by moderating their issue positions and increasing their affective distaste for opposite-party partisans when they read about them.

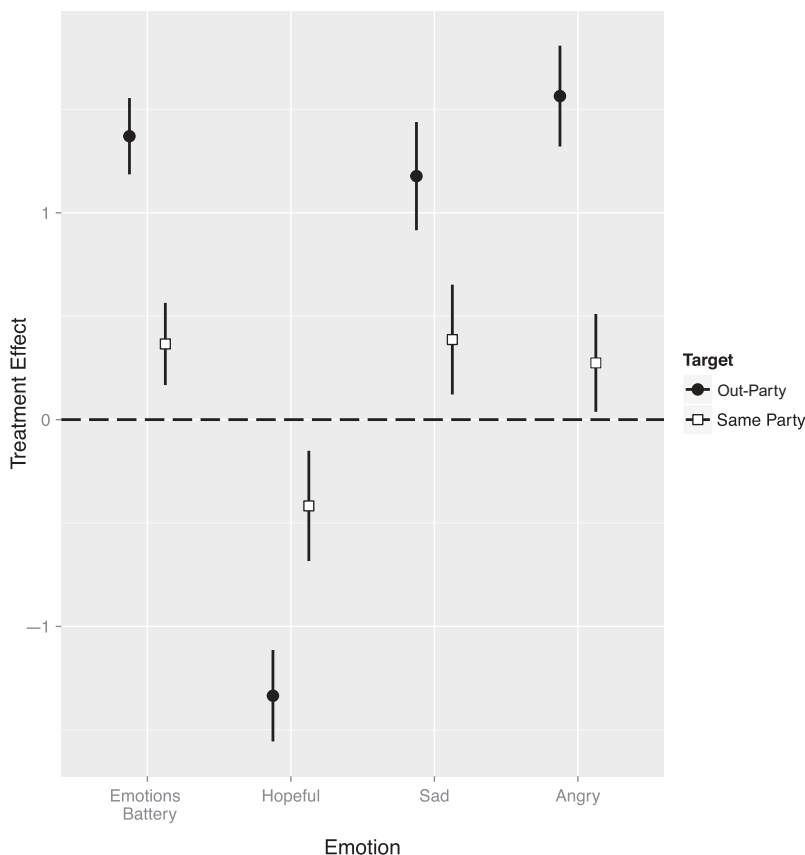


Figure 8. Media coverage of mass polarization elicits negative emotional reactions. Differences in respondents' emotional reactions to the story exemplars between the polarized and moderate conditions (point estimates and 90% confidence intervals).

Discussion and Implications

This study is the first to illustrate the political consequences of media coverage of partisan polarization. While there has been a vigorous debate about the levels and changes of polarization in the American electorate (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Fiorina et al., 2005), no research has yet explored the media's role in describing the country as deeply divided along partisan lines. We find that depictions of a divided populace transmitted through the mass media can increase perceived polarization. Polarized media coverage also moderates issue positions. At the same time, it increases affective polarization, thereby increasing the potential for partisan discord.

We stress that our findings on perceived polarization are distinct from the more conventional findings about the level of polarization. That said, our results add a new wrinkle to that larger debate. We show how media coverage can moderate issue positions, reinforcing the idea that some voters, especially those in the center, are "turned off" by depictions of polarized politics (Fiorina et al., 2005; Harbridge & Malhotra, 2011). However, our results also make clear that polarized media coverage causes citizens to view the opposing party less positively. While we are not the first to describe and document affective

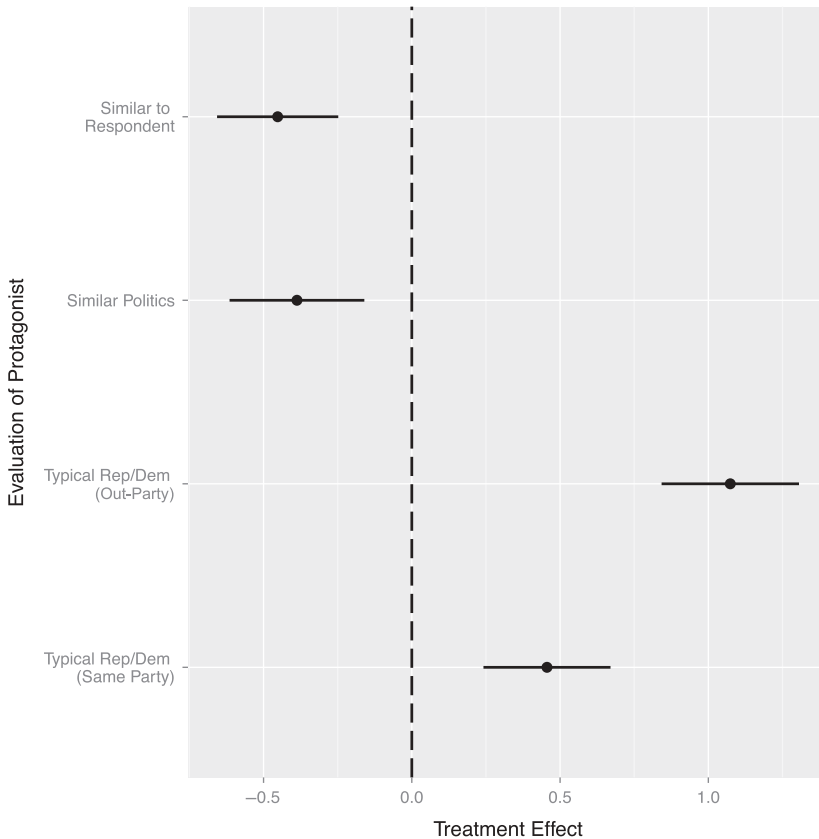


Figure 9. Media coverage of mass polarization change perceptions of exemplars. Differences between the polarized and moderate conditions in respondents' assessments of how typical the story exemplars are of partisans and how similar they are to the respondent (point estimates and 90% confidence intervals).

polarization, we are the first to show how media coverage exogenously increases it. Our findings offer one mechanism for explaining the increased discord and disagreement seen in contemporary American politics.

Our findings seem to conflict with a recent article by Ahler (2014), who finds that providing people with information about a divided electorate causes people to become more extreme and more polarized. We note several differences between his study and ours that could account for these differences. First, Ahler (2014) did not collect data from a representative sample of Americans. Rather, he studied samples of people who opted in to complete political surveys. It is possible that these people—who are likely more extreme and interested in politics—behave differently from people who do not pay as close attention to politics (Malhotra & Krosnick, 2007). Second, Ahler (2014) presented information about polarization in a direct, quantitative manner, whereas we embedded exemplification within a newspaper article. Consequently, it is possible that he is observing demand effects, or respondents seeking to conform to information provided directly by the researcher. Consequently, for the purposes of studying the effects of media coverage, our treatments seek to replicate the type and form of information people would encounter in the real world.

There are many opportunities to build upon the research presented here. While we may not expect our single treatment in the experiment to affect attitudes at a much later point in time, people are normally repeatedly exposed to polarized media coverage from multiple outlets. Subsequent research can explore over-time effects while examining the consequences of multiple doses of these treatments. Future studies can also explore other sources of information about partisan polarization besides the media (Druckman et al., 2013), or different types of media coverage (e.g., debate and opinion shows, many of which are characterized by incivility). Although we mainly focus on policy positions in the studies described here, a separate question is whether perceived polarization affects political engagement and participation. As with negative advertisements (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995), it is possible that media coverage of polarization may make citizens more detached from and less trusting of the political system, leading them to withdraw from politics. Our findings serve as a key baseline and provide an impetus to explore additional effects of media coverage of polarization.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental data for this article can be accessed on the publisher's website at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2015.1038455>

Notes

1. We searched for “(Polarize OR polarized OR polarization) within the same paragraph as politic AND (U.S. OR U.S.A. OR America).” We found that qualifiers to politics and the U.S. were necessary to reduce the number of false positive stories (i.e., stories about polarization in Latin American politics). Searches were conducted in the U.S. Newspapers and Wires in LexisNexis, and then the results were restricted to newspapers only.

2. For the variables used here, Cohen's (1960) κ exceeds 0.6, which Fleiss and Koch (1977) suggest indicates “substantial” agreement (p. 165).

3. Relevant articles are those that actually discuss polarization (i.e., removing the “false positive” articles just discussed). There are 224 relevant articles across all years.

4. For example, someone quoted in a story might talk about “hating” George W. Bush or thinking that John Kerry is a “doofus” (Tuttle, 2004).

5. For this analysis we exclude opinion and editorial pieces, which employ a different style of reporting.

6. We use the term *partisan issue polarization* to refer to the divide between the two mass parties on policy issues like taxation or immigration.

7. Throughout the text, we substitute the phrase *perceptions of polarization* for the more cumbersome *perceptions of partisan issue polarization* in the interest of simplicity.

8. We are not the first to theorize about the perceptions of polarization. A number of previous scholars have examined these perceptions, and how they vary across the electorate (Brady &

Sniderman, 1985; Van Boven, Judd, & Sherman, 2012; Westfall, Chambers, Judd, & Van Boven, 2012). There is also a similar literature examining perceptions of *candidates'* issue positions (e.g., Conover & Feldman, 1982; Markus & Converse, 1979). These studies, while valuable, are different from our focus here on the effects of media coverage.

9. We are agnostic about whether the moderation described in H2 occurs because citizens dislike extremity, or because they dislike incivility and an unwillingness to compromise. We note, however, that because media typically depict both features, either one could be at work in the real world.

10. Note that this logic is also consistent with theories of naive realism (Robinson, Keltner, Ward, & Ross, 1995).

11. Furthermore, the processes by which people form issue attitudes and evaluate political actors are not necessarily the same. Indeed, respondents can hold strong positions without disliking the other side (or vice versa).

12. Respondents were randomly assigned to either the question about public financing or free trade so that each respondent answered a total of three issue questions.

13. A research assistant vetted each response to ensure that it was a legitimate dislike.

14. Following Kesteléc and Leoni (2007), we present our results in graphical form. For readers who prefer to see results in tabular form, we present all the results as standard regression tables in supplemental material (Appendix 5).

15. We focus on comparisons between the polarized and moderate treatment conditions because this is the relevant theoretical comparison and because it is the most powered test. Readers interested in comparing the effect sizes to the baseline control condition can consult the figures and supplemental material (Appendix). Here, and throughout the analysis, we restrict our analysis to partisans only, excluding leaners. We do this in order to more precisely bifurcate respondents into partisan categories. Pure Independents, which only comprise 3.7% of the sample, were excluded. We also conducted all analyses including leaners, and obtain similar results in terms of substantive and statistical significance (see supplemental material [Appendix 4]).

16. All *p*-values are two-tailed.

17. Recall that for the public election financing and free trade items, we provided respondents a partisan cue by indicating the typical position of the parties on these issues. Because we told respondents where the parties stood, they seemed to use this proximate cue, rather than the more distant one from the treatment.

18. The exception is free trade, although the estimated effect is small and imprecise. Due to the imprecision of the estimate, we do not speculate on it in much detail, but one possibility is that free trade is a cross-cutting issue that does not cleanly fall on liberal-conservative lines given that prominent elites on both sides of the political spectrum have been both proponents of free trade (Bill Clinton, George W. Bush) and opponents (Dick Gephardt, Pat Buchanan).

19. Because the items are of different scale lengths; they have been recoded to lie between 0 and 1 for comparability in the figure. For the feeling thermometer, “1” represents intense liking of the other party whereas for the other variables “1” represents intense disliking. We normalize the feeling thermometer score by taking the natural log.

20. We conducted this follow-up on Amazon’s Mechanical Turk ($N = 206$).

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