

Social Media

Summary: Affective polarization is defined as interparty hostility, where people have more positive attitudes towards people from their own party and more negative attitudes towards people from the opposite party. This memo will discuss why social media; a source of political news and a platform for political discussion, can cause affective polarization.

*When mentioning polarization, I am referring to affective polarization.

*Social media is not social networking: the main purpose of social networking is to connect with people, whereas social media's purposes include marketing, sharing and advertising.

Argument 1: Social media serves as a MAIN source for political news

In 2017, fully 90% of all 18–49-year-old adults used at least one form of social media. 33% of them said that social media is the primary way they discover news online (Pew, 2017).¹

- **Why getting political news from social media is problematic**

1) Exposure to biased information

Echo chambers or filter bubbles: people prefer to approach supportive over non-supportive information (Iyengar and Hahn, 2009). For example, liberals will choose liberal-leaning news sources, while conservatives will choose conservative-leaning sources (Northeastern, 2018). Since people are only exposed to information they agree with, they may become more narrow-minded and develop extreme political views.

2) Divisive ads controlled by political campaigns

In the 2016 presidential election, Facebook sold more than \$100,000 worth of ads to a Kremlin-linked company, and Google sold more than \$4,500 worth of accounts thought to be connected to the Russian government (New York Times, 2017). These ads tend to be negative and very aggressive, causing people to lean towards their own party and develop strong negative feelings for the opposite party.

3) People believe the news they see on social media even when it's false

Information about politics and current affairs shared by a friend that a respondent trusts and respects is rated as trustworthy by 57% of respondents, versus just 4% who distrust the information (Echelon, 2016). Merely seeing a news headline multiple times in a news feed makes it seem more credible before it is ever read carefully, even if it's a fake item being whipped around by friends as a joke. *Repetition* and *trust in friends* help facilitate a belief in the fake and negative news that often degrade the opposing party.

Argument 2: Social media is a platform for political discussion

Half of all social network site users have shared news stories, images or videos in 2014, and nearly as many (46%) have discussed a news issue or event on social media (Pew, 2014).

- **Characteristics of political discussions on social media that lead to polarization**

¹ Some examples of social media used for news: Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Snapchat, Huffington Post

1) Users are not interacting face-to-face

Many users view social media as places where people say things they would never say in person, while a smaller subset views these platforms as places where people are afraid to speak their minds. It is possible for extreme arguments to be expressed online since the participants don't have to face in-person consequences like meeting these people, or even using their true identity.

2) People are often angry and disrespectful towards people with different opinions

Roughly half of social media users (53%) feel that the political discussions they see on social media are less respectful than those they see elsewhere, while a similar proportion feel that these social media discussions are less likely to come to a resolution (51%), are less civil (49%), and are more angry (49%) than discussions in other venues (Pew, 2016). This leads to more negative opinions from the opposite party because it makes people think that everyone from opposing parties are violent, aggressive and disrespectful.

3) Examples of polarization caused by social media discussions

-Republican participants expressed substantially more conservative views after following a liberal Twitter bot, whereas Democrats' attitudes became slightly more liberal after following a conservative Twitter bot (Bail, 2018).

-64% of people polled say their online encounters with people on the opposite side of the political spectrum leave them feeling as if they have even less in common than they thought (Pew, 2016).

Counterarguments: Why social media is not a cause of polarization

1) People who use social media the least are the most polarized

Polarization was highest for the age groups that use the Internet and social media the least, including older adults aged 75+ (Boxell, 2017).

2) People acknowledge that news on social media is unreliable

Over half (57%) of news consumers say they *expect* the news they see on social media to be largely inaccurate, with about three-quarters of Republicans saying this (72%), compared to 46% of Democrats and about half of independents (52%) (Pew, 2018).

Conclusion

Social media is considered a factor of affective polarization because it is a misleading source for political news and generates political discussions that "bring out the worst" in people from the opposite party. Although some evidence states that the most polarized use social media the least, social media still stands as a cause of polarization because its spread of biased information from diversified sources and aggressive political discussions.

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Bail, Christopher A. et al. 2018. "Exposure to Opposing Views on Social Media Can Increase Political Polarization." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115(37): 9216–21.

In this article Bail and his team of researchers investigated how opinions of liberals and conservatives would alter after having participants follow a twitter bot for a month. Bail and his team found that Republicans had more conservative views whereas there was no large change in Democrat's opinions. Thus, though the effect on both parties varied, it is still seen that exposure to social media can increase political polarization.

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