Media, Polarization, and the 2016 Election

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Questions

1. Are Americans more polarized than ever before?
2. Is it the Internet’s fault?
3. Did fake news change the 2016 election outcome?
Trends in Polarization
Congress: Roll Call Votes

Source: Poole & Rosenthal
Congress: Partisan Language

Average partisanship

0.500
0.505
0.510
0.515
0.520
0.525

real random

Source: Gentzkow et al. 2016
Voters: Prior literature

- Fiorina and Abrams (2008)
  - “The most direct evidence... shows little or no evidence of increased polarization.”
- Ansolabehere et al. (2006)
  - “The great divide across the American states is not really much of a divide at all.”
- Glaeser & Ward (2006)
  - The proposition that “America’s political divisions are increasing” is one of the “myths of American political geography.”
Where *don’t* we see evidence of increasing divisions?

- Views on individual issues
- Self-described ideology
- Party identification
- Residential segregation
Where *do* we see evidence of increasing divisions?

- Correlation between issue views and party
- Correlation of views across issues
- Straight ticket voting
- **Hostility / negative feeling toward those on the other side**
Source: Five-Nation Civic Culture Study (Almond and Verba 1960); YouGov/Polimetrix poll (2008)
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Index of 9 Polarization Measures

SI Figure S1: Trends in political polarization

Notes: Each of the nine small plots shows the trend in a given polarization measure across time. The large plot shows the trend in the index, which is computed as the average across all polarization measures available in a given year after normalizing each measure to have a value of one in 1996. The shaded regions are 95 percent confidence intervals constructed using a nonparametric bootstrap with 100 replicates. See main text for definitions.
Bottom Line

- Polarization of politicians clearly increasing
- Over the last decade, increasing evidence that this is true for voters as well
- Shows up most clearly in feelings about the other side
Digital Media and Polarization
As of 2013, all digital media platforms accounted for 8% of total news consumption time (McKinsey).

In 2016, 18% of Americans said they got news and information from social media “often” (Pew).

In 2016, 14% of Americans said social media was their “most important” source of election news (Gentzkow & Allcott 2017).

In 2016, 4% of Americans said they trust information on social media “a lot” (Pew).
“Most important” source of 2016 election news:

Source: Gentzkow & Allcott 2017
Are the groups getting more polarized those that use social media the most?
Social media use by age

Figure 1: Trends in internet access and social media use by age group

Panel A: Internet access
Proportion with internet access
0.0 0.2 0.4 0.6 0.8 1.0
18−39 65+ 75+

Panel B: Campaign information online
Proportion that saw campaign news online
0.0 0.2 0.4 0.6 0.8 18−39 65+ 75+

Panel C: Social media use
Proportion that use social media
0.0 0.2 0.4 0.6 0.8 1.0
18−39 65+ 75+

Notes: Panel A shows the weighted proportion of respondents who have internet access by age group. Panel B shows the proportion of respondents that saw campaign information online by age group. Panel C shows the estimated proportion of the adult American population that uses social media by age group according to the Pew Research Center (2005; 2008; 2011; 2012). See section 2.1 for details on each variable.
Polarization by age

Figure 2: Trends in polarization by demographic group

By age group

Index

0.8 1.0 1.2 1.4 18−39 65+ 75+

By predicted internet access

0.8 1.0 1.2 1.4 1.6 Top quartile Bottom quartile

Notes: Each plot shows the polarization index broken out for different demographic groups. The top plot shows the index by age group. The middle plot shows the index by quartile of predicted internet access. The bottom quartile includes values that are at or below the 25th percentile, while the top quartile includes values greater than the 75th percentile. The bottom plot shows the index by internet access. For a given measure and group, the polarization value is normalized by the 1996 value of the polarization measure in the full sample. The index is then the average of these normalized polarization measures for each group. See section 2 for definitions and section 3 for construction of predicted internet access.
Are people in online echo chambers?
Gentzkow & Shapiro (2011)

- Ideological segregation of online news consumption low, similar to offline media
  - Most consumption concentrated in large sites
  - Those who visit extreme sites are also heavy users who sample across the spectrum

- Segregation of face-to-face interactions much higher
Echo chambers in 2016

- Substantial segregation on Facebook, similar to face-to-face networks (Adamic et al. 2015)
- Still a small enough part of the news diet that overall picture has not changed dramatically (Flaxman et al. 2015)
- Some recent evidence that online segregation may have been higher in run-up to 2016 election (Peterson et al. 2017)
Fake News
Sources

- Online audience data
- Fact checking websites
- New online Survey (late Nov, 2016)
Quantity of Fake News

- Number of articles:
  - Pro-Clinton: 0
  - Pro-Trump: 150

- Number of Facebook shares (millions):
  - Pro-Clinton: 0
  - Pro-Trump: 30
Exposure to Fake News

- **Method 1**
  - Upper end of prior estimates: 1 share ↔ 20 reads
  - Implies ≈ 3 fake news stories per voter
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- **Method 1**
  - Upper end of prior estimates: 1 share ⇔ 20 reads
  - Implies ≈ 3 fake news stories per voter

- **Method 2**
  - Across our list of fake news sites, 159m visits per month before election
  - Implies ≈ 1.9 fake news stories per voter
Exposure to Fake News

- **Method 1**
  - Upper end of prior estimates: 1 share $\leftrightarrow$ 20 reads
  - Implies $\approx$ 3 fake news stories per voter

- **Method 2**
  - Across our list of fake news sites, 159m visits per month before election
  - Implies $\approx$ 1.9 fake news stories per voter

- **Method 3**
  - Survey: Test recall of fake and placebo stories
  - Implies $\approx$ 1.1 fake news story per voter
Summary

- Best guess: Average voter read and remembered on the order of 1-5 fake news stories

- Could this have changed the election outcome?
Conclusion
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- Polarization is real
- Digital media are increasingly important, but probably not the driving force

- Other explanations?
  - Cable TV
  - Politicians → voters
  - Structural factors