



Media Bias' Influence Upon Opinion

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ABSTRACT

The United States is becoming increasingly polarized, in terms of both partisanship and ideological alignment. This study seeks to examine the factors behind this growth and understand the most important elements. Through four surveys distributed at a medium sized suburban high school in southern California, data was collected on self-reported ideology, partisan alignment and strength of alignment, news media viewership, reaction to biased media based on control data, and interest in politics. In order to illustrate bias, all four surveys asked questions about Net Neutrality, but only three gave the participant information about the topic. Each of these three had a different bias, presenting the leading opinion of liberal and conservative ideologies, with another providing both sides to the participant. The rest of the data was collected through the same self-report methods on each of the four surveys. By investigating the relationships between partisan-ideological sorting, selective exposure, and exposure to media bias, this study endeavors to illustrate the connections making them so impactful to the beliefs of individuals, and how the combination of these influences polarization in the United States today.

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INTRODUCTION

Political polarization, the divergence of political attitudes to ideological extremes, is becoming noticeably more prevalent in America today. More people strongly identify with a specific party and a corresponding ideological identity than in the recent past (Davis, Dunaway 2016). This phenomenon, known as partisan-ideological sorting, results in a very tense, antagonistic political atmosphere. To date, the country has become more divided along party lines and ideological groups, encouraging further separation and resulting in parties unwilling to cooperate, not only in legislation, but in even the smallest of tasks or decisions (Chambers, Baron, Inman 2006). Within the public majority of the country, many media sources have begun to embrace differing partisan biases that encourage citizens to become more polarized themselves (Levendusky 2013; Mummolo 2016), creating discord amongst individuals tending towards opposite parties. Individuals that watch the news are more likely to select a media outlet reflecting their own opinions more closely than other sources (Davis, Dunaway 2016; Mummolo 2016). This action of selectively exposing oneself to biased media can often result in a more narrow scope with which to view current events and topics, as opinions are filtered through the lens of a given outlet before reaching the audience. Defining precisely how news media creates less informed populations will assist in analyzing different degrees of misinformation and connections to media interacted with and viewed in a given time frame. It is necessary to understand the extent to which partisan biased media may exacerbate polarization effects to make changes to effectively reduce their ideological impact.

METHODS

Using a random assignment function, one of the four surveys was designated for a class or class period. Of these four, the control survey gives data from a sample of the population responding to the questions on the form without any present influence - just their own opinion and preconceived ideas on the topic discussed. The liberal and conservative biased surveys provide information supporting a common opinion of individuals who align with each respective ideology, in order to show correlation between biased information and response changes. The moderate survey does the same, but provides perspective on both sides, allowing for the most evenly informed responses from the surveys. For these surveys, the topic of Net Neutrality was selected as the information presented to the participants. At the time of distribution, it was a relatively newer issue and had clearly defined ideological boundaries on opinion. This made it an ideal subject to use in order to study impact of bias upon the students' beliefs.

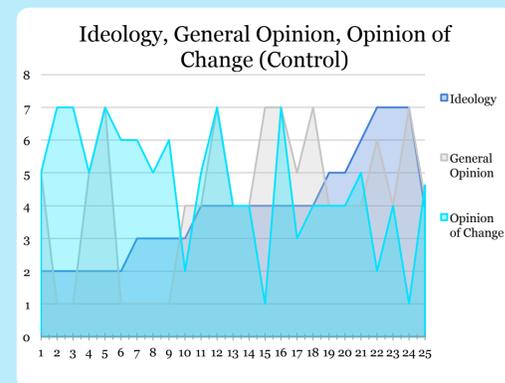


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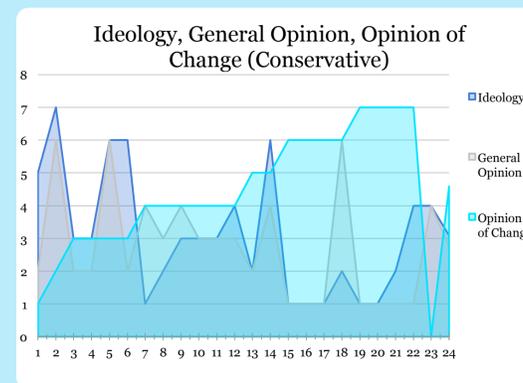


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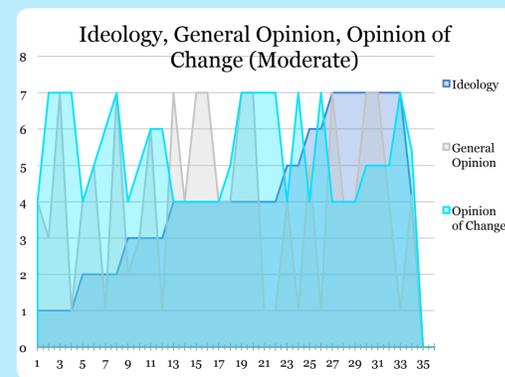


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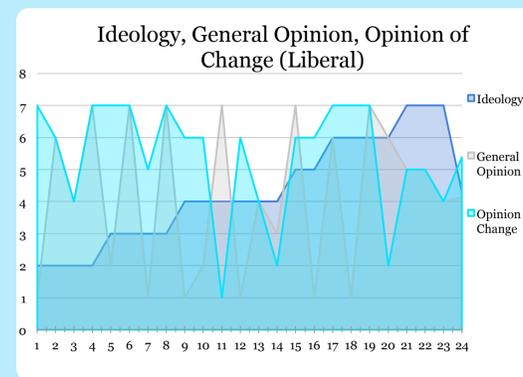


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DISCUSSION

- Average party political ideology: Democrats, 2.5; Republicans, 6.5; Libertarians, 4.82; None, 2.5.
- The more polarized an individual is, the greater the interest they have in politics - people identifying more strongly one way or another care more.
- As a person's opinion of Net Neutrality moves one way or another from the neutral selection of four, their opinion of proposed changes moves similarly in the opposite direction.
- Generally people identifying more strongly as conservative have less positive feelings towards current Net Neutrality and desire more change to its laws and guidelines, and the opposite being true of those identifying as liberal.
- When presented with balanced information, participants elected to stand by their original assessment of Net Neutrality in general, but decided the cons of changing Net Neutrality laws outweighed the positive possibilities. This is a perfect example of an informed decision being made concerning the participants' ideas - based on balanced information.
- The biased information presented to the participant before answering the pertinent questions had a significant impact upon the opinions of the responders regarding alterations to current Net Neutrality legislation. Most responders kept their general opinion of Net Neutrality the same, but their ideas surrounding changes to the current laws altered based on the information provided.
- Less partisan strength coupled with low interest results in less selective exposure, fitting ideological trends within the party group.

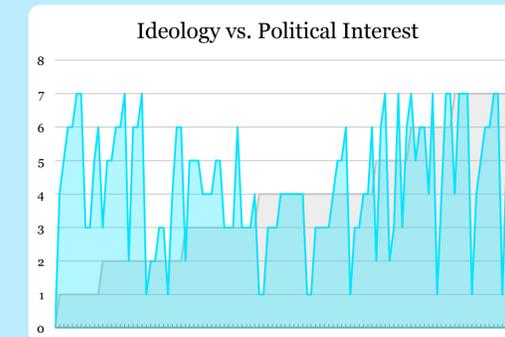


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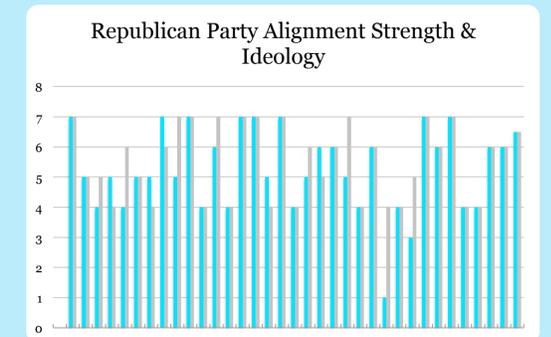


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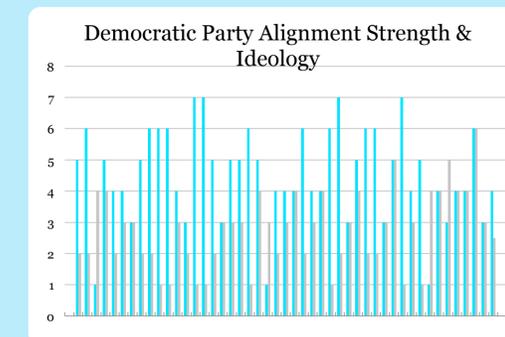


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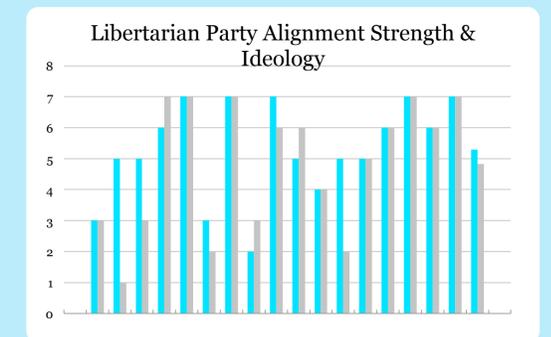


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CONCLUSIONS

Partisan media bias has a direct, measurable impact upon the opinions of viewers. Participants kept their original opinion of Net Neutrality, but shifted their ideas of change in response to the information they were presented with. Partisan-ideological alignment was demonstrably present within the subject population, and the more invested an individual was in politics, the more likely they were to have an extreme ideology. As strong ideology combines with high interest, a rise in viewing of biased media occurs. When additionally combined with strong partisan alignment, increased ideological unity within the group encourages selective exposure to outlets that support their opinions, further exacerbating the effects of bias and promoting even more narrow viewing. As demonstrated through the findings of this study, all of these factors together result in skewed opinions made without the perspective necessary for informed ideas. A similar study, replicated over a larger geographical area and subject population, could more definitively prove the trends detected in the data amassed from this research. In addition, small studies conducted on a focused group could provide interesting results concerning the impact of bias on different population subsets.