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Loud and Clear: Effects of Homogenous and Extreme Partisan Media Diets

Abstract:

The recent explosion of cable television and talk radio programming allows individuals to select more homogenous and ideologically extreme media diets than was possible when the more temperate network channels dominated the airwaves. Observers express concern that media fragmentation along partisan lines polarizes the citizenry and undermines deliberative democracy. Yet there are also reasons to expect that exposure to more unified and outspoken partisan perspectives in the media may help mobilize citizens to participate in politics, thus bolstering participatory democracy. We test the effects of exposure to 73 partisan news and entertainment programs on attitude polarization and campaign participation using the Internet Panel of the 2008 National Annenberg Election Survey. To do so we construct a new measure of partisan media exposure that documents the degree of homogeneity and ideological extremity of a person’s media diet. Within subjects and matching analyses indicate that exposure to more homogenous and extreme media is associated with greater increases in attitude polarization and campaign participation over the course of the election season. The paper provides a methodological contribution with the introduction of a new measure, and an empirical
contribution by analyzing the effects of understudied dimensions of the new media environment. It thus serves as a complement to extant studies of partisan media effects.