Partisan Selective Exposure on Social Media During the 2020 Presidential Election

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Abstract

This study examines selective exposure and selective avoidance on social media during the 2020 presidential election. 147 voters participated in the survey conducted using Qualtrics. The purpose of this study was to understand whether selective exposure and avoidance behaviors differed based on voting outcome (Trump or Biden), and to test whether political ideological polarization was reflected in news consumption through social media. Taken together, the results indicate that although both voting bases engaged in selective exposure and avoidance, the propensity was the same between Trump and Biden voters. Additionally, results confirm existing hypotheses that strength of political ideology positively correlates with selective exposure. However, results challenge whether there is a relationship between strength of political ideology and selective avoidance. Taken together, this study contributes to existing literature by providing preliminary evidence that, during the 2020 presidential election, polarization between members of political parties was reflected on social media through both news consumption and disengagement with attitude-incongruent information.

Political news during election cycles has a profound impact on voting choice and election perceptions (Levendusky, 2015). Political news serves a crucial, democratic function by exposing citizens to a wide range of current issues to keep them informed. However, partisan media, or opinionated media, have the potential to skew individuals' attitudes and beliefs toward particular candidates or ideological viewpoints (Chan & Stone, 2013). Additionally, citizens' reliance on social media for political news raises questions about the prevalence of exposure to solely one-sided political news, or selective exposure (Stroud, 2011; Chan & Stone, 2013). Research confirms that social media is an important factor in elections (see Drew & Weaver,

2006; Hajj Flemings, 2012; (Wicks et al., 2014), few studies have examined selective exposure on social media during elections. To that end, this study examines selective exposure on social media during the 2020 presidential election. The rise in polarization between members of political parties and their increased reliance on social media for political news makes the 2020 election a unique time to examine selective exposure.

Selective exposure occurs when an individual intentionally selects information that confirms his or her beliefs (Stroud, 2011). Partisan selective exposure asserts that a user's political beliefs drive their choice in news selection and avoidance. Communication researchers have confirmed this alignment (Sulfow et al., 2018). Understanding how selective exposure shapes voters' attitudes during elections becomes increasingly important in our current political contexts due to the proliferation of partisan sources and viewpoint polarization (see related arguments by Shehata & Strömbäck, 2021). According to a study by Pew Research Center in 2019, Democrats and Republicans are holding increasingly unfavorable perceptions of members of the opposing party. For example, 55% of Republicans say Democrats are "more immoral" than other Americans, a near 10% increase from 2015. The same report indicates a deeper divide beyond issues of policy with 73% of Democrats and Republicans reporting that they do not only disagree over plans and policies, but they also cannot even agree on basic facts (Pew Research Center, 2019). Although existing research confirms the existence of selective exposure on social media, the research is unclear as to which members of political parties engage in selective exposure more (Wicks et al., 2014).

Another notable reason for studying selective exposure and selective avoidance during the 2020 Presidential Election is due to the shifting media landscape with people's increased reliance on social media for political news. People increasingly consume news through multiple

media outlets, and particularly from social media platforms (Newport, 2020). In 2018, Pew Research Center reported that only 18% of persons aged 18-29 received their news from television, while 90% were active on at least one social media site, especially Facebook (Matsa & Bialik, 2020). More notably, nearly two-thirds of adults received at least some of their news from social media websites (Matsa & Bialik, 2020). In addition, reliance on social media during election cycles was at an all-time high amid the 2020 Presidential election cycle. Yet, those who consumed their election-related news solely through social media platforms were less engaged and less knowledgeable (Pew Research Center, 2020).

Social media affords users a plethora of sources to choose from, making selective exposure behaviors even more pronounced (Cinelli et al., 2020). Social media platforms, such as Facebook, usually do not produce original news reports. Instead, these sites function as a pathway to third-party publishers who share and circulate news that represents various political viewpoints (Fletcher & Nielson, 2019). In addition to traditional news sources like CNN and FOX, new hyper-partisan outlets have surfaced online. A unique feature of hyper-partisan media is how they explicitly highlight their political bias rather than appeal to perceptions of objectivity like traditional media (Xu et al., 2020; Wischnewski et al., 2021). The rise in partisan news sources is likely reflective of the extreme polarization between members of competing political parties (Xu et al., 2020). According to their website, The Daily Wire, for instance, promotes a "hard-hitting, irreverent news and commentary site for a new generation of conservatives." In contrast, left wing media such as Vox, Huffington Post, and BuzzFeed news consistently cover issues from a politically progressive point of view (Pew Research Center, 2023).

The high-choice news environment of social media allows users to engage with a variety of different viewpoints, yet research confirms that individuals are not utilizing social media to

consume different perspectives (Garrett, 2009; Stroud, 2011; Cinelli et al., 2020; Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2020). Moreover, social media also allows users to disengage with information that is attitude-inconsistent through unfriending and muting, which is called selective avoidance (Rhine, 1967). Selective avoidance among social media users seemed especially prevalent during the 2020 elections with growing rates of intolerance for political opponents. For instance, in 2012 Pew Research Center reported that 18% of individuals on social media sites blocked or unfriended people because of their political views. A subsequent survey conducted in 2016 found that number had risen to 40% of social media users indicating rising rates of selective avoidance. Although research also indicates that selective avoidance behaviors may be more prominent among people who hold strong ideological opinions (Neely, 2021). However, differences in selective avoidance and voting outcome have not yet been tested (Shin & Thorson, 2017).

Partisanship and political news consumption during election cycles remains an essential focus for many political communication scholars, particularly given the hostility that characterized the 2020 presidential election as evident in out-group disdain (Hmielowski et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2022). Many people took to social media to consume news and engage in information sharing and discussions (Pew Research Center, 2020). The prevalence of selective exposure and selective avoidance behaviors may reinforce notions of political intolerance and polarization and may also suggest a relationship between social media use for news consumption and voting outcome.

This research expands on the concepts regarding selective exposure, and avoidance. Studying the 2020 U.S. Presidential election represents an important context for understanding the extent to which polarization was reflected in online engagement. Examining such behaviors

among Trump and Biden voters not only furthers the literature on the relationship between media use and partisanship and polarization by looking at the connection between selective exposure and avoidance on voting outcome. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to test the differences in selective exposure, avoidance, and online engagement between Trump and Biden voters on social media during the 2020 election cycle.

Literature Review

Partisan Media

In this study, the term partisan *media* refers to a politically biased media organization while partisan *news* refers to the stories these organizations publish. Accusations of media bias are increasing across the political spectrum (Iyengar & Krupenkin, 2018) and indeed, partisan media on both sides is becoming more prominent (Xu et al., 2020).

Literature identifies a few factors that have contributed to the growth of partisan media. One theory is that the partisanship of media organizations reflects the polarization of society. In other words, nowadays there are more people who hold concrete and coherent sets of political beliefs across a diverse political spectrum, creating a larger market for more ideologically slanted news, or partisan news (Levendusky, 2013). The proliferation of these media organizations fosters a diverse media environment where individuals have greater choice over what news to consume. Hyper-partisan media emphasizes the outlet's political view with the intention of attracting like-minded consumers. Social media has contributed to the growth of hyper-partisan media outlets because they are no longer competing with the viewpoint of legacy, or traditional, media outlets such as cable television, radio, and newspaper. However, research underscores the democratic consequence of such ideologically slanted news, such as

misinformed voters (Messing & Westwood, 2014). Similarly, Stroud (2011) suggests that there is an inherent relationship between partisan media and polarization with each fueling the other.

More traditional, yet partisan, media such as FOX News and MSNBC tends to choose facts and evidence that highlight a particular stance or angle while leaving out other details. These news organizations still undergo a process of fact-checking and editing. Although these are not technically inaccurate stories, they can certainly be misleading. On social media, the lack of vetting and fact checking altogether allows hyper-partisan media to spread overtly false information (Garrett, 2019).

In addition, there is growing hostility in partisan media about how the "other side" is discussed (Yair & Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2015). Existing research suggests that talk show hosts on partisan media spend much of their time chastising political opponents, particularly during election cycles. During elections, partisan media tends to stress negative themes and narratives about the opposition. For instance, a study conducted on the 2008 presidential election between Barack Obama and John McCain found that Fox News not only *defended* McCain, they *attacked* Obama and explained why he would not be a good president (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2012). In doing so, FOX reminded their audience who not to vote for, in addition to recommending who to vote for (Levendusky, 2013). Thus, consuming solely partisan news results in viewers only consuming media messages that support their candidate while vilifying their opponent.

Selective Exposure and Selective Avoidance

Partisan Selective Exposure to Political News

Selective exposure occurs when individuals intentionally select messages that match their pre-existing beliefs (Stroud, 2011; Arceneaux et al., 2012). Partisan selective exposure refers to the desire to seek out information that is consistent with an individual's existing political beliefs.

Research on cable news channel viewers finds that liberals and conservatives equally tend to seek out sources confirming their political beliefs, and to highly distrust sources challenging them (Stroud, 2008, p. 885; see also Ditto et al., 2018). This results in selective tuning, or "higher levels of knowledge for facts that confirm beliefs and low levels of knowledge that oppose them" (Jerit & Barabas, 2012, p. 662). It is entirely possible that partisan media may convey misinformation and consequently reinforce inaccurate beliefs about candidates and issues. In addition, selective exposure in cable news, e.g., MSNBC for Democrats and FOX for Republicans, leads to unfavorable or distorted views of the opposing political party (Lee et al., 2014; Stone, 2019;). Strong preference based on political predisposition also results in distrust of opposing partisan sources, i.e., FOX for Democrats and MSNBC for Republicans (Lee et al., 2014). Both liberals and conservatives are increasingly skeptical of the traditional news media, however, research indicates that conservatives tend to be more hostile and distrustful of the media (Morris, 2007). Cable news media bias influences users by emphasizing certain aspects of a news story in order to direct people's thought focus (Wolfe & Baumgartner, 2013). Selective exposure research confirms that political news selection is driven in part by political predisposition (Shin & Thorson, 2017). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: There will be a positive relationship between strength of political ideology and selective exposure

Political Predisposition and News Choice

Political predisposition is strongly associated with both message processing and policy support (Lee & Kim, 2017). Political messaging frame issues in such a way that trigger principles foundational to a coherent political identity, and which elicit the desired partisan response and policy support. An understanding of the principles of predisposing political

affiliation is critical to harnessing partisan media's influence on political perceptions. For example, Democrats view CNN and MSNBC very differently in their portrayals of news, whereas Republicans view them as much more similar in their coverage (Lee et al., 2011). Personal attitudes influence consumers' choice of which stories to read on social media (Sulfow et al., 2018). Individuals report recognizing the influence of their political beliefs on their media selections as well as their interpretations of them. Additionally, people acknowledge that news from social media can intentionally frame certain aspects of a story to appeal to their political in-group, though this recognition appears not to improve their news consumption habits (Tully et al., 2018). Discomfort (cognitive dissonance) arises when users are confronted with attitude-challenging views, but selective exposure enables them to avoid this discomfort by turning to only attitude-consistent sources (Metzger et al., 2015). Research indicates that selective exposure "bolsters the self-concept" of those with entrenched political beliefs (Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2011, p. 103). This reinforcement augments the perception of being "right" on a particular issue, but may lead to more extreme beliefs, and foment dislike for the opposing side (Dvir-Gvirsman et al., 2018). Dislike causes bias and people tend to be biased against things they dislike, political parties included (Martin & Yurukuoglu, 2017). This dislike is driven in part by perceptions that are objectively false and such dislike could be abated if each side would try to understand the other better (Stone, 2019). Dislike also indirectly impacts integrity and empathy perceptions (Druckman & Parkin, 2005).

Understanding political predisposition as a cause for division is foundational for understanding selective exposure and ultimately candidate perception. Gaps in literature suggest further exploration is necessary to understand voting behavior and social media. As such, I propose this research question:

RQ1: Were there differences in selective exposure behaviors between Trump and Biden

voters?

There are various types of selective exposure: selection of news or entertainment,

messages about different issues; selection of a certain medium; selection of like-minded

messages (Stroud, 2011). This study focuses on selective exposure to like-minded political news

on social media due to the relevance of political news during the 2020 presidential election.

Selective Avoidance

Social media functionalities enable users to engage in selective avoidance, or

intentionally avoiding exposure to information that is counter to their political beliefs by hiding

posts, unfriending, or muting social media friends, known as selective avoidance (Skoric et al.,

2022). People use different social media platforms to fulfill various gratifications. Reddit, for

example, is a discussion-based social media platform that allows communities to form around

niche interests. Whereas Facebook allows individuals to connect with friends and family,

consume news, and engage in discussion-like forums. For the purpose of this study, social media

is conceptualized as a site that functions as a pathway to third party news sources and where

users are able to build networks of friends whom they can interact with on personalized

newsfeeds. Literature on selective avoidance is conflicted as to the frequency selective

avoidance occurs on social media. Some studies suggest that selective avoidance is relatively

rare, other studies show that strength of ideology can predict selective avoidance (Bode, 2016;

Song, 2017; Zhu & Skoric, 2021). Given the heightened polarization in 2020, it is necessary to

consider voters' selective avoidance on social media. Against the backdrop of existing literature,

I propose the following hypothesis:

H2: Strength of political ideology will positively correlate to selective avoidance

Research has not yet examined the extent to which Trump and Biden voters engaged in selective

avoidance on social media during the 2020 presidential election. Therefore, I propose the

following research question:

       RQ2: Were there differences in selective avoidance behavior between Trump and

  Biden voters?

Social Media

Uses and Gratifications

This study is interested in examining online engagement behaviors in the context of social

media during the presidential election. As such, it is necessary to provide a framework by

exploring the purpose of social media during elections and existing studies on the role of social

media during elections. There are many aspects that make social media appealing for news

consumption as opposed to traditional news regardless of the type of social media platform. Uses

and gratifications theory provides a framework for understanding why people use certain forms

of media, such as social media (Thongmak, 2021). Individuals are motivated to use social media

for a variety of reasons such as social interaction, information seeking, entertainment, or as a

hobby (Whiting & Williams, 2013). Because there are so many forms of mass media competing

for the attention of users, research finds that the consumption of political media should

increasingly be looked at as a behavioral manifestation of a person's political ideology or party

identification (Shao, 2009). Uses and gratification framework has also been deployed to

understand why voters use social media for election related content. One reason is due to social

media's interactivity, networkability, collaborative possibilities, convenience, and ability to

foster engagement (Ruggiero, 2000). To meet gratifications, users are also able to enhance social

connectedness, self-expression, sharing problems, sociability, relationship maintenance, and self-

actualization (Shao, 2009). There are many different social media platforms each fulfilling different uses and gratifications among its users. For the purpose of this study, social media is conceptualized as any platform that has the functionality to follow or friend other people, distribute news, and engage in commenting or posting on one's own or someone else's posts or pages.

Examining social media use by liberals and conservatives is essential in understanding election outcomes. According to Pew Research Center, liberals tend to get their news from Facebook more often than conservatives, but conservatives are more likely to pay attention to political posts there. Additionally, most Facebook users report seeing political posts that differ from their own views, which is an important factor in understanding the relationship of these posts to selective exposure (Mitchell, 2020).

Even when users do not ignore attitude-inconsistent content, they are less likely to engage with the full story, which can lead to misperceptions (Sulfow et al., 2018). Users from both sides often dismiss news that disagrees with them, choosing to 'walk away' or 'stop reading.' Very few say they seek secondary sources even though they know they should (Tully et al., 2018). Research on partisan selective exposure on social media provides conflicting support for whether or not a particular ideology or party engages in higher degrees of selective exposure. For instance, a study conducted on partisanship and media diet found an asymmetric pattern of selective exposure between conservative and liberals. According to this study, liberal individuals' selective exposure was higher than that of conservatives' selective exposure (Cinelli et al., 2020).

Social Media During Elections

The 2016 election between Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump highlighted the importance of social media on election outcomes (Johnson et al., 2020). Although Donald Trump was a clear underdog in the polls leading up to the election, he managed to surpass the expected amounts of votes and be elected president. In 2016, users turned to social media to select information or avoid information about candidates (Shen, 2017). Accordingly, conservatives and liberals maintained separate media environments during the 2016 election with conservatives relying more heavily on Fox News and the Drudge report, Breitbart News, the Daily Caller and Info Wars, while liberals relied heavily on sources such as the Huffington Post, MSNBC, and The Daily Beast. In addition, liberals relied on more traditional media as well such as the New York Times, Washington Post, and CNN (Johnson et al., 2020). Furthermore, political and economic researchers conducted a content analysis finding that Twitter's somewhat liberal bias tended to elevate politically liberal tweets which may have persuaded Twitter users with moderate views to vote against Donald Trump (Peterson et al., 2021). Taken together, the literature suggests that social media is an important medium to study in the contexts of elections. Given the prevalence of social media use during the 2016 election, it is curious whether polarization continued on social media during the 2020 election and whether or not this reflected how polarizing this election was. Wicks et al. (2012) conducted a study examining partisan media selective exposure amidst the 2012 presidential election. Their findings confirm that indeed, partisans differing in political orientation differ in terms of where they obtained information.

In addition, a study conducted in 2006 on voter learning from media found that variables such as strength of political party affiliation and campaign interest were likely predictors of whether someone planned to vote (Drew & Weaver, 2006). Findings also suggested that existing

interest predicted the likelihood of seeking out campaign information from traditional forms of media.

Method

Procedures

After receiving Institutional Research Board approval, I recruited participants by posting invitations and survey links on social media (Facebook and LinkedIn), and by emailing student email distribution lists in Political Science and Communication departments at a small public university in the Midwest United States. In addition, my survey was posted to a psychology research participant recruitment website at that same university. All participants were required to have voted in the 2020 Presidential election, and to have been active on at least one social media platform during the campaign. I collected and analyzed 147 survey results covering a broad range of demographic attributes, including age, gender, and political affiliation. The 2020 presidential election day was on November 3, 2020. Survey data was collected between March 2, 2021, and April 28, 2021. Because participants took the survey no more than six months after the 2020 presidential election day, reliability issues associated with participant memory recall were mitigated.

To explore how selective exposure on social media influenced candidate perception and voting choice during the 2020 Presidential election, I used a cross-sectional survey design to measure individuals' attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs. Surveys are beneficial for collecting large sample sizes in a short amount of time (Davis & Lachlan, 2017). Additionally, the study uses existing scales from previous research that have been tested for reliability. The survey asked a series of questions regarding aspects of social media use, political orientation, and political perceptions during the 2020 Presidential election. Survey questions and their measurement scales

were taken from existing scales used in political communication research studies. The survey was designed to be completed in 20 minutes or less. There are limitations to self-reported surveys including potential bias, relying on participant recall, and potential unintentional behavior, however, there is enough literature to support the validity of self-reported surveys that it remains an appropriate measure for this study.

Participants

In total, one hundred and forty-seven respondents participated in this study. Of all the respondents 26.9% were male while 73.1% were female. Out of all participants, 76.92% were predominantly white, 7.69% were black, 5.59% were Asian, and 9.79% reported as others. In addition, 19.15% identified as strongly Democrat, 24.82% identified as leaning Democrat, 28.37% identified as moderate, 17.73% identified as leaning Republican, and 9.93% identified as strongly Republican,14.18% of participants reported being very liberal, 33.33% reported liberal, 28.37% reported conservative, and 4.26% reported very conservative.

Measurements

Political information exposure. Participants identified the amount of time they accidentally, or intentionally encountered political information on social media. The response to each item used a five-point Likert scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree.

Selective Exposure. Participants were asked how often they (i) intentionally searched for information that was positive toward a candidate they supported, (ii) critical of the candidate they opposed, (iii) supported their political views. The responses to each item used a five-point Likert scale: 1= None to 5= Everyday (Heiss et al., 2019).

Social media use frequency. Participants were asked to identify how often they visited a social media site (YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or LinkedIn) during the past two weeks based on a five-point Likert scale: 1 = Never to 5 = Very Frequently (Park, 2019).

General media exposure. Participants were asked how often they used television, newspapers, radio, the internet, video sharing sites, social networking sites, and blogs for presidential campaign information, using a five-point Likert scale: 1 = Never to 5 = Very Frequently (Stroud, 2011).

Reliance on social media. Participants were asked how much they rely on social media for political news and information, on a five-point scale: 1 = Never to 5 = Heavily (Johnson, Kaye & Lee, 2017).

Selective Avoidance. Participants were asked whether they had (i) hidden someone's comments or posts on Facebook because they did not agree with their views on the political issues, and (ii) unfriended someone on Facebook because they did not agree with his or her view on the political issues. Responses for both questions were 0 = No, 1 = Yes (Barnidge et al., 2022).

Social media use for news. Participants were asked whether they use social media to (i) stay informed, (ii) get news about current events and public affairs, (iii) get news about current events through friends. Each item response rated frequency from 1 = Never, to 5 = Very Frequently (Hollander, 2014).

Political ideology strength. Participants identified their political orientation. Measured on a five-point scale: 1 = Very Liberal, 2 = Liberal, 3 = Moderate, 4 = Conservative, 5 = Very Conservative (Bode, 2016).

Political affiliation. Measured on a five-point Likert scale: 1 = Strong Democrat to 5 = Strong Republican (Weeks et al., 2019).

Political engagement. Participants were asked how often they (i) wrote a comment on political issues, (ii) liked or shared a political issue on social media, (iii) commented on posts and engaged in discussion. (Heiss & Mathes, 2019).

Polarization. Participants were asked their favorability toward each of the Republican Party and the Democratic Party. Responses ranged from 1 = Not at All Favorable to 10 = Very Favorable. (Johnson, Kaye & Lee, 2017).

Data Analysis

I used independent-samples *t*-tests and Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients to assess the existence of relationships among individuals' attributes of attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs, and the strength of those relationships. These *t*-tests identify statistically significant (unlikely to have occurred by mere chance) differences between two sample means of some non-categorical variable of interest (Davis & Lachlan, 2017). In other words, *t*-tests determine differences between two groups such as Trump and Biden voters. A statistically significant difference means that difference exists in the population from which the samples are drawn. A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient measures whether two interval, or ratio-level, variables vary together in a way not expected by mere chance. A correlation coefficient is an appropriate statistical test for identifying a relationship between selective exposure and political ideology because they are both continuous variables. They may vary together positive, negatively, or not at all.

Results

Results from the analysis confirm H1, strength of political ideology positively correlated to selective exposure. However, the results did not indicate any relationship between strength of political ideology and selective avoidance, thus, H2 was not confirmed. Results from RQ1 indicate no differences in selective exposure between Trump and Biden voters. Similarly, with RQ2, no differences in selective avoidance were found between Trump and Biden voters. This section explains the results from each statistical test.

Analysis of H1

Hypothesis one states that there is a positive relationship between strength of political ideology and selective exposure. Selective exposure was measured by asking participants how frequently they (i) searched for information that was positive toward the candidate they supported, (ii) critical of the candidate they opposed, (iii) supported their political beliefs. To analyze this relationship, correlation coefficients were conducted. The correlation coefficient for strength of ideology and selective exposure identified a positive relationship between the two variables, $r(119)=2.46, p>.05$. The strength of ideology (very liberal, very conservative) did positively correlate to selective exposure. Participants who reported being more liberal or conservative engaged in selective exposure behavior more frequently.

Analysis of H2

Hypothesis two states that there is a positive relationship between strength of political ideology and selective avoidance on social media. To analyze this relationship, correlation coefficients were conducted. The correlation coefficient for strength of ideology and selective avoidance identified no relationship between the two variables, $r(118)=-.003, p>.05$. The strength of ideology (very liberal, very conservative) did not impact whether or not participants

hid posts unfavorable to their view or unfriended individuals who posted information that was

unfavorable to their views.

Analysis of RQ1

The first research questions asked if there were differences in selective exposure between

Trump and Biden voters. An independent-samples *t*-test indicated a slight, but not significant

group difference in voting based on selective exposure. A slight difference was detected in

selective exposure behavior between Trump voters (*M* = 1.88, *SD* = 1.25) and Biden voters (*M* =

2.60, *SD* = 1.56); *t* (100) = 2.75, p = <.05 (two-tailed). Trump voters reported seeking out like-

minded political information slightly more often than Biden voters.

Analysis of RQ2

The second research question asked if there were differences in selective avoidance

between Trump and Biden voters. An independent-samples *t*-test indicated no significant

differences in selective avoidance between Trump voters and Biden voters. No differences were

detected in selective avoidance behaviors between Trump voters (*M* = 1.48, *SD* = 0.503) and

Biden voters (*M* = 1.37, *SD* =489); *t* (116) = 1.80, p = <.05 (two-tailed).

Discussion

The goal of this study was to examine selective exposure and selective avoidance

behaviors on social media among voters during the 2020 presidential election. The results

highlight this study's unique contribution to the literature. First, the data reflects no differences

between Trump and Biden voters in seeking out like-minded news sources. Consistent with

existing literature (Stroud, 2011), selective exposure on social media did take place during the

election yet there were no differences in propensity between Trump and Biden voters which were

variables that had not been examined in the literature prior to this study. There is not existing literature to explain the lack of difference between Trump and Biden voters.

Second, the data indicates no differences between Trump and Biden voters in hiding posts that were politically in-congruent or unfriending someone whom they disagreed with politically. In other words, Trump and Biden voters engaged equally in selective exposure or selective avoidance behaviors on social media. This is an important finding because it provides, at minimum, evidence that neither voting base was more hostile toward people whom they disagreed on social media than the other during the 2020 election. Relatedly, contrary to existing literature (Kim et al., 2022), results show no relationship between strength of political ideology and selective avoidance. Specifically, the degree to which some identified as liberal or conservative did not impact whether they hid posts that were politically in-congruent, or unfriended individuals who they disagreed with politically. These findings could potentially represent the growing discomfort individuals have with engaging in political dialogue during presidential elections as a way to avoid cognitive dissonance.

Finally, consistent with existing literature (Stroud, 2011; Peterson et al., 2017), results did indicate a positive relationship between strength of political ideology and selective exposure. Individuals who identified as strongly liberal or strongly conservative sought out politically like-minded posts more often than individuals who identified as slightly liberal or slightly conservative. These findings confirm hypotheses that highly partisan individuals have a lower tolerance for cognitive dissonance and therefore will engage in selective exposure more often to avoid feelings of cognitive dissonance (Levendusky, 2011). The findings here have both theoretical and practical implications.

Implications

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study contribute to existing literature on polarization and partisanship by finding that, consistent with Stroud (2011) and Levendusky (2013), such political polarization did translate to social media in the form of selective exposure to political news during the 2020 presidential election. Although the literature has explored this relationship (Peterson et al., 2021), this study's unique contribution is that it examined the extent to which political ideology impacts seeking out like-minded information in the context of the 2020 election. Because exposure to solely like-minded news has been linked to furthering political intolerance and heightening out-group disdain (Metzger et al., 2020), this study offers evidence that social media did in fact fuel polarization during the 2020 election between the two political extremes.

Conversely, no relationship was detected between strength of political ideology and selective avoidance between Trump and Biden voters. In other words, individuals engaged equally in hiding posts or unfriending people who they disagreed with politically regardless of how conservative or liberal they felt. This extends the literature by suggesting this may have been indicative of the general levels of intolerance during the 2020 presidential election in addition to avoiding experiences of cognitive dissonance.

Results show no differences between Trump and Biden voters in selective exposure or selective avoidance on social media. This is significant because of misperceptions that may exist about the online engagement behaviors of members of voting bases on social media. Trump voters, for instance, may have speculated that Biden voters only read like-minded news, or are more intolerant by hiding posts and unfriending people. This study supports the existing literature with no evidence of differences in propensity of such behavior based on voting. In fact, this study confirms that both Democrats and Republicans are more likely to engage with like-

minded sources and perceive non-like-minded sources as bias supporting the hypotheses of viewpoint polarization on social media (Cinelli et al., 2020). Additionally, both Trump and Biden voters reported hiding posts or unfriending people with whom they differed politically, confirming speculated levels of intolerance for members of the opposing voting base and exposure to attitude-inconsistent information.

Practical Implications

From an applied perspective, social media can play an integral role during election cycles. Campaigns can use social media to engage with and mobilize their voting base. As such, the results of this study serve as useful information for campaigns and politicians to better understand the ways in which their voting base, and opposing voting base, engages with news and political messages on social media.

First, understanding which news sources partisans seek out and avoid, the extent to which partisans engage with attitude-inconsistent messages, and even what platforms certain age groups gravitate towards may allow campaigns to more strategically craft messages targeted at specific audiences depending on their goal.

Additionally, the findings of this study serve as useful information for political media in terms of understanding whether or not individuals pay attention to news sources. Most people reported paying attention to the sources they receive political news from. This not only helps partisan media craft content that appeals to their audience but is also beneficial in providing information on which platforms to focus on developing their presence. For instance, if conservative partisan news media know that conservatives are more active on Instagram, for example, they are able to spend more time and effort building content for that particular platform.

Taken together, this study contributes to discussion of political polarization on social media by presenting preliminary evidence confirming the existence of polarizing behaviors and extends the conversation by illustrating that polarizing behaviors on social media are taking place between both voting bases and on either side of the political spectrum. Additionally, this study challenges Peterson et al. (2021) finding fewer differences in selective exposure behaviors between Democrat (Biden) voters and Republican (Trump) voters. The results of this study, however, do not provide any recommendations for reducing polarization between voting bases aside from seeking out political news from a multiple different types of news sources. This study also provides practical information for campaigns and political media that will assist them in analyzing their audiences to grow their bases.

Limitations and Areas for Future Research

These findings are subject to several limitations. First, selective exposure was measured using retrospective self-reported surveys. Currently, literature finds the best way to measure selective exposure is in a lab setting due to the fact that people are not always conscious of their news consumption behaviors (Clay et al., 2013). However, due to constraints of this study, self-reported surveys were appropriate and the literature supports self-reported surveys as a valid measurement even if it is not the ideal condition. Second, relying on retrospective self-reported surveys poses a reliability challenge because participants must recall information about their behaviors from weeks or months prior to their research participation (Clay et al., 2013). Since participants took the survey no more than six months after the election, some of the issues that come with longer term memory recollection were mitigated.

Finally, the relatively small sample size limits the findings' analyzability, robustness, and generalizability. Future research should consider revisiting these hypotheses and research

questions in future elections to determine whether behaviors among partisans and voting bases have shifted at all. In addition, future studies should incorporate different measurements for selective exposure, for instance in an eye-tracking lab or holding focus groups to understand deeper levels of perceptions and motivations.

Future studies would also benefit from narrowing the scope of social media to a single platform. Each platform interface differs, and standardizing input data on a single platform would likely improve their accuracy and the accuracy of inferences derived from them. Constraints in this study limited the ability to run ad-hoc analysis to determine which platform users engaged in selective exposure and avoidance on. Future studies should consider testing differences in selective exposure and avoidance across platforms.

Conclusion

This study presents findings on the use of social media for news during the 2020 Presidential Election. The results speak to the increasing levels of polarization in society and the ways in which they translate, or do not translate, to online engagement behaviors on social media. In addition, this study highlights the importance of social media during the election cycle and confirms the rise in reliance on social media for political news. As the media landscape shifts and polarization continues to rise it is essential to examine the ways in which the two variables inform each other. Even though the findings suggest that neither Trump or Biden voters engaged in different levels of selective exposure, the data showcases the existence of selective exposure between the two voting bases. As such, exposure to one-sided news may have the potential to shape perceptions about candidates and effectively impact voting outcomes. The results presented here should also make us vigilant of how our social media tendencies affect our own bias and political perception and particularly heighten our attention during future elections.

Appendix A.
Survey Questions
What is your age?
What is your gender?
- Male
- Female
- Other

What is your race?
- White
- Black or African American
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- Other

What is your highest level of education?
- High school diploma
- Some college, no degree
- Associates degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- Doctorate degree

Please indicate your political affiliation

	Strong Democrat	Leans Democrat	Moderate	Leans Republican	Strong Republican
I most closely identify politically as		•	•	•	•

Please indicate the strength of your political ideology

	Very Liberal	Liberal	Moderate	Conservative	Very Conservative
I most closely identify politically as	•	•	•	•	•

Please indicate how frequently you used each social media platform in the last two weeks:

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very frequently
Facebook	•	•	•	•	•
Twitter	•	•	•	•	•
Youtube	•	•	•	•	•
Instagram	•	•	•	•	•
LinkedIn	•	•	•	•	•

Please select the option that best describes you:

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very frequently
I pay attention to which sources I receive political news from	•	•	•	•	•

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Obtain political information	•	•	•	•	•
Follow current political events	•	•	•	•	•
Learn about interesting political perspectives	•	•	•	•	•
Pass the time	•	•	•	•	•
Find entertaining information	•	•	•	•	•
Watch entertaining videos/pictures	•	•	•	•	•
Stay in contact with other people	•	•	•	•	•
Show other people that I care about them	•	•	•	•	•
Maintain existing friendship	•	•	•	•	•
Express interest my interests to others	•	•	•	•	•
Show others what I am doing	•	•	•	•	•
To post pictures, videos and updates	•	•	•	•	•

Please indicate your political affiliation

	Strong Democrat	Leans Democrat	Moderate	Leans Republican	Strong Republican
I most closely identify politically as	•	•	•	•	•

Please indicate the strength of your political ideology

	Very Liberal	Liberal	Moderate	Conservative	Very Conservative
I most closely identify politically as	•	•	•	•	•

Please indicate how frequently you used each social media platform in the last two weeks:

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very frequently
Facebook	•	•	•	•	•
Twitter	•	•	•	•	•
Youtube	•	•	•	•	•
Instagram	•	•	•	•	•
LinkedIn	•	•	•	•	•

Please indicate how often you comment on social media related to the following

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very frequently
Comment on non-like-minded news	•	•	•	•	•
Comment on like-minded news	•	•	•	•	•
Share non-like minded news	•	•	•	•	•
Share like-minded news	•	•	•	•	•
Receive non-like-minded news	•	•	•	•	•
Receive like-minded news	•	•	•	•	•

Please indicate how strongly you agree with each of the following statements:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Political issues are important to me	•	•	•	•	•
I have a lot of knowledge when it comes to politics	•	•	•	•	•
I usually do not change my opinions when it comes to politics	•	•	•	•	•

In the past month how often have you **accidentally** encountered information online that:

	Never	About once	2-3 times	Once a week	A few times a week	Everyday
Was critical of the candidate you **supported**	•	•	•	•	•	•
Was favorable towards the candidate you **opposed**	•	•	•	•	•	•
Disagreed with your political views	•	•	•	•	•	•

In the past month how often have you **intentionally** searched for information that

	None	About once	2-3 times	Once a week	A few times a week	Everyday
Was positive toward a candidate you supported	•	•	•	•	•	•
Critical of a candidate you opposed	•	•	•	•	•	•
Supported your political views	•	•	•	•	•	•

Please indicate whether or not you have done the following

	No	Yes
Hidden someone's comments or posts on social media because you did not agree with their political views	•	•
Unfriended someone on social media because you did not agree with their political views	•	•

Please indicate your level of political engagement on social media during 2020 presidential election.

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Frequently
I posted political related content	•	•	•	•	•
I liked or shared a political post	•	•	•	•	•
I commented on political posts	•	•	•	•	•
I engaged in discussion on	•	•	•	•	•

Please indicate how often you used each form of media for political information during the 2020 presidential election.

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Frequently
Television	•	•	•	•	•
Newspaper	•	•	•	•	•
Radio	•	•	•	•	•
Internet(non social media websites)	•	•	•	•	•
Social media (Facebook, Twitter, Youtube)	•	•	•	•	•
Blogs	•	•	•	•	•

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