The manifold effects of partisan media on viewers' beliefs and attitudes: A field experiment with Fox News viewers[*]

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Abstract

Partisan media impacts voting behavior, yet what changes in viewers' beliefs or attitudes may accompany these impacts is poorly understood. We present a field experiment in which we recruited a sample of regular Fox News viewers using data on actual TV viewership from a media company. We then incentivized them to watch CNN instead for a month, shifting the slant of their media diets. Despite regular Fox viewers being largely strong partisans, we found manifold effects of this change in their media diets on factual beliefs, attitudes, perceptions of issues' importance, and overall political views. We show that these effects stem in part from partisan outlets selectively reporting information, leading viewers to learn a biased set of information. Consistent with this, treated participants concluded that Fox concealed negative information about President Trump. Partisan media does not only present its side an electoral advantage—it may present a challenge for democratic accountability.

The impact of partisan media has drawn considerable concern from social scientists and civil society (e.g., Druckman, Levendusky and McLain 2018). Natural experiments indicate that partisan media meaningfully affects voting behavior, impacting elections (DellaVigna and Kaplan 2007; Martin and Yurukoglu 2017; Hopkins and Ladd 2014). However, we know little about what changes in viewers' beliefs, attitudes, or priorities may accompany these shifts in voting behavior, leaving the effects of partisan media—and its implications for democracy—paradoxically "well-known but poorly understood" (Yglesias 2018, p. 682-3).

In this paper, we present a unique field experiment which shifted the slant of partisan media viewers' media diets: we incentivized regular Fox News viewers to watch CNN instead for four weeks during September 2020.

During this time, Fox News and CNN's coverage differed dramatically. CNN provided extensive coverage of COVID-19, which included information about the severity of the COVID-19 crisis and poor aspects of then-President Trump's performance handling COVID-19. Fox News covered COVID-19 much less. The coverage of COVID-19 it did offer provided little of the information CNN did, instead giving viewers information about why the virus was not a serious threat. On the other hand, Fox News extensively but highly selectively covered racial issues, and its coverage of these issues provided extensive information about Biden and other Democrats' supposed positions on them and about outbreaks of violence at protests for racial justice in American cities. CNN provided little information about either. The networks both covered the issue of voting by mail, but again covered dramatically different information about it.

How would viewing networks with such different content affect viewers' beliefs and attitudes? It is far from obvious that it would at all. Indeed, influential theories would suggest that partisan media's effects will be limited because those who choose to watch it already have strong views (for review, see Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Prior 2013), consume other cross-cutting sources of news, or might resist or counter-argue any information contrary to their partisan preferences or from outpartisan sources (e.g., Zaller 1992). However, existing research has not measured the

effects of sustained exposure to televised partisan media on individuals' beliefs and attitudes.[1]

To assess these questions, our experiment changed the slant of partisan media viewers' media diets. To do so, we first partnered with a media analytics company (Bully Pulpit Interactive) to recruit individuals to a survey panel who regularly watch Fox News, as identified in data on their households' actual television viewership. At baseline, these Fox News viewers were nearly all very conservative and strong Republicans. To change the slant of their media diet, we offered a randomized treatment group of participants \$15 per hour to watch up to 7 hours of CNN per week during September 2020, prioritizing the hours at which participants indicated they typically watched Fox News. We enforced compliance with viewership quizzes (e.g., about which guest had just appeared), described in more detail below.

In a follow-up survey launched three days after the incentivized viewership period ended, we found substantial learning. First, we found large effects of watching CNN instead of Fox News on participants' factual perceptions of current events (i.e., beliefs) and knowledge about the 2020 presidential candidates' positions. We also found both large decreases in knowledge of information covered on Fox News during the incentivized period and large increases in knowledge of information CNN covered during this period, indicating that both substitution away from Fox News and substitution towards CNN occurred and impacted viewers' beliefs. We also found substantial evidence for agenda setting, as treated participants were much more likely to see issues covered on CNN (COVID-19) instead of on Fox News (racial protests) as important.

Accompanying these shifts, we also found evidence of manifold effects on viewers' attitudes about current events, policy preferences, and evaluations of key political figures and parties. For example, we found large effects on attitudes and policy preferences about COVID-19. We also found changes in evaluations of Donald Trump and Republican candidates and elected officials.

We argue that these manifold effects likely result from both the mechanisms most highly emphasized in the American politics literature in political science (agenda-setting and framing) and

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[1]For experiments on the effects of online media exposure, see, e.g., Searles et al. (2021); Guess et al. (2021).

from a third mechanism, partisan media outlets selectively reporting information. Indeed, consistent with participants underestimating the extent of partisan media's selective reporting of information at baseline, treatment group participants became more likely to agree that if Donald Trump made a mistake, Fox News would not cover it.

We also conducted an endline survey two months later that found these impacts largely receded as treated participants primarily returned to their prior viewership habits, consistent with both participants having a preference for like-minded media and the impacts of this media consumption.

In the discussion, we elaborate two broader implications of our findings. First, our results contrast with conventional wisdom that Americans—and especially highly engaged partisans—reject or counter-argue information contrary to their partisan loyalties and from opposing sources (e.g., Zaller 1992). Second, our results indicate challenges that partisan media may pose for democratic accountability. Our findings suggest that partisan media may affect voters' choices at least in part because it is less likely to cover information about aligned incumbents' failures and distorts perceptions of political rivals. This suggests that partisan media does not only present a challenge for the opposing party, it may present a challenge for democracy.

Theories of Media Influence

Partisan media affects voting behavior (e.g., Martin and Yurukoglu 2017), but what about its content leads to these effects, with what affects on viewers' knowledge and attitudes, and with what implications?

Prior research indicates three broad ways in which partisan media might impact viewers: agenda-setting, framing, and partisan coverage filtering.[2] These mechanisms are not mutually exclusive, and we argue partisan media impacts viewers with all of them. Table 1 provides an overview of these constructs. Existing research uses some of these terms in different ways; to fix

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[2]Due to length constraints, we also do not review the related literature on online and social media (e.g., Guess et al. 2021; Searles et al. 2021).

ideas, in this section we briefly review this literature and clarify how we use these terms within this paper.

First, a primary mechanism by which the media is thought to influence public opinion is through *agenda setting* (McCombs and Shaw 1972). "The idea of agenda setting is that the public's ... beliefs about what is a significant issue or event are determined by the amount of news coverage accorded" to those events (Ansolabehere, Behr and Iyengar 1993, p. 142). In other words, more news coverage of a topic leads viewers to conclude that the topic is "important" (Iyengar and Kinder 1987, p. 16). In addition, this is also thought to make viewers bring those topics to mind when evaluating elected officials through a process of *priming* (Krosnick and Kinder 1990).

A second potential mechanism is framing. Although definitions of framing vary widely, we follow definitions of framing as entailing "*emphasizing* which aspect" of a given issue is "relevant for evaluating it *without the frame itself [providing] any new substantive information about the issue*" (Leeper and Slothuus 2020, p. 154, emphasis in original). For example, describing civilian deaths in a military conflict as "collateral damage" instead of "deaths of unarmed women and children" might bring to mind different considerations, affecting levels of support for the conflict. This form of framing is arguably the primary reason previous literature has hypothesized partisan media persuades (Levendusky 2013). Consistent with this, previous laboratory- and survey-based experiments have typically measured the impacts of partisan media's use of different frames when covering *the same events* (for discussion, see Searles et al. 2021).

A third mechanism is a practice we call *partisan coverage filtering*. This mechanism has received considerable attention in the economics and communications literatures (e.g., Hayakawa 1940; Mullainathan and Shleifer 2005; Gentzkow and Shapiro 2006), although has traditionally received less emphasis within the American politics literature within political science. When engaging in partisan coverage filtering, a media outlet is more likely to report information flattering to politicians and causes on their ideological or partisan side, and not to report information unflattering to the same. In other words, it conveys more information favorable to its partisan or

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Table 1: Overview of Theoretical Constructs

Theoretical Construct	Media's Action	Effect on Viewers	Hypothetical Example
Agenda Setting	A network **covers a topic more**, holding constant the information conveyed about that topic (e.g., McCombs and Shaw 1972; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Krosnick and Kinder 1990).	This leads viewers to **see this topic as *more important*** and to ***priming* viewers' *pre-existing* attitudes on this topic** when forming political evaluations.	A Republican President launches a new military conflict. Media outlets cover the new conflict every day, leading viewers to see the conflict as important and to base their evaluations of the President on how they think she is handling the conflict.
Framing	A network "provides an interpretation of an issue or policy by *emphasizing* which aspect of the issue is relevant for evaluating it, *without the frame itself [providing] any new substantive information about the issue*" (Leeper and Slothuus 2020, p.154, emphasis in original)	This leads viewers to think about the issue in a different way, **changing which considerations are salient** to them.	**CNN** refers to local militias fighting back against the US as "freedom fighters," while **Fox News** refers to them as "terrorists." **CNN** refers to civilian casualties as "deaths of unarmed women and children," while **Fox News** refers to them as "collateral damage." When thinking about the conflict, viewers then bring to mind related considerations (e.g., the need to fight terrorists), affecting levels of support for the conflict.
Partisan Coverage Filtering	A network **is more likely to cover information favorable to its partisan or ideological side** and less likely to cover information unfavorable to its partisan or ideological side (e.g., Hayakawa 1940; Mullainathan and Shleifer 2005; Besley and Prat 2006; Gentzkow and Shapiro 2006).	This leads viewers to ***learn* more information favorable to the network's partisan side**, which could ***change* viewers' attitudes and political evaluations**.	**CNN** gives extensive information about the cost of the conflict, the number of US soldiers who died, and civilian casualties. **Fox News** gives equally extensive information about the severity of the threat that the President's military campaign neutralized and anecdotes of civilians who have greeted US soldiers as liberators. This leaves viewers of each network with different factual understandings of the conflict, and subsequently different levels of support for the conflict and the President.

ideological side and less information unfavorable to its side. In turn, this should lead its viewers to *learn* more information favorable to the network's side, which could change viewers' attitudes and political evaluations.

Partisan coverage filtering is different than agenda setting. Agenda setting concerns how the amount of coverage on a topic affects that topic's importance to viewers, while partisan coverage filtering concerns how reporting of different information leads to learning and attitude change. For instance, CNN and Fox News could give equal *amounts* of coverage to the military conflict while still giving viewers different information about it. This would be an example of partisan coverage filtering, not agenda setting, as agenda setting refers to different amounts of coverage of a topic.

Researchers have used many different terms to refer to this idea: Hayakawa (1940) and Mullainathan and Shleifer (2005) use "slant"; Gentzkow and Shapiro (2006) use "media bias"; Besley and Prat (2006) simply call this "bias"; Baum and Groeling (2008) discuss "bias" in "selection" of stories; Gentzkow, Shapiro and Stone (2016) use "filtering bias"; and Grossman, Margalit and Mitts (2022) use the term "facts bias."[3] Consistent with the plausibility of this mechanism, a small body of research shows that different media sources do cover different facts and information (e.g., Baum and Groeling 2008; Grossman, Margalit and Mitts 2022), and observational evidence has found that partisan media viewers are aware of very different facts than other citizens (e.g., Barabas and Jerit 2009). However, little research has determined to what extent this mechanism impacts viewers. For instance, Levendusky (2013) speculates that partisan media may lead people to "different factual beliefs" but that "existing evidence cannot really draw definitive conclusions about this" (p. 145).

Partisan coverage filtering is especially concerning for democratic accountability because it may deprive voters of the information they need to hold politicians accountable, potentially weak-

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[3]We use the term partisan coverage filtering to avoid the use of "bias" (since bias is often defined with respect to a true parameter, but objective media coverage is impractical to define) and to avoid the use of the term "slant" (because this term is now more commonly used to describe the overall ideology of a news source (e.g., Martin and Yurukoglu 2017)). This concept makes no assumptions as to what motivates this behavior among outlets (e.g., ideological versus economic motivations, see Martin and Yurukoglu 2017), nor whether the covered information is accurate.

ening politicians' incentives to represent voters (Besley and Prat 2006).

Our experiment, described below, shows that partisan media affects public opinion through both agenda setting and partisan coverage filtering.[4] We also more generally document the manifold effects of partisan media on its viewers' beliefs and attitudes, likely through a mix of all three of the mechanisms we describe in this section.

In the context of the literature, this experiment is novel for studying the causal effects of sustained viewership of televised partisan media on current partisan media viewers' beliefs and attitudes. It thereby complements previous lab- and survey-based studies which focus on the effects of brief exposure on attitudes among the general population, and natural experiments which have focused on aggregate behavior such as vote choice.

CONCLUSION:

Our findings suggest a number of broader implications. First, we found that participants' attitudes shifted away from and then back towards their partisan side along with changes in their viewership behavior, first shifting leftwards as they switched towards CNN due to our incentives, and then shifting back once they chose to return to watching Fox News after our incentives ended. This accords with Ladd and Lenz's (2009) conclusion that "stable elite communication flows" in the media, "rather than any inherent durability of public preferences," may explain why public opinion is typically so resistant to change (p. 405). In other words, our results show how strong voters' preferences are for consuming like-minded media, and that this media may continually 're-plenish' people's partisan loyalties and political beliefs, giving it tremendous ongoing power even if its immediate effects are short-term.

Second, our results indicate challenges that partisan media may pose for democratic account-ability. Media outlets plays a central role in helping voters hold elected officials accountable (e.g., Hopkins and Pettingill 2018). By the same token, not covering information from voters can under-mine their ability to hold their elected officials accountable (Besley and Prat 2006). Our evidence indicates that partisan media do exactly this, with manifold consequences for their beliefs and at-titudes. Viewed from this vantage point, partisan media is not simply a challenge for the opposing party—it may present a challenge for democracy and warrant attention from policymakers.

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