

Partisan News Media and Opinion Polarization: A Self-categorization Theory Approach

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Ji Young Han

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Dr. Daniel B. Wackman

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Ji Young Han

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Abstract

This study explored the exact processes that might underlie the influence of partisan news media on opinion polarization. Consistent with self-categorization theory, exposure to partisan news was expected to indirectly create opinion polarization when the news exposure made one's party identification salient as opposed to its counterpart (i.e., Democrats vs. Republicans). A pretest/post-test experimental study ($N = 364$) provided evidence of the causal direction of the main effects as well as the mediation influence of the strength of one's party identification in this relationship. However, a moderated mediation test failed to prove interaction effects of partisan news exposure and the strength of ideological predisposition on the enhanced perception of one's party identification. Theoretical implications of these findings for limited media effects research paradigm as well as practical implications for news writers were discussed.

Keywords: opinion polarization, self-categorization theory, party identification, partisan news, media bias, conflict

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Partisan News Media and Opinion Polarization: A Self-categorization Theory Approach

After the Arizona shooting, in Tucson on January 12th, 2011, President Obama encouraged Americans “to listen to each other more carefully, to sharpen our instincts for empathy, and remind ourselves of all the ways our hopes and dreams are bound together.” Paul Krugman, the columnist of *The New York Times*, wrote that the speech was beautiful; yet America is “a deeply divided nation and is likely to remain one for a long time” in his column on the following day. According to Pew Research Center (2010), 36% of the general public describe themselves as conservative, 37% are moderates and 19% are liberal. Many news media appeal to these ideologically divided audiences with their political stands. For instance, many readers of *The New York Times* are liberal (47%), whereas those of *The Washington Post* are conservative (45%). In contrast, *The New York Times* has 11 % of conservative readers and *The Washington Post* has 12 % of liberal readers (Pew Research Center, 2010).

Politically biased news media can intensify ideological and partisan leanings (Hofstetter, Donovan, Klauber, Cole, Huie, & Yuasu, 1994). Jones (2002) argues that the divided nation can be attributed to the “partisan nature” of news media because it accentuates existing cleavages and, consequently, polarizes public opinion (p.158). He found a broad rightward shift between 1992 and 1996 among regular, attentive listeners to *Rush Limbaugh*. However, the underlying mechanism detailing how partisan news media can induce opinion polarization remains unclear. Moreover, in considering the previous research focused on politically biased radio talk shows that are led by an

eloquent host (e.g., Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Jones, 2002; Hofstetter et al., 1994; Hollander, 1996), the observed opinion polarization could have been a charismatic leadership effect rather than a media effect.

One of the theoretical explanations of partisan news media effects on opinion polarization can be obtained from group polarization literature consistent with self-categorization theory. Group polarization refers to the reinforcement of individual group members' opinions or attitudes as a result of group discussion (Hogg, Turner, & Davidson, 1990; Isenberg, 1986; Michener & Wasserman, 1995; Moscovici & Zavalloni, 1969; Turner, Hogg, Oackes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). For example, people who are independently opposed to euthanasia will oppose euthanasia more strongly after discussing it.

In this process, group discussion has been regarded as an indispensable condition for group polarization (Isenberg, 1986; Michener & Wasserman, 1995; Turner et al., 1987). Even when the same amount or same quality of information is offered, this information fails to lead to group polarization without group discussion (Myers & Lamm, 1975). The creation of commitment is a more important function of group discussion than the transmission of information in the process of group polarization (Moscovici & Zavalloni, 1969). Given its necessity, group polarization literature suggests that news media, which lacks face-to-face interpersonal interactions of group discussion, is unlikely to produce group polarization and, ultimately, opinion polarization. Accordingly, even when group polarization literature is applied to mass communication, it has been restricted to computer-mediated communication such as online small group chatting (e.g.,

Lee, 2007; Sia, Tan & Wei, 2002).

However, self-categorization theorists suggest that group polarization is not induced by group discussion, but by group membership, a sense of belonging that is generated when people identify themselves as a member of a certain group. According to Wetherell and Turner (1979, as cited in Mackie, 1986), group discussion in the previous group polarization experiments is one way of creating group membership or group identification. To self-categorization theorists, therefore, physical participation in group discussion is not critical; instead, a distinction between ingroup and outgroup must occur. In support of this view, some studies used recorded discussion as stimuli for their experiments and informed the subjects whether the taped discussion was from their own group or not (e.g., Mackie, 1986; Mackie & Cooper, 1984; Wetherell, Turner & Hogg, 1985, as cited in Wetherell, 1987). All of the studies found polarized changes in attitude when the subjects were informed that the taped discussion was from their own group.

This explanation of group polarization leads one to pose a hypothesis that partisan news media even without partisan pundits can produce opinion polarization once it primes one's party identification as opposed to its counterpart (i.e., Democrats as an ingroup and Republicans as an outgroup or vice versa). Admittedly, one time exposure to partisan news cannot be a determinant of one's party identification. However, it is able to make the pre-existing party identification more salient as one form of ingroup/outgroup category priming. Thus, in this article, priming one's party identification refers to the enhanced perception of party identification.

Very little study has focused on the exact processes that might underlie the

influence of partisan news media on opinion polarization. Although there might be several potential mediating variables, this study extends opinion polarization literature by providing one of the first empirical investigations of whether the enhanced perception of one's party identification, which can be measured by the strength of party identification, may play a role in the relationship between partisan news exposure and opinion polarization consistent with the theoretical framework of self-categorization theory. Therefore, this study establishes a causal claim that exposure to partisan news will induce opinion polarization; furthermore, the enhanced perception of party identification is responsible for this causal effect.

Strength of Party Identification as a Mediator

Self-categorization theorists explain group polarization as a three-step process: *categorization*, *extremization*, and *conformity*. People conveniently categorize social objects or events into groups where particular actions, intentions and systems of beliefs are shared (Tajfel, 1981). Due to the “centrality of the self in social perception,” social categorizations generally differentiate “the group containing the self, the ingroup, and the other groups, the outgroup” (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2010, p.1089). When identifying themselves as a member of a certain group, people tend to attach less importance to their unique personal characteristics and behave according to their “prototypical representations of the [group] category” (Yzerbyt & Demoulin, 2010, p.1029; see also Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner et al, 1987). For example, a white man can oppose affirmative action because it threatens the overall interest of his group not because he is personally affected (Riek, Mania & Gaertner, 2006).

Furthermore, when their group identification is salient as opposed to its counterpart, for example the opposing gender, race, or political party, people are psychologically prone to maximize the similarities within the group and differences between the groups to make the distinction more overt (Hogg, 2003; Turner et al., 1987; Turner & Onorto, 1999; Yzerbyt & Demoulin, 2010). This perceptual accentuation of intra-group similarities and intergroup differences, so-called *meta-contrast*, stereotypically exaggerates the prototypical traits of a group (Hogg, 2003; Turner, 1981; Turner et al., 1987). Mackie and Cooper (1984) noted that extremitized group norms were only observed when the participants were informed about which group they would join; participants also conformed to this new group norm (see also Mackie, 1986, Experiment 1). Given the above findings, self-categorization theorists characterize group polarization as a result of group members' conformity to these extremitized group norms (Mackie & Cooper, 1984; Michener & Wasserman, 1995; Myers, 1982).

At a societal level, group identification can be facilitated by news media (van Dijk, 2009). Group identification becomes cognitively salient when people compare and contrast an ingroup and outgroup (e.g., black vs. white, woman vs. man, liberal vs. conservative) or when a conflict between the two groups gets intense (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2010; Riek, Mania & Gaertner, 2006; Turner et al., 1987; Yzerbyt & Demoulin, 2010). Group conflict is a central theme of news (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; MacDougall, 1982; Patterson, 1993; Price & Tewksbury, 1997). Partisan news, specifically, focuses on conflict between Democrats and Republicans. In considering journalists deliberately articulate who *we* are and who *they* are with a particular emphasis

on lexical choices (van Dijk, 2009), politically biased news coverage is expected to indirectly polarize the readers' opinion through priming their party identification as a Democrat or Republican.

It is important to note that regardless of the direction of a political bias, exposure to partisan news will cause the same effects on opinion polarization. That is, readers will hold more liberal opinion even after reading Republican biased news as long as the partisan news succeeds in making one's party identification, as a Democrat, salient as opposed to a Republican. Along the same lines, readers will hold more conservative opinion after reading Democratic biased news as long as the partisan news succeeds in making one's party identification, as a Republican, salient as opposed to a Democrat.

Strength of Ideological Predisposition as a Moderator

Politically biased partisan news will not always prime one's party identification, however. For instance, readers who have no or weak ideological predisposition toward either liberal or conservative politics are unlikely to show polarized opinion after being exposed to partisan news because they have a lower chance of categorizing themselves into the Democratic or Republican Party. By contrast, readers who have strong ideological predispositions either toward liberal or conservative politics are likely to show polarized opinion after the news exposure. Due to the shared ideological values and beliefs, they are ready to identify themselves as a Democrat or Republican. Stronger attitudes associate with stronger resistance to change, stronger stability over time, stronger impact on cognition, and stronger impact on behavior (Krosnick & Petty, 1995). Although the strength of ideological predisposition is not equal to attitude strength, along

the extended lines, I hypothesize the magnitude of the relationship between partisan news exposure and the strength of party identification will vary as a function of the strength of ideological predisposition.

Taken together, I propose a conceptual model that illustrates how partisan news can create opinion polarization (see *Figure 1*). Based on this model, three hypotheses are postulated.

H1: Exposure to partisan news will cause opinion polarization.

H1a: After reading Democratic biased news, Democrats will offer stronger support for the Democratic Party.

H1b: After reading Democratic biased news, Republicans will offer stronger opposition to the Democratic Party.

H1c: After reading Republican biased news, Democrats will offer stronger support for the Democratic Party.

H1d: After reading Republican biased news, Republicans will offer stronger opposition to the Democratic Party.

H1e: No exposure to partisan news will show no significant change in opinion.

H2: The relationship between the partisan news exposure and opinion polarization will be mediated by the strength of party identification.

H3: The stronger the ideological predisposition, the stronger the party identification.

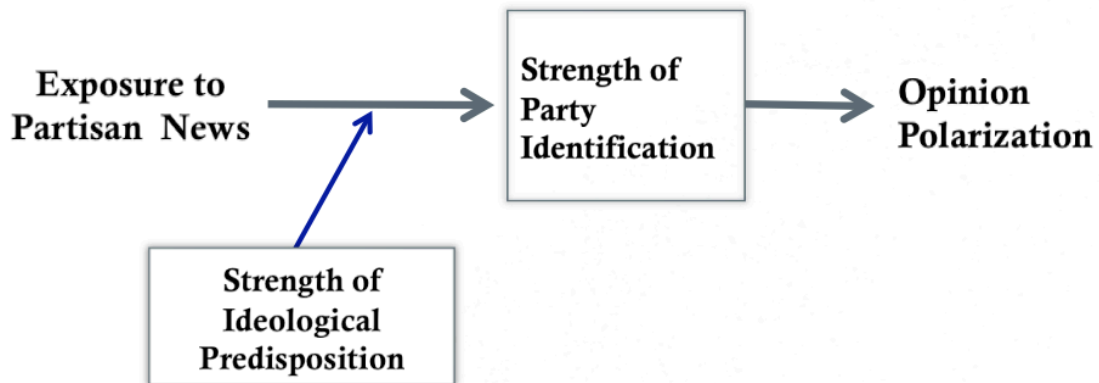


Figure 1 A conceptual model of partisan news media effects on opinion polarization consistent with the theoretical framework of self-categorization theory

Method

News Article Stimuli

Two partisan news articles with Democratic or Republican bias were created (461 words, 464 words, respectively). Each article had a particular emphasis on either Democrats' or Republicans' arguments over Obama's 2011 jobs bill, a \$447 billion economic stimulus plan that includes surtax on income in excess of \$ 1 million. Specifically, both articles introduced the story of a disabled teenager Danielle Kelly who died of starvation in 2008 because two social workers failed to check up on her once a week (see Matheson, 2008, for the original news article). In accordance with the intended political bias, two different lines of argument were developed. Regarding Obama's 2011 jobs bill, Democratic biased news mainly described that the loss of the child is a product of the system failure; to avoid its future dysfunctions, the government should impose

surtax to wealthy people and keep its workforce. By contrast, Republican biased news underscored that the loss of the child is a typical example of the lack of morality in civil servants and taxpayers should not support this irresponsible spending by the current government.

In addition, the ongoing partisan conflict between Democrats and Republicans was directly spelled out at the very beginning of the news articles. For instance, Democratic biased news started with a lead, “Democratic efforts to take up President Obama’s jobs bill were blocked again by Senate Republicans on Wednesday. For the past four months, Republicans have continuously defeated every Democratic economic stimulus plan that was put before the Congress.” On the other hand, Republican biased news opened with a lead, “Senate Republicans on Wednesday succeeded again in defeating a Democratic effort to take up President Obama’s jobs bill, which requires a tax on the rich. Over the past four months, Republicans have resisted every Democratic economic stimulus plan that has been put before the Congress.”

The partisan conflict was also emphasized through repeated source cues such as “Republican (or Democratic) Representative Ben Pershing.” Labeling of a source is a powerful way of provoking cognitive categorizations (Pan & Kosicki, 1993) and, accordingly, it can effectively prime one’s party identification (Turner & Onorato, 1999). To intensify the given conflict, the news articles closed with a sentence, “With just eight months remaining until the 2012 Presidential election, the rivalry between Republicans and Democrats over government expenditure is getting intense.”

The news articles were formatted to be consistent with the actual layout comprising a larger headline, by-line, a blurb, and several short paragraphs. The actual stimuli are presented in *Appendix*.

Procedure

Participants were informed that this study assessed their interpretation of news and completed two sequential Web-based questionnaires. In the pretest, participants were asked to indicate to what extent they agree or disagree with Obama's jobs bill. Then, their ideological predisposition and the strength of it were measured. In the post-test, a week later, participants were randomly exposed to Democratic biased news (i.e., DemBias), Republican biased news (i.e., RepBias), or no article (i.e., control). After reading the article, participants were asked again to what extent they agree or disagree with Obama's jobs bill. Then, party identification and the strength of it were measured. To check whether the participants read the article, there were a series of recall questions. Both questionnaires took approximately 20 to 25 minutes. The data collection started on February 23 and ended on April 16, 2012.

Measures

Opinion polarization. Participants indicated to what extent they agree or disagree with Obama's 2011 jobs bill on an 11-point Likert scale (0 = *strongly disagree*, 10 = *strongly agree*). This item was measured both in the pretest (i.e., PREobama) and the post-test (i.e., POSTobama). Opinion polarization, therefore, was assessed by the mean difference between PREobama and POSTobama (i.e., POLARobama). That is,

subtracting PREobama from POSTobama generated POLARobama. Positive numbers (+) indicated that participants supported Obama's jobs bill more strongly after reading the news article, whereas negative numbers (–) indicated that participants opposed Obama's jobs bill more strongly after the news exposure. Greater absolute values in POLARobama indicated bigger changes in opinion.

Taking the possibility that participants have no prior knowledge on the given issue into account, they were also asked their familiarity with Obama's 2011 jobs bill on an 11-point Likert scale (0 = *extremely unfamiliar*, 10 = *extremely familiar*) prior to the opinion question. Additionally, six attitude items on a tax plan were asked on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Sample items include "In times of economic recession, the government is responsible for expanding its expenditures" "In times of recession the surtax on wealthy people is a good option for financing the government" and "With the purpose of cutting government expenditure, state and local governments can layoff some of their workforce (reverse scored)." The order of the six items was randomly counterbalanced.

Ideological predisposition. Participants described their political outlook on a 7-point scale (1 = *very liberal*, 7 = *very conservative*). Five subsequent questions measured the strength of the political outlook on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*). Sample items include "To what extent do you feel certain about your political outlook?" and "To what extent is your political outlook deeply connected to your beliefs about fundamental questions of 'right' and 'wrong'?"

Party identification. Participants indicated how strongly they identify with either Democrats or Republicans on an 11-point scale (0 = *strongly Democrats*, 10 = *strongly Republicans*). Then, the strength of party identification was measured by the identity subscale of the Collective Self-Esteem Scale (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). The wording of the scale was modified to refer to party identification as follows: “The political party I identify with is an important reflection of who I am,” “Overall, my political party has very little to do with how I feel about myself (reverse scored),” “The political party I identify with is unimportant to my sense of what kind of a person I am (reverse scored),” and “In general, identifying with a political party is an important part of my self image.” All responses were completed on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

Control variables. I controlled for the quality of arguments presented in the news because it is possible that opinion polarization occurs as a result of persuasiveness of the partisan news. According to persuasive argument theory (Burnstein & Vinokur, 1977), group polarization occurs towards the direction that is supported by more *novel* arguments that contain new facts or new ways of information organization, or by more *valid* arguments that are logically coherent and consistent with established facts (see also Isenberg, 1986; Michener & Wasserman, 1995). Thus, participants answered how *novel* and *valid* five quotations from either of the two news stimuli were on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*). If participants never heard about the argument before, it was very much novel. If they thought the argument was true, it was valid. Among the five quotations, four were from the favored party and one from its counterpart.

Sample items include: “The richer have a larger responsibility to finance the economy. By taxing the richest of the rich a little bit more, we can fund job creation and ensure this country’s economic success”; “Republican should remember that the economic recession occurred during the Bush administration and their policy of cutting tax rates is responsible for the major financial problems we suffer from right now”; “We cannot raise more taxes to bail out cities and states that cannot pay their bills”; “Why on earth would you support an approach that we already know won’t work? President Obama should explain how another economic stimulus plan would be more successful than the one he signed in 2009.”

Recall. Participants responded to two open-ended questions on the main point of the article and their thoughts or feelings about the article. Five True/False questions followed. Sample questions include “Congress has passed President Obama’s jobs bill” and “Obama’s jobs bill includes a tax on the rich.”

Results

Manipulation Check

There were three pilot tests to determine whether the news article stimuli clearly presented the conflict of the two political parties as well as the intended political bias. In the first pilot test, conducted from December 6 to 16, 2011, one hundred ninety students were randomly assigned to DemBias ($N = 95$) or RepBias ($N = 95$) and completed a Web-based questionnaire. Most of them were white (80%), female (71.6%), and ideologically skewed toward liberal (57.4%; conservative 28%, moderate 14.6%). They

were recruited from *Advertising in Society* and *Mass Media and Popular Culture* classes (Freshman 2.1%, Sophomore 25.3%, Junior 31.6%, Senior 40%, unknown, 1.1%). Most of them were Journalism and Mass Communication major or minor students (64%). All participants received extra course credit in exchange for their voluntary participation.

The participants mainly responded to three statements about the news stimuli regarding the prominence of partisan conflict and political bias either toward the Democratic or Republican Party on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). An independent group t-test showed that participants felt the news focused on partisan conflict in DemBias ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.57$) as well as in RepBias ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 0.81$), $t(188) = 0.21$, *ns*. In addition, partisan bias was somewhat implanted in both articles. Democratic bias was perceived more overt in DemBias ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 0.97$) than in RepBias ($M = 2.78$, $SD = 0.97$), $t(188) = 3.07$, $p < .005$. Similarly, Republican bias was perceived more overt in RepBias ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 0.97$) than in DemBias ($M = 2.71$, $SD = 0.94$), $t(188) = -2.50$, $p \leq .01$.

Although participants answered that the articles were fairly similar to the other news stories, which they typically read in news media (DemBias, $M = 3.48$, $SD = 0.68$; RepBias, $M = 3.07$, $SD = 0.90$), some of their comments pointed out issues of the stimuli. For example, the participants stated that the Danielle Kelly's death and political arguments over Obama's jobs bill were poorly connected and too much information made them confused. Given those critiques, both news articles were revised to be more focused and coherent. The intended political biases were more emphasized in both articles as well.

With revised stimuli, the second pilot test was conducted on February 7, 2012. Thirty-one students, recruited from an *Advertising in Society* class, completed a pencil and paper questionnaire (DemBias, $N = 15$; RepBias, $N = 16$). They answered that the partisan conflict was obvious in the revised stimuli (DemBias, $M = 4.01$, $SD = 0.46$; RepBias, $M = 3.93$, $SD = 0.68$), $t(29) = 0.62$, *ns*. Democratic bias was marginally more obvious in DemBias ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.01$) than in RepBias ($M = 2.56$, $SD = 0.89$), $t(29) = 1.86$, $p \leq .07$; Republican bias was more obvious in RepBias ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 0.82$) than in DemBias ($M = 2.40$, $SD = 0.83$), $t(29) = -3.72$, $p \leq .001$. Consequently, the Democratic biased news article was further developed.

A week later the third pilot test was conducted. Thirty-four students were recruited from a *Global Communication* class and randomly assigned to DemBias ($N = 18$) or RepBias ($N = 16$). Overall, the manipulations in this pilot test were the most successful. An independent group t-test showed that partisan conflict was clearly presented in DemBias ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 0.71$) as well as in RepBias ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.82$), $t(32) = 0.638$, *ns*. Moreover, partisan bias was distinctively implanted in both articles. Democratic bias was perceived more strongly in DemBias ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 0.84$) than in RepBias ($M = 2.19$, $SD = 0.83$), $t(32) = 5.14$, $p < .001$; Republican bias was perceived more strongly in RepBias ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 1.03$) than in DemBias ($M = 2.22$, $SD = 0.81$), $t(32) = -4.04$, $p < .001$.

Table 1 presents the improvement of the manipulations through the series of pilot tests. The improvement indicates that two distinctive lines of argument over Obama's 2011 jobs bill were achieved.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of Pilot Tests

	Pilot 1				Pilot 2				Pilot 3			
	DemBias (<i>N</i> = 95)		RepBias (<i>N</i> = 95)		DemBias (<i>N</i> = 15)		RepBias (<i>N</i> = 16)		DemBias (<i>N</i> = 18)		RepBias (<i>N</i> = 16)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Conflict	3.78	0.57	3.76	0.81	4.01	0.46	3.93	0.68	4.17	0.71	4.00	0.82
Democratic Bias	3.21	0.97	2.78	0.97	3.20	1.01	2.56	0.89	3.67	0.84	2.19	0.83
Republican Bias	2.71	0.94	3.05	0.97	2.40	0.83	3.50	0.82	2.22	0.81	3.50	1.03
Difference	.50		.27		.80		.94		1.45		1.31	

Preliminary Analyses

A total of 393 students participated in the pretest and 369 of them completed the post-test (DemBias, *N* = 144; RepBias, *N* = 146; control, *N* = 79). Preliminary analyses provided evidence that participants attentively read the news article. About seventy percent of the participants who read either of the stimuli were right for more than three out of five True/False recall questions ($M = 2.93$, $SD = 1.07$). Although seven participants earned zero score, four of them accurately described the main point of the article and two of them did not respond to any of recall question. In addition, the level of familiarity with Obama's jobs bill increased from the pretest ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 2.36$) to the post-test ($M = 4.91$, $SD = 2.41$). A paired-sample t-test revealed that the difference was statistically significant, $t(368) = 10.341$, $p < .001$. Moreover, a one-way ANOVA between participants indicated that after being exposed to the partisan news, participants felt more familiar with Obama's jobs bill (DemBias, $M = 5.17$, $SD = 2.35$; RepBias, $M =$

5.14, $SD = 2.43$) than those in the control group ($M = 3.99$, $SD = 2.26$), $F(2, 366) = 7.366$, $p \leq .001$, $\eta^2 = .040$.

Nevertheless, preliminary inspection of the opinion measures (i.e., PREobama, POSTobama, POLARobama) in association with condition and party identification disclosed some changes against opinion polarization ($N = 54$). For instance, some Democrats who supported Obama's jobs bill in the pretest became less supportive of Obama's jobs bill in the post-test ($n = 23$), or some Republicans who opposed Obama's jobs bill in the pretest became more supportive of Obama's jobs bill in the post-test ($n = 31$). What is worse, part of these changes were against not only participant's party identification but also potential message effects of persuasion ($N = 38$). In other words, some Democrats opposed or showed less support for Obama's jobs bill after reading Democratic biased news ($n = 14$), some Republicans supported or were less opposed to Obama's jobs bill after reading Republican biased news ($n = 16$), and some participants in the control group changed their opinion against their party identification despite the absence of a stimulus ($n = 8$).

Table 2 presents the distribution of POLARobama among Republicans, Neutrals, and Democrats in each of the three conditions (i.e., DemBias, RepBias and control).

Table 2
*Changes in Opinion among Republicans (R), Neutrals (N), and Democrats (D) as a
 Function of Partisan News Exposure*

POLARobama	More Supportive of Republicans						More Supportive of Democrats						
	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	8
DemBias													
R (n = 46)	1 (2.2)	1 (2.2)	5 (10.9)	3 (6.5)	7 (15.2)	20 (43.5)	3 ^a (6.5)	4 ^a (8.7)	1 ^a (2.2)	0 (0.0)	1 ^a (2.2)		
N (n = 22)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	2 (4.5)	17 (77.3)	3 (13.6)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)		
D (n = 76)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	1 ^b (1.3)	6 ^b (7.9)	7 ^b (9.2)	34 (44.7)	14 (18.4)	8 (10.5)	3 (3.9)	3 (3.9)	0 (0.0)		
RepBias													
R (n = 53)	1 (1.9)	1 (1.9)	4 (7.5)	4 (7.5)	6 (11.3)	23 (43.4)	8 ^b (15.1)	3 ^b (5.7)	3 ^b (5.7)	0 (0.0)	1 ^c (1.9)	0 (0.0)	1 ^c (1.9)
N (n = 27)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	1 (3.7)	3 (11.1)	2 (7.4)	16 (59.3)	4 (14.8)	0 (0.0)	1 (3.7)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
D (n = 66)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	4 ^a (6.1)	1 ^a (1.5)	2 ^a (3.0)	32 (48.5)	13 (19.7)	7 (10.6)	3 (4.5)	1 (1.5)	0 (0.0)	1 (1.5)	0 (0.0)
Control													
R (n = 31)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	2 (6.5)	23 (74.2)	1 ^b (3.2)	1 ^b (3.2)	2 ^b (6.5)	1 ^c (3.2)	1 ^c (3.2)		
N (n = 17)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	2 (11.8)	14 (82.3)	0 (0.0)	1 (5.9)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)		
D (n = 31)	1 ^c (3.2)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	1 ^b (3.2)	24 (77.4)	4 (12.9)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	1 (3.2)	0 (0.0)		

Note. The superscript a, b, and c indicate changes in opinion that violates opinion polarization hypothesis. In particular, the superscript a indicates changes in opinion against participant's party identification. The superscript b indicates changes in opinion against their party identification as well as possible persuasion effects of partisan news. The superscript c indicates outliers. Percent signs omitted in parentheses.

Since these thirty eight cases violated not only the self-categorization theory prediction but also the normative prediction that people would modify their opinion corresponding to the information offered, there were additional examinations of responses of the thirty eight participants to the two open-ended questions on the main point of the article and their thoughts or feelings about the article. The examination failed to find sufficient evidence to assume these responses were careless besides one exception.

Specifically, this participant was right for four out of five True/False recall questions and wrote, “I don’t think the rich should be taxed heavily to help sustain the government.” Yet he strongly agreed with Obama’s jobs bill in the post-test (i.e., his POSTobama was 10). In considering that he disagreed with Obama’s jobs bill in the pretest (i.e., his PREobama was 2), read the Republican biased news article, and identified himself as a Republican, it was legitimate to conclude that his POSTobama response was erroneous. Thus, this participant was eliminated from all analyses.

In addition, one more participant was excluded from RepBias as an outlier. He was right for two out of five recall questions; his responses to the open-ended questions were quite general but not necessarily wrong. However, his opinion change was drastic. Specifically, he slightly disagreed with Obama’s jobs bill in the pretest (i.e., his PREobama was 4) and became very supportive of Obama’s jobs bill in the post-test (i.e., his POSTobama was 9) even though he read Republican biased news and identified himself as a Republican. On an 11-point scale, a five-point change in opinion against his party identification as well as potential message impacts of persuasion was quite sizable. As a reference, this sizable change was not found in DemBias. Accordingly, he was also dropped from all analyses. Along the similar lines, three cases showing bigger than four-point changes in opinion against their party identification in the control were also excluded as outliers, leaving an *N* of 364 (DemBias, *N* = 144; RepBias, *N* = 144; control, *N* = 76). In support of this decision, the studentized residual plot showed these responses were beyond the ± 2 standard deviation reference lines (see Figure 2).

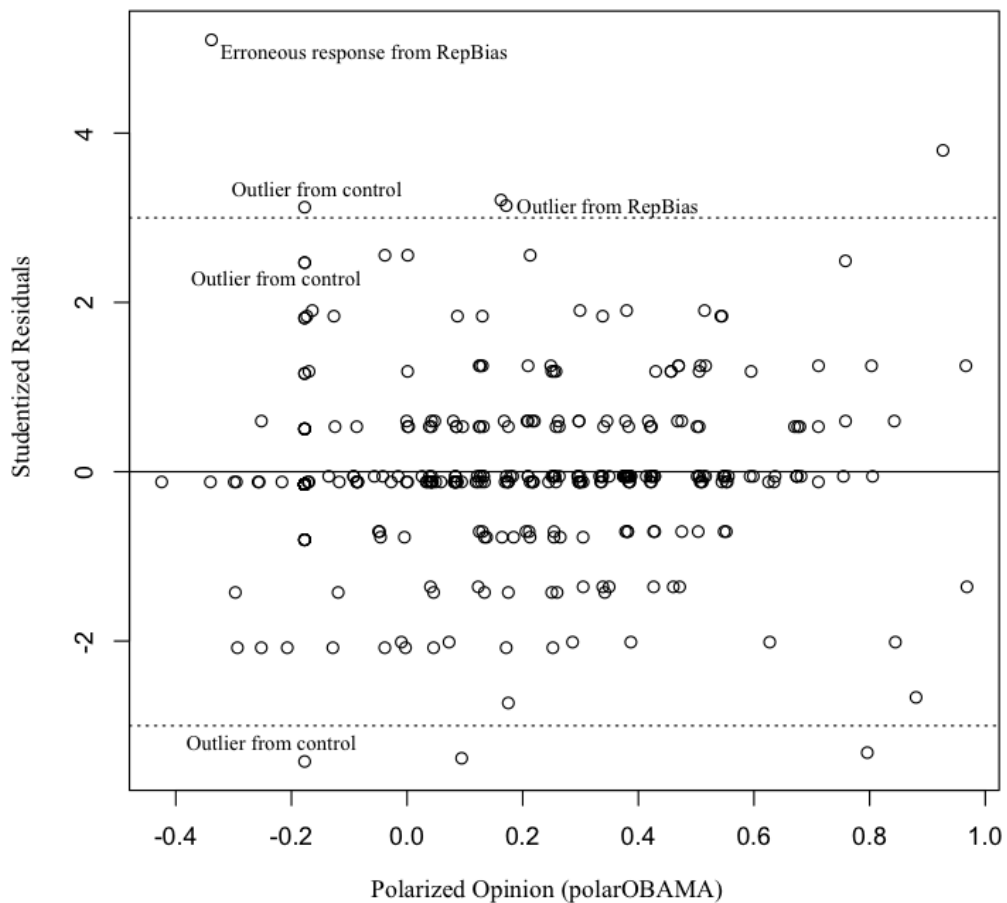


Figure 2 Studentized residual plot with fitting least squares regression line

Lastly, the alternative six attitude items on a tax plan were not used for analyses since they failed to achieve high internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .63$ in the pretest, $\alpha = .67$ in the post-test). As a result, the dependent variable of this study was restricted to changes in opinion with regard to Obama's 2011 jobs bill.

Participants

Participants were 364 undergraduate students (76.9% female) with a mean age of 21.36 years ($SD = 2.01$). Most of them were white (84.1%; Black 3.0%, Hispanic 2.2%, Asian 12.9%, others 1.4%). With respect to political ideology, 44.2% were liberal, 33.0% were conservative, and 22.8% were moderate. On average, they consume news about 6 hours per week ($SD = 6.57$) via TV, newspaper or the Internet. Participants were recruited from various classes and a subject pool offered by the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at a large Midwestern university (Freshman 12.9%, Sophomore 29.4%, Junior 32.4%, Senior 23.9%, unknown 1.3%). Half of the participants (50.8%) majored in Journalism and Mass Communication (other social sciences, 17.9%; engineering and science, 12.6%; art, 6.6%; humanities, 4.7%; undeclared, 6.3%; unknown 1.1%). All participants received either extra course credit or a \$5 gift card in exchange for their voluntary participation.

Main Effect: Exposure to Partisan News as a Predictor of Opinion Polarization

The main analysis for the present study involved a 3 (exposure to partisan news: DemBias, RepBias, control) \times 3 (party identification: Republicans, Neutrals, Democrats) ANOVA performed on the dependent variable, POLARobama. In doing so, based on a single item response assessing one's party identification on an 11-point scale, participants were categorized into three groups: Democrats (from 0 to 4), Neutrals (5), and Republicans (from 6 to 10). The results indicated that when compared with Republicans ($M = -0.13$, $SD = 0.13$), Democrats became more supportive to Obama's jobs bill ($M =$

0.36, $SD = 0.12$), $F(2, 355) = 4.459, p \leq .01, \eta_p^2 = .025$. However, there were no main effect and interaction involving exposure to partisan news.

These null findings were likely because the negative changes in opinion of Republicans would cancel out the positive changes in opinion of Democrats or vice versa. Therefore, to determine whether exposure to partisan news creates opinion polarization, a one-way ANOVA between participants was replicated for each of the three conditions (i.e., DemBias, RepBias and control). As expected, after reading Democratic biased news, Democrats supported Obama's jobs bill more strongly ($M = 0.38, SD = 1.41$) and Republicans opposed Obama's jobs bill more strongly ($M = -0.39, SD = 1.83$); but Neutrals did not show significant changes in opinion ($M = 0.05, SD = 0.49$), $F(2, 141) = 3.954, p < .05, \eta^2 = .228$. Similarly, after reading Republican biased news, Democrats supported Obama's jobs bill more strongly ($M = 0.47, SD = 1.53$) and Republicans opposed Obama's jobs bill more strongly ($M = -0.23, SD = 1.66$); but Neutrals did not show significant changes in opinion ($M = -0.15, SD = 1.17$), $F(2, 141) = 3.456, p < .05, \eta^2 = .243$. On the other hand, no exposure to partisan news (i.e., control group) resulted in no statistically significant change in opinion, $F(2, 73) = 0.558, ns$.

Table 3 presents the opinion differences among Republicans, Neutrals, and Democrats as a function of partisan news exposure. These findings of the repeated ANOVA analyses support Hypothesis 1 that exposure to partisan news, regardless of its direction of political bias, will cause opinion polarization.

Table 3
Opinion Polarization as a Function of Partisan News Exposure

	DemBias			RepBias			Control		
	Republicans (n = 46)	Neutrals (n = 22)	Democrats (n = 76)	Republicans (n = 53)	Neutrals (n = 27)	Democrats (n = 64)	Republicans (n = 29)	Neutrals (n = 17)	Democrats (n = 30)
PREobama M = 6.04 (SD = 1.45)	5.30 (1.46)	5.77 (1.15)	6.93 (1.43)	5.02 (1.28)	6.15 (0.60)	6.52 (1.35)	5.34 (1.37)	6.12 (0.86)	6.37 (1.19)
POSTobama M = 6.15 (SD = 1.45)	4.91 (1.60)	5.82 (1.18)	7.32 (1.65)	4.79 (1.80)	6.00 (1.11)	6.98 (1.71)	5.59 (1.05)	6.12 (0.60)	6.60 (1.10)
POLARobama M = 0.11 (SD = 1.40)	-.39 (1.83)	.05 (0.49)	+.38 (1.41)	-.23 (1.66)	-.15 (1.17)	+.47 (1.53)	+.24 (0.91)	.00 (0.61)	+.23 (0.82)
	$F(2, 141) = 3.954, p < .05.$			$F(2, 141) = 3.456, p < .05.$			$F(2, 73) = 0.558, ns.$		

Note. Positive values in POLARobama denote stronger support, whereas negative values denote stronger opposition. Greater absolute values in POLARobama indicate bigger changes in opinion.

Mediation Effects of the Strength of Party Identification

Dependent variable. For regression analyses, the direction of each value of Republicans' POLARobama, in the given sample, was converted because it was highly prone that the negative changes in opinion of Republicans would cancel out the positive changes in opinion of Democrats or vice versa. To eliminate this possibility, negative changes in opinion of Republicans were converted to positive values and positive changes in opinion of Democrats were converted to negative values (i.e., POLARobama2).

Predictors. Two dummy variables (i.e., DEMdummy and REPdummy) were created for the three conditions (i.e., DemBias, RepBias and control).

Mediator. The strength of party identification (i.e., STRpartyID) was computed by averaging the four identity subscale items of the Collective Self-Esteem Scale ($\alpha = .86$).

Control variables. The quality of arguments presented in the news was computed by averaging responses to the five quotations from each article, regarding their novelty and validity. The response to the quotation from the disfavored party was reverse scored only in the case of validity.

Table 4 presents descriptive statistics and correlations among key variables.

Table 4
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among Key Variables

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1. POLARobama2	0.24	1.39	—				
2. STRpartyID	3.52	1.20	.20**	—			
3. IdeSTR	3.14	0.87	.03	.50**	—		
4. novelty	1.97	1.28	.01	-.04	-.05	—	
5. validity	2.38	1.41	.04	-.05	.01	.70**	—

Note. The total N is 364. However, the actual number of responses to novelty and validity is 288 because they were measured in treatment conditions only.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Results. To determine whether the effect of partisan news on opinion polarization depends on the strength of party identification, I used multivariate hierarchical regressions. As suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986), three least squares regression equations were tested. Control variables (i.e., novelty and validity) were entered in the first block; two dummy variables were entered in the second block (i.e., Equation 1); mean centered STRpartyID, the mediator, was entered in the third block (i.e., Equation 3).

In addition, centered STRpartyID was regressed on two dummy variables while controlling for the potential impact of messages (i.e., Equation 2).

Table 5 presents the results of the regression analyses including the unstandardized coefficients (b), their standard errors (SE), and their associated standardized coefficients (β).

Table 5
Regression Analyses for Testing Mediation Effects of Party Identification

	Equation 1 (POLARobama2)			Equation 2 (STRpartyID)			Equation 3 (POLARobama2)		
	b	SE	β	b	SE	β	b	SE	β
Intercept	.00	.16		-.02	.14		.01	.16	
novelty	-.17	.09	-.15	-.11	.08	-.11	-.14	.09	-.13
validity	-.16	.10	-.16	-.17	.09	-.20	-.12	.10	-.13
DEMdummy	1.22	.43	.43**	.88	.37	.36*	1.03	.43	.36*
REPdummy	1.18	.44	.42**	.73	.38	.30 [†]	1.02	.43	.36*
STRpartyID							.22	.06	.19***
R ²	2.4%			1.9%			5.8%		

Note. b refers to the unstandardized coefficient and β refers to the standardized coefficient.

Dependent variables are denoted in parentheses.

[†] $p < .06$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

In sum, Equation 1 yielded significant main effects of exposure to partisan news on opinion polarization ($\beta_{\text{DEM}} = 0.43, p < .01$; $\beta_{\text{REP}} = 0.42, p < .01$). Equation 2 yielded significant main effects of the news exposure on the strength of party identification ($\beta_{\text{DEM}} = 0.36, p < .05$; $\beta_{\text{REP}} = 0.30, p < .06$). Finally, Equation 3 yielded a significant mediation effect of the strength of party identification on the relationship between partisan news exposure and opinion polarization. Adding the centered STRpartyID to Equation 1 significantly increased the variance explained, R^2 change = .034, $p < .001$.

Moreover, it significantly reduced the effect of partisan news exposure. That is, the absolute sizes of the two dummy variables' standardized coefficients were smaller in Equation 3 ($\beta_{\text{DEM}} = 0.36, p < .05$; $\beta_{\text{REP}} = 0.36, p < .05$) than in Equation 1. In addition, Sobel tests revealed that the main effects of partisan news exposure were significantly attenuated when the strength of party identification was in the equation ($z_{\text{DEM}} = 2.28, p < .05$; $z_{\text{REP}} = 2.20, p < .05$).

These multivariate regression analyses support Hypothesis 2 that partisan news effects on opinion polarization depend on the strength of party identification.

Moderation Effects of the Strength of Ideological Predisposition

To estimate the moderation effect of the strength of ideological predisposition (i.e., ideSTR) in the given process where partisan news exposure results in the strength of party identification toward opinion polarization, I tested a moderated mediation model based on Muller, Judd, and Yzerbyt's (2005) suggestion. Basically, three least squares regression equations used for the mediation tests above were repeated with additional variables, namely ideSTR and its interaction terms. To compute ideSTR, five items assessing the strength of the ideological predisposition were averaged ($\alpha = .87$).

As earlier, control variables were entered in the first block of multiple hierarchical regressions; two dummy variables and centered ideSTR, the moderator, were entered in the second block; their interaction terms (i.e., DEM*ideSTR and REP*ideSTR) were entered in the third block (i.e., Equation 4); lastly, centered STRpartyID and its interaction term with centered ideSTR were entered in the fourth block (i.e., Equation 6). In addition, centered STRpartyID, the mediator, was regressed on the two dummy

variables and centered ideSTR as well as their interaction terms while controlling for the potential impact of messages (i.e., Equation 5).

Table 6 presents the regression results of the moderated mediation test.

Table 6
Regression Analyses for Testing Moderated Mediation

	Equation 4 (POLARobama2)			Equation 5 (STRpartyID)			Equation 6 (POLARobama2)		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	β
Intercept	-.02	.16		.01	.12		-.04	.16	
novelty	-.16	.10	-.14	.00	.07	.00	-.14	.09	-.13
validity	-.14	.11	-.14	-.13	.08	-.15	-.09	.11	-.09
DEMdummy	1.15	.44	.41**	.38	.33	.15	.93	.44	.33*
REPdummy	1.11	.45	.39*	.33	.34	.13	.90	.45	.32*
ideSTR	-.21	.20	-.13	.47	.15	.34**	-.37	.20	-.23
DEM*ideSTR	.18	.24	.08	.26	.18	.12	.14	.24	.06
REP*ideSTR	.36	.24	.15	.24	.18	.11	.34	.24	.14
STRpartyID							.26	.07	.23***
ideSTR*STRpartyID							.08	.06	.07
R ²	3.0%			25.7%			7.6%		

Note. *b* refers to the unstandardized coefficient and β refers to the standardized coefficient.

Dependent variables are denoted in parentheses.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

In sum, Equation 4 yielded significant main effects of exposure to partisan news on opinion polarization ($\beta_{\text{DEM}} = 0.41, p < .01$; $\beta_{\text{REP}} = 0.39, p < .05$). Also these effects were not moderated by the strength of ideological predisposition ($\beta_{\text{DEM*ideSTR}} = 0.08, ns$; $\beta_{\text{REP*ideSTR}} = 0.15, ns$). However, Equation 5 failed to yield significant interaction effects of the partisan news exposure and the strength of ideological predisposition on the strength of party identification ($\beta_{\text{DEM*ideSTR}} = 0.12, ns$; $\beta_{\text{REP*ideSTR}} = 0.11, ns$). According

to Muller et al. (2005), if the interaction effects were statistically significant in Equation 5, while they were not in Equation 4, it would be indicative of moderated mediation meaning the effect from partisan news exposure to the strength of party identification varies in magnitude as a function of the strength of ideological predisposition. Since this criterion was not satisfied, Hypothesis 3 is rejected.

Discussion

On the basis of self-categorization theory, partisan news can induce opinion polarization when it primes one's party identification as opposed to its counterpart (i.e., Democrats vs. Republicans). This ingroup/outgroup categorization activates subsequent cognitive processes such as the accentuation of the intergroup differences and intra-group similarities and conformity to this perceptually extremitized prototype of the ingroup. The results of this study provide compelling support for partisan news media effects on opinion polarization and for the self-categorization mechanisms postulated to underlie such polarization. That is, regardless of the direction of a political bias, exposure to partisan news further increased the difference in opinion between Democrats and Republicans. The hypothesized mechanism responsible for this opinion polarization, namely, the strength of party identification, was clearly identified by the series of mediation analyses. I believe this study adds a new perspective and explanatory power to an old and challenging problem, opinion polarization. Most importantly, this study succeeds in offering one of the bodies of first empirical evidence showing group

polarization can occur via mass communication, which entails no group discussion of any kind.

Mass communication scholars have explored opinion polarization as the reinforcement of preexisting attitudes or beliefs as a result of selective exposure, particularly to a politically biased news channel (e.g., Hollander, 2006; Jones, 2002; Webster, 2005) or as the reflection of a lack of deliberation associated with online echo chamber effects along the extended line of selective exposure (e.g., Mutz & Martin, 2002; Sunstein, 2001). In this light, the growing body of literature suggests that exposure to varying, and specifically, opposite opinions may contribute to narrowing the disagreement. As noted by Moy and Gastil (2006), however, there is little consistent evidence illuminating whether exposure to divergent perspectives actually reduces opinion polarization and promotes deliberation on social issues (see also Kahne, Middaugh, Lee, & Feezell, 2011).

Furthermore, the present study demonstrates that exposure to opposite opinions leads not to alleviation or maintenance of difference, but to amplification of difference. Some scholars may insist that this is an example of *biased assimilation* that individuals dismiss and discount evidence that contradicts their initial views but derive support from evidence that aligns with their views (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979). It is true that many studies have provided strong and consistent support for biased assimilation as a cause of *attitude polarization* (e.g., Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979; Munro & Ditto, 1997; Munro, Ditto, Lockhart, Fagerlin, Gready, & Peterson, 2002). Yet I argue that the present study

indicates a different cognitive process was at work, despite the similar outcome variable (i.e., polarization).

Firstly, the stimuli of this study were partisan news, not *mixed evidence*, and the implanted bias was perceived equally strongly by Democrats and Republicans both in DemBias (Democrats, $M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.00$; Republicans, $M = 3.76$, $SD = 0.79$), $t(110.68) = 1.634$, *ns*, and in RepBias (Democrats, $M = 3.23$, $SD = 1.08$; Republicans, $M = 3.26$, $SD = 0.79$), $t(115) = 0.144$, *ns*. In other words, there was little room for alternative interpretations. Secondly, opinion polarization shown in the present study was stimulated by ingroup/outgroup category priming, not by the arguments or evidence that the news offered. The quality of arguments was even statistically controlled in the data analysis. Thus, the observed polarization in opinion of this study was not the product of selective perception (i.e., bias assimilation). Moreover, this study measured actual changes in opinion by subtracting the pre-exposure measure (i.e., PREobama) from the post-exposure measure (i.e., POSTobama), whereas attitude polarization was restricted to measures of *perceived* attitude change (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979; Miller, McHoskey, Bane, & Dowd, 1993; Munro & Ditto, 1997, Munro et al., 2002).

Despite its contribution to a better understanding on partisan media effects on opinion polarization, many questions remain for future scholars. First of all, previous literature on intergroup relations consistent with self-categorization theory has mostly tested the impact of group identification in a situation where individual self-interest and prior attitudes were neither present nor relevant, called the *minimal group paradigm* (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2010; Yzerbyt & Demoulin, 2010). Accordingly, in these

experiments, participants were randomly assigned to different groups based on an arbitrary criterion (e.g., Sherif, 1956). By contrast, party identification as a Democrat or a Republican is not a situation-specific group category. It is relatively more established and stable. Consequently, the two treatment conditions of the present study (i.e., exposure to either Democratic or Republican biased news) are not creating group membership or group identification, but simply making participants' pre-existing party identifications more salient. If I employed the minimal group paradigm instead of the pre-existing group category, "perfect mediation," which the news exposure had no effect on opinion polarization when group identification (i.e., the mediator) was controlled, might hold (Baron & Kenny, 1986, p. 1177). The use of the pre-existing group category, in some sense, contributes to increasing external validity of this study. However, there is room for further improvement, specifically with respect to measuring the salience of one's party identification. For instance, while I operationally defined the salience of one's party identification as the strength of party identification, there might be more attributes that are associated with salience besides strength. If the measurements are more inclusive regarding the breath of the concept, salience, stronger mediation may hold.

Secondly, the moderation role of the strength of ideological predisposition (i.e., ideSTR) was not supported in the relationship between partisan news exposure and the strength of party identification (i.e., STRpartyID). This was likely the result of a high correlation between ideSTR and STRpartyID ($r = .50, p < .01$). Adding the centered ideSTR to Equation 2 significantly increased the variance explained, R^2 change = .233, $p < .001$, leaving the main effects of partisan news exposure insignificant. When the

interaction terms of ideSTR with partisan news exposure (i.e., DEM*ideSTR and REP*ideSTR) were additionally added to Equation 2 (i.e., Equation 5), however, the variance explained had not changed. Future research could employ personality variables related to political ideology such as need for closure or need to evaluate in order to sophisticate the given model.

This study also suffers from external validity issues. In addition to utilizing a college student sample, the duration of the effects remains in question. If the result of the study, the polarized opinion, is an ephemeral reaction to a carefully constructed laboratory stimulus that disappears shortly after the presentation of the stimulus, it will hardly lead to behavioral actions, namely voting, and other important real-world implications. Therefore, future research may follow up on changes in opinion several days after the exposure. It would be also beneficial to measure participant's media exposure before and after the stimulus exposure since one can speculate that the exposure itself affects subsequent media consumption and that the polarized opinion can be modified accordingly.

At this point, it is worth repeating that the present study primed the party identification by spelling out the partisan conflict and repeating source cues. This priming directly underscores the practical implications of this study for news writers. Ultimately, the goal of this study is beyond explaining the underlying mechanism alone and seeks answers to the issue of a *divided nation*. The results of this study at least suggest what journalists should not do to contribute to intensifying opinion polarization. In essence, journalists should stop treating politics as a kind of "spectator sport" (Price, 2006, p.3). A

win-lose, zero-sum competition is a fundamental cause of intergroup conflict (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2010). Under the presence of intergroup conflict, intergroup contact fails to reduce intergroup bias (Allport, 1954; Dovidio & Gaertner, 2010; Sherif, 1956; Yzerbyt & Demoulin, 2010). This means that as long as political coverage is confined to horse race journalism, journalistic efforts to counterbalance each side, typically quoting from both parties, hardly serves civic deliberation, or a better democratic society as media professionals so often claims to influence.

Schudson (1995) once noted that the media can aim to make money for owners, create jobs for employees, establish prestige among colleagues, and entertain consumers; but the media enjoy special rights (e.g., First Amendment rights) and privileges (e.g., special postal system rates) because they “claim also to have a special mission of informing the citizenry to make democratic government possible” (p. 205). In pursuit of this mission, journalists should preclude themselves from emphasizing partisan conflicts even when reporting partisan debates unless there is some overriding news reason. Their obligation is not only delivering facts but also helping citizens to deliberate and make informed decisions. Therefore, the present study poses one last question for future research — how should journalists report partisan debates without priming partisanship that leads to increased opinion polarization?

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