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Political Discussion Network Homogeneity and Partisan Selective Exposure

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Political Discussion Network Homogeneity and Partisan Selective Exposure

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Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

December 2018

Abstract

Political Discussion Network Homogeneity and Partisan Selective Exposure

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2018

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This thesis examines the nature of political discussion networks in the period leading up to the 2016 presidential election and the relationship between discussion network composition and partisan selective exposure. Using a nationally representative panel survey, this research examines the partisan makeup of discussion networks across sociodemographic factors, evaluating mainstream media narratives that attribute surprise at Donald Trump's victory within to voting blocs insulating themselves from alternative views. It also examines whether there is a relationship over time between discussion network partisanship and homogeneity and partisan selective exposure. It finds differences in network partisanship and network partisan distance from ego across respondent partisan affiliation, race, and income consistent with a theoretical framework that suggests partisan sorting is an indirect result of geographic sorting. Further, it concludes that there is a relationship between network partisan distance from ego and subsequent selective exposure, in line theoretical models in which discussion with like-minded alters reinforces partisan attitudes, which lead to further selective exposure.

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Chapter One: Introduction

In the wake of the 2016 election, pundits and media personalities searched for a narrative to explain how a candidate as contentious as Donald Trump could win the presidency and how so much of the election coverage had failed to present a Trump victory as a real possibility. One idea put forward that gained much attention was that American voters tend to insulate themselves from exposure to opposing views both in their interpersonal interactions and in the media they consume (e.g. Bump, 2017; Hess, 2017; Murray, 2017; Robson, 2018; Silver, 2017; Thompson, 2016). This idea gained further traction as more attention was paid to the role of social networking sites in circulating “fake news” targeting various demographic groups and questions of ideological insulation – or political bubbles – became part of the election coverage. Two years after the election, the theme continues to pervade mainstream news coverage (e.g. Block, Buchannan, Katz, & Quealy, 2018; Robson, 2018; Zadrozny, 2018), especially as the president has continued to tweet about fake, partisan news and the Senate Intelligence Committee confirms that Russia conducted targeted media campaigns to influence the election. Drawing on a national panel survey of Americans in May of 2016 and of 2017, this thesis aims to interrogate the overarching narrative of partisan insulation based on identity and media selection in the context of the 2016 presidential campaign, paying particular attention to the networks of individuals with whom we discuss politics and the choices we make in selecting our political news sources.

While these questions seem to have increased salience after the most recent federal election cycle, there is an extensive history of research on these subjects, stretching back to the

mid-twentieth century. Emerging from the seminal work of Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and colleagues (P.F. Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948; Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Berelson, Miyamoto, & McFee, 1954), a body of work has emerged examining the role of discussion networks in the formation of political positions and in shaping civic engagement. Studies in this tradition have found that we are more likely to discuss important matters with individuals similar to ourselves in terms of sociodemographic and socioeconomic characteristics (e.g. Marsden, 1987; McPherson, Smith-lovin, & Cook, 2001). More recent work (e.g. Mutz, 2002; Sinclair, 2012) has provided evidence that the political views of those with whom we discuss politics can influence our own positions.

This thesis first examines whether individuals, in fact, found themselves discussing politics within likeminded partisan networks during the 2016 election, asking if there are differences in network partisanship and ideological distance from ego across socio-cultural and economic divisions. Ego networks were assessed based on whether alters leaned Republican, leaned Democratic, or neither, with partisan lean being averaged for the network as a whole. By examining the degree of partisanship in political discussion networks during the election, I aim to both evaluate the accuracy of media narratives surrounding partisan insularity during the campaign and provide new descriptive data on partisan sorting in the contemporary political climate, assessing whether such sorting is consistent with the existing theoretical framework. In doing so, I will also go one step further than other contemporary research on discussion network sorting, providing new data on the degree to which network partisanship and distance from ego vary across demographic groups that may contribute to sorting, where individuals find themselves in communities of others like themselves. Findings are consistent with the idea that

sorting occurs primarily along visible, salient socio-demographic and socio-cultural characteristics, leading to politically like-minded networks indirectly.

The second component of this thesis examines the degree to which political discussion networks consisted of people with similar political views and whether this differed across demographic groups. This lens (measured by what I call “partisan distance,” which is the difference between ego’s party affiliation and the mean party affiliation of their alters) is necessary to understand not just the direction of network partisanship, but the degree of ideological insularity that actually occurred. This is important in situations when a particular demographic group might find themselves geographically located such that their networks lean primarily toward one end of the partisan spectrum, but where said demographic group is not monolithic in its party affiliation, and therefore network partisanship alone cannot be used to understand how much difference of opinion is at play. Where network partisanship indicates whether individuals found themselves in Democratic or Republican-leaning discussion networks, partisan distance from ego measures the degree to which they found themselves in echo chambers. For the purposes of this thesis, discussion networks are examined in terms of ego demographics, with particular attention to demographic divisions that were paid the most attention in media coverage of the 2016 election: partisanship, gender, race, income, and education. In order to further understand how the strength of a relationship – as opposed to just convenience - might contribute to the makeup of discussion networks, I also assess differences along the measure of perceived closeness. Results show differences in network partisanship across ego partisanship, race, and income as well as differences in network partisan distance across ego partisanship, race, income, and closeness.

The proposition that individuals prefer sources of information that are closer to their own view to sources that take opposing propositions – a phenomenon referred to as selective exposure – has similar roots in Lazarsfeld et al.'s (1954) work. It has since been developed into its own, sometimes overlapping, body of research, though when and to what extent selective exposure takes place has been subject to greater debate. Nevertheless, more recent work has consistently demonstrated selective behavior in the context of partisan politics (Hart et al., 2009; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Stroud, 2008, 2011).

Multiple, perhaps compatible, mechanisms for explaining selective exposure have been proposed, including avoiding cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), choosing news sources that help one reach a socially advantageous position (A. W. Kruglanski, 1990), or choosing information based on a biased interpretation of what is most accurate (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979). This thesis asks whether there is a relationship between discussion network partisanship and partisan selective exposure and considers how each of these mechanisms could contribute to the result. Findings are consistent with the idea that like-minded discussion networks may enable more partisan selective exposure.

By addressing how network composition relates to partisan selective exposure, this thesis brings together work on political discussion networks and selective exposure to assess the particular circumstances in which people discussed and consumed political news during the 2016 campaign. Questions about the nature of networks and their role in selective behavior are addressed with respect to the 2016 election, but inferential analysis of the relationship between partisan discussion networks and selective exposure provides insight into the broader relationship between discussion network composition and selective exposure.

With regards to the specifics of the 2016 election, I ask to what degree are politics of identity and demographics are manifested in the partisanship and ideological diversity of discussion networks. Findings suggest that Americans did discuss politics in discussion networks where both network partisanship and network partisan distance from ego varied with salient socioeconomic and sociodemographic factors. Notably, along with ego's party affiliation, the sociodemographic factors across which network partisanship varied in May 2016 were race, education, and income (where only partisanship and race had a statistically significant relationship to network partisanship once all demographic factors were included). Network partisan distance from ego varied with respondent's race, income, and party affiliation, with all three having statistically significant relationships to network partisan distance. These results are consistent the notion that partisan discussion networks form along demographics that lead to geographical sorting and that networks are shaped as much by convenience as by ideological compatibility.

On a broader scale, this thesis asks whether discussion partner choice and media choice are part of a larger practice of selection, in which individuals choose exposure to not only media but also discussion partners who will reaffirm their existing beliefs and in which like-minded discussion networks make choosing like-minded media more desirable. This question is increasingly important as political discussion and media consumption increasingly take place in an online setting designed to allow individuals to discuss politics in niche communities and find news tailored to their preconceptions. Previous work has examined how selective media consumption correlated with partisan and homogeneous discussion environments but has not demonstrated a relationship between the two. While this thesis does not attempt to answer the

question of causality, its results address this gap in the literature and demonstrate a relationship between ideological insularity within discussion networks and subsequent selective behavior, providing the first inferential data linking ideological homogeneity of the network with the practice of selective exposure. It then posits that if like-minded discussion leads to stronger partisan attitudes, as evidenced in previous work on the subject (e.g Knobloch-Westervick & Meng, 2009) suggests, there is a logical path through which network composition may influence partisan selective exposure. Further such a path would be consistent with the current models for selective behavior.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This literature review draws on two primary research traditions focused on political discussion networks and on selective exposure as well as the limited work examining their intersections. It begins with work on discussion networks, and specifically focuses on the body of literature surrounding political discussion networks and their composition in order to contextualize divisions that may have led to increasingly biased discussion networks during the 2016 campaign and to examine whether existing theory regarding divisions into homogeneous discussion networks are consistent with the divisions that occurred leading up to the election. Because the narrative surrounding the 2016 election so heavily focused on online interactions and media consumption, it also pays special attention to work examining the relationship between core discussion networks and the growth of the internet. It then explores the evolving explanations for selective exposure, building on recent interventions into the literature that begin to question how individuals' networks might influence media choice. This thesis brings together these bodies of literature, providing a framework for examining the compatibility of current theoretical mechanisms for selective exposure and actual practices from 2016 to 2017, as well as for conducting inferential analyses of the relationship between the partisan composition of discussion networks and partisan consumption of news.

Discussion Networks

It has been long understood that interpersonal communication influences the consumption and effects of mass media (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). More recent work in this tradition has recognized the potential for interpersonal communication to enhance or exacerbate the sense of polarization and distrust in the media that comes with a highly politicized environment (Shah et

al., 2017). In line with Dewey's (1938) argument that the act of engaging with an idea has more influence than simple passive absorption of information, it has been proposed that meaningful discussions of politics act not only as an attempt to persuade others, but also to strengthen one's one beliefs through expression (Habermas, 1984; Wyatt, Katz, & Kim, 2000).

Thus one's social network has the potential to play an important role in the development of political identity, and those with whom one discusses politics may have an outsized role in determining one's partisanship expression. Granovetter's (1973) seminal work on network composition suggests that social networks consist of both strong and weak ties, which can be leveraged in different ways to enhance social capital. While a network might contain a greater number of weak ties – acquaintances that play a crucial role in the spread of information between groups – strong ties are closer connections who are relied on as confidants and sources of support, and who are likely to be similar to ego. Research on the relationships between strong ties has shown that individuals typically have a small number of trusted contacts with whom they discuss important matters, referred to as core discussion network (e.g. Marsden, 1987). This thesis focuses on understanding the partisanship of respondent's strong ties and the partisan dynamics of those relationships, as strong ties are both the individuals with whom respondents are most likely to discuss politics and those who are most likely to impact their views.

Contemporary research on discussion networks considers the effects of the online environment and how it might change the roles of core networks and weaker ties; this is particularly relevant in addressing discussion network composition and news consumption in an election cycle when online news itself was a subject of debate and potential foreign interference. Recent years have seen a great deal of work examining whether the internet has led to a decline

in core networks. Much of this work responds to concerns about increasing isolation raised in Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (2001) and Mcpherson et. al's (2005) finding that core network sizes declined between 1985 and 2004. A number of additional studies found evidence suggesting that internet use might be partly responsible for this change (Brashears, 2011; Chen, 2013), while others found a positive relationship between internet use and discussion network size (Gross, Katz, & Rice, 2003; Robinson & Martin, 2010; Zhao, 2006). Research to date then does not have reached a consensus opinion that internet use leads to differences in discussion network composition.

Other recent projects have worked to understand how interpersonal and mass communication interact in a world where communication increasingly take's place online. Studies have shown that online dialogue can have similar effects to face-to-face conversation in terms of political outcomes (Delli Carpini, 2013; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005). Shah, McLeod, Rojas, Cho, Wagner & Friedland (2017) propose a model in which the medium of communication is less important than the ideological diversity of perspectives that individuals consume. They argue that there is a positive feedback loop – see Slater's (2015) reinforcing spirals – between partisan media use and expression of partisan views within a discussion network. According to Shah et al., partisan discussion reinforces views leading to partisan media consumption that itself reinforces views and leads to partisan discussion, all within an environment that integrates the online and offline. In these contexts, both consumption and expression of partisan views act to reify individual's beliefs.

Studies of core discussion networks (e.g. the General Social Survey) typically ask respondents about individuals with whom they discuss “important matters.” Within work on

political discussion networks, specifically, this precedent is often adopted, both to provide consistency across network studies and to avoid triggering potential over-reporting of political discussion. However, some investigations interested specifically in political discussion (this thesis included) specifically ask about those with whom one discusses politics, accounting for possible differences between general discussion partners and political discussion partners. While there is some evidence to suggest that political discussion networks are less dense and interconnected than general core discussion networks (Eveland & Kleinman, 2013), analysis by Klofstad, McClurg, and Rolfe (2009) suggests that the difference between core discussion networks and political discussion networks is relatively small and that during election season, political discussion becomes so prevalent in the core discussion network that asking for people with whom one discusses politics elicits the same results as asking for those with whom one discusses important matters. This suggests that for the purposes of this thesis, it is likely that previous findings about core discussion networks also apply to political discussion networks.

Starting with the seminal study by Lazarsfeld and Merton (1954), empirical research has consistently found that discussion networks tend to be homogenous relative to the general population in terms of sociodemographic characteristics as well as in terms of attitudes and beliefs (e.g. P.F. Lazarsfeld et al., 1948; Marsden, 1987; Mcpherson et al., 2001). More recent research has suggested that more diverse discussion networks lead to greater likelihood of opinion change (Ben-Nun Bloom & Levitan, 2011; Levitan & Visser, 2008) and that network composition may impact stability and strength of attitudes (Levitan & Visser, 2009).

This thesis investigates homogeneity within political discussion networks in terms of alter partisanship and how it relates to ego's partisanship. It begins by asking if there are differences

in the partisan environments in which different sociodemographic groups tend to discuss politics. It also examines this environment in terms of “partisan distance,” which measures the difference between ego’s party affiliation and the mean party affiliation of their discussion partners. These metrics are applied for every sociodemographic factor considered, in order to paint a picture of both the partisan lean of discussion networks and the degree of counter-attitudinal exposure within discussion networks. The sections below outline the characteristics I will examine, as well as the practical and theoretical context for my associated research questions.

Partisanship. The predominant narrative in assessing the 2016 election and explaining the perceived surprise at Donald Trump’s victory asserted that individuals were divided into like-minded political discussion networks that reaffirmed their own positions and failed to expose them to other views. In their study of the 2016 election, Stroud and Collier (2018) found that across both partisanship and ideology, left-leaning respondents were more likely to have entirely left-leaning networks than those on the right and vice-versa. This provides preliminary support for the claim that individuals tended to discuss politics with like-minded individuals. There is also work not specific to 2016 that might provide an idea of what to expect. A series of studies have demonstrated that discussion networks tend to be more homogenous in terms of party affiliation than the general population (Knoke, 1990; Lazer, Rubineau, Chetkovich, Katz, & Neblo, 2010; Marsden, 1987; Mutz, 2006; Sinclair, 2012). A study by Swann, Milton, and Polzer (2000) found that individuals formed groups with those who saw them as they saw themselves, resulting in groups with similar political positions.

To expand our insight into how discussion networks functioned during the 2016 election requires examining differences in degree of partisanship across respondent party affiliation.

Therefore I ask:

RQ1a: Did political discussion network partisanship differ with ego's party affiliation?

Based on the literature, I would propose:

H1a: Discussion network partisanship will have differed with ego's party affiliation.

However, much of the media narrative surrounding the 2016 election outcome and the surprise at Trump's victory focused not just on partisan sorting but also on the idea of echo chambers in which individuals only talked to like-minded individuals. Less research has examined the degree to which alters' partisan distance from ego differed by partisanship. A study by Mutz (2002a) that examined tolerance for individuals with dissonant views did not find evidence to suggest a difference in tolerance between Democrats/liberals or Republicans/conservatives.

Despite media attention to partisan division, it is not clear that partisan sorting is the direct result of choosing partners with similar political positions. While individuals tend to be relatively homogenous in terms of partisanship relative to the broader population, a study by Mutz (2002a) found no clear difference in comfort with ideologically dissonant others based on partisanship. Furthermore, individuals frequently have discussions – sometimes discussions they would rather avoid – based on circumstance rather than based on shared views (McPherson et al., 2001). A number of additional factors have been investigated as means of partisan sorting, including income, race, education, and gender, and these demographic characteristics were also frequently cited in understanding the 2016 election. To assess whether the degree to which alters' presented

counter-attitudinal perspectives varied with party affiliation, I ask:

RQ1b: Did political discussion network partisan distance from ego differ with ego's party affiliation?

Gender. Gender was one of the most frequently discussed aspects of the 2016 election, both because of Hillary Clinton's status as the first female presidential nominee by a major political party and because of the perception that Donald Trump was particularly sexist both prior to and during the campaign. After the election, pundits questioned whether women, who were believed to be more Democratic in general and who were thought to be particularly put off by Trump during the campaign, were to blame for Clinton's loss (e.g. Fox, 2016; Newton-Small, 2016) despite the fact that a majority of women voted for her (Foran, 2016). Some suggested that while gender was one identifying factor that brought people together in support of Hillary, others such as ethnicity played a larger role.

In her work on understanding which demographic factors contribute to partisan sorting, Sinclair (2012) suggests that gender and its relationship to partisan identity may play a role in the development of ideologically homogenous networks. Similarly, Feld (1982) suggests that many opportunities for developing relationships arise as a result of shared demographics including gender. But unlike other characteristics associated with partisan sorting (see below) gender is less likely to lead to geographical sorting, and Marsden found that while core discussion networks tended to be homogeneous in terms of socio-demographic factors, they were not more homogeneous in terms of gender (1987). Still, the American workplace is still often divided by

gender (Sinclair, 2012), and gendered norms relating to familial care and job choice could lead women to interact with others who have similar political motivations based on their roles as caretakers or in feminine-coded fields. In order to address the idea that women were more likely to discuss politics in Democratic networks, I ask:

RQ2a: Did political discussion network partisanship differ with ego's gender?

However, understanding how political discussion networks function across gender requires knowing not only whether women are more likely to find themselves in Democratic networks. It is also important to know whether women are more likely to find themselves in more-likeminded networks that give result in stronger echo chambers, making them more likely to unite against Trump without taking other positions into consideration as expected by media coverage (or perhaps whether men were more isolated from perspectives that would challenge their support of Trump). To address the level of partisan distance between respondents and their networks across gender, I ask:

RQ2b: Did political discussion network partisan distance from ego differ with ego's gender?

Race/Ethnicity. Another factor that has been frequently linked to partisan sorting is ethnicity. Media coverage of the election largely treated ethnic minorities as monolithic in-groups likely to vote based on their race and presumed relationship to those who would be impacted by candidates' policies, or communities with whom candidates tried to connect but did

not truly reach (e.g. Cohn, 2016; Williams, 2016, respectively). This coverage frequently noted geographical sorting by race in its analysis.

Because of social structures in place within the US, race and ethnicity lead to substantial sorting in terms of geography, work, and social groups. The coincidence of race and partisan homogeneity is evident in multiple studies (e.g. Knoke, 1990; Lazer et al., 2010). Knoke notes, for example, that black Americans are more likely to be embedded in communities with a large percentage of Democratic partisans. Sinclair (2012) suggests that 79 percent of alters in political discussion networks are of the same race as ego. If there is a link between race and partisanship, network partisanship would be likely to vary by ego's race. Therefore, I ask:

RQ3a: Did political discussion network partisanship differ with ego's ethnicity?

Even if there is a difference in network partisanship based upon ethnicity, that does not necessarily mean that members of some ethnicities are more likely to be in more like-minded networks than those who identify as other ethnicities. This is particularly of interest given the possibility that different ethnicities might experience different levels of partisan sorting, whether because of social impetus, associations between class and race, or numbers of minorities within a given area. In order to evaluate the degree of like-mindedness among alters across ethnicity I ask:

RQ3b: Did political discussion network partisan distance from ego differ with ego's ethnicity?

Income. Another demographic factor associated with partisan discussion networks is income. Leading up to the election, much was made of the ways in which a “coastal elite” was ignorant to the plight of the white working class in “middle America,” and the idea that these two groups existed so separately from one another was used to explain how each could arrive at an entirely different set of conclusions. Despite this, however, Mutz (2018) found that economic hardship was not a primary motivating factor in voters’ choice to support Donald Trump, suggesting that the role of income in the election may have been more limited to geographical sorting.

Partisan sorting based on income has been documented extensively (e.g. Knoke, 1990, 2010; Sinclair, 2012), though it has primarily been theorized to operate via the places individuals work and the neighborhoods they live in, rather than specifically through individuals seeking out alters based on perceived economic status, especially as research has shown that individuals are more likely to actively select based on visible markers (Goeree et al., 2017), and multiple studies have not found support for direct selection based on income.

RQ4a: Did political discussion network partisanship differ with ego’s income?

Financial success often allows greater access to exclusive groups and more flexibility in terms of where one lives and works. As a result, it is possible that individuals with different incomes might have different levels of control over the environments in which they build discussion networks. If higher income allows individuals to select for groups and environments where individuals share their perspectives, it might by extension result in

lower levels of difference within political discussion networks. To explore this possibility, I ask:

RQ4b: Did political discussion network partisan distance from ego differ with ego's income?

Education. Similarly, education has been given as a factor in determining one's political discussion networks. A number of post-election analyses suggested that education was the strongest predictor of presidential voting, with a variety of explanations (McGill, 2016; Silver, 2016). These included: academia is a liberal bubble; education level is related to racial resentment; Trump's emotional appeals work better with the less educated; education level is related to media-consumption practices; and complex combinations of the above. Education level as a factor in sorting has been suggested by previous work, with empirical research providing mixed results about related effects. Knoke (1990) found no significant relationship between education and partisan environment from which to select alters. Nevertheless, the idea remained that those with less education were likely to be in networks of Republican Trump supporters, while a higher educated liberal elite was supporting Clinton. Thus I ask:

RQ5a: Did political discussion network partisanship differ with ego's education?

Seemingly contrary to the idea of an educated liberal elite existing within a partisan echo chamber, Mutz (2002a) found that educational level was a strong predictor of comfort with opposing views. On the other hand, Sinclair (2012) specifically suggests that educational

attainment is related to partisanship and can play a role in the development of homogeneous networks. Taken together these findings are not immediately consistent with any major narrative regarding the role of education in the election. Therefore, I ask:

RQ5b: Did political discussion network partisan distance from ego differ with ego's education?

The final dimension across which I examine discussion network composition differs from the rest in that it focuses on respondents' perception of their connection to their alters rather than on a characteristic of respondents themselves. However, this element is important as it adds to our understanding of how the relationship between individual and alter relates to network makeup.

Closeness. It is true that individuals are not always able to control conversations in social situations, and might at times end up discussing politics with individuals with whom they disagree even if they would prefer otherwise (Mcpherson et al., 2001). Nevertheless, there are cases in which individuals do select like-minded individuals if given the choice, such as when evaluating potential romantic partners. A study by Swann, Milton, and Polzer (2000) found that individuals formed groups with those who saw them as they saw themselves, resulting in groups with like-minded opinions, including on political matters. I investigate by asking:

RQ6a: Was political discussion network partisanship related to network closeness?

It is not inconceivable that while citizens might encounter alters with a variety of perspective in their daily lives, they would choose to discuss matters they view as important with like-minded individuals and might give more weight to the opinions of those individuals to whom they felt closest. To evaluate whether political discussion networks comprised of stronger ties are more likely to be more partisan relative to ego, I also ask:

RQ6b: Was political discussion network partisan distance from ego related to network closeness?

Selective Exposure

Selective exposure in the broadest sense has been theorized as far back as the late 19th century and began to enter the discourse of social science research around the time of Lazarsfeld's early studies (e.g., P.F. Lazarsfeld et al., 1948).

Existing Models. However, research on the matter began in earnest after the publication of Festinger's *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (1957), which provided a theoretical mechanism through which the phenomenon could take place. Festinger argues that individuals experience cognitive dissonance when they encounter ideas or information that is in conflict with their existing beliefs. He suggests that when the level of dissonance becomes uncomfortable enough, the individual is motivated to resolve the issue by seeking out information that reaffirms their existing beliefs and avoiding information that would increase uncertainty. This is most frequently applied to partisan selective exposure research through the argument that individuals

will seek out information that supports the party they believe to be better, avoiding information that would contradict this.

Both Festinger and others have acknowledged the potential for other factors to contribute to selective exposure. For example, the cognitive miser model argues that because information contrary to existing beliefs is more difficult to process (Edwards & Smith, 1996), individuals may be motivated to conserve mental energy by avoiding information incongruent with existing beliefs. As a result, individuals less invested in politics or experiencing other factors that might cause fatigue would be less likely to seek out contradictory information. These individuals effectively practice selective behavior motivated not by beliefs themselves but by the desire to avoid the strain of intensive cognitive processing. In contrast to the cognitive miser model, others have suggested that most individuals attempt to pick the most accurate information available (Fischer, Schulz-Hardt, & Frey, 2008). However, individuals perceive like-minded information as more accurate (Lord et al., 1979; Sears, 1968). This means that individuals often practice selective exposure without conscious motivation in an attempt to find the most credible sources. Others have suggested that individuals were likely to seek information based on their hypotheses (Snyder, 1977) or attempt to seek congruent information in efforts to achieve closure. Arie Kruglanski's (A. Kruglanski & Ajzen, 1983; A. W. Kruglanski, 1990) theory of lay epistemics provides a model for selective exposure based on motivations shaped by context. Kruglanski argues that individuals are driven by a need to find or avoid closure and a need for specific or nonspecific closure. This model suggests that in a specific context, individuals either want to reach a conclusion or avoid one and that the conclusion may be a specific one or any conclusion at all. Stroud (2011) outlines how this could be applied to partisan selective exposure

specifically: if an individual wants to avoid coming to a specific conclusion, s/he might avoid information that supports that position and seek out information that contradicts it. If an individual wants to avoid coming to a decision altogether, s/he might constantly seek out differing viewpoints to avoid coming to a conclusion. And if an individual wants to achieve a specific conclusion, s/he might seek out information that supports that particular position until they achieve closure. In each of these cases, the subject might be motivated by personal identification with a particular party or candidate, the desire to find an answer quickly, or the desire to achieve a specific position for social reasons.

Partisan Selective Exposure. Between Lazarsfeld et al.'s early work and more recent studies of selective exposure, the question of when and to what degree selective behavior takes place has been a contentious question. While doubts remain about the impact of selective exposure more broadly, a great deal of research has established the presence of selective exposure in the context of partisan politics, showing that individuals select for political news that they believe will be amenable to their own positions (Hart et al., 2009; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Stroud, 2008, 2011). A proposed explanation for the relative strength of partisan selective exposure is that political identity is central to an individual's social identity, increasing motivation to select for agreeable information (Slater, 2007; Stroud, 2010).

Intersection. Relatively little research has been conducted on the relationship between political discussion networks and selective exposure. There is a clear intersection between levels of agreement in political discussion network and levels of partisan selective exposure, as both are strong predictors of partisanship/polarization.

Stroud (2010) infers that there is a direct relationship between homogeneous political

discussion networks and partisan selective exposure, as her work and (Huckfeldt, Mendez, & Osborn, 2004) link both phenomena directly to political polarization. Additionally, Stroud points out that the mechanisms through which political discussion networks are theorized to increase polarization (either exposure to strong arguments or by social pressure to conform) could be applied to media selection as well.

Yonghwan Kim (2015) extended this research, determining that exposure to diverse ideas through heterogeneous political discussion networks could mitigate the weaker polarizing effects of partisan selective exposure. Additionally, a quasi-experimental study by Jeffrey Mondak (1995) noted that partisan media could mitigate the effects of political discussion on individual voting behavior. Despite these suggestive findings, these studies do not assess the direct relationship between selective exposure and discussion network homogeneity.

Additionally, the integration of political discussion dynamics into the research on selective exposure has the potential to illuminate how different factors simultaneously contribute to selective behavior (or cancel one another out). Understanding the social context in which individuals practice selective exposure provides a means of assessing the potential for different motivations under the lay epistemics approach. More broadly, certain sources of information might be considered more socially acceptable within particular social networks, extending the aforementioned social pressures argument directly from the discussion network to the practice of selective exposure.

Despite the amount of existing work suggesting a potential link between network partisanship and selective exposure, I am not aware of any work that examines the relationship beyond descriptive analysis. To this end, I ask the following question and propose a hypothesis

based on existing research and theory:

RQ7a: What is the relationship between network partisanship and subsequent selective exposure?

Based on the findings of Kim (2015) and Mondak (1995), it is likely that partisan selective exposure and political discussion network homogeneity have combined effects. To the degree that political discussion networks are not chosen based on political beliefs, it is unlikely that the two are mutually reinforcing. However, additional research might examine how political discussion networks act as channels for information, contributing to Slater's (2007) reinforcing spirals. This is also consistent with Shah et al's (2017) Revised Communication Mediation Model, which suggests that extreme partisan media and extreme partisan discussion create a cycle of increasing partisanship and distrust in opposing positions. Extant research does not suggest that those with one party affiliation are more likely to practice selective exposure than those with another (though strength of partisanship may be related to levels of selective behavior). Thus I propose:

H7b: Partisanship of political discussion networks will have a negative relationship with subsequent selective exposure.

In order to understand the directionality of a potential relationship between network composition and partisan selective exposure, I also address the above questions by asking:

RQ7c: What is the relationship between selective exposure and subsequent network partisanship?

RQ7d: What is the relationship between selective exposure and subsequent network partisan distance from ego?

Chapter Three: Methodology

Because of the nature of the alleged political polarization, nationwide data are necessary in order to assess whether insulated discussion and consumption exist, as studies within specific communities might obscure the effects relative to the general population. Some previous work on selective exposure has been conducted via experiment and thus has limited ability to reflect real-world practices in which users do not always engage with news or do so in a setting where they are either directly primed for a particular response or entirely uninfluenced. Additional research drawing from representative survey data will help provide a realistic view of selective exposure in practice.

Sample

This project relies primarily on quantitative analysis of data from the Texas Media and Society Survey (TMASS), which is a cross-sectional nationwide survey conducted during and after the 2016 US presidential campaign. Data include demographic factors such as age, race, gender, educational attainment, and location, with oversampling of the Texas population.

Most existing literature on discussion networks and selective exposure draws on surveys that ask respondents about the networks of individuals with whom they discuss “important matters.” While there is evidence to suggest that core discussion networks as discovered using the important matters metric are suitable for studies of political discussion, especially during election years (Klofstad et al., 2009), TMASS circumvents this challenge by inquiring specifically about those with whom respondents discuss political matters and asking a series of follow-up questions to assess possible partisanship of those alters. One potential risk associated with specifically asking about political discussion is that individuals will recall individuals with

whom they have talked about politics even if they do not consider them core discussion partners.

TMASS phrased the question as follows:

From time to time, people discuss government, elections, and politics with other people. We'd like to know the first names or just the initials of people you talk with about these matters. These people might be from your family, from work, from the neighborhood, from some other organization you belong to, or they might be from somewhere else. Who is the person you've talked with most about politics? Aside from this person, who else have you talked with about politics?

It is possible – especially during an election year when discussion of politics is more omnipresent than usual – that individuals will include individuals who are not their core political discussion partners, particularly given the wording of the inquiry about the second and third alters. In this case, asking individuals with whom they talk most about politics might include individuals who would not be as likely to be included in response to an “important matters” prompt. While this is unlikely to happen often when only considering the three alters with whom one talks most, it is an advantage of asking about political discussion partners specifically.

Another potential limitation of the TMASS survey is that it only asks for up to three alters, and respondents with a larger core discussion network would not be able to report more. However, most research on the size of core discussion networks suggests that the average American has less than three key discussion partners (Klofstad et al., 2009; Marsden, 1987), so it is likely that any missing data are minimal.

The first portion of this project uses data collected in the spring of 2016 to assess the state of political discussion networks during the presidential campaign (N=2015). At the time the data were collected, Donald Trump had already become the presumptive Republican presidential nominee. While Hillary Clinton achieved the required number of votes to become the presumptive Democratic nominee during data collection, she was easily outpacing Sanders prior to the start of the survey. Of those surveyed 1,752 provided data about their own partisan leaning and the leanings of their political discussion partners, both of which are necessary to determine network partisan distance from ego. (Table 1)

To answer RQ3, the project draws on data collected in both 2016 and 2017 to assess the potential impact of partisan discussion networks over time. Data were collected on 1,267 of the original respondents, 1,024 of whom reported data on their discussion partners. (Table 2).

Table 1: 2016 Ego Demographics

Variable	Mean or Valid%	Std. dev.	Min	Max	N
Age	51.5	16.552	18	93	2015
18-29	12.10%				2015
30-44	23.20%				2015
45-59	29.00%				2015
60+	35.70%				2015
Gender					
Male	48.70%				2015
Female	51.30%				2015
Race/Ethnicity					
White, Non-Hispanic	62.50%				2015
Black, Non-Hispanic	9.00%				2015
Other, Non-Hispanic	7.80%				2015
Hispanic	20.70%				2015
Party Preference					
Democrats	51.00%				2015
Republicans	45.40%				2015
Neither/Depends	3.60%				2015
Education					
Less than High School	10.80%				2015
High School	26.30%				2015
Some College	27.60%				2015
Bachelor's or Higher	35.30%				2015
Income					
\$0-24,999	16.70%				2015
\$25,000-74,999	39.70%				2015
\$75,000+	43.60%				2015

Table 2: 2017 Ego Demographics

Variable	Mean or Valid%	Std. dev.	Min	Max	N
Age	53.74	16.19	19	74	1267
18-29	12.1%				1267
30-44	23.2%				1267
45-59	29.0%				1267
60+	35.7%				1267
Gender					
Male	52.4%				1267
Female	47.6%				1267
Race/Ethnicity					
White, Non-Hispanic	67.3%				1267
Black, Non-Hispanic	8.4%				1267
Other, Non-Hispanic	8.5%				1267
Hispanic	16%				1267
Party Preference					
Democrats	48.9%				1267
Republicans	47.5%				1267
Neither/Depends	3.7%				1267
Education					
Less than High School	5.9%				1267
High School	25.9%				1267
Some College	29.8%				1267
Bachelor's or Higher	38.4%				1267
Income					
\$0-24,999	14.8%				1267
\$25,000-74,999	40.51%				1267
\$75,000+	44.7%				1267

Measures

Network Partisanship. Ego's partisanship was reported on a 7-point scale, which was then recoded to a 3-point scale where "Republican" refers to respondents in the categories "Strong Republican," "Not Strong Republican" and "Leans Republican"; "Democrat" refers to those in the categories "Strong Democrat," "Not Strong Democrat," and "Leans Democrat;" and the remaining respondents listed as "Independent/Undecided." The "Independent/Undecided" group makes up only 3.6 percent of valid responses and is excluded from the analysis, though it has been included in additional tests as a means of checking robustness where appropriate (see footnotes in Results). Partisanship scores for all reported alters were averaged to create a network partisanship score ranging from 1 to 3, where 1 is the most Republican network possible and 3 is the most Democratic network possible. In 2016 ($M = 1.96$ $SD = 0.65$), 40.2% of respondents found themselves in networks of alters that skewed Republican while 34% found themselves in networks that skewed Democratic. In 2017 ($M = 1.99$ $SD = 0.66$), 42.6% of respondents found themselves in networks of alters that leaned Republican and 35.6% found themselves in networks that leaned Democratic.

Network Partisan Distance. Network partisan distance (from ego) describes the ideological diversity of respondents' discussion networks relative to the respondent themselves. Partisan distance from ego was measured by scoring each alter on the same scale 3-point scale, subtracting each alter score from ego score, and averaging the difference. This generated a score for each ego on a scale of 0 to 2, where 0 represents a network in which all alters share ego's partisan identification, and 2 represents a network in which all alters have been affiliated with the party opposite of that with which ego is associated.

Measures of partisan distance have not historically been used within the literature on political discussion networks, which have frequently instead used measures of difference in agreement/disagreement, proportion disagreed, network ambivalence, or Simpson's D to describe the partisan environment of political discussion networks (R. Lupton & Thornton, 2017). Lupton et al. suggest the use of Nir's formula (2005) for ambivalence when two groups are present and Simpson's D when three groups are present. While this may be appropriate in situations where a third party or independent alter acts in a way entirely discrete from the other political parties, it would give alters listed as "neither/depends" equal weighting to those of the opposite party in terms of representing an additional viewpoint. Because I am primarily concerned with exposure to dissonant information, this is not necessarily the best treatment for the neither/depends group in my study, and I opt to use simple averages instead (though as Lupton et al. point out, this means a network with one opposite-party alter and one same party alter would receive the same score as one with two neither/depends alters; I have deemed this a better compromise for my purposes).

In 2016, respondents networks mean network partisan distance score was 0.60 (SD=.53), suggesting that individuals' networks tended to share their partisan biases. The mean score in 2017 was 0.58 (SD=.53), meaning that this tendency continued.

Table 3: Network Partisan Distance (from Ego)

Score	2016 (%)	2017 (%)
.00	30.8	33.1
.33	12.3	11.7
.50	3.8	3.9
.67	16.2	15.9
1.00	24.7	23.5
1.33	6.7	6.7
1.50	1.1	1.1
1.67	2.2	1.7
2.00	2.4	2.3
Total	100.0	100.0

Race/Ethnicity. Race/ethnicity was reported by respondents, who were asked to self-identify themselves as black (9.0%), white (62.5%) Hispanic (20.7%), 2+ races, or other (7.8%, combined). Due to the small number of respondents who chose 2+ races or “other,” the two categories were condensed for the purpose of this thesis.

Income. Income was defined in three categories. Respondents initially identified themselves as belonging to one of 14 income brackets. For the purposes of addressing my research questions, I condensed these brackets into low-, middle- and upper-income categories based on Pew metrics utilized in reporting of the 2016 election. Pew did not report national average income brackets for 2016, instead employing a system that relied on specifics of location

and family size. However, reports from Pew during the 2016 campaign season used brackets based on the system used in 2014. Those earning less than \$25,000 were categorized as low-income (16.7%), those earning between \$25,000 and \$75,000 were categorized as middle-income (39.7%), and those earning more than \$75,000 were categorized as upper-income (43.6%). The same metric has been applied for the purposes of analysis here.

Education. Level of education was defined by respondent self-identification. Individuals were classified as having less than high school education (10.8%), high school education (26.3%), some college education (27.6%), or at least a bachelor's degree (35.3%)

Agreement. Network agreement is measured by averaging respondent self-assessments of how much they disagreed with each alter. For each alter, respondents could choose: All of the time, most of the time, half of the time, hardly ever, and never. Scores were recoded to represent agreement and averaged to provide a network agreement score ranging from 1 to 5, with 5 representing the most agreement). The mean network agreement score was 3.57 (SD = .75) suggesting individuals tended to agree slightly with their alters on average.

Closeness. Network closeness was measured by averaging respondent self-assessment of closeness to each alter. Respondents could describe their relationship with alters as "very close," "close," "fairly close," "not too close," or "not close at all." These responses were coded on a 5-point scale and averaged, producing a measure for network closeness with a scale of 1 to 5 where 5 represents the most closeness between ego and their network. The mean network closeness score was 3.86 (SD = .75) suggesting individuals tended to discuss politics with those to whom they felt closer, rather than with those to whom they felt less close.

Selective Exposure. Partisan selective exposure requires a slightly more complex working definition. The degree of selective exposure can be measured by self-reported consumption of media text with a bias favoring the respondent's stated political orientation. Drawing on related work by Stroud and Collier (2018) using TMASS, I categorize the partisan bias of media based on user perception, treating sources that more than 50% of users rated as having a liberal bias (*MSNBC, CNN, The New York Times* and *NPR*) as liberal and sources that more than 50% of users felt had a conservative bias (*The Rush Limbaugh Show, Fox News,* and *The Drudge Report*) as conservative. For Republicans, individuals were scored as exhibiting selective behavior if they consumed at least one of the conservative sources and no liberal sources. For Democrats, respondents exhibited selective behavior if they consumed at least one of the liberal sources and no conservative sources. For the purpose of this thesis, selective exposure is a binary variable. In 2016, 35.7 percent of individuals practiced selective exposure while 64.3 did not, and in 2017, 44.0 percent of respondents practiced selective exposure while 56.0 did not (using this measure).

Limitations

While working with survey data has advantages in terms of collecting large quantities of information easily and gathering information about how individuals behave in the real world rather than in designed experimental conditions, relying on self-reported data presents its own challenges. Ensuring that questions are worded such that responses are valid can be challenging when working with such a large, diverse population (See Appendix A for relevant questions from the Texas Media and Society Survey; questions only used to describe the sample in Tables

1 and 2 have been omitted for brevity). Furthermore, individuals' memories are not always accurate, and the ability to accurately assess news sources and alters may vary from person to person.

Perceptions of Alters. I rely on respondents' assessments of their alters' party affiliation and political opinions to construct measures of agreement and of network partisan distance from ego. Mutz & Martin (2001) find that individuals have a reasonable ability to assess their alters' party affiliation, with a tendency to err toward in the direction of their own party affiliation when they do make mistakes. Further, Mutz and Martin argue that in some cases the perception of similarity is more important than actual similarity because the potential effects of partisan similarity or difference within the network are likely to rely on how respondents perceiving their alters (or their alters' positions). While there is some room for respondents to perceive alters as sharing similar party affiliation but having different perspectives, the general accuracy of perception paired with the greater importance given to perception makes these reports appropriate for use in this thesis.

Perception of Media Bias and Use. Additionally, my analysis uses several survey questions to construct scores for partisan selective exposure. First, I adopt Stroud & Collier 's (2018) method of using respondent perceptions to categorize media sources as partisan. Because respondents' ability to accurately assess bias is limited (Mutz & Martin, 2001) – in fact some models of selective exposure presume an inability to accurately assess bias - Stroud and Collier propose using summary measures, where media outlets are labeled partisan when more than 50% of those using them recognize them as having a conservative or liberal slant. Ultimately, this measure is perhaps conservative, as individuals may be less likely to consume news they

perceive as biased and more likely to see news biased in accordance with their beliefs as accurate.

Next, I rely on self-reporting of media consumed in the two weeks prior to administration of the survey. Empirical analysis has shown that self-reports of news media consumption may not be accurate (Prior, 2009), though subsequent work has argued that an approach focusing on which sources were consumed rather than in what quantity they are consumed can still be appropriate (Dilliplane, Goldman, & Mutz, 2013; see also critique from Prior, 2013; and argument from Goldman, Mutz, & Dilliplane, 2013, that this is the best available method).

Breadth. Finally, one limitation is that while the survey collects data on a large sample, it is limited in how much data can be collected from each individual. Respondents were given the option to list up to 3 alters, and while that is reasonably close to historical averages for core network size (Marsden, 1987; Mcpherson, Smith-lovin, & Brashears, 2005), it does mean that not all alters are recorded. Additionally, respondents were asked about a pre-established list of possible media outlets, meaning that not all possible media sources were included in this analysis. Still, analysis using the alters and media outlets reported on is sufficient to give preliminary insight into network composition and selective behavior.

Chapter Four: Results

Network Composition

Ego Partisanship. To assess RQ1a, that network partisanship would differ with ego partisanship, respondents were separated into Democrat-leaning and Republican-leaning.² Data was collected for 1720 individuals who provided data on both their own partisan identity and that of at least one alter. An independent samples t-test was conducted to check for differences in network partisanship by ego partisanship. Supporting H1a, results showed a statistically significant difference $t(1,1718)=-30.904$, $p<.001$, where Republicans had more Republican-leaning networks (1.56) and Democrats had more Democratic-leaning networks (2.34).

A second independent samples t-test was conducted to assess RQ1b, whether there was a difference in the network partisan distance from ego between Republicans and Democrats. This test showed a statistically significant difference $(1,1718)= 3.563$, $p<.001$, where Republicans had less diverse networks relative to ego (.561) than Democrats had (.66).

Gender. To answer RQ2a regarding whether network partisanship differed with gender an independent samples t-test was used to assess differences in the same measure of network partisanship by gender. The results showed no significant difference $(1,1718)=.550$ $p<.001$, in network partisanship between men (1.94) and women (1.98).

² As a robustness check, a Kruskal-Wallis test was used to assess difference in network partisan diversity across ego partisan identities when the “neither/depends” group is included (giving a significant result for Levene’s test, $p<.05$). Results were significant $\chi^2(2) = 33.07$, $p <.001$. Post-hoc pairwise comparison using Dunn’s test showed significant differences between each group.

In response to RQ2b, a second t-test was conducted to assess for difference in network partisan distance from ego across genders. Results of this test showed no significant difference in network partisanship distance from ego between men (.61) and women (.59), $t(1750) = .794$, $p = .427$.

Race/Ethnicity. Addressing RQ3a, whether network partisanship would vary with ethnicity, data were collected for 1131 individuals and, because Levene's test had a significant result ($p < .01$), a Kruskal-Wallis Test was conducted. Results showed statistically significant differences in network partisanship by ethnicity, $N = 1782$, $\chi^2(3) = 233.04$, $p < .001$. Post-hoc pairwise comparison using Dunn's test showed statistically significant differences between network partisanship of all groups, with white (1.80) having more Republican networks than "other" (1.96) respondents, which had more Republican networks than Hispanic (2.26) respondents, which in turn had more Republican networks than black (2.45) respondents. This is consistent with H3a.

To assess RQ3b, that network partisan distance from ego would differ with ethnicity, data were collected for 1131 individuals who provided data on both their own partisan identity and that of at least one alter. Again, Levene's Test was significant ($p < .01$), and Kruskal-Wallis was used to assess the difference in network partisan distance across ego partisan identities: $N = 1752$, $\chi^2(3) = 14.51$, $p < .05$. Post-hoc pairwise comparison using Dunn's test showed a significant difference between those who identified as "other"/more than one ethnicity, and those who identified as black or white, with black (.53) and white (.59) respondents having lower network

partisan diversity scores than those in the “other” category (.76).³ These findings are consistent with H3b suggesting difference in network partisan diversity based on ethnicity.

Income. Using data from 1782 respondents, a Kruskal-Wallis test (Levene’s test: $p < .001$) was used to assess RQ4a: whether network partisanship differed by income during the 2016 election. Results showed a statistically significant difference in network partisanship across income levels, $\chi^2(2) = 21.71$, $p < .001$.

Post-hoc pairwise comparison using Dunns’ test showed that lower-income respondents had more Democratic networks (2.14) than did middle- (1.96) or upper-income (1.90) respondents.

An ANOVA was conducted to assess RQ4b: whether there was a difference in network partisan distance across income brackets (as defined by Pew⁴). Results showed a statistically significant difference across income brackets $F(2,1749)=9.35$, $p < .001$. Post hoc testing showed a significant difference between Lower Income respondents (.72) and Middle Income (.60) or Upper Income (.56) respondents.

Education. To assess RQ5a, an ANOVA was conducted to assess whether network partisanship differed with education levels. The results showed a statistically significant difference $F(3,1749)=14.57$, $p < .001$, and post-hoc Bonferroni comparison demonstrated that

³ Here one-way ANOVA also shows a different between Hispanic (.62) and “Other”(.76) respondents as well.

⁴ Pew estimates of income for individuals take into consideration a variety of factors including where one lives. In writing about the 2016 election Pew cites generalized statistics for individuals from 2014, which fit to our survey questions place the lower-/middle-income divide at \$25000 and \$75000, though these numbers do not take into account family size.

those with less than a high school education had more Democratic (2.25) networks than those with a high school education (1.99), those with some college (1.90) and those with a bachelor's degree or higher (1.91).

In response to RQ5b, Kruskal-Wallis (and ANOVA) was conducted to assess whether there was a difference in network partisan distance across education levels. Results showed no statistically significant difference across education. $\chi^2(3) = 4.47, p = .22$. H5b, that partisan distance from ego would have varied with educational attainment, is not supported.

Closeness. Addressing RQ6a, there was no statistically significant relationship between network partisanship and network closeness. However, in response to RQ6b there was a statistically significant but weak negative correlation between network closeness and network partisan distance, $r(1751) = -.159, p < .01$. This can be understood as individuals who are closer to their alters (on average) also having had more similar partisan affiliation to their network average than those who are less close to their alters had.

Selective Exposure

A two-stage hierarchical logistic regression was used to assess RQ7a (see table 6). Demographic factors, as well as network closeness and agreement, were entered in the first before network partisanship was added in the second stage. Results did not suggest a relationship between network partisanship and subsequent levels of selective exposure ($B = -0.18, SE = 0.13, p > .05$).

Addressing H7b, another hierarchical logistic regression was conducted. Again, demographic factors and network closeness and agreement were controlled for in the first stage, with network partisan distance from ego being added in the second phase. Results are consistent

with H7b, finding a statistically significant negative relationship between network partisan distance from ego and subsequent selective exposure, ($B = -0.625$, $SE = 0.14$, $p < .001$).

Table 4: Relationship of Selective Exposure to Subsequent Network Composition

Model	Selective Exposure (Partisanship Model)		Selective Exposure (Partisan Distance Model)	
	B	se	B	se
Network Closeness	.198**	.070	.198**	.070
Network Agreement	-.102	.092	-.102	.092
Party Affiliation (Republican as Reference):				
Democrat	-.340	.138	-.340	.138
Age	.031***	.004	.031***	.004
Income	.178	.106	.178	.106
Education	.363***	.078	.363***	.078
Ethnicity (White as Reference):				
Black	.084	.240	.084	.240
Hispanic	-.656*	.329	-.656*	.329
Other	-.647*	.300	-.647*	.300
Gender (Male as Reference):				
Female	-.295*	.134	-.295*	.134
Constant (Block 1)	-3.279***	.613	-3.279***	.613
Nagelkerke R ² (Block 1)	.159***		.159***	
Network Closeness	.205**	.070	8.445	.072
Network Agreement	-.096	.092	-.230*	.098
Party Affiliation (Republican as Reference):				
Democrat	-.472**	.167	-.447**	.142
Age	.031***	.004	.031***	.004
Income	.180	.106	.136	.108
Education	.362***	.078		
Ethnicity (White as Reference):				
Black	.084	.240	.014	.244
Hispanic	-.588	.332	-.867***	.338
Other	-.601*	.302	-.771***	.306

Table 4, cont.

Gender (Male as Reference):				
Female	-.302*	.135	-.274*	.136
Network Partisanship	-.183	.129		
Network Partisan Distance			-.625***	.136
Constant (Block 2)	-2.92***		-2.111	.664
Nagelkerke R ² (Block 2)	.162***		.182***	
R ² Change	.003		.023***	
N	1094		1094	

a. Dependent Variable: Selective Exposure

* p<.05

** p<.01

*** p<.001

A third hierarchical regression was conducted to assess the relationship between selective exposure and subsequent network partisanship. Results suggest a statistically significant relationship between selective exposure and subsequent network partisanship, where higher levels of selective exposure were associated with more Democrat discussion networks, $F(1, 1016) = 0.06, p = .804$.

A final hierarchical regression was conducted to test H7d, controlling for demographic factors as well as network closeness and agreement. Results did not support H7d, indicating no relationship between selective exposure subsequent network partisan distance from ego, $F(1, 1013) .001, p = .30$.

Table 5: Relationship of Selective Exposure to Subsequent Network Composition

Model	Network Partisanship		Network Partisan Distance	
	<i>b</i>	se	<i>b</i>	se
Network Closeness	.063*	(.018)	-.080*	(.017)
Network Agreement	.029	(.023)	-.215***	(.023)
Party Affiliation (Republican as Reference):				
Democrat	.567***	(.034)	.064*	(.067)
Age	-.030	(.001)	-.068*	(.001)
Income	.020	(.027)	-.061	(.026)
Education	.004	(.019)	-.032	(.019)
Ethnicity (White as Reference):				
Black	.146***	(.065)	-.093**	(.063)
Hispanic	.111***	(.051)	-.008	(.049)
Other	.025	(.061)	.091**	(.059)
Gender (Male as Reference):				
Female	-.005	(.034)	-.017	(.032)
Constant (Block 1)	1.263***	(.147)	1.566***	(.142)
Adjusted R ² (Block 1)	.407***		.077***	
Constant (Block 1)	1.263***		1.566***	(.142)
Adjusted R ² (Block 1)	.407***		.077***	
Network Closeness	.062*	(.018)	-.079*	(.017)
Network Agreement	.029	(.023)	-.217***	(.023)
Party Affiliation (Republican as Reference):				
Democrat	.567***	(.036)	.064*	(.067)
Age	-.031	(.001)	-.066*	(.001)
Income	.020	(.027)	-.061	.026
Education	.003	(.020)	-.028	(.019)
Ethnicity (White as Reference):				
Black	.146***	(.065)	-.093**	(.063)
Hispanic	.112***	(.051)	-.009	(.049)
Other	.024	(.061)	.093**	(.059)

Table 5, cont

Gender				
(Male as Reference):				
Female	-.004	(.034)	-.021	(.033)
Selective Exposure	.006	(.035)	-.032	(.033)
Constant (Block 2)	1.262***		1.572***	(.142)
Adjusted R ² (Block 2)	.407***		.077***	
R ² Change	.000		.001	
<hr/>				
N	1026		1024	
<hr/>				

b. Dependent Variable: Selective Exposure

* p<.05

** p<.01

*** p<.001

Chapter Five: Discussion

Media narratives surrounding politics focus heavily on assumptions about the behavior of certain demographic groups. When faced with unexpected outcomes, pundits often focus on how these groups deviated from expectations or how those predicting elections failed to understand particular group dynamics. In the case of the 2016 presidential election, much of this discussion focused on how the liberal and Democratic groups to which much of the mainstream media allegedly belonged failed to interact with and understand those on the other side, because they were trapped in their own bubbles of liberal discussion and news. These echoed complaints from the political right throughout the campaign, which argued that Democrats and the liberal media did not understand what “real America” wanted and needed. The following analysis breaks down each finding in terms of its implications within the context of the 2016 election and what it adds to our broader understanding of political discussion networks and selective exposure.

Network Composition

Examining discussion networks during the 2016 presidential campaign, I first asked whether network partisanship differed with ego’s party affiliation (RQ1). My findings support the hypothesis that individuals tend to discuss politics with others who have political views similar to their own. Whether due to sorting based on sociodemographic factors or because of active choice of politically like-minded alters, this finding is consistent with previous literature (Knoke, 1990; Lazer et al., 2010; Mutz, 2006; Sinclair, 2012) that suggests homogeneity in terms of party affiliation. To the degree that the mainstream media is, in fact, liberal this is also

consistent with the idea that media pundits may have been likely to have core discussion partners who reaffirmed their own perspectives rather than exposing them to opposing views⁵.

However, in addressing whether partisan distance varies with ego partisanship (RQ2), analysis indicates that while homogeneity existed regardless of party affiliation, Republicans had more ideologically homogenous networks than Democrats did. One theoretical explanation for this focuses on how political parties are organized. It has been posited that the Democratic Party has acted as a form of political coalition bringing together diverse identities and perspectives to support common interests, while the Republican Party has been more ideologically consistent in its makeup, with most GOP voters sharing a set of core beliefs. This explanation is expanded upon in work on political operatives by Glaser & Berry (2018), who suggest that Republicans tend to be more invested in core ideals and less open to compromise. As a result, we might imagine that Democrats would be more open to discuss politics with those who have different perspectives. However, it is also possible that these results stem from other factors that coincide with partisanship and lead to sorting independently of party identity, and additional research is needed to determine the cause of this difference.

Regardless of the causal factor, these results should not be interpreted as a rejection of the idea that liberal groups may have been insulating themselves from conservative perspectives – both sides showed levels of partisan distance that suggest some form of partisan sorting (though

⁵ How one defines liberal media sources might also affect these findings. The method employed from Stroud & Collier (2018) results in only 3 conservative and 4 liberal sources for the sake of this analysis. Additionally, pundits may not discuss politics in a manner typical of the American population.

not necessarily on the basis of partisanship specifically). Instead, this suggests that this sorting was taking place on both sides. Future studies on the impact of ideological insulation on political outcomes should consider both how lack of exposure to certain views can create network-wide blindspots and how consistent reinforcing of a particular position can lead to political strength, rather than examining each effect in isolation without considering the larger system.

Despite the fact that women were more likely to identify as Democrats⁶ than as Republicans and the fact that men were more likely to identify as Republicans than as Democrats, when addressing whether network partisanship differed with gender (RQ2a), results showed that there was no difference in mean network partisanship between men and women, suggesting women were not more likely to pick Democratic discussion partners than men or vice versa. This echoes Marsden's (1987) findings and is consistent with the idea that any indirect partisan sorting takes place based on socioeconomic and sociodemographic factors that lead to geographic sorting in ways that gender typically would not. It seems that gendered sorting by workplace or social-group either does not have a partisan sorting effect or is not strong enough for the effect to be significant.

RQ2b asked whether network partisan distance from ego varied with gender. Results show no difference in network partisan distance between men and women. This finding is particularly interesting in light of political coverage in response to the Trump campaign that presented women as a group likely to unite against Trump's perceived sexism, as it suggests that women were not more likely to find themselves in political echo chambers where their partisan views were likely to be strongly reinforced.

⁶ $\chi^2(1, N=1910) = 7.0761, p < .01$.

RQ3a asked whether network partisanship differed with race and ethnicity. The finding that network partisanship differed with race and ethnicity such that minority respondents tended to find themselves in more democratic discussion networks is consistent with previous literature on partisan sorting (Knoke, 1990; Lazer et al., 2010). It also is consistent with the media narrative that racial division contributed to political division and insularity during the campaign cycle, a position supported in recent work from Mutz (2018) on the role of status threat in the 2016 election.

RQ3b asked whether there was a difference in network partisan distance across ethnic and racial identities. Results indicated that black and white respondents had lower levels of partisan distance from ego within their networks than did respondents who identified themselves as “other.” One explanation for this finding is that Americans are heavily geographically sorted by race and ethnicity, as well as often being sorted along racial lines in terms of kin and workplaces. It is possible that those in the “other group” were more likely to have cross-cutting discussion networks because that group includes respondents who identified as two or more races. If discussion networks are based on convenience rather than selection for similar political views, these individuals may have developed cross-cutting discussion networks as a result of having kin and social contacts whose political views were informed by different racial identities (whether directly because of the relationship between these identities and desired policy or because these political views are themselves partially produced and reinforced by racial sorting).

During the campaign, both parties positioned their constituents as belonging to a struggling working class ignored or exploited by wealthy elites from the other party. After Trump’s victory, much media coverage focused on the economic anxieties of working-class

Trump supporters, and the wealthier liberal Democrats in political bubbles that kept them from understanding their plight. Addressing whether network partisanship differed with income level (RQ4a), I found that higher- and middle-income respondents had more Republican discussion networks than lower-income individuals. This finding (consistent with Knoke, 1990 and Sinclair, 2012), does not fit this narrative neatly, as the most economically vulnerable individuals found themselves in Democrat-leaning networks while there was no significant difference in partisanship or between middle- and upper- income voters. To the extent that income level plays a role in partisan sorting, it is theorized that higher income could be associated with more exclusive social groups, workplaces, and neighborhoods and that those who can afford to select these exclusive memberships would seek out those where they saw others like themselves or who shared their views.

Results in response to whether network partisan distance from ego varied with income (RQ4b) further complicate this narrative. Analysis shows that higher- and middle-income respondents had more ideologically homogenous political discussion networks. While not exclusive to Democrats, this does suggest that the wealthy are more likely to exist in networks that could serve as political echo chambers. It is possible that individuals with more resources have more ability to select for places to live and work where the population shares their views and goals.

Additionally, the reproduction of intergenerational wealth results in certain sociodemographic groups being more likely to have access to jobs that provide greater income, meaning that differences between income brackets may be related to sociodemographic sorting that results in partisan differences. This is particularly notable considering Mutz's (2018) finding

that feelings of status anxiety, rather than economic anxiety, influenced whether voters leaned Republican or Democratic in the 2016 election.

As with income, the media narrative surrounding the role of education in the election suggested a highly-educated Democratic constituency so consumed by their own left-leaning political bubbles that they did not realize they were alienating the less-educated and driving them to the politically incorrect candidate Trump. RQ5a asked whether network partisanship differed with education level. Again, however, the descriptive data on 2016 voters raises questions about this assessment, as higher levels of education did not predict a more Democratic-leaning discussion environment (and, in fact, those with less than a high school education were more likely to have had a more Democratic-leaning discussion network).

Additionally, RQ5b asked if network partisan distance from ego varied with education level. Results showed there was no significant difference between those with a college education and those with no more than a high school education in terms of partisanship or partisan distance from ego. Previous work was divided on the subject, but this finding is consistent with Knoke's (1990) finding that educational attainment was not a factor contributing to networks political homogeneity. While this gives more support to Knoke's position, it is possible that education plays a role when controlling for factors such as income and race that were not explored here, and additional work is needed before Sinclair's (2012) position can be rejected.

RQ6a asked whether there was a relationship between network closeness and network partisanship. Results found no such relationship, which is not especially surprising as there is no precedent to assume that Republicans would feel closer to Republicans than Democrats would feel to Democrats or vice versa. RQ6b asked if there was a relationship between closeness and

network partisan distance from ego. Closeness was found to be negatively related to network partisan distance from ego, suggesting that individuals feel closer to discussion partners when they have networks that are generally ideologically similar. Future research will need to examine whether this result is limited to individuals feeling closer to like-minded discussion partners, or whether people also feel closer to those with different perspectives when the network as a whole has views closer to their own.

Examining descriptive data about voters by individual demographic characteristics is useful for examining claims about how specific demographic divisions shaped the 2016 election. However, exploring single elements of identity has its limits, and does not allow for an understanding of how intersection dimensions of class and identity create more specific positionalities for voters and shape their behavior. While examining the specifics of those cross-sections is beyond the scope of this project, the regression models incorporating all of these factors provide a starting point.

Selective Exposure

In response to RQ7a, on whether network partisanship was related to later selective exposure, results found no significant difference in between Republicans and Democrats. This indicates that both parties are equally likely to exhibit selective behavior.

RQ7b asked about the relationship between network partisan distance from ego and later selective exposure. Results showed a weak but significant negative relationship between network partisan distance from ego and subsequent selective exposure when controlling for the previously addressed demographic factors. This is consistent with models that suggest ideological insularity contributes to selective exposure (additionally, previous theoretical work and the results

regarding RQ7d support this directional reading). Such an impact could result from the discussion network strengthening ego's position such that dissonant information would create more cognitive dissonance or such that ego would be more likely to perceive news agreeing with their position as high quality, but it is also possible that individuals would simply be exposed to more like-minded news or go out of their way to find news that would help them maintain a position palatable to the group.

No relationship was found between selective exposure and subsequent network partisanship (RQ7c). This is unsurprising considering that selective exposure has not been found to be specific to just one party, but the question was asked in order to begin establishing directionality had a relationship between network partisanship and later selective exposure been found.

Finally, no relationship was found between selective exposure and later network partisan distance from ego. This is consistent with the idea that political discussion plays a role in shaping media consumption but that individuals do not choose discussion partners based on compatibility with political preferences.

Limitations and Future Work

This thesis is limited in what it can infer from these findings. In addition to the limitations inherent in the use of panel survey data (See Chapter 3, Limitations), the analysis employed in this thesis has limits in terms of broader applicability. The majority of the analysis of discussion network composition is descriptive in nature. While it is illuminating in terms of understanding the 2016 presidential campaign, my findings do not necessarily extend to previous or future periods of American history, when individuals might be sorted along different characteristics than are salient in the current political climate or when individuals might be less inclined to align

with a specific political party. However, to the extent that polarization is increasing rather than decreasing and to the extent that individuals do in fact select discussion partners based on convenience, network ideological homogeneity may be resilient to change.

More work is needed to understand the ways in which the sociodemographic identities examined in this thesis intersect. While a true examination of interaction effects was beyond the scope of this project, preliminary regression suggests that some of the differences across income, race, education, and partisanship may derive from sorting along other factors. A more complex dedicated study could examine these interactions more thoroughly, providing greater insight into the complexities of partisan sorting.

Future work will also need to establish experimental conditions to assess whether greater network ideological homogeneity actually contributes to increased selective exposure, though finding ways to control for other factors while replicating the way in which both political discussions and media consumption play out over time will require creative design.

Conclusion

This study's contributions to the literature are twofold. First, it provides new insight into the discussion network composition of Americans during the 2016 campaign, looking at the networks of key sociodemographic groups through the lens of not only partisanship but also ideological distance. In doing so, it highlights how partisanship, race, income, and education correspond with differences in discussion networks that have the potential to influence both political opinions and drive selective exposure. While there has long been a reasonable level of consensus that demographic factors play a role in the sorting that leads to ideologically similar

discussion networks, this project is among the first since the rise of social networking sites to assess these differences across those factors. In doing so, it provides a better understanding of how subgroups differ in the degree of partisanship and degree of ideological difference and suggest avenues for further inquiry.

Understanding both the partisan lean and degree of partisanship associated with these subgroups creates space for considering how social structures can contribute to the reinforcement of specific political ideas. For example, the finding that black and white Americans experience similar levels of network partisan distance (but different levels of network partisanship) while those identifying as multiple races or other experience less ideological homogeneity suggests a need to better understand how those who are not sorted neatly into the nations' largest racial divide are (or are not) still sorted and how they negotiate a space within more diverse networks.

However, the broadest implications of this research come from analysis of the relationship between network composition and partisan selective exposure. While it might seem intuitive that there is no relationship between network partisanship and selective exposure from year to year (or vice versa), it is noteworthy that there is a relationship between network partisan distance and later partisan selective exposure (but not between partisan selective exposure and later network partisan distance). Causality cannot be established from this relationship, but the finding is consistent with literature theorizing that individuals do not select discussion partners primarily on compatibility of political partisanship or ideology, but do select for media that matches their beliefs. Building on Shah et al.'s model (2017), we can conceive of possible mechanisms through which having low network partisan distance could increase selective exposure. On the one hand, homogeneous political discussion networks may lead individuals to

feel more comfortable expressing partisan beliefs and to hear more similar beliefs. Both can increase the strength of their convictions and lead to increased cognitive dissonance when encountering a contradictory perspective or increasingly biased perceptions of what news is accurate. Additionally, having more homogenous networks might create more incentive for individuals to find sources of information that allow them to arrive at a particular belief. Thus, this finding can fit within the existing framework of cognitive dissonance, perceived accuracy, and lay epistemic explanations for selective exposure.

As online communication and media consumption more and more becomes the norm, understanding how fragmentation into like-minded communities and exposure to niche news relate to one another and to political polarization will become increasingly important. This thesis has begun work to envision a more holistic vision of partisan exposure that includes not only the news one selects for but also the environment in which one discusses their views and the views of their peers. By demonstrating a relationship between the ideological homogeneity of discussion networks and partisan selective exposure, this thesis opens the door for more detailed research into the interconnected processes through which partisan beliefs are reinforced and partisanship grows.

Appendix: Survey Questions

A. From which sources did you get news IN THE PAST 14 DAYS that is from **[INSERT DAY OF THE WEEK]** two weeks ago through today. If you are unsure, please DO NOT select it.

[Items in Random Order:]

1. Rush Limbaugh Show (radio)
2. ABC's World News Tonight with David Muir, CBS Evening News with Scott Pelley, or NBC Nightly News with Lester Holt
3. Local television news
4. Local newspaper
5. Wall Street Journal
6. Washington Post
7. The New York Times
8. The Huffington Post
9. Drudge Report
10. National Public Radio (NPR)
11. Fox News Cable Channel
12. CNN
13. MSNBC
14. NewsHour on PBS
15. Breitbart

B. For each source listed below, please indicate whether you think it has a **[RANDOMLY INSERT “liberal or a conservative” or “conservative or a liberal”]**, or neither type of bias. If you are not familiar with the source, please answer “don’t know / not sure.”

[Items in Random Order:]

1. Rush Limbaugh Show (radio)
2. Wall Street Journal
3. Washington Post
4. The New York Times
5. Huffington Post
6. Drudge Report
7. National Public Radio (NPR)
8. Fox News Cable Channel
9. CNN
10. MSNBC
11. NewsHour on PBS
12. Breitbart

[Choices if question read: “liberal or a conservative”:]

1. Strong liberal bias
2. Slight liberal bias

3. Neither a liberal nor a conservative bias
4. Slight conservative bias
5. Strong conservative bias
6. Don't know / not sure

[Choices if question read: "liberal or a conservative":]

1. Strong conservative bias
2. Slight conservative bias
3. Neither a liberal nor a conservative bias
4. Slight liberal bias
5. Strong liberal bias
6. Don't know / not sure

C1. From time to time, people discuss government, elections, and politics with other people.

We'd like to know the first names or just the initials of people you talk with about these matters.

These people might be from your family, from work, from the neighborhood, from some other organization you belong to, or they might be from somewhere else. Who is the person you've

talked with most about politics?

_____ please enter the person's name or initials [**This is Alter 1 in subsequent questions**].

C2, 3. Aside from this person, who else have you talked with about politics?

_____ please enter the person's name or initials [**Alter 2 in subsequent questions**]

_____ please enter the person's name or initials [**Alter 3 in subsequent questions**]

D. [For each alter:] Is _____?

1. Male
2. Female

E. [For each alter:] How close would you say you are with _____?

1. Very close
2. Close
3. Fairly close
4. Not too close
5. Not at all close

F. [For each alter:] Do you think that _____ normally favors:

1. Democrats
2. Republicans
3. Different parties depending on the issue or election
4. Neither Democrats nor Republicans

G. [For each alter:] When you discuss politics with _____, how often do you disagree?

1. All of the time
2. Most of the time
3. Half of the time
4. Hardly ever
5. Never

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