

RUNNING HEAD: PARTISAN PATHS TO EXPOSURE DIVERSITY

**Partisan paths to exposure diversity: Differences in pro- and counter-attitudinal news consumption**

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## **Abstract**

This study examines selective exposure to political information, arguing that attraction to pro-attitudinal information and aversion to counter-attitudinal information are distinct phenomena, and that the tendency to engage in these behaviors varies by partisanship. Data collected in a strict online experiment support these predictions. Republicans are significantly more likely to engage in selective avoidance of predominantly counter-attitudinal information than those with other partisan affiliations, while non-Republicans are significantly more likely to select a story that includes pro-attitudinal information, regardless of its counter-attitudinal content. Individuals across the political spectrum are receptive to predominantly pro-attitudinal content and to content that offers a mix of views, but the form these preferences take varies by partisanship. The political significance of these findings is discussed.

## **Partisan paths to exposure diversity: Differences in pro- and counter-attitudinal news consumption**

For much of its history, politically motivated selective exposure has been contested; indeed, many scholars questioned its occurrence (e.g., Chaffee, Saphir, Graf, Sandvig, & Hahn, 2001; Sears & Freedman, 1967). Today, however, the evidence that citizens' news consumption privileges likeminded views over less consonant content is overwhelming (Hart et al., 2009; Stroud, 2011). In an era characterized by unprecedented media choice, uncertainty about the existence of the selective exposure phenomenon has been replaced by questions premised on its existence. Is it on the rise (Garrett, Carnahan, & Lynch, 2013)? What are its consequences (Stroud, 2010)? Under what conditions does it occur (Fischer, Jonas, Frey, & Schulz-Hardt, 2005; Valentino, Banks, Hutchings, & Davis, 2009)? And when and why do partisan differences in selectivity appear (Iyengar, Hahn, Krosnick, & Walker, 2008)?

In this paper, we advance our understanding of selective exposure in two ways. First, we offer new evidence in the debate over the need to distinguish between selective approach, the tendency to seek information consistent with one's prior beliefs, and selective avoidance, a drive to avoid contradictory information. The conventional understanding of selective exposure as the pairing of selective approach with equally strong selective avoidance has been criticized, both theoretically (e.g., Garrett, 2009b) and empirically (e.g., Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011), but several prominent scholars recently have embraced the classical view (e.g., Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). This study aims to extend earlier scholarship by offering the most stringent experimental test to date of whether selective approach is the stronger tendency.

Building on new evidence for the distinction between selective approach and selective avoidance, our second contribution is to examine partisan differences in these phenomena.

Recent research has highlighted not only differences in how partisans approach and think about the world (see, for example, Jost & Amodio, 2012), but also different patterns of partisan selective exposure (see, for example, Knobloch-Westerwick & Kleinman, 2012). This is, to our knowledge, the first study to analyze and document the role that party affiliation plays in shaping the propensity to engage in selective approach and avoidance.

Distinguishing between selective approach and avoidance has important political ramifications. If citizens jointly avoid attitude-inconsistent information and seek attitude-consistent information, then only media providing one-sided perspectives can flourish. Citizens would gravitate toward likeminded news and, as a consequence, would develop polarized political views, would participate in politics more frequently, and would form less tolerant opinions of those with whom they disagree (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008; Mutz, 2006; Stroud, 2011). Furthermore, opportunities for opinion change based on contact with counter-attitudinal information would be diminished (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008), which could ultimately hinder the ability of factions within society to reach compromise.

If, however, citizens prefer attitude-consistent information but tolerate inconsistent information, more variability in the media is *possible*. One-sided media still could fare well if selective avoidance were a weaker motivator than selective approach, but such preferences leave open the possibility that more balanced coverage also could find an audience. This is valuable as exposure to diverse viewpoints can help citizens to develop more informed opinions and more tolerant attitudes (Cappella, Price, & Nir, 2002; Mutz, 2006). By understanding how citizens approach and avoid information, we will be better able to envision why different media environments thrive.

### **Arguments for Approach *and* Avoidance**

A number of theories suggest that *both* selective approach and avoidance are motivated by a common set of psychological processes. Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory suggests that moderate cognitive discomfort motivates a preference for attitude-consistent information *and* an aversion to counter-attitudinal information. A second theory notes that attitude-consistent messages are easier to process, making them more appealing for humans looking to conserve cognitive energy (Ziemke, 1980). If non-likeminded messages are cognitively taxing, then cognitive misers will avoid them, preferring instead to seek the likeminded. Third, attitude-consistent information is perceived to be of higher quality, which provides a rational basis for its selection (Fischer, Schulz-Hardt, & Frey, 2008). These theories do not specify that the urge to avoid is of similar magnitude to the urge to approach. Rather, they treat these two tendencies as inseparable. If one seeks attitude-consistent messages to dispel dissonance, to minimize cognitive processing, or to rely on superior sources, one at the same time avoids counter-attitudinal messages for the same reasons.

Many scholars have found evidence that can be read as supporting both selective approach and avoidance. When making decisions about exposure to information on controversial political issues, people select more attitude-consistent than attitude-inconsistent information (e.g., Taber & Lodge, 2006). People also are more likely to select politically likeminded media outlets (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Stroud, 2011) and to use the Internet in ways that confirm their partisan inclinations (Lawrence, Sides, & Farrell, 2010; Nie, Miller, Golde, Butler, & Winneg, 2010). Across these studies, ample evidence indicates that there is something quite compelling about attitude-consistent messages and, apparently, repellent about counter-attitudinal messages.

Thus, we begin with two confirmatory hypotheses. First, *the more pro-attitudinal information an article is purported to contain, the more frequently it will be selected* (H1),

reflecting participants' tendency to engage in selective approach. Second, we predict that *the more counter-attitudinal information an article is purported to contain, the less frequently it will be selected* (H2). This corresponds to individuals' tendency to engage in selective avoidance.

### **Avoidance as the Weaker Motivator**

Although various theories suggest that selective approach and avoidance co-occur, these tendencies may not be equally strong. Selective approach may be easier to enact than avoidance. Scholars from McGuire (1968) to Chaffee and his colleagues (2001) have argued that the evidence in favor of selective avoidance is weaker than the evidence favoring selective approach. There are several theoretical reasons to anticipate that the desire to avoid counter-attitudinal information is weaker than the desire to seek attitude-consistent information.

Many factors could motivate counter-attitudinal exposure. Personality attributes, such as defensive confidence and curiosity, can motivate the selection of information with which one disagrees (Albarracín & Mitchell, 2004; Festinger, 1957). Message characteristics, such as the personal relevance of a message, its perceived utility, and a lack of familiarity with the topic, also can prompt an individual to select discrepant information (Donsbach, 2009; Frey, 1986; Knobloch-Westerwick & Kleinman, 2011). Moods and emotions also can contribute to information preferences. When one is in a positive mood, for example, the desire for confirmatory information is attenuated (Jonas, Graupmann, & Frey, 2006). The experience of anxiety coupled with the belief that one will have to defend one's view motivates more exposure to counter-attitudinal perspectives (Valentino, et al., 2009). Anxiety brought about by reading an opinion-challenging article also prompts increased exposure to oppositional viewpoints (MacKuen, Wolak, Keele, & Marcus, 2010). Regardless of personality or context, selective avoidance may be weaker than selective approach because avoidance is but one of many

strategies that individuals have at their disposal when encountering information with which they disagree (McGuire, 1968). Individuals can misremember or counter-argue counter-attitudinal information. Indeed, there is evidence that people systematically discount information that challenges their beliefs (Redlawsk, 2002; Taber & Lodge, 2006). Furthermore, successfully defending against an attitude challenge can produce feelings of pleasure (Westen, Blagov, Harenski, Kilts, & Hamann, 2006). For these reasons, people may not have a strong motivation to engage in avoidance; instead, it may be easier, and perhaps more rewarding, to respond in other ways.

Prior work confirms that people do not always avoid contradictory information. Even though attitude-consistent political information often attracts more attention, people still attend to counter-attitudinal information (Chaffee, et al., 2001; Lau & Redlawsk, 2006). Studies have found that negative information about a preferred candidate, a clear example of a counter-attitudinal message, is approached (Donsbach, 1991; Meffert, Chung, Joiner, Waks, & Garst, 2006). This pattern persists when looking at the Internet. Gentzkow and Shapiro (2011) examined web tracking data and uncovered exposure to both liberal and conservative websites. Garrett and colleagues (Garrett, 2009b; Garrett, et al., 2013) show that gathering news online makes no difference in, or possibly increases, the frequency with which one encounters counter-attitudinal statements. Examining the selection of online news articles on political issues, for instance, Garrett (2009a) found that believing a news item contains opinion-challenging information is a positive predictor of selection, albeit weaker than believing it contains opinion-reinforcing information.

The work to date is suggestive: people do not avoid counter-attitudinal information in all instances. Questions about selective exposure remain, however, because previous experimental

tests suffer from important limitations. In many cases, the distinction between selective approach and avoidance has been obscured by research designs that make it impossible to disentangle these tendencies. When a research participant is asked to select a piece of information from a set of *either* confirmatory *or* contradictory information items, for example, it is not possible to tell whether the selection of confirmatory information represents selective approach, selective avoidance, or some combination of both. Other studies provide insufficient control over possible confounds. Garrett's quasi-experimental work (2009a) provides a foundation for the continued exploration of these ideas, but more research is needed for two main reasons. First, Garrett relied on subjects' perceptions about the extent to which articles reinforced and challenged their opinions. Other factors, such as subjects' desire to seem unbiased in their *assessment* of the news, could have affected these scores. Second, Garrett's design restricted the range of pro- and counter-attitudinal sources that participants encountered because it relied on real-world article lists generated via an online news aggregator.

Based on the notion that selective approach and selective avoidance differ, we predict that *the magnitude of the attraction to pro-attitudinal information will be greater than the magnitude of the aversion to counter-attitudinal information* (H3).

### **A Preference for Both Sides**

Studies pitting selective approach against selective avoidance also ignore potentially important interactive effects between confirmatory and contradictory information. We suggest that a news story including a mix of pro- and counter-attitudinal information could be more attractive than a one-sided alternative. This is likely as the types of content have complementary value. For example, successful rebuttals of counter-attitudinal information can be satisfying and are more likely if the source also includes congenial information. Thus, citizens who are



ambivalent about encountering counter-attitudinal views may find a mix of pro- and counter-attitudinal information attractive.

There is some empirical evidence for this idea. Chaffee and McLeod (1973), for example, found that citizens preferred a multi-candidate pamphlet put together by the League of Women Voters to purely partisan pamphlets endorsing particular candidates. Further, several studies suggest a positive relationship between confirmatory and contradictory information use (e.g., Chaffee, et al., 2001). There also are indications that citizens like balanced news; the Pew Research Center recently found that 68 percent of Americans say they prefer news without a political slant (Kohut, Doherty, Dimock, & Keeter, 2012). As these studies are based on cross-sectional survey data, however, they fall short of demonstrating that people seek a mix of confirmatory and contradictory information. People could encounter counter-attitudinal information merely based on its availability, rather than their desire to see it (Sears & Freedman, 1967), but we find the theoretical argument for an attraction to be compelling. We predict that *articles rated as having both high levels of pro-attitudinal and counter-attitudinal information will be selected most frequently* (H4).

### **Partisan Differences in Selectivity**

Examining selective approach and avoidance as distinct phenomena also allow us to consider the potential for partisan differences. Recent psychological research suggests that liberals and conservatives differ in ways that may have implications for their tendencies to engage in selective approach and avoidance. Jost and Amodio (2012) propose that ideology is a “powerful motivational force” (p. 62) and review research showing that ideology is related to how people react in novel situations and how they perceive the world. Conservatives, for example, appreciate order, familiarity, and unambiguity more than their liberal counterparts

(Carney, Jost, Gosling, & Potter, 2008; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). Further, conservatives react more negatively to aversive stimuli than liberals (review by Jost & Amodio, 2012; also see Shook & Fazio, 2009; Tetlock, 1989). For example, conservatives experience higher arousal (expressed as increased skin conductance) than liberals in the face of aversive visual stimuli (Dodd et al., 2012). Shook and Fazio (2009) found that when playing a game that permitted players to approach or avoid both positive and negative information, conservatives were more likely than liberals to adopt an avoidant strategy. Through this strategy, conservatives effectively limited their exposure to potentially negative information. Yet the link between avoiding negative information and avoiding counter-attitudinal information is not altogether clear. After all, pro-attitudinal information can be negative. More directly related to our research, Nam, Jost, and Van Bavel (2013) used the “induced compliance paradigm” to analyze partisan differences in responding to dissonance-arousing situations. When given a choice of whether or not to write a counter-attitudinal political essay, those preferring Republican presidents were less likely to do so in comparison to those preferring Democratic presidents. The differences did not appear when study participants were given *little* choice over writing the essay, or when the choice did not have to do with politics. Consistent with the findings about Republican responses to other forms of aversive stimuli, these findings suggest that Republicans may be more prone to avoid negative and counter-attitudinal stimuli. Based on this literature, we predict that there will be partisan differences in selectivity such that *Republicans will show a greater aversion to counter-attitudinal information than Democrats* (H5).

To this point, the psychological literature has emphasized correlates of political conservatism such as responses to threatening stimuli and openness to new experiences. This previous research provides a solid foundation for hypothesizing partisan differences in selective

avoidance, but offers little guidance on whether to expect partisan differences in selective approach. As we propose that selective approach and avoidance are distinct phenomena, literature suggesting that Republicans may avoid disproportionately counter-attitudinal information more than Democrats is not a firm basis for proposing that Republicans seek pro-attitudinal information more than Democrats. For this reason, we ask: *Are there partisan differences in preferences for pro-attitudinal information (RQ1)?*

### **Method**

We conducted an online experiment to examine how pro- and counter-attitudinal information independently influence individuals' exposure decisions. The experiment was conducted utilizing a matched sample of 650 participants representing the general U.S. population. YouGov (formerly Polimetrix), a non-partisan opinion research firm, constructed the sample by recruiting members from its opt-in online panel whose attributes most closely matched those of a "target" sample, a stratified random sample of Americans. Matching was based on demographic characteristics including age ( $M = 45.8$ ,  $SD = 15.9$ ), race (70.6% White, 12.2% Black, 10.0% Hispanic), gender (51.5% male), education (40% high school or less, 26% up to 4-year college degree, 12.2% post-graduate), party identification (34.3% Democrat, 25.7% Republican, 29.5% Independent), and attention to news, a proxy for political interest (34.8% follow news most of the time, 39.2% some of the time, 23.5% less often). The resultant sample is politically knowledgeable, scoring higher on Delli Carpini and Keeter's (1996) four-item political knowledge scale than respondents in the large representative National Annenberg Election Survey ( $M = 2.7$ ,  $SD = 1.2$  versus  $M = 1.0$ ,  $SD = 1.4$  in the 2008 NAES).

### **Procedure**

The experiment was conducted between November 11 and 19, 2009. Participants were

presented with a list of headlines from four news stories related to the abortion debate. The order in which the stories were presented was randomized across participants, and each story was accompanied by a two-line excerpt and a small graphic that summarized how well the linked story represented both pro-life and pro-choice perspectives (described in more detail below). Participants then had up to five minutes to read as many or as few of the stories as they desired. Such time limits are commonly employed in selective exposure research, both because they are realistic—most online news users spend relatively little time reading news—and because they can promote selectivity, making the effects easier to detect (Fischer, et al., 2005; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2012). The website automatically tracked which stories individuals chose to view. Participants could proceed to the next stage of the study, a brief questionnaire tapping demographics and abortion attitudes, at any time. If participants were still reading at the end of the allotted time, they automatically advanced to the next stage as soon as they finished viewing the current story. After completing the questionnaire, participants were thanked and debriefed.

The stories were realistic, but fictional, accounts written by a journalist based on recent controversial events related to the abortion debate (see online Appendix). The stories were of comparable length (317-350 words), and each was set in a different large U.S. city (Boston, Columbus, Jacksonville, and San Francisco). Although each story concerned a separate news event, we attempted to craft stories that were comparably newsworthy. For example, one story featured a public political action and the accompanying counteraction (“‘Walk for Life’ attracts abortion-rights protestors”), while another focused on protests over the decision by a small regional group of hospitals to end their affiliation with insurers that cover abortion (“Health care provider severs relationship with insurer over abortion”). Importantly, the four stories were constructed with an eye toward balance: pro-life and pro-choice perspectives were given

comparable coverage in terms of word count, key ideas, sources cited, etc.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

The graphic accompanying each story was a chart composed of three five-point bars (see Figure 1; a screenshot of the full interface is provided in the online appendix, Figure A1). Instructions presented at the start of the study and repeated at the top of the story-selection page explained how to interpret the graphic: the first bar was blue and corresponded to the amount of pro-choice information a story contained; the second was red and corresponded to the amount of pro-life information; and the third was yellow and corresponded to how much additional information unrelated to the abortion debate there was in the story. The instructions also explained that these scores were computer-generated and accurately represented the stories' contents. Unbeknownst to participants, however, the amounts of pro-choice and pro-life information were actually randomly assigned for each run of the experiment, yielding four score combinations: (1) high (scored as four out of five) pro-choice and low (scored as two out of five) pro-life, (2) low pro-choice and high pro-life, (3) low on both, or (4) high on both. In all cases, the third score was set so that the average of the three scores was three. Randomizing the cues ensured that levels of pro- and counter-attitudinal information would not be confounded with other aspects of the stories that might attract participants' attention.

Although the indicators used here are a ruse, the idea that news systems might automatically detect and display content indicators is not as far-fetched as it may seem at first blush. There are tools in use today that convey the anticipated political orientation of news sites through color coded links (Baio, 2012). Microsoft's search engine, Bing, allows users to filter news results by political leaning (Schwartz, 2012). And several researchers are working to build systems that encourage users to adopt more diverse news diets (Munson & Resnick, 2010; Park,

Kang, Chung, & Song, 2012). It is plausible that the fictional indicators used here could be commonplace in the next decade. Perhaps more importantly, these explicit indicators can serve as proxies for the less reliable indicators on which people rely every day. For instance, many consumers associate different news outlets with different political ideologies, though these assessments are sometimes flawed (Baum & Gussin, 2007).

## **Measures**

As noted above, story selection, the dependent variable, was unobtrusively logged. Presenting 650 participants with four stories each yields a total of 2,600 exposure choices. Each participant could choose up to four stories, and most selected two ( $M = 2.0$ ,  $SD = 1.3$ ; see Table A1 in Online Appendix for distribution), producing a total of 1,327 selected stories in all (51% of the total possible selections).

The study also included self-reported measures of participants' attitudes toward abortion using an established index of three five-point scales such as whether abortion is un/acceptable in all circumstances, whether respondents favor/oppose abortion rights, and beliefs about whether abortion is right or wrong (see online Appendix, and Albarracín & Mitchell, 2004). The items were summed, and a dummy indicator variable was constructed such that scores higher than nine were coded as pro-choice and score less than nine were coded as pro-life (41.5% pro-choice; 45.4% pro-life). Participants holding a neutral stance (13.1%) on the abortion issue or who declined to state a position were omitted from subsequent analyses as it was not possible to classify the stimuli as either pro- or counter-attitudinal for these individuals. This leaves 544 participants who selected 1,107 (51%) of the 2,176 stories presented.<sup>1</sup>

Pro- and counter-attitudinal information levels associated with each story were coded as dummy variables based on the participants' attitude toward abortion and on the visual indicator

representing the story's political content. Stories were coded high on pro-attitudinal information for participants classified as pro-life (pro-choice) when the content cue indicated high levels of pro-life (pro-choice) information. Similarly, stories were coded high on counter-attitudinal exposure when the cue indicated high levels of information representing the opposite position. Using this scheme, the selection of stories high in pro- (counter-) attitudinal information (1) was contrasted with the selection of stories low in pro- (counter-) attitudinal information (0). Because content cues were randomly assigned, participants were always selecting among an even mix of pro- and counter- attitudinal information.

Note also that we tested the models with controls for political knowledge, attention to political news (days of watching cable news in the past week), and issue position, but these factors were not significant in any of the models and including them had no influence on the magnitude or significance of the variables of theoretical interest. For these reasons, the controls are omitted throughout.

## **Results**

As a manipulation check, participants were asked whether “the automatically assigned story summaries (colored bar charts) are trustworthy,” responding on a five-point scale anchored by strongly disagree (1) and strongly agree (5). Focusing on individuals who chose to view at least one story, we find that only about a quarter (24.5%) of participants reported that they disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, suggesting that those who distrusted the content cues were in the minority ( $M = 2.96$ ,  $SD = .89$ ). Furthermore, trust did not influence the number of stories selected ( $diff. = .1$ ,  $p = .56$ ) or the perception that the stories favored one side more than the other ( $diff. = .1$ ,  $p = .21$ ). Excluding those who distrusted the content cues did not change the direction of the relationships reported in the results that follow, although the reduced

sample size did alter a few significance levels (see Table A3 in online appendix). These differences are noted in the relevant sections below.

### **Influences of pro-and counter-attitudinal information**

We begin with a brief recap of our approach. Independently manipulating the levels of pro- and counter-attitudinal information purportedly included in the news stories allows us to assess the unique influence of these two types of information. If we find that stories containing high levels of pro-attitudinal content are more likely to be selected than those containing lower levels after controlling for counter-attitudinal content, we have evidence of selective approach. Similarly, if stories are less likely to be selected when marked as containing higher levels of counter-attitudinal content, regardless of their pro-attitudinal content, selective avoidance is occurring.

H1 concerns selective approach, predicting that the more pro-attitudinal information a news story is purported to contain based on the bar-chart content indicator, the more likely an individual is to select it. The data support this prediction. The simplest evidence of this is the fact that participants selected 56% of the stories ostensibly including a high amount of pro-attitudinal information compared to only 46% of the stories said to contain less, a statistically significant difference,  $z = 4.50, p < .001$  (see Table 1 for a more detailed summary). A more rigorous test is needed, however, to account for repeated within-participant measures. This is achieved using a multilevel mixed-effects logistic regression, predicting story selection while allowing each participant a unique random intercept. Table 2 summarizes the model coefficients.<sup>2</sup> Focusing our attention on the stage 1 results, stories that scored highly on the dichotomous pro-attitudinal measure are more likely to be selected than those with low scores. A potential limitation of this model is that with only four stories, individuals who wanted to read multiple stories were



constrained in their ability to act on their preferences. To account for this, we replicated the analyses predicting only participants' first selection, and find that pro-attitudinal information remains a highly significant predictor (see Table A4 in the online appendix).<sup>3</sup>

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

The evidence for selective approach is in stark contrast to the evidence for selective avoidance. Consistent with conventional interpretations of selective exposure, H2 predicts that the more counter-attitudinal information a story contains, the less likely individuals are to select it. We fail to find support for this prediction. Returning to Table 1 and repeating the simple analytic approach used above suggests that this effect is virtually non-existent: participants selected 50.8% of the stories said to contain large amounts of counter-attitudinal information, versus 50.9% of the stories that did not, an obviously non-significant difference,  $z = .04$ ,  $p = .97$ . The results of the random-intercept logistic regression affirm our failure to detect a difference based on this predictor (see Table 2, stage 1). One must go out three decimal places to see how the coefficient differs from zero,  $B = -.005$ ,  $SE = .10$ ,  $p = .96$ . Given the large number of observations—2,176 exposure decisions by 544 participants—and the very small coefficient, it is highly unlikely that the failure to achieve significance is due to a lack of statistical power.

Taken together, this pair of results is consistent with H3, which posits that pro-attitudinal information will do more to promote exposure than counter-attitudinal information does to constrain it. A statistical test comparing the magnitude of the coefficients on these predictors confirms this is correct: the magnitude of the increase in exposure associated with pro-attitudinal information is much larger than the (non-significant) decrease associated with counter-attitudinal information,  $\chi^2(1) = 12.36$ ,  $p < .001$ .

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Next we turn to the proposed interaction between pro- and counter-attitudinal information described in H4, which predicted that individuals would be more likely to select stories high on both types of information than stories high on just one dimension. The data do not support this prediction. An interaction between pro- and counter-attitudinal information is added in the second stage of the model predicting story selection (see Table 2, stage 2). The coefficient on this term is quite large, but it fails to achieve significance,  $B = .35$ ,  $SE = .19$ ,  $p = .07$ . Thus, despite the large number of cases, we do not find evidence for this interaction effect. We do note, however, that among those who expressed no skepticism toward the content indicators, the interaction was significant,  $B = .56$ ,  $p < .05$ .

### **Partisan differences**

The possible moderating role of party affiliation is our next topic. H5 predicts that Republicans will show a greater aversion to counter-attitudinal information than Democrats. The bottom portion of Table 1 suggests that this is the case; only 39.4% of Republicans selected stories high in counter-attitudinal information and low in pro-attitudinal information in comparison to 45.9% of Democrats and 46.2% of Independents,  $\chi^2(2) = 7.65$ ,  $p < .05$ . Again, we use an extension of the regression model described above to account for the repeated within-participant measures. The results suggest that Republicans show a greater aversion to counter-attitudinal content than non-Republicans, though additional analyses suggest that this tentative finding requires more research (see Table 2, stage 3). The coefficient on the interaction between the amount of counter-attitudinal information included in a story and Republican party affiliation (as opposed to Democratic or other affiliations<sup>4</sup>) is negative and significant,  $B = -.52$ ,  $SE = .22$ ,  $p < .05$ . The coefficient, however, fell short of significance when we limited our analyses to the subsample of participants who most trusted the content cues,  $B = -.44$ ,  $SE = .26$ ,  $p = .09$  and

when we limit our analyses to predicting only the first news item selected,  $B = -.13$ ,  $SE = .23$ ,  $p = .58$  (see Tables A3 and A4 in the Online Appendix). We return to these discrepancies in the discussion section.

[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

To explore this relationship more fully, we reran the model for each party affiliation: Republicans, Democrats, and everyone else (see Table 3). The differences are striking. The first model suggests that although Republicans do not engage in selective approach, they exhibit a strong aversion to stories that are *disproportionately* counter-attitudinal,  $B = -.79$ ,  $SE = .26$ ,  $p < .01$ . We say “disproportionately” because the aversion effectively disappears when counter-attitudinal information is accompanied by a comparable amount of information that is supportive of the participant’s position. The moderating relationship is evidenced by the positive and highly significant interaction between pro- and counter-attitudinal information,  $B = .85$ ,  $SE = .36$ ,  $p < .01$ . The counter-attitudinal and interaction coefficients are nearly identical in magnitude, but of opposite sign, suggesting that among Republicans, the negative influence of dissonant content on story selection is offset by its positive influence on selection in the presence of more consonant information. Furthermore, and in contrast to the discrepancies noted above, this pattern of relationships persists when we exclude those who distrust the content cues (see Table A5 in the online Appendix).

The second model shown in Table 3 indicates that Democrats, unlike Republicans, exhibit a clear preference for pro-attitudinal information,  $B = .63$ ,  $SE = .25$ ,  $p < .05$ , while remaining uninfluenced by the presence of counter-attitudinal information either on its own or in tandem with more congenial content. A comparable pattern is evident among Independents and those who named third-party affiliations,  $B = .48$ ,  $SE = .22$ ,  $p < .05$ . The results for Democrats

are substantively unchanged when we include only those who did not report skepticism toward the content indicators (see Table A5 in the online appendix.), but the effect of proattitudinal information among those with other non-Republican party identifications was rendered non-significant.<sup>5</sup>

One obvious threat to the interpretations offered here is that we might be confounding issue position with party identification. We test this in two ways. We first examine the relationship between partisanship and abortion attitudes. In our data, the correlation is modest: although most Republicans (66%) are pro-life, Democrats are more evenly divided (47% prochoice, 38% prolife, 15% neutral). Second, we test our regression models substituting issue position for party identification. In these analyses (see Tables A6 and A7 in the online appendix), the moderating effects disappear. As the effects are not significant, and as the relationship between partisanship and selection remains in the presence of controls for issue position, we conclude that our findings are not about issue position, but are, as we have argued, related to partisanship.

These results paint distinctly different portraits of news exposure for Republicans and those with other partisan affiliations. Political attitudes influence story selection for all respondents, but members of different parties have markedly different selection strategies. In short, selective approach is fairly common and no one engages in strict selective avoidance.

## **Discussion**

An experiment conducted online with a large and demographically diverse sample of adults finds evidence that politically motivated selective exposure is composed of two separate processes: selective approach and selective avoidance. The effect sizes of pro- and counterattitudinal information on political news story selection are distinct. In the aggregate, pro-

attitudinal information has a much stronger influence on story selection than counter-attitudinal information. Stories purported to provide opinion reinforcement are selected more often. The presence of information challenging an individual's preferred position, however, has no statistically significant influence on story selection, despite a dataset representing well over two-thousand individual exposure decisions.

Perhaps more striking, the results suggest that selection patterns are affected by party identification. We see some evidence that Democrats, Independents, and those with third-party affiliations tend to engage in selective approach, but not selective avoidance. Crossing to the other side of the aisle, we find that Republicans show no tendency toward selective approach; instead, they engage in selective avoidance of predominantly counter-attitudinal content. Bear in mind, however, that these partisan differences did not hold up when predicting only the news item selected first, though the direction and magnitude of the coefficients were comparable (see Table A3 in the online Appendix); and that they did not hold up consistently when excluding participants who expressed skepticism toward the content cues (contrast Tables A4 and A5 in the online Appendix.) It is clear that partisans engage in selective exposure, and there is at least tentative evidence that their primary mode of selectivity differs such that Republicans avoid challenge in some circumstances, while Democrats and those with other partisan identities consistently seek out reinforcement.

To the extent that these patterns replicate in other issue contexts, the real-world implications are important. Given sufficient control over the news environment, consumers of all political stripes will select a media diet that includes more pro-attitudinal than counter-attitudinal information. More importantly from a deliberative perspective, *no group prefers disproportionately pro-attitudinal sources to more balanced alternatives*. If citizens had only

partisan stories from which to choose, the results here suggest that people would gravitate toward likeminded, and avoid counter-attitudinal, stories. The results also suggest, however, that if stories containing *both* pro and counter-attitudinal stories were available, they also would be selected. Consider: Republicans will actively avoid stories with a clear Democratic slant; Democrats will prefer stories that offer a more diverse perspective to those with a Republican bias; but both groups will prefer an alternative which they consider to be more balanced to a one-sided source biased in favor of the opposing party.

Democratic theorists may find these results encouraging. Cross-cutting exposure can increase tolerance toward those who hold different points of view, and can help to keep polarization in check (Mutz, 2006, but see Meffert et al., 2006). This is not to say that exposure to dissonant ideas changes attitudes or beliefs; results are mixed regarding the persuasive potential of counter-attitudinal information (Feldman, 2011; Miller, 2002). Yet the preferences evident in this study suggest that media choice does not inevitably lead to attitude-reinforcing echo chambers or ignorance of others' viewpoints. Nevertheless, more research is needed to clarify the democratic implications of the patterns uncovered here.

On first read, these results may appear to be contradicted by the success of partisan cable news outlets such as *MSNBC* and *Fox News*. Numerous studies demonstrate that partisans are drawn toward stories from likeminded sources (see, for example, Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Mutz, 2006; Stroud, 2011). Yet our results suggest that a preference for likeminded content does not preclude the possibility of more diverse exposure. Individuals in this study exhibit a willingness to view news stories that include a mix of viewpoints. How can both sets of results be true?

The key to reconciling these seemingly contradictory findings is to recognize that source cues and content cues have distinct implications. We suggest that perceptual biases lead people

to prefer partisan sources precisely because they perceive them to offer a broader mix of views than found in less partisan alternatives. Ideologues tend to see neutral stories as antagonistic to their interests (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). They also see likeminded political content as more neutral than content representing opposing views (Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, & Chih-Yun Chia, 2001). Partisan outlets may be preferred because partisans see them as more *neutral* than other offerings, not because they want to avoid differing viewpoints. Content indicators eliminate this source of bias by allowing all participants to agree on which news stories are balanced, which favor a pro-life perspective, and which favor a pro-choice perspective. As a result, story selection based on content cues is less prone to excluding counter-attitudinal information than selection based on source attributions.

An important limitation of this study is its consideration of a single issue. Abortion was chosen as a rigorous test of the hypotheses: it is a value-laden issue where argument familiarity is high and, at least at the time of the study, the threat of major policy change is low. In comparison to the mid-1990s, when pro-choice beliefs had the upper-hand, today's public is more evenly split between pro-choice and pro-life perspectives (Saad, 2011). It is almost certain that these results would be different had participants been facing an important overhaul of U.S. abortion policy, in which case counter-attitudinal information may have been uniquely attractive to those who opposed the impending change (see Knobloch-Westerwick & Kleinman, 2011). There is, however, no clear theoretical reason to think that other controversial issues would substantively alter the exposure patterns observed here, although the possibility exists.

The strength of this study—it is the most carefully controlled experimental test of the distinction between selective approach and avoidance to date—is also a potential weakness. This test relied on an artificial experimental manipulation that allowed us to examine how people

respond to explicit cues. The order of the content cues was not randomized; the pro-choice content bar always appeared first. This could have resulted in Republicans displaying greater selective avoidance and Democrats greater selective approach. Whether this was the case requires additional research. Further, the manipulation may have made people more conscious of their exposure decisions than they typically are. In the real world, it is likely that people's decisions are influenced by subtler, more implicit indicators and considerations. Yet other selective exposure research has demonstrated that individuals are influenced by explicit indicators about a news story, such as its source (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). Further, new tools resembling the content indicators used here are in development (see, for example, Baio, 2012; Munson & Resnick, 2010). Thus our unambiguous content indicators not only have a real-world equivalent, they also allow us to isolate our theoretical interest in disentangling approach and avoidance. Although there are studies showing similar patterns outside of the lab (e.g., Garrett, 2009a; Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011), additional exploration was merited to overcome the shortcomings of prior work.

Another important limitation to note is that participants' abortion attitude was measured after story selection, creating risk that story selection could have influenced attitude, instead of the other way round. None of the analyses presented here concern attitude strength, however, and we argue that the chance that an individual would switch sides on the abortion issue, from pro-choice to pro-life or vice versa, based on less than five minutes of exposure to a handful of carefully balanced news stories on the topic is vanishingly small. It is conceivable that reading may have moved some participants from a neutral stance to one that was slightly more opinionated, leading us to misclassify these individuals. However, limiting our analyses to those with strong attitudes did not change our results, so this threat appears small.



Ultimately, this study represents a significant advance in our understanding of selective exposure, and of the role of partisanship in shaping selective approach and selective avoidance. The observed differences are both theoretically and substantively important. In theoretical terms, it is critical that we conceptualize selective exposure accurately. Several prominent scholars recently have embraced a more classical view of selective exposure, treating approach and avoidance as linked (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Iyengar, et al., 2008; Nie, et al., 2010). This research suggests, however, that they are distinct. To continue to presume that citizens are equally attracted to likeminded news and averse to other views is to fundamentally misunderstand the nature of the phenomena in question. Furthermore, to ignore party-based differences risks obscuring an important moderating mechanism. Individuals exhibit a comparable willingness to engage diverse viewpoints, but there are important partisan differences to which scholars should attend.

More practically, the relatively weak aggregate influence of counter-attitudinal information on story selection is modestly encouraging from the perspective of deliberation. The rating system used in this study could be used as a starting point for news outlets or online news personalization systems interested in counteracting selective exposure tendencies (see Garrett & Resnick, 2011). Effective decision-making in a democracy rests squarely on citizens' ability to weigh options and reach informed judgments. This capacity is undermined by an information environment in which individuals are shielded from ideas that are different from their own. This research suggests that although such an environment is still possible, it is not an inevitable outcome of individual news preferences.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> There is risk that so narrowly defining what counts as “neutral” could lead some individuals to be arbitrarily classified as pro-life or pro-choice. A more conservative test treats participants who scored between seven and 11 on the index as neutral so that the abortion attitude indicator reflects more extreme attitudes. This leaves 379 individuals, who made 1,516 story selection decisions. The magnitude and direction of the effects are consistent throughout, though interactions that were approaching significance in the full sample are not significant here. (See Table A2 in the online appendix.)

<sup>2</sup> The amounts of pro- and counter-attitudinal information exactly predict the amount of information shown by the third cue. This variable is omitted to avoid perfect multicollinearity.

<sup>3</sup> Similarly, participants who chose to view all four stories may have faced an even more extreme lack of choice. Bear in mind though that participants could choose not to view additional articles; indeed, selective avoidance predicts that this is precisely what an individual would do when facing high levels of counter-attitudinal information. Nevertheless, running the analyses excluding the 122 individuals who read all four of the stories had no substantive influence on the results. For example, in this first analysis, the pro-attitudinal information coefficient,  $B = .485$ ,  $p < .001$ , is nearly identical to that of the full sample.

<sup>4</sup> The model includes 208 respondents not identifying as Democrats or Republicans (e.g., Independents) who could be classified as either favoring or opposing abortion rights. As shown in Table 3, there were no substantive differences between Democrats and these individuals which is why they were combined in Table 2.

<sup>5</sup> We also tested a three-way interaction between pro-attitudinal high, counter-attitudinal high, and Republican (and all lower-order interactions) to Stage 3 of Table 2. The resultant interaction was marginally significant and in line with the interpretations discussed in the text.

Table 1. Percent of stories selected by condition, grouped by party affiliation

|  | Hi discrepant | Lo discrepant | Total |
|--|---------------|---------------|-------|
| <u><i>All participants (n=2,176)</i></u> |               |               |       |
| Hi consistent                            | 57.3%         | 54.0%         | 55.7% |
| Lo consistent                            | 44.3%         | 47.8%         | 46.0% |
| Total                                    | 50.9%         | 50.9%         | 50.9% |
| <u><i>Republicans (n=608)</i></u>        |               |               |       |
| Hi consistent                            | 52.6%         | 51.3%         | 52.0% |
| Lo consistent                            | 39.4%         | 55.9%         | 47.7% |
| Total                                    | 46.1%         | 52.6%         | 49.8% |
| <u><i>Democrats (n=732)</i></u>          |               |               |       |
| Hi consistent                            | 60.1%         | 55.2%         | 57.7% |
| Lo consistent                            | 45.9%         | 43.7%         | 44.8% |
| Total                                    | 53.0%         | 49.5%         | 51.2% |
| <u><i>Other (n=832)</i></u>              |               |               |       |
| Hi consistent                            | 58.2%         | 54.8%         | 56.5% |
| Lo consistent                            | 46.2%         | 45.2%         | 45.7% |
| Total                                    | 52.2%         | 50.0%         | 51.1% |

Note: Cell values indicate the proportion of stories selected according to story type. The proportion was calculated by dividing the number of times a story type was selected by the number of times the story type was presented.

Table 2. Predicting story selection

|  | Stage 1                             | Stage 2                             | Stage 3                             |
|--|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <i>Article-level (level-1) fixed effects</i>       |                                     |                                     |                                     |
| Pro-attitudinal high                               | 0.49 <sup>***</sup><br>(0.10)       | 0.32 <sup>*</sup><br>(0.14)         | 0.43 <sup>**</sup><br>(0.15)        |
| Counter-attitudinal high                           | -0.00<br>(0.10)                     | -0.18<br>(0.14)                     | -0.03<br>(0.15)                     |
| Pro-attitudinal high X<br>Counter-attitudinal high | —                                   | 0.35 <sup>†</sup><br>(0.19)         | 0.35 <sup>†</sup><br>(0.19)         |
| Intercept  | -0.20 <sup>*</sup><br>(0.11)        | -0.11<br>(0.11)                     | -0.22 <sup>†</sup><br>(0.12)        |
| <i>Individual-level (level-2) fixed effects</i>    |                                     |                                     |                                     |
| Republican <sup>a</sup>                            | —                                   | —                                   | 0.39 <sup>†</sup><br>(0.22)         |
| <i>Cross-level interactions</i>                    |                                     |                                     |                                     |
| Pro-attitudinal X Republican                       | —                                   | —                                   | -0.38 <sup>†</sup><br>(0.22)        |
| Counter-attitudinal X<br>Republican                | —                                   | —                                   | -0.52 <sup>*</sup><br>(0.22)        |
| <i>Variance of random effects</i>                  |                                     |                                     |                                     |
| Intercept  | 1.13<br>(0.09)                      | 1.13<br>(0.09)                      | 1.13<br>(0.09)                      |
| Observations                                       | 2176                                | 2176                                | 2172                                |
| Participants                                       | 544                                 | 544                                 | 543                                 |
| Likelihood-ratio test                              | $\chi^2(1) = 109.0,$<br>$p < .0001$ | $\chi^2(1) = 109.65$<br>$p < .0001$ | $\chi^2(1) = 109.8,$<br>$p < .0001$ |

Notes.

Random-intercept logistic regression model, grouped by participant

Standard errors in parentheses

a. Reference category Democrat or other partisan affiliation

<sup>†</sup>  $p < .1$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Table 3. Predicting story selection, by party

|  | Republicans                        | Democrats                         | Other                             |
|--|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <i>Article-level (level-1) fixed effects</i>       |                                    |                                   |                                   |
| Pro-attitudinal high                               | -0.22<br>(0.25)                    | 0.63*<br>(0.25)                   | 0.48*<br>(0.22)                   |
| Counter-attitudinal high                           | -0.79**<br>(0.26)                  | 0.12<br>(0.25)                    | 0.05<br>(0.22)                    |
| Pro-attitudinal high X<br>Counter-attitudinal high | 0.85*<br>(0.36)                    | 0.15<br>(0.35)                    | 0.12<br>(0.31)                    |
| Intercept  | -0.28<br>(0.19)                    | -0.35<br>(0.20)                   | -0.24<br>(0.17)                   |
| <i>Variance of random effects</i>                  |                                    |                                   |                                   |
| Intercept  | 0.94<br>(0.17)                     | 1.41<br>(0.17)                    | -0.24<br>(0.17)                   |
| Observations                                       | 608                                | 732                               | 832                               |
| Participants                                       | 152                                | 183                               | 208                               |
| Likelihood-ratio test                              | $\chi^2(1) = 18.6,$<br>$p < .0001$ | $\chi^2(1) = 59.4$<br>$p < .0001$ | $\chi^2(1) = 36.4$<br>$p < .0001$ |

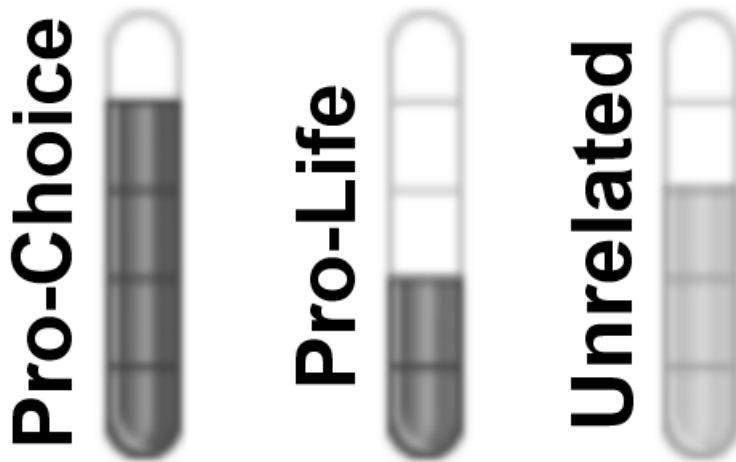
Notes.

Random-intercept logistic regression model, grouped by participant

Standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

Figure 1. Sample content indicator



Note. See online appendix for screenshot of full story selection interface

NOTE TO PRODUCTION STAFF: ADDITIONAL PAGE APPROVED BY EDITOR. THIS FIGURE DOES NOT NEED TO BE LARGE, JUST LEGIBLE (1" HIGH IS PROBABLY SUFFICIENT). IT IS INCLUDED AT A HIGH RESOLUTION HERE FOR EASE OF PRODUCTION. OTHER FORMATS ARE AVAILABLE AS NEEDED.