

Whom to Blame: News Reporting, Partisanship, and Political Polarization in the U.S.

Political polarization, as an increasingly popular topic, has gained momentum over the past a few decades not only in scholarly publications but also in public discussions. The United States, in many people's eyes, has never been less united since the Civil War (Pew Research Center, 2019). The nation has become fractured along partisan and ideological positions: Republican vs. Democrats, Liberal vs. Conservative, Red vs. Blue, etc. When it comes to what causes such a disappointing political phenomenon, one of the major academic focuses lies on media effects. A plethora of previous studies revealed that bad journalism should be primarily responsible for the political dividedness among the public in the U.S. (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016). However, I argue that it is not so much media effects as the diverging parties that lead and continuously increase the political polarization in the American public; furthermore, journalism can be a potential cure to moderate the political discussion as an effective method toward the reunion of the whole nation.

Journalistic perspectives originate in the party polarization. The fundamental role of journalism is to be a bridge between the political leaders and the public. By telling the factual stories about political parties, journalists usually deliver the first-hand information to the audience. However, no journalist can achieve a neutral framework in their storytelling, which means picking a position in their news reporting either consciously or non-consciously is inevitable. Since most news media outlets are for-profit organizations in a revenue-driven business, whoever satisfies their profitable goals or long-term interests will win the heart of their shareholders. In this case, journalism merely serves as a convenient and practical tool in political competitions. Political parties take advantage of journalism and extend their battlefields to any news media platform to pursue the maximum of their civilian support. In other words, news

industries exchange their labors with political parties for the promise of their future incomes. The ideology behind the news media is to maximize its interests by binding with political powers. Journalists get their paychecks from their news companies while those companies try to build solid relationships with political powers to stabilize their sustainable revenues. Such an economical chain indeed explains the purpose of weaponized news media in the political competitions and discloses the partisan antipathy in polarized politics.

With preset tones and angles of reporting, the style of news coverage on politics will be similar to sports reporting, especially based on the two-party system in the U.S. The public focus in the political arena is on the result, and so is the news media. Election campaigns through news media are the best examples in political games. The only thing that matters in political elections is winning. The winner-or-loser mindset furthermore develops into the us-or-them scope for the audience to perceive political news. In the same vein, mainstream news media are increasing framing political issues as “either/or” choices (Crouch & Rozell, 2014). News media, in this process, enlarge the gap between two partisan groups by dramatizing the political events as political sports. However, reporting on political events with “either/or” framework cannot justify the accusation of news media to prompt the polarized public because both sides can harbor the same mindset, and it is hard to identify which one starts to influence another first.

Media effects such as agenda-setting, framing, and priming undoubtedly influences the audience’s attitudes to different candidates and parties, and eventually on their voting behaviors. However, it is campaign teams who determine the effectiveness of media effects. The results of the political election are not the major concerns to news media unless they are the candidates. The main goal of media is to seek every opportunity to make money from both polarized parties and divided audiences. On the other hand, news media is only one platform for political

campaigns, which only reaches a proportionally limited group of people who read and watch news frequently. This way, journalism seems inadequate to influence the majority of the audience. Most elites and middle class have habits of reading newspapers regularly, but most of them have established partisan identities that would not be easily changed by the news media. As for non-elite and non-middle-class groups, they usually have less time as well as lower interest in political issues compared to elites and middle-class groups. As a result, they are more likely to change their political positions by different opinions including news media. Without fixed partisan identity, those people influence the political polarization by reducing the degree of dividedness among the audience because they are not contributing to the extremeness of the political positions. Instead, they change their attitudes on political parties and even voting decisions based on the media and non-media exposures to political issues. It is not hard to imagine that political polarization will still be a matter of fact without the appearance of journalism. Therefore, even though media effects have the power to affect people's voting and political positions, news media are not necessarily able to cause the polarization but only to reinforce the already polarized attitudes from the audience.

Partisan identity is one of the most influential factors in political polarization. Emerging in the mass public in recent years, affective polarization has become a new type of division and measurement in political polarization. The affective polarization examines how "ordinary Americans increasingly dislike and distrust from the other party" (Iyengar, Lelkes, Levendusky, Malhotra, & Westwood, 2018, p 1). The origins of affective polarization to the power can be traced as social identity, particularly partisan positions in the context of political polarization. For example, both Democrats and Republicans claim that the other party's members are "hypocritical, selfish, and closed-minded, and they are unwilling to socialize across party lines,

or even to partner with opponents in a variety of activities” (Iyengar et al., 2018, p 1). Such unwillingness to compromise between separate parties can be inherited from one generation to another through family members, and family’s influence on picking political positions can be more powerful than the media effects. Meanwhile, partisan identities not only generate more negative views of the opposing party but also have an impact on how people read and watch the news. For example, from the perspective of the selective exposure theory, many people decide to read and watch news that only align with their partisan identities. Therefore, they choose specific news media based on the acknowledgment that they already known news media are politically biased to confirm their political beliefs. In this process, partisan identities drive people to become more polarized by selecting and consuming news media products accordingly. Again, journalism becomes the provider of the materials to the audience to secure their partisan representations and to support their parties intentionally or unintentionally.

News media menus truthfully serve the audience’s tastes. In-group favoritism and out-group animosity have expanded into almost every part of the social life and also established the normalization of the public attitudes to the political news coverage. Rather than portraying different political perspectives in news stories, media outlets begin to show their partisan preference as an open secret based on the ideological composition of their audience (Pew Research Center, 2014). Therefore, it is no surprise to note that Fox News has become synonymous with the conservative. Once the news media recognize the ideological disunity and partisan antipathy among their audience, they begin to deliver personalized news fed through every possible channel with use and gratification strategies. In the age of the internet, the proliferation of hashtag strategies on social media and a clicked-based business model allow both news media and audience to fulfill their appetite with fruitful outcomes from the political

polarization. For news media, polarized politics and audience as their blooming markets are the guarantees to their readership and revenues. As for the audience group, as long as they are treating the opposing party as an enemy, they will self-serve the polarized news coverage to mirror their partisan identities.

Political leadership blinds the eyes of democracy. The purpose of democracy serves as a collaborative platform that contributes to the unity of the public. However, ideological disunity and partisan antipathy intervene and turn the democratic fantasy into a disaster. Political leaders, as the national representation of separate parties, portrays the pictures of intense games of political parties (Broockman, 2016). Such images from the polarized Congress structure give the strongest beats to public attitudes. There is plenty of evidence indicating that Democratic and Republican politicians disagree over policymaking more than ever (McLaughlin, 2018). Thus, there is little space left for the public to express their opinions but only to exhibit their attitudes. A poll of 5,000 U.S. adults conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2017 found that partisan divide over political issues such as racial discrimination, immigration, international diplomacy and government aid have widened significantly since the early 1990s (Pew Research Center, 2017). There are two separate aspects of political ideology: issue-based and identity-based ideologies (Mason, 2018). Through the political survey data, it turns out that “the more potent predictor of social distance is identity-based ideology — how we identify ourselves as Democrats or Liberals as opposed to Republicans or Conservatives — not where we stand on the issues” (Mason, 2018). Predictably, most people learn about political issues from news media. However, such findings provide good evidence for the incapacity and limitations of issue-centered news media to decisively influence the political polarization among the public. Thus, news media become specific tools in this political arena, which not only trade with the polarized

political leaders to help them win elections but also reflect and satisfy the status quo of the divided public.

Values in news coverage highlight the polarized public. Although most news media are biased because of different interests and conflicts involved in their business, there are some shared values among news industries. “The three key news values that guide how the media make decisions regarding newsworthiness are novelty, negativity and conflict” (Crouch & Rozzell, 2014, p 292). One significant reason why many researchers blame journalism for causing political polarization is because those news values potentially increase the degree of the public polarization by giving the illusion of the far more polarized America and hence deepen the affective polarization among audiences from separate parties. In their news coverage, the news and opinion media only reflect or emphasize those partisan conflicts from the political battlefield (Crouch & Rozzell, 2014). For example, journalism provides the vision of political polarization by mapping the Red and Blue states in the U.S. Those news values often successfully catch the audience’s attention and draw more investment from political powers by highlighting and exaggerating the media effects on influencing partisan positions among audiences.

In conclusion, news media and media effects are not the causation but consequences of political polarization in the U.S. from my position. It is the diverging parties that lead to the division among the audiences and the polarized news media outlets. Disunity is a poison to the civic body, in which it sabotages the social contract of democracy, results in the partisan antipathy and leaves bottomless pit for news media to reinforce the conflicts and polarization in politics and public. The perception of conflict, in turn, can also mediate effects on increasing partisan identification and ideological polarization (McLaughlin, 2018). Thus, to relieve the conflict and reunite the country, news media can provide more moderate discussions on politics.

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