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Polarizing the Middle: Internet Exposure and Public Opinion

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Polarizing the Middle: Internet Exposure and Public Opinion

Abstract

Purpose – Research on opinion polarization in the United States repeatedly finds more divergence among politically privileged groups: respondents who are college educated, politically interested, party identified, or have a liberal/conservative orientation. The purpose of this study is to examine whether their excluded counterparts can be polarized by exposure to political information on the internet.

Methodology – Quantile regression and visual analysis of raw data from the online and face-to-face samples in the 2012 and 2016 American National Election Studies (N=9,563) assessed the impact of online political information on opinion polarization among ideological moderates, political Independents, respondents without a college degree, and those with low interest in politics.

Findings – Exposure to online political information during the survey was associated with significant polarizing shifts toward more consistent ideological positions in all four groups.

Practical implications – Engaging the middle is a social justice issue as much as a matter of political conflict, and evidence suggests that politically excluded groups use the internet to translate their own views into the language of policy opinions and popular (polarized) politics. Recommended policy interventions include information literacy programs. Further research should use experimental models and browser histories.

Contributions – Current research on political polarization leaves open the question of whether larger portions of the electorate are available to join the fray. This study shows that excluded publics can be polarized via exposure to online information.

Keywords: public opinions, social exclusion, internet politics

Paper Type: Research paper

Polarizing the Middle: Internet Exposure and Public Opinion

Introduction

Evidence from the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign suggest that alienated voters played a crucial role in President Trump's victory. His campaign used social media to target (Malone, 2016) and mobilize (Kennedy *et al.*, 2018) marginalized voters, especially those with less education (Morgan and Lee, 2018), by popularizing extremist views, including racism and anti-immigrant sentiment (Hooghe and Dassonneville, 2018). Trump also carried Independents (CNN, 2016), who normally "stand out for their low level of interest in politics" (Pew Research Center, 2019b: 3). Moreover, divisive (wedge) issues have long been used to energize apathetic voters. Republican strategists put measures banning gay marriage on thirteen state ballots during the 2004 presidential election to increase turnout among their base (Campbell and Monson, 2008), and Democrats used women's rights as a wedge in 2012 to increase turnout among single women and produce the widest gender gap in presidential vote choice to date (Hansen, 2016).

These observations, however, are not consistent with decades of research on U.S. opinion polarization demonstrating that inactive portions of the electorate are not easily swayed. Moderate, Independent, less-educated, and less-interested survey respondents generally take *less,* not more, extreme positions than other potential voters (e.g., Converse, 1964; DiMaggio *et al.*, 1996; Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008; Baldassarri and Goldberg, 2014). This paper addresses that empirical contradiction by applying the concept of excluded publics (e.g., Fraser, 1990) to show that exposure to online political information can incorporate marginalized actors into the political sphere, increasing their own polarization. Thus, some of the people who normally constitute our political middle do so, not because they are staunch ideological moderates, but because they are not active political participants who can easily interpret policy questions according to their

beliefs or interests. Given a little incentive and political information, however, polarization can

quickly emerge, even within moderate groups. Here, the incentive is an opportunity to voice

political opinion in a context where it is possible to research survey questions online.

While most polarization studies analyze long-term trends (e.g., Iyengar *et al.*, 2012;

Baldassarri and Goldberg, 2014; Park, 2017), this paper shifts focus to the immediate effects of

accessing political information online during the 2012 and 2016 American National Election

Time Series Studies (ANES), each of which fielded identical surveys in face-to-face and online

formats. Known in the literature as "survey cheating" (e.g., Jensen and Thomsen, 2014; Burnett,

2016; Motta *et al.*, 2016), respondents who access the internet during a survey provide different

answers than their face-to-face counterparts, who had no such opportunity. *In short, this study*

asks whether respondents who likely accessed political information online are more polarized

than comparable respondents whose political knowledge was retained, with special attention to

the four politically marginalized groups, above. Does internet exposure polarize the middle?

The dependent variable taps polarization as ideological consistency—the extent to which

a respondent provides consistently liberal or conservative opinions across 41 policy and political

opinion questions. This measure of ideological consistency is notably employed by The Pew

Research Center (2014) and also called "constraint" in leading studies by Converse (1964),

DiMaggio *et al.* (1996), and Baldassarri and Gelman (2008). The key independent variable is

survey cheating—accessing political information online. The four groups studied serve as the

population for this analysis, but comparisons with their counterparts are addressed for reference.

Results demonstrate that those who likely accessed the internet during the survey evidenced

greater polarization than other members of their group, including those in the face-to-face survey

with high levels of retained knowledge. In short, internet exposure not only polarizes politically excluded respondents, it can do so quickly—during a survey.

Four subsets of eligible U.S. voters are examined. Discussed in further detail below, these are the groups previously found to resist polarization: (1) those who report having little or no interest in politics , (2) those with no college degree, (3) those who identify as political Independents, and (4) those who proclaim moderate political views.

The following section begins by describing the importance of the political middle and how the middle is produced through political exclusion. Next, the four groups least likely to polarize are identified from existing research on political polarization. Third, survey cheating is addressed as a response to the needs and opportunities respondents face in voicing their opinion through political polls. Fourth, relevant theoretical models of online communication are considered. This section ends with a statement of hypotheses. Finally, after describing methods and presenting the analysis of those hypotheses, the paper concludes with insights and implications for policy responses and further research.

Background

The Essential Middle and the Excluded Middle

Sociologists have long viewed the political middle as central to stability in the democratic process (Lazarsfeld *et al.*, 1944; Lipset, 1960). For example, median voter theory (Downs, 1957) posits that moderate, undecided, and cross-pressured voters—those with opinions that are mixed with regard to party platforms—force politicians to aim policies toward the middle in order to win available votes. The power of the center is even thought to operate when its members do not vote, as their silence can indicate confidence in existing political arrangements (Lipset, 1960). From this perspective, the political middle is an important, but understudied, source of stability.

A contrasting view of the political middle posits that it is not so much reliably moderate as excluded from political processes. Disincentives for political inclusion include the cultural capital required in order to engage in political conversation and the institutions that distribute those cultural skills, especially education (Bourdieu, 1984; Fraser, 1990; Herbst, 1993, 2003; Perrin and McFarland, 2011). Converse (1964) famously addressed this question, searching for evidence that his respondents organized their opinions according to coherent liberal-to-conservative "belief systems." Finding that only the college-educated portion of his sample did so, he worried that most of the population failed to understand politics well enough to interpret specific policy questions according to abstract principles. Other scholars have similarly demonstrated that much of our current polarization happens only among politically privileged and engaged citizens (e.g., DiMaggio *et al.*, 1996; Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008; Abramowitz, 2010).

The role of political privilege has been documented by many other scholars who found that political engagement is discouraged through the moral boundaries that the working class draws against political elites (Lamont, 2000; Lamont *et al.*, 2016), legal exclusion historically based on land ownership, gender, and race (e.g., Habermas, 1989; Calhoun, 2010), and the etiquette of friendly conversation (Noelle-Neumann, 1984; Eliasoph, 1998; Cowan and Baldassarri, 2018). From this perspective, the unwillingness or inability to participate in the democratic process has negative implications. Large portions of the electorate cannot voice their interests, so policy outcomes benefit privileged actors. The question for the 21st century, however, is whether increased access to the internet can overcome such barriers, offering previously excluded groups greater access to information and more opportunities to exercise

political voice. Survey cheating presents respondents with such an opportunity—one visible to the researcher.

Four Groups in the Middle

The population of interest for this study consists of four groups found to have lower rates of polarization than their counterparts, but who have largely been left out of closer scholarly consideration because the action appears to be happening elsewhere—among partisan identifiers, for example. What, then, happens to the out-groups in these scenarios of polarization when they are exposed to online information about policy and politics? It is important to consider these groups in the context of rising opinion polarization because they are the potential candidates for future polarization.

First, respondents who lack a bachelor's degree were the focus of Converse (1964), who argued that this large group was unaware of the social significance inherent in political choices. Baldassarri and Goldberg (2014) also posit a feedback loop wherein polarized parties devalue the median voter and increase the electoral power of those with more education. While education is an objective measure and the three groups below involve more subjective identifications, Converse's seminal work continues to inform polarization research and related assumptions about political access and inclusion.

The second group consists of respondents who report not being especially interested in politics. Separate from education, uninterested respondents are repeatedly found less likely to polarize than their more interested counterparts (DiMaggio *et al.*, 1996; Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008; Straughn and Andriot, 2011; Alt *et al.*, 2016; Perrin, 2016). Third, it is unsurprising that liberals and conservatives are more likely to report polarized opinion, but moderates have also been examined with some care and found to resist polarization (Martin and Desmond, 2010;

Carmines *et al.*, 2012; Baldassarri and Goldberg, 2014). Finally, unlike moderates, political

Independents have been ignored in media reports about the increasing gap between Democrats

and Republicans (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2014; Newport, 2019), even though Independents

have been shown to understand candidate differences just as well as partisans (Smidt, 2017) and

to be influenced by partisan media outlets, (Hopkins and Ladd, 2013).

In short, understanding the role of internet information on polarization within these four

groups is central to ascertaining the impact of polarization writ large, especially because of

increases in education and direct access to political information on the internet—forces that

might overcome some forms of political exclusion. The assumption that all these groups are

more moderate than their counterparts, overall, will be confirmed before the remainder of the

analysis proceeds.

Survey Cheating as Political Engagement

Why would respondents cheat on an opinion survey and why should we expect that

behavior to increase opinion polarization? Speaking to The American Association for Public

Opinion Research in 1983, sociologist Charles Tilly noted that "[N]owadays we can consider the

opinion survey a complement to, or even an alternative to, voting, petitioning, or protesting"

(Tilly, 1983: 462). In fact, when survey questions trigger issues of political voice or identity,

respondents take their answers seriously (Baldassarri and Goldberg, 2014; Mason, 2015), so it

should not be surprising that some will "cheat" on survey questions by consulting the internet for

answers or interpretive context. The literature on survey cheating places cheating rates on

knowledge questions around 22% (Jensen and Thomsen, 2014) to 24% (Prior and Lupia, 2008).

But survey cheating also appears to influence answers to political opinion questions. Prior and

Bougher (2013), for example, reported that respondents in the online sample of the 2012 ANES

showed greater differences in "warmth" toward Democrats versus Republicans than the face-to-face respondents. While the motivation to answer knowledge questions correctly may be rooted in social desirability, the motive to research opinion questions may be rooted in the effective exercise of political voice. And for less-confident respondents, an online opinion poll does not pose the threat of social pressure or exclusion from conversation partners.

Information access has also changed radically since Converse (1964) lamented that only the college-educated ten percent of the U.S. public really understood politics. As of 2018, 35 percent of U.S. adults over 25 years of age held a college degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Moreover, internet access is close to full saturation in the United States at 90 percent (Pew Research Center, 2019a). This is important because the internet offers both speedy access to information and an inexpensive way to deliver unsolicited political messages to users. In fact, 14 percent of respondents to a 2016 survey reported changing their minds about a political or social issue because of something they saw online (Bialik, 2018). These shifts in the information landscape have the potential to incorporate into the political sphere a larger portion of the public, including previously excluded groups, while increasing their ability to voice their views in political debate and survey polling. Moreover, while we already know that respondents with high levels of political knowledge are more polarized (Claassen and Highton, 2009), this paper uses survey cheating to ask whether knowledge gained from the internet during a survey has its own influence on polarization—beyond that of retained knowledge.

Communication Theory, Polarization, and the Internet

Recent theorizing about the role of the internet in producing opinion polarization has been dominated by questions about selective exposure, in which media consumers seek (or see) only media content that suits their preferences (Sears and Freedmann, 1967; Westerwick *et al.*,

2017). Unfortunately, this research is better-suited for explaining polarization among those who are already interested in politics and subscribe to specific political positions.

A more relevant consideration for excluded groups is whether they suffer from knowledge deficits. Knowledge gap theories posit that media information creates and exacerbates gaps between informed and uninformed populations (Tichenor *et al.*, 1970), such as the gap between news consumers and those who prefer only entertainment Prior (2007). This analysis reverses that question to ask whether the internet can overcome such deficits in retained knowledge, resulting in increased polarization. For example, internet access, increases political engagement (Tolbert and McNeal, 2003; Kenski and Stroud, 2006; Morris and Morris, 2013), and even accidental online exposure decreases the SES gap in political participation (Morris and Morris, 2017).

But how can internet information activate previously excluded groups so quickly—within the time of a survey? Although this study cannot answer these questions directly, the observation of nearly immediate effects narrows the field of possibilities. Simple models that posit direct flows of media content into the human psyche have seen a recent revival because they are easily mapped onto social media behaviors such as likes, posts, and reposts. These concepts include the hypodermic needle metaphor (Lasswell, 1927) and the related two-step model in which media content flows first to "opinion leaders" who then influence others (Lazarsfeld *et al.*, 1944; Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Choi, 2015). Evidence from Twitter suggests that these models work in tandem (Hilbert *et al.*, 2017), and are mediated by network heterogeneity (Lee *et al.*, 2014).

These metaphors do not, however, require us to assume that consumers absorb totalizing ideologies. Instead, brief encounters with small bits of information such as tweets, hashtags, memes, and "facts" can be used to make sense of survey questions. This might better be

understood as a loosely organized "toolkit" of cultural repertoires (Swidler, 1986), argument

repertoires (Cappella *et al.*, 2002), or interpretive frames (Snow *et al.*, 1986), rather than entire

belief systems.

Hypotheses

Assumption: Each of the four groups is, on the whole, more moderate than

their counterparts who are college educated, politically interested, identified

with a political party, or profess liberal/conservative views.

Research Hypothesis: Within each of the four politically excluded groups—

those who have no college degree, are less interested in politics, identify as

politically Independent, or profess moderate ideological views—exposure to

online political information during the survey will increase ideological

consistency, even with controls including retained political knowledge, survey

mode, and demographic variables.

Methods

Data

This study is an original analysis of individual-level data from the 2012 and 2016 ANES

Time Series Studies, each of which fielded identical questionnaires to a sample of online

respondents in addition to face-to-face interviews (combined N=9,563). Surveys lasted about 80

to 90 minutes for both online and face-to-face surveys, and respondents in the online sample

received free internet access and hardware, if necessary. The samples were weighted for, and

intended to be, used together. In addition, members of the online and face-to-face samples were

not significantly different on demographic characteristics: age, income, race, ethnicity, gender,

education, or even political interest and activity. (See the respective codebooks for further

methodological information: American National Election Studies, 2012; American National

Election Studies, 2016).

The online method did, however, provide those respondents an opportunity that the face-

to-face respondents did not have: the ability to access the internet during their survey. Thus,

online respondents provided more-consistent political opinions, and they earned higher scores on

political knowledge questions. These are the differences of interest. In particular, this paper asks

whether those differences are apparent specifically among political out-groups and, if so,

whether they can be attributed to survey cheating. The two years are combined to increase the

predictive power of the analysis, and survey year is controlled in the quantile regression models.

Dependent Variable – Polarization as Ideological Consistency

The ideological consistency measure includes 8 topic areas: crime law, traditional values,

lesbian and gay rights, race policy, women's rights, immigration, health care, and federal

spending.[1] Whenever possible, questions with a long history on the ANES or matching questions

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[1] The variables in each topic scale were: crime & terror (gun_control, wiretappo_toofar,

securpub_secchg, fedspend_crime, dhs_torture, and penalty_favopp_x), traditional values

(trad_adjust, trad_lifestyle, trad_tolerant, and trad_famval), lesbian & gay rights (gayrt_adopt,

gayrt_marry, gayrt_discstd_x, and discrim_gays), race policy (aa_uni, aidblack_self,

stype_hwkblack, resent_try, aapost_hire_x, resent_workway, resent_slavery, resent_deserve, and

discrim_blacks), women's rights (women_works_x, modsex_prob, discrim_women, and

abortpre_4point), immigration (immig_policy, immigpo_jobs, and discrim_hispanics), health

care (hlthlaw_qual, hlthlaw_num, presapp_health_x, health_2010hcr_x, inspre_self), and federal

in the General Social Survey were included to increase compatibility with previous and

potentially future studies (e.g., DiMaggio *et al.*, 1996; Evans *et al.*, 2001; Baldassarri and

Gelman, 2008; Bougher, 2017). Newer questions that frequently evidence more controversy,

however, were also included, such as Obamacare, immigration, and terrorism. The goal in

constructing this scale was to include as many policy evaluations and opinion questions as

possible, given that they were included on both the 2012 and 2016 surveys.

Each of the 41 individual items was recoded to the same direction, with lower scores

being liberal and higher scores being conservative. Items were then weighted equally and added

together to form the eight topic scales. Each topic was, then, weighted to a scale of seven, and

they were combined to form the ideological consistency measure. The resulting index ranges

from 15.05 to 52.90, but could have ranged from 8 to 56. That is, no respondent answered every

question in the most extreme liberal or conservative way possible. Scores in the middle may

indicate consistently moderate answers or ideologically mixed opinions.

Independent Variable – Survey Cheating

Respondents who likely accessed the internet during their survey were flagged as

potential cheaters if they took their survey online and had improbably high scores (of seven or

eight) on an eight-item political knowledge scale.[2] In regression analyses, this functions as an

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spending (fedspend_ss, fedspend_schools, fedspend_welfare, fedspend_child, fedspend_poor,

and fedspend_enviro).

[2] Improbably high knowledge is a common measure of survey cheating (e.g., Berinsky *et*
al., 2012; Clifford and Jerit, 2014; Motta *et al.*, 2016) that entails some measurement error. But

the impact of erroneously including knowledgeable online respondents among those who may

interaction effect between high political knowledge and survey mode (See Figure 1). Although

knowledge is positively related to polarization and controlled in the analyses, the key

independent variable is survey cheating—gaining that political knowledge online. The main

effect of taking the survey online is also controlled, as required when testing interaction effects

in regression models.

- - Figure 1 about here - -

In the knowledge scale, four multiple-choice questions ask respondents about House and

Senate majorities, whether and which party is more conservative, and which category of federal

spending is the smallest from the following choices: Social Security, Medicare, national defense,

or foreign aid. In addition, there were four open-ended questions: the length of a Senate term,

and what job or political office was, at the time, held by Paul Ryan, Mike Pence, and John

Roberts.

The question about John Roberts offers a clear demonstration of online cheating.

Although most respondents were not able to identify his position, 8.7 percent of face-to-face

respondents and 7.5 percent of online respondents replied that he was a Supreme Court Justice,

likely from retained knowledge. A similar number of face-to-face respondents gave the more

specific answer "Chief Justice," (7.3 percent), but nearly four times as many online respondents

were able to retrieve that information: 28.5 percent.

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have cheated is a conservative one that makes it more difficult, not easier, to find significant

effects of survey cheating.

Group Variables and Controls

Party identification and political ideology were identified based on 7-point self-placement scales, where pure moderates and Independents were separated from liberals, conservatives, Democrats, Republicans, and respondents who leaned in one of those directions. The political interest question read: "Some people don't pay much attention to political campaigns. How about you? Would you say that you have been very much interested, somewhat interested or not much interested in the political campaigns so far this year?" This variable is divided roughly in half by separating the "very interested" respondents into a dummy variable for political interest. Finally, the less-educated group is defined as those coded zero on a dummy variable for holding a bachelor's degree.

Analytic Strategy

In the following analyses, density plots provide visual representations of distributions for the groups and conditions of interest. The plots are also divided into quantiles, the sizes of which are formally tested with controls using quantile regression in the R statistical programming environment (Koenker, 2015, 2019). Quantile regression predicts specific points in the shape of a distribution and is especially valuable for identifying the effect of independent variables (probable cheating and controls) on the variance of a distribution (in this case, ideological spread). In short, quantile regression can test for a condition that, in itself, would violate the assumptions of OLS regression (Koenker, 2015).

Analysis

Assumption: Each groups is moderate, overall.

Figure 2 presents density distributions for each of the four groups compared to their

counterparts. As expected, respondents with less education have a taller more-narrow

distribution than those with bachelor's degrees. They also have a shorter left tail, leaning to the

right of their college-educated counterparts. Those who were not especially interested in politics

are also more moderate than interested respondents. Their distribution is taller and more-narrow,

while those with high interest evidence a dip in the middle indicating polarization. Independents

and moderates also lie between their comparison groups on the left and right, but there is

substantial overlap among the groups, a point often lost in reports of party polarization.

- - Figure 2 about here - -

Statistical tests for differences in means between related groups support the conclusions

above and indicate significant moderation in the cases of party identification and political

orientation, with no significant difference in mean between those with more versus less interest

in politics. The rightward lean of respondents who do not hold a bachelor's degree is also

confirmed as small but significant. [3] These results provide an important baseline measure

confirming that each of the four groups constitutes part of our political middle. Therefore,

increased polarization in these groups could notably increase polarization at the national level.

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[3] Means tests used bivariate regression, weighted and adjusted for complex sampling

design, using the R survey package (Lumley, 2019). All significant results have $p < .001$.

Research Hypothesis: Cheating increases polarization within each group.

Density distributions for each group appear in Figure 3, where those who likely accessed the internet are depicted in each right-hand panel, compared to the rest of each group in the corresponding left-hand panels. These figures lend support to the hypothesis in that likely cheaters have broader, flatter, more-polarized distributions of opinion than their counterparts, as respondents abandon the tall middle in the left panels for the more ideologically consistent ends of each x-axis. Descriptive statistics available from the author confirm the visible spread with significantly greater variances and larger negative kurtoses, indicating fatter tails. Visual inspection further suggests that those not interested in politics were polarized most dramatically into a striking bimodal distribution. In terms of flattening, however, the effect of likely cheating was the strongest among those with no college degree (also demonstrating the widest variance).

- - Figure 3 about here - -

These results are formally tested and confirmed in quantile regressions reported in Table 1, and significant coefficients for likely cheating are marked in Figure 3. In those models, the indicator for likely cheating had no significant effect on any of the median scores, but did have significant polarizing effects (at the first and/or third quartiles). Internet exposure did not always polarize opinions equally on the left and right, however. Those with no bachelor's degree and those with less interest in politics, were pulled to the right, while those with Independent party identifications were pulled to the left. Moderates were pulled in both directions.

- - Table 1 about here - -

Other significant influences include more-liberal opinions expressed in 2016 (compared to 2012) and by Black and Latinx respondents. Gender and age, conversely, had conservative effects, especially among less-interested and less-educated respondents. High political

knowledge was only significant in three of the twelve possible models. In all cases, however, the

indicator for likely cheating had a significant polarizing effect in one or both directions,

supporting the research hypothesis that probable cheating polarizes responses within each of the

four politically excluded groups.

Conclusion

Contrary to a long history of polarization research showing that liberals and

conservatives, party identifiers, educated respondents, and those interested in politics are the

main sources of U.S. political polarization, this study shows that their counterparts are not all

staunch moderates. While each group was moderate, on the whole, they were easily polarized

when incorporated into the political sphere through access to online information, supporting the

research hypothesis. This suggests the powerful influence of our changing media environment on

a potential erosion of the political middle, even as it increases political inclusion. From a

methodological standpoint, then, this study is important because face-to-face opinion polls may

no longer reproduce the context of political engagement. Voters need not attend to campaign

issues months before an election and may not be prepared to address them when pollsters come

calling. We can do that research on election day (Hamza Saad, 2016).

Moreover, the very fact that members of excluded groups bothered to consult the internet

during their surveys suggests that their tendency to appear politically moderate and even

uninterested in politics *per se* does not preclude the possibility that they want to be heard.

Opinion polls provide an opportunity for voice and the internet offers easy access to political

discourse. Both of these possibilities are fraught with inequality and uncertainty, but current

communication theory can inform a relevant policy agenda.

First, potential knowledge gaps implicate policy related to digital divides, including both access to the internet (which the ANES provided if necessary) and "second-level digital divides" (Hargittai, 2002)—the skills required to find and interpret information. In this study, respondents appeared to jump this second gap with ease, but their resulting polarization suggests that leap may have been too easy. The ability to wade through bias and misinformation is a skill that can be bolstered with media literacy campaigns.

Second, internet echo chambers may exacerbate biased or incorrect information delivered to consumers. While several countries, such as China, France, and Italy, have implemented laws against misinformation, most advanced democracies struggle with the tension between free speech and the negative impact of intentionally malicious information (Funke and Flamini, 2019). As a result, U.S. policy analysts encourage online media platforms to regulate themselves (Samples, 2019).

Third, the speed with which internet information influenced political opinions (like a hypodermic needle) suggests that survey cheaters likely encountered small chunks of influential information. To maintain a robust political center among the general public, then, consumers need information that offers, not the elusive foundations of moderate ideology writ large, but argument repertoires and political action frames that articulate smaller bits of moderate interpretation from the time each controversial issue emerges. Media literacy campaigns could also address the power of small "facts," hashtags, and memes, which consumers could learn to investigate further.

Finally, this study deserves to be replicated as a formal experiment with random allocation to each group and a controlled research environment for the online respondents. Collecting the browser history of each respondent could also answer many questions about what

kind of information they accessed and what sources provided it (campaign sites offered by Google or news articles in a social media feed). A better understanding of these processes could inform all the specific policy responses suggested above.

We still have much more to learn about the effect of a rapidly changing communications environment on excluded groups and their place in the public sphere. Moderate, Independent, uninterested, and less-educated potential voters are important to overall political legitimacy and social solidarity, while their inclusion in the political sphere is a matter of equity and social justice that has the potential to go awry. Therefore, it is important to document the mechanisms that draw them into political conflicts and the reasons they polarize while developing effective responses that support the democratic process.

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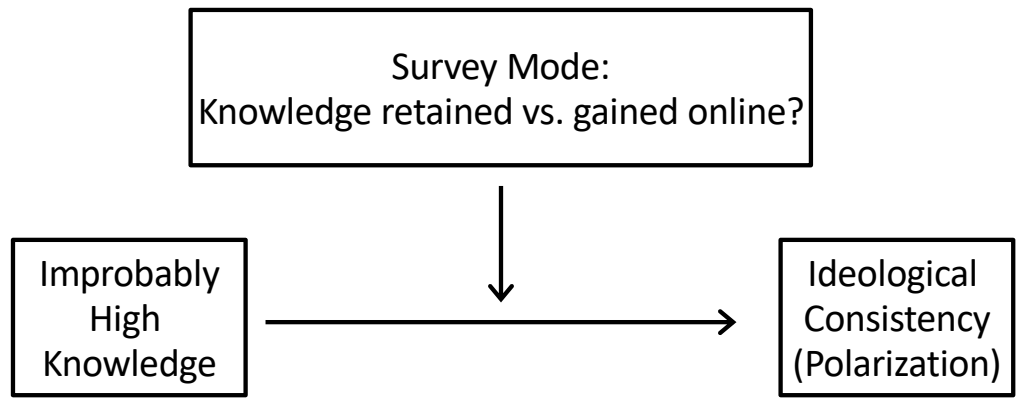   Chicago Press, Chicago.

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a) Conceptual Interaction Model

Survey Mode:
Knowledge retained vs. gained online?

Improbably High Knowledge

Ideological Consistency (Polarization)

b) Regression Interaction Model

Improbably High Knowledge

Survey Mode

| Online |
| Face-to-face |

Effect of Interest:
Interaction Term
for Cheating

Retained Knowledge

Ideological Consistency (Polarization)

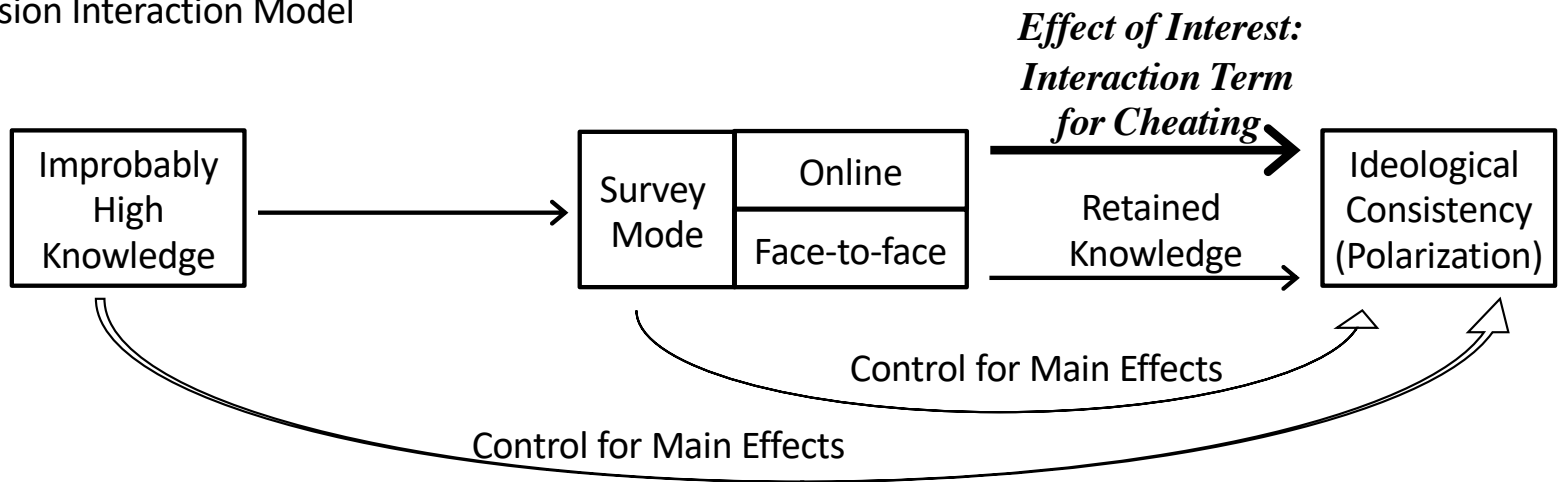Control for Main Effects

Control for Main Effects

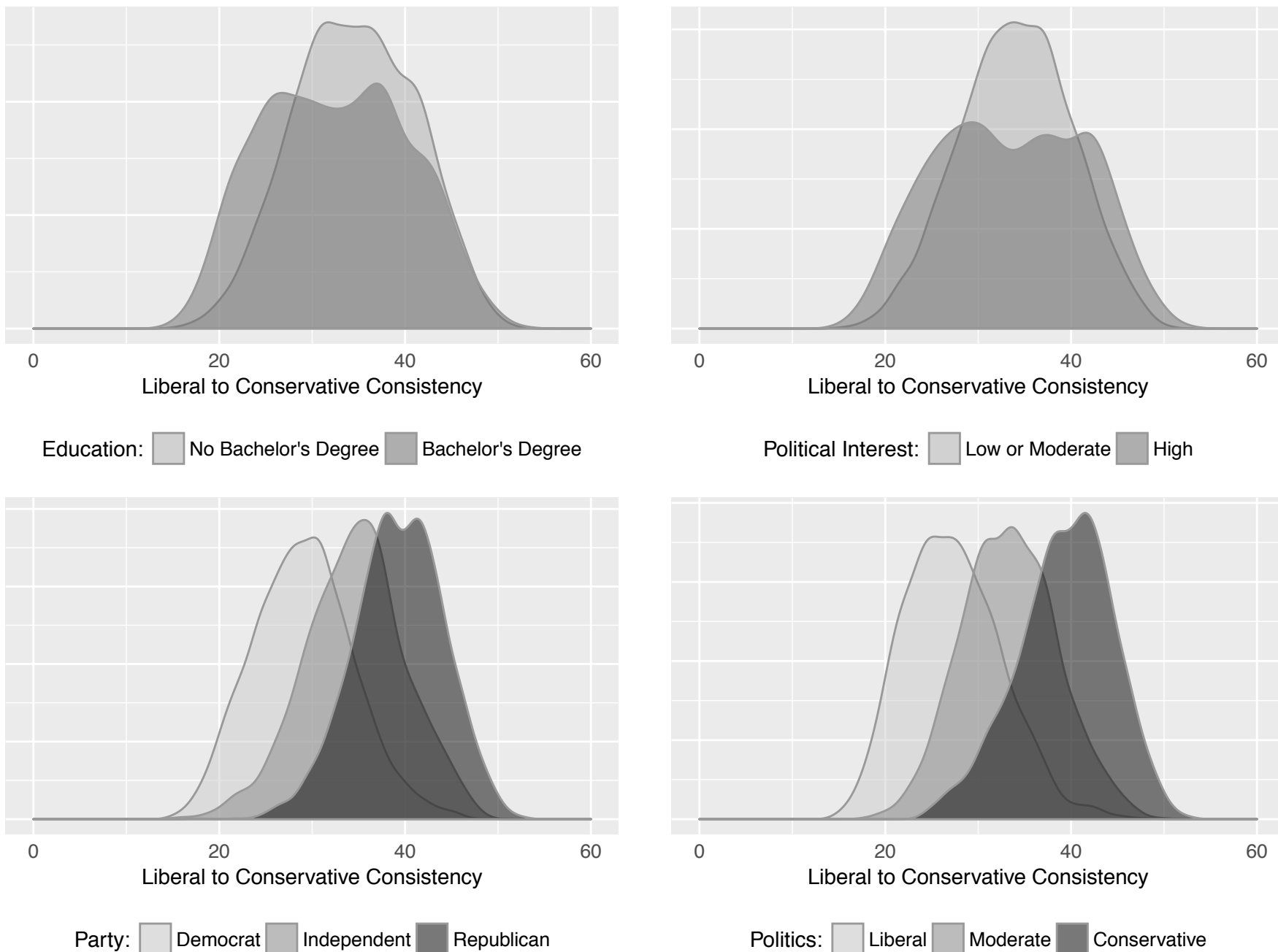Figure 1. Conceptual Model of the Key Independent Variable on the Dependent Variable.

Figure 2. Density Plots of Liberal to Conservative Consistency Among Each of the Four Groups Compared to their Counterparts.

Figure 3. The Effect of Likely Cheating Within Each of the Four Groups.

Table 1: Quantile Regression Results for the Effect of Likely Cheating in Each of the Four Groups.

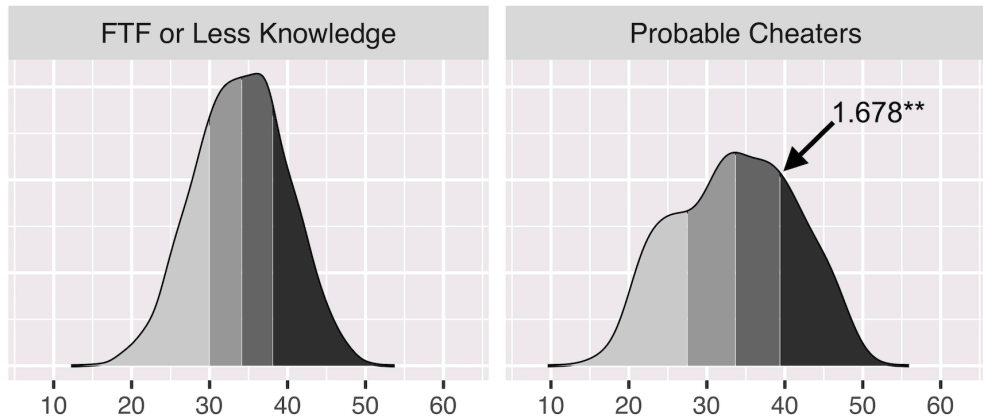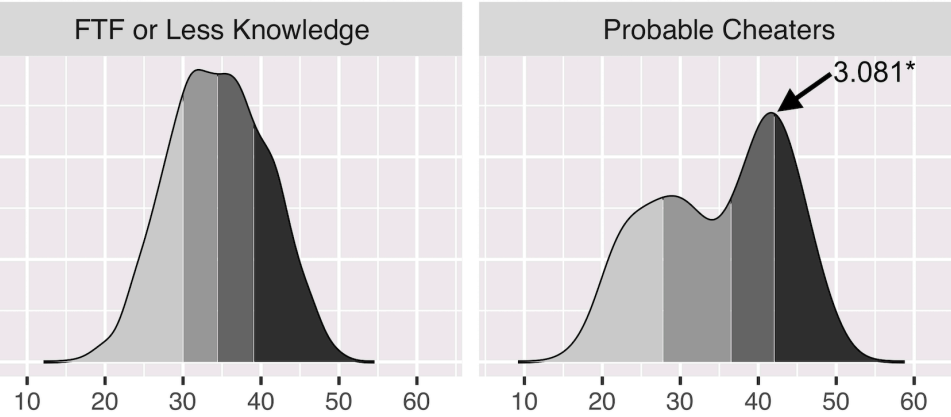| Quartile	Not Interested in Politics			No Bachelor's Degree		
	Q1	Median	Q3	Q1	Median	Q3
Year=2016	-0.863*	-0.556	-0.567*	-0.846**	-0.692*	-0.209
	(.349)	(.352)	(.285)	(.297)	(.341)	(.264)
Bachelor's Degree	-2.867***	-1.836***	-1.466***			
	(.427)	(.360)	(.298)			
Log Income	-0.197	-0.043	-0.025	-0.173	0.221	0.136
	(.158)	(.126)	(.138)	(.108)	(.132)	(.124)
Age	0.040***	0.046***	0.032***	0.058***	0.055***	0.037***
	(.010)	(.009)	(.009)	(.007)	(.009)	(.008)
Black	-4.904***	-6.234***	-7.530***	-4.697***	-6.934***	-8.215***
	(.408)	(.303)	(.363)	(.262)	(.333)	(.31)
Latinx	-2.606***	-3.700***	-4.214***	-2.37***	-3.958***	-4.088***
	(.373)	(.369)	(.523)	(.304)	(.37)	(.442)
Male	0.966**	1.231***	1.420***	0.825***	0.888**	0.808***
	(.317)	(.277)	(.273)	(.229)	(.285)	(.243)
Home Internet	-0.544	-0.321	-0.516	-0.111	0.324	0.095
	(.401)	(.409)	(.491)	(.274)	(.436)	(.434)
Political Interest				-1.268***	0.187	1.263***
				(.279)	(.304)	(.244)
Web Survey	0.400	0.590	0.551	0.644**	0.724*	1.344***
	(.357)	(.336)	(.32)	(.217)	(.316)	(.313)
High Knowledge	-5.061	-2.157	-2.441	-5.93**	-1.429	-0.915*
	(2.819)	(2.13)	(1.274)	(2.287)	(4.522)	(.466)
Cheaters	2.911	1.131	3.081*	2.664	0.789	1.678**
	(2.908)	(2.212)	(1.4)	(2.377)	(4.588)	(.588)
(Intercept)	29.501***	33.889***	37.102***	29.829***	34.802***	38.487***
	(.493)	(.378)	(.246)	(.409)	(.763)	(.137)

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001, one-tailed tests.

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Table 4 (Continued): Quantile Regression Results for the Effect of Likely Cheating in Each of the Four Groups.

Quartile	Moderate Political Views			Independent Party Identification		
	Q1	Median	Q3	Q1	Median	Q3
Year=2016	-0.929**	-1.296***	-0.692*	-1.421*	-1.845**	-1.381*
	(.295)	(.299)	(.309)	(.633)	(.585)	(.538)
Bachelor's Degree	-2.257***	-1.516***	-1.194***	-1.854**	-1.517**	-1.737**
	(.325)	(.350)	(.316)	(.581)	(.553)	(.588)
Log Income	-0.094	0.044	-0.067	0.084	-0.170	-0.153
	(.136)	(.131)	(.144)	(.245)	(.237)	(.222)
Age	0.011	0.018*	0.016	0.046**	0.042*	0.048**
	(.009)	(.008)	(.009)	(.017)	(.018)	(.015)
Black	-3.863***	-5.48***	-5.996***	-4.605***	-5.620***	-5.347***
	(.315)	(.304)	(.347)	(.903)	(.625)	(1.083)
Latinx	-2.063***	-2.792***	-3.486***	-1.911**	-1.862**	-1.985***
	(.331)	(.325)	(.454)	(.682)	(.709)	(.421)
Male	0.424	0.567*	0.913**	0.548	0.291	0.758
	(.272)	(.271)	(.289)	(.516)	(.500)	(.466)
Home Internet	0.141	0.155	0.175	0.995	0.804	1.317
	(.416)	(.345)	(.48)	(.658)	(1.036)	(.687)
Political Interest	-1.086***	-0.705*	-0.094	-0.554	-0.140	1.007
	(.283)	(.281)	(.313)	(.541)	(.655)	(.584)
Web Survey	0.722	0.565	0.582	1.430	0.296	1.195**
	(.380)	(.294)	(.380)	(1.045)	(.603)	(.451)
High Knowledge	-0.406	-0.092	-2.507***	-0.827	-3.202	-2.834
	(.657)	(1.602)	(.510)	(1.365)	(2.634)	(2.871)
Cheaters	-2.090**	-1.825	1.400*	-3.492*	-0.251	0.085
	(.787)	(1.685)	(.652)	(1.768)	(2.83)	(2.889)
(Intercept)	30.132***	33.246***	35.945***	30.929***	33.729***	36.969***
	(.157)	(.295)	(.157)	(.325)	(.519)	(.551)

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001, one-tailed tests.