

## Unbiased and Credible: Motivating Partisan News Choice

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### **Abstract**

Evidence points to partisan segmentation in the contemporary news market, but the mechanism causing consumers to sort along party lines is unclear. This study develops a framework for news choice based on perceived credibility and reports results from a nationally representative survey experiment identifying the effect of message content on perceptions of news bias and source credibility. I find support for a congenial media effect, where information consistent with existing beliefs is seen as more credible and less biased. I contend that political segregation of news audiences can be best understood as the product of distorted perceptions about news outlets' political biases, individual's desire for credible information, and the conflating of credibility with objectivity.

The recent rise of politically biased news providers on cable TV and the Internet represents a significant shift in the media environment, one with important unexplored consequences. Evidence points to partisan segmentation in the contemporary news market but, while assumptions abound, the mechanism causing consumers to sort along party lines is unclear. In this chapter, I develop a framework for news choice based on perceived credibility and report a test of its central mechanism using a nationally representative survey experiment that uniquely identifies the effect of message content on perceptions of news bias and source credibility. I find support for a congenial media effect, where information consistent with existing beliefs is seen as more credible and less biased. I contend that political segregation of news audiences can be best understood as the product of cognitive biases in how people process the news amid individuals' desire for credible information.

Recognizing the vital mediating role of the news media in a functioning democracy, an innovative line of research has sought to understand how individuals process information presented in the news (e.g. Dalton et al. 1998; Graber 1984; 1988; Lazarsfeld et al. 1952; Zaller 1992). Research along this vein has shown how preexisting attitudes distort perceptions of bias (e.g. Vallone et al. 1985; Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken 1994; Gunther 1992; Gunther et al. 2001) and how news outlets' reputations precede them, providing cues about the political slant of coverage and the credibility of information reported (e.g. Turner 2007; Baum and Gussin 2008; Arceneaux et al. 2012). The main conclusion from this work is straightforward: changing either the message recipient or source matters and can lead to very different conclusions about the bias and credibility of identical content.

In the context of understanding choice among biased news providers however, content across sources is not identical. And while news outlets have reputations that serve as heuristics in a fragmented marketplace, reputations do not spring fully formed into the

public consciousness. At some point, individuals must be exposed to information from a new source and evaluate its content, forming at least tentative conclusions about the credibility of information presented and the likely political agenda of the source. Understanding this process is important because once formed, reputations act as interpretative filters for additional information from the source (e.g. Baum and Gussin 2008; Kuklinski and Hurley 1994; Turner 2007). Reputations are not fixed and may be updated over time, but ultimately they are born of an initial evaluation.

The study presented here inverts the dominant meme by exploring how message content affects perceptions of news bias and credibility. In doing so, I explore the interaction between message content and consumer attitudes and the mediating effects of both for persuasive communications and political learning from the news.

The remainder of this chapter is organized as follows. First, I present the theoretical framework of news choice motivating the empirical analysis, outlining several testable hypotheses. I argue that perceptions of news bias and credibility depend upon: a) the extent to which the news content is slanted to favor a particular political party, b) whether the slant of coverage matches the individual's political orientation, and c) how politically invested and attentive the individual is. To investigate these variables I conducted an experiment in which participants were exposed to news coverage in the form of a transcript presented as being from "a national cable news program". News content was manipulated to create three conditions mimicking the cable news landscape, with pro-Republican, pro-Democratic, and balanced versions. I subsequently investigate treatment effects on participants' perceptions of the information in the news story and impressions of the political agenda guiding coverage.

### **A Theoretical Framework of News Choice**

Consider a simplified world in which multiple news sources offer competing political biases. An individual with strong political beliefs who enjoys regularly consuming political news must choose from among them some preferred source or combination of sources. In this simplified world, let us assume a single dimension along which both she and news providers position themselves (for example a Democratic-Republican spectrum of political partisanship). This presents three general choice combinations. She can choose a source whose bias 1) generally supports her own position, 2) generally opposes her own position, or 3) generally adopts some neutral position between the two.

This scenario is not so far-fetched in today's fragmented media environment; an emerging body of scholarly work details the availability and popularity of politically biased news coverage (Groseclose and Milyo 2005; Groeling and Baum 2007). Mounting evidence of partisan segmentation within news audiences (Stroud 2007; 2008; Iyengar and Hahn 2007; Iyengar et al. 2008) indicates people increasingly are adopting the first strategy, a phenomena dubbed 'political selective exposure'. While individuals' tendency towards selective exposure to political information is not a new discovery (e.g. Berelson et al. 1957; Klapper 1960; Lazarsfeld et al. 1944) the extent to which the modern media environment facilitates it is historically unprecedented. The rise and popularity of partisan news sources in an era of mass media fundamentally alters the connection between citizens and politics, with significant yet mostly unexplored consequences. However, to fully understand the consequences of news choice, we must first examine the underlying mechanism that motivates it.

In spite of observable partisan sorting within the news audience, a sizable majority of Americans (76%) report a preference for news sources without a particular political point

of view<sup>1</sup>. Among the most politically attentive both the expressed desire for unbiased news (82%) and the observed tendency to engage in political selective exposure are greater (Brannon et al. 2007; Knobloch-Westerwick and Meng 2009; Stroud 2008). Of course, it is likely expectations about civic responsibility and social desirability together bias survey reports about news preferences. Still, all things equal, people given the option should prefer news that is both credible and unbiased (Tsfati and Cappella 2003).

In a recent study using a series of open-ended questions to investigate the qualities people consider when evaluating news media, the most frequently mentioned considerations were “news accuracy”, mentioned by 41%, and “bias”, mentioned by 22% (Ladd 2012). As well, both popular and professional standards of journalism emphasize objectivity, the importance of distinguishing fact from opinion, and fairly representing opposing sides (Schudson 2001; Patterson and Donsbach 1996). In short, that overwhelming majorities of the public recognize unbiased news as somehow ‘right’ suggests beliefs about objectivity should play a role in news choice, leading people towards more neutral news sources, provided those sources are also viewed as credible.

This expectation is unmet in the cable news market however, where the most middle of the road network, CNN, continues to lose market share to its more explicitly partisan competitors MSNBC and The Fox News Channel (Groseclose and Milyo 2005; Pew Research 2012). This presents an interesting puzzle, that people may sincerely prefer objective news in the abstract, yet choose to consume biased news in practice. In the next section, I develop a mechanism of news choice to reconcile this seeming contradiction, based on the uncontroversial assumption that individuals prefer credible information. I argue that cognitive biases in information processing can perversely lead people with a sincere desire for objectivity to instead consume biased news coverage.

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<sup>1</sup> Pew Research Center Biennial Media Consumption Survey 2008.

## **The Role of Perceived Bias and Credibility**

While expanding media choice has dramatically increased the information available to the public, cognitive limits on information processing capacity necessitate some strategic selectivity (Smith et al. 2008). The strategy chosen depends on the motivation of the individual.

For those uninterested in politics, the increasing availability of entertainment alternatives to news offers the option of avoiding news about politics altogether (Baum and Kernell 1999; Prior 2005; 2007). On the other hand, for those motivated to do so, the deep reservoir and easy accessibility of political information from diverse perspectives affords the opportunity to expose oneself to as much political news from as many or as few perspectives as desired. Understanding news choice means focusing on the motivations of these political junkies, the dedicated news audience.

By definition, the dedicated news audience is made up of people who are interested in and attentive to politics. Nonetheless, the volume of political information publically available vastly outstrips the cognitive and temporal resources of even the most dedicated news savant, making some form of selective exposure unavoidable.

The assumption that partisans will view biased news coverage as more credible, provided the bias reflects rather than contradicts the viewers' beliefs, is central to theoretical models of media bias (e.g. Mullainathan and Shleifer 2002; Gentzkow and Shapiro 2006; Bernhardt et al. 2008); however, to my knowledge this assumption has not been tested empirically. In addition, this assumption rests on the corollary assumption that people accurately perceive bias in coverage, a claim that cannot withstand empirical scrutiny.

Individuals are biased information processors in general (see Eagly and Chaiken 1993 for an excellent review of this expansive literature). Perceived bias in news coverage is

often a product of one's own attitudes (Vallone et al. 1985; Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken 1994; Gunther 1988).

The existence of a "hostile media effect", the tendency for partisans to view objectively neutral news coverage as biased against their position, is well established (Vallone et al. 1985; Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken 1994; Gunther et al. 2001) with the phenomena more pronounced among intense partisans (Gunther 1988; Gunther 1992) and political conservatives (Eveland and Shah 2003).

The hostile media effect has its roots in social judgment theory, which suggests that individuals' use their own beliefs as reference points for processing new information (Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken 1994; Sherif and Hovland 1961). Issue statements closer to the message recipient's own position fall within the "latitude of acceptance" while those further away fall into the "latitude of rejection" (Sherif and Hovland 1961). The social judgment framework posits the existence of two cognitive processing biases: contrast and assimilation. Contrast effects occur when issue statements falling within the latitude of rejection are perceived as being further from one's own position than may be the case. Thus, hostile media perceptions can be framed in terms of contrast effects, where objective information is mistakenly viewed as being actively against the recipient position (Giner-sorolla and Chaiken 1994).

In most hostile media studies, effects are often implicitly assumed to be symmetrical. That is, the bulk of these studies consist of partisans on opposing sides of an issue viewing ostensibly objective reporting on that issue as biased against their position (but see Gunther et al. 2001). In Vallone and colleague's (1985) seminal study, both Israeli and Palestinian students viewed the same coverage as biased against their respective positions, a finding later replicated (Giner-sorolla and Chaiken 1994; Perloff 1989). Similarly, while social judgment theory offers a general framework applicable across issue

domains, with both contrast and assimilation biases are moderated by belief intensity (Hovland et al. 1957), it does not provide for specific instances where the direction of belief may be as or more important than intensity of belief.

When it comes to political beliefs however, differences in information processing between ideological liberals and conservatives may trump those between weak and strong ideologues. Given the increasing correlation between ideology and partisanship in the modern US context (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998), this raises the question of whether we should expect Republicans and Democrats to respond to biased news in the same manner. There are two reasons to expect Republicans to respond more strongly to dissonant news coverage, the first having to do with elite opinion leadership, the second with cognitive style.

Since the 1970's Republican elites have made a deliberate strategy out of criticizing the media for its supposed liberal biases (Domke et al. 1999; Watts et al. 1999). While evidence supporting this claim is mixed at best (see D'Alessio and Allen 2000; Gentzkow and Shapiro 2006) the unrelenting consistency with which this charge has been levied has led to increased media skepticism among rank-and-file Republicans (Eveland and Shah 2003).

In addition to heightened media cynicism engendered by party elites, there is a growing body of evidence suggesting that cognitive style and motivational needs precede and covary with political orientation (e.g. Jost et al. 2003a; Jost et al. 2003b; Jost et al. 2007; Jost 2009). In the uncertainty-threat model of conservatism developed by Jost et al. (2003a; 2003b), political ideology is associated with psychological needs to manage uncertainty and threat. They argue political conservatism consists of two central components, opposition to equality and resistance to change, which together reduce uncertainty and threat. Consistent with expectations they found, "intolerance of ambiguity

and stronger personal needs for order, structure, and closure were all positively associated with conservatism (or negatively associated with liberalism). Integrative complexity, openness to new experiences, and tolerance for uncertainty were all positively associated with liberalism (or negatively associated with conservatism)” (Jost 2009, pg 134). Complementing these behavioral studies, evidence from the emerging field of political neuroscience points to differences between liberals and conservatives at the level of neurological and physiological functioning (e.g. Amodio et al. 2007; Jost and Amodio 2012; Oxley et al. 2008).

In the US context, these results are consistent with empirical studies showing Republicans, given the choice, exhibit a stronger preference for politically congenial news coverage than Democrats (Iyengar et al. 2008; Knobloch-Westerwick and Meng 2009). Similarly, conservatives are more likely than liberals both to maintain ideologically homogeneous discussion networks (Mutz and Martin 2001) and are more heavily influenced by conversations within them (Eveland and Shah 2003).

In short, decades of elite opinion leadership demonizing the ‘liberal news media’ should generate a stronger negative response among Republicans asked to evaluate news coverage, indicating greater news skepticism in general. Conversely, cognitive antecedents to partisanship may induce Republicans to respond more intensely to both neutral and biased news, resulting from stronger need to avoid ambiguity and maintain attitude consistency.

Drawing together the above review, I propose a *congenial media effect* as a corollary to the established hostile media effect, where perceptions of bias are minimized and biased information supporting a message recipients’ own position is mistakenly perceived as objective. I suggest this effect will be intensified among strong partisans and Republican Party identifiers. This perspective offers an answer to the puzzle of how the same public

stating a theoretical preference for objective news reporting can, in practice, systematically sort itself into congenial news sources.

A recent study conducted by Arceneaux and colleagues' touches on this in an experiment varying both message and source (Arceneaux et al. 2012). Consistent with the framework presented here, they find pro-attitudinal shows are seen as "more fair, friendly, good, and cooperative" as well as "more balanced, even-handed and more American." However, as the authors acknowledge, because the media content they present consists of actual programming segments hosted by well-known cable news personalities (e.g. Bill O'Reilly and Chris Matthews) they cannot distinguish the effects of source cue from the effects of message content. By exploring how message content independently affects perceptions of bias, this study isolates the interaction between message content and consumer attitudes.

In sum, I argue news choices are driven by individual's desire for credible information, distorted perceptions of news bias, and the conflation of credibility with objectivity. From this, I test the following primary hypotheses:

**(H1) Congenial Media Effect:** News coverage presenting biased information supporting recipients' positions will be perceived as objective.

**(H2) Credible Media Effect:** News coverage presenting biased information supporting recipients' positions will be perceived as more credible than either more balanced or actively hostile coverage.

And the following ancillary hypotheses:

**(H3) Party Identification:** Both congenial and credible media responses will be greater for Republicans than for Democrats.

**(H4) Party Strength:** Both congenial and credible media responses will be greater among those heavily invested in politics than among those not heavily invested.

**(H5) News Junkies:** Both congenial and credible media responses will be greater among heavy news consumers than among less active news consumers.

**Experimental Examination of Message Effects**

I test my theory through an online survey experiment designed to explore cognitive responses to slanted news coverage. The survey was conducted by Knowledge Networks in 2011, on a sample of 731 randomly selected U.S. residents<sup>2</sup>. Knowledge Networks maintains a large panel, selected through Random Digit Dialing, with free Internet connections in exchange for completing surveys. Participants for this study constitute a randomly selected subset of the KN panel designed to be representative of the U.S. adult population<sup>3</sup>. This research is concerned with partisan responses to biased news, limiting the sample used in the following analyses to 701 individuals who aligned themselves clearly with either the Democratic or Republican Party.

The survey included a set of questions about political interest, attitudes towards the news media, and the frequency and preferred medium of news consumption. Additionally, the protocol asked respondents to read a news transcript presented as being from “a national cable news show.” Respondents were randomly presented with one of three transcripts compiled from actual news reports and interviews, each providing a competing political perspectives on the two-year extension of the Bush tax-cuts recently voted on by Congress (pro-Democratic, pro-Republican and balanced). Participants were then asked a series of questions about perceived bias in coverage and the credibility of information presented. Demographic statistics for respondents across treatment conditions are provided in Table 1.

[Table 1 about here]

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<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Time-sharing Experiments for the Social Sciences (TESS) for funding this study under National Science Foundation grant (SES-0818839).

<sup>3</sup> Household completion rate for this study was 65.5%. For a comparison of the representativeness of KN data versus an RDD telephone survey see Chang and Krosnick (2009).

For this study, I define biased news coverage as politically unbalanced. In the context of partisan bias in news, a partisan news source presents information about events in a way designed to bolster the agenda of their preferred political party, while denigrating the opposition. To create competing bias across treatment conditions I compiled news transcripts from actual news reporting and edited them so that differing levels of scrutiny were applied to factual claims made by either a Democratic or Republican member of Congress. These claims were made in the wake of President Obama's December 6, 2010 announcement that a deal had been reached with Congressional Republicans to extend both unemployment benefits and the Bush tax-cuts.

The basic format of the transcript across all conditions was identical. Video clips were described for two members of Congress, Senators Dan Coats (R) of Indiana and Sherrod Brown (D) of Ohio respectively, responding to the announced compromise. In their response, both Senators make factual claims: Sen. Coats states that a majority of Americans supported the extension of all the Bush tax-cuts, Sen. Brown declares the cost of the agreed upon tax-cut extension to be \$700 billion. These claims were chosen because both had been evaluated by Politifact and found to be false.

In the pro-Republican condition the Republican Senator is introduced with a video clip of their statement and then interviewed gently by the host, allowing them to restate and bolster their claim unchallenged. After the initial interview an additional video clip is presented, this one of the Democratic response. Following this, an analyst is introduced and identified as being from Politifact. Stating the press' responsibility to "keep them honest" the analyst proceeds to debunk the speaking Senator's statement. During the course of her analysis she refers to the Senator's claim as "highly misleading", "inaccurate and deceptive", and "simply not true", before closing with "Politifact.org rates Brown's (Coat's) statement as "completely false". The pro-Democratic condition reverses this pattern, while

in the balanced condition the analyst is omitted and both Senators are interviewed following each video clip<sup>4</sup>.

### Analysis

There are two key independent variables for all four hypotheses. The first,  $\chi_i^{Consist}$ , is an indicator variable equaling one if message and partisanship align, and zero otherwise. The second,  $\chi_i^{Dissonant}$ , is an indicator variable equaling one if message and partisanship conflict, and zero otherwise. An example of consistency would be a Republican identifier who was in the pro-Republican condition; dissonance would be the same Republican if they were in the pro-Democratic condition. Note that the focus of this analysis is on the cognitive response of political partisans to biased news; because of this, true independents (N=30) were excluded from the analysis. The result of this coding framework is to create a baseline category of partisan identifiers exposed to the balanced condition.

H1 states perceptions of bias will be minimized and biased information supporting recipients' own positions will be perceived as objective. Operationally this implies Democratic Party identifiers will see news coverage as more objective when it delivers a pro-Democratic message, with the same holding for Republicans. To test this I define,  $\mathbf{v}_i^{Bias}$ , a post-treatment ordinal scale (0-5) of the degree of bias the respondent perceived in the news program, where zero is unbiased and five is very biased. Note that this definition of bias is non-directional and measures the total extent to which the program deviated from individual  $i$ 's relative perception of unbiasedness.

H2 states the perceived credibility of coverage will be greater when the information presented is consistent with the recipient's existing political beliefs. I define credibility as,

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<sup>4</sup> Full text of treatment conditions presented in the Appendix

$V_i^{Credibility}$ , a post-treatment additive index<sup>5</sup> created from three questions about the news coverage: how much individual  $i$  believes the information presented in the program, how much individual  $i$  believes information from Politifact.org, and how informative individual  $i$  found the program to be.

H3 and H4 suggest interactive effects between party identification and strength of political involvement for both congenial and credible media responses. I test these expectations in a series of interactions with  $\chi_i^{Consist}$  and  $\chi_i^{Dissonant}$ . First between  $\chi_i^{rep}$ , a dichotomous indicator for Republican Party identification, and second with  $\chi_i^{Strpid}$ , an indicator coded one if individual  $i$  self-reported as either a Strong Democrat or a Strong Republican and zero otherwise.

H5 posits an interactive effect between high levels of news consumption and both congenial and credible media responses. Heavy news consumers are defined as individuals scoring in the upper quartile of an additive index of news use<sup>6</sup> created from individuals' responses to a series of questions about the frequency with which they get political information from the following sources: radio, Internet news sources, paper newspapers, television, and magazines<sup>7</sup>.  $\chi_i^{News}$  is coded as one for individuals in the upper quartile of news use and zero otherwise. Turning first to perceived bias in coverage, Table 2 reports results from the following series of linear regression models:

**Baseline:**

$$V_i^{Bias} = \alpha + \beta_1 \chi_i^{Consist} + \beta_2 \chi_i^{Dissonant} + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

<sup>5</sup> Cronbach's Alpha=0.87, Min=3, Max=30, Mean=15.25, Std. Dev.=5.66

<sup>6</sup> Cronbach's Alpha=0.71, Min=0, Max=25, Mean=11.91, Std. Dev.=5.92

<sup>7</sup> News consumption from each source was measured from 0-5, where zero means the individual never gets political information from that source and five that they receive information daily.

**Partisan Identification:**

$$v_i^{Bias} = \alpha + \beta_1 \chi_i^{Consist} + \beta_2 \chi_i^{Dissonant} + \beta_3 \chi_i^{rep} + \beta_4 \chi_i^{Consist} \chi_i^{rep} + \beta_5 \chi_i^{Dissonant} \chi_i^{rep} + \varepsilon_i \quad (2)$$

**Partisan Strength:**

$$v_i^{Bias} = \alpha + \beta_1 \chi_i^{Consist} + \beta_2 \chi_i^{Dissonant} + \beta_3 \chi_i^{stpid} + \beta_4 \chi_i^{Consist} \chi_i^{stpid} + \beta_5 \chi_i^{Dissonant} \chi_i^{stpid} + \varepsilon_i \quad (3)$$

**High News Consumption:**

$$v_i^{Bias} = \alpha + \beta_1 \chi_i^{Consist} + \beta_2 \chi_i^{Dissonant} + \beta_3 \chi_i^{News} + \beta_4 \chi_i^{Consist} \chi_i^{News} + \beta_5 \chi_i^{Dissonant} \chi_i^{News} + \varepsilon_i \quad (4)$$

In Table 3 the same models are used to explore perceptions of credibility by substituting

$v_i^{Credibility}$  as the dependent variable.

[Table 2 about here]

**Results**

At first glance, the results from the baseline model presented in the first column of Table 2 offer limited support for H1. However, while the coefficient for consistency is not statistically significant, recall that the baseline comparison group is partisans exposed to the balanced condition. Substantively then, the null coefficient indicates a lack of significant difference between the magnitude of perceived bias for partisan exposed to the balanced condition and those exposed to congenial bias. In other words, partisans who received supportive news coverage saw the same amount of bias as did those exposed to balanced coverage<sup>8</sup>.

In contrast, the coefficient for dissonance is significant and positive. Substantively this indicates that partisans saw coverage biased against their position as more biased than the balanced coverage. Taken together, these findings paint a picture consistent with H1, where perceptions of news bias are asymmetrical, with partisans minimizing the extent to

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<sup>8</sup> This does not imply that partisans saw no bias in coverage. With the exception of Democrats in the Consistent condition, who saw it as almost exactly neutral, all partisans saw at least some hostile bias in both balanced and consistent conditions.

which supportive news coverage is biased and exaggerating the bias of oppositional news coverage.

The second model examines the interactive effects of Republican Party identification. The coefficient for dissonance is positive and statistically insignificant, while the corollary interaction term is negative and significant. Substantively this indicates while Republican Party identifiers saw dissonant news coverage as significantly more biased than either balanced or consistent coverage, Democrats saw no significant differences in the magnitude of bias across conditions. While consistent with H2, the extremity of this finding was somewhat unexpected. Looking at the effects of consistency, as in model one, both unadorned and interactive coefficients were statistically insignificant. Substantively, this indicates respondents saw the same amount of bias in supportive as they did in balanced coverage, regardless of party identification.

Model three examines interactive effects between strong partisan attachments and response to news bias. The coefficient for strong partisanship by itself is positive and statistically significant. Consistent with hostile media research, this indicates that strong partisans in the balanced condition viewed it as more biased than weaker partisans (see Gunther 1992). At the same time, the coefficient for dissonance is positive and statistically significant, while its interaction with strong partisanship is not significant. Substantively, this indicates that weak and strong partisans responded similarly to exposure to hostile news bias.

Perhaps the most interesting results are those for both baseline and interactive coefficients for consistency. The base coefficient is positive and moderately significant ( $p=0.06$ ), indicating that weaker partisans accurately recognize supportive news bias as more biased than balanced coverage. Conversely, the interaction with strong partisanship is negative and statistically significant. Substantively this indicates that strong partisans

viewed congenial bias as *less* biased than unbiased coverage. Given that the regular news audience is disproportionately made up of more politically interested and involved individuals, this result is of particular importance for understanding news choice and its consequences.

Finally, model four interacts consistency and dissonance with high news consumption. By itself, the coefficient for high news consumption is both positive and statistically significant, indicating that people who follow politics regularly are more likely to view balanced coverage as more biased than those who consume less political news. This result is consistent with that of strong partisanship, and reinforces the conclusion that understanding news choice means recognizing that regular news consumers differ in important respects from the general public (cf. Prior 2007). While the coefficient for dissonance is positive and statistically significant, the interaction is not significant. Consistency likewise is not statistically significant, nor is its interaction.

The results from Table 2 paint a picture where perceptions of news bias are heavily impacted by the direction and strength of political attachments. Republican Party identifiers respond with greater intensity to dissonant bias, while Democratic Party identifiers may fail to recognize biased coverage at all. And while strong partisans may see bias in balanced coverage and balance in biased, individuals with weak partisan attachments are more likely to recognize bias in coverage, even when the bias supports their political perspective.

[Table 3 about here]

The pattern of coefficients for the baseline credibility model mirrors that for perceived bias, however the substantive interpretation differs in important ways. The negative sign and statistical significance of the coefficient for dissonance indicates that news coverage unfavorable to viewers' beliefs was viewed as less credible than balanced

coverage. While this will be discussed in greater detail below, it is important to point out that in this case both biased versions provided more ‘accurate’ information than did the balanced condition, in the sense that the political fact checking provided was correct at the time. At the same time, consistent information was viewed on average as no more credible than balanced information.

In the partisan identification model, the coefficient for Republican partisanship is negative and statistically significant, indicating a greater skepticism of news coverage in general. However, neither interaction term is significant. Substantively this indicates, that while Republicans viewed the balanced coverage as less credible than Democrats, responses to dissonant and consistent news coverage did not differ across party lines.

Turning to model three and the interaction between partisan strength and bias response. The coefficient for dissonance is negative and statistically significant, however the related interaction term is statistically insignificant. Interestingly, while the main effect of consistency is not significant, the corollary interaction term is positive and statistically significant. The implication is that weaker partisans saw both balanced and congenial coverage as equally credible, while strong partisans saw congenial coverage as more credible. This result echoes the findings in the bias model, where strong partisans saw congenial coverage as the least biased; here they are shown to view it as the most credible as well.

Lastly, model four attempts to shed light on the behavior of the regular news consumers by interacting high news consumption with bias exposure. As in previous models, the coefficient for dissonance remains negative and statistically significant. Its attendant interaction term is not significant, indicating that both heavy and more casual news consumers respond similarly to dissonant coverage. However, while the coefficient for consistency is not statistically significant, its interaction term is both positive and

significant. Substantively this indicates that heavy news users view congenial news coverage as more credible than balanced coverage.

In sum, people view coverage presenting information they disagree with as less credible, with Republicans responding more intensely than Democrats. Strong partisans view congenial coverage as most credible, as do the individuals most likely to consume political news.

## **Discussion**

While existing evidence demonstrates the existence of significant political segmentation within the contemporary news market, until now the mechanism behind this fragmentation has been unclear. The findings presented here have important consequences for understanding news choice in an era of unprecedented media alternatives. At the same time, they highlight important normative considerations about the modern democratic function of the press.

This study proposed and finds empirical support for a mechanism of news choice based on the assumption that people desire unbiased and credible political coverage, but where cognitive biases in information processing cloud their perceptions. As a result, individuals see bias where none exists and objectivity in bias flattering to their worldview. At the same time, for those heavily invested in politics, the credibility of news coverage is determined in part by the extent to which it reflects their preferred political worldview. Perversely, the desire for unbiased and credible news may contribute to audiences sorting into biased news sources.

It comes as no surprise that people do not view all news sources as equal. However, because the bulk of recent political selective exposure research has relied either on traditional survey data (e.g. Morris 2007; Stroud 2007; 2008) or used experimental manipulations with source cues (e.g. Iyengar and Hahn 2008; Turner 2007; Arceneaux et al.

2012), until now scholars have been unable say much about the selection process more definitive or empirical than Republicans prefer Fox News because it is conservative and Democrats avoid it for the same reason. By holding source constant and varying content, the experiment presented here solves the problem of endogenous selection, providing new insights into political selective exposure by focusing on the causal mechanisms driving it.

Much of the renewed interest in selective exposure is rooted in normative concerns for democratic theory should individuals choose to avail themselves of the increased opportunity to attend only to congenial news sources. If individuals seek out only news coverage that reinforces their political beliefs, some fear society may become increasingly polarized (Sunstein 2001) and intolerant (Mutz 2002). These fears are all the more justified if, as some evidence suggests, different patterns of news exposure lead people to develop systematically different perceptions of political realities in the world around them (e.g. Kull et al. 2003-4). Having a common understanding of current events and political issues facilitates the compromises necessary for democratic governance.

From this perspective, the results presented here are discouraging. While increasing the availability of information from diverse political viewpoints has the potential to increase citizens' knowledge of opposing viewpoints, this seems increasingly unlikely. Given the overwhelming amount of news content available, much of it unreliable, the savvy news consumer must employ some strategic selectivity. What these results suggest is that even people motivated to explore alternative political viewpoints may be inexorably drawn towards sources offering biased coverage, if they also prioritize credible information.

These findings presented here are also important for understanding the incentive structure for news providers seeking to maximize market share. Recall that the political fact checking in both biased conditions represented accurate criticisms about claims made by political elites. That individuals view the journalistically vacuous he-said/she-said

coverage format as more credible than coverage accurately highlighting political falsehoods creates a dangerous incentive for news providers to shy away from performing their democratic function as political watchdog. That the individuals who disproportionately comprise the bulk of a shrinking news audience view congenial coverage as the most credible further reinforces the incentive for news providers to adopt partisan biases in order to satisfy increasingly niche markets. Evidence for both of these trends is plentiful<sup>9</sup>

In theory, the rise of partisan news does not preclude the media as an institution from performing its democratic function, since the full range of information would still be publically available. However, rather than enhancing democracy by forcing all political perspectives to battle for the public's favor in a true marketplace of ideas, increasing choice may simply facilitates peoples' natural inclination to avoid dissonant information as possible (Festinger 1957). From this perspective, cognitive biases in processing the news allow patterns of political selective exposure to be rationalized by encouraging the perception that congenial news sources offer the most unbiased and credible coverage.

Recent research has shown that in the absence of trusted information, partisan predispositions increasingly inform and potentially distort beliefs about political reality (Ladd 2012), the results presented here show the inverse also holds: partisan predispositions play a significant role in what information, and by extension, what information sources are trustworthy. Taken together, these findings paint a potentially troubling picture, where the most politically active are increasingly ensconced in distinct and self-reinforcing knowledge networks, convinced they are privy to the most credible and unbiased information available, we should expect increasing and increasingly entrenched political polarization to result.

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<sup>9</sup> For example, the Pew Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism publishes an annual report on the State of the News Media. These reports document the decline of investigative journalism and the concomitant rise of a more overtly partisan journalistic style, particularly in the cable news market.

**Table 1: Balance Across Treatment Conditions**

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	Condition			P-Value
	Dissonant	Balanced	Consistent	
Republican	0.459 (0.033)	0.455 (0.032)	0.475 (0.032)	0.896
Democrat	0.541 (0.033)	0.512 (0.032)	0.525 (0.032)	0.819
Age	51.60 (1.08)	49.16 (1.067)	49.03 (1.061)	0.166
Education	2.830 (0.066)	2.831 (0.063)	2.714 (0.063)	0.334
Gender	1.489 (0.033)	1.512 (0.032)	1.433 (0.032)	0.201
Income	12.09 (0.290)	12.27 (0.278)	11.82 (0.280)	0.517
N	229	242	238	

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Note: Standard errors in parentheses. P-values from between groups differences ANOVA.

**Table 2: Partisan Perceptions of News Bias**

Models	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Baseline	Partisan Identification	Partisan Strength	High News Consumption
Dissonance	0.576*** (0.147)	0.289 (0.200)	0.528*** (0.179)	0.555*** (0.180)
Consistency	0.111 (0.146)	0.146 (0.200)	0.314* (0.172)	0.145 (0.177)
Republican	-	0.212 (0.206)	-	-
Strong Partisan	-	-	0.818*** (0.218)	-
High News Consumer	-	-	-	0.562*** (0.212)
Dissonance X Republican	-	0.630** (0.294)	-	-
Consistency X Republican	-	-0.087 (0.291)	-	-
Dissonance X Strong Partisan	-	-	-0.023 (0.305)	-
Consistency X Strong Partisan	-	-	-0.649** (0.311)	-
Dissonance X High News	-	-	-	0.074 (0.305)
Consistency X High News	-	-	-	-0.060 (0.305)
Constant	1.314*** (0.103)	1.220*** (0.141)	1.061*** (0.121)	1.116*** (0.126)
Observations	699	692	699	699
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.024	0.048	0.063	0.052

Robust standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

**Table 3: Bias and Perceptions of News Credibility**

	Baseline	Partisan Identification	Partisan Strength	High News Consumption
Dissonance	-2.419*** (0.518)	-2.146*** (0.705)	-2.319*** (0.638)	-2.547*** (0.637)
Consistency	0.555 (0.511)	-0.005 (0.705)	-0.142 (0.612)	-0.415 (0.625)
Republican	-	-1.410* (0.728)	-	-
Strong Partisan	-	-	-0.515 (0.780)	-
High News Consumer	-	-	-	-0.381 (0.749)
Dissonance X Republican	-	-0.829 (1.038)	-	-
Consistency X Republican	-	1.033 (1.023)	-	-
Dissonance X Strong Partisan	-	-	-0.173 (1.092)	-
Consistency X Strong Partisan	-	-	2.300** (1.108)	-
Dissonance X High News	-	-	-	0.362 (1.081)
Consistency X High News	-	-	-	2.963*** (1.074)
Constant	15.885*** (0.361)	16.625*** (0.500)	16.043*** (0.433)	16.020*** (0.446)
Observations	687	680	687	687
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.051	0.071	0.060	0.067

Robust standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\* p&lt;0.01, \*\* p&lt;0.05, \* p&lt;0.1

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## Appendix

TESS 096- Kelly  
December 2011  
- Questionnaire -

### [CONDITION ONE (PRO-REPUBLICAN)]

December 6, 2010 Monday  
7:00 PM EST

#### Tax Cut Deal

HOST: Good evening everyone. Tonight, dramatic breaking news, a deal brokered by President Obama and the newly empowered Republican congressional leaders -- the key points, a two-year extension of all the Bush tax cuts and an extension of unemployment benefits the White House says will benefit seven million Americans.

The deal is widely seen as a victory for Republicans, who had taken a firm stance in favor of extending the tax cuts for everyone, while President Barack Obama and many congressional Democrats wanted to extend them only for families earning less than \$250,000.

Here in the studio to discuss the compromise is Senior Political Analyst for the non-partisan watchdog organization Politifact.org, Jessica Nichols.

Welcome Jessica, tell us a little bit about this deal.

NICHOLS: This is an important deal for the White House. Extending unemployment benefits for the 1.9 million Americans about to lose them at the end of the year was a top priority for the President and this deal the president has brokered extends unemployment benefits for 13-months.

HOST: Some congressional Democrats may be upset, what about the American people? Where do they stand? Here's Senator Dan Coats, Republican of Indiana, speaking with reporters at a news conference earlier today.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

SEN. DAN COATS (R), INDIANA: "The American people spoke pretty loudly during the election and I think that my colleagues across the aisle finally decided to listen. The American people want to stop all the looming tax hikes and to cut spending."

(END VIDEO CLIP)

HOST: With more, Republican Senator Dan Coats joins us live. Good evening, sir.

SEN. DAN COATS (R), INDIANA: Good evening.

HOST: Based on the tentative agreement, is this something you could vote for?

COATS: We'll see. The details are still emerging and evolving. And I always like to read these things before I vote on them. But the important thing here, I think, from our standpoint is that people across this country are now going to have certainty. Families, small businesses that are making decisions are not going to be stuck with higher taxes come January 1. And that's the thing that we were trying to avoid and something that we desperately need to avoid if we want to get the economy growing again.

As I said, the American people spoke pretty loudly during the election, they want to stop all the looming tax hikes and to cut spending. It's good that my colleagues across the aisle finally decided to listen.

HOST: You know, I thought the president looked quite somber and maybe even angry when he made the announcement.

COATS: I think this is going to be a hard sell for him in his caucus. And he's going to have to go up and sell this to members of the House of Representatives, who really believe that these tax cuts should expire. But the votes aren't there, and I think he is acknowledging that.

But in the end, the important thing is you have certainty for families, small business owners. Even with regard to estates, I think there's a death tax provision there that for two years, lowers the top rate on estates to 35 percent and allows for a \$5 million exemption, which is something that we've been advocating for, for a long time.

HOST: Thank you senator.

Up next, Democrats aren't happy about this deal. Can the president sell the deal to his supporters? Here's Senator Sherrod Brown, Democrat of Ohio, up for reelection next cycle, at a news conference earlier today.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

SEN. SHERROD BROWN (D), OHIO: I'm very unhappy about it, you're right, in essence, it takes 700 billion -- borrows \$700 billion from China, puts it on our children and grandchildren's credit cards and gives it to the wealthiest 2 percent taxpayers. People say Washington doesn't listen enough.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

HOST: Pretty strong words, to say what the president of the United States just agreed to would blow a seven billion -- \$700 billion hole in the budget to give extra tax cuts to the wealthiest two percent. Jessica?

NICHOLS: Well, first of all we in the press have a responsibility to sort of -- as we say, keep them honest, and what the Senator from Ohio said is highly misleading.

The problem with using that \$700 billion figure now, which is the estimated cost of extending the tax cuts for an additional 10-years, is that the Obama-GOP deal, and the resulting tax package that Congress could approve this week, calls for extending the tax breaks for only two more years. A 10-year extension is not on the table.

Plus, that \$700 billion figure for ten years includes a whole lot of people who are neither millionaires nor billionaires. The figure, in fact, includes all single filers earning more than \$200,000 a year and

joint filers earning more than \$250,000. To call a two-earner couple making \$251,000 "millionaires and billionaires" is inaccurate and deceptive.

HOST: Do we know the real cost of the tax cut deal yet?

NICHOLS: The best estimate of the cost of extending these tax cuts comes from Joint Committee projections released on Dec. 10, a day after Brown spoke on CNN. They show the cost of retaining both the 33 percent tax bracket and the 35 percent bracket for two more years would come to \$60.7 billion. Of course, this also covers a lot more people than millionaires and billionaires.

In short, Brown's claim that the cost of extending the Bush tax-cuts will cost \$700 billion is simply not true; Politifact.org rates Brown's statement as "completely false".

HOST: Thank you Jessica.  
END

## **[CONDITION 2 (PRO-DEMOCRATIC)]**

**December 6, 2010 Monday**  
7:00 PM EST

### **Tax Cut Deal**

HOST: Good evening everyone. Tonight, dramatic breaking news, a deal brokered by President Obama and the newly empowered Republican congressional leaders -- the key points, a two-year extension of all the Bush tax cuts and an extension of unemployment benefits the White House says will benefit seven million Americans.

The deal is widely seen as a victory for Republicans, who had taken a firm stance in favor of extending the tax cuts for everyone, while President Barack Obama and many congressional Democrats wanted to extend them only for families earning less than \$250,000.

Here in the studio to discuss the compromise is Senior Political Analyst for the non-partisan watchdog organization Politifact.org, Jessica Nichols.

Welcome Jessica, tell us a little bit about this deal.

NICHOLS: This is an important deal for the White House. Extending unemployment benefits for the 1.9 million Americans about to lose them at the end of the year was a top priority for the President and this deal the president has brokered extends unemployment benefits for 13-months.

HOST: We'll look at some specifics about what this deal means in a moment, but first Democrats unhappy about this deal. Can the president sell the deal to his supporters? Here's Senator Sherrod Brown, Democrat of Ohio, up for reelection next cycle, at a news conference earlier today.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

SEN. SHERROD BROWN (D), OHIO: I'm very unhappy about it, you're right, in essence, it takes 700 billion -- borrows \$700 billion from China, puts it on our children and grandchildren's credit cards and gives it to the wealthiest 2 percent taxpayers. People say Washington doesn't listen enough.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

HOST: With more, Democrat senator Sherrod Brown joins us live. Good evening, sir.

SEN. SHERROD BROWN (D) OHIO: Good evening.

HOST: Senator, you said on Saturday when you were voting on a plan to just have the middle class tax cuts stay in play. This is what you said after Senate Republicans voted in lock step against tax cuts for all Americans. "They would prefer to blow a \$700 billion hole in the budget to give extra tax cuts to the wealthiest two percent. At a time of record deficits, they propose borrowing another \$700 billion from China and passing along the tab to our grandchildren."

Could I now fairly, in your view, read that statement back to you and say the concession that Republicans extracted from the president of the United States would blow a \$700 billion hole in the budget to give extra tax cuts to the wealthiest two percent, sir?

SEN. SHERROD BROWN (D), OHIO: You could.

HOST: Will you vote for it?

BROWN: I need to look at it. I'm very unhappy about it. You're right, in essence takes 700 billion -- borrows \$700 billion from China. Charges it -- puts it on our children and grandchildren's credit cards and gives it to the wealthiest two percent taxpayers. I mean you know people say Washington doesn't listen enough. It's clear what the public was saying is keep the tax cuts going for the middle class, maintain unemployment benefits for families that lost their unemployment benefits last week. The Republicans continue to filibuster that.

I'm not at all happy with this. I want to see all the details before I make any kind of commitment. It's only been -- I watched the president on TV 20 minutes ago. I already had some briefing about it prior to that of course, but this is a real concern. It doesn't do the right thing long-term for our country.

HOST: Thank you senator.

Next, congressional Democrats may be upset, but what about the American people? Where do they stand? Here's Senator Dan Coats, Republican of Indiana, speaking with reporters at a news conference earlier today.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

SEN. DAN COATS (R), INDIANA: "The American people spoke pretty loudly during the election and I think that my colleagues across the aisle finally decided to listen. The American people want to stop all the looming tax hikes and to cut spending."

(END VIDEO CLIP)

HOST: Pretty clear where he stands, but is it really that cut and dry? How does the public feel about extending the Bush-era tax cuts? Jessica?

NICHOLS: Well first of all, we in the press have a responsibility to sort of -- as we say, keep them honest, and what the Senator from Indiana said with regards to the Bush-tax cuts is highly misleading.

The truth is that public opinion is considerably more mixed than Sen. Coats is presenting it. The percentage of people who favor extending the tax cuts for every income level -- which is how Mr. Coats framed his comment -- ranges from 23 percent to 40 percent. Quite a bit short of a majority.

Instead, the highest level of support for any specific course of action was actually the Obama position -- extending tax cuts for those below \$250,000 and not for those above that line. Across different polls between 40 percent and 50 percent of the public supported this position.

In short, Coats' claim that the American people support extending all of the Bush tax-cuts is simply not true; Politifact.org rates Coats' statement as "completely false".

HOST: Thank you Jessica.  
END

**[CONDITION 3 (BALANCED)]**

**December 6, 2010 Monday**  
**7:00 PM EST**

### **Tax Cut Deal**

HOST: Good evening everyone. Tonight, dramatic breaking news, a deal brokered by President Obama and the newly empowered Republican congressional leaders -- the key points, a two-year extension of all the Bush tax cuts and an extension of unemployment benefits the White House says will benefit seven million Americans.

The deal is widely seen as a victory for Republicans, who had taken a firm stance in favor of extending the tax cuts for everyone, while President Barack Obama and many congressional Democrats wanted to extend them only for families earning less than \$250,000.

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HOST: We'll look at some specifics about what this deal means in a moment, but first here to talk more about the compromise, Republican Senator Dan Coats joins us live. Good evening, sir.

SEN. DAN COATS (R), INDIANA: Good evening.

HOST: Based on the tentative agreement, is this something you could vote for?

COATS: We'll see. The details are still emerging and evolving. And I always like to read these things before I vote on them. But the important thing here, I think, from our standpoint is that people across this country are now going to have certainty. Families, small businesses that are making decisions are not going to be stuck with higher taxes come January 1. And that's the thing that we were trying to avoid and something that we desperately need to avoid if we want to get the economy growing again.

The American people spoke pretty loudly during the election and I think that my colleagues across the aisle finally decided to listen. The American people want to stop all the looming tax hikes and to cut spending.

HOST: You know, I thought the president looked quite somber and maybe even angry when he made the announcement.

COATS: I think this is going to be a hard sell for him in his caucus. And he's going to have to go up and sell this to members of the House of Representatives, who really believe that these tax cuts should expire. But the votes aren't there, and I think he is acknowledging that.

But in the end, the important thing is you have certainty for families, small business owners. Even with regard to estates, I think there's a death tax provision there that for two years, lowers the top rate on estates to 35 percent and allows for a \$5 million exemption, which is something that we've been advocating for, for a long time.

HOST: Thank you senator.

Up next, can the president sell the deal to his supporters? Some congressional Democrats are upset with the compromise. Here's Senator Sherrod Brown, Democrat of Ohio, up for reelection next cycle. Good evening, sir.

SEN. SHERROD BROWN (D) OHIO: Good evening.

HOST: Senator, you said on Saturday when you were voting on a plan to just have the middle class tax cuts stay in play. This is what you said after Senate Republicans voted in lock step against tax cuts for all Americans. "They would prefer to blow a \$700 billion hole in the budget to give extra tax cuts to the wealthiest two percent. At a time of record deficits, they propose borrowing another \$700 billion from China and passing along the tab to our grandchildren."

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HOST: Thank you senator.  
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