

Partisan Media and its Consequences

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Introduction

Social media and news hold the most important role in the American political world. Contemporary media consumption has led to a drastic increase in polarization in the American people. This has occurred not only through the partisan nature of current media itself but also through the way in which people are consuming media. People staying in their own groups and not straying to any other media sources feed into this partisanship. This combination of partisan media and single-minded viewership patterns is what leads to this increase in polarization. I will look at the division in news media, the targeting of content in social media, and who the consumers of the two are. In the end, I will also go over potential solutions and ways that the cycle can be remedied.

Partisan Media

The simple definition of partisan news media is outlets reporting specific stories and viewpoints that are beneficial to a particular political party, and also reporting content that is harmful to an opposing party. In the case of partisan social media, I am mainly referring to general partisan content that people are exposed to. -In terms of news stations, good examples of partisan news media are Fox News and CNN. On the social media side, Facebook is arguably the most polarizing.

Effects of Partisan Media on Polarization

In most cases, people who are consuming partisan media are already on the side of the media they are engaging with. People are essentially putting themselves into “echo chambers” where they are only hearing the views that they agree with. The effect of this is that the political ideals of people that are already far from the middle are empowered and affirmed (Levendusky, p. 1-2). In terms of social media, the effect is the same. Facebook uses an algorithm that takes in massive amounts of data on everything you do within the site in order to give you a feed that is tailored exactly to your liking. (*Settle*, p. 35). With this algorithm in use, you don’t even have to consciously make a decision on what to consume on Facebook. The application is giving you exactly what you interact with and enjoy looking at, leading to another type of echo chamber that has the exact same effect as the partisan news.

This cycle of living in an echo chamber of your own ideas and continuing to consume content in line with your own ideas leads to such a divide between party members that conversation becomes extremely difficult. When someone is consuming the same information and getting affirmations on that information, they will believe that it is correct. This divide and unwillingness to cooperate is the exact opposite of how a democracy functions, and will only lead to more tension.

Solutions

The answer to the problem of media and populace polarization is not such an easy find. There are multiple parts of this cycle that need to be remedied. On the part of the media to be less biased. On the part of the people, we need people to learn what their consumption habits actually do. All of this is easier said than done.

In order for the news to stop putting out partisan content, people must start to understand that the continued consumption of such media only emboldens news outlets to keep putting it out. It is the same principle for social media as well, the companies will keep giving people what they interact with the most.

One solution that seems promising in decreasing polarization among the population is intergroup contact. If people were engaged in positive ways with others that don’t agree with them for large periods of time and at high frequencies, and exchange actual ideas instead of devolving to disdain, a sort of understanding might be able to be reached. It is obvious that not everyone will agree with everyone. In a country with 300 million-plus people, a complete agreement is purely impossible. But if people began to try to understand each other and understand why people think the way they do, some hate from polarization may subside over time. The only problem with this solution is that the conditions for such contact are extremely hard to achieve without forcing people into it. (*What Are the Solutions to Political Polarization*, 2019)

The second most promising solution in my opinion is changing the way people vote. The American population has focused on voting solely based on party affiliation, and not on actual political ideals. If change could be made to have people let go of how strongly they want their party to win, maybe they could focus more on voting based on the actual policy. (Mason, 2018)

Conclusion

The media in our country has led to polarization of our population, and in turn, this polarization leads the population to consume media in such ways that affirm their viewpoints leading to a cycle. The solutions proposed above are only two possibilities among many others, and they still require more refinement. In the future study on this topic, I plan to research more about the reasons behind this cycle. In the process, I hope to find more solutions and what exactly is required to make them work.

Bibliography

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