Resurgent Mass Partisanship Revisited:

The Role of Media Choice in Clarifying Elite Ideology

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Abstract

Elite polarization is at an all-time high. Has this division filtered down into the public, and is this trend being exacerbated by expanded media choice in the post-broadcast era? Using NAES data from recent election cycles, we analyze the influence of news choice on individual-level perceptions of the ideologies of parties and partisan elites. We examine whether cable news choice shapes respondents' ability to correctly identify Democrats as the more liberal party, and Republicans as more conservative. Using cross-sectional and panel data, we find that partisan news consumers—particularly those watching Fox News—are better able to identify the positions and ideologies of partisan elites. Partisan news may help citizens participate more effectively by helping them identify the ideological orientation of the major parties and candidates.

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Sixteen years ago, Marc J. Hetherington identified an important connection between elite and mass polarization: as parties in Congress grew further apart ideologically, the importance and salience of parties increased on the mass level (2001). Today, elite polarization is at its highest levels since Reconstruction (Hare, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2014), potentially exacerbated by a post-broadcast era with expanded media choice and partisan news options (Arceneaux et al., 2016). These ongoing trends, along with recent research calling for more focus on political elites in studies of media choice and polarization (Arceneaux et al., 2016), suggest the need for an updated analysis. How does expanded media choice influence public understanding of partisan elites' ideologies and issue positions?

Partisan news exposure strengthens partisan attachment, partisan affect, and partisan-ideological sorting in the mass public (Stroud, 2010, 2011; Levendusky, 2009, 2013a, 2013b; Lelkes et al., 2017). Elite polarization also influences mass partisanship (Hetherington, 2001) and partisan-ideological sorting (Levendusky, 2009; Layman & Carsey, 2006; Davis & Dunaway, 2016) by providing clear distinctions between the two parties, leading to mass opinion change and stronger partisanship (Hetherington, 2001; Levendusky, 2009; Layman & Carsey, 2006). However, the precise mechanisms connecting media choice, elite polarization, and changes in mass partisanship are less clear. Today's extreme elite polarization and high media choice provide an opportunity for an extension of Hetherington (2001), investigating the role of media choice in clarifying party positions for the mass public.

Using data from the National Annenberg Election Surveys (NAES), we examine whether different patterns of news use clarify party positions for news consumers. Namely, we

investigate whether partisan cable news clarifies party ideologies and issue positions more than

mainstream news, especially given that mainstream news outlets avoid policy analysis (for fear

of being accused of bias) and emphasize the game frame and controversies instead (Bennett,

2012; Patterson, 2013). We find that there are key differences between partisan news watchers,

cable news watchers, and non-news watchers in their ability to correctly place parties and their

nominees along the ideological spectrum and to correctly identify candidate issue positions.

These findings identify important but previously neglected links between high media

choice environments, elite polarization, and the mass public's ability to differentiate between the

ideologies and policy positions of the two major parties. These linkages matter for the study of

mass partisanship, polarization, and sorting given the emphasis that extant work places on the

important role of elite polarization (Hetherington, 2001; Levendusky, 2009; Layman & Carsey,

2006). Our study moves the literature forward by bringing media choice into conversations about

elite influence on mass opinion and behavior and bringing the role of political elites into

conversations about media choice.

Normatively, our findings suggest a set of democratic tradeoffs: exposure to partisan

news and polarized elites produces some negative consequences for the public in terms of

polarization and partisan affect, but together they enhance the ability of ordinary citizens to

correctly perceive party ideology and policy positions that are genuinely polarized, allowing

them to make more informed selections between two very different parties at the ballot box.

Mass Partisanship Then and Now

From the 1980's to the early 2000's, most scholars agreed that mass partisanship was in

decline (Nie, Verba, & Petrocik, 1979; Wattenberg, 1984; Konda & Sigelman, 1987; Bartels,

2000; Hetherington, 2001). At the same time, party cohesion was reemerging at the elite level

(Poole & Rosenthal, 1997; Rohde, 1991). Hetherington (2001) linked elite-based theories of

mass public opinion to growing elite-level polarization, arguing that, "Mass behavior should

reflect, at least to some degree, elite behavior … mass party strength should have increased as a

result of greater partisanship at the elite level" (p. 619). He demonstrated quite effectively that as

elite partisans became more polarized, ordinary citizens were better able to understand party

positions—and adjust their own partisan stances accordingly.

Since 2001, elite polarization has only intensified (McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2006;

Shor & McCarty, 2011), and the mass public is increasingly polarized along a social dimension.

Partisans' hostility towards the other party has grown more intense and negative over time (e.g.

Iyengar et al., 2012), while partisan bias and anger have substantially increased (Mason, 2015).

Feeling thermometers show increasing gaps in reported warmth and coldness toward in-party and

out-party respondents, and social distance between the parties is growing. For example, between

1960 and 2010, the percent of partisans who report they would be unhappy if their child married

a member of the other party increased from five to fifty (Lelkes, 2016). Evaluations of

presidential traits are also polarizing over time (Hetherington et al., 2016), reflecting that

affective and social elements of polarization extend to candidates.

While partisans seem increasingly seem to dislike each other, the policy preferences of

most Americans remain somewhat moderate (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008; Fiorina, 2014). There is

consensus that elite polarization is on the rise (Layman, 1999; Stonecash, Brewer, & Mariani,

2003; Layman, Carsey, & Horowitz, 2006), and that these social and affective forms of animus

and distance are increasing among the mass public (Hetherington et al., 2016; Lelkes, 2016).[1]

Hetherington and colleagues (2016) suggest a partial explanation for the discrepancy between

affect-based and issue or ideology-based measures: affective expressions require less political

knowledge. Policy-related measures of ideological polarization may be too complex to be

understood by the public, which is why issue-based measures fail to capture it. Researchers

simply have an easier time "finding" mass polarization when they use measures citizens can

easily express.

If mass polarization is catching up to elite polarization, it could be because cues from

polarized elites are being communicated more effectively, giving ordinary Americans a clearer

understanding of distinctions between the parties (Levendusky, 2009; Thornton, 2013). Clarified

understanding of party positions facilitates citizens' ability to form more consistent partisan and

ideological preferences. If this process holds, the current political environment characterized by

extreme elite polarization should facilitate citizens' ability to accurately understand elites'

ideological stances and issue positions.

The Media Then and Now

An emerging literature links changes in mass partisanship and polarization to changes in

the media environment (e.g. Sunstein, 2001; Stroud, 2010, 2011; Levendusky 2013a, 2013b).

Because some indicators of polarization are accelerating simultaneously with ongoing media

fragmentation, the bulk of extant research attempts to demonstrate a direct link between media

fragmentation and mass polarization, even in the absence of conclusive evidence on this point

(see Hopkins and Ladd, 2012 and Prior, 2013 for useful discussions).

Much of this research investigates whether and how the contemporary fragmented media

environment is contributing to mass polarization or partisan-ideological sorting, and for good

reason (Stroud, 2010, 2011; Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016). Media choice has expanded

considerably over the past several decades (Groeling, 2013; Prior, 2007, 2013; Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013). Partisan outlets have multiplied, and their content is distinct from that of traditional mainstream news media. Stories from cable outlets such as Fox News reflect a partisan bias, and niche audience targeting based on ideology is also evident in Internet and blog content (Groeling, 2008; Baum & Groeling, 2008; Adamic & Glance, 2005; Hargittai et al., 2008; Prior, 2013).

There is ample evidence that exposure to partisan cues and messaging can polarize attitudes. Levendusky (2013b), for example, demonstrates that when individuals are exposed to pro-attitudinal and counter-attitudinal media they become more polarized. Stroud (2010) shows a consistent relationship between selective exposure and mass patterns of polarization, and finds individual-level selective exposure behaviors across a host of media platforms. Increased exposure to messages from partisan news outlets increases polarization, strength of partisan attachments, negative partisan affect, and partisan-ideological sorting (Stroud, 2010, 2011; Levendusky, 2009, 2013; Lelkes et al., 2016). Partisan media messages lead to polarized attitudes, and selective exposure to partisan media increases exposure to those messages.

Along with work on selective exposure, research on the geographic rollout of Fox News reveals an effect on party vote shares (DellaVigna and Kaplan, 2007), and that the current media environment does more to reinforce partisanship than to persuade out-partisans (Hopkins and Ladd, 2012). We contend the clarification of elite differences is a likely mechanism connecting partisan media, polarized elites, and mass polarization. But precisely how does media choice facilitate mass partisanship through the communication of elite cues? Investigating this question requires that we return focus to how elite cues facilitate mass partisanship, especially in the

context of the contemporary high choice media environment (e.g. Hetherington, 2001; Levendusky, 2009).[2]

Opinion Change and Party Positioning

There is a consensus in the polarization literature that elite cues play a role in mass partisanship. Elites are solidly and increasingly polarized (McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2006; Shor & McCarty, 2011), and polarization and sorting among the mass public are part of a top-down process where elites polarize first and the mass public follows (Hetherington, 2001; Levendusky, 2009). Cues from elites help Americans construct and update their partisan identities, and the mass media are the conduits through which elite cues are delivered to the public. Learning the positions of parties or candidates facilitates opinion change through the media: effects previously classified as "priming" are often better described as a partisan learning effect, where partisans learn about differences in parties and elites and adjust their opinions accordingly (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Lenz, 2009).

While mainstream media remain tethered to professional norms of journalistic objectivity (Groeling, 2010), partisan news media convey particularly strong signals about the differences between parties and political elites and the direction of those differences. Partisan cable news outlets rely heavily on congressional partisans at the extreme ends of the ideological spectrum for soundbites and guest appearances (Padgett, 2014). Regular delivery of strong, polarized partisan cues should increase news consumers' ability to distinguish between the parties.

If elite polarization fosters mass partisanship and sorting by providing clearer distinctions between the two parties, effects of partisan media should be indirect. Levendusky (2009) argues that in a context of high media choice Americans sample only a few like-minded media outlets,

promoting an echo chamber where "voters hear their side's message over and over." He adds, "Voters who consume these sorts of programs should therefore find themselves inundated with partisan cues from their side of the aisle, which should heighten their awareness of party positions." (p. 20-21). Partisan news should provide more consistent cues from polarized elites relative to mainstream news, further clarifying party positions for viewers.

Levendusky's argument about consistent and high intensity messaging also fits with what we know about how voters process information. Most voters pay only intermittent attention, and only the most intense messages are received and accepted (Zaller, 1992). Elite partisans therefore sell their messages and partisan brand by repeating themselves in a clear and consistent manner (Tomz & Sniderman, 2005; Groeling, 2010). Groeling (2010) argues that the journalistic norms and routines of traditional non-partisan media disrupt party clarification by sourcing outside the party, asking questions, and giving equal time to both sides. Hetherington makes a similar argument about the consistency or party messages: "Because greater ideological differences between the parties on the elite level should produce a more partisan information stream, elite polarization should produce a more partisan mass response" (2001: 622). Party message cohesion should be at its strongest in a partisan media environment.

The current media context provides the opportunity for audiences to self-select into partisan news, mainstream news, or no news, resulting in differential reception of partisan messages.[3] One meaningful way to test the implications of such choices on party clarity is to examine the effect of news choice on the ability to correctly match parties to their ideologies and issue positions. As elite partisans polarize, their cues make it clearer to ordinary Americans that there are key distinctions between them. These cues raise the salience of elites' ideological positions on the right or left, improving the public's ability to array the parties accurately and to

discern important differences between the parties altogether. As position, distance, and differences become increasingly clear, the public becomes more concerned about which party dictates policy and partisan attachments become more consequential (Key, 1966; Nie, Verba, & Petrocik, 1979; Page, 1978; Carmines & Stimson, 1989).

Clearer cues about party ideology should influence perceptions of presidential nominees, who are also likely to be further apart ideologically as the elite polarization trends have continued. In the 2004 and 2008 elections—the time periods studied here—there are similar ideological distances between the candidates on the liberal-conservative DW-NOMINATE scale (Poole & Rosenthal, 1997): George Bush (0.408) and John Kerry (-0.366) were 0.774 points apart, while John McCain (0.329) and Barack Obama (-0.436) were 0.765 points apart (Poole, 2004; Carroll et al., 2008). As major party nominees differentiate, it should become more straightforward for ordinary citizens to correctly place their ideologies through association with the party that nominated them—and, these distinctions are possibly made even clearer through reinforcement by partisan news media. Building on Hetherington's (2001) arguments, we offer the following hypotheses:

> H1: Partisan news watchers are more likely to correctly place parties' and presidential candidates' ideologies and issue positions than non-partisan news watchers.

Though we expect partisan news watchers to benefit from the sharpest and most consistent partisan cues (e.g. Levendusky, 2009; Groeling, 2010), all cable news watchers should be able to place candidates on the ideological spectrum more accurately than non-news watchers. Mainstream and objective news still contains partisan signals (Padgett, 2014), as well as information about candidates and their issue positions. News watchers are also more politically interested and informed than those who avoid news (Prior, 2007). Thus, we expect that those

who are interested in news would be more likely to turn their exposure to political information

into more accurate ideological placements.

> H2: Cable news watchers will be more likely to correctly place parties' and presidential candidates' ideologies and issue positions than non-news watchers.

We also expect that these relationships will be stronger in 2008 than in 2004, the years of

our observed data. The time between 2004 and 2008 was characterized by the largest growth of

MSNBC and Fox viewers. During this time, Fox continued to stake out its branded position on

the ideological right and MSNBC made a concerted move to the left. The network allowed

commentators Keith Olbermann and Chris Matthews to lead their election coverage-before

removing them after pushback about their explicit partisanship, and granted liberal commentator

Rachel Maddow her own nightly show before the election (Stelter, 2008). The continued success

of Fox News and MSNBC's deliberate move to the left should be associated with a clear growth

in their viewership's ability to perceive ideological differences between the candidates.

> H3: The effects of partisan and cable news watching on correct ideological placement of presidential candidates were stronger in 2008 than in 2004.

Data and Method

We conduct two analyses to assess these hypotheses. In Analysis 1, we estimate the

impact of partisan media choice on perceptions of elites' ideological differences in a model

based on Hetherington's (2001). Previous research demonstrates that partisan selective exposure

leads to polarization, with weaker evidence for reverse causality (Stroud 2010), but no number of

covariates in an observational analysis can account for the potential for perceptions of

ideological differences between elites to precede the choice to consume partisan media. In

Analysis 2, using panel designs to account for selection and reverse causality, we examine the

impact of partisan news choice on perceptions of elite ideological differences before and after

clarifying partisan events: the Democratic National Convention (DNC) and Republican National Convention (RNC) (Romer et al., 2006). This analysis tests within-person effects of partisan media consumption before and after periods of intense elite messaging, placing our conclusions on firmer causal footing.

Assessing the impact of partisan media usage on perceptions of elite ideological and policy differences requires a dataset that captures media channel choice, opinions towards the parties and their nominees, and individual-level partisanship and ideology. The 2004 and 2008 National Annenberg Election Surveys (NAES) asked respondents media use questions for specific newspapers, radio channels, and cable television stations, making the NAES an ideal source for analyzing the role of news choice in public perceptions.

We are unable to rely upon a series of measurements across decades due to the recent emergence of partisan cable news and the paucity of nationally representative surveys with reliable and specific media selection measures. As such, we do not utilize Hetherington's (2001) variables denoting off-year elections, divided government, and differences between the parties' mean DW-NOMINATE scores. There is little variation between the 107th and 109th Congresses (those preceding the 2004 and 2008 NAES, respectively). Consistent with the trend observed in Hetherington (2001), the parties diverged further since his study. In 2004 and 2008, the years studied, the average mean distance between the parties is higher than in any of the years in Hetherington's sample, which ended in 1996.[4]

We estimate a partial replication and extension of Hetherington (2001), absent some dependent variables—seeing important differences between the parties, correctly placing the parties ideologically, and the perceived ideological distance between parties—that are not all available in the NAES datasets. The 2004 NAES contains a question asking which party is more

conservative,[1] while the 2008 NAES does not. Both surveys contain questions asking

respondents to place the Democratic and Republican presidential candidates on a five-point

ideological scale, allowing us to create a dichotomous measure of correct ideological placement

of the presidential candidates in each election cycle. Respondents who correctly placed the

Democratic candidate (John Kerry or Barack Obama) as more liberal than the Republican

nominee (George W. Bush or John McCain) were considered "correct." We also conduct

analyses predicting accurate identification of candidates' policy positions. The six policy-related

dependent variables are dichotomous indicators for whether respondents correctly matched

partisan presidential candidates with their stated policy preferences.

Self-reported cable television news consumption serves as the primary independent

variable.[5] The 2004 NAES first asks respondents how many days in the past week they watched

a 24-hour cable news channel. If respondents reply with a number greater than zero, they are

then asked to choose between three listed options: Fox News, MSNBC, and CNN. The 2008

NAES asked about cable news preferences slightly differently: respondents were asked which

specific news programs they watched, and we compiled those responses into viewership by

network. We coded each network as its own dummy variable, with the "0" term representing

viewership of no cable news or any other cable news network. Respondents claiming to watch all

three networks equally (around 5% of the sample) are excluded from the analysis.

The control variables are consistent with Hetherington's models. As he describes,

strength of partisanship and strength of ideology (coded as dummy variables indicating weak and

strong) are important indicators of respondent's understanding of ideology and partisanship and

ability to detect differences. Since Hetherington does not include respondents' partisan

identification, we exclude this as well, and measure only the intensity of those attachments and

beliefs. More education should increase the probability that respondents will perceive differences

between the parties (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). The age, race, and gender variables account

for political experience and important sources of individual-level variation (Mondak, 1999).

Given the added threat to inference posed by selective exposure, we include other

measures of news consumption, civics knowledge, interest in politics, and date interviewed.

Newspaper readership is included to account for exposure to the higher-quality political coverage

produced by newspapers (Druckman, 2005). Exposure to any news on television is also included:

given that viewership of the channels in question (Fox News, MSNBC, and CNN) is explicitly

measured, this coefficient will represent the effect of exposure to news on any other channel.

Political interest and political knowledge are also likely to contribute to respondents' ability to

correctly place the ideology of political actors. Political interest is captured by asking

respondents how closely he or she follows public affairs, coded one to four from "not closely at

all" to "very closely." A three-question index of civics knowledge, using several of the questions

recommended by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1997), captures knowledge of features of

government stored in respondents' long-term memory: which branch of government declares

laws constitutional, the proportion of the House needed to overturn a presidential veto, and the

current majority party in Congress (Republicans in 2004 and Democrats in 2008). Using these

independent and dependent variables, we examine the impact of partisan news choice on

perceptions of elite ideological differences in Analyses 1 and 2.

The equations are analyzed using logistic regression because our dependent variables are

binary. In each model, the effect of viewership of Fox News, MSNBC, and CNN are estimated

simultaneously. Each coefficient captures the variation accounted for by watching each

respective news channel, meaning that the effects of the two other specified networks are not

estimated in the coefficient for each network. This estimation strategy results in a common baseline in which the "zero" term for each of the cable news variables is the same: "other" cable news channels (besides the three estimated) and no cable news consumption.

<div align="center">**Results**</div>

Analysis 1 (Rolling Cross-Section)

Establishing an association between partisan news consumption and correct ideological placement of parties and candidates is a necessary, but not sufficient, step towards confirming our hypotheses. Self-reported media choice and unobserved variables leading to selection bias cannot be overcome as threats to inference, issues we address in the within-subjects panel data in Analysis 2. However, we believe our specification in Analysis 1 demonstrates the existence of a relationship between partisan news and correct ideological placement while capturing valuable information about the relative size of partisan news effects compared to other known influences on political knowledge.

We estimate Equation 1, a logistic regression model, to analyze the influence of partisan media consumption on ideological clarity about parties and their presidential candidates:

Pr(correct relative ideological placement [2004 (party), 2004 & 2008 (candidate)])[6]

$= f$ (watches Fox News, watches MSNBC, watches CNN, watches any TV news, reads a newspaper, civics knowledge index, strength of partisanship, strength of ideology, political interest, education, age, black, female, date sampled)

The results for party distinctions in 2004 are presented in Columns 1 and 2 of Table 1, followed by results for candidate ideology in 2004 (Columns 3 and 4) and 2008 (Columns 5 and 6).

<div align="center">[Insert Table 1 here]</div>

Watching Fox News is the only news choice with a consistently significant, positive association with correct party ideology placement, supporting H1 for party perceptions. Odds ratios (in column 2) quantify these differences more effectively than the logit coefficients: compared to those who do not watch cable news, Fox News viewers are 43.5% more likely than to correctly place the parties, while there is no significant effect of watching CNN or MSNBC. Therefore, watching cable news of any kind (as proposed in H2) does not improve the accuracy of perceptions of party ideology. Watching non-cable television news has a significant and negative association with correct perception of party ideology (-26%), while reading a newspaper has a positive and significant effect (+16%). H2, therefore, cannot be completely rejected: watching non-cable news leads to a higher probability of incorrect ideological assessments, making CNN and MSNBC more accurate by comparison. Only Fox News viewership, however, leads to a substantial and positive effect.[7]

The effect of watching Fox News is smaller than factors like political interest, civics knowledge, and education, but still substantial. Fox News viewership increases odds of correct perception as much as self-identification as a strong ideologue (+43.5% vs. +44.2%), and more than having a strong party identification (+17.8%). Other variables capturing political knowledge, such as civics knowledge (+89.9%), high political interest (+146.4%), and earning a B.A. or higher (+256%), have a much more substantial impact on odds of correct perception of parties.

Odds ratios clearly demonstrate that Fox News viewers are more likely to correctly place elite ideologies, but what percentage of their viewers are accurately informed? The percent of voters who could identify Republicans as the more conservative party in 2004, calculated using predicted probabilities from Stata's -margins- command, are presented in Figure 1.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Fox News viewers are much more likely to correctly identify the ideology of the parties than

viewers of MSNBC, CNN, and non-cable news consumers. Estimating this effect while holding

other variables at their means reveals that 82% of Fox News viewers correctly identify

Republicans as the more conservative party. Only 77.4% of MSNBC viewers, 74.4% of CNN

viewers, and 76% of those abstaining from cable news can do so. Given the evidence from DW-

NOMINATE that the parties were far apart ideologically in 2004, it is unsurprising that so many

respondents correctly perceive differences between the parties. The high baseline of knowledge

makes the nearly five percent advantage enjoyed by Fox News viewers even more striking.

Do the public's clear perceptions of the parties carry over to their presidential standard-

bearers? The data allows for testing this question in both 2004 and 2008. Columns 3 and 4 of

Table 1 present the logit coefficients and odds ratios that respondents correctly perceived George

W. Bush was more conservative than John Kerry in 2004, and Columns 5 and 6 show

assessments that John McCain was more conservative than Barack Obama in 2008. H2 is

supported across all three channels in 2008, but once again only Fox News viewership has a

positive and significant effect on candidate ideology perceptions in 2004. MSNBC's impact is

indistinguishable from CNN's or from eschewing cable news in 2004, but grew in 2008,

consistent with H3.[8] As MSNBC's partisan orientation increased, their viewers' partisan

perceptions seem to have corrected (Stelter, 2008; Stroud, 2010).

Similarly, the effect sizes of partisan news remained the same in 2004 but grew

substantially in 2008. In 2004, watching Fox News once again has effects of similar magnitude

to a strong ideological self-identification (+58.3% vs. +58.8%), but smaller effects than high

political interest (+102.4%), high civics knowledge (82.2%), or having a college degree or higher

(+290%). In 2008, the impact of Fox News viewing is much larger (+108%): larger than the civics knowledge measure (+62.6%), but still smaller than high political interest (+168.8%) or a college education and above (+176.3%). Interestingly, the coefficient on Fox News viewership is roughly similar to the effect of being sampled after October 1 in 2004 (51.7%), when campaign learning should be the highest, and surpasses it in 2008 (+108.1% vs. +41.7%).

All three cable networks have a significant and positive impact on candidate placement in 2008, but Fox viewership produces much stronger associations than either MSNBC or CNN viewership (108%, 35.3%, and 8.9% increased odds ratios, respectively). Model predictions of the correct perception of viewers of each network in 2004 and 2008 appear in Figure 2.

[Insert Figure 2 here]

Two clear trends emerge from these predicted probabilities: partisan networks clarify candidate differences to their viewers, and correct perceptions of cable news abstainers drop from 2004 to 2008. In 2004 and 2008, Fox News and MSNBC viewers correctly place the presidential candidates at predicted rates of roughly 87% and 82%, respectively, across both cycles. Though the raw prediction is not significantly different for MSNBC from 2004 to 2008, its viewers' perceptions are more accurate compared to CNN and to cable news abstainers after its partisan turn. In 2008, CNN viewers with correct perceptions fall to 77% (from 81.5% in 2004) and non-cable news viewers with correct perceptions fall to 74.4% (from 81.2% in 2004), lending support to H3.

Correct ideological placement of candidates does not necessarily imply that respondents understand the policy implications of those labels (Converse, 1964; Kinder & Kalmoe, 2017). Viewers of cable and partisan news may be more familiar with ideological labels as pejoratives, but may not absorb the corresponding distinctions in policy preferences of the candidates. To

account for this possibility, we reanalyzed the model in Equation 1, replacing the dependent variable with six policy distinction questions that were randomly asked of subsamples of the NAES in 2004. Each policy distinction variable is a dichotomous indicator of whether respondents correctly matched the major party presidential candidates with their stated issue positions. Policy statement question wording and the direction for significant coefficients are presented in Table 2, below, with the full results in the Online Appendix (Table A1).

[Insert Table 2 here]

There are clear differences in policy knowledge between viewers of partisan, cable, and mainstream news sources. Most notably, the coefficient on watching Fox News is significant across all six questions. Fox News viewers are more likely to correctly name Bush as the candidate favoring making recent tax cuts permanent, repealing the estate tax, and putting Social Security into the stock market. These issues were central to the Bush campaign, and may have been amplified by Republican-leaning Fox News coverage. Fox News viewers are less likely, however, to name Kerry as the candidate favoring the elimination of overseas tax breaks, health care for children and workers, and re-importation of drugs, all issues emphasized by Kerry throughout the campaign. Consumers of MSNBC, CNN, other TV news, and newspapers, by comparison, are more likely to identify Kerry with these positions, but are neither more nor less likely to identify Bush with his signature positions. The lack of learning effects from non-Fox News sources could be due to higher familiarity with Bush (the incumbent president) or a more substantial relative focus on Kerry, and future research should focus on disentangling these dynamics. For the purposes of this article, however, these results provide encouraging evidence that ideological perceptions are not entirely separate from policy perceptions.

In sum, the results from Analysis 1 support and give valuable context to the expectations described in H1, H2, and H3. Partisan news watchers are more likely to correctly place parties' ideologies and more likely to correctly place the ideologies of those parties' nominees (H1) – though for MSNBC, this effect is only supported in 2008. Watching cable news alone is not enough to improve the odds of correctly identifying party ideologies, but improves candidate placement in 2008 (H2). Across all categories, there is a marked increase in correct perception from 2004 to 2008 (H3). Finally, we present evidence that news selections are also associated with perceived policy distinctions. Though this cross-sectional data does not account for possible selection biases in partisan news consumption, it demonstrates clear correlations between partisan news consumption and correct ideological placement of parties and candidates.

Analysis 2 (Panel Analysis)

Panel analysis allows for within-subjects comparisons, holding individual-level variations constant and generating causal estimates rather than regression-based associations. In a panel design, we should be able to discern the impact of news consumption on interpretation of political events, while accounting for selection into those sources. Descriptive statistics from the 2008 NAES Online Panel, for instance, demonstrate that Fox News viewers experience a clear increase in the perceived ideological distance between McCain and Obama over the course of the campaign, compared to those who do not watch Fox News (Figure 3, below).

[Insert Figure 3 here]

Though Fox News viewers began 2008 perceiving the same level of ideological distance between McCain and Obama as their abstaining counterparts—around 2.5 points on a 7-point scale—their perception of that distance increased more steeply than others' perceptions over the course of the campaign. During the fall campaign, Fox News viewers saw McCain and Obama as

0.2 points further apart than those who did not watch Fox News. This trend provides some support for our contention that partisan news enhances ideological distinctions.

If partisan news consumption leads to clearer perceptions of ideological differences between parties and candidates, coverage of clarifying events for partisans should provide a particularly powerful example of that effect. Parties invest in nominating conventions to develop their message, improve their image, and influence the press (Hagen & Johnston, 2007). We expect all respondents to learn about candidate ideologies from conventions, but partisan news viewers should receive the clearest signals from their networks, and learn accordingly.[9]

Fixed-effects logit models control for stable characteristics, measured or unmeasured, in panel data (Allison, 2009).[10] This model approximates random assignment within an experiment: time-invariant factors are controlled for, but not estimated. This approach should account for unobserved variables leading to selection into partisan news consumption, an admitted confounder of the results in Analysis 1. Only variables that change from wave 1 to wave 2—in this case, before and after each party's convention in 2004—are estimated by the model. The coefficients, therefore, measure those who did not report consuming each type of media in the week before the conventions, but reported consuming that form of media during the conventions. This leaves us with a similar model as above, represented in Equation 2:

Pr(correct relative ideological placement of candidates, 2004)[11]

$= f$ (watches Fox News, watches MSNBC, watches CNN, watches any TV news, reads a
newspaper, civics knowledge index, strength of partisanship, strength of ideology,
political interest)

If respondents' odds of correct ideological placement are greater following the conventions, this within-subjects evidence will bolster the causal validity of our conclusions in Analysis 1. Logit coefficients and odds ratios are presented for the DNC and RNC panels in Table 3, below.

[Insert Table 3 here]

Partisan cable news watchers learned from the conventions (supporting H1), while CNN viewers benefited far less. Watching Fox News' coverage of the Democratic National Convention (DNC) was associated with a 208.4% increase in the odds of correctly identifying John Kerry as the more liberal candidate, while MSNBC viewership translated to an even larger 251.3% increase in the odds of correct candidate identification. CNN's impact was much smaller, a 51.3% increase. Watching television news on other channels did not have a significant effect, while reading a newspaper produced roughly the same effect as CNN (53.7%, $p < 0.1$). Increased political interest led to more correct perceptions as well.

The results from the Republican National Convention (RNC) panel contained no significant learning across any media source, presenting the possibility of differential learning effects in different political contexts. Given that George W. Bush was the incumbent and that the DNC preceded the RNC by nearly over a month, it is understandable that respondents would have a better sense of his ideological positioning relative to Kerry by the time of the RNC. The coefficients on civics knowledge and political interest remain significant and positive, but there is no media effect on learning information that presumably is more settled. The DNC, as portrayed on cable news, seems to have reinforced the perception of John Kerry's relatively liberal ideology, and the RNC did little to disrupt that perception. If interested citizens turn to cable news during political events, particularly clarifying events such as conventions, their

propensity to discern meaningful differences may be heightened—particularly when the information is less settled in advance.

The large effect of MSNBC viewership shows that our support for H1 is mixed, given MSNBC's relatively neutral stance at the time. Fox News' increased impact relative to CNN, other television stations, and newspapers, however, indicates support for H1; it cannot be disregarded completely. Differences in impressions of the candidates' ideologies from the Democratic convention are influenced by one's viewership of cable news, supporting H2's prediction that cable news consumption—not prior attributes or a higher baseline of learning leading to selection bias—increases respondents' ability to discern candidate ideologies correctly. The absence of significant effects in the RNC panel adds valuable context to these findings, however. Cable news viewership—particularly of partisan news—may be most helpful for differentiating between candidates in their coverage of political events.

Limitations and Future Research

Our analyses reveal that partisan news consumers are more likely to accurately match parties and candidates with their correct ideologies and policy positions, and more likely to learn from coverage of partisan conventions. Though some of the causal questions from Analysis 1 are addressed by the panel data in Analysis 2, we lack random assignment to media availability (as in studies such as Arceneaux et al., 2016), limiting our certainty in the estimates. Though the DNC analysis shows much larger effects than the RNC analysis, without observation of the exact content around those events, our interpretation must rely upon speculation. Though beyond the scope if this article, a content analysis of MSNBC content surrounding the 2004 DNC, in particular, might shed some light on that substantial coefficient. We plan to include content analyses in future related studies. In order to bolster the evidence we provide here on the

clarifying role of partisan news, we also intend to include more elections in future work. Though we include two cycles here, additional elections will allow us to investigate whether these effects persist across variable political contexts and candidate pairings.

Future research should also continue to examine these questions in homogenous social media networks and in emerging online patterns of news consumption. The candidacy and election of Donald Trump provide other potential avenues for future research, given uneasy fit in traditional conceptions of conservatism. Such analyses will depend upon panel data with accurate measures of self-reported media consumption. We recommend that, in the absence of future NAES studies, other major surveys in the discipline adopt similarly detailed media use measures.

Conclusion

Hetherington (2001)'s analysis documents the widening gulf between the parties in the era before the rise of partisan news. Our analysis adds that partisan news helps respondents to correctly perceive those ideological differences, while less partisan outlets like CNN are less effective at conveying this information. Analysis 1 demonstrates the powerful association between watching partisan news and perceptions of real and growing differences between the parties. Analysis 2 demonstrates that these associations are not explained purely by selection effects: partisan and cable news consumption during prominent political events contributes to respondents' ability to differentiate between the candidates, but only when respondents were less familiar with the candidates and their positions.

In the burgeoning literature on media choice and partisan polarization, a few gaps remain (Prior, 2013). Despite the long-established influence of elites, many media based theories neglect their role. Meanwhile, much of the research articulating a top down influence from elites does

not yet incorporate how the contemporary era of high media choice operates in tandem with highly polarized elites. We address these gaps by turning our focus to the important mechanism of partisan ideological differences. Sorting into the correct party ideology requires understanding of which party (and its nominee) represent that ideology. We observe that the so-called partisan media echo chamber effect may operate through its provision of clearer channels of cohesive party messages from polarized elites. Partisan media provide the least diluted partisan messages from our presently polarized elites (Groeling, 2010; Padgett, 2014).

The literature on selective exposure tends to negatively characterize partisan news and its effects on tolerance, extremity, and civility (Sunstein, 2001; Huckfeldt, Mendez & Osborn, 2004; Gervais, 2014). Concerns about the polarizing effect of elite partisan extremity are legitimate, but our findings illustrate a positive benefit from partisan news: an improved ability for ordinary Americans to distinguish between parties that are genuinely polarized. These findings fit with other studies that have found positive effects of partisan media consumption on participation and political engagement (Dilliplane, 2011; Stroud, 2010). Clarifying, consonant exposure may facilitate political participation by demonstrating easily understandable variation between political options.

On the other hand, our findings only show party clarification benefits for those who self-select into partisan news. We see smaller effects on learning and ideological accuracy among those who choose non-partisan cable news—in several cases, similar effects to watching no cable news. A substantial portion of the electorate watches no cable news in a high choice media context (Prior, 2007). Perhaps the benefits we observe from the combined efforts of polarized elites and media choices do not provide Americans with the tools to overcome partisan gridlock,

apathy, or growing political dislike across party lines, even as they increase issue position knowledge.

Hetherington (2001), Levendusky (2009), and others have documented the top-down influence elite cues can have on citizens' ability to connect their values and issue positions with those of the political parties. Turning to partisan news appears to facilitate this top-down process. Partisan news is not as constrained by the same journalistic values as mainstream media, which tend to disrupt messaging and branding efforts of the parties (Groeling 2010). Partisan messages from partisan outlets are clear, more intense, and more consistent with partisan agendas and values than those encountered in mainstream news (Padgett, 2014). As a result, those paying attention to partisan news are better able to identify the positions and ideologies of partisan elites. Partisan news may help citizens participate more effectively by helping them to connect their values and preferences with the candidates of their choice.

Views about the good and ills of mass partisanship ebb and flow. Hetherington's (2001) article bookended a time when observers were wringing their hands over the weak state of mass partisanship. Eroding partisanship is intermittently seen as something to worry about, primarily because of its usefulness in structuring political decision-making and conflict. In the present context of elite polarization and high levels of negative partisan affect, anxiety about polarization among elites and the mass public is a major point of discussion among journalists, the punditry, academia and the public. Our study may serve as a useful reminder that elite and mass polarization help voters participate more meaningfully by enabling them to better connect their own preferences and values with those of the parties.

[1] Some explanations for persistent differences between elite and mass polarization are based on low levels of political knowledge among the public. Survey-based policy measures used on low interest/low knowledge respondents reflect uncertainty of response rather than truly moderate ideological and partisan positions (Hetherington, Long, and Rudolph 2016). This is why affect-based measures reflect partisan polarization more than policy based measures

[2] Some of the most promising emerging work demonstrates how elite attitudes and behaviors are influenced by the proliferation of partisan news (e.g. Arceneaux et al 2016; Clinton and Enamorado 2014), highlighting important way that changing media may be indirectly influencing mass partisanship through their influence on elites.

[3] Levendusky (2013b) defines partisan media as those that not only report the news, but also offer a distinct point of view on it. As in his study, we define Fox News and MSNBC as examples of right-wing news and left-wing news, respectively (Jamieson & Cappella 2008; Steinberg 2007). Though there is disagreement on the exact positioning of CNN's ideological orientation (see Stroud 2010), we interpret CNN as lying somewhere between Fox News and MSNBC on the ideological spectrum (for more evidence, see Lowry and Shidler 1998; Groseclose & Milyo 2005).

[4] The average mean distance between the parties on the first dimension in DW-NOMINATE is 0.772 in 2004 and 0.795 in 2008, a difference of 0.023.

[5] The detailed media use measures in the NAES allows for a broader and more thorough conception of "partisan media use," including radio and newspapers (see Stroud 2011). The collection of partisan endorsements for newspaper and radio stations is labor-intensive, however,

and beyond the scope of this paper (though an important subject of future research). We thus adopt cable news channel choice as our measure of partisan news consumption.

[6] The measures presented here include "Don't know" responses as incorrect answers, since there are clear differences between the parties at the time of measurement. Results are not substantively different if "Don't know" responses are excluded.

[7] We also provide an alternative specification in which we include a standard measure of party ID instead of partisan extremity. Doing so does not significantly change the substantive effects; it slightly dampens the effect of Fox in the first specification, which has the smallest N. The results for this specification are provided in Table A2 of the online appendix.

[8] There was no variation in the "Watches TV news" variable in the 2008 sample, and it was omitted from the analysis for multicollinearity.

[9] The convention panels do not contain questions regarding party ideology, only candidate ideology.

[10] Random-effects models, another possible estimation strategy, do not control for omitted variables. Results using random effects are not substantially different in any coefficient. Results are available upon request.

[11] The measures presented here include "Don't know" responses as incorrect answers, since there are clear differences between the parties at the time of measurement. Results are not substantively different if "Don't know" responses are excluded. Results are available upon request.

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Table 1. Effect of cable news viewership on correct relative placement of party ideology (2004) and candidate ideology (2004 and 2008), NAES.

	Party ideology 2004		Candidate ideology 2004		Candidate ideology 2008	
	(1) Logit coeff.	(2) Odds ratios	(3) Logit coeff.	(4) Odds ratios	(5) Logit coeff.	(6) Odds ratios
Watches Fox News	0.361***	1.435***	0.459***	1.583***	0.733***	2.081***
	(0.072)	(0.104)	(0.068)	(0.107)	(0.040)	(0.083)
Watches MSNBC	0.079	1.082	-0.047	0.954	0.302***	1.353***
	(0.095)	(0.103)	(0.085)	(0.081)	(0.061)	(0.083)
Watches CNN	-0.087	0.916	-0.079	0.924	0.085***	1.089***
	(0.062)	(0.056)	(0.058)	(0.054)	(0.031)	(0.034)
Watches TV news	-0.301***	0.740***	-0.236**	0.790**	(omitted)	
	(0.116)	(0.086)	(0.106)	(0.084)		
Reads a newspaper	0.148**	1.160**	0.007	1.007	0.127***	1.135***
	(0.059)	(0.068)	(0.055)	(0.056)	(0.028)	(0.031)
Civics knowledge (index)	0.641***	1.899***	0.600***	1.822***	0.486***	1.626***
	(0.028)	(0.054)	(0.027)	(0.049)	(0.015)	(0.024)
Strong party ID	0.164***	1.178***	0.119**	1.127**	0.157***	1.171***
	(0.052)	(0.061)	(0.049)	(0.055)	(0.028)	(0.033)
Strong ideology	0.366***	1.442***	0.462***	1.588***	0.267***	1.307***
	(0.081)	(0.117)	(0.075)	(0.119)	(0.034)	(0.044)
Follows politics						
Not closely at all (omitted)						
Not too closely	0.156	1.169	0.021	1.021	0.431***	1.539***
	(0.108)	(0.126)	(0.107)	(0.110)	(0.088)	(0.136)
Somewhat closely	0.537***	1.711***	0.329***	1.389***	0.725***	2.064***
	(0.104)	(0.178)	(0.104)	(0.144)	(0.081)	(0.168)
Very closely	0.902***	2.464***	0.705***	2.024***	0.989***	2.688***
	(0.110)	(0.270)	(0.109)	(0.221)	(0.083)	(0.223)
Education						
HS or less (omitted)						

Some college	0.488***	1.630***	0.599***	1.821***	0.502***	1.651***
	(0.058)	(0.095)	(0.055)	(0.099)	(0.032)	(0.053)
B.A. or above	1.270***	3.560***	1.361***	3.900***	1.016***	2.763***
	(0.065)	(0.233)	(0.062)	(0.243)	(0.034)	(0.093)
Age						
18 – 29 (omitted)						
30 – 44	-0.197***	0.821***	0.183***	1.200***	-0.003	0.997
	(0.076)	(0.063)	(0.070)	(0.085)	(0.054)	(0.053)
45 – 55	-0.074	0.929	0.197***	1.217***	-0.014	0.986
	(0.082)	(0.076)	(0.074)	(0.090)	(0.054)	(0.053)
56 – 65	-0.364***	0.695***	-0.012	0.989	-0.150***	0.861***
	(0.092)	(0.064)	(0.082)	(0.081)	(0.054)	(0.047)
65 +	-0.438***	0.645***	-0.087	0.917	-0.215***	0.806***
	(0.089)	(0.058)	(0.083)	(0.076)	(0.053)	(0.043)
Black	-0.662***	0.516***	-0.910***	0.402***	-0.808***	0.446***
	(0.081)	(0.042)	(0.074)	(0.030)	(0.042)	(0.019)
Female	0.073	1.076	0.114**	1.121**	-0.068**	0.934**
	(0.051)	(0.055)	(0.048)	(0.054)	(0.027)	(0.026)
Time sampled						
Before Labor Day (omitted)						
Labor Day – Sept. 30	-	-	0.096	1.101	0.317***	1.372***
			(0.062)	(0.069)	(0.041)	(0.056)
Oct. 1 – Election Day	-	-	0.417***	1.517***	0.349***	1.417***
			(0.059)	(0.089)	(0.041)	(0.058)
Constant	-0.989***	0.372***	-0.744***	0.475***	-1.235***	0.291***
Observations	10,446	10,446	14,683	14,683	38,634	38,634

Standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 2. The influence of media choice on correct assessments of which candidate, George W. Bush or John Kerry, favors stated policy positions.

	Make the recent tax cuts permanent	Repeal the estate tax	Social Security in stock market	Eliminate overseas tax breaks	Health care for children and workers	Re-importation of drugs
Watches Fox News	+	+	+	-	-	-
Watches MSNBC				+	+	
Watches CNN				+	+	+
Watches TV news		-		+		+
Reads newspaper				+	+	+
N	12,408	9,085	12,408	12,399	12,406	8,981

Note: Logistic regression analysis. Cell entries reflect direction of coefficients (significant at $p < 0.05$). Covariates omitted for brevity. The full specification appears in Table A1 in the Online Appendix.

Table 3. Effect of cable news viewership on correct placement of candidates, 2004 NAES Democratic and Republican National Convention panels. Fixed effects panel analysis.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	DNC panel		RNC panel	
	Logit coeff.	Odds ratio	Logit coeff.	Odds ratio
Watches Fox News	1.126***	3.084***	0.431	1.539
	(0.289)	(0.891)	(0.290)	(0.447)
Watches MSNBC	1.256***	3.513***	0.669	1.952
	(0.470)	(1.649)	(0.428)	(0.835)
Watches CNN	0.416*	1.515*	-0.154	0.857
	(0.233)	(0.354)	(0.244)	(0.209)
Watches any TV news	0.232	1.261	-0.125	0.882
	(0.353)	(0.445)	(0.340)	(0.300)
Reads a newspaper	0.430*	1.537*	0.104	1.109
	(0.235)	(0.361)	(0.253)	(0.281)
Civic knowledge (index)	0.322***	1.379***	0.446***	1.561***
	(0.074)	(0.102)	(0.076)	(0.118)
Follows politics (Not closely at all omitted)				
Not too closely	1.023**	2.781**	0.494	1.638
	(0.499)	(1.387)	(0.498)	(0.815)
Somewhat closely	1.251***	3.494***	1.193**	3.297**
	(0.471)	(1.645)	(0.472)	(1.556)
Very closely	1.703***	5.491***	1.973***	7.189***
	(0.474)	(2.601)	(0.489)	(3.519)
Strong party ID	-0.116	0.890	0.342	1.407
	(0.215)	(0.191)	(0.213)	(0.300)
Strong ideology	0.306	1.358	0.349	1.417
	(0.296)	(0.402)	(0.343)	(0.486)
Observations	884	884	953	953
Number of waves	2	2	2	2

Standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Figure 1. Predicted probabilities of correct placement of party ideology by cable news viewership, 2004 NAES.
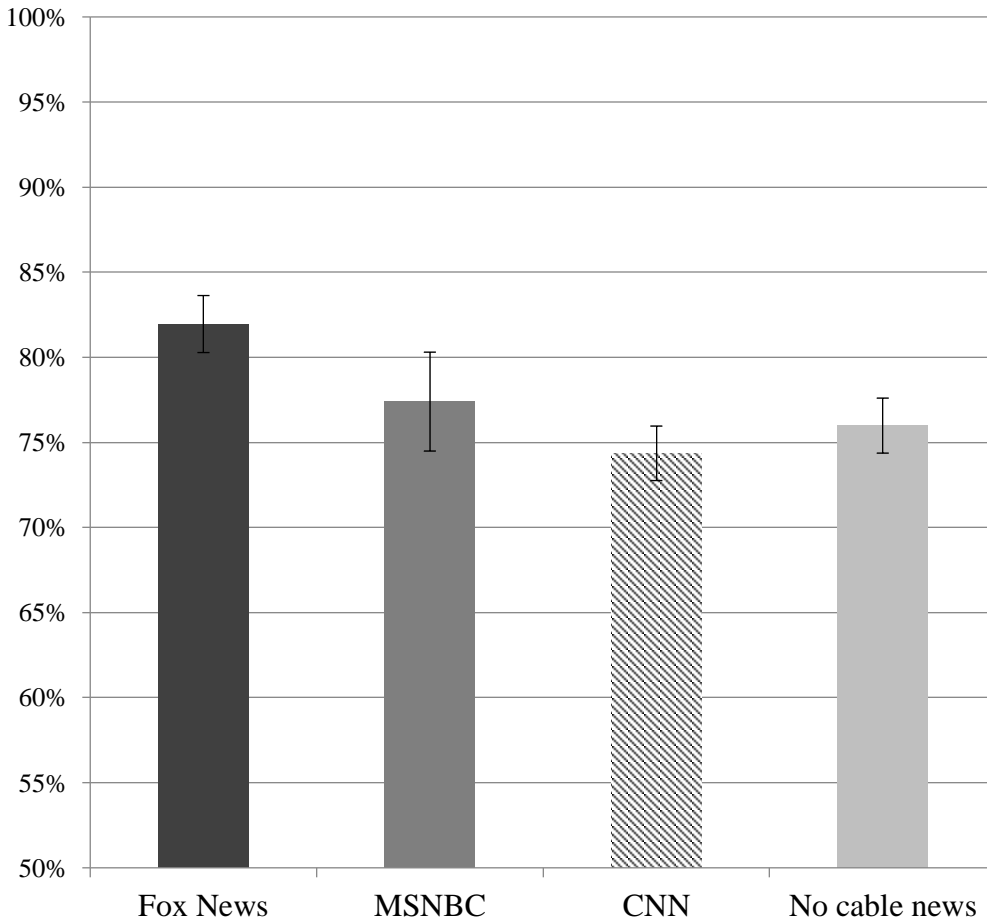
Figure 2. Predicted probabilities of correct placement of candidate ideology by cable news viewership, 2004 and 2008 NAES.
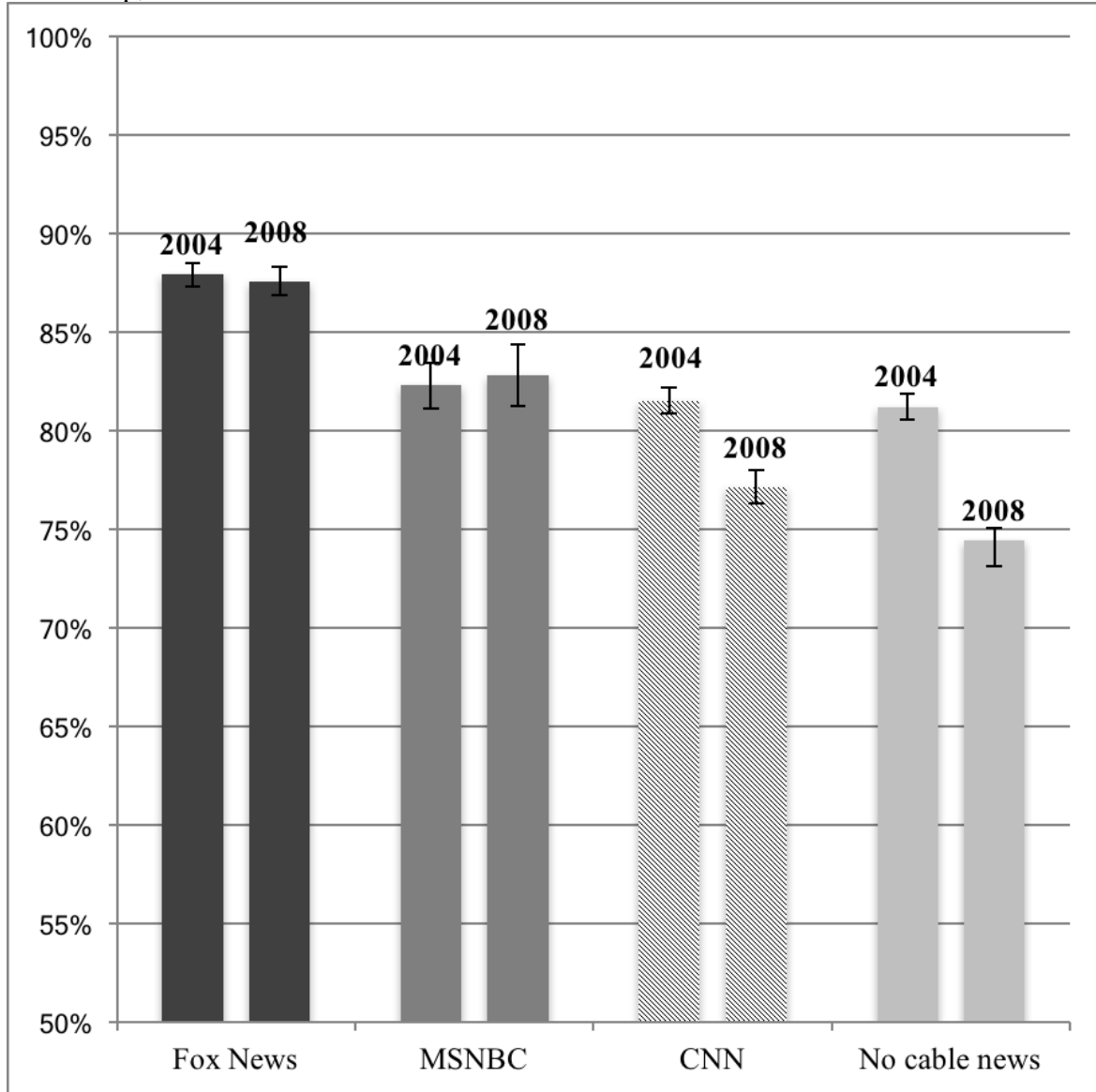
Figure 3. Change in perceived ideological distance between McCain and Obama among viewers of Fox News and those who do not watch Fox News, 2008 NAES Online Panel.