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The Dark Web of Affective Polarization: How the Internet Divides Our Country

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The Dark Web of Affective Polarization: How the internet divides our country

Introduction

In America, the most significant polarizing line isn't race, religion, or economic status. Instead, it's party lines (Iyengar et al., 2018). The current American political climate consists of an unprecedented party divide. Before, America was united in its differences. A party line has now become one between right and wrong, between likable and unlikable. A party represents a team, and any other entity is considered the opposition. In political science, this animosity for the outer-party and positive affinity towards the inner-party is known as affective polarization, a trend which has reached its highest point in decades. Currently, 80% of Americans feel negatively towards the out-group, or the outer party (Hetzl, 2020). The portion that feels a strong distaste towards other parties has tripled since 1994 (Hetzl, 2020). This divide has become evident to American citizens, as 90% believe that America is currently divided, and 60% feel pessimistic about their country's ability to compromise in drastic circumstances (Hetzl, 2020).

The United States current political climate is arguably more polarized than any other historic period. What has caused this drastic increase? Many political scientists believe that the connection is due to social media algorithms and the creation of echo chambers, an algorithmic bubble where voters are only exposed to their preconceived beliefs (Morales et al., 2021). This paper will focus on analyzing comprehensive survey data collected from the 2020 American National Election Study. Using the results produced from this survey, I will compare the hours of social media usage a participant has with the amount of affective polarization that individual exhibits, and compare them to a control variable, age. From these results, I will evaluate whether or not there is a clear link.

Significance of Issue

Whether it's the consistent Congressional gridlock or the partisan behavior of the Supreme Court, affective polarization impacts our entire democracy and keeps the gears of our republic from swiftly turning. In American democracy, compromise is critical to successful public policy, and affective polarization makes that near impossible.

In our congress, American representatives are mainly incentivized by garnering votes, as their main objective is to continue their term in office. Because of this, they are greatly influenced by their constituents' opinions. Previously, the American electorate's voices were coherent, and allowed for smooth congressional processes, but the historical togetherness of the electorate has now become incoherent, creating divided government, and political gridlock, also known as the halt in our democratic processes (Jacobson, 2016). Because of this gridlock, passing legislation has become much more difficult, as regular bi-partisan bill support seems to be a practice that is now out of reach.

Not only this, but in America, we are currently experiencing democratic backsliding, which is the dismantling of democratic norms and institutions by elite individuals (Catorthers, 2022). Past research indicate that affective polarization and democratic backsliding are highly correlated (Orhan, 2022). Representatives are less likely to cross party lines, as even if current representatives violate democratic principles, it is unlikely that a representative will step out of their party's tent (Orhan, 2022).

However the implications of affective polarization are not limited to the political arena. Studies have shown that affective polarization has great societal implications, and has impacted the inner workings of American families, as they have continuously become more politically homogeneous. Couples sharing political views have now exceeded 80% of all American families,

with parent-offspring sharing views at 75% (Iyengar et al. 2018). Both of these figures are significantly larger than family agreements in the past (Iyengar et al. 2018). The same study compared surveys spanning over fifty years, and found that spousal and intergenerational commonalities in political identifications has increased drastically, and that this commonality trend in personal groups is solely seen in political ideas (Iyengar et al. 2018). Not only this, but it psychologically impacts the way Americans perceive other individuals. One example is physical attractiveness. Studies have found that faces are considered more physically appealing when the individual is of the same party (Nicholson et al. 2016). Overall, affective polarization has changed how much time we spend with our familial members, where we want to work and shop, and who we want to date (Iyengar et al. 2019). Not only this, but one study found that political affiliations can impact job offers. When an individual indicates a certain political belief in a county that shares that overall belief, they are more likely to get a job at a much quicker rate than an individual who doesn't indicate any belief, or has the opposing belief (Gift et al. 2014). Affective polarization is impacting the social and political sphere of our American climate, and understanding what is causing this is crucial to finding a solution.

Background

The American constitution was signed in 1776. President George Washington pleaded with Americans to avoid creating substantial political parties, as he believed it to be the bane of democracy. Even so, Americans created parties of distinct ideologies. Throughout our history, parties have played a critical role in our democracy, acting as clear representation for political ideals. Although political parties and institutions have remained virtually the same, affective polarization has only just started to increase. Research has shown that a steady increase in

polarization began around 2006, with an even sharper increase occurring in 2012 (Hout & Maggio, 2021). Affective polarization, though a recent trend, is one of great significance, and plays a significant role in our current democracy. To understand the possible relationship between social media and affective polarization, a solid understand of social media is warranted.

With over four billion people using the internet in some capacity, media has become a solidified part of everyday life, and a large aspect of the internet is social media. When we discuss social media networks, we have to understand the backbone behind them. This backbone is the algorithm laced within. With this powerful tool, billions of people are able to find information which suits their needs, and view information which fits their preferences. This has positives and negatives.

There is an abundance of content on social media. The purpose of algorithms is to comb through that content, and construct a personally crafted web page for the viewer (O'Brien, 2023). Though this can help with advertisements and marketing, it has clear negatives for politics. Because of this sorting, studies have found a clear separation of party lines through social media algorithms (Morales et al., 2021). This means that if an individual has a right-leaning view, they primarily see the opinions of other right-leaning individuals. This minimizes the diversity of knowledge an individual sees, and creates a bubble which constantly repeats the beliefs and notions that the individual already has back to them (Morales et al., 2021). In political science, this bubble of limited thought is formally known as an echo chamber.

Now, whether social media causes affective polarization is still an ongoing debate between political scientists. There is a large body of research which finds a clear connection. For example, one study randomly assigned Americans to deactivate their Facebook account four weeks before the 2018 midterm elections. The results were that individuals who deactivated their

account and escaped the bubble had reduced affective polarization, and had a better understanding of the political world (Bavel et al., 2021). When affective polarization increases, individuals are more likely to believe in misperceptions consistent with their own ideas (Garrett et al., 2019), and social media could be causing this to occur. This research proves a strong link between the topics, and finds that without social media algorithms, individuals would exhibit less affective polarization. But it is worthy to mention the body of literature that showcases more fluctuation in this connection. One study found that though social media and affective polarization have a link on specific social media platforms, on others there wasn't a clear link to be found (Yarchi et al., 2020). At the same time, there are also studies that argue that even if there is a link, it's very weak. One study found that polarization only increased among groups who had the least amount of likelihood to even use social media (Boxell et al., 2017). This topic has a lot of conflicting views and literary tension, and this research project will alleviate these opposing claims.

Theory and Argument

This research paper will cover multiple hypothesis in its data. The first hypothesis is regarding the amount of affective polarization exhibited from both parties without any other dependent variables. When analyzing previous research on this subject, I found evidence which suggested equal affective polarization between parties (Kleinfield, 2023). Other research highlights how both parties have swayed to the poles of the political spectrum, and are both becoming increasingly more extreme (Pew Research Center, 2022). I crafted my hypothesis based on the literary evidence of several political scientists that without any impacting variables, the Republican and Democratic party will be equally affectively polarized.

My second hypothesis is the main purpose of this research project, as it discusses the connection between social media usage and affective polarization. I hypothesize that as the frequency an individual spends on social media increases, the affective polarization that the individual exhibits will also increase. This is because the social media algorithm will continue to consistently show an individual their already-held beliefs. This will create an echo chamber, an algorithmic bubble where voters are only exposed to their preconceived beliefs (Morales et al., 2021). This echo chamber will make the individual only view propaganda from their party, which includes negative propaganda to the other party. As an individual sees only this more and more, they will be influenced by it and will become more affectively polarized. Using the extensive survey data provided by the 2020 American National Election Study, I will measure whether social media usage increases the affective polarization an individual exhibits.

There are other factors that could be the prime cause of affective polarization. One possibility could be the increasing focus on identity politics (Mason, 2015). Naturally, when we are focusing on topics that involve discrimination against large numbers of people, there will be emotional ties towards the particular legislation or statement. Before, many topics weren't as emotionally charged, therefore it was easier to disagree. Now, if someone disagrees with an opinion regarding identity politics, it could easily be taken as an emotional insult to someone's personal background, instead of just an opinion on general politics. Since social media often focuses on identity politics, it could just be the messenger of the real cause of affective polarization. Another cause could be our awareness of less-than-ideal circumstances. When unemployment increases and there is political and economic unrest, trends such as affective polarization increases. With social media, we are more aware of these social unrests, as we are

more connected to other individuals. Being more aware of these occurrences could create a more negative perception on the outer world, fueling outer-party perception, and possibly creating inner-party perception. This again showcases that social media could just be the messenger of the real cause.

The third and final hypothesis is an extension of the second hypothesis. This hypothesis is similar, but includes a control variable, age. How we absorb social media, and how we are impacted by social media algorithms, is directly connected to our understanding of social media. Research has shown that as the older an individual gets, the more susceptible they are to be swayed by social media algorithms, as they have less understanding of the dangers of echo chambers (Phillips, 2022). My hypothesis is that older party individuals will be more affectively polarized than younger party individuals, but both groups will showcase affective polarization. This is because older party individuals would be more susceptible to falling under the gaze of echo chambers. This will be showcased in both parties.

Research Design

I plan to test several variables with a large-n quantitative study cross-sectional sample. Because my unit of analysis is the American electorate, I will be using data provided by the 2020 American National Election Study, a comprehensive national study with over 8,000 participants. This research was broken into two separate time periods, before and after the 2020 election. The pre-election interviews ranged from August to the 2020 presidential election day. The post election ranged from after election data to late December. For the purpose of my research, I chose to examine interviews from the pre-election time slot. This is because social media propaganda before an election is at an all-time high. Research has found that there are dramatic increases in not only lawmaker posts and party propaganda, but audience's political engagement

(Pew Research Center, 2021). This means that this data will see the possible highest change in voters' perceptions due to social media usage.

Though this data is comprehensive in its size, there are a few distributions that are important to highlight. Firstly, we find that though the amount of Republicans and Democrats in this survey are well-matched, there are over five hundred more Democrats. This means that we have a slightly smaller Republican population, which could possibly impact the produced data. However, this data is reliable, as the questions are accompanied by quantitative measures that create no ambiguity in the meaning of the question; it is very direct. There is great strength in direct data, as it proves efficient in creating descriptive statistics which summarize the encompassing conclusion of the data. The main weakness of this is that it restricts a more nuanced understanding of the data, as there is no qualitative data to directly explain the produced outcome.

Firstly, I plan to create a baseline monitor for the Republican and Democratic party, and test whether one party is more affectively polarized than the other. My hypothesis is that without any impacting variables, the Republican and Democratic party will be equally affectively polarized. This means that they will have equal inner-party affection, and equal outer-party animosity.

For this analysis, my independent variable is the party affiliation that an individual has; either Republican or Democrat. Using programming software, I will operationalize this variable by filtering the data set by party affiliation, separating data sets into sole party responses. My dependent variable is the amount of affective polarization one exhibits. When pertaining to the American National Election Study, this variable will be operationalized by a feeling thermometer. A feeling thermometer showcases how cold (negative, 0) or warm (positive, 100)

an individual feels about both parties. There is strong validity in a feeling thermometer, as it directly measures the feeling that an individual has towards the topic, which directly showcases the amount of affective polarization an individual exhibits. I will use these thermometer responses to analyze how Democrats and Republicans feel about each other and themselves, and conclude whether there are any noticeable differences.

After this baseline, I will test my main relationship, social media usage and affective polarization. As there has been an abundance of previous literary tension, conclusions range from no correlation to a direct correlation. Even so, I based my hypothesis on the analysis of echo chambers. Because of this, my hypothesis is as follows; as an individual's social media usage increases, an echo chamber will be created. This will influence an individual's perception of their in and out-party, increasing the amount of affective polarization one has. This will occur for both the Republican and Democratic party, meaning with more social media usage, there will be more inner-party affection and outer-party animosity.

For this hypothesis, my independent variable is social media usage. Though the American National Election Study had comprehensive survey data on multiple social media platforms, including Instagram, Tik Tok, and X (previously known as Twitter), I chose to narrow my study to one specific social media platform, Facebook. This is because, within the political science network, Facebook is infamous for its alleged impact on the political thought of its active users, and has been cited as an impactful factor in the results of several presidential elections, due to its rigorous algorithm (Madrigal, 2017). In order to produce a clear representation of the impact Facebook has on users, I plan to compare users on opposite sides of the Facebook spectrum; individuals who don't have Facebook, and individuals who use Facebook multiple times a day. I will split individuals by party affiliation, in order to understand how each party is impacted by

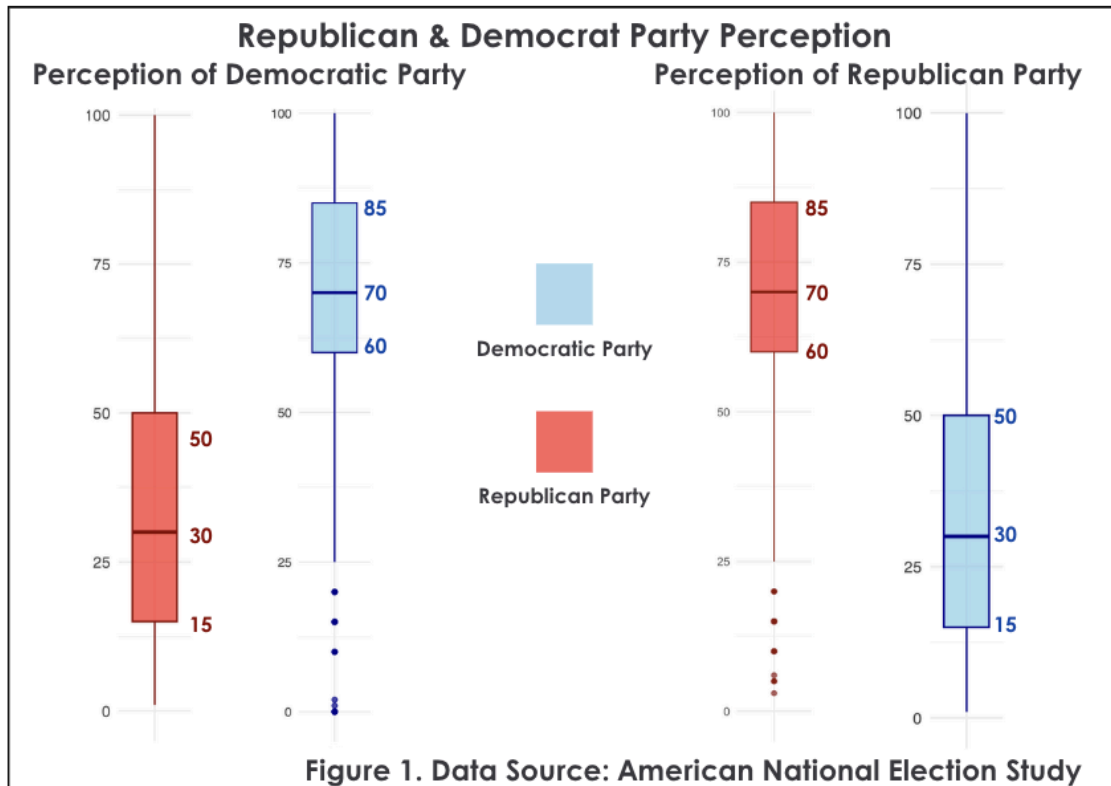
Facebook's algorithm. After filtering the data by party affiliation and Facebook usage, I will test for my dependent variable, the amount of affective polarization that an individual exhibits. As previously discussed, I will use the feeling thermometer to numerically examine the relationship.

In order to examine this relationship even further, I plan to separate the created data by a control variable; age. How we absorb social media, and how we are impacted by social media algorithms, is directly connected to our understanding of social media. My hypothesis is that older party individuals will be more affectively polarized than younger party individuals, but both groups will showcase affective polarization.

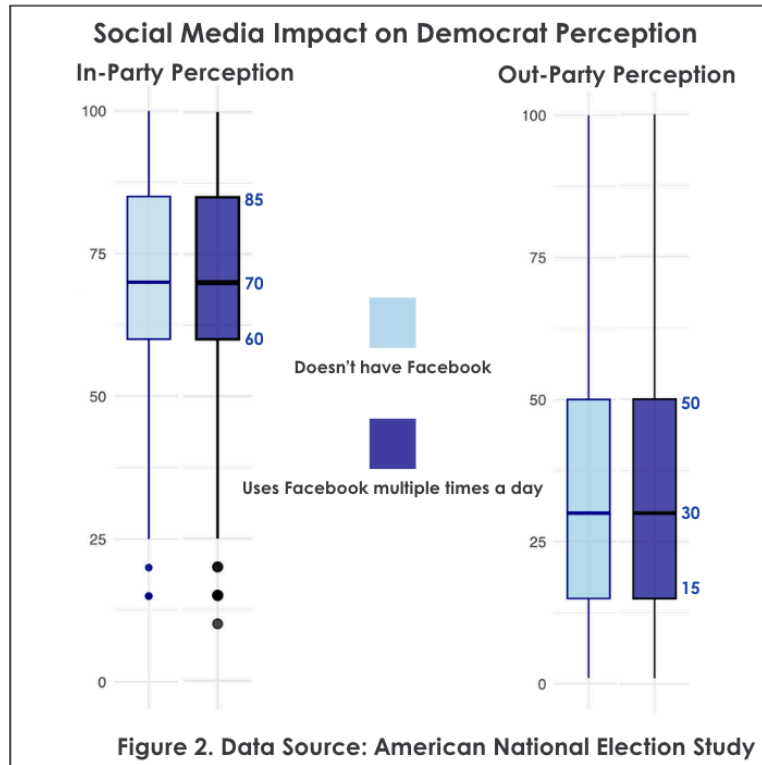
For this, my dependent variable will remain the same, as the dependent is the exhibition of affective polarization, but there will be two independent variables, social media usage and age. To showcase the differences in age, I split the dataset in half for a similar amount of participants on either side. This means that the younger audience will be participants who are between eighteen and forty-nine, and the older audience will be between fifty to eighty.

Even so, using programming software (RStudio), I will create statistical interpretations from multiple filtered sets of this data. Because of the continuous nature of the feeling thermometers, the best statistical showcase of the data will be through a box plot. This will allow us to not only clearly see the descriptive statistics of each plot, but will showcase the overall responses of the survey participants.

Findings and Analysis

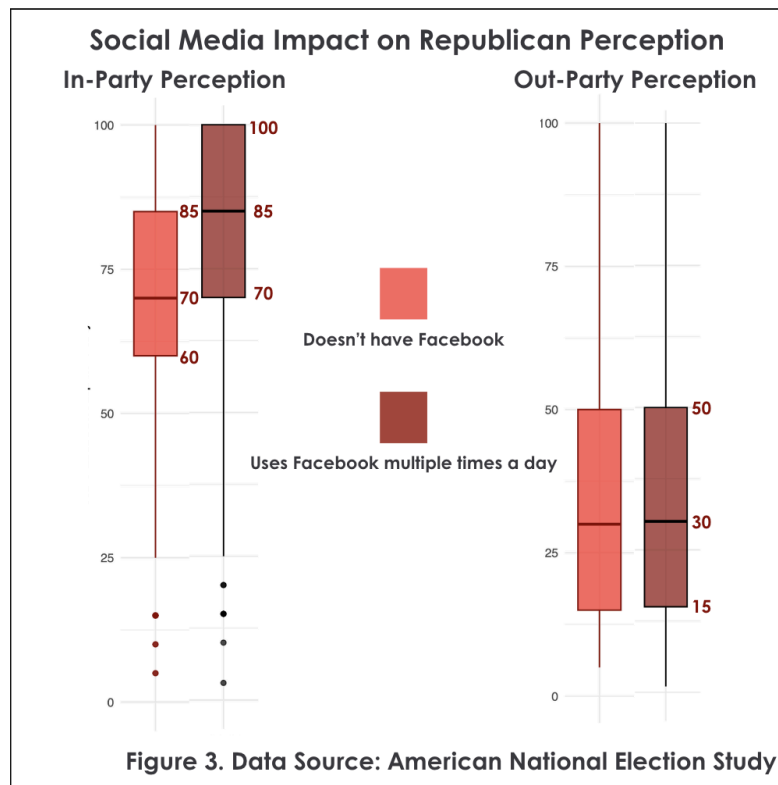


For the amount of affective polarization produced by both parties without any variables included, my hypothesis was that without any impacting variables, the Republican and Democratic party will be equally affectively polarized. My data suggests that this hypothesis is correct, and that we can accept the alternative hypothesis, and reject the null hypothesis. When we examine the outer-party perception of both the Republican and Democratic party, we see that the first quartile, median, and third quartile is equal, with the numbers being 15, 30, and 50, respectively (Figure 1). When we examine the in-party perception of both the Republican and Democratic party, we see the exact same trend, that the first quartile, median, and third quartile is equal, with the numbers being 60, 70, and 85, respectively (Figure 2).



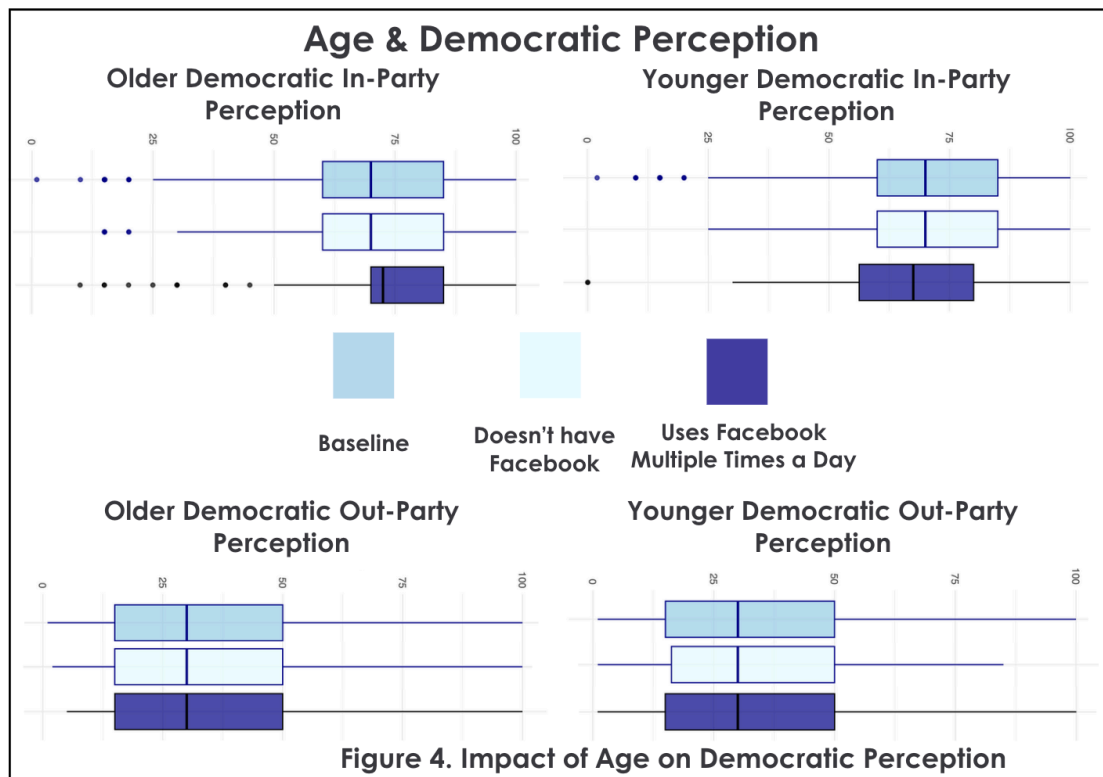
When discussing the relationship between social media usage and affective polarization, I hypothesized that as an individual's social media usage increases, the amount of affective polarization they exhibited would also increase. I also believed that this would occur for both the Republican and Democratic party. My findings failed to reject the null hypothesis. This is because, when examining the box plots, we see that with the inner-party perception, there is no significant difference, as the first quartile, median, and third quartile remain the same, 60, 70, and 85, respectively (Figure 2). The only noticeable difference is an addition of a low outlier, placed at 12/100. Though this difference exists, and could possibly be because Facebook did impact a few individuals in the data set, it still isn't enough to accept the alternative hypothesis. This means that with increased Facebook usage, Democrats don't have more positive affection for their party. When examining the out-party perception, these findings stay consistent, as there is

again, no change in the data. The lower quartile, median, and upper quartile stay the same, at 15, 30, and 50, respectively (Figure 2).



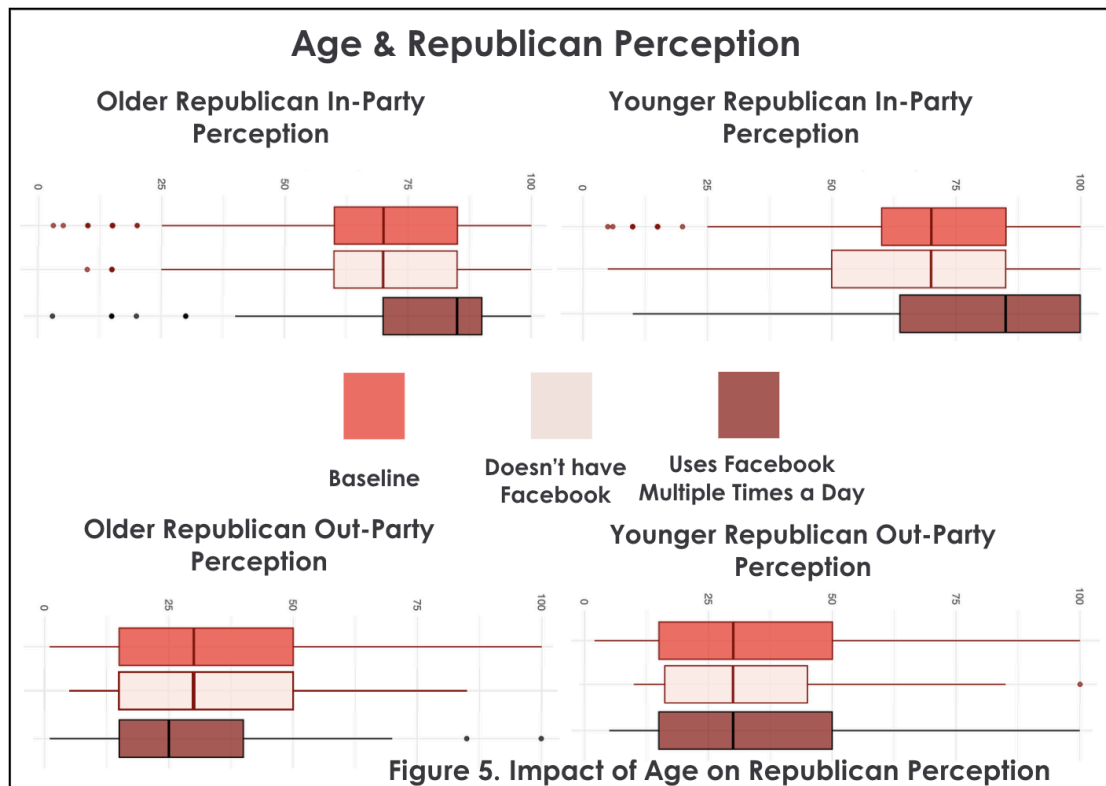
These results stayed consistent for the outer-party perception of the Republican party. This is because, when examining the box plots, we see that with the outer-party perception, there is no significant difference, as the first quartile, median, and third quartile remain the same, 15, 30, and 50, respectively (Figure 2). This means that with an increased usage of Facebook, Republicans don't have more animosity towards the Democratic party. The only significant change I viewed was in the inner-party perception of Republicans. When examining the inner-party perception, we found a 15 median point jump in the responses. The median of the no Facebook response group became the lower quartile for the Facebook response group, and the upper quartile for the no Facebook response group became the median of the Facebook response group. This means

that as Republican party Facebook usage increases, their positive affections to their own party also increases. However, for affective polarization to take place, there needs to be both inner-party affection and outer-party animosity. Because of this, we still reject the alternative hypothesis and accept the null hypothesis.



When including my control variable, age, I hypothesized that older party individuals would be more affectively polarized than younger party individuals, but both groups would showcase affective polarization, and that this would be showcased in both parties. For the Democratic party, my findings were a little bit less predictable. For the older group, we found that their inner-party perception acted as expected. They became more positively affiliated with the Democratic party. With the younger group, we found a more perplexing result. As younger Democrats used Facebook, they exhibited less affection to their own party, and actually disliked their party more. With both the older and younger outer-party perceptions, we found basically no

change in the feeling thermometers. This means that as Facebook usage increases for both older and younger Democrats, there is no change in their perception of the Republican party. This means that we reject the alternative hypothesis, and accept the null hypothesis.



For the Republican party, my findings were a little more predictable than the Democratic party. For both the older and younger group, we found that their inner-party perception acted as expected. They became more positively affiliated with their own party, the Republican party. With the younger group, we found even more positive affection than the older party. With the older outer-party perception, we also found affective polarization exhibited. With more Facebook usage, the older Republicans disliked Democrats more. With the younger party, we found a less predictable answer. Individuals who used no Facebook had less variety in their responses, and their range was much smaller, and answers were less extreme. When individuals used Facebook,

their responses expanded, with more extreme answers, including very positive and very negative. This means that we reject the alternative hypothesis, and accept the null hypothesis.

Implications

The findings in my research imply that the impact that social media has on party perception is much more nuanced than previously thought. Instead of a clear example of affective polarization, we saw a more scattered impact, with showcases of animosity and affection at less predictable times. One clear implication of the data is that in a general sense, Facebook has more engagement with Republican users, and pushes more Republican propaganda. This is because in the data shown, Facebook has more of an impact on the Republican party than the Democratic party. Not only this, but since Facebook is a community for connecting with other individuals, it could also mean that there are more Republican-centered groups on the webpage, making Republicans have more of an affiliation to their party. This can also explain why Facebook has seemingly no impact on Democrats' out-party perception, as since there's more Republican propaganda, Democrats don't dislike Republicans more than before.

Another implication is that Facebook censorship won't have much of an effect on the amount of affective polarization in the Democratic party, and won't greatly affect the Republican party. This is because, though fragments of affective polarization were shown, a clear link was not represented in the data. This means that even if Facebook algorithms were different, or censored, there wouldn't be a drastic change in the amount of affective polarization the American electorate exhibits. This is a large implication, as currently, affective polarization is causing drastic problems in our democracy, as with topics such as democratic backsliding, congressional gridlock, and more, affective polarization is making it harder and harder to continue to effectively work as a nation.

We still saw affective polarization play out in older Republican populations, and a more predictable impact on the older Democratic party. Because older individuals aren't as knowledgeable on social media algorithms, they are more susceptible to affective polarization. The solution that I would recommend for older individuals includes civics courses. Studies have shown that individuals who took civics courses were less likely to be impacted by echo chambers (Passe et. al., 2018). Experts argue that echo chambers cause an issue due to the lack of knowledge individuals have regarding the subject. The more older citizens understand echo chambers and its impacts, the less likely they are to be impacted by them (Passe et. al., 2018). In one study, it was ranked as the most effective strategy for combating echo chambers (Passe et. al., 2017).

Conclusion

When discussing the connection between the social media algorithm, Facebook, and affective polarization, we found a more ambiguous understanding of the link between the two. On one hand, we found impacts that correlated with the expected effect on some portions of both parties. In the Republican party, we found significant impacts on the overall Republican inner-party perception, the older Republican inner and outer-party perception, and the younger Republican inner-party perception. In the Democratic party, we found impacts on the older Democratic party perception. On the other hand, we found impacts that went against the notion of affective polarization. We found a more negative inner-party perception from the younger Democratic party, and a more spread perception from the younger Republican outer-party perception. The most consistent relationship between the two variables was no relationship, as in the general examination, we found no impact on either Democratic party perceptions, no impact

on older and younger Democratic outer-party perceptions, and no impact on one Republican party perception.

Affective polarization continues to threaten American democracy as it stands. In our status quo, affective polarization is still increasing, and party identities are stronger than the American identity. Bipartisanship is critical in a democracy, and as affective polarization increases, democracy falls. Currently, America's democratic ratings are decreasing, falling in several democracy calculations (Diamond, 2021). Because of this, it is critical to understand the root issue behind affective polarization, in order to help alleviate this large stress in our current status quo. In order to expand this data to a more comprehensive study, to truly understand the impact social media algorithms have on affective polarization, we need to view the impact of other social media sites, including X (formerly known as Twitter), Instagram, Tik Tok, and more. Another area of expansion also includes other sources of political media absorption, including cable news networks. The more comprehensive the study, the more understanding that we will gain regarding this debated connection.

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