

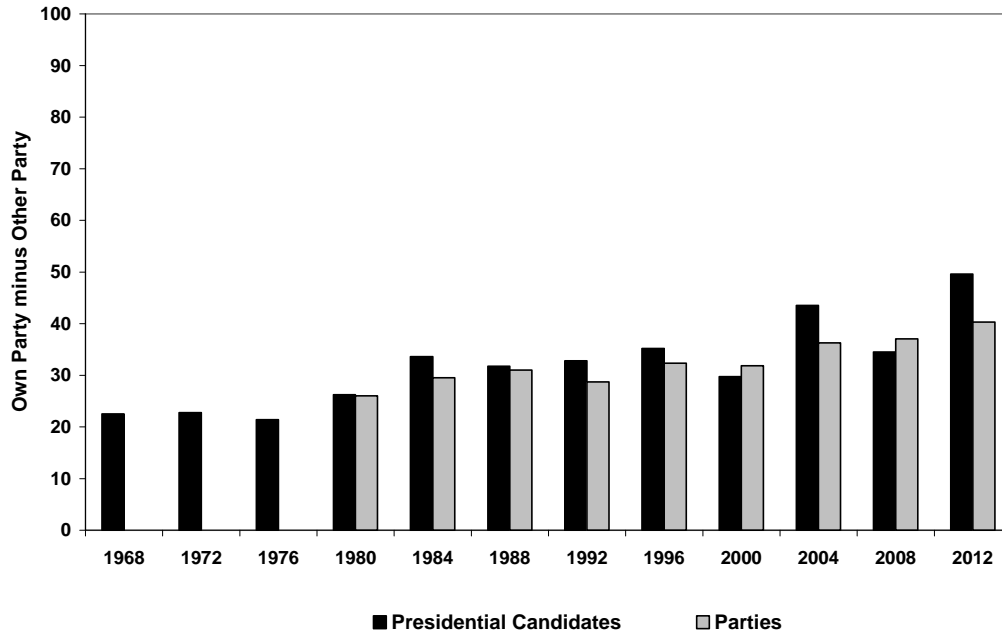
**Partisan Media and Electoral Polarization in 2012:
Evidence from the American National Election Study**

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Partisan divisions among ordinary Americans, after steadily widening for several decades, reached new extremes during Barack Obama’s presidency. The electorate that returned Obama to the White House in 2012 was more polarized along party lines than any in at least six decades. Voters displayed the highest levels of party-line voting, lowest levels of ticket splitting, and widest partisan difference in presidential approval ever documented in American National Election Studies (ANES) going back to 1952. The proportion of both approvers and disapprovers of Obama who held these views “strongly” were both at all-time highs for a president pursuing reelection (Jacobson 2013a). The ideological divergence between the party coalitions was matched only by 2008 in the ANES time series.¹ Partisan differences in placement of the presidential candidates and political parties on the 100-degree feeling thermometer scales, displayed in Figure 1, also reached record levels in 2012.²

Figure 1 Partisan Differences in the Thermometer Ratings of Presidential Candidates and Parties



¹ Based on mean self-locations by partisans on the 7-point ANES liberal-conservative scale.

² The feeling thermometer is a scale ranging from zero (coldest) to 100 (warmest) with 50 degrees as the neutral point.

Although scholars continue to debate the trend's breadth and causes (e.g. Abramowitz 2010; Levendusky 2009; Hetherington and Weiler 2009; Fiorina, Adams and Pope 2006; Fiorina and Adams 2009; Jacobson 2011a; Bishop 2008; Baumer and Gold 2012), it is clear that the American people have in recent decades become increasingly divided along party lines in their opinions on issues, ideologies, evaluations of leaders, and, in notable instances, perceptions of political, economic, and scientific realities (Jacobson 2010; Bradberry and Jacobson 2013b; Kull, Clay, and Lewis 2003; Gaines et al. 2007). Widening partisan divisions in the public have coincided with the proliferation of partisan news and opinion outlets enabled by the spread of cable television, talk radio, and the internet, raising the obvious question of how these two phenomena might be related. The question has inspired a number of important studies (e.g., Mutz 2006; Prior 2007; Jamieson and Capella 2008; Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Stroud 2011; Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Levendusky 2013) that point to several general conclusions. First, the multiplication of media options fragmented the audience for national news. Some people deserted the once-dominant network news in favor of entertainment shows; others migrated to partisan information sources on cable and later the internet; the audiences for national network news shrank. Second, selective exposure is pervasive; most people who do attend to partisan media chose sources that can be relied on to confirm rather than challenge their existing attitudes and opinions. Third, exposure to ideologically slanted messages tends to reinforce the prior opinions in ways consistent with theories of motivated cognition and reasoning (Kunda 1990; Lodge and Tabor 2001; Tabor and Lodge 2006).

Together, these conclusions suggest that partisan media amplify as well as cater to partisan divisions in the public. My purpose in this paper is to examine the contribution of partisan media outlets to the unusually high levels of partisan polarization observed in the 2012 electorate. The combination of selective exposure and reinforced biases poses tricky questions of causation, however. As we shall see, it is easy to document the remarkably strong relationship between the partisan and ideological thrust of media outlets and the typical political attitudes and opinions of their audiences in 2012. But whether this relationship is simply the result of selective exposure, or whether the biased messages to which people expose themselves actually influence their attitudes, opinions,

and beliefs, is a more difficult question to answer. Experimental and panel studies have found evidence that such messages do alter opinions (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Levendusky 2013; Jones 2002), although these studies are necessarily limited in scope, focusing as they do on only a few partisan sources and often on unrepresentative populations. The 2012 ANES study I examine here provides much greater coverage of the range of real-world media outlets that people report using, but it cannot, as an observational study, unambiguously identify causal effects. The data leave no doubt that polarized political attitudes, opinions, and beliefs strongly reflect partisan media consumption. But they also provide at least strong circumstantial evidence that ideologically-biased media—particularly on the right—contributed appreciably to (as well as reflected) polarized opinions of the presidential candidates, parties, and issues in 2012.

The Data

The 2012 ANES Time Series Study (American National Election Study 2013) combined the traditional ANES sample interviewed face-to-face with a separate sample interviewed via the internet. The two samples include 4,314 respondents who reported voting in the presidential election (1,361 in the face-to-face sample, 2,953 in the internet sample), and these are subjects of my analysis. Uniquely in 2012, the survey asked respondents whether they watched any of 64 specific television programs, listened to any of 15 radio programs, read any of four national newspapers in print or on the internet, or visited any of 15 websites. For my analysis, I classified those sources whose primary focus is political news and opinion into three categories: conservative, liberal, and mainstream, based on their public reputations. In cases where a source had multiple outlets (for example, newspapers with internet versions, television news programs with websites, or commentators with more than one venue), they were counted as a single source.³ Table 1 lists the sources classified by ideological leanings and ordered, in the second column, by the number of respondents (out of the 4,185 voters responding to this part of the survey) who said they used each one.

³ I also combined NPR's Morning Edition and All Things Considered in to a single NPR category.

Table 1. Partisanship of Audiences for Television, Radio, Print, and Internet News and Opinion Sources

	Weighted N	<i>Republicans</i>			<i>Independents</i>	<i>Democrats</i>
		Tea Party	Other	All		
National Average	4185	23.2	18.9	42.1	7.9	49.9
<i>Conservative Sources</i>						
Fox News	961	51.3	20.0	71.3	4.0	24.7
Bill O'Reilly	561	68.2	17.4	85.6	3.4	10.9
Sean Hannity	520	74.3	14.9	89.2	3.7	7.2
Greta Van Susteren	348	69.9	14.9	84.8	3.3	11.9
Mike Huckabee	313	77.8	15.3	93.1	3.2	3.7
Bret Baier	277	74.6	10.5	85.1	3.1	11.9
Rush Limbaugh	382	73.0	13.7	86.7	3.8	9.5
Glenn Beck	219	75.0	15.6	90.6	3.1	6.3
<i>Wall Street Journal</i>	178	42.8	18.4	61.2	4.6	34.2
Drudge Report	148	70.1	8.2	78.3	10.7	11.0
Mark Levin	101	87.7	3.9	91.6	2.7	5.7
Laura Ingraham	88	76.7	7.2	83.9	2.5	13.7
Michael Savage	85	77.9	10.5	88.4	4.2	7.3
Average		70.7	13.1	83.8	4.0	12.1
<i>Liberal Sources</i>						
CNN	528	17.5	15.3	32.8	6.4	60.9
Anderson Cooper	482	14.4	13.1	27.5	5.4	67.1
NPR	458	10.7	13.2	23.9	7.5	68.5
Jon Stewart	457	7.0	7.4	14.4	5.0	80.5
MSNBC	449	20.7	14.3	35.0	6.2	58.8
<i>New York Times</i>	374	8.1	17.9	26.0	4.2	69.8
Stephen Colbert	370	8.0	11.1	19.1	4.3	76.6
Huffington Post	334	16.2	9.5	25.7	6.3	68.0
Frontline	250	15.9	9.2	25.1	5.5	69.3
Chris Matthews	247	9.0	6.3	15.3	3.0	81.7
<i>Washington Post</i>	201	24.8	7.9	32.7	6.8	60.6
Average		13.8	11.4	25.2	5.5	69.3
<i>Mainstream Sources</i>						
60 Minutes	1198	16.3	18.2	34.5	6.9	58.6
NBC Nightly News	1121	18.3	19.7	38.0	6.6	55.4
CBS Evening News	1019	19.0	18.1	37.1	7.8	55.2
20/20	976	16.3	20.3	36.6	8.8	54.6
Dateline	949	15.3	20.2	35.5	6.7	57.3
ABC World News	855	16.5	18.9	35.4	7.6	57.2
Nightline	722	18.4	18.6	37.0	6.8	56.2
Meet the Press	492	21.7	16.6	38.3	6.6	55.1
<i>USA Today</i>	405	24.2	25.0	49.2	7.0	43.8
Face the Nation	403	23.0	13.8	36.8	9.7	53.5
Average		18.9	18.9	37.8	7.5	54.7

Table 1 also displays the partisan composition of the audiences for each source; independents who said they leaned toward a party are considered partisans.⁴ I also divided Republicans into those who said they supported or leaned toward supporting the Tea Party and those who did not.⁵ Tea Party Republicans, comprising a majority of the Republican coalition (55 percent in this survey), express modal opinions quite distinct from those expressed by other Republicans on a wide variety of political opinions and beliefs, especially those involving Barack Obama. Not only are they more likely to take conservative positions, but on most questions their mean responses differ more from those of other Republicans than the other Republicans differ from independents (Bradberry and Jacobson 2013). Thus they are treated as a separate category in some analyses here.

The data on the distribution of partisans reported in Table 1 confirm the prevalence of selective attention by partisans. Republicans in general and Tea Party Republicans in particular are highly overrepresented among users of conservative media. On average, 84 percent of the audiences for conservative sources are Republicans, 71 percent of them Tea Party supporters. Only 12 percent are Democrats, and pure independents are also typically underrepresented. Liberal media, in contrast, attract audiences that are disproportionately Democratic (average, 69 percent), although they attract twice the proportion of Republicans (25 percent) as conservative media do Democrats. Audiences for mainstream media are about 6 percentage points more Democratic and 5 points less Republican than the national average for these categories—presumably reflecting Republican distrust of mainstream media (Morales 2012)—and mainstream outlets attract a relatively larger share of independents as well, although independents are still underrepresented, a sign of their comparative political indifference.

Within the conservative and liberal categories, a few sources have less highly skewed audiences. The national newspapers fall into this category; more Democrats read the *Wall Street Journal* than attend to any other conservative source, and more

⁴ Partisan leaners were actually more loyally partisan in their voting behavior than weak partisans in this survey.

⁵ The ANES measured Tea Party support with a three-part branching question patterned on the party identification question; as with party identification, weak and leaning Tea Party supporters held similar views and reported similar behaviors, so Republicans in both groups are classified as Tea Party supporters for this analysis.

Republicans read the *Washington Post* than attend to any other liberal source except CNN and MSNBC. Cable news networks such as CNN, MSNBC, and Fox also tend to more balanced audiences. The most lopsided audiences belong to most enthusiastic ideologues, who apparently preach mainly to the choir.

Overall, about 54 percent of all Republicans, and 69 percent of Tea Party Republicans, reported using at least one of the conservative sources, compared to only 23 percent of independents and 18 percent of Democrats. About 54 percent of Democrats reported using at least one liberal source, compared to 39 percent of independents and 33 percent of Republicans (same percentage for both factions). Majorities in all categories used mainstream sources, although Tea Party Republicans were less likely (56 percent) than other Republicans (68 percent), independents (61 percent) or Democrats (70 percent) do say they did so.

Most voters attend to more than one type of outlet (Table 2). Few use one type of partisan media exclusively (17 percent of the total); more common is the use of partisan sources plus mainstream sources (28 percent); 16 percent expose them selves to both liberal and conservative sources; 19 percent use only mainstream media, and 20 percent report using none of these sources at all. Arceneaux and Johnson (2013) argue that, even though “partisan news shows have a substantial effect on political attitudes in the expected direction” (2013, 151), the audiences for the cable news shows whose effects they investigate are so small that their contribution to national polarization can only be very modest. The 2012 ANES data indicate that when a broader range of partisan media are considered, a clear majority of voters—more than 60 percent—were exposed to their messages, so their potential impact on polarization is not trivial.

Table 2. Media Source Combinations

<i>Sources</i>	<i>Percent</i>
None	19.8
Mainstream only	18.9
Conservative only	8.0
Conservative and mainstream	9.3
Liberal only	9.4
Liberal and mainstream	18.3
Liberal and conservative	3.8
All three	12.5

To analyze the relationship between partisan media and the polarized electorate in 2012, I created 5-point additive scales based on the number of sources in each category the respondent reported using; the scales range from 0 to 4 or more for each type. Table 3 reports the distribution of partisan voters on this scale for each type of media. Tea Party Republicans are the most distinctive group by this measure; they are much heavier users of conservative media than any other group and pay less attention to mainstream media as well. The relatively heavy use of conservative media by the tea partiers is only partially a consequence of the large contingent of Fox personalities on the list; if we count them together as only one source, 18 percent of Tea Party Republicans still report using four or more conservative sources. Again, the tendency toward selective exposure by partisans is unmistakable.

Table 3 Use of Media Sources, by Party

		<u>Republicans</u>		<u>Independents</u>	<u>Democrats</u>
		Tea Party	Other		
Conservative Sources	None	31.1	64.7	76.9	81.7
	1	14.2	16.6	12.3	12.8
	2	10.0	7.6	3.5	3.3
	3	8.4	5.3	2.8	1.3
	4 or more	36.4	5.8	4.4	0.9
Liberal Sources	None	66.4	66.8	61.5	46.1
	1	19.5	18.0	21.2	21.9
	2	8.6	8.2	7.3	12.2
	3	2.8	3.6	3.1	8.0
	4 or more	2.7	3.3	6.9	11.9
Mainstream Sources	None	44.5	32.7	38.7	30.0
	1	17.3	16.4	17.0	17.3
	2	11.5	14.4	9.7	13.3
	3	10.3	8.7	12.1	12.6
	4 or more	16.4	27.8	22.5	26.8

Media Use and Opinion Polarization

Barack Obama was without question the primary focal object of electoral polarization in 2012. His immediate predecessor, George W. Bush, had received the most divergent partisan evaluations since surveys began asking about presidential

approval in the 1930s (Jacobson 2011a, 4-6). In 2012, Obama not only matched but by a small margin exceeded Bush in this regard.⁶ Obama also received the coldest average feeling thermometer ratings from the other party's voters of any president running for reelection, and the partisan difference in mean temperature was wider in 2012 than in any previous year.⁷ Thus I begin my examination of the relationship between partisan media consumption and polarized opinions and beliefs by examining responses to questions about the president. For this exercise, I computed a net index of partisan media use by subtracting the number of conservative sources mentioned from the number of liberal source mentioned (up to 4 each) that ranges from -4 (4 or more exclusively liberal sources) to 4 (4 or more exclusively conservative sources).⁸ About 10 percent of voters were at the extremes on this scale; about 32 percent had net scores in the -2 to -4 or 2 to 4 ranges and so were distinctly partisan in their choice of media.⁹

Figures 2A and 2B display the distribution of voters' opinions and beliefs about Obama across locations on the partisan media use scale. The relationships between attention to partisan media and views of Obama are all very strong, and the greater the difference in net partisan media used, the more polarized are responses to Obama. Approval of Obama's job performance ranges from 90 percent at the liberal source maximum to less than 1 percent at the conservative source maximum. Very few below the midpoint on the index think Obama is an extreme liberal, while large majorities of those at the right end of the scale do so. In 2012, partisan differences in the ideological location attributed to the Democratic presidential candidate, and the proportion of voters rating him as an extreme liberal, were the widest ever observed in the ANES time series going back to 1972, when the question was first asked. The charge that Obama is an

⁶ During the final quarter of 2004, the partisan difference in approval of Bush's performance averaged 79 percentage points (Republicans at 92 percent, Democrats at 13 percent); during the comparable quarter of 2012, the gap was 81 points (Democrats at 91 percent, Republicans at 10 percent.)

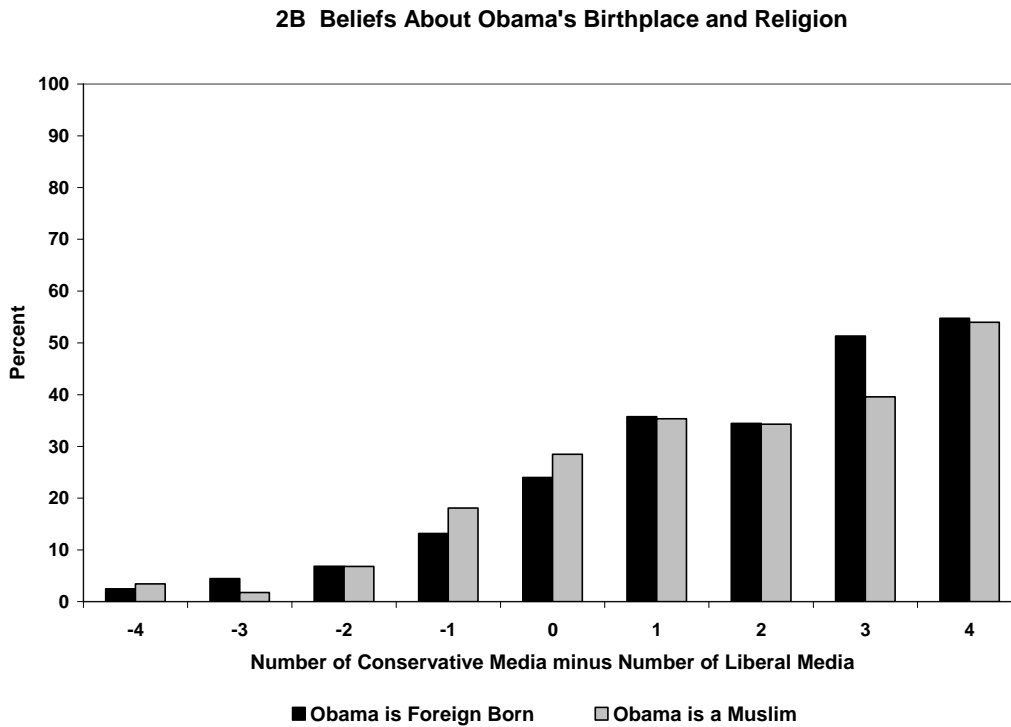
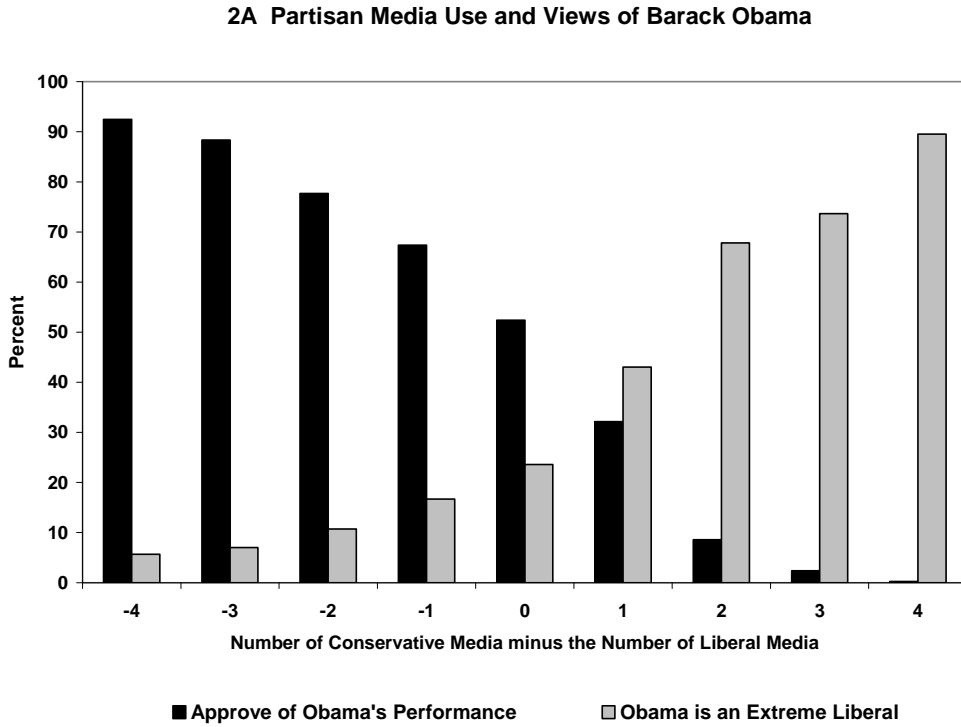
⁷ Obama's average thermometer rating from Republicans in 2012 was 29.2 degrees; G.W. Bush's average rating from Democrats in 2004 was 29.8 degrees; the partisan gap in 2012 was 53.0 degrees, in 2004, 52.7 degrees. The largest previous gap was 42.9 degrees for Bill Clinton in 1976.

⁸ With minor exceptions, responses to the questions analyzed here did not vary according to respondents' use of mainstream media and I therefore ignore this variable here, although it will be included in later multivariate analyses of these relationships.

⁹ The distribution of voting respondents was:

-4	4.7%	-1	16.0%	2	4.5%
-3	5.4%	0	43.6%	3	3.7%
-2	7.7%	1	9.0%	4	5.5%

Figure 2. Opinions and Beliefs about Barack Obama



extreme leftist was a central theme of the McCain-Palin campaign in 2008 and has been a staple of conservative attacks ever since (Jacobson 2011b). Republican voters in 2012 located Obama further to the left than any previous Democratic candidate, including George McGovern (Jacobson 2013a)—this for a president whose first-term DW-Nominate score, based on his positions on legislation considered in Congress, identified him as “the most ideologically moderate Democratic president in the post-war period” (Hare, Poole, and Rosenthal 2013).

Consumers of conservative media were also inclined to accept even more dubious claims about the president’s birth place and religion. The notion that Obama is foreign born and thus ineligible to be president, circulating among some of his detractors since he first sought the presidency, has proven highly resistant to disconfirming information. The same is true of the claim that he is Muslim rather than a Christian (Bradberry and Jacobson 2013). More than half of the heaviest users of conservative media accept these bogus claims, which are rejected a huge majority of respondents favoring liberal media.

Net partisan media use is also strongly related to other beliefs about reality (Figures 3A and 3B). Climate change denial, a rejection of the overwhelming scientific consensus that human activity is heating up the planet, increases as net partisan media use becomes more conservative, as does the unfounded belief that the Affordable Care Act establishes government panels to make end-of-life decisions for people on Medicare (the so-called “death panels”). Media use also influenced perceptions of how the economy had progressed over the year leading up to the election, with consumers of conservative media believing it had gotten worse (by the usual objective indicators it had improved, albeit modestly¹⁰) and whether the administration’s policies were biased in favor of black over whites.¹¹

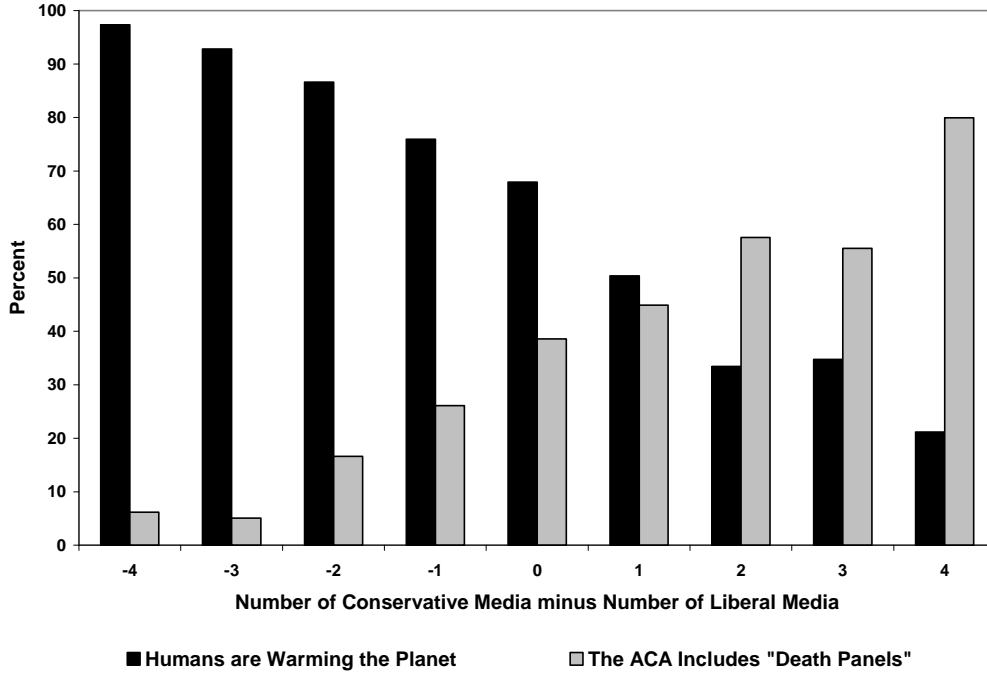
I have focused here largely on beliefs rather than opinions. Similar, sometimes even sharper illustrations of polarization across the net partisan media use scale appear in

¹⁰ The nation’s GDP, real per capita income, and median family income grew, though slowly, over the election year, and unemployment declined by about 1 percentage point.

¹¹ The ANES also asked about two dubious claims thought to be more common on the left: that the George W. Bush administration had foreknowledge of the terrorists attacks of September 11, 2001, and that the Army Corps of Engineers let Hurricane Katrina flood African American section of New Orleans to protect white sections. Media use had little effect on responses; respondents at the liberal end of the scale (-2 or less) were only about 6 points more likely to believe the claim than respondents at the conservative end of the scale (2 or higher). Belief in these claims decreased with the increasing use of media of all three types.

Figure 3. Beliefs About Reality

Figure 3A Belief in Human-Induced Climate Change and ACA "Death Panels"



3B Beliefs About the Economy and the Administration's Racial Bias

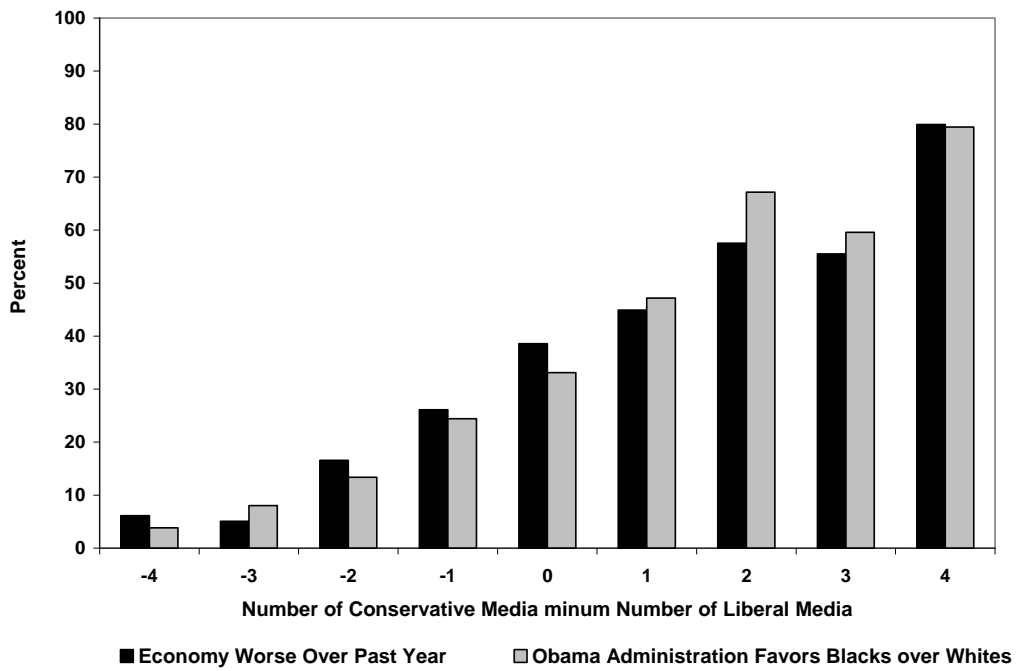
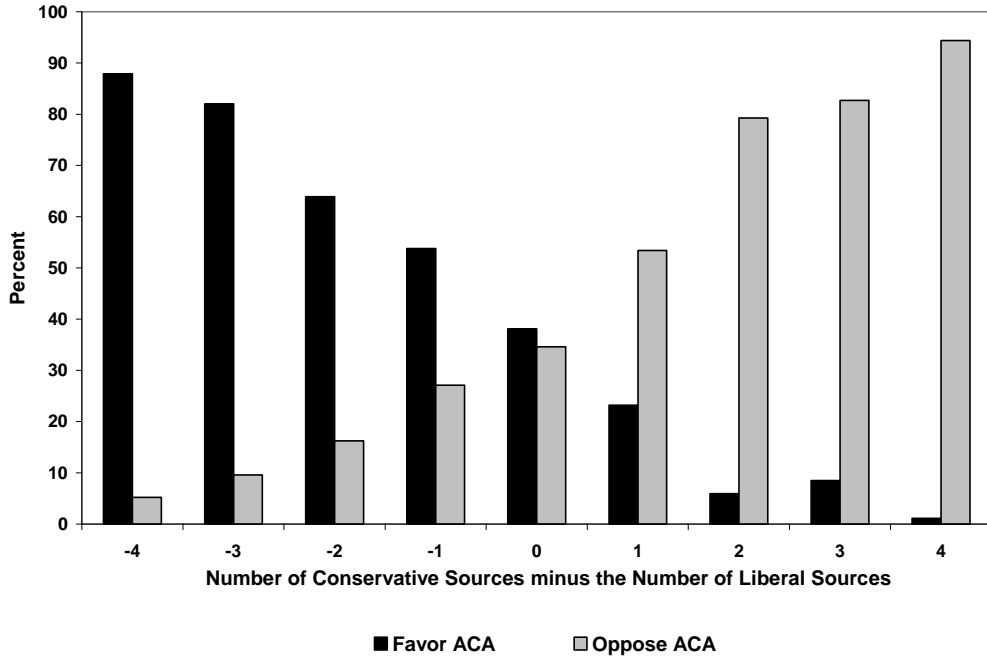
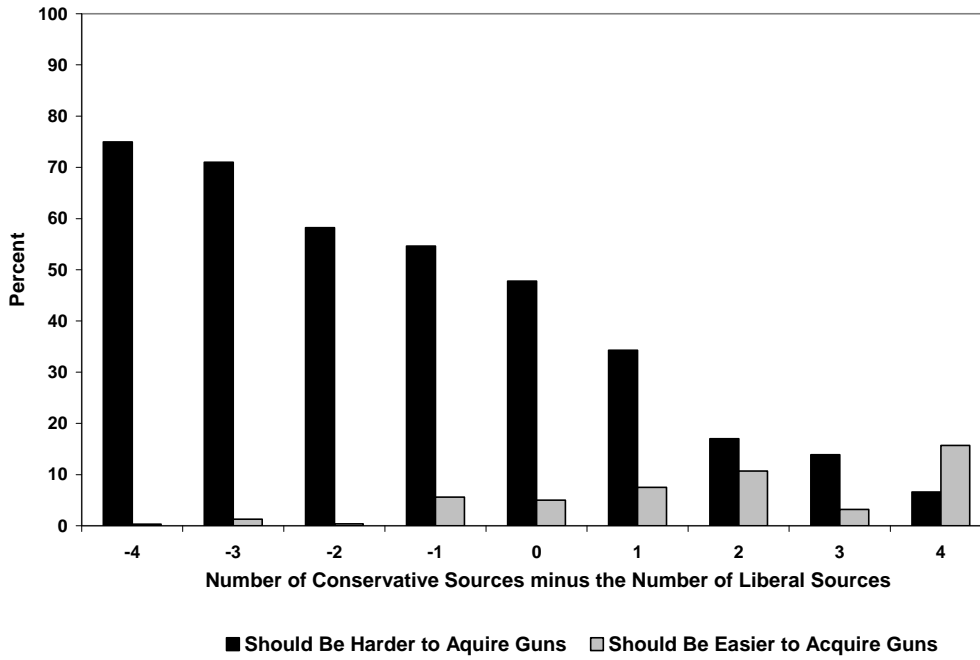


Figure 4 Opinions on Issues

4A Support for the Affordable Care Act



4B Opinions on Gun Control



opinions on policy questions, such as the Affordable Care Act or whether to tighten gun regulation (Figures 4A and 4B). Such examples could be multiplied almost endlessly, but these figures are sufficient to demonstrate the how strongly polarized opinions and beliefs reflect voters' use of partisan media and how widely voters at the opposite ends of the scale diverge—by more than 90 percentage points in some cases, approaching the mathematical limit.

Is It Only Selective Exposure?

Theoretically, these relationships could be entirely the consequence of the strong tendency toward selective exposure documented in Tables 1 and 3. If so, however, they should vanish if we control for the characteristics of voters that determine their choice of partisan media. To test for this possibility, I estimated two logit models with responses to the questions analyzed for Figures 2 and 3 as the dependent variables. For the first, the independent variables are simply the three media use scales (each ranging from 0 to 4). Selective exposure guarantees that these estimates are subject to omitted variables bias, and thus for the second equation, I include a set of variables that should influence the selective choice of media sources: party identification, self-location on the 7-point liberal-conservative scale, the 7-point Tea Party support scale, and the three standard ANES scales measuring racial resentment, egalitarianism, and moral traditionalism.¹² Table 4 displays estimates derived from these equations of the difference in probability of a positive response to each question moving from the lowest to highest use of each type

¹² All of these variables are in fact significant predictors of partisan media consumption. The racial resentment scale is based on respondents' agreement or disagreement with four statements: 1) "Irish, Italians, Jewish, and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors." (2) "Over the past few years blacks have gotten less than they deserve." (3) "It's really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as whites." (4) "Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class." The four items generated a single factor (eigenvalue=2.60, absolute factor loadings ranged from .79 to .82); Cronbach's Alpha for the four items is .81. The factor scores are recoded to range from 0.0 to 1.0. The moral traditionalism scale is based on respondents' agreement or disagreement with four statements about social morality and tolerance. The four items generated a single factor (eigenvalue=2.3, absolute factor loadings ranged from .69 to .78); Cronbach's Alpha for the four items is .72. The egalitarianism scale is from a six item battery of agree-disagree statements regarding equality; the six items generated a single factor (eigenvalue=3.01, absolute factor loadings ranged from .66 to .75); Cronbach's Alpha for the six items is .80.

of media when the other variables are set at their mean values. Estimates based on coefficients failing to meet the $p < .05$ level of statistical significance are in parentheses.

The first column in each set reiterates the strong relationship between partisan media use and responses to these questions, with the level of attention to conservative media having the largest effect on predicted responses all but one question (Obama’s religion is the exception—a tie here). The estimated effects of the use of mainstream media are all considerably smaller and in three cases are based on insignificant coefficients; the significant coefficients do, however, all have the same signs as the estimates based on liberal media use.

Table 4. Difference in Probability of Holding Selected Opinions and Beliefs

	<i>Conservative</i>		<i>Liberal</i>		<i>Mainstream</i>	
	No controls	Controls	No controls	Controls	No controls	Controls
Approve of Obama’s job performance	-.65	-.34	.52	(.12)	.17	(.01)
Obama is an extreme liberal	.67	.34	-.27	-.10	-.10	(-.02)
Obama is foreign born	.33	(-.02)	-.28	-.09	(.03)	(.03)
Obama is Muslim	.25	(-.06)	-.25	-.12	(.01)	.06
Human induced climate change	-.54	-.30	.31	.21	.11	.08
ACA has “death panels”	.44	.16	-.33	-.22	-.13	-.10
Economy worse over past year	.49	.11	-.34	-.17	(.05)	(.02)
Administration favors blacks	.50	.11	-.24	-.13	-.06	(.04)
Support the ACA	-.65	-.16	.44	.12	.23	.10
Favor stricter gun control	-.46	-.17	.26	(.03)	.15	.06

Note: Entries are based on logit equations estimating the probability of holding each opinion or belief and indicate the difference in probability of holding an opinion or belief between the least (0) and most (maximum of 4) use of each type of media with the other variables set at their mean values. Estimates based on coefficients below the .05 level of statistical significance are in parentheses.

The second column in each set displays estimates of the remaining effects of media use once the six variables contributing to selective exposure are taken into account. They are in every case notably smaller than the initial estimates. For partisan media, however, most effects remain substantively meaningful and statistically significant. The residual estimated effects of conservative media use remain particularly large for approval of Obama’s performance, perceptions of him as an extreme liberal, and acceptance of human-induced climate change. Conservative media use is unrelated to beliefs about Obama’s alleged foreign birth and Muslim religion when these additional

variables are taken into account, but greater liberal media use continues to predict a lower probability of accepting these canards. Liberal media use also continues to have a substantial effect on answers to other factual questions (climate change, death panels, the economy's performance over the past year), but not on approval of Obama or opinion on gun control. The estimated effects of mainstream media use also shrink and are not significant for half of the ten questions when the controls are introduced; no remaining probability difference is greater than .10.¹³

These same control variables can be used to gauge the effects of net partisan media use on the polarization of opinions and beliefs. The entry in the first column in Table 5 is the difference between the mean responses of voters at the extreme ends of the net partisan media scale as displayed in Figures 2 and 3 (shown here as proportions rather than percentages). The second column lists, in order of their absolute magnitudes, the estimated differences when the six variables that determine selective exposure to partisan media are taken into account.¹⁴ If the control variables eliminate most or all of the omitted variables bias arising from selective exposure, then the data suggest that partisan media did indeed contribute to a polarized electorate in 2012. The largest effects are for evaluations of Obama's job performance, views of his ideology, and opinions on his signature legislative achievement, the ACA, along with factual questions about climate change and the existence of death panels. By this evidence, partisan media helped make Obama the focal object around which partisan voters polarized in 2012 while also contributing to divergent perceptions of reality regarding global warming and death panels. The residual effects of media use on polarized views of the economy, gun control, and administration favoritism toward blacks are smaller but still appreciable. But respondents' polarized beliefs about Obama's birthplace and religion were not, by this analysis, influenced by media use but rather reflect prior beliefs held by the self-selected partisan media users.

¹³ The one curiosity is that belief that Obama is Muslim actually increases significantly (albeit quite modestly) with use of mainstream media; perhaps the idea would never occur to people who had little or no exposure to sources that at least mentioned the claim, if only to dismiss it.

¹⁴ Estimated from logit equations in which the net partisan media scale replaces the three individual media use scales used to produce the estimates listed in Table 4.

Table 5. Polarizing Effects of Partisan Media Use, Controlling for Selective Exposure

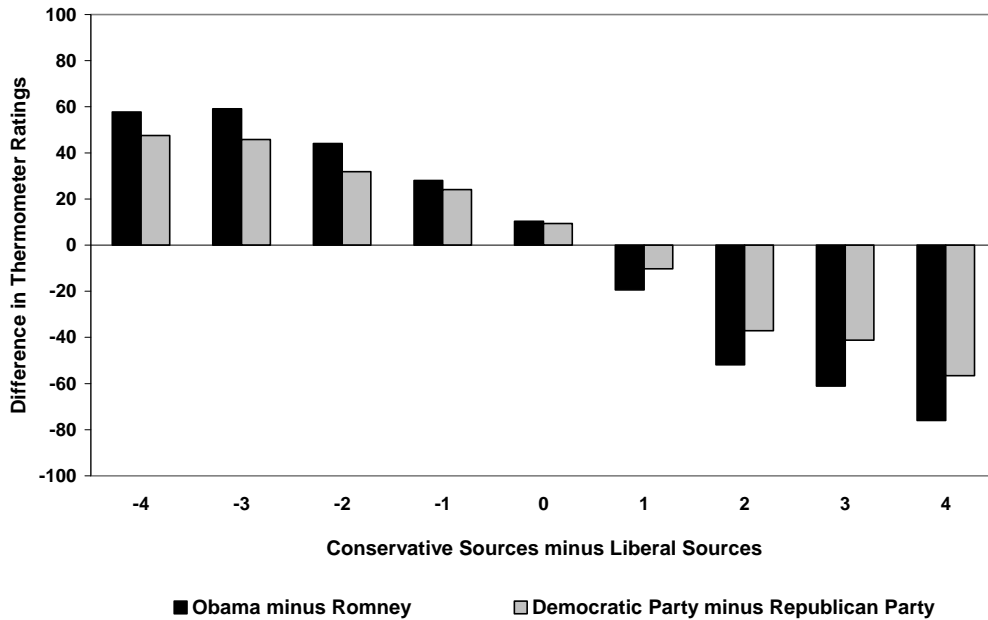
Difference Between Respondents at -4 and +4 on the Net Partisan Media Scale

	No Controls	Controls
Approve of Obama's job performance	-.97	-.47
Human induced climate change	-.76	-.44
Support the ACA	-.87	-.42
Obama is an extreme liberal	.84	.39
ACA has "death panels"	.74	.34
Economy worse over past year	.74	.27
Favor stricter gun control	.68	.26
Administration favors blacks	.76	.16
Obama is Muslim	.51	.05
Obama is foreign born	.52	(.03)

The Effects of Individual Media Sources

The data examined so far indicate some asymmetry between conservative and liberal media, with the former attracting the more ideologically homogeneous audience (Table 1) but nonetheless having a relatively larger residual effect on opinions and beliefs when the variables predicting selective exposure are taken into account (on average about 35 percent larger according to the estimates in Table 4). To examine this asymmetry and partisan media source effects more generally, I chose the two exemplary measures of polarization in 2012 for further analysis: the difference in voters' thermometer ratings of Obama and Romney and of the Democratic and Republican parties. Recall from Figure 1 that partisan differences in these ratings were the highest in the entire ANES time series. As with the other opinions analyzed here, the degree of polarization of thermometer ratings on the candidates and parties in 2012 varies strongly with the use of partisan media (Figure 5). To assess the relationship between individual media sources and the degree of polarization, I regressed these variable on the use of each of the 34 media sources by itself (as a categorical variable) and again with the six selective exposure control variables; the results are reported in Table 6.

Figure 5 Net Partisan Media Use and Differences in Thermometer Ratings of the Presidential Candidates and the Parties in 2012



The estimated coefficients for each source without the selective exposure variables reflect with great precision the partisan composition of each source’s audience as displayed in Table 1; the correlations between the proportion of Republicans and Democrats in the audience and the net differences in candidate and party thermometer scores for each source are in all four cases greater than .99. Thus users of conservative sources rate Romney much higher than Obama and the Republican Party much higher than the Democratic Party, while users of liberal media are clearly favor Obama and the Democratic Party over their rivals, but to a smaller extent. The audiences for mainstream sources also mostly tilt toward Obama and the Democrats but by much smaller margins. The six control variables by themselves explain a very large proportion of the variance (75 percent for the candidate thermometer differences, 76 percent for the in party thermometer differences), and their inclusion reduces the estimated source effects sharply. The effects of using all but a few liberal sources cease to be significantly different from zero, and of the five of the 26 coefficients that do meet the conventional $p < .05$ standard, three have the “wrong” (negative) sign. With these controls, mainstream sources have almost no evident effect on voters’ affective reactions to the candidates and

Table 6. Media Bias and Polarized Net Thermometer Ratings of Obama and Romney and the Political Parties

	Obama minus Romney (Average=5.4°)		Democratic Party minus Republican Party (Average=6.3°)	
	<i>No Controls</i>	<i>Controls</i>	<i>No Controls</i>	<i>Controls</i>
<i>Conservative Sources</i>				
Mark Levin	-78.9	-10.9	-53.8	(0.2)
Sean Hannity	-78.2	-14.2	-57.3	-4.8
Mike Huckabee	-77.5	-8.3	-62.3	-6.5
Glenn Beck	-71.2	-6.3	-55.4	(-3.1)
Bret Baier	-70.8	-8.3	-53.5	(-3.3)
Bill O'Reilly	-70.3	-10.9	-53.8	-6.0
Greta Van Susteren	-68.5	-12.4	-53.2	-8.1
Rush Limbaugh	-68.5	-7.4	-50.0	(-0.4)
Michael Savage	-63.3	(-5.9)	-47.8	(-2.5)
Laura Ingraham	-61.2	-8.1	-47.8	-6.6
Fox News	-55.7	-8.2	-42.3	-3.6
Drudge Report	-51.9	(-1.3)	-38.2	(2.6)
<i>Wall Street Journal</i>	-15.6	(-1.4)	-13.8	(-1.2)
Any	-55.5	-8.5	-42.0	-3.5
<i>Liberal Sources</i>				
Chris Matthews	52.9	(-1.6)	42.1	(1.8)
Jon Stewart	46.0	(-2.4)	36.0	(-1.1)
Stephen Colbert	39.8	-3.8	30.5	(-2.5)
<i>New York Times</i>	37.2	(-0.0)	27.6	(0.1)
NPR	34.3	(-1.6)	25.7	(-1.5)
Huffington Post	29.7	-4.0	20.8	-4.5
Frontline	28.4	(-0.2)	24.2	(1.9)
Anderson Cooper	24.2	(-2.3)	19.6	(-1.9)
CNN	22.4	4.1	13.0	(-1.0)
<i>Washington Post</i>	18.7	(-0.2)	12.6	(-0.1)
MSNBC	15.0	3.6	8.2	(0.1)
Any	30.4	(-1.4)	22.2	-2.4
<i>Mainstream Sources</i>				
60 Minutes	13.6	(-2.2)	13.4	(0.6)
NBC Nightly News	12.1	(0.5)	10.0	(0.5)
ABC World News Tonight	11.7	(0.9)	9.7	(1.1)
Dateline	11.5	(0.0)	9.3	(-0.7)
Meet the Press	11.2	(-2.7)	11.3	(1.0)
20/20	9.2	(-0.1)	8.8	(0.7)
Nightline	7.4	(0.0)	6.0	(-1.0)
CBS Evening News	6.6	(-1.8)	6.1	(-1.3)
Face the Nation	(5.0)	-4.0	8.4	(0.9)
USA Today	(-1.7)	(0.5)	(-1.7)	(1.0)
Any	14.6	(0.0)	12.0	(0.1)

Note: Coefficients not meeting the p<.05 level of statistical significance are in parentheses.

parties. Thus relationships observed in the first column of each set for liberal and mainstream sources arise from selective exposure rather than from any messages to which the voters have exposed themselves.

Attention to many of the conservative outlets, in contrast, continues to have a significant effect on thermometer differences, particularly with regard to the presidential candidates. Ten of the 13 coefficients for the Obama-Romney differences remain significant at $p < .05$, averaging about -8.6 degrees. Notably, the coefficients for all of the Fox news commentators and Fox News itself remain substantial and statistically significant, averaging -10 degrees. Estimated conservative source effects on relative party thermometers are smaller, with only six of them remaining significantly different from zero when the control variables are added. Again, however, five of these six belong to the Fox stable. This is clear if circumstantial evidence that the Fox audience absorbed messages from the network's personalities that magnified their affective reactions to the presidential candidates and, to a lesser extent, the national parties. These source effects registered on thermometer ratings of both Romney and Obama when they are examined separately (results not shown); if anything, the media source coefficients for Romney's ratings tended to be the larger. Thus insofar as Fox commentators influenced their audience's affective reactions to the candidates, it was to boost Romney at least as much as to hurt Obama. Perhaps this is one reason that, although Romney won the Republican nomination by defeating several rivals with greater intrinsic appeal to the party's dominant conservative faction, the Republicans most sympathetic to the Tea Party eventually became the largest, most loyal, and most active component of his electoral coalition (Bradberry and Jacobson 2013).

Media Use and Expectations about the Election Outcome

One of the oddities of the 2012 presidential election was the apparently sincere confidence expressed by the Romney camp and much of the conservative commentariat that most published polls were wrong and that Romney would emerge the winner on election day, according to some by a wide margin. Prominent conservatives who predicted a Romney victory included Newt Gingrich, Karl Rove, Michael Barone, George Will, Dick Morris, William Kristol, Glen Beck, Ann Coulter, Peggy Noonan, and

Charles Krauthammer; Gingrich, Morris, Barone, Will, and Beck predicted Romney would get more than 300 electoral votes (Greenfield 2012). They were thus embarrassed as well as shocked when Obama outpolled Romney by nearly 5 million votes while winning a 332-206 electoral-college majority.

Ordinary Republicans had shared the partisan optimism permeating the conservative media; 70 percent of Republican voters in the ANES survey's pre-election wave predicted a Romney victory, 25 percent an Obama victory. In contrast, 90 percent of Democrats thought Obama would be reelected, with only 7 percent predicting a Romney victory.¹⁵ It is normal for a far larger share of supporters than opponents to predict in a candidate's victory—except in years with huge landslides, typically around 80 percent of respondents expect the candidate they support to win (Granberg and Brent 1983)—but expectations this divergent are unusual. Because predictions of a Romney victory were so prevalent in the conservative media—Krauthammer, Rove, Coulter, Noonan, Morris, and Gingrich had made or repeated their forecasts on various Fox programs, among other venues—it is not surprising that their Republican audiences were persuaded by what they heard, insofar as they needed any persuading. Obama supporters could and did rely on liberal or mainstream sources that interpreted the polls as pointing to an Obama victory, most prominently in Nate Silver's widely cited "FiveThirtyEight" blog on the *New York Times* website, where his poll aggregation model, updated daily, had Obama ahead throughout the campaign. Not by much, however, and published surveys taken during the last month of the campaign gave Obama an average margin of less than one percentage point, with virtually all of the results indicating that the election was, statistically speaking, too close to call.¹⁶ Considering the high level of uncertainty left by these polls, it is not surprising that voters resolved it in a manner consistent with their hopes. More to the point here, if partisan media messages are ever going to influence partisan beliefs an election outcome, it should be when ambiguity is high and the desire for the preferred outcome is intense, as in 2012.

¹⁵ Five percent of Democrats and 7 percent of Republicans were unsure or thought someone else would win. A Gallup poll taken in late October 2012 got similar results; 71 percent of Republicans predicted a Romney victory (19 percent, Obama), and 86 percent of Democrats predicted an Obama victory (8 percent, Romney).

¹⁶ That is, either outcome fell within the 95 percent confidence interval; the average from 49 surveys taken by 20 polling firms between October 1 and the election gave Obama 50.4 percent of the two-party vote (based on data gathered from PollingReport.com and Pollster.com).

Figure 6 Media Use and Prediction that Romney Will Defeat Obama

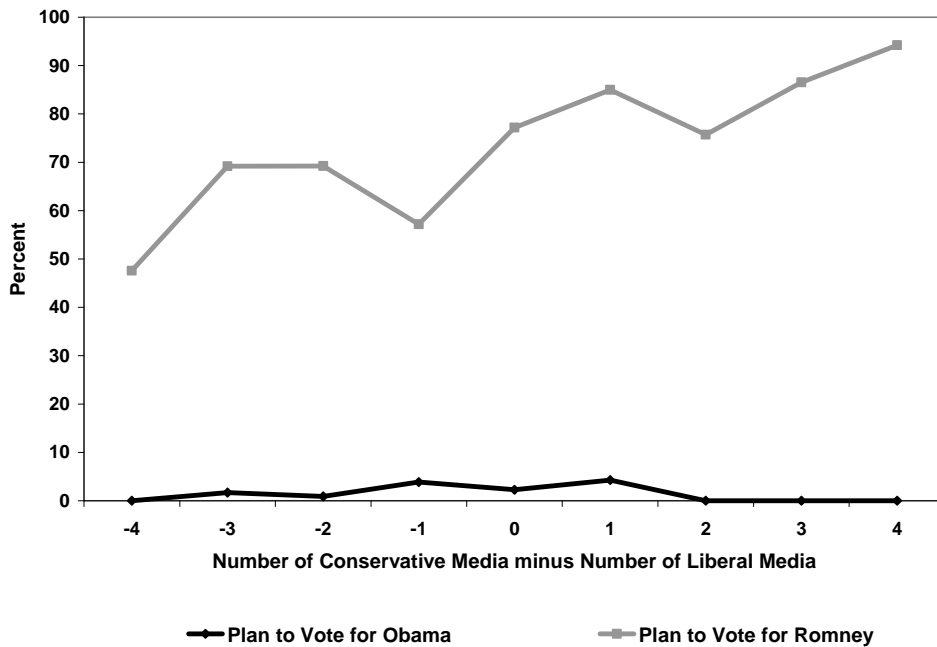


Figure 6 displays the incidence of predictions of a Romney victory according to the voter’s pre-election presidential preference and net use of partisan media. Virtually everyone intending to vote for Obama thought he would win regardless of their attention to partisan media. Most of these voters were of course Democrats (90 percent), but 90 percent of the small contingent of Republicans intending to vote for Obama, comprising 6 percent of the total, also thought he would win. Most voters planning to vote for Romney expected him to be elected, and the more so the more conservative the mix of media the used. These voters were mainly Republicans (87 percent); among Democrats planning to vote for Romney (5 percent of Romney’s total), 67 percent thought he would win. In light of the Fox channel’s role in spreading the news that prominent conservatives pundits forecast a Romney victory, it is worth noting that Romney supporters’ expectations of his victory rose monotonically with their level of attention to the five Fox commentators on the list, from 72 percent if they tuned into none of them up to 92 percent if they tuned in to all five.¹⁷

¹⁷ The percentages were 0: 72.0%; 1: 72.9%; 2: 81.0%; 3: 83.5%; 4: 88.3% and 5: 91.5%.

Presidential preferences dominated expectations about who would win, but partisan media use remains a significant predictor of expectations when preferences and party identification are controlled. It also remains a significant predictor when a variable almost as potent as (and of course strongly related to) presidential preference is added: relative affect as measured by the difference in the candidate feeling thermometers (Table 7). Earlier research produced evidence that greater intensity of preferences strengthened the links between presidential preferences and predicted outcomes (Granberg and Brent 1983). This was certainly the case in 2012; the stronger the motive (as measured by relative candidate affect), the greater the inclination to motivated reasoning about the election outcome. The coefficient on media use shrinks when the thermometer difference variable is include, not surprisingly given the strong relationship between partisan media use and relative affect displayed in Figure 5. But partisan media use continues to contribute significantly to the popular divergence of opinion on who was going to win in 2012 even when powerful sources of motivated reasoning are taken into account.

Table 7. Logit Models of Prediction of a Romney Victory

	Coefficient	Robust S.E.	Coefficient	Robust S.E.
Media use index (-4 to 4)	.26***	.05	.12*	.05
Party ID (7-point scale)	.23***	.05	.06	.06
Plan to vote for Romney	3.79***	.28	1.75***	.36
Obama-Romney thermometer difference			-2.78***	.36
Constant	4.11***	.20	2.45***	.29
Pseudo R ²	.54		.57	
Percent correctly predicted (Null= 64.3)	87.0		87.3	
Number of cases	3568		3568	

Note: the dependent variable is 1 if the respondent predicted a Romney victory, 0 otherwise; the thermometer difference has been divided by 100 to make the coefficient easier to read.

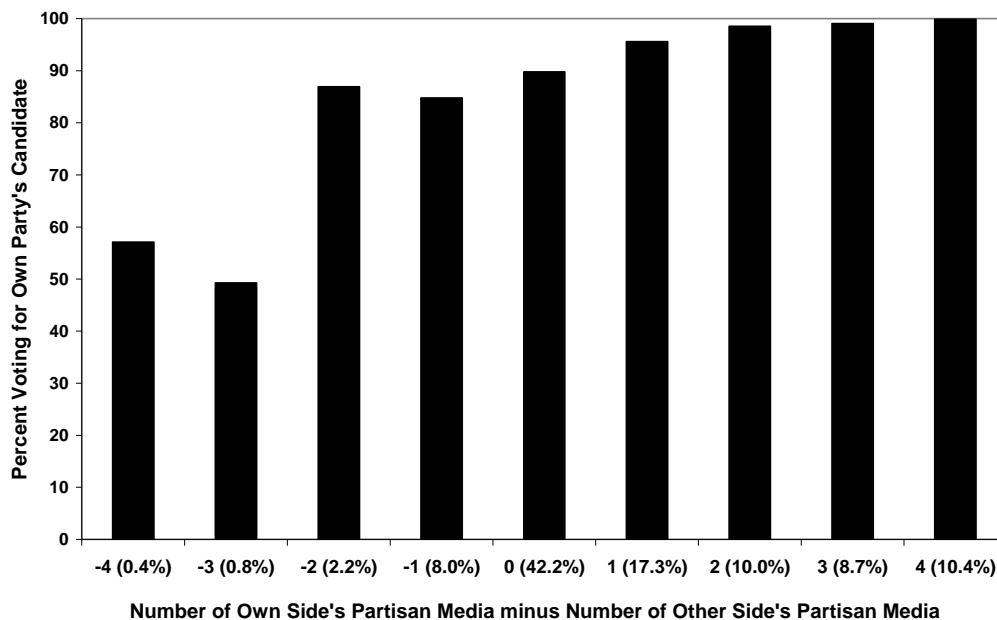
*p<.05; ***p<.001.

Partisan Media and the Vote

One prominent manifestation of electoral polarization in 2012 was the record-high level of partisan loyalty reported by voters in the presidential election. Neither candidate had any significant crossover appeal, and Obama’s electoral coalition was more

lopsidedly partisan than that of any previous winner in the entire ANES time series.¹⁸ Still, party loyalty varied with the use of partisan media, as Figure 7 illustrates. In this chart, the sign on the media use scale is reversed for Democratic voters, so that the higher the number, the greater the voter's exposure to congenially biased media. The horizontal axis labels also show the proportion of partisan voters within each category, mainly to document how few are found at the lowest three points on the scale. Party loyalty clearly grows as the partisan media mix becomes more asymmetrically favorable to one's party. The handful of voters below -1 on the scale are the least loyal (68 percent on average); above that level, loyalty increase monotonically to nearly reach 99.9 percent at 4 or more.

Figure 7 Partisan Media Use and Party Loyalty in the Presidential Election



Note: The proportion of voters in each category is in parentheses.

To consider once again whether this was merely a product of selective exposure, I estimated several logit models of the presidential vote that included the original net partisan media use index as an independent variable along with fourteen attitudinal and

¹⁸ In the ANES face-to face component, 89.9 percent reported voting for their party's nominee; both the National Exit Poll and the Cooperative Congressional Election Survey reported loyalty levels in excess of 93 percent (Jacobson 2013a); in the ANES data, 87.5 percent of Obama's electoral coalition consisted of Democratic identifiers; only 8 percent were Republicans.

demographic variables that might be expected to influence the vote.¹⁹ The first model omitted the Obama approval and candidate thermometer difference variables, which are so strongly predictive of the vote that they come close to measuring the same thing (presidential approval by itself accurately predicts 93.6 percent of reported votes, relative thermometer rating, 95.8 percent). The estimated coefficient on the partisan media use variable in the initial equation is -.35 (standard deviation, .08, $p < .001$); simulations suggest that, for example, among weak Democrats, the difference in probability of voting for Obama falls by -.40 across the full range of the scale, while the probability of a weak Republican voting for Romney rises by .41. When Obama approval is added to the equation, the coefficient shrinks to -.29 but is still statistically significant (standard deviation, .08, $p < .001$). However, when relative thermometer ratings are added the coefficient on partisan media use becomes notably smaller (-.17) and no more than marginally insignificant (standard deviation, .10, $p = .07$).²⁰

These results suggest that, insofar as partisan media contributed independently to party-line voting in 2012, they did so mainly through their effect on how voters assessed the two candidates. As we saw from the analyses reported in Table 6, attention to conservative media evidently had the greater independent impact on candidate affect than attention to liberal or mainstream media. This is also true for the vote; if we replace the net partisan media use index with the two separate 0-4 scales for conservative and liberal media use, coefficients for conservative media are large and significant in the first two equations (-.55, standard deviation .12, $p < .001$ in the first, -.48, standard deviation, .12, $p < .001$ in the second). The coefficients for liberal media use are less than half as large but remain at or close to the standard level of significance (.20, standard deviation .10, $p = .047$ in the first equation, .18, standard deviation, .10, $p = .065$ in the second). Neither of the coefficients meet the $p < .05$ level of statistical significance when relative affect is taken in to account in the third equation, although that for conservative media use

¹⁹ These variables included party identification, ideology, opinion of the Tea Party, the racial resentment scale, the egalitarianism scale, the traditional values scale, beliefs about Obama's birthplace and religion, race (black, Hispanic), age and age squared, gender, and religiosity. Coefficients for age, gender, and religiosity were not statistically significant in any of the models; for a complete description of these variables, see Bradberry and Jacobson (2013).

²⁰ The predictive accuracy of the equations rises from 93.2 percent to 95.5 percent and then to 96.6 percent with each additional independent variable.

remains the larger of the two and comes close (-.28, standard deviation, .15, $p=.063$, compared to .09, standard deviation .12, $p=.433$, for liberal media use).

Discussion

The evidence presented here suggests that partisan media did contribute independently to the record levels of partisan polarization in the electorate that ultimately gave Barack Obama his second term. Selective exposure was widespread, with partisans showing a clear preference for sources of news and opinion that reliably fit their biases, so it is no surprise that modal opinions, beliefs, and behaviors varied strongly with variations in the use of partisan media. Nonetheless, taking factors that determine the choice of media into account, exposure to partisan media continued to have a substantively and statistically significant effect on voters' responses to a variety of the survey questions examined.

The estimated effects of media source use varied across questions, and these variations also point to genuine media influence. For example, opinions of Obama, his ideological leanings, and his signature legislative accomplishment, the ACA (and the accompanying “death panel” myth) were all affected by attention to conservative media. Attacks on Obama, charges that he is a radical leftist or worse, and scathing attacks on his proposals for health care reform been staples of conservative commentary almost since the day he took office (Jacobson 2011). In contrast, bogus notions about Obama's birthplace and religion, although popular among conservative media audiences, were not promoted by major conservative pundits. Some Fox shows gave platforms to people questioning the authenticity of Obama's birth certificate, but none of the Fox hosts expressed doubts that Obama was a citizen; Bill O'Reilly even argued that birtherism helped Democrats aiming to marginalize Republicans “by painting them as nuts.”²¹ Fox commentators also sometimes accused Obama of being overly sympathetic to Muslims, but none claimed he was one himself. Thus when determinants of selective attention are controlled, attention to conservative sources had no discernable effect on beliefs that Obama is foreign-born or a Muslim. On the other hand, liberal sources—including

²¹ The O'Reilly Factor, February 16, 2011, at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8rAqhdL1BU>, accessed March 21, 2014.

Matthews, Stewart, Colbert, Cooper and the Huffington Post—gleefully ridiculed these notions and their proponents, and greater attention to liberal media significantly diminished the likelihood of accepting them.

The climate change question is also instructive here. Back in the 1990s, beliefs about global warming did not differ by party, but a partisan divide opened up after Al Gore raised the alarm, most prominently in his Academy Award-winning documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*.²² By 2012, skepticism or outright denial of human-induced climate change was modal if not universal on the right (Levin, Beck, Hannity, Limbaugh, Savage, O'Reilly, Ingraham, the *Wall Street Journal*'s op-ed pages, and Fox News are examples; Huckabee is something of an exception). Liberal and mainstream outlets, in contrast, treated global warming as established fact, and liberal pundits and programs (including Matthews, Stewart, Colbert, and Cooper, the Huffington Post, CNN, and PBS's Frontline) regularly skewered its deniers.²³ Thus it is not surprising to find large residual effects of partisan media attention on beliefs about climate change (see Table 4) and that polarization on this issue was unusually high (see Table 5). In sum, the effects of partisan media use varied in ways that echoed variations in the emphasis of partisan messages and were most pronounced on issues where conservative and liberal media took clear and emphatic contrary positions.

As I cautioned at the outset, causality is difficult to demonstrate unambiguously in a cross-sectional study like the 2012 ANES. And of course a single study cannot show that the spread of partisan media has contributed the growing partisan polarization of the American electorate over the last several decades. But results reported here do, I think, stand as strong circumstantial evidence that partisan media did contribute measurably to making 2012 the most partisan and polarizing election in at least sixty years.

Under current electoral configurations, party-line voting by a polarized electorate delivers a divided, polarized national government. The high level of party-line voting was a net plus for Obama because the Democrats had a clear advantage among party

²² In at 1997 Gallup Poll, 46 percent of Democrats and 47 percent of Republicans agreed that human beings were already warming up the planet; by the 2008 poll, the comparable division was Democrats, 76 percent Republicans, 41 percent.

²³ For these and all of the other assessments of outlets' positions in this section, I used numerous sources on the web that provided such information.

identifiers in 2012²⁴ and the distribution of partisans across the states also favored Democrats in the Electoral College.²⁵ In House elections, however, a comparable level of party-ling voting produced a Republican majority because, mainly as a consequence of coalition demography, Republican voters are distributed more efficiently than Democratic voters across congressional districts, enabling them to win a majority of seats (53.8 percent) with a minority of the major-party vote (49.3 percent; see Jacobson 2013b, for details).

The intense partisanship expressed in the 2012 election directly translated into intense partisan conflict in Washington because Obama and the House Republican majority owed their elections to thoroughly disjunctive coalitions with starkly opposed opinions and beliefs. After 2012, only 15 percent of House Republicans' electoral constituents (those who voted for the winning Republicans) also reported voting for Obama; this is the smallest proportion of voters shared by the president and members of the rival party in any Congress on record (the record going back to 1952).²⁶ The House Republicans' electoral constituents gave Obama the lowest thermometer ratings from the rival congressional party's coalition ever recorded for a president. More than 86 percent disapproved of his performance, 74 percent strongly. More than 40 percent said he was foreign born or a Muslim, and a majority (54 percent) viewed him as an extreme liberal. They were adamantly opposed to the ACA and stricter gun control. The ideological distance between the president's and the opposing congressional party's electoral coalitions has also reached a peak during Obama's administration.²⁷ No wonder, then, that Obama's reelection only intensified Republican intransigence, inspiring this aptly named conference on "American Gridlock."

²⁴ Of 4.4 to 9.4 percentage points; see footnote 1.

²⁵ According to Gallup's calculation of party affiliation by state from their tracking poll, January-June, 2012, Democrats outnumbered Republicans in 26 states (and the District of Columbia) with 334 electoral votes, Republicans outnumbered Democrats in 24 states with 204 electoral votes; data at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/156437/Heavily-Democratic-States-Concentrated-East.aspx#2>, accessed August 20, 2013.

²⁶ Among Republican Senate electoral constituents, the overlap was even lower: 10 percent, the lowest on record.

²⁷ Measured by mean locations on the 7-point liberal-conservative scale.

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