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RESEARCH NOTE/NOTE DE RECHERCHE

Evaluating the Partisan Media Echo Chamber Hypothesis in Canada

Eric Merkley

University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada
Email: eric.merkley@utoronto.ca

Abstract

Affective polarization is often blamed on the rise of partisan news. However, self-reported measures of news consumption suffer serious flaws. We often have limited ability to characterize partisan media audiences outside of the United States. I use a behavioural data set of 728 respondents whose online behaviour was tracked over four weeks during the 2019 Canadian federal election. These data were paired to a survey for a subset of respondents. I find that audiences for partisan media are small, and web traffic is driven by an even smaller share of the population. There are few major partisan differences in news media use, and partisan news exposure is higher among highly attentive, sophisticated news consumers, rather than those with strong political commitments.

Résumé

La polarisation affective est souvent accusée d'être à l'origine de la montée des informations partisanes. Toutefois, les mesures de la consommation d'informations autodéclarées présentent de sérieuses lacunes. Nous avons souvent une capacité limitée à caractériser les audiences des médias partisans en dehors des États-Unis. J'utilise un ensemble de données comportementales de 728 répondants dont le comportement en ligne a été suivi pendant quatre semaines au cours de l'élection fédérale canadienne de 2019. Ces données ont été couplées à une enquête pour un sous-ensemble de répondants. Je constate que les audiences des médias partisans sont faibles, et que le trafic Web est alimenté par une part encore plus faible de la population. Il y a peu de différences partisanes majeures dans l'utilisation des médias d'information, et l'exposition aux nouvelles partisanes est plus élevée chez les consommateurs de nouvelles très attentifs et sophistiqués, plutôt que chez ceux qui ont des engagements politiques forts.

Keywords: partisan media; echo chambers; media use; polarization; Canada

Mots-clés : médias partisans; chambres d'écho; utilisation des médias; polarisation; Canada

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Extraordinary changes in communications technology over the past two decades have generated a fragmentation of the political news environment in North America. A landscape dominated by print and broadcast television news was challenged first by cable television, which often catered to narrow partisan audiences (Ladd 2011), and then the Internet, which lowered the cost of news production for alternative news outlets not as interested in investing in credibility as traditional news organizations (Munger 2020). The added competition from freely available online news sources, which often cater to niche, partisan audiences, has put pressure on traditional news outlets, especially newspapers and magazines.

As a result, the partisan news ecosystem in the United States is now more than just Fox News and MSNBC with the rise of online sources like Breitbart, the Blaze, Raw Story, and Daily Kos. This change is not unique to the United States. We have seen some growth of these outlets in Canada as well, most prominently on the right, with the likes of True North News and Ezra Levant's Rebel News. News consumers have far greater choice now about what news to consume as mainstream news struggles and alternative, often partisan, news grows at their expense.

A media ecosystem increasingly dominated by partisan media outlets untethered to traditional journalistic norms is one that will produce more polarizing, inflammatory content. Partisan media, after all, traffic in outrage (Mutz 2015; Sobieraj and Berry 2011). Mass polarization could be an important consequence of these developments. Experimental evidence has shown that exposure to partisan news can lead to more extreme policy beliefs (Levendusky 2013). There is also compelling real-world evidence of these effects, especially as they pertain to Fox News. Fox News viewers typically take on more conservative positions, like hostility towards immigration (Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2012; Hoewe et al. 2021) and climate denialism (Carmichael et al. 2017; Feldman et al. 2012). Other work has been able to causally identify relationships. A field experiment that randomly induced Fox News viewers to switch to CNN saw considerable moderation in their attitudes (Broockman and Kalla 2025). Others have successfully exploited as-if randomized variation in Fox News's channel position as a proxy for exposure to connect it to higher Republican vote shares (Martin and Yurukoglu 2017) and lower COVID-19 vaccination rates (Pinna et al. 2022).

Not everyone agrees about the polarizing potential of partisan news. Objections to this theory take on two forms. First, there is disagreement about whether partisan media truly polarize conditional on exposure in real world settings. Already polarized individuals may gravitate towards partisan news, known as *selective exposure* (Stroud 2011), so the effects of these news sources could be limited by the fact their consumers hold attitudes close to a ceiling. Experimental evidence shows that, in practice, less polarized individuals tend to opt out of partisan news exposure, mitigating its polarizing potential (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013). Studies linking partisan media exposure to polarization (and other outcomes) using trace data have typically exhibited null results (Guess et al. 2021; Peterson et al. 2021; Wojcieszak et al. 2023).

Second, and more relevant for this note, is that there is considerable evidence that exposure to partisan media is quite limited. This observation is long standing, with Neilson data showing that the share of Americans watching at least 10 minutes of partisan cable news per day was, at most, 10-15%, while most cable news watchers split their viewing time between left- and right-wing outlets: Fox News viewers watching CNN and vice versa, for instance (Prior 2013, pg. 113). Although the rise of the

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Internet and online partisan media could potentially complicate this picture, Guess (2021) finds that audiences for online partisan news are small (though intense) and as a result there is considerable overlap (50-65%) in the media diets of Republicans and Democrats. Muise et al. (2022) find that only 4% of Americans are "partisan-segregated" in their online news consumption, a figure that was closely matched by Fletcher et al. (2021). Heseltine et al. (2024) find that two-thirds of online political news exposure is to centrist websites. To some degree, it is a subjective evaluation as to whether the prevalence of partisan media exposure or echo chambers is large or not. Broockman and Kalla (2024), for instance, argue that 15% of Americans watching 8 hours of partisan cable news *per month* is substantial, but that is a point on which reasonable people could disagree. There is a consensus, however, that only a minority of citizens consume partisan news, and an even smaller minority do so regularly. Consequently, media diets are more balanced than we would expect, and echo chambers are small. The degree to which this is true in Canada remains to be seen.

Measuring the scale and scope of the partisan media echo chamber phenomenon is no easy task. Self-reported survey data suffer serious flaws. People tend to overreport their news consumption, especially for partisan-aligned outlets (Prior 2013), and the ability of people to accurately recall their news consumption is poor as well (Dilliplane et al. 2013; Guess 2015). This makes it difficult to credibly measure the size of partisan media audiences, let alone understand its determinants and consequences. The principal alternative is to use behavioural data that allow researchers to directly observe the links clicked on by survey respondents, which includes links to news media outlets (see Guess 2021). These data are expensive and hard to come by, however. As a result, we do not have a lot of quantitative evidence on the nature of online news audiences outside of the United States (see Stier et al. 2020 for an important exception), let alone the determinants or consequences of these news consumption patterns.

In this note, I aim to quantify the size of partisan news audiences in Canada, both in absolute terms and relative to mainstream news audiences, using behavioural data collected by the 2019 Digital Democracy Project. This dataset provides unique tracking of the online behaviour of over 700 participants in a four-week span during the 2019 election and includes over 2.2 million website visits. This tracking data is paired to a survey for a subset of participants. I use these data to 1) describe the absolute and relative size of the online partisan media audience; 2) show how these audiences vary by partisan identity; and 3) describe correlations of partisan media use with factors like political sophistication and attitudinal strength.

Canada is a useful test case for the partisan media echo chamber hypothesis. Canada has a similar profit-driven media system as the United States, albeit with a public broadcaster and a parallel French-language media ecosystem based in Quebec. It fits the mold of a liberal, Western or hybrid media system depending on the classification scheme (Brüggemann et al. 2014; Hallin and Mancini 2004; Humprecht et al. 2022). Canada's print sector has been in a similarly steep decline (Lindgren and Corbett 2018; Lindgren et al. 2017). Its political parties are polarizing in ideological terms (Cochrane 2015), while partisan supporters in the electorate have followed suit (Merkley 2023). Perhaps as a result, we see growing affective polarization in Canada between partisans of the left-leaning parties, like the Liberals and NDP, and the principal party of the right, the Conservatives (Johnston 2023).

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Further, trust in mainstream news is declining in Canada (Bridgman et al. 2023). There is a potential market for partisan-slanted news.

On the supply side, Canadians have access to the highly fragmented U.S. media ecosystem. Canadians, especially in English Canada, are exposed to a tremendous amount of news from the United States due to shared language and culture, close-proximity, and population imbalance. Social media further facilitates this access, particularly to online partisan news sites. Some recent work has shown that most COVID-19 misinformation shared on Twitter in Canada originated in the U.S., while people who consumed U.S. news and used social media were more misinformed about COVID-19 (Bridgman et al. 2021). Canadians might not need domestic outlets to get their fix for partisan news. They might turn to U.S. sources as well.

Data

I use data that I collected as part of the 2019 Digital Democracy Project. We tracked online media use over a four-week period during the 2019 Canadian federal election for a sample of respondents from Qualtrics' online panel. The study initially aimed to collect four weeks of tracking data—staggered over that two-month span—for 2,000 respondents, matched to surveys conducted before and after the tracking period. The panel provider was not able to deliver on the project, resulting in fewer participants (N=728) and an even smaller sample where tracking data could be matched to surveys (N=273). Nevertheless, the resulting dataset involves over 2,213,410 website visits (excluding duplicates) with metadata indicating the type of link (e.g., news), the amount of time spent on a page, the date and time of the visit, and the device used, among other things. We can directly observe the news and social media applications our respondents were using over the tracking period.[1]

I matched the web domains of a list of prominent Canadian, American, and international news sources (including partisan media) to a website domain variable included in the data set.[2] I manually excluded false positives from the matching procedure. I take an expansive view of news exposure, preserving use of news sources for forms of soft news (e.g., entertainment, lifestyle, and sports news), but I exclude non-news uses of these web domains. For example, while the web domain nbcnews.com implies some form of news exposure when it is visited, the same cannot be said for the cbc.ca, which includes pages related to its television and cultural programming—most notably its NHL Hockey Night in Canada stream.[3] I use the domain paths to exclude such visits. I exclude duplicate visits by removing duplicate URL visits within the same minute. Results are substantively similar when duplicate visits are not removed from the data set (see Clemm von Hohenberg et al. 2024). I preserve only respondents who visited an average of at least one website per day over the tracking period.

80% of respondents visited what was classified as a news website over the four-week period. However, these visits only constituted 2.3% of overall traffic, which amounted to roughly 51,679 website visits. This is an exceedingly liberal estimate of news consumption, let alone political news consumption, because it includes websites like the Weather Network and those dedicated to sports and lifestyle news as well. The distribution of web traffic is also very far from equitable. 1% of respondents are responsible for 23% of news traffic (N=7). 10% of respondents are

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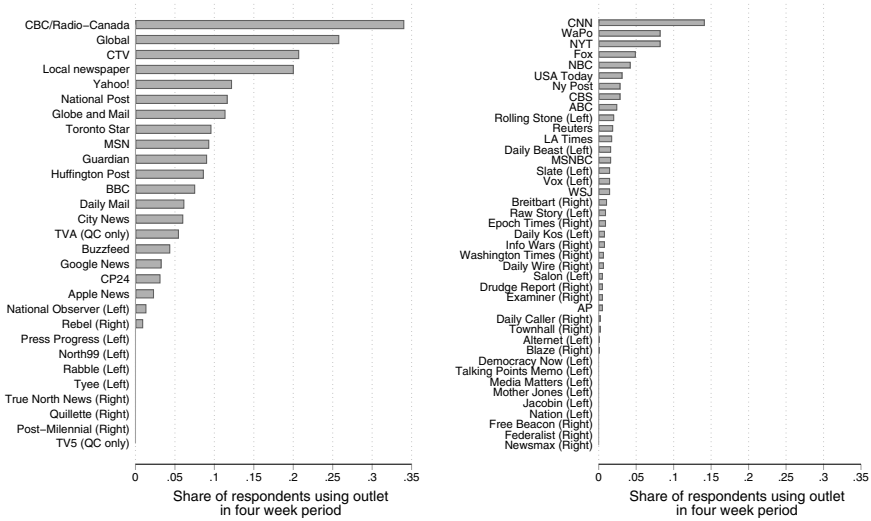


Figure 1. Share of respondents using domestic, international (left) and American (right) online news sources over the four-week tracking period. TVA and TV5 are Quebec-based, French language broadcasters. The CBC category includes visits to Radio-Canada. Local newspaper includes: Vancouver Sun, The Province, Victoria Times-Colonist, Calgary Herald, Calgary Sun, Edmonton Sun, Edmonton Journal, Saskatoon Leader-Post, Regina Star-Pheonix, Winnipeg Sun, Winnipeg Free Press, Ottawa Sun, Ottawa Citizen, Waterloo Region Record, Toronto Sun, London Free Press, The Guardian (PEI), Telegraph-Journal (NB), Chronicle Herald (NS), The Telegram (NL), Le Devoir, La Presse, Journal de Montreal, Journal de Quebec, and the Montreal Gazette.

responsible for 69% of traffic (N=73). These figures are even more striking when focused on my list of prominent American, Canadian, and international sources. 1% of respondents were responsible for 34% of visits to these websites, while 10% of respondents were responsible for 78% of visits. Canadians are not voracious news consumers, far from it, and patterns of news consumption are highly inequitable.

Results

Figure 1 provides the share of respondents who visited domestic and international (left) and American news sites (right) over the four-week tracking period. CBC, CTV, and Global lead the way, but other online news aggregators like Yahoo! are also quite important.[4] The major newspapers, the *National Post*, *Globe and Mail* and *Toronto Star*, cluster in the middle, alongside international outlets like the BBC, Huffington Post (which at this time had a Canadian branch), the *Daily Mail*, and the *Guardian*. Local newspapers, which include major regional papers like the *Waterloo Region Record*, *Calgary Herald*, and the *Saskatoon StarPheonix* were read at some point by 20% of respondents.

Domestic partisan media received virtually no readership. Only Rebel Media and the National Observer received any traffic at all over the monthly tracking period, reaching around 1% of the sample in each case (N=7-10). 0.4% of the sample is responsible for almost 70% of the visits to these two websites (N=3). No one in the

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sample relied on domestic partisan media for more than half of their news. Domestic partisan media has little foothold in Canada's news media ecosystem.

However, social media provides a gateway to the American partisan media ecosystem as well (Bridgman et al. 2021).[5] The right panel of Figure 1 provides a list of major national American news outlets that encompass broadcast (e.g., ABC), cable news (e.g., CNN), print (e.g., *New York Times*), and online partisan sources (e.g., Breitbart). American news consumption is not particularly high. CNN (14%) is the most used website, followed by the *Washington Post* (8%) and the *New York Times* (8%). Fox News follows behind at 5%. All other listed outlets fall below 5% over the four-week period.

Aside from Fox News, U.S. partisan news sites are hardly visited. Of 28 websites covered here, Rolling Stone was the most viewed, at 2% of the sample. 10 of the 28 websites received no visitors at all. When counting all domestic and American partisan news, including Fox on the right, and MSNBC on the left, 14% of the sample visited a partisan news site over the four-week period, but just over 50% of visits come from 0.4% of the sample (N=3), and 79% from 1% (N=7). Only 1% of respondents got more than half of their news from partisan news sources of any type, among those that consumed any news at all (N=6).

The three big broadcasters (i.e., CBC, CTV, and Global) have almost 3 times (14 times) the traffic as the 14 right-wing (left-wing) partisan news sites identified here. Their overall reach is approximately 6 times that of right-wing and left-wing partisan news sites. Partisan news consumption is highly concentrated in a very small minority of individuals. An overwhelming majority of both news traffic and viewership is directed to mainstream news outlets, and that is before accounting for the reach of these outlets through print readership and television viewership.

How do these findings compare to self-reported media use measures? I use a series of nationally representative surveys conducted by the Media Ecosystem Observatory (MEO) from 2020 to 2021 to provide a benchmark for comparison.[6] Respondents were asked to report their exposure to domestic partisan news sources over the past week in these surveys. In a subset of these surveys, conducted between June and August 2020, they were also asked to report exposure to U.S. outlets, which included partisan outlets like Fox News and MSNBC. About 15% of respondents reported being exposed to an aligned partisan media outlet in the past week, compared to the 10% of our tracked respondents who visited such sites over a four-week period. Self-reported exposure to partisan news is likely exaggerated.

It is possible that visits to partisan media, while concentrated among a very small segment of the population, are intensely visited (Guess 2021). The top panels of Figure 2 provide the average number of visits to news sources over the tracking period among those who visited a given site at least once. The left panels focus on domestic and international sources, while the right panels feature U.S. outlets. For domestic and international sources, news aggregators like MSN (127 visits), Yahoo! (48) and Google News (28) lead the list, while Rebel News (12) falls in the middle of the pack and the National Observer trails considerably (2). We see the same general pattern for average duration of exposure, which are displayed in the bottom panels of Figure 2. Broadcasters (perhaps owing to video content) and news aggregators lead the pack, while Rebel News falls towards the middle and the National Observer trails at the bottom of the list. Traffic to domestic partisan media sources among

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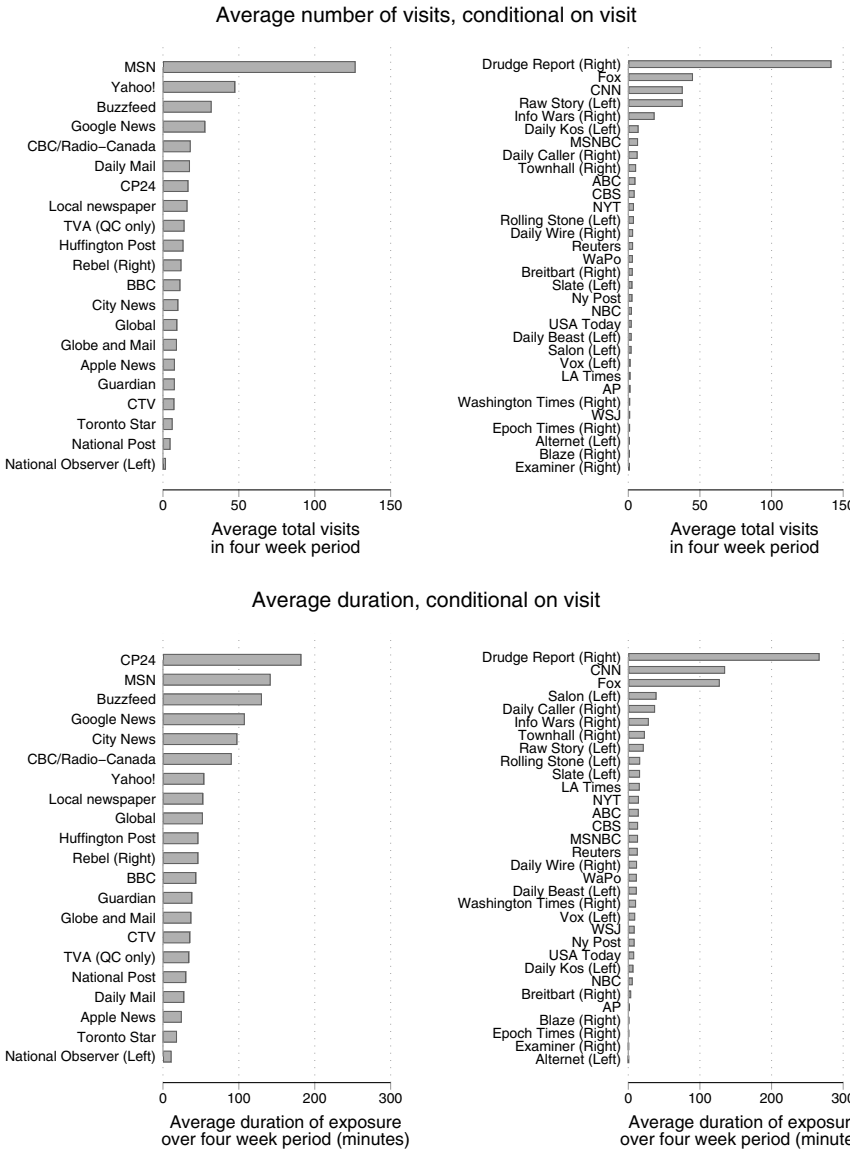


Figure 2. Average number of visits to (top) and average visit duration in minutes (bottom) for domestic, international (left) and American (right) online news sources over the four-week tracking period, conditional on respondents visiting the site. TVA is a Quebec-based, French language broadcaster. The CBC category includes visits to Radio-Canada. Local newspaper includes: Vancouver Sun, The Province, Victoria Times-Colonist, Calgary Herald, Calgary Sun, Edmonton Sun, Edmonton Journal, Saskatoon Leader-Post, Regina Star-Pheonix, Winnipeg Sun, Winnipeg Free Press, Ottawa Sun, Ottawa Citizen, Waterloo Region Record, Toronto Sun, London Free Press, The Guardian (PEI), Telegraph-Journal (NB), Chronicle Herald (NS), The Telegram (NL), Le Devoir, La Presse, Journal de Montreal, Journal de Quebec, and the Montreal Gazette.

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those who visited these sites over the tracking period is not notably more intense than for other news sources.

We see more evidence that exposure intensity is higher for U.S. partisan media sources, at least compared to mainstream U.S. sources. Visits to the Drudge Report lead the list by a considerable margin (142, top-right panel), but this figure is based on only 4 respondents. Fox (45) and CNN otherwise lead the pack (38). Other partisan sources occupy the top of the list such as Raw Story (38), Infowars (18) and Daily Kos (7), but we need to place these figures in context. Partisan sources trail news aggregators considerably, like MSN (127) and are comparable to broadcasters like the CBC (18), CP24 (17), and newspapers like *La Presse* (40).

The same is true when observing duration of exposure over the tracking period. U.S. partisan media tend to occupy the top of the American list, like Fox (128 minutes), Salon (39), and the Daily Caller (37), but are still in line with, or even trail, prominent mainstream domestic sources, like the CBC (91), Global (53), and the *Globe and Mail* (37). With a few exceptions, partisan news outlets are not more intensely used by respondents than mainstream domestic sources. In fact, duration of exposure over the tracking period is higher, on average, across the mainstream outlets I evaluate (45 minutes, excluding news aggregators) compared to partisan media outlets (32 minutes), which is true for average number of visits as well (42 vs. 8).

How does exposure to news sources vary by partisanship? We should expect sharp differences in source exposure, with Conservatives preferring right-wing outlets and Liberal and NDP supporters preferring left-wing news sites if political attitudes are the primary driver of partisan media use. I focus my attention here on respondents for whom I have matched survey data and specifically on the difference between Liberal and NDP partisans and voters (*left*) on the one hand, and Conservatives on the other (*Right*).[7] I have a sample of 131 Liberal and NDP supporters, along with 90 Conservatives.

Table 1 displays the partisan differences in online readership of partisan news.[8] We see very little differentiation. The biggest difference is for Fox News, where just over 6% of Conservatives visited the site in a 4-week period, but almost 4% of Liberal and NDP supporters did the same. 2% of Conservatives visited Rebel News, compared to 0.8% of Liberal and NDP supporters. In most cases, partisan division reflects the slant of the outlet, but there are some exceptions. For example, no Conservatives visited Breitbart, which was visited by 0.7% of Liberal and NDP supporters. Unexpected partisan gaps are denoted in the table with italics.[9]

The average share of a Conservative Party supporter's news media diet dedicated to right-wing partisan sources is only 4%. This figure for Liberal and NDP partisans, in regards to their consumption of left-wing partisan news, is an even lower 1.4%. Only a single Conservative respondent received more than half of their news from partisan media outlets. The same was true for Liberal and NDP supporters for equivalent left-wing sources. In short, there is considerable overlap in the news media diet of left and right in Canada and partisan media has limited relevance for all but a tiny sliver of Canadians.

Again, it is possible that partisan differences will emerge mostly in the *intensity* of one's partisan media use. Few people may be exposed to partisan media, but those that are may be very intense users, and that intensity may exhibit more obvious partisan differences than exposure as displayed in Table 1. Perhaps Liberals do visit

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Table 1. Partisan differences in online partisan news exposure

Outlet	Slant	Left	Right	|Diff.|	Outlet	Slant	Left	Right	|Diff.|
Fox News	Right	3.9	6.7	2.8	Daily Kos	Left	0.8	0.0	0.8
Raw Story	Left	2.3	0.0	2.3	Rolling Stone	Left	0.8	0.0	0.8
Slate	Left	1.6	0.0	1.6	*Info Wars*	*Right*	*1.6*	*1.1*	*0.5*
Rebel News	Right	0.8	2.2	1.4	Daily Beast	Left	1.6	1.1	0.5
Townhall	Right	0.0	1.1	1.1	National Observer	Left	1.6	1.1	0.5
Blaze	Right	0.0	1.1	1.1	*MSNBC*	*Left*	*0.8*	*1.1*	*0.3*
Daily Caller	Right	0.0	1.1	1.1	Epoch Times	Right	0.8	1.1	0.3
Drudge Report	Right	0.0	1.1	1.1	Daily Wire	Right	0.8	1.1	0.3
Washington Examiner	*Right*	*0.8*	*0.0*	*0.8*	Washington Times	Right	0.8	1.1	0.3
Breitbart	*Right*	*0.8*	*0.0*	*0.8*	*Salon*	*Left*	*0.8*	*1.1*	*0.3*

Note: difference is expressed as an absolute value. "Wrong-signed" partisan differences denoted with italics.

Fox News, but they are unlikely to do so frequently, or for a considerable amount of time, compared to Conservatives.

Table 2 displays partisan differences in average number of visits (top panel) and average duration of exposure (bottom panel) *conditional on respondents having visited the website at all.* We see some expected partisan differentiation in news source visits, but these differences are rather modest, aside from a handful of sources (Raw Story, Drudge, and the Daily Caller). And again, there are unexpected partisan gaps. Most notably, Liberal and NDP supporters visited Fox News more frequently than Conservatives (i.e., 64 vs. 52 visits).

The duration results in the bottom panel more clearly conform to expectations. Conservatives visited right-wing sites longer than Liberal and NDP supporters and vice versa for left-wing sites. There is one notable and surprising exception, Rebel News, though we must keep in mind the small sample size. The other exceptions are rather trivial. Although Liberal and NDP supporters spent more time on Info Wars than Conservatives, for example, both partisan groups kept their visits extremely brief on average.

All told, partisan differences in partisan media use are not as stark as we might expect. But the table above masks an important asymmetry. Conservatives visited the average right-wing news site 10 times for 58 minutes (conditional on the source receiving a visit over the four-week period), compared to 2 times for 2 minutes for left-wing sources. In contrast, Liberal and NDP supporters visited the average left-wing site 12 times for 25 minutes, compared to 10 times for 23 minutes for right-wing sites. Conservative respondents appear to be more sensitive to the slant of partisan news.[10]

Correlates of Partisan News Consumption

We can also use these data to evaluate the correlates of partisan news. I make no claims to causality here. Rather, I aim to describe the characteristics of those that consumed partisan media over the tracking period. I run a series of bivariate regression models predicting partisan media use with four categories of correlates: political intensity, political attitudes, political sophistication, and media consumption.[11]

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Table 2. Partisan differences in number of visits and duration of exposure conditional on source being visited

Average number of visits									
Outlet	**Slant**	**Left**	**Right**	**|Diff.|**	**Outlet**	**Slant**	**Left**	**Right**	**|Diff.|**
Raw Story	Left	84	0	84	*Daily Wire*	*Right*	*4*	*2*	*2*
Drudge Report	Right	0	21	21	Salon	Left	3	1	2
Fox News	*Right*	*64*	*52*	*12*	Slate	Left	1.5	0	1.5
Daily Caller	Right	0	12	12	Daily Beast	Left	2.5	1	1.5
Townhall	Right	0	9	9	*Rebel News*	*Right*	*3*	*2*	*1*
MSNBC	*Left*	*1*	*4*	*3*	Blaze	Right	0	1	1
Breitbart	*Right*	*2*	*0*	*2*	*Washington Examiner*	*Right*	*1*	*0*	*1*
Daily Kos	Left	2	0	2	National Observer	Left	2	1	1
Rolling Stone	Left	2	0	2	*Epoch Times*	*Right*	*2*	*1*	*1*
Info Wars	*Right*	*4*	*2*	*2*	Washington Times	Right	1	2	1
Average duration (minutes)									
Outlet	Slant	Left	Right	|Diff.|	Outlet	Slant	Left	Right	|Diff.|
Fox News	Right	134	296	162	*MSNBC*	*Left*	0	4	3
Salon	Left	105	2	103	Daily Beast	Left	3	0	3
Drudge Report	Right	0	96	96	Daily Kos	Left	3	0	3
Daily Caller	Right	0	74	74	*Daily Wire*	*Right*	2	1	2
Raw Story	Left	47	0	47	Blaze	Right	0	1	1
Townhall	Right	0	46	46	National Observer	Left	2	1	1
Rebel News	*Right*	23	5	17	Epoch Times	Right	1	2	1
Slate	Left	9	0	9	*Breitbart*	*Right*	1	0	1
Rolling Stone	Left	5	0	5	*Info Wars*	*Right*	1	0	1
Washington Times	Right	1	4	3	*Washington Examiner*	*Right*	0	0	0

Note: difference is expressed as an absolute value. "Wrong-signed" partisan differences denoted with italics.

Political intensity measures include *partisan strength* and *ideological extremity*. People with strong partisan attachments or extreme ideological commitments may prefer attitude-reinforcing content from partisan news because of selective exposure (Iyengar and Hahn 2009), or partisan media may itself be a cause of these strong attitudes (Levendusky 2013). For political attitudes, I use *populism* and *conspiratorial thinking*. The former relates to the tendency to view politics as a conflict between a virtuous common citizenry and a corrupt elite (Mudde 2004), while the latter refers to the propensity of some to imagine political events are shaped by conspiracies of sinister political and economic elites. These two dimensions have recently been combined into a construct called *anti-establishment orientation* (Uscinski et al. 2021). I also use left-right ideology because previous work has shown partisan media consumption in the U.S. to be more common on the political right (Guess 2021), perhaps owing to their greater *distrust of mainstream news*, which I also use as a final covariate in this category.

For political sophistication I use *political interest* and *political knowledge*. People who are invested in politics may be more likely to take the time and energy to seek out alternative news sources, while partisan outlets may carry more of the political content they crave. And finally, I use *domestic media exposure* and *social media use*. I have no expectation that either variable causes or is caused by partisan media, but

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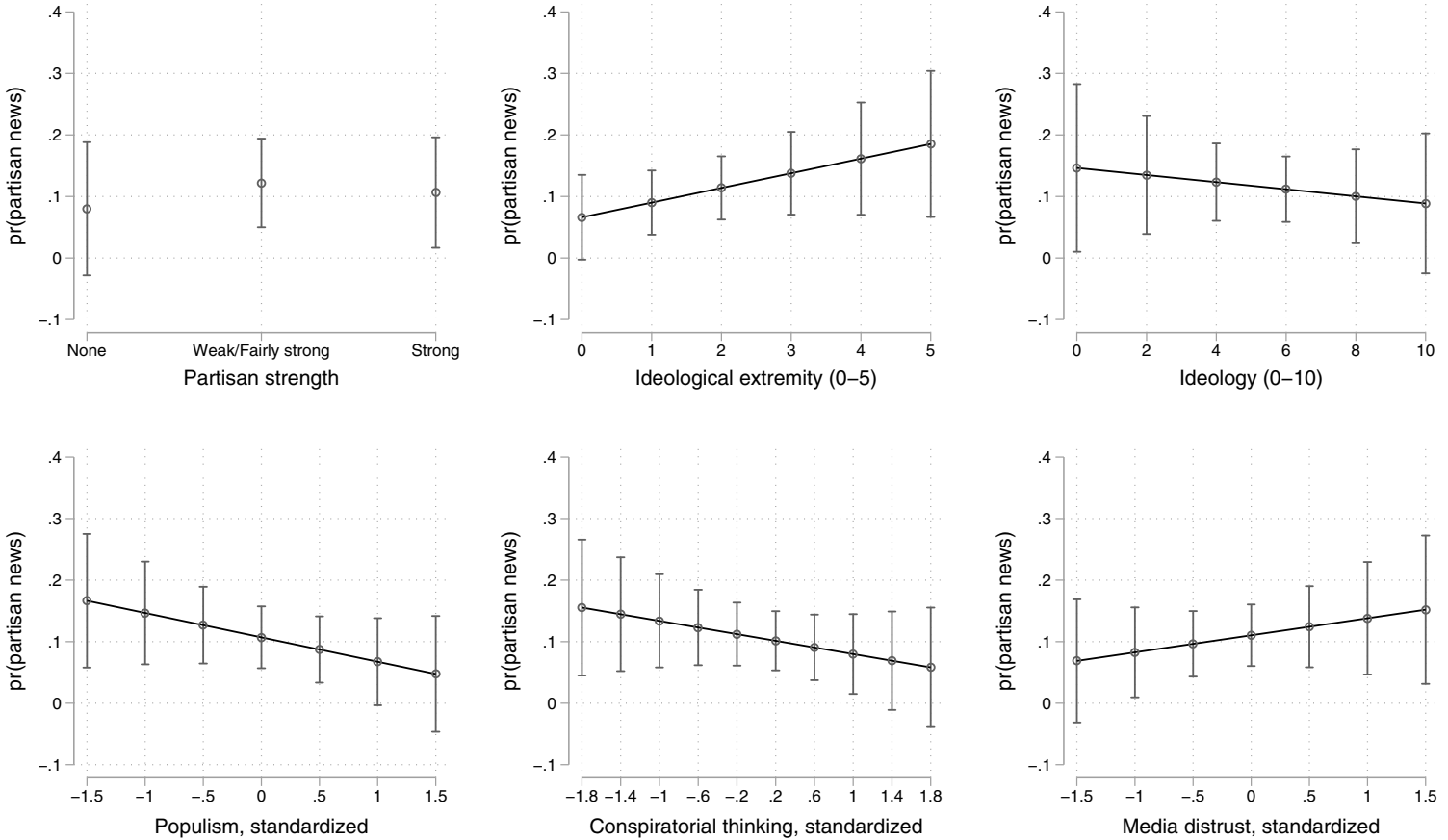


Figure 3. Predicted partisan media use by partisan strength (top-right), ideological extremity (top-centre), political ideology (top-right), populism (bottom-left), conspiratorial thinking (bottom-centre), and media distrust (bottom-right). 95% confidence intervals.

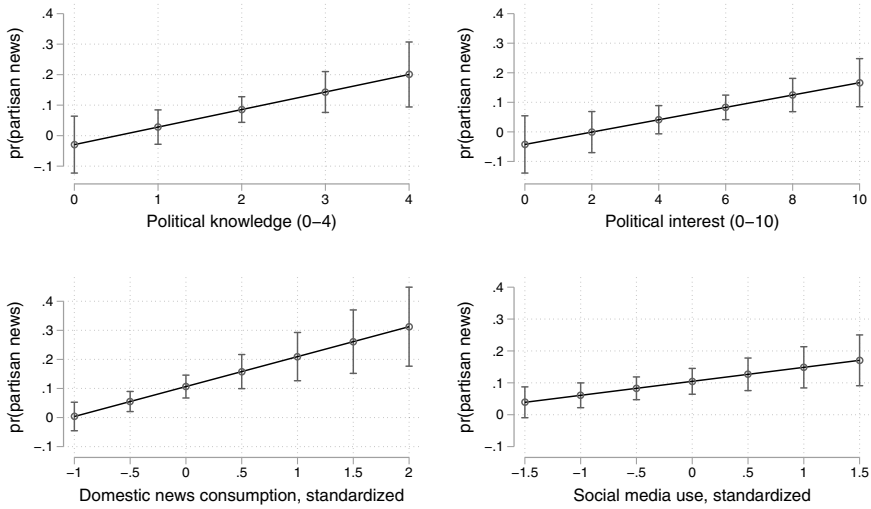


Figure 4. Predicted partisan media use by political knowledge (top-right), political interest (top-right), domestic news consumption (bottom-left), and social media use (bottom-right). 95% confidence intervals.

these correlations will shed light on whether these media substitute for, or are complimentary to, partisan media use.

In Figure 3 we see surprisingly little connection between attitude strength and partisan media use. Neither partisan strength (top-left panel), nor ideological extremity, is correlated with partisan media use (top-centre). Partisan media use is not significantly higher for populists (bottom-left), the conspiratorial minded (bottom-centre) and those that distrust the media (bottom-right), nor is it higher on the political right (top-right).[12]

Figure 4, on the other hand, shows that partisan media use rises between 0.21 and 0.23 points across levels of political interest and knowledge (top-right, $p=0.010$ & centre-left, $p=0.013$). We see associations with domestic (0.31, $p<0.001$, bottom-centre) and social media use (0.13, $p=0.013$, bottom-right).[13] There is more evidence that partisan media use in Canada is associated with general political awareness and sophistication than intense or extreme political attitudes. We also see general symmetry in partisan media use between the left and right.[14]

How similar are these correlations to those produced with self-reported exposure to partisan news? Tables S4 and S5 in the Supplementary Materials replicate these correlations using the MEO data set. We see close correspondence in the effects of political knowledge, political interest, news exposure, and social media use. But estimated correlations are higher for partisan strength, conspiratorial thinking, and left-right ideology using the survey self-reports. We must be cautious in interpreting these differences because of the small sample size for the behavioural data, but nonetheless these results suggest that survey self-reports overstate the link between partisan news exposure and characteristics associated with political polarization.[15]

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Discussion

Canadians are not voracious news consumers. Partisan news exposure is far less common, and the vast majority of traffic to these websites is driven by a tiny sliver of the population—and this includes U.S. based sources that are easily accessed by Canadians. There is surprisingly little partisan differentiation in exposure to these news sites. The left and right in Canada mostly read online news from the same outlets. Also interesting is the lack of significant association between partisan media use in Canada and right-wing ideology, anti-establishment orientations, and media distrust. Nor is there a significant connection to political attitude strength as measured by factors like partisan strength and ideological extremity. Rather, the people that use partisan media are mostly politically sophisticated individuals who generally consume a lot of news media in general.

These results compliment previous work in the U.S. showing the limited reach of partisan news in the United States (Guess 2021) and other cross-national work showing that the connection between partisan media use and political attitudes like populism vary depending on the media system—being stronger in countries with more robust partisan media ecosystems like the U.S. (Stier et al. 2020). But these findings are also somewhat at tension with literature on partisan media and selective exposure that would expect partisan news use to be higher among strong partisans and the highly ideological since they should have stronger motivation to seek out politically aligned news. We see little of this in Canada. This echoes findings by Stier and his colleagues (2020) who argue that the correlates of partisan media use (and other forms of media use) may depend on the media system. What is true in the United States may not hold elsewhere.

There are obvious implications of these findings for understanding political polarization. Canada is a case where partisans are affectively polarizing between Conservatives, on the one side, and Liberal and NDP supporters, on the other (Cochrane 2015; Johnston 2023). At the same time, these partisan groups have diverged from one another in their beliefs and ideology (Merkley 2023). These findings suggest partisan media is not an important part of this story. That is not to say that nothing about the media environment polarizes Canadians. Mainstream news can polarize indirectly by conveying the polarized stances of political elites to the mass public (Zaller 1992) or by framing political issues in sensationalistic and conflict-laded ways to increase consumer interest (Bennett 2008), thereby making citizens believe society is more polarized than it really is (Levendusky and Malhotra 2016). We need more research on how different dimensions of media use influence polarization in Canada.

There are important limitations to these data. The sample size, particularly for the matched survey data, is not ideal. We cannot rule out small correlations between partisan media use and my null covariates (e.g., ideological extremity). It is not an entirely representative sample. The individuals participating in the survey tend to be much more "online" than the average person. For instance, 67% of the sample used Facebook at some point over the tracking period, while 52% used Twitter. The sample also skews male, native-born, and English Canadian, though it is otherwise relatively representative across age, education, and vote choice (Table S1). We also cannot use these data to observe what news respondents might see or hear on

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television or radio, while these data primarily involve web visits on one's browser, rather than mobile devices.

Nevertheless, there are obvious advantages to directly observing what news respondents read given problems with measures of self-reported media consumption. Indeed, we see some indication that self-reported measures inflate partisan news consumption, especially among those with strong political commitments. And, if anything, these data provide a *liberal* estimate of partisan news consumption since most of these outlets are online and find their audiences though social media. Partisan news exposure is almost certainly lower in the general population.

We need more research on partisan news audiences outside of the United States—particularly using behavioural data—before we can hope to understand the cross-national consequences of this innovation in the media environment, like polarization and political extremism. At least in Canada, it appears that the causes of affective polarization lie elsewhere.

Supplementary material. To view supplementary material for this article, please visit https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423925000198.

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Notes

1 Table S1 of the Supplementary Materials provides sample characteristics for the linked survey respondents. One limitation of this sample is that most people chose to install the plugin on their web browser, rather than their phone. As a result, 97% of visits are from browsers. This limitation is important, since more and more people are consuming news on their phones (Walker 2019).

2 This list includes French language sources, like major broadcasters TVA Nouvelles, Radio-Canada, TV5, Le Devoir, La Presse, Journal de Montreal, and Journal de Quebec. The newspapers are included in the local newspaper category below, while Radio-Canada is folded into the CBC results.

3 The other major concern involved visits to msn.com. I focus on visits with URL paths that involve the home page or to news sections on the website (e.g., en-ca/channel/topic/News/).

4 As news aggregators, these sources carry articles from other outlets, so we cannot intuit the slant of these sources.

5 We see evidence of this in my data. Social media usage is correlated with mainstream domestic, mainstream American, and American partisan news exposure (Figure S5), but its overall effect is to increase the prevalence of U.S. partisan news exposure relative to mainstream domestic news. At low levels of social media usage, the ratio of domestic to partisan media visits is 9:1. This drops to 2:1 at high levels of usage. There are important platform differences. Facebook usage is correlated with both domestic news exposure, but not U.S. mainstream or partisan news (Figure S6). Twitter is associated with all three. The effect of Twitter usage is to decrease the ratio of mainstream domestic news to U.S. mainstream news (partisan news) from 13.1(26):1 to 1.4(1.8):1.

6 Table S1 in the Supplementary Materials provides a comparison of the characteristics of this sample to the DDP study.

7 In cases where the partisanship of a respondent does not match vote intention, I prioritize reported partisan identity when classifying respondents into left and right.

8 Table S2 in the Supplementary Materials provides a partisan breakdown of the other mainstream sources used in Figure 1.

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9 These unexpected partisan differences are partially the result of an interesting asymmetry. Left-leaning respondents are just as likely to visit left-wing as right-wing partisan media websites (7.8% vs. 6.2%), but the same is not true for Conservatives (4.4% vs. 14.4%). Conservatives are more sensitive to the slant of the partisan media outlet. This will be returned to below.

10 Left-leaning respondents also visit the average mainstream news outlet (excluding aggregators) more intensely (10 visits for 33 minutes) compared to Conservatives (5 visits for 19 minutes).

11 Table S3 of the Supplementary Materials provides more detail on the covariates.

12 We might be concerned effects are non-linear. However, Figure S1 in the Supplementary Materials shows that this is not the case.

13 We see similar results when using duration rather than visit based measures of media use. See Figure S4.

14 For robustness, Figure S2 and S3 present the results weighted by age, gender, region and language matched to 2016 census benchmarks. The only change is to weaken the results of social media usage to the point of non-significance.

15 I cannot rule out small correlations between these indicators and partisan news exposure. Most notably, the ideological extremity coefficient is similar in magnitude to the self-reports (0.12 vs. 0.15). I do not have the sample size to detect the correlation observed in the self reports (0.42 power). Regardless, it is clear enough that sophistication and overall news exposure are much more important drivers of partisan news usage.

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