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# The age of misinformation: how does exposure to new information affect previously held beliefs?

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BOSTON UNIVERSITY  
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Thesis

**THE AGE OF *MIS*INFORMATION:  
HOW DOES EXPOSURE TO NEW INFORMATION  
AFFECT PREVIOUSLY HELD BELIEFS?**

by

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B.A., Boston University, 2019

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
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**ABSTRACT**

At every turning point in our daily lives, we are exposed to information in the hopes of persuasion and changing our minds. But, what if none of this new information is actually doing anything to convince us? Political scientists have long been obsessed with this age-old question of what impact information exposure has on people, with the aim of determining how it can influence a democracy. Much of the current work, however, is either outdated or addresses too many factors at once. This piece, specifically, is aimed at examining the effects of social media on information exposure. When you interact with a post on Facebook that you either agree or disagree with, under what circumstances does that information actually impact your beliefs? Does it merely reinforce what you already believe or does it actively change what your opinion is? So, this thesis examines specifically what effect social media in particular has on the observational mind. The hope in examining this field is clarifying whether outreach across social media and educational information actually makes a difference in changing people's mindsets and, in turn, their voting behavior. How can we expect to "win" people over to our sides, if the information that we are presenting them is meaningless?

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## **Introduction**

We live in an age of information. At every turning point, our days are filled and flooded with information technology that has exposed us to knowledge in ways that scientists in the past could never have dreamed of. Our pockets are the homes of devices whose storage exceeds any computer first developed in the 1970s. Our portable, touchable, interactive screens are the gateway to an abundance of data, statistics, articles, news reports, documentaries, movies, reflections, editorials, and more. Our information exchange is wide and grand; it is not limited to the sole sources before. The emergence of the twenty-first century has introduced a new way for information and politics to be disseminated – social media. This is a phenomenon that you have likely directly experienced firsthand. As you scroll through your Facebook account or personal social media, it is nearly impossible to avoid seeing an article re-posted by a friend who either disagrees or resonates with the message articulated. And, their hope in posting is to convince you one way or another. In addition, you might imagine that with the inexhaustible list of Google searches regarding any topic you could research, that people could almost mindlessly and endlessly look for data on any such topic.

However, it is essential to keep in mind that not all information is the same. While much information presents itself as factual data or observable phenomena, it takes other forms such as op-eds, persuasive pieces, and even media bias aimed at propagating a specific political agenda. The American obsession with information is so great that President Trump, at his press conference since election day in January of 2017, uttered the now infamous phrase “fake news” and popularized it for the alt-right. Suddenly, this



oxymoronic phrase was used to describe certain news outlets that allegedly reported on facts these groups found to be erroneous. If there is such a high availability of information, the preponderance of 'fake' news ought to be low. Trump's main purpose in bringing up the idea of the fake news is to both question the news sources from which he believes the masses are basing their opinions and also to invalidate the opinions that they hold. This, in turn, raised the question of how severely access to news information actually impacts people's opinion. Though the case of Trump might reckon that that answer is low, I am more optimistic.

Trump's claim that fake news bears such a strong hold and presence in the world of politics is certainly an interesting one, but it is one that has been explored repeatedly in political science. Time and time again, researchers are looking at questions as to how *misinformation* affects participants' outlooks. These studies are focused primarily on how exposure to false information, such as the fake news Trump believes exists, is having impacts on individual choices, voting, policy outlook options, and elections. This policy realm is certainly interesting, but I am more interested in how exposure to information affects people. I'm not necessarily concerned in how misinformation affects people, but rather how exposure to new information would actively (or not) change an individual's perception regarding a policy issue. Granted, those specific questions seem to have been explored in political science within the last fifty years. However, the prominence of social media came about somewhat later, and the majority of political science analyses have not accounted for social media (understandably so). So, if we are ever to arrive at the definitive answer regarding how information affects people, we also need

My main motivations for my research design are rooted largely in the discussions and topics of a class that I took with Professor Spencer Piston during my senior year of college and the first semester of the Master's portion of the BAMA. I remember that one week in particular focused on the media and its influence and role in the American political structure. I was captivated by and genuinely curious about the impact that the news had. What role do these news outlets and social media sites play in determining how people's minds are swayed. One reading in particular, by Iyengar and Kinder (whose claims I will be addressing in the literature review), made me question how important data and information is. I've sought to put a "modern twist" to their findings and see just how applicable they might be to the devices that millions of people store in their pockets each and every day. My second motivation for this research topic is the fact that I constantly see friends and family members post news articles on Facebook or other social media. Although I might often take the time to read them (sometimes, frankly, I roll my eyes when I see certain sources that people choose to repost), I'm not always swayed by the arguments presented. But, other times (often when the ideology of either the author or the general sentiment of the pieces matches with my own), the information does either change or expand my opinion. Are they sharing those articles in vain or in a genuine attempt to convince the reader to think differently or confirm their beliefs? Why is it the case that some information sways opinion but others do not? There seems to be quite a divergence of thought on how information affects the political system, and my hope is to further explore how exposure to information affects people and what this means for the political system at large. More broadly, this field certainly has more grave implications

regarding democracies and ensuring a well-informed public. How can we expect to change people's opinions, either in favor or against an opinion, if we can't accurately determine how prone those opinions are to changing in the first place when people are exposed to information? If exposure to new information is not impacting people's opinions, then most editorial pieces, persuasive articles, and even news outlets are useless. If new information cannot change people's opinions, then engaging in political discourse or political education is futile. So, my work aims to examine these questions and delve into the world of information exposure and opinion changes.

In exploring my topic, I was first fascinated by a psychological theory known as selective exposure.<sup>1</sup> It prevails in media and communication research for its ability to describe an individual's tendency to favor information which reinforces their pre-existing views while ignoring information that contradicts that person's held-opinion.<sup>2</sup> Confirmation bias is a form of selective exposure. For example, if you previously held a belief and are subsequently exposed to a piece of information that supports what you already believe, you are statistically more likely to agree with the sentiment of the article and believe it to be a credible source. In reality, however, that news source merely reaffirmed and "confirmed" your prior understandings and thoughts – a clear cut case of

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<sup>1</sup> Kenski, Henry C. "Contemporary Sociology." *Contemporary Sociology*, vol. 22, no. 5, 1993, pp. 738–739. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/2074664](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2074664).

<sup>2</sup> Hart, William et al. "Feeling validated versus being correct: a meta-analysis of selective exposure to information" *Psychological bulletin* vol. 135,4 (2009): 555-88.

confirmation bias and selective exposure. The reason this theory seems relevant is, because it seemingly defines some of my expected findings for policy areas such as race. I expect that people will “select” which information it is that further confirms their beliefs while neglecting any opposing views. Selective exposure will be measured in the research design by noting how frequently people stick to their prior beliefs even after the exposure to new information. If an individual stays firm and reinforces their prior beliefs while ignoring any new facts of data, they likely were the proponents of selective exposure.

## Literature Review

After further research, I learned that a similar theory dominates my research field in political science; it is known as motivated reasoning. Motivated reasoning explains the underlying cognitive choices that lead voters to think the way that they do, relating it back to their previously mentioned opinions. To say that motivated reasoning has not been extensively researched before would be foolish. However, it is important to note that the policy realms that I am looking at are inherently different from previous research on political motivated reasoning. The majority of the research that currently exists on political reasoning seems to deal with the same subjects over and over again. Those subjects seem to repeatedly be global warming, climate change, or conspiracy theories such as President Obama being Muslim or born in another country. The hope of the authors in each of these political questions is to see whether people respond differently to these controversial topics when they are provided with new information about the subject. The new information is intended to enlighten and shift previously held opinions, although the outcome is not always the same as the intent. We began to see a shift away from these repeat topics with the works of the following famous political scientists. Milton Lodge and Charles Taber's *The Rationalizing Voter* seems to diverge from these prior topics, and deals mostly with contextual clues and environmental factors and examining how those impact voters' opinions subconsciously. The lab experiments in that book do not deal exclusively with specific policy issues, which I hope to look at, but rather looks at specific stimuli (such as how playing upbeat music and showing patriotic symbols during a campaign ad affect a voter's perception of that ad). It does not deal

specifically with political information, but rather how voters react to environmental stressors. So, Milton and Lodge, although they contributed heavily to the field of motivated reasoning, do not seek to answer the same questions that I am looking at. They are concerned with specific stimuli impacting behavior and what people believe about certain issues, whereas I am specifically looking at how new information (in a controlled situation with no change in external stimuli) might impact an individual's decision-making process.

Further research, such as Adam Enders' *Information Cues, Partisan-Motivated Reasoning, and the Manipulation of Conspiracy Beliefs*, falls short in the same light. This piece not only falls victim to the same issue of looking at conspiracy theories, but it also focuses more on contextual cues such as whether Democratic-identifiers in a piece makes a reader more likely to agree or disagree with the findings.<sup>3</sup> Unlike Taber and Lodge, Ender is not examining specifically external stimuli to which people are exposed, but rather is taking a look at whether specific clues embedded within the news information changes a person's opinions. Here, Ender is looking for cues impacted motivated reasoning which are inherently embedded into the information source that the participant is purposely exposed to. Again, it is not specifically exposure to information that is at the

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<sup>3</sup> Adam M. Enders & Steven M. Smallpage (2018) Informational Cues, Partisan-Motivated Reasoning, and the Manipulation of Conspiracy Beliefs, Political Communication, DOI: [10.1080/10584609.2018.1493006](https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2018.1493006)

forefront here, but instead the contextual cues dictating how people are going to behave. So, it is clear that one of the potential downfalls of current research on motivated reasoning is that it focuses on very specific topics and not broader policy realms. What makes my research different is that it directly seeks to establish the link between exposure to information and broader political topics. It would not look solely at conspiracy theories or the issue of global warming, but would hope to establish broader implications for policy realms such as the economy or race. The field of motivated reasoning is unfortunately lacking in establishing standards for how opinion changes across specific policy realms, instead of highly specific issues as those mentioned prior. In addition, my work will not be examining the same cues that Taber, Lodge, and Ender studied. Instead it is the sole exposure of information and method that is in question. My research will hope to determine whether the source of the information – whether it be a reputable news source or an online social media post – plays an impact in changing an individual's opinion.

Similar steps are taken by Lewandowsky et al when trying to determine why certain groups of people are more likely to believe that vaccines cause autism (important to note, another widely popular conspiracy theory).<sup>4</sup> Here, the authors focus more on how misinformation spreads and why it remains prominent in people's minds. Mainly, they

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<sup>4</sup> Lewandowsky, Stephan, et al. "Misinformation and Its Correction: Continued Influence and Successful Debiasing." *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2012, pp. 106–131., [www.jstor.org/stable/23484653](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23484653).

attribute these widespread beliefs to several main factors, including rumors and fiction, vested interest groups, politicians, and the media. Importantly, the authors bring up a series of reasons that align with Taber and Lodge's findings, which are ones that I do not inherently disagree with. Namely, they suggest that citizens are concerned with determining whether information is "compatible" with that which they already believe, whether the source is promising, or whether reactance (people do not like being told what to do and the effects) occurs. There was no specific experiment conducted here, but rather a more philosophical narrative that explains the dangers of misinformation. The downfall in doing so is that the authors do not rely on much data to come to their conclusion, which is guided by misinformation and not necessarily information exposure. This difference is essential to understanding the underlying argument. Whereas misinformation focuses on people either being exposed to false information and/or acting off those false beliefs, information exposure is concerned with how facts and data are impacting people's beliefs. Further, the experiment in this analysis will further look at how source cues might play a role.

There is definitely a lot of existing literature regarding misinformation as well. The first relevant piece to dissect is Iyengar and Kinder's *News that Matters: Television and Public Opinion*. Iyengar and Kinder present a finding that goes against previous work that television news coverage had no political impact or influence on people's opinions about the most pressing issues for the nations. They challenge Patterson and McClure's previous findings, arguing instead that television news coverage plays an active role in determining what issues people care the most about. One concept that I



think can be further explored is whether the impact of news coverage influencing political opinion still holds true no matter what the issue being covered is. For example, Iyengar and Kinder mention unemployment as one issue that respondents viewed; what about other political issues, such as race? The authors do observe the “priming effect” on different issues, but those issues revolve nearly entirely around the economy or defense spending. A further limitation of Iyengar and Kinder’s piece is that it fails to address “unadulterated network news broadcasts.”<sup>5</sup> Namely, their test subjects were exposed to cables news with competing ideologies and even political advertisements; thus, “it remains unclear what happens when there are strongly competing agendas within network news, from political advertising or from other media.”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, it is impossible to attribute whether the responses to the cable news were as a result of the news broadcasting or whether it was the result of some other factor, such as the political advertisements. Because it is impossible to pinpoint precisely what caused the observed shift in cables news interests, it is impossible to completely attribute the priming effect to the broadcastings. The final limitation with Iyengar and Kinder’s piece worth noting is that their experiment focuses exclusively on the effects of cable news television in swaying or reinforcing participants’ opinion. It does not take into account other media

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<sup>5</sup> Drechsel, Robert E. “The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science.” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 504, 1989, pp. 153–154. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/1046625](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1046625).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

forms, such as newspapers, articles, or others; more importantly, given the fact that the piece was originally published in 1987, Iyengar and Kinder were unable to observe the effects of social media or mobile technology in spreading information and how that might impact individual opinion. Because social media did not yet exist, they could not effectively study that and their findings are limited to effects in television broadcasting and not other forms of media.

All three of these limitations that I mentioned will be addressed in my research. Predominantly, an extension of Iyengar and Kinder's original work is necessary in order to determine whether their conclusions are salient across policy areas. It is not satisfactory to say that the priming effect can be observed when the authors only looked at the phenomena as it applied namely to the presidency, to the economy, and to the defense spending, which are the three most frequently mentioned policy topics throughout the book. We need to determine whether priming can be applied to race, which is barely mentioned in the book. In fact, race is mentioned for barely four pages in chapter four when the authors were trying to determine whether there was correlation between sympathy and the race of an unemployed person portrayed in the TV news. The most promising, yet still brief, section found that people were more likely to rate unemployment as an important national issue when the portrayed victim was white, instead of black; however, it is important to note again that this does not constitute exposure to information, making Iyengar and Kinder's piece inconclusive for my specific research interests. Second, in order to address the fact that news broadcasts were not isolated but rather were intermixed with political advertisements and potentially

conflicting ideologies were presented, I think the remedy here is simply; merely show participants isolated clips or information that is void of political advertisements or potential confounders. Doing so will resolve Iyengar and Kinder's mistake while also boosting the conclusiveness of my research. Finally, I hope to address the fact that Iyengar and Kinder used only television news to establish their conclusions by expanding my experiments to include other forms of news and information exposure that will be discussed later. Doing so will pinpoint whether specific forms of information and media exposure are more prominent in their ability to sway the respondent's opinion.

Continuing with the literature review, I will also assess the claims made by Hochschild and Einstein in *Do Facts Matter?: Information and Misinformation in American Politics*. This publication breaks down a series of illustrations in which the authors attempt to pinpoint which kind of political information sways collective or individual opinions across a range of policy issues and spectrums.<sup>7</sup> The authors juxtapose their two central ideas of omission and commission.<sup>8</sup> The former they define as the neglecting, whether intentional or not, of certain facts regarding a policy. The latter, which worries the authors more so than omission, involves people taking false facts or data and then acting around and based on those falsehoods. This is nearly directly related with the idea of misinformation. Ultimately, they conclude that commission is more

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<sup>7</sup> Hochschild, J. L. (2016). *Do facts matter?: Information and misinformation in american politics*. Place of publication not identified: Univ Of Oklahoma Press.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

problematic than omission, because it poses a far greater threat to a democratic political system.<sup>9</sup> It tricks citizens into believing certain “facts” and then causes them to react and vote based off of those false premises. Even more concerning, these falsehoods often stem from political elites, who play a vital role in “informing, misinforming, encouraging, or discouraging” certain kinds of political knowledge over others, including false information.<sup>10</sup> Here, the source of the information also plays a role. It is coming from political elite who people, depending on their ideology, are more likely to believe and gain facts from. The more concerning part of the problem occurs when people accept, take on, and act off of the false facts that the members of their own ideology present. For Hochschild and Einstein, the emphasis is not solely on lack of information (although the authors do express worries about this), but rather misinformation that is damaging to a political system.

To conduct their experiments, the authors rely on a series of polls regarding specific political policy or general political beliefs. For example, Hochschild and Einstein examine policy fields, such as child vaccination, support for the Iraq war, Iraq’s alleged holding of weapons of mass destruction, and whether President Barack Obama was born in the United States or not. They examine such questions across informed or misinformed policy groups, across party identification, and across race. They find that elected officials

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

greatly “alienated” their constituencies in these policy areas.<sup>11</sup> They find a greater preponderance of people acting on misinformation rather than lack or neglect of information, and the political ramifications can be tumultuous. It is clear that commission is just as large of a problem as omission. Not only are people not gathering the entire spectrum of facts regarding a policy area, but they are also acting upon information that is simply not true. It is the deliberate concealment and manipulation of facts that are the main concern for Einstein and Hoshild.

The rhetoric regarding “fake news,” or false information that Hochschild and Einstein focus on, was expanded upon even more around the time of the 2016 election. The election saw the resurgence of information politics and media effects in the field of political science, largely promulgated by President Trump’s claims. A myriad of ones had been published to address the questions of “What constitutes fake news?” and “Why do people believe fake news?” To begin with, Allcott and Gentzkow’s “Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election” looked at these very questions, while shifting the focus to the spread of misinformation across social media. The latter constitutes an analysis of fake news stories that were shared around the time that Trump announced his presidency and following into the actual election.<sup>12</sup> Important to note, no specific experiment occurs, as will in this analysis. Pennycook et al’s “Prior exposure increases perceived accuracy of

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Allcott, H & Gentzkow, M 2017, 'Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election' *Journal of Economic Perspectives*.

fake news”<sup>13</sup> dealt with similar issues. In all of these authors’ findings, they mark social media as the culprit for spreading misinformation and allowing people to hold beliefs that they might not hold otherwise. The power of information, news, and now, social media, in buttressing your opinions cannot be denied. The reason for mentioning these specific pieces include the fact that they are the initial authors who were becoming increasingly concerned with the ability for social media, specifically, to manipulate people’s opinions. This thesis will go one step further in providing a specific controlled experiment, which aims to show how different social media sources impact people’s opinions.

So, then, what exactly is the problem with Hochschild and Einsteins’ or the other authors’ conclusions? Not much. In fact, many of their conclusions stem reasonably from their methods and studies. My broader reason for breaking down their pieces is that it reinforces a narrative among political scientists that focuses on misinformation and not motivated reasoning. Importantly, the authors’ work does cover a broader range of policy issues than the motivated reasoning pieces; but, because the piece focuses on misinformation, it cannot conclusively tell us much about, more generally, exposure to new information and how that impacts the political psyche. Last, the concern regarding social media also arises.

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<sup>13</sup> Pennycook, Gordon and Cannon, Tyrone and Rand, David G., Prior Exposure Increases Perceived Accuracy of Fake News (May 3, 2018). Forthcoming in *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*.

Perhaps no single book has been so essential in explaining public opinion than John Zaller's *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*.<sup>14</sup> Zaller's basic argument comes two-fold; it is concerned first with deconstructing the notion that voters hold structured frameworks for preferences and second on the role of political elites. Zaller breaks down the commonly-held idea that individuals possess belief structures off of which they form their opinions on issues. Instead, "political communications become considerations in a person's mind;" it is the facts and thoughts that are 'most immediately salient' that people use to respond.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the reason that variation exists from one response to the next is the fact that "what is at the top of a person's head varies stochastically over time."<sup>16</sup> Zaller distinguishes that these aren't random responses to survey questions, but rather ones that utilize a different mix of considerations that causes individuals to "vacillate in their responses within a certain, systematically determined range."<sup>17</sup> Broader attitude changes are attributed to people's long-term response probabilities, resulting from a change in the mix of ideas to which people are exposed. Further, Zaller dedicates an entire chapter of his book to explain individual variations in receptivity of elite's discussions, a concept which he calls "response instability." Now, let's move on to how

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<sup>14</sup> Zaller, John R. *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. Cambridge University Press, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 266.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 266.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 266.

Zaller views the role of elites in the political system. For Zaller, elite discourse on political matter plays a central role in explaining the shaping of public opinion. Zaller argues that elite's discussion of politics is one of the heaviest influences on manipulating and molding public opinion. There are then further variations in how individuals respond to the political communications from elites. This variation in responsiveness is attributed directly to varying levels in political awareness. The individuals in a system with higher political awareness are correlated with greater consistency and stability of political opinions. Throughout the entire book, Zaller also mentions talk of the effects of political campaigns and personal values in mildly influencing opinion. Zaller's discussion on elites in the political sphere is one that mirrors many of the sentiments expressed by Einstein and Hirsch.

The main issues I found with Zaller are as follows. He consistently makes the point that the most prevalent issues are the ones that come to mind. However, to go so far as to say that political elites play the most prominent role in bringing issues to the forefront of public debate seriously undermines the power of the media in swaying opinion. Although my research will not be directly competing with Zaller's, it will intensify the role that media outlets and information news sources have in shaping opinion, where Zaller gives little weight to them before. In fact, Zaller goes on to discredit the role of the media, in part in the appendix, because he finds it improbable to distinguish between "low brow" and "high brow" forms of media. The former is related more to popular news sources, such as People magazine and talk show radio versus the latter which consists of TV network news, National Public Radio and the *Wall Street*



*Journal*.<sup>18</sup> I think that this point that Zaller brings up is actually quite valid and a serious concern. It made me think of the countless stories I've seen on my social media feed from news sources such as BuzzFeed or Vox, which are not entirely reputable political sources and have a hidden agenda of catering to the mass public in an attempt to increase shares and likes on a piece. I think that I would need to account for this in my experiments by potentially making a separate test group that is exposed to "low brow" media while another is exposed to "high brow" media. This would address Zaller's concern that it is difficult to measure changes based on low brow or high brow sources.

Expanding upon Converse's prior works, Edward Dreyer provides some insight into how political information exposure affects voters, though applying that theory to the context of presidential campaigns. Dreyer's main contribution to the field is working with and expanding the "floating voter" hypothesis. That is, the idea that voters that are least exposed to current political information tend to change their vote preferences more readily within a single campaign as well as switch their vote from one party to the other after two successive election.<sup>19</sup> Dreyer measures inter-election changes and stability in partisan preferences by comparing the proportion of those supporting the same party by exposure to political communication across a range of panels, including Converse's in

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 334.

<sup>19</sup> Dreyer, Edward C. "Media Use and Electoral Choices: Some Political Consequences of Information Exposure." *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 35, no. 4, 1971, pp. 544–553. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/2747671](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2747671).

1956, Butler and Stoke's in 1960, and the American SRC from 1960 and 1964. Dreyer concludes that the “the less involved or floating voter tends to drop out of the off-year electorate, as evidenced by the rather dependable 10 to 20 percentage point decline in voter turnout when compared with the turnout rate in the preceding presidential contest.” The reason for this change in voter turnout stems directly from the ‘diffuse flow of new stimuli;’ it is this new stimuli, which comes in the form of new information, data, or political advertisements and campaigns, that drives the percentage change. Dreyer further confirms prior knowledge that strong identifiers are more likely to remain stagnant in their beliefs and support their party’s nominee more regularly than do the floating-in-and-out.

Dreyer’s conclusions are also important, but there are also limiting factors to consider here. First, Dreyer is looking mainly at presidential elections and information during election periods, whereas I am concerned with broader policy implications. Particularly, they won’t be limited to a specific period. There is the additional limitation that the studies occurred during election years, which makes certain issues more salient than others and to the forefront of the national spotlight. Because the new information and stimuli came about at election time, people might be more prone and subject to either changing or confirming their opinion since political discussion is heightened. Also, it might be important to highlight that some of the studies used to reach the conclusions were over 50 years old and, in my view, do not hold the same weight that they might have in the past.

When I was able to locate research that specifically dealt with motivated reasoning, the findings were similar to my hypothesized ideas but required further explanation and insight. I'll start by discussing the work of Taber and Lodge in *Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs*. The overarching results of the authors are ones that I do not disagree with and rather I think are similar to my expected findings. Taber and Lodge conclude that participants viewed arguments in such a way that "attitudinally congruent arguments are evaluated as stronger than attitudinally incongruent arguments." Further, when participants were reading pro and con arguments, they often counter-argued the arguments that they disagreed with while supporting the ones that they did agree with, showing evidence of disconfirmation bias. These are findings that I think will present themselves in my own later experiments. However, there are some issues that I find with their experiments. First, I question the test subjects used in the experiments. Taber and Lodge recruited participants from introductory political science courses at Stony Brook University, and respondents received course credit for their participation. My main issues are as follows: first, college students, being the selected sample, cannot logically be representative of the entire population. The authors pick such a niche environment that to say that university students are representative of the entire American public, many citizens of whom did not attend college, would be inconclusive. The students were then categorized and characterized further in their being students of political science. Students taking political science courses, though introductory, are undoubtedly going to be (ideally) more versed and informed in the world of politics and thus less rigid in changing their opinions. Meanwhile, a randomly-

selected member of the American public that is not as informed in politics will likely be more prone to the effects of motivated reasoning than, say, a student of politics. Thus, a more representative sample size is required to provide more conclusive results. Second, I take issue with the information board method of testing for the confirmation and disconfirmation bias. In Taber and Lodge's experiment, participants were free to look for information on the computer and they were not forcefully exposed to certain other kinds of information. It flows logically, thus, that people sought out information that reinforced their previously held beliefs. It is not unreasonable to see the confirmation bias take effect. My issues, thus, are the fact that respondents were not forcefully exposed to information that they disagreed with and seeing if their opinions change, which is namely what I am more interested in. Because respondents were able to seek out information on their own volition, Taber and Lodge were not able to effectively test whether counterfactual information actually changed people's opinions if respondents were never exposed to it in the first place. The experiments do not specifically cite whether people actually clicked on the section of the information board that they disagreed with, leaving the potential for respondents to never have actually even been exposed to information they disagreed with. Taber and Lodge only account for attitude changes and not whether actual exposure occurred, which is a further flaw. Taber and Lodge did look at reading times for arguments, but, interestingly, incongruent arguments took up more time.

The final two issues revolve again around the topics as well as the sources of information. I do enjoy that Taber and Lodge discussed two highly controversial topics, affirmative action and gun control. I would argue, however, that those topics are heavily

influenced by race and socioeconomic status and thus might not be indicative of how motivated reasoning works in regards to other policy areas, which I hope to explore. Last, as part of the information board, Taber and Lodge use data and arguments from print and online publications from various interest groups. My work is different in that it hopes to also take a look at the effects of television media and social media in changing people's views and not solely published articles.

It is clear that selective exposure is a contested subject not just in the psychological academic world but also the political one. And, when we crossover two words with competing ideas, the challenge in defining a theory and determining its applicability becomes even more difficult. At every crossroad and turning point of political theory there is debate as to whether selective exposure takes place. Kinder himself (2003) argues that “despite all of the early confidence, the evidence for selective exposure turns out to be thin. We now know that people do not, for the most part, seek out mass communications that reinforce their political predispositions” (p. 369).<sup>20</sup> Likewise, Zaller's main contribution directly competes with and aims to dismantle selective exposure: “Most people...are simply not so rigid in their information-seeking behavior that they will expose themselves only to ideas that they find congenial. To the extent selective exposure occurs at all, it appears to do so under special conditions that do

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<sup>20</sup> Stroud, Natalie Jomini. "Media use and Political Predispositions: Revisiting the Concept of Selective Exposure." *Political Behavior* 30.3 (2008): 341-66. *ProQuest*. Web. 14 Mar. 2019.

not typically arise in situations of mass persuasion” (p. 139).<sup>21</sup> For Zaller, it is a series of specific factors that are actively influencing choices that vary from one decision-making standpoint to another. Opinions are not rigid but rather can fluctuate depending on those factors that Zaller examines. Yet, we also see contrary perspectives that affirm selective exposure. Jonas et al. (2005) contend that “When searching for new information, people are often biased in favor of previously held beliefs, expectations, or desired conclusions” (p. 978).<sup>22</sup> All of these conflicting ideas very clearly confuse our issue, so the purpose of this thesis is to further hone our working definition and ensure that we have a clear understanding of how selective exposure works.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

## **Theory**

My theory is based largely in many of the findings by the authors whose arguments I have now dissected. It is clear that there are conflicting ideas on whether people are prone to changing their opinions upon the exposure of new information. In my view, there are certain kinds of information that people are more prone to changing their minds than others. Namely, it is those political issues that revolve around morality, early upbringing, and personal values that are least likely to change. These political issues tend to include issues such as gay marriage or abortion which are largely fueled by such experiences. On the other hands, political issues that are based off math, statistics, or factual, observable data are the ones that people are most willing to change their opinion. These political issues are those that revolve around topics such as the economy, which tends to include much more concrete, quantitative data that can be used to convince and more easily sway people's opinions.

Now, let's discuss the difference between social media in its ability to convince and sway versus the New York Times Article that people will be exposed to. I expect that the social media is going to be less persuasive in its ability to convince people. Social media, I predict, will see lower levels of opinion change. The reason that I believe this will take place is due to the fact that many people tend to be more skeptical of posts on social media, whether it be from family or friends. People tend to be more apprehensive of and challenging towards information on Facebook or Twitter that are sharing political posts. We often hear of how people are "sick of" seeing political issue wars breaking out online and how their timelines are flooded with tons of news articles shared by others that

they know. However, I do believe that much of the information will follow the prior findings by experts in the field. In this way, this thesis is merely an extension of their prior work and applying it to a new field – the intersection of social media and political science.

Overall, people are going to be more likely to be swayed by certain issue types than others. Further, I expect that people will be less likely to confirm their opinions with the digital article. They will be more likely to confirm their own opinion, whether it disagrees or agrees with the stated piece, for the social media post.



## **Experiment Design**

Now, I will begin to define how my personal research experiment will take place. My design draws inspiration from Iyengar and Kinder's experiment with some "tweaking." It will consist of a controlled study in which participants are exposed to new information across a variety of media technologies. The test groups will consist of randomly selected participants. Before participants actually are "exposed" to the new information, they will be instructed to complete a questionnaire that establishes their base-level opinions on a wide range of issues. I will purposely make that list expansive and cover social politics, foreign politics, and more; the reasoning for this is that respondents won't be able to anticipate what questions they might be asked about or what policy sphere they might be discussing. For example, opinions on common political issues such as abortion will be polled, but I also think it's important to ask about local politics so that participants can't pre-determine what the controlled topics will be about. In compiling the preliminary data, I will include both a five-point-thermometer scale as well as "blank space" in order for respondents to write their opinions if they choose not to use the scale. The thermometer ratings will range from "strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, no opinion, somewhat agree, and strongly agree." I would compile a mean for the results and see how closely the mean of post-coverage answers deviates from the mean for pre-coverage. This will help to provide a statistical way to analyze changes and provide some math-based evidence for my thesis.

After this section, participants will be exposed to one of three media "routes" corresponding to one of three issue topics. The media forms will include television

broadcasting, social media coverage, and print paper articles, while the issue topics will revolve around race, social welfare, and abortion. Specifically, the issues I have chosen are as follows. For race, respondents will be shown media coverage regarding the George Zimmerman case and the killing of Trayvon Martin, emphasizing facts such as Martin being unarmed or that Zimmerman was asked not to approach the suspected person (Martin), and that the Sanford police didn't arrest Zimmerman. It will also include general statistics on police brutality against blacks and responses to the 'blue lives matter' movement. For welfare, respondents will be shown coverage about welfare recipients and welfare abuse statistics; specifically; how white Americans are the biggest recipients of welfare and how the welfare queen stereotype largely is a myth. For abortion, respondents will be exposed to facts regarding health concerns with illegal abortions, such as the use of toxic chemicals or using objects harmful to a woman's body. For each of these policy issues, the topics are highly controversial. The purpose of the controversiality is to illicit a legitimate response from the reader and ensure that they are interested in (hopefully) or captivated by the topic at hand. After the group at large is divided into the topics mentioned, there will be a further division among the groups. They will be split up among different media styles. Some will be shown video news coverage, while others will read print articles and the third group viewing social media stories. The purpose of doing so is to test the efficacy of different media outlets in shaping opinion. I suspect that certain routes might be more effective than others. Last, I am definitely amenable to expanding the scope the topics covered so that we can gain a more generalized viewpoint on which policy areas are more subject to the priming effects.

After the exposure occurs, respondents will then be asked to rate themselves on the same thermometer scale as before with a blank space as well. The ratings will be recorded and tallied in order to assess variance from the original response. Further, respondents will be asked altogether “Did your original response change after watching/reading/viewing the source of information?” Respondents will then be asked how strongly the information affected their opinion in the same five-point scale. There might be some potential confounders in these situations, such as the emotional nature of the information topics, but I anticipate that it would be difficult to account for all of them without performing several multivariate regressions.

After the election of Donald Trump, many pollsters might agree with me in saying that predicting political outcomes is quite difficult. For that reason, I don't want to make any specific conclusions about how the experiment will turn out. However, speaking broadly, I feel that people will be more likely to change their opinions for social issues and less likely to change them for racial ones. My reasoning for this is that people might be more grounded in their racial beliefs, since they are deeply personal, potentially moral, and highly receptive to personal life experiences. Meanwhile, the issue of abortion might be more subject to scientific enlightening that might sway a person's opinion. I truly do not know how the economic issues will play out. My expected findings are that people are more likely to be susceptible to the priming effect for economic issues, but less likely in racial and social issues. I do not think that people are quick to change their opinion on issues that are influenced highly by perspectives of personal relationships and morality

(e.g., gay marriage or abortion). The deviation is likely to be higher for economic issues and lower for the others.

To say that the already-existing literature is inconclusive would be foolish. Rather, I would say that my research question is ostensibly different from prior works. My work attempts to answer important questions about which policy areas are subject to selective exposure and which media forms are more persuasive. My research design is looking at areas of information that were not necessarily in the spotlight before and certainly were not hypothesized about. With the previous works in the field, we see a continuance that focuses on misinformation. The theme is consistently experimenting with how false information and how that has broader impacts for political science. All of the previous authors focused on misinformation and its ramifications. My work is distinct in that it seeks to examine an otherwise-understudied realm of exposure to information. Currently, the literature revolves around misinformation and how it affects citizens versus how exposure to information can play an active role in shaping and defining people's viewpoints. My main interest is not in studying this field. Rather, it is exposure to information that concerns me and makes me question whether people are actually open or willing to change their opinion based off such exposure. It is applying the psychological theory of selective exposure to the field of political science that fascinates me.

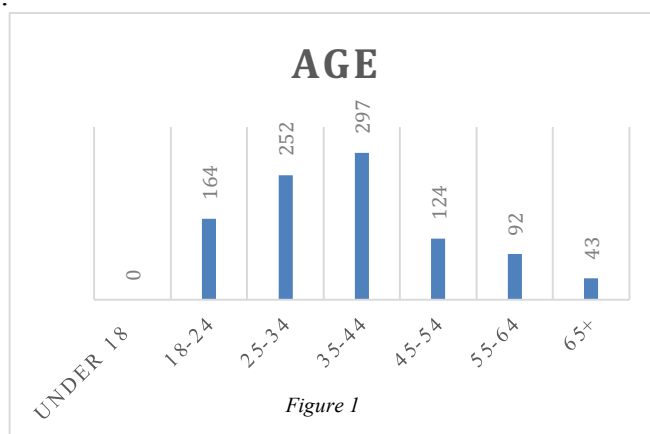
There is no question that media coverage and information access can have profound ramifications. However, we need to be more holistic in how we approach the field in order to properly assess what that role is. My research would hope to bridge the gaps between policy issues and clarify whether exposure to information is significant

across a range of policy issues. It expands the scope of findings to include myriad of pertinent topics that we see shared on the very ‘timelines’ of our family members attempting to articulate their opinions and ideally change our own. It further helps us understand what information sways people’s opinions and what does not. More broadly, the implications of information consumption is critical to a functioning government. A democracy can only function properly if its members are educated about the topics being collectively decided upon. If we expect our democracy to be well-informed, we need to better realize which forms of media are able *to inform* and not merely *to misinform*.

## Results

An experiment was conducted during the month of March to test out my prior hypotheses. The design was submitted to the IRB for approval in late January/early February and was distributed the week after final approval came at the end of March. The IRB approval number is # 5085C and was conducted by principal investigator Spencer Piston.

Let's begin by analyzing the demographics of the participants. Survey results were collected via Qualtrics. 1,500 people were originally requested to take the survey, but I received only 972 responses at the time of analyzing the data. The survey began by asking general demographic and identifiable information. Respondents were asked to provide their age, race, gender, highest-level of education completed, party identification, ideology, the candidate for whom they voted in the 2016 election, and their household income. A breakdown of all of the demographics is provided in the following bar graphs showing the number of respondents that fit into a specific category. Although we encouraged participants to answer all questions, they had the ability to skip questions as well. This is reflected as '99' in my data and represents certain discrepancies in the number of responses.



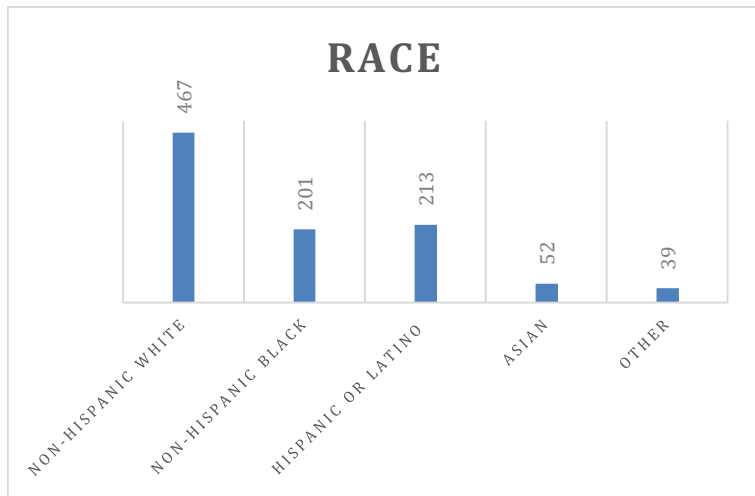


Figure 2

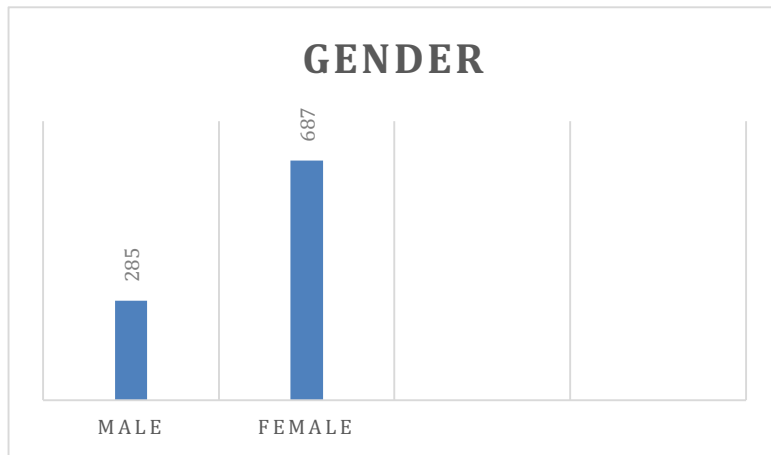


Figure 3

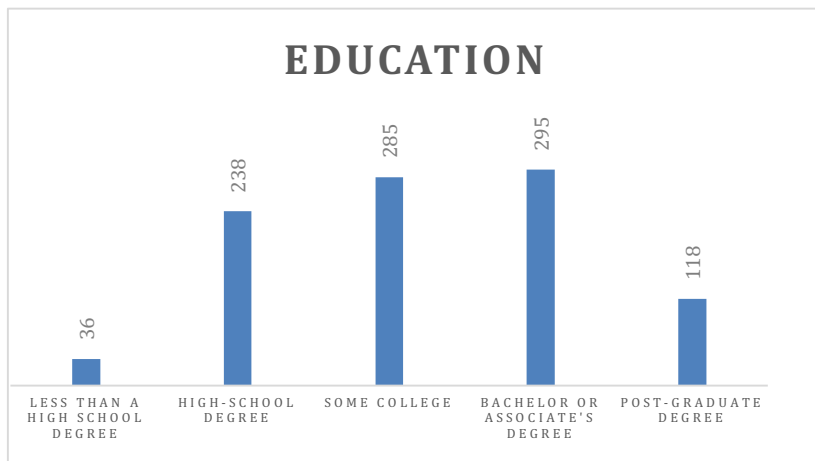


Figure 4

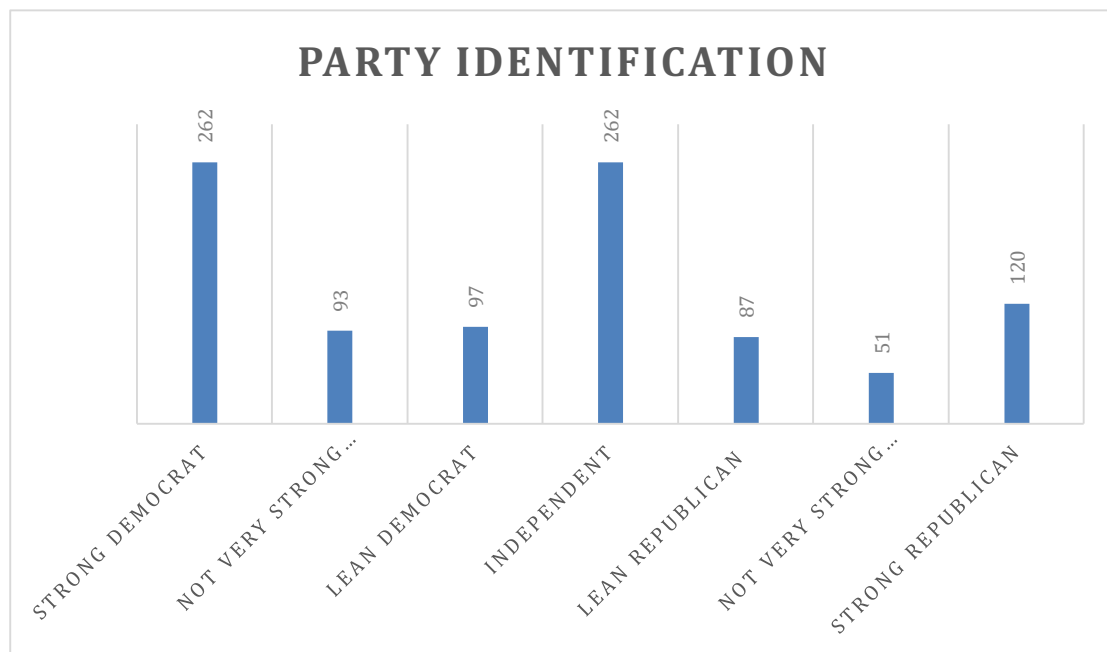


Figure 5

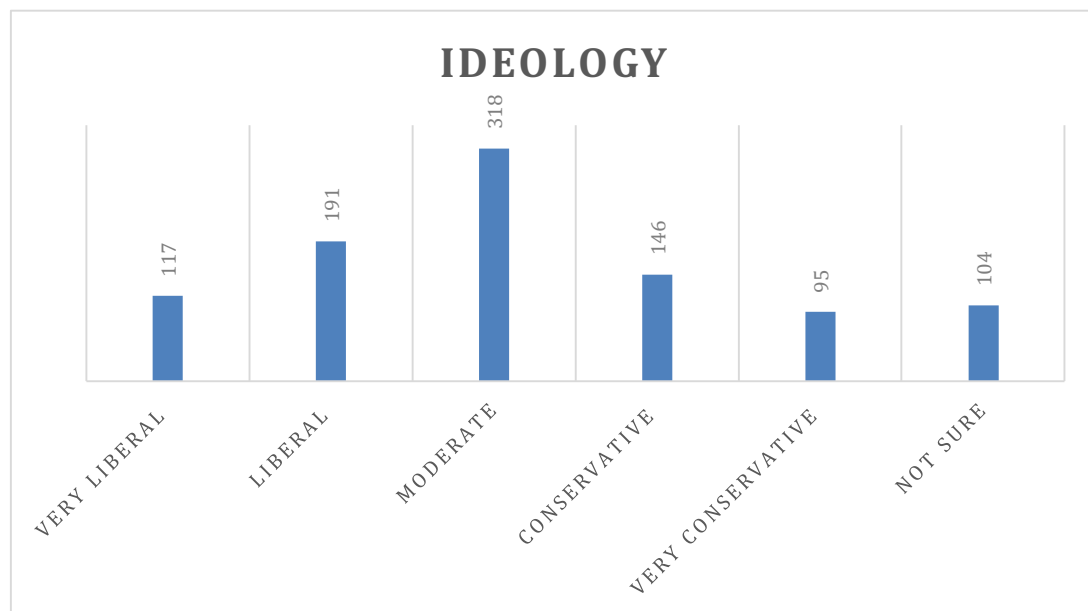


Figure 6



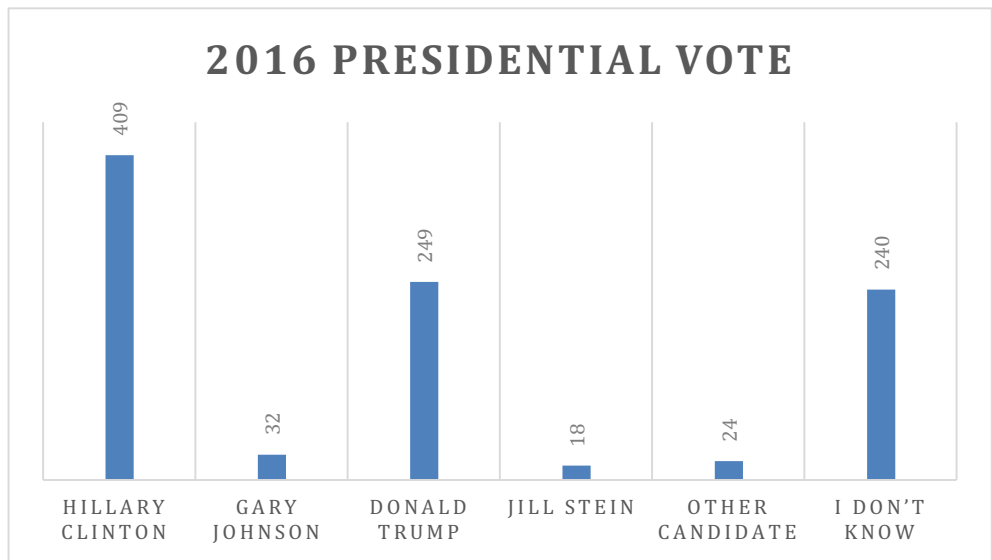


Figure 7

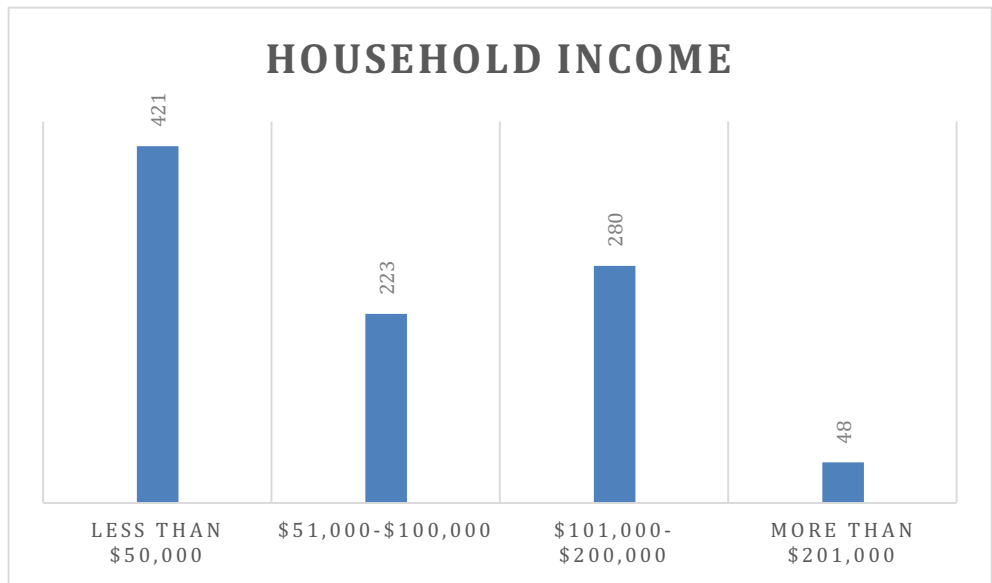


Figure 8

After answering the preliminary demographics questions, respondents were guided through a variety of questions composed by different theses-writers. All of the different experiments and designs of different students were combined into one giant survey and experiment design. The total amount of questions administered spanned 180 when

combining everyone's work. My questions were the final three that were asked in the survey.

When participants arrived at my portion of the experiment, they were exposed to one of two articles. Both of the articles contained the exact same information. The article presented facts and arguments regarding income inequality, pointing out concerns with CEO pay and comparing them to employee salaries. The articles, however, were different in their appearance and presentation. One of the articles presented itself as a screenshot of the New York Times' website. The other article was a social media post (specifically Facebook). The only difference in the two forms was the media type and the form to which respondents were exposed. Nothing else differed. Figure 1 displays the New York Times Article that some respondents were exposed to, while Figure 2 shows the Facebook/social media post that the other group was exposed to. Again, the contents of each were purposely made to be similar.

# The New York Times

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Opinion

## Wealth Inequality in America

By J. Foster

December 30, 2018

This is the top one percent we've been hearing so much about so much. One percent of America has 40% of all the nation's wealth while the bottom 80% - 8 out of every 10 people or 80 out of these hundred - only has seven percent between them, and this has only gotten worse in the last 20 to 30 years while the richest 1% take home almost a quarter of the national income today in 1976. They took home only nine percent, meaning their share of income has nearly tripled in the last 30 years; the top 1% owns half the country's stocks bonds and mutual funds. The bottom 50% of Americans own only half a percent of these investments, which means they aren't investing. They're just barely scraping by.


I'm sure many of these wealthy people have worked very hard for their money. But do you really believe that the CEO is working 380 times harder than his average employee? And not necessarily as low as the janitor, but the average earner in his company? The average worker needs to work more than a month to earn what the CEO Makes in one hour.

We certainly don't have to go all the way to socialism to find something that is fair for hardworking Americans.

We don't even have to achieve what most of us consider might be ideal.

All we need to do is wake up and realize that the reality in this country is not at all what we think it is.

*Figure 9*



**J. Foster**  
Today 12:45 pm · 🌐

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We certainly don't have to go all the way to socialism to find something that is fair for hardworking Americans.

We don't even have to achieve what most of us consider might be ideal.

All we need to do is wake up and realize that the reality in this country is not at all what we think it is.

[Like](#) · [Comment](#) · [Share](#)

*Figure 10*

The purpose of doing so was to measure whether the social media post is any more convincing in altering the mind and perception of the person reading it. 480 people were exposed to the New York Times Article and 492 were exposed to the social media post. The process of assigning people to the posts was completely arbitrarily and determined by the Qualtrics software.

Upon reading the article, participants were asked to answer the following three questions:

1. The author states that the top 1% take home what fraction of the national income today?
2. Did your opinion on income inequity in the United States change after reading this article? If yes, how so, and if not, why?
3. The author points out that CEOs earn about 380 times more than their average employee. That rate would be even higher for lower ranked employees, such as janitors. Does this impact your opinion on whether CEOs and their employees are fairly paid?

Question one was an intentional diagnostic question aimed at determining how intently the reader skimmed the article. The answer to this question was one-fourth. Only 313 of the respondents returned with the correct answer. 224 voted for one-tenth, 171 for one-half, and 263 for three quarters. Roughly 1/3 of the respondents answered correctly.

These are the responses overall. The breakdown of this question depending on the article that respondents were exposed to is as follows:

The author states that the top 1% take home what fraction of the national income today? (New York Times Article Responses)	
One tenth	111 (23.3%)
One quarter	153 (32.1%)
One half	82 (17.2%)
Three quarters	131 (27.46%)

Figure 11

The author states that the top 1% take home what fraction of the national income today? (Social Media Post Responses)	
One tenth	113 (23.1%)
One quarter	158 (32.3%)
One half	88 (18%)
Three quarters	130 (26.6%)

Figure 12

After this initial diagnostic question, respondents were asked to clarify if a change in opinion occurred as a result of reading the article. This question was a free-form response, which meant that respondents could answer with random, non-answers. Any response which failed to answer the question asked or mentioned anything not-related to the questions at hand was flagged and removed from the data for this question. Then, all of the remaining questions were parsed by me and assigned a variable from 0 to 5. A '0' meant that the reader underwent no change in opinion; '1' meant the reader indicated a change; '3' meant that the reader did not properly answer; '4' meant that the reader

indicated somewhat of a change; and ‘5’ meant that the reader indicated that they are unable to form an opinion with the facts given. After assigning each response one of these variables, I begin to examine the changes in answers between the New York Times exposure group and the social media exposure group.

Did your opinion on income inequity in the United States change after reading this article? If yes, how so, and if not, why? (New York Times Article Responses)	
No change	310 (64%)
Change	55 (11%)
Somewhat change	1 (.2%)
Cannot form opinion	27 (5.6%)
No response	90 (18.6%)

Figure 13

Did your opinion on income inequity in the United States change after reading this article? If yes, how so, and if not, why? (Social Media Post Responses)	
No change	331 (67%)
Change	58 (12%)
Somewhat change	3 (.6%)
Cannot form opinion	26 (5.3%)
No response	76 (15.38%)

Figure 14

In parsing through the data, I noticed a trend in many of the responses that indicated “no change” to question two. Since the response was free-form, respondents

were able to explain their reasoning for their selection. I noticed that many respondents elected that the article only confirmed that which they already believe. So, I decided to add an additional measure that looked at which amount of responses that did not undergo a change in opinion indicated a confirmation bias. 64 respondents out of the 310 that indicated there was no change (upon exposure to the New York Times article) also indicated that they experienced a confirmation of their prior held beliefs. 61 respondents of the 331 for the social media post did the same.

The final question drew out what I found to be the most shocking piece of information regarding income inequality. It articulated that CEOs make upwards of 380 times more than their lowest paid employee (not even counting custodial staff who get paid even lower than the average). The purpose of doing so was to provide a startling statistic that would surely change the mind of any logical person who would object to CEOs making exponentially more than their average-paid worker. The results are as follows.

<p>The author points out that CEOs earn about 380 times more than their average employee. That rate would be even higher for lower ranked employees, such as janitors. Does this impact your opinion on whether CEOs and their employees are fairly paid? (New York Times Article Responses)</p>	
No change	188 (39.2%)
Change	292 (60.8%)

Figure 15



<p>The author points out that CEOs earn about 380 times more than their average employee. That rate would be even higher for lower ranked employees, such as janitors. Does this impact your opinion on whether CEOs and their employees are fairly paid? (Social Media Post Responses)</p>	
No change	185 (37.68%)
Change	306 (62.32%)

Figure 16

## **Analysis**

To sufficiently analyze the results, I will be breaking down the responses question-by-question, starting with the first. I will determine what the main payoffs and insights from each question are, as well as potential confounders that are present throughout. The main theme relating all of the responses are that we see an almost identical split for the responses between all of the options available. The percentages converge to the same number for nearly every response, no matter what the question being asked is.

### Question One

Luckily, the correct answer for the first question, one quarter, did attract the majority of correct answers. For both responses, roughly one third of respondents chose the correct answer. No significant differences in answers occurred between the New York Times piece and the social media post. Although one quarter was the highest response chosen individually, overall, most people (roughly two thirds) chose the wrong answer). The disappointing part of the responses for this question is that the majority of respondents overall returned an incorrect answer. Again, we see a similar response rate for the incorrect answers as we did for the correct one with no significantly different outliers. There was no major variance in choices of the incorrect answers between the New York Times piece and the social media post.

The intent in asking this question was to impose a general diagnostic assessment of how well respondents captured the essence of and information in the piece. The response rate does seem disappointing. It could be argued that survey participants did not

accurately, thoroughly, or fully read the article. In turn, they might not have understood the purpose or message being conveyed. In defense of the readers, though, I will point out that the question asked was incredibly particularistic and specific; thus, it would be entirely less likely for the respondent to have answered correctly. In addition, respondents were not able to reference the article. Once the article was shown, readers have to move on from that screen altogether and begin answering the questions. So, if readers were skimming the piece and not reading it accurately, they would have had no way of determining what the correct answer was.

### Question Two

Question two provided the most difficulty in terms of assessing results. Part of this was my own error in making it a free-response question. However, I felt that doing so would best allow me to gauge how people's opinions changed. Moreover, I knew that I would be including question three which would consist of a simple yes-no dynamic. This question provided for a bit more variety to the responses.

As might occur with any free-form type of question, a small fraction of responses either did not answer the question whatsoever, skipped the question, or provided an unknown response. All of these responses were coded as 'no response' to maintain consistency and ensure that they did not skew the change or no change results. Both forms of media yielded nearly the same 'no response rate,' around 15% (3.6 percentage points more for the New York Times piece). An even smaller fraction (~5%) of respondents for either media form were unable to answer the question given the limited information that they had access to. I appreciate their honesty. And, finally, the smallest

amount of respondents (.2%-.6% for the New York Times or Facebook post, respectively) indicated somewhat of a change. The difficulty in analyzing this question is the inability to determine how much of a change occurred and what the survey taker meant by “somewhat.”

The most interesting part of the analysis revolves around the fact that nearly two thirds of respondents did not undergo a change in their opinion as a result of being exposed to this information. The response rates did not vary significantly for the New York Times piece over the social media post. Both media forms were consistent in that they were unable to persuade the majority of opinions of readers.

I will say that I was surprised by the results of the New York Times article more so than I was for the Facebook post. The findings of the Facebook post conform to my original theory. I did not expect that the Facebook post was going to be persuasive in changing people’s perspectives very much. What’s disappointing from the results is that the New York Times article was just as ineffective as the Facebook post in being unable to sway opinion. People were just as likely to not be swayed by the Times piece than they were by the Facebook post, even though the information is exactly identical. This does not necessarily fit with my theory, since I expected a higher rate of change from the New York Times piece. The reasoning behind this is that the New York Times is a bit more trusted and a credible source than the average social media post that you see on Facebook. Typically, Facebook posts are not as intensive or long in real life as participants might encounter in the survey experiment. So, I would not expect that the majority of people are going to take their time and read the posts, so they are not as likely

to be persuasive. So, to think that the New York Times and social media post were equally as unconvincing was a bit disheartening.

### Question Three

In designing question three, I kept in mind my concern for question one in which readers were not able to reference the article in order to answer the question. So, for question three, I purposely decided to include the factual information so that this problem would not resurface.

Overall, the responses to question three followed the same response rate. Responses were distributed roughly 60% in favor of change and 40% indicating that no change had occurred. We do see a 2% reversal in answers for the NYT piece versus the social media post (39/61 split versus 37/63 split), but the data reflects the overall trends of the responses converging.

The main purpose of this question was to determine whether a change from the pieces occurred. I am glad to report that this does in fact seem to be the case. Both outlets reflected a change in the person's opinion as a result of the exposure to the new information. So, this does support my overall thesis that people are going to undergo a change in their opinion. In addition, it is important to note that this policy realm directly reflects and mirrors the ones that I predicted would be subject to change in my theory section. The entire article revolved around income inequality and issues regarding the economy. In addition, the article mentions several factual data observations and statistics intended to persuade the reader. This question in specific cites a fact. Due to this, it is clear that the responses align with the predicted outcomes and theory that I outlined prior.

One of the main downfalls of this question is its inability to measure the direction of change. As a result, it cannot accurately provide an ordinal or thermometer rating that specifies the degree to which change occurs.

### **Survey Limitations**

In writing this Master's thesis, there had been a variety of issues that both limited and restricted the ability to complete a holistic and thorough analysis regarding motivated reasoning and information exposure. In a traditional PhD or Masters programs, students typically devote the majority of their final few year(s) to a thesis alone. However, with the political science BAMA program, students are required to also maintain a full coursework in addition to writing the thesis. This reality, in combination with several other factors that will follow, meant that the experiment design for this specific thesis was limited in several factors.

The first limiting factor in this experiment was its inability to examine a breadth of policy areas. When initially crafting the design of the experiment, my hope was to be able to take a look at how selective exposure and motivated reasoning applied across different policy areas. It was my intention to be able to survey participants on a wide range of issues. Ideally, the experiment that we conducted would then be applied twice more. I had already put together drafts of experiments for the issues of abortion and race measured via stances on affirmative action. With the abortion issue, respondents would have been exposed to statistics regarding abortion and how unsafe, illegal abortions can cause unnecessary and extensive complications for the women who undergo them. With the issue of race, the information guided respondents through a historical analysis and documentation of affirmative action and its necessity for minorities.

The purpose of studying these several policy areas is to observe whether different policy areas elicit different changes in respondents' behavior when it comes to opinion.

In the study that I conducted, the only policy area that respondents were asked about revolved around the economy and income inequality. Thus, I do not believe that it is conclusive to say that the results from this experiment are applicable across differences in policy areas. For example, respondents' opinions might change different to information exposure to different issue spheres, such as abortion or race, and this experiment is not sufficient in determining whether the results here are applicable to those separate issues. Had I been given additional time, resources, IRB approval, or money, then I would have conducted the additional experiments testing a wider scope of policy areas.

The second limitation that I faced in crafting this experiment was the inability to incorporate different media types. The experiment was limited to exposing participants to solely digital means – i.e., the fake social media post as well as the fake New York Times online article. Because the survey took place online and not in person, I was not able to show respondents physical newspaper articles, books, or even educational videos. My original experiment design actually heavily incorporated educational news clips and documentaries regarding each of the three previously mentioned policy areas. I went ahead and transcribed the exact recordings of those videos and transformed the transcriptions into the fake articles. However, I was unable to execute and incorporate these videos into the experiment due to limitations with the software used.

The purpose of the additional media types is to create a greater analysis as to which types of media are persuasive and which ones are not. In the experiment that I did conduct, the participants were only exposed to digital media in one of two forms, either digital newspaper or social media post. Thus, it is safe to conclude that the conclusions



from the data can only serve as evidence towards digital media. The question as to which other types of media – which could contain the same exact information as was embedded in the methods used – remains. Further, those forms of media could be either less or more efficacious in their ability to sway the respondents’ opinion. However, the method executed here is more helpful in explaining how the digital sources compare to one another and thus might not be directly applicable to other unexamined forms of media. The way to reconcile this potential problem is to reconsider that much of the existing data and studies already center around traditional forms of media, such as television or print publications. Thus, the merit in conducting these experiments was to shed light on these specific previously unstudied forms of media.

The final limitation worth mentioning is in regards to measuring the alleged “change” as a result of the exposure to the information in each of the posts. Because of the limitations in the number of questions that I was allowed to ask (given time and funding), I was unable to ask questions that measured the direction of change in opinion that occurred after exposure to the articles. Respondents were free to indicate that a change occurred for their questions, but they were not entirely able to specify in which manner their opinion change. Although some respondents did, none of the questions were able to determine which way the opinion change or whether it reinforced prior-held beliefs. Being able to measure the direction of the change is important because it would further contribute to questions about whether information exposure merely reinforces already-held beliefs or whether it changes them altogether. So, while many participants

did indicate a change in their opinion, the survey is unable to measure how that very opinion actually morphed.

Many of the restrictions that I have discussed are easily fixable, and the experiments themselves are rather easy to mimic. Had I had enough time to conduct all of the experiments, I would have been able to come to broader conclusions to the other policy areas that I was interested in.

## **Conclusion**

This thesis has been an exploration of the major works regarding information politics, media, and how exposure to information changes or fails to change people's already opinions. Often, exposure merely reinforces the prior stereotypes and beliefs that people already had, while others it tends to revert it altogether.

The particular nature of the experiment design in this case was intended to test whether we see a difference in people's opinions as a result of being exposed to one of two experimental stimuli. The stimuli were identical in content but differed in their appearance; one reflected a faux New York Times article and the other a faux Facebook post. Although expecting initially to find a divergence in how opinions were affected by each of the stimuli, the data produced similar results suggesting that both stimuli had the same effects in impacting or not impacting opinion in a particular way.

The implications of my results contribute to the field of information politics and media in better telling us what kinds of information are changing opinion. The next time that you see an article on Facebook or Twitter reposted by a friend or family, I would expect that that article is not going to really change your mind; in fact, what it's really going to do is reinforce that which you already believe.

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