



Are Social Media Driving Political Polarization?

Battles rage on Facebook and Twitter—but their influence on real-world politics is subtler than you might think.

BY LEE DE-WIT, CAMERON BRICK, SANDER VAN DER LINDEN | JANUARY 16, 2019

Americans are more divided along party lines than ever before.



In the past two decades, the percentage of Americans who consistently

hold liberal or conservative beliefs—rather than a mix of the two, which is the case for most people—has jumped from 10 percent to over 20. At the same time, beliefs about the other side are becoming more negative. Since 1994, the number of Americans who see the opposing political party as a threat to “the

nation’s well-being” has doubled. This deepening polarization has predictable results: government shutdowns, violent protests, and scathing attacks on elected officials.

Why are we becoming more polarized?

There are probably many reasons. Could social media be driving polarization? Many people think so—and, indeed, Facebook, Reddit, and Twitter have all become sites of ferocious political argument. While polarization definitely plays out on social media, the evidence to date suggests that its impact is subtler than you might think. Social media, it seems, amp up moral and emotional messages while organizing people into digital communities based on tribal conflicts.

This makes consensus building more difficult—but, as we’ll discuss, it could also pave a more cooperative path forward.

Do we live in “filter bubbles”?

Many people argue that we increasingly live in online filter bubbles that only expose us to the ideas we already agree with. This is consistent with a broader psychological literature on confirmation bias, showing that we are more likely to seek out and agree with views that align with our pre-existing beliefs. Selecting our preferred news sites and

curating our social media accounts potentially makes it easier to listen to groups or individuals who validate our own worldviews.

The filter bubble idea has recently been elegantly demonstrated in the lab by Cass Sunstein and Tali Sharot and colleagues. The authors tested who participants would turn to for advice in categorizing geometric shapes—an obviously non-political task. In fact, this study found, participants preferred to seek advice from people who held similar political views, deciding that they must be more competent—despite evidence to the contrary!

If following people on social media who are more aligned with your worldview exacerbates polarization, then it follows that listening to “the other side” would reduce polarization. However, a recent experiment found essentially *the opposite*.

Christopher Bail and colleagues from Duke University recruited hundreds of Democrats and Republicans who were active on Twitter, and paid them to follow a Twitter bot that would retweet content from the opposing side. After a month of exposure, the Democrats retained about the same attitudes—but the Republicans ended up more conservative than when they started the study! This result suggests that polarization in the U.S. could be driven by *exposure* to views people disagree with, rather than being separated from them by filter bubbles.

There are several ways of interpreting this result. For example, it could be that participants were reacting directly to the content of the messages they were exposed to on Twitter, but it could also be the case that they were simply responding to the messengers, not the message. In other words, the issues are not as important as group affiliation. Whatever the interpretation, this study suggests that more work is required to understand to what extent filter bubbles might drive political polarization.

A study by Levi Boxell and colleagues provided a simpler test of the role of the Internet: Is more social media use associated with more polarization? Boxell and colleagues assessed polarization in the U.S. for different age ranges—and they surprisingly found that polarization was highest for the age groups that use the Internet and social media the least, such as older adults (75+).

This suggests that if the Internet is fueling polarization, its influence might be more indirect. This indirect influence is plausible, however, because in many traditional newsrooms, activity on social media has itself become news. Indeed, Trump has proved particularly successful in dominating the traditional news media (TV and print) with his activity on Twitter.

Thus, it is possible that the climate of debate on social media influences the tone of debate on other media platforms.