

Apr 3rd, 11:00 AM - 1:00 PM

## Does Political Orientation Cause Us to See Things Differently?

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Sedlacek, Matthew, "Does Political Orientation Cause Us to See Things Differently?" (2019). *Annual Graduate Student Symposium*. 32.

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## Abstract

The hostile media effect and biased assimilation both concern biased interpretations of information (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979; Vallone & Ross, 1985). Participants read the same news article with either an NBC News heading or a Fox News heading and were then asked about their perceptions of bias in the article and their attitudes. Results for the hostile media effect were mixed, but we found evidence for biased assimilation.

## Introduction

The *hostile media effect* refers to the tendency for people on a particular side of an issue to view news coverage as biased against their stance, even if this news coverage is objective (Vallone & Ross, 1985). *Biased assimilation* refers to the tendency for individuals to interpret new information that supports their position more positively than information that does not (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979).

Previous studies have shown that news source impacts the presence of these phenomena. For example, when sports fans read a fictitious news article about an NCAA investigation into their team, they saw it as more biased than did fans who read about a rival team (Arpan & Raney, 2003).

This study examined whether similar effects would occur for political information.

### Hypotheses

- Liberals (Conservatives) will rate a news article as lower quality when presented with the Fox News (NBC News) heading and identify it as biased against Liberals (Conservatives).
- Conservatives (Liberals) will change their opinion away from the legislation discussed in the article when presented with the NBC News (Fox News) heading.

## Method

### Participants

- Sample: 150 individuals (68 males, 82 females) between the ages of 21 and 86 in the U.S. obtained through Amazon Mechanical Turk, an online crowdsourcing platform ( $n = 93$  after cleaning, see below)
- Study was pre-registered on Open Science Framework (OSF), and data and materials are available at <https://osf.io/na5yu/>

### Procedure

- Participants read an adapted news article on the U.S. Farm Bill. Half were randomly assigned to a Fox News heading, whereas the other half were randomly assigned to the NBC News heading.
- Participants completed a manipulation check asking them to identify the source of the article they read.
- 57 participants who failed this manipulation check were excluded from further analyses
- Participants then completed a questionnaire regarding perceptions of the article, their preferred news sources, political affiliation, and an adapted subscale of the Partisan Identity Scale (Huddy & Bankert, 2017).
- All scales were on a Likert scale format ranging from 1=*Strongly disagree* to 7=*Strongly agree*
- Example of hostile media effect item: "I feel this article was biased towards a Liberal viewpoint"
- Example of biased assimilation item: "My attitude on the U.S. Farm Bill became more negative as a result of reading this article."
- Debriefed at the conclusion of the study and given \$0.50 for participation

## Results

- Participants were categorized into 3 groups based on the political affiliation they indicated they identified most with: "Liberal", "Conservative", or "Other"

### Hostile Media Effect (see Figure 1.1)

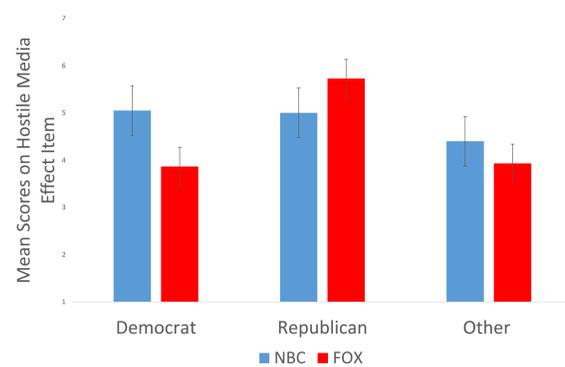
- Liberals perceived the article less positively than did moderates and conservatives, regardless of the news heading,  $F(2, 92) = 3.59, p = .03, \eta^2 = .072, 90\% \text{ CI} : [.004, .157]$ .
- Surprisingly, Liberals rated the article as more biased towards the Conservative viewpoint when it came from NBC instead of Fox,  $F(2, 93) = 5.03, p = .009, \eta^2 = .098, 90\% \text{ CI} : [.015, .189]$ .

### Biased Assimilation (see Figure 1.2)

- Liberals were more supportive of the bill when reading the article with the NBC heading, whereas Conservatives were more supportive when reading the article with the Fox heading  $F(2, 93) = 10.50, p < .001, \eta^2 = .184, 90\% \text{ CI} : [.070, .287]$ .
- Conservative attitudes became more negative  $F(2, 93) = 5.47, p = .006, \eta^2 = .105, 90\% \text{ CI} : [.019, .198]$  as a result of reading the article with the NBC heading, and Liberal attitudes became more positive  $F(2, 93) = 4.64, p = .012, \eta^2 = .091, 90\% \text{ CI} : [.012, .180]$  as a result of reading the article with the NBC heading.

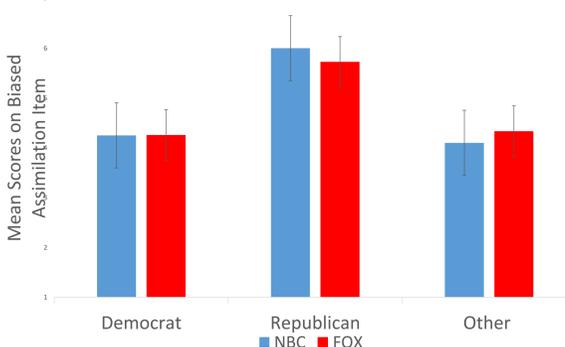
### Exploratory Analysis Results

- Participants who identified more strongly with their political party reported that their attitudes became more positive as a result of reading the article,  $r = .286, p = .008$ .



**Figure 1.1:** The effect of Political Orientation on the Hostile Media Effect Item: "Please rate the quality of the article."

Lines represent the 95% confidence intervals for each value



**Figure 1.2:** The effect of News Source on Biased Assimilation Item: "My attitude towards the U.S. Farm Bill became more negative as a result of reading this article."

## Discussion

- We found support for biased assimilation, as Conservatives' attitudes towards the U.S. Farm Bill became more negative after reading the article with the NBC News heading and liberals' more negative after reading the article with the Fox News heading.
- We found limited support for the hostile media effect. Participants generally didn't rate the article as more biased against their viewpoint, regardless of the news heading.
- Some limitations included an uneven number of participants in each source condition, due to a large number of participants missing the attention check.
- Future research could use similar methodology, but with a CNN News heading instead of NBC News, as CNN News may be more closely associated with the Liberal political stance and thus, may be more identifiable by the participants as a liberal source.
- Future research could look at moderators and mediators of the hostile media effect and biased assimilation, as well as what situations would cause individuals to be more biased in their perceptions.
- Identifying the political contexts and the news sources where biased perceptions are at play is important in our polarized political climate. The hysteria surrounding "fake news" highlights the need for individuals to seek out the most accurate information, especially when it determines their voting choices.

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