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Party differences in political content on social media

Political
content on
social media

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595

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Abstract

Purpose – Social networking sites (SNS) increasingly serve as a source of political content for Americans. The purpose of this paper is to clarify the relationships between types of political content exposure, especially congruent vs incongruent content, and its effects on political expression and participation. This study pays special attention to whether these relationships differ depending on whether an individual affiliates with the Republican or Democratic party.

Design/methodology/approach – This study uses a representative national sample to examine the relationships among exposure to congruent vs incongruent political content via SNS, political expression, and political participation. This study also tests whether these relationships are consistent for Democrats vs Republicans.

Findings – The results suggest the effects of political content exposure on political expression on SNS depend on how many friends post about politics, as well as whether that content is congruent or incongruent with one's political beliefs. Moreover, the relationship between exposure to congruent vs incongruent content, political expression, and political participation differs for Republicans and Democrats.

Originality/value – This study highlights the need for researchers to take more care in distinguishing the type of and the audience for political content exposure via social media websites. Further, if the relationships between seeing political content via social media and acting upon such content – either through posting behaviors or participatory activities – differs by political group, it raises the potential for disparities in democratic engagement.

Keywords Social media, Political participation, Party affiliation, Political expression, Selective exposure

Paper type Research paper

Social media are increasingly a part of American life, accounting for roughly 30 percent of the time Americans spend online (Mander, 2015). And despite majorities of people saying that social networking sites (SNS) serve primarily social purposes, seeing political content via SNS has become the norm (Ellison *et al.*, 2011; Rainie and Smith, 2012; Vraga *et al.*, 2015). For example, 48 percent of Facebook users get news about government and politics from Facebook (Mitchell and Weisel, 2014), while 75 percent of users said their friends on SNS posted political content during the 2012 election (Rainie and Smith, 2012). Such political exposure is important, as SNS represent a more diverse network than offline political conversations (Kim *et al.*, 2013; Rainie and Smith, 2012) and exposure to and engagement with political content on SNS has been related to increased offline participation (Bode *et al.*, 2014; Vitak *et al.*, 2011).

However, more effort is needed to clarify the relationships between types of political content exposure and its effects on political expression and participation. Of particular importance is whether people are exposed to congruent vs incongruent content – and especially whether such content co-exists in one's social media or whether individuals see echo chambers of like-minded content – should differentially relate to willingness to engage in political behaviors, both online and offline (Eveland and Hively, 2009; Garrett, 2009; Mutz, 2006).



Additionally, research needs to more carefully consider how individual predispositions contribute to this process. A growing strain of research suggests that political content on social media can influence democratic orientations, but such effects are conditioned by predispositions such as political interest or extraversion (Bimber *et al.*, 2015; Kim *et al.*, 2013; Vraga *et al.*, 2015). But in considering political exposure on SNS and its implications for participation, party affiliation remains one of the most important factors to test. Previous research suggests that Democrats and Republicans have different social media habits, with Democrats relying more on SNS like Facebook in recent presidential elections (Bode *et al.*, 2014; Vitak *et al.*, 2011). Additionally, differences in predispositions between parties, especially in orientations toward conflict or disagreement (Jost *et al.*, 2003; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2009; Vraga, 2015), may also produce differences in how often partisans see political content, what they do when they see such content, and whether they post about politics or participate offline.

This study examines how the experience of political content – particularly exposure to congruent vs incongruent content – via SNS contribute to political expression on SNS and offline political participation using a nationally representative survey from spring of 2014. Additionally, the study explores whether these relationships among types of political exposure, political expression, and offline participation differs for Republicans vs Democrats. This study contributes to the understanding of how political exposure and expression via social media differs depending on content exposure and party affiliation.

The relationship among political consumption and expression

Social media represent a unique experience of political content for many of its users. The content that people see on social media platforms is created from a complex blend of choices about which people to friend or follow online, which often includes a wide combination of strong and weak ties from diverse social spheres, the content that these connections choose to post, and opaque algorithms that prioritize some types of content over others to display on an individual feed (Gillespie, 2014; Marwick and boyd, 2010; Vraga *et al.*, 2015). As a result, SNS often provide more incidental exposure to heterogeneous political expression than offline discussion networks (Bode, 2016; Kim, 2011).

However, people do have some control over their content exposure on social media. Uses and gratifications research broadly suggests that people use social media to fulfill particular needs and goals (Macafee, 2013; Raacke and Bonds-Raacke, 2008). Although political activity is often not only of the primary reasons that people engage with SNS (Vraga *et al.*, 2016; Ellison *et al.*, 2011), people often seek to create congruent political contexts in other spaces, often by avoiding conversation with or exposure to those with whom they disagree (Mutz, 2006; Zhang *et al.*, 2013). There is some evidence that such selective exposure occurs on SNS, with people actively working to limit exposure to incongruent content (Bakshy *et al.*, 2015; Gainous and Wagner, 2014).

At the same time, existing research has suggested that tendencies toward selective exposure are more common than pressures toward selective avoidance, especially deliberate selective avoidance (Frey, 1986; Garrett, 2009). Indeed, some research suggests that exposure to ideologically congruent news content is often correlated with greater exposure to incongruent content as well (Edgerly, 2015; Garrett *et al.*, 2013), further discrediting the likelihood of selective avoidance for political news.

Therefore, there is a possibility for two competing patterns of exposure to congruent vs incongruent content on social media. On the one hand, people can engage in selective

avoidance when seeing political content from their contacts on SNS, and choose to block incongruent political content or engage selectively with congruent content, thus boosting exposure only to congruent posts. Similarly, social media algorithms can reinforce this relationship (Bakshy *et al.*, 2015; Gillespie, 2014), and together these forces will lead to a negative association between exposure to congruent content compared to incongruent content. On the other hand, the social nature of SNS may inhibit the ability of individuals to block disagreeable content posted from friends and family to avoid social conflict, leading them to see and potentially engage with incongruent political content that they see in SNS (McLaughlin and Vitak, 2011; Messing and Westwood, 2014). In addition, the frequency of political content may spur those interested and unafraid of conflict to engage in more political posting online (Huckfeldt and Mendez, 2008; Vraga *et al.*, 2015), increasing the likelihood that seeing more political content will lead individuals to also view both congruent and incongruent political content as a result:

RQ1. What is the relationship between seeing political content, seeing congruent information, and seeing incongruent information on SNS?

Furthermore, seeing political content should directly relate to posting behaviors. Seeing political content more frequently on SNS should enhance perceptions of political expression as an acceptable behavior on SNS, creating social norms that encourage posting – or at least do not discourage posting (Bode and Dalrymple, 2014; Halpern and Gibbs, 2013; Vitak *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, seeing political content also produces clear opportunities for political expression by responding to friends' posts and comments, which may create a lower-risk opportunity to engage in political conversation on social media than creating or sharing one's own content:

H1. Seeing more political content on SNS will be associated with more frequent posting of political content to SNS.

This relationship is likely particularly powerful when such political content is agreeable. Previous research has found that engagement in congruent political discussion produces greater political engagement and participation by several mechanisms. First, seeing congruent political content should lower the perceived risks of posting political content oneself on SNS, as friends are likely to agree with the political posts, creating a "safe" discussion environment (Eveland and Hively, 2009; Gearhart and Zhang, 2015). Second, exposure to similar viewpoints tends to encourage participation overall by increasing perceptions of social support, calls to mobilization, and empowering individuals to participate (Eveland and Hively, 2009; Mutz, 2006; Verba *et al.*, 1995). Therefore, seeing congruent political content on SNS should encourage greater political expression on SNS and more offline participation:

H2a. Seeing congruent content on SNS will relate to posting more political content.

H2b. Seeing congruent content on SNS will relate to more political participation offline.

The effects of exposure to incongruent political content on posting are less clear. Some scholars argue that exposure to cross-cutting views deters political participation and discussion (Mutz, 2006), while others argue political disagreement and exposure to incongruent information can spur interest and engagement in politics (Huckfeldt and Mendez, 2008; Martin, 2004). This relationship is particularly unclear online. For some,

political disagreement may be demobilizing, limiting their desire to participate in a dangerous discussion environment, whereas others may find disagreement a spur to participation or it may create a need to correct misperceptions (Eveland and Hively, 2009; Rojas, 2010; Vraga *et al.*, 2015):

RQ2a. What is the relationship between seeing incongruent political content on SNS and political posting behaviors?

RQ2b. What is the relationship between seeing incongruent political content on SNS and political participation offline?

Finally, this study tests the relationship between political posting behaviors on SNS with traditional forms of offline participation. Research broadly agrees that people who engage with political content more in online settings, especially posting political content, are more likely to participate in offline contexts (Bode *et al.*, 2014; Vitak *et al.*, 2011):

H3. People who post more political content on SNS will also be more likely to participate in politics offline.

The role of party affiliation

However, there is reason to believe that these relationships among political exposure, expression, and participation may differ depending on individual differences – in this case, an individual’s party affiliation. Previous research suggests that Democrats and Republicans visit different SNS (Duggan *et al.*, 2015) and engage in different political behaviors on SNS (Bode *et al.*, 2014; Vitak *et al.*, 2011). These differences in posting behaviors should create distinct norms about the appropriateness of posting political content for Democrats vs Republicans, as well as shape perceptions of the imagined audience and its likely response to such content (Boyd, 2010; Litt, 2012; Marwick and boyd, 2010).

Additionally, research suggests that Republicans and Democrats differentially value and respond to agreement vs disagreement, with Republicans more strongly preferring congruent content and responding more strongly to incongruent political content, often leading to less desire to engage in heterogeneous discussion and higher polarization toward the political parties (Borah *et al.*, 2013; Jost *et al.*, 2003; Nam *et al.*, 2013; Schreiber *et al.*, 2013; Vraga, 2015). However, initial evidence suggests that in general, liberals, and Democrats engage in more partisan filtering and homophily on SNS – but among activists, it is Republicans who have more homogeneous networks (Bakshy *et al.*, 2015; Colleoni *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, it remains unclear how party affiliation will relate to patterns of selective exposure via SNS, or their effects on the likelihood of engaging in political expression or participation.

In sum, the ability of audiences to actively manage their SNS feeds, both in terms of their own behaviors (e.g. posting) as well as exposure choices, suggests that individual differences like partisan affiliation may create different relationships between seeing political content, the nature of that content – and in particular, whether it is congruent or incongruent with predispositions – and political expression and participation for Democrats and Republicans, although the nature of those relationships and how they differ remains unclear:

RQ3. Will the relationships between political consumption, expression, and participation described above differ for Republicans vs Democrats?

Methods

This study uses a nationally representative survey of 1,013 American adults conducted in April of 2014. Data were collected by the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication and the George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication as part of the Climate Change in the American Mind Project (Leiserowitz *et al.*, 2014). To avoid sensitizing participants, the questions about social media habits and political participation used in this study appeared before any questions about climate change.

The sample was drawn from GfK's KnowledgePanel, an online panel using probability sampling methods via a combination of random digit dialing and addresses in the USA. Those contacted who wished to join the panel but did not have access to a computer were loaned computers and provided internet access. This sample includes a representative cross-section of American adults. Moreover, the sample is weighted using key demographic variables to match US Census Bureau numbers.

The sample also included an oversample of 250 Republican and Independent-leaning Republican respondents. This oversample included a separate weight, based on census numbers. The oversample is only used for comparative purposes between Republican ($n = 420$) and Democratic ($n = 619$) respondents, including those who leaned toward a party (Petrocik, 2009). For these analyses, Independents ($n = 113$) and those who selected other/no party/not interested in politics ($n = 252$) were excluded.

Measures

Social networking site use. Respondents were asked how often they used eight social media websites on seven-point scales, from "never" to "many times per day." For both Facebook and political blog use, the full scale was used, as previous research has underscored their importance for political expression and participation (Gil de Zuniga *et al.*, 2010; Vitak *et al.*, 2011). For the six other social media sites, a total usage score was computed, with those who used a platform at all scored as a "1" and those who never did scored as a "0." This measure of alternative SNS diversity captures the number of less frequent SNS sites individuals' used, ranging from 0 to 6, which participants on average using 1.7 additional SNS outside of Facebook or political blogs. Please see Table I for all descriptive statistics, reported for the US population (excluding the Republican oversample).

Post-political content. Participants who reported using at least one SNS ($n = 740$) were asked how much of what they post on social media is related to politics, political issues, or the upcoming elections on a five-point scale from "None at all" to "All of it."

See politics. Respondents were asked how many of their friends post content related to politics, political issues, or the year's elections on SNS on a five-point scale, from "None of them" to "All of them" (see also Rainie and Smith, 2012).

	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Percent who perform activity
Facebook use	1	7	3.79	2.20	72.9
Political or news blogs use	1	7	1.78	1.45	30.5
Alternative SNS diversity	0	6	1.70	1.44	81.3
See political content	1	5	2.32	0.90	81.1
See congruent political content	1	5	3.02	0.82	94.7
See incongruent political content	1	5	2.88	0.75	95.6
Post-political content	1	5	1.65	0.95	39.3
Participate in politics	0	7	1.02	1.18	59.5

Table I.
Descriptive statistics
for sample of US
population

Congruent and incongruent political content. Respondents who reported seeing at least some of their friends posting political content on SNS ($n = 597$) were asked on four-point scales, from “Never” to “Always or almost always,” how often they agreed and how often they disagreed with the political content their friends post on SNS.

Political participation. Respondents were asked whether (yes/no) in the past 12 months they had performed nine political activities: voted in a federal, state or local election; written or called a politician; written a letter to the editor of a newspaper or magazine or called a live radio or TV show to express an opinion; written an article for a magazine or newspaper; attended a political rally, speech, or organized protest; held or run for political office; signed a petition; worked for a political party; and been an active member of any group that tries to influence government. These items were summed to form a scale.

Party identification. Participants were asked generally speaking whether they thought of themselves as a Democrat, Republican, Independent, Other, or No party/Not interested in politics. Participants who answered “Independent” initially were asked if they were closer to the Democratic party, the Republican party, or neither. For the full measure of party affiliation, a five-point scale was created ranging from Democrat to Republican, with true Independents (those that do not lean toward either party) in the middle ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 1.74$). This scale was also dummy coded, with those leaning toward a party classified as partisans (Petrocik, 2009).

Controls. A number of demographic controls were entered into the models, including age (median = 45-54), education (median = some college), gender (52.0 percent female), household income (median = \$50,000-\$59,999), and political ideology, measured on a five-point scale from very liberal to very conservative ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 1.02$).

Results

Political exposure and behavior

To test these results, this study employs a series of multiple regression analyses. For the first analyses, the representative cross-section of American adults is used, excluding the Republican oversample and individuals who did not use any social media platform.

Table II suggests that several control variables are powerful in explaining exposure to political content on SNS. Both frequency of Facebook use and blog use are related to seeing more political content, a finding that aligns with existing research (Bode *et al.*, 2014; Gil de Zuniga *et al.*, 2010; Mitchell *et al.*, 2015). Further, Facebook use and political blog use both predict seeing congruent political content, but not incongruent content, suggesting the potential for both platforms to contribute to exposure to a political echo chamber. Meanwhile, using additional SNS platforms (beyond Facebook and political blogs) produces more exposure to political content, but does not have a relationship to seeing either congruent or incongruent content.

However, in contrast to previous research (Bode *et al.*, 2014; Vitak *et al.*, 2011), Republicans report more exposure to political content via SNS than Democrats in this study – and moreover, more exposure to congruent (but not incongruent) political content. There are no differences between Independents and Democrats in terms of exposure to political content, either congruent or incongruent.

Turning to *RQ1*, the results show that seeing more political content is associated with seeing both more incongruent and congruent political content via social media. In addition, there is a negative relationship between seeing congruent and incongruent

	See politics on SNS	See congruent content	See incongruent content	Post-political content	Political participation
Age	0.03	-0.04	0.03	0.03	0.20***
Education	0.01	-0.02	-0.04	-0.16***	0.23***
Gender (female)	0.02	-0.00	-0.00	-0.11*	0.01
Income	-0.01	0.01	0.07	-0.09*	0.05
Republican	0.11*	0.12*	-0.04	0.06	0.05
Independent	0.05	-0.00	-0.00	0.02	0.01
Ideology (conservative)	-0.08	-0.02	-0.04	-0.12*	-0.05
Alternate SNS use	0.10*	0.03	0.07	0.03	0.05
Facebook use	0.13**	0.14**	0.07	0.06	-0.06
Political blog use	0.24***	0.13*	0.00	0.28***	0.20***
See political content	-	0.19***	0.10*	0.28***	0.04
Congruent content	-	-	-0.11*	0.18***	0.06
Incongruent content	-	-0.10*	-	0.03	-0.05
Post-political content	-	-	-	-	0.17**
Adjusted R^2	0.106	0.089	0.012	0.306	0.222
n	605	464	464	448	448

Notes: Standardized β coefficients reported to facilitate comparison. * $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$

Table II.
Predicting exposure
to political content
via social media for
US population

information, suggesting that people who see more congruent information via SNS tend to see less incongruent information, and vice versa – although models are more successful in predicting exposure to congruent vs incongruent content.

Turning to political posting behaviors, only frequent political blog users also report more frequent posting of political content themselves, with no relationship to Facebook or alternative SNS use emerging. Moreover, the analyses support both *H1* and *H2a*: seeing more political content on SNS and seeing congruent content both directly boost political posting behaviors on SNS, while exposure to incongruent information has no effect on political expression (*RQ2a*).

Finally, the relationships to offline political participation are examined. Again, blog use is the only social media platform to directly relate to participation. Further, while there is no relationship between seeing congruent (*H2b*) or incongruent content (*RQ2b*) and political participation, *H3* is supported: people who post more frequently about politics on SNS are also more likely to be active in politics offline.

Comparing Republicans to Democrats

To answer *RQ3*, which asked whether the patterns of behavior observed above would differ for Republicans and Democrats, the study utilizes the oversample of Republican respondents. These analyses exclude Independents, but this oversample allows greater parity between Republican and Democratic participants than typical surveys on social media use. These analyses are performed separately for Democrats and Republicans (see Table III).

The results reveal that major differences exist in the relationships among political exposure, expression, and participation for Democrats vs Republicans. First, the study confirms that greater exposure to political content on SNS is related to exposure to congruent information for both groups, but only for Democrats is seeing more political content is also related to seeing more incongruent information. More tellingly,

Table III.
Comparing
Republicans to
Democrats in
predicting exposure
to political content
via social media

	See politics on SNS		See congruent content		See incongruent content		Post-political content		Political participation	
	Republican	Democrat	Republican	Democrat	Republican	Democrat	Republican	Democrat	Republican	Democrat
Age	0.01	0.03	0.04	-0.01	-0.05	0.13*	0.08	0.03	0.11	0.26***
Education	-0.01	-0.03	-0.01	0.10	0.07	-0.09	-0.09	-0.22***	0.08	0.30***
Gender (female)	-0.12*	0.04	-0.00	0.07	0.04	-0.11	-0.10	-0.09**	-0.09	0.10
Income	0.05	0.01	-0.02	-0.04	0.05	0.03	-0.11	-0.14**	0.07	-0.03
Ideology (conservative)	0.08	-0.17***	0.22**	-0.23***	0.08	0.03	-0.09	-0.07	0.12*	-0.20***
Alternate SNS use	-0.05	0.13*	-0.03	0.10***	0.15*	0.02	0.06	0.08	0.04	0.06
Facebook use	0.16**	0.14**	0.12*	0.00	0.03	0.12*	0.04	0.06	-0.01	-0.06
Political blog use	0.18**	0.24***	0.08	0.09	-0.03	0.02	0.21**	0.33***	0.31***	0.15*
See political content	-	-	0.14*	0.11*	0.03	0.14*	0.24***	0.26***	0.06	0.05
Congruent content	-	-	-	-	-0.23**	0.16**	0.13*	0.23***	0.06	0.01
Incongruent content	-	-	-0.21***	0.14**	-	-	0.00	0.01	0.02	-0.06
Post-political content	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.20**	0.05
Adjusted R^2	0.053	0.156	0.121	0.145	0.049	0.055	0.175	0.410	0.256	0.272
n	294	447	241	330	241	330	231	317	231	317

Notes: Standardized β coefficients reported to facilitate comparison. * $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$, *** $p \leq 0.001$; **** $p < 0.10$

for Democrats, seeing more congruent information on SNS is related to also seeing more incongruent information, whereas for Republicans the relationship is negative, meaning seeing more congruent information on social media is related to seeing less incongruent information (*RQ1*). In other words, for Democrats exposure to incongruent and congruent political content tend to coincide in their SNS use, whereas for Republicans, congruent and incongruent content are less likely to occur together, providing a different set of results for *RQ1* about the relationship between seeing political content overall, seeing congruent content, and seeing incongruent content for Republicans vs Democrats.

In terms of posting behaviors, seeing political content associated with more political posting for both groups (*H1*), but *H2a* is only supported only among Democrats, for whom seeing congruent content is associated with frequently posting political content, a relationship that is not significant for Republicans. There is again no relationship between seeing congruent (*H2b*) or incongruent (*RQ2b*) content and political participation among either group. In contrast, *H3* is only supported among Republicans, among whom posting political content on social media is linked to greater political activity, a relationship that is not significant for Democrats.

Additional analyses

To reinforce these findings, a single regression model using the Republican oversample was performed, entering interaction terms for party affiliation (Republican vs Democrat) and the independent variables from the previous models. The Hayes PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2014) with Model 1 was used to test each of these interactions separately to avoid multicollinearity. The PROCESS models provide a more rigorous test of whether the differences in the size of the coefficients and their significance level uncovered by the separate regression analyses for Democrats vs Republicans represent meaningful differences between the groups, as would be suggested by a significant interaction term. The analyses confirm the results presented above. First, seeing political content has a stronger relationship to seeing incongruent content among Democrats ($B = 0.21$, $SE = 0.09$, $p < 0.05$). Moreover, seeing congruent content also produces a stronger positive relationship to seeing incongruent content among Democrats compared to Republicans ($B = 0.22$, $SE = 0.08$, $p < 0.01$), driven by the negative relationship between exposure to congruent and incongruent content among Republicans. Finally, these analyses confirm that posting about politics on SNS produces a stronger relationship to offline political participation among Republicans as compared to Democrats ($B = -0.29$, $SE = 0.11$, $p < 0.01$). Supplemental analyses replicated these relationships on the nationally representative sample and confirmed similar patterns emerged, and these results were also consistent when testing alternative measurements of party affiliation, such as when those who “lean” toward a party were classified as Independents (rather than partisans as presented here) or using the full five-point scale for party affiliation rather than a dummy code (please see the appendices or contact the lead author for more information on these analyses).

Discussion

This study set out to examine how the types of political content that people are exposed to via social media platforms contribute to or hinder political expression and participation. Drawing from theories of incidental exposure, selective exposure, and selective avoidance, this study pays particular attention to the relationship between

congruent and incongruent content, and its effects on democratic outcomes. The results suggest that the type of political content that individuals see in their social media feeds matters greatly for their decisions to engage with politics, both online and offline – and moreover, that these relationships differ depending on the party affiliation of the individual seeing this content.

First, this paper reinforces the value of seeing political content in general – and particularly, seeing congruent political content – for political expression. Exposure to political content from friends on social media should promote expression in two ways: by providing low-cost ways to engage in political expression by replying to existing content and by creating social norms that political expression is acceptable on SNS (Bode and Dalrymple, 2014; Halpern and Gibbs, 2013; Vitak *et al.*, 2011). Notably, seeing incongruent political content does not relate to more online expression, as it may instead heighten the stakes of posting political content when facing an unknown and potentially hostile audience (Eveland and Hively, 2009; Marwick and boyd, 2010; Vraga *et al.*, 2015). Further, for individuals overall, exposure to congruent and incongruent political information in SNS appear at odds, suggesting that some filtering behaviors may be occurring online (Bakshy *et al.*, 2015; Colleoni *et al.*, 2014; Gainous and Wagner, 2014).

Such filtering is of particular concern to democratic scholars, suggesting that although incidental exposure may produce somewhat higher levels of exposure to incongruent political content via SNS than offline, as a whole individuals are taking active steps to reduce their exposure to incongruent content in favor of seeing content that agrees with their predispositions (Bakshy *et al.*, 2015; Colleoni *et al.*, 2014; Garrett, 2009; Kim, 2011). More practically, it may also mean that individuals are seeing less incongruent political content on their social media feeds than we assume, especially those who see political content frequently, which may lessen tolerance and contribute to heightened polarization between parties (Mutz, 2006). At the same time, this filtering may also encourage greater posting behaviors and thus to greater offline participation, reinforcing the notion that political content on social media sites can be a gateway to political action (Bode *et al.*, 2014; Vitak *et al.*, 2011). Although the merits of partisan filtering for democratic society are mixed, it is important to recognize that it does occur on social media, often heralded for its potential to expose people to diverse content more incidentally than other types of discussion networks (Bode, 2016; Kim, 2011).

However, this study also suggests that these relationships differ by party affiliation. In terms of exposure to political content, two differences between Republicans and Democrats are especially important. First, seeing more political content boosts exposure to incongruent political content more for Democrats than Republicans. Second, for Republicans, seeing congruent political content via SNS is associated with seeing less incongruent information, suggesting worries about a political echo chamber online may be true for this group. Yet for Democrats, the opposite occurs: seeing congruent content is related to seeing more incongruent content. These differences may be attributed to a number of factors. First, it may be that Republicans, who are likely to find political disagreement more troubling, are engaging in more selective filtering of their social networks (Jost *et al.*, 2003; Nam *et al.*, 2013). Second, Republicans have been shown to engage in social media in more “activist” ways, which might produce stronger desires for selective filtering and thus create echo chambers online (Colleoni *et al.*, 2014). Third, it may result from a tendency for Democratic youth to speak out in the face of disagreement, lessening the potential for polarized political content in their online spaces (McDevitt, 2010). Finally, it could also be an artifact of the cross-sectional nature

of these data, which were gathered during a relatively low-salience political environment. The patterns of content exposure and potential differences between parties in such exposure may differ depending on the political context in which these relationships are studied, underscoring the importance of studying political content at discrete political moments. Future research should validate these differences and explore the mechanisms by which congruent and incongruent content on social networks become intertwined or separated by different partisan groups, and the environmental forces that contribute to partisan filtering.

Beyond exposure, notable differences also exist between Democrats and Republicans in terms of the relationship of such exposure to political expression and participation. This study finds that seeing political agreement via SNS is particularly important in encouraging Democrats – but not Republicans – to postpolitical content themselves. In the face of such political diversity, which congruent and incongruent information are intermingled, agreement may be especially important to reassure Democrats they do not face a hostile crowd alone (Gearhart and Zhang, 2015; Hampton *et al.*, 2014), whereas Republicans have already ensured that their social networks are relatively “safe” posting environments (Eveland and Hively, 2009). On the other hand, posting political content motivated Republicans, but not Democrats, to participate in offline activities. Choosing to post may be more motivating for Republicans because it further embeds them in a congruent political environment, known to facilitate participation by increasing social support, attitude certainty, and calls for action, whereas for Democrats it embeds them in a diverse environment with mixed effects for participation (Eveland and Hively, 2009; Mutz, 2006). However, social media are heralded for their potential to serve as a gateway into alternative forms of participation (Bode *et al.*, 2014; Vitak *et al.*, 2011), but if it functions more effectively for one political group (Republicans) than another (Democrats), it could create inequalities in participation between these groups.

In considering the levels of political exposure on SNS and its implications for engagement, more research is needed to compare Republicans and Democrats. Given the value of exposure to different views for tolerance – and its potentially demobilizing effects for participation (Mutz, 2006) – party differences in these behaviors may reinforce schisms between groups in how they engage with politics. Future research should also consider whether differences in political orientations or personality factors between the groups, like political interest or conflict avoidance, contribute to the partisan differences uncovered here.

This study is limited as a cross-sectional survey during a time when politics is less salient in April of 2014, which may explain the differences compared to previous studies of Republican vs Democratic use of SNS, which largely occurred during presidential campaigns (Bode *et al.*, 2014; Vitak *et al.*, 2011). However, this also points to the need for more research to investigate how Democrats and Republicans differentially engage with and are affected by political expression via SNS, both in times of political controversy and during less salient times.

Altogether, this study suggests that more attention needs to be paid to the audiences for different type of social media content, especially with regards to politics. Inequality in how Democrats and Republicans engage with social media – both in terms of the political content they see and the impact it has on their further political engagement – may resonate in democratic society at large. Therefore, as politics become a more recognized part of the social media landscape, understanding group differences that create unevenness in the experience of such content is particularly consequential for democratic society.

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Appendix

Models

- (1) Using Republican oversample, party affiliation dummy coded including leaners as partisans, as reported in text of paper.
- (2) Using Republican oversample, party affiliation dummy coded excluding leaners as partisans.
- (3) Using Republican oversample, party affiliation measured on a five-point scale.
- (4) Using generalizable sample, party affiliation dummy coded including leaners as partisans.
- (5) Using generalizable sample, party affiliation dummy coded excluding leaners as partisans.
- (6) Using generalizable sample, party affiliation measured on a five-point scale.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
<i>DV: congruent content</i>						
Party affiliation × incongruent content	0.24 (0.09)***	0.37 (0.10)***	0.08 (0.02)***	0.34 (0.11)**	0.47 (0.12)***	0.11 (0.03)***
<i>DV: incongruent content</i>						
Party affiliation × see political content	0.21 (0.09)*	0.17 (0.10)****	0.05 (0.02)*	0.30 (0.10)**	0.23 (0.12)****	0.07 (0.03)*
Party affiliation × congruent content	0.22 (0.08)**	0.31 (0.08)***	0.06 (0.02)**	0.29 (0.09)**	0.38 (0.10)***	0.08 (0.02)***
<i>DV: political participation</i>						
Party affiliation × post-political content	-0.29 (0.11)**	-0.36 (0.12)**	-0.09 (0.03)**	-0.34 (0.12)**	-0.42 (0.14)**	-0.10 (0.03)**
Notes: All analyses report unstandardized β coefficients using PROCESS Model 1, with standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$; **** $p < 0.10$						

Table AI.
Supplemental
PROCESS
models testing
operationalization
of party affiliation

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