

**Incidental Exposure, Selective Exposure, and Political Information Sharing: Integrating  
Online Exposure Patterns and Expression on Social Media**

Abstract

Political information sharing in social media offers citizens opportunities to engage with news and express their political views, but how do different patterns of online political information exposure, including *both* incidental and selective exposure, affect sharing? Using two-wave panel survey data collected in the United States, we examine the relationship between incidental and selective exposure and their consequent links to political information sharing, across different levels of strength of political party affiliation. Our results demonstrate that incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal information drives stronger partisans to more actively seek out like-minded political content, which subsequently encourages political information sharing on social media. The results highlight the need to consider both types of political information exposure when modeling citizens' political behavior online.

Keywords: Incidental Exposure, Selective Exposure, Social Media, Information Sharing, News, Political Expression

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The widespread adoption of social media has brought along with it important changes to the way people encounter, seek, and engage with news and political information. One of the most important affordances social media offer is the ability to easily share political information with others in one's social network. Rather than being passive consumers of n

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spurring less politically interested or motivated individuals to participate online through low-cost forms of engagement, such as political information sharing (Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016).

While incidental exposure to political information online may make it more difficult to avoid counter-attitudinal ideas, it does not exist in an information exposure vacuum. Although people do not actively avoid online information they disagree with (Garrett, Carnahan, & Lynch, 2013), the internet allows individuals to easily seek out and consume like-minded political news (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008) and this selective exposure is more likely to occur when people strongly identify with one particular political party (Stroud, 2011). One intriguing but unexplored possibility is that repeated accidental exposure to counter-attitudinal information online may motivate those who identify with a political party to increasingly engage in selective exposure, as they seek to reaffirm and reinforce their political identity through like-minded media use over time (Slater, 2007, 2015). This possibility may further catalyze the behavioral consequences of selective exposure to pro-attitudinal political news, such as increased online political engagement (Knobloch-Westerwick & Johnson, 2014) and political information sharing in social media (Hasell & Weeks, 2016).

Taken together, there is reason to believe that both online incidental and selective exposure to political news and information may increase the likelihood of engagement with that content by sharing it with others. However, prior research has not examined how these two forms of information exposure may affect each other, for whom they are most influential, and how they may ultimately impact political information sharing. Using two-wave panel survey data collected

in the United States, we test a theoretical model that accounts for how *both* online incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal political information and selective exposure to pro-attitudinal information affect political information sharing in social media over time. In particular, we examine whether online counter-attitudinal incidental exposure encourages pro-attitudinal selective exposure, which may subsequently facilitate social media political information sharing. We also test whether strength of party affiliation moderates these relationships, as exposure to different types of information should have different behavioral consequences depending on the strength with which people identify with a major political party. In doing so, we provide a more complete theoretical understanding of how unique online information exposure patterns motivate political news and information sharing in social media.

### **Online Incidental Exposure**

The burgeoning literature on online incidental exposure to news challenges previous work warning against the prevalence and negative consequences of selective exposure (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). Most people use a mix of online news sources, including politically diverse mainstream sites (Garrett et al., 2013) and many happen across news when using the internet for non-political purposes, some of which presumably includes counter-attitudinal political information (Tewksbury et al., 2001). Although some users may have good reasons to intentionally seek out counter-attitudinal information (e.g. information utility; Valentino, Banks, Hutchings, & Davis, 2009), there are increasing acknowledgements in the literature that many people are exposed to disagreeable political information without actively seeking it online, which

may affect subsequent behavior differently than actively sought information (Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009). The internet and social media weaken social boundaries, resulting in social networks that offer greater exposure to weak-ties and diverse information (Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2012). As a result, there are ample opportunities for individuals to *inadvertently* encounter opinion-challenging information online (Brundidge, 2010; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017).

While patterns of political information exposure have typically been studied in isolation, the complexity of contemporary online information environments requires us to consider the link *between* incidental exposure and selective exposure. Extant research makes clear that the ability for users to control their information exposure in social media is significant, but by no means total (Bode, 2016; Thorson & Wells, 2016), suggesting the two exposure patterns are related. We first explore the possibility that incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal political information online may motivate users to engage in further information seeking and sharing.

### **Political Information for Self-Affirmation**

When users stumble upon political opinions or information they disagree with online, how do they respond? Media consumption is guided by a desire to seek and process information in a way that reinforces salient social identities (Slater, 2007). How individuals process and respond to political information is influenced in part by the political beliefs and values that are closely linked with one's self-concept (Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2011). Self-concepts comprise both a framework for individuals to organize self-relevant information as well as a blueprint for taking action in order to maintain a positive self-image (Markus & Wurf, 1987).

Particularly for individuals who strongly identify with a political party, political beliefs and party membership are important components of a “political-self,” which lead them to process political information in close relation to their self-concept (Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2004).

Information that challenges strongly held political views paradoxically pushes individuals to engage in cognitions and behaviors designed to reinforce their existing beliefs (Taber & Lodge, 2006). One method of achieving such reinforcement is by selecting media that supports self-relevant social identities (Slater, 2007). This process is facilitated by the need to resolve dissonance between conflicting cognitions (Festinger, 1962), and is enhanced when the dissonant information specifically threatens an individual’s self-concept (Slater, 2015). Counter-attitudinal information encountered incidentally, as opposed to being actively sought, may pose a unique identity threat because individuals may not be prepared for exposure to such information. Because the challenging information is unexpected, it may be particularly dissonance-inducing.

While individuals may take immediate actions to reduce identity threats, research also suggests that cognitive dissonance can have longer-term behavioral effects, because encounters with past dissonance can guide future behavior (Freedman, 1965). Similarly, Slater (2007) argues that media selection and the effects of media use are mutually reinforcing, such that short-term dissonance reduction behaviors (e.g. selective exposure) may be influenced by past information seeking behavior and subsequently result in larger cumulative effects. In the political realm, there is growing evidence that different types of information exposure can change attitudes and behaviors longitudinally (e.g. Boulianne, 2011). Accordingly, we may expect that

repeated incidental exposure to information that threatens one's self-concept may *over time* lead to an increase in information exposure behaviors that promise to protect individuals from identity-challenging information (Slater, 2007, 2015).

Research on self-affirmation theory provides one theoretical explanation for how partisans can resolve the dissonance presented by incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal political information. People are motivated to maintain a sense of self-integrity that assures that, "on the whole, one is a good and appropriate person" (Sherman & Cohen, 2006, pp. 185-186). Such threats to self-integrity can come in the form of challenges to individuals' beliefs, or to group identities, which are central to an individual's understanding of self. As an individual's association with a political party strengthens, their self-concept is more closely tied to political beliefs and counter-attitudinal information comprises a more significant threat that must be addressed (Mason, 2015). Self-affirmation theory suggests that one way to relieve the psychological stress of a threat to self is to engage in behaviors that affirm self-integrity (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Self-affirmation behaviors first remind individuals of a self-relevant value and then allow them to reassert its importance (see McQueen & Klein, 2006). While experimental manipulations of self-affirmation have typically taken the form of essay writing or self-reflection, work in political communication indicates that information seeking behaviors can be theorized as a form of self-affirmation. Knobloch-Westerwick and Meng (2011) suggest that selective exposure serves as a form of self-affirmation for partisans seeking to affirm their political selves in the face of counter-attitudinal messages. As partisanship strengthens, selective



exposure makes self-relevant political attitudes more readily accessible, thereby reinforcing pre-existing political views and re-affirming the self.

Online, where incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal political information is difficult to avoid (Garrett et al., 2013), partisans may over time become motivated to seek self-reinforcing information in order to ameliorate the growing threat to their self-concept. This may be particularly likely during a campaign season, when individuals may repeatedly be exposed to messages that challenge their political views and may persistently feel that their political identities are under threat. This should motivate them to seek attitude-consistent information, which can bolster their self-image and open the possibility of further political engagement (Slater, 2007). Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

*H1: The relationship between incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal political information online (W1) and pro-attitudinal selective exposure online (W2) will become stronger and more positive as strength of political party affiliation increases.*

### **Selective Exposure and Political Information Sharing on Social Media**

Compared to more traditional forms of political participation that require individuals to contribute resources or be physically present (vote, attend a rally, etc.), sharing news or political information in social media is a relatively easy form of political engagement. It has become a prominent behavior online, with half of social media users reporting having shared or reposted news stories within platforms like Facebook or Twitter (Mitchell, Gottfried, Barthel, & Shearer, 2016). We define political information sharing in social media as a form of political expression

that includes posting or recommending news or information about politics and public affairs in order to provide others within a social network access to such information (Kümpel et al., 2015).

Considering that political information sharing on social media is a form of political expression directed at a set of audiences within a specific social context, the extent to which individuals engage in political information sharing may be driven by their perceptions of the opinion climate within their social networks (Vraga, Thorson, Kligler-Vilenchik, & Gee, 2015). Spiral of silence theory suggests that people differ in their tendency to express their opinions, depending on their perception of the opinion climate. That is, when people feel that their opinion is the prevailing one, they are more willing to speak out. On the other hand, when people perceive they are in the opinion minority, they tend to remain silent out of fear that they may be socially isolated or sanctioned because of their divergent opinions (Noelle-Neumann, 1974).

One important factor that affects individuals' perceptions of opinion climates is the degree to which the information they encounter is congruent with pre-existing attitudes and beliefs. Thus, engaging in pro-attitudinal selective exposure may shape people's perception of the opinion climate, which can increase their willingness to express opinions. Recent work has examined how exposure to pro- and counter-attitudinal messages influence perceived opinion climates and subsequent expression in online forums (Yun & Park, 2011) and social media (Gearhart & Zhang, 2015; Kwon, Moon, & Stefanone, 2015). In online forums, when people were presented with messages congruent with their views, they perceived their view to be the majority view and tended to speak out by posting messages (Yun & Park, 2011). Similarly, on

social media, the more people were exposed to information consistent with their views, the more they expressed their views by liking or commenting on someone else's post. However, when people are exposed to counter-attitudinal information, they tend to remain silent on social media, perhaps out of fear of receiving unfavorable reactions from others (Gearhart & Zhang, 2015).

Extending this line of research, we expect that people are more likely to share political information on social media when they are exposed to more pro-attitudinal information through online selective exposure. As individuals encounter pro-attitudinal information online through selective exposure, they are more likely to perceive their opinion to be in the majority, as their existing political views may be reinforced or their uncertainty about their own political positions is reduced (Tsfati, Stroud, & Chotiner, 2014). As a result, people should have less fear of isolation and more confidently express their views by sharing political information on social media. Research supports the notion that exposure to pro-attitudinal political information can increase sharing behavior in social media. For example, Twitter users retweeted more political news when they were exposed to more news from sources that matched their political leanings (An, Quercia, Cha, Gummadi, & Crowcroft, 2014) and exposure to pro-attitudinal partisan news online facilitated political information sharing on social media (Hasell & Weeks, 2016).

Furthermore, there are reasons to expect that the influence of pro-attitudinal online selective exposure on political information sharing in social media increases as one's affiliation with a political party strengthens. First, those who strongly identify with a political party are already committed to specific political beliefs and may more closely monitor the political

opinion climate to determine if they are in the majority (Kwon et al., 2015). Second, stronger partisans may become more certain about their political positions through pro-attitudinal selective exposure, as they are likely to engage in biased information processing in favor of their existing positions (Taber & Lodge, 2006). We therefore expect the following:

*H2: The positive relationship between pro-attitudinal selective exposure to political information online (W2) and political information sharing in social media (W2) (H2a) will become stronger as strength of political party affiliation increases (H2b).*

Given that stronger partisans are expected to be more likely to seek attitude-consistent political information in response to attitude-challenging incidental exposure (H1) and be more likely to share political information as a result of engaging in selective exposure (H2b), we predict the following:

*H3: The indirect association between incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal political information online (W1) and political information sharing on social media (W2) through pro-attitudinal selective exposure to political information (W2) will become stronger and more positive as strength of political party affiliation increases.*

### **The Direct Relationship Between Incidental Exposure, and Political Sharing**

While we expect incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal information to indirectly facilitate political information sharing, it is less clear if there will be a direct relationship between the two. Although previous research does not provide a sufficient theoretical basis for us to make a prediction, this direct relationship is important to test given some evidence that incidental

exposure may be an important gateway to political engagement for individuals who do not strongly identify with a political party. For those without strong political loyalties, inadvertent encounters with politics on social media might offer an opportunity to “catch up” with their more politically engaged and knowledgeable counterparts. For example, Valeriani and Vaccari (2016) found that incidental exposure to political information increases political participation for those less interested in politics because it offers a low-effort path into the world of politics. However, one of the few other studies testing this link found the opposite effect; incidental exposure to information widened the gap in engagement between those interested in news and those who were not (Kim et al., 2013). Given that the literature does not allow us to formulate a clear hypothesis we pose the following research question:

*RQ1: What is the nature of the relationship between incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal political information online (W1) and social media political information sharing (W2) for varying levels of strength of political party affiliation?*

## **Method**

### **Sample**

The data were collected via a two-wave national online survey conducted in the United States. The survey research company *Ipsos* was contracted to administer data collection via their pre-recruited online panel of approximately 1 million households. *Ipsos's* panel is recruited through online sources and is asked to periodically participate in online surveys. Quotas were applied for age and gender in order to ensure the sample reasonably resembles the U.S.

population. Although the quota sampling method does not produce a probability-based random sample, the resulting data reflect the demographic characteristics of the national population, as reported by the US Census Bureau in the 2012 American Community Survey (ACS). In W1, the median age for individuals 18 years or older was 47 in the current study and 45-54 in the ACS. Women comprised 52% of the current sample and 51.4% of the population in the ACS. Household incomes were comparable as well, as the median income in the study was \$60,000 – 64,999 compared to \$50,000 – 74,999 in the ACS. The sample did exhibit differences in education level from the ACS, as the median education for respondents 25 years or older in the study was “college diploma,” as opposed to “some college” in the ACS. Sample demographics in W2 are comparable to W1, though the median age is older (53 years old).

Data for the first wave were collected October 19-25, 2012 during the general campaign period of the presidential election. 17,381 individuals were invited to participate in the study and 1,250 respondents completed the first wave, resulting in a completion rate of 7.2%. The completion rate is similar to response rates for online surveys conducted during this time period by research centers such as Pew (Pew, 2012). All W1 respondents were invited via email to participate in the second wave of the study, which was fielded from November 10-19, 2012. 950 individuals completed W2 for a retention rate of 76%.

Because our primary criterion variable—political information sharing in social media—requires individuals to use social networking sites, all analyses reported below were limited to respondents who answer “Yes” to the following question in W2: “Do you use Social Networking

Sites (SNS) such as Facebook and Twitter?” A total of 861 (68.9%) respondents reported using social media in W1, while 582 (64.3%) used social media in W2. A data quality check revealed that 8 of the 582 social media users from W2 provided invalid data (e.g. race, gender, and age notably different between the two waves) and were dropped from subsequent analyses.

### Measures

**Counter-attitudinal incidental exposure.** To measure incidental exposure to attitude-challenging information, respondents first read an introduction noting that “sometimes people accidentally come across political opinions or news on the internet that they did not seek out or expect to see.” Respondents were then asked, “In the past month, how often have you accidentally encountered information online that...” 1) was critical of a candidate you support; 2) was favorable toward a candidate you oppose; and 3) disagreed with your political views. Responses were measured using a six-point scale (1= “none”, 2 = “about once”, 3 = “2-3 times”, 4 = “once a week”, 5 = “a few times a week”, 6 = “every day”) and the average of the three items was used ( $W^1 M = 2.51, SD = 1.59, \pm = .96$ ).

**Pro-attitudinal selective exposure.** The degree to which respondents actively sought out information consistent with their existing political views was measured using the average of three items on the same six-point scale. Respondents were first told that “sometimes people intentionally search for certain political opinions or news on the internet” and then asked how often in the past month they had intentionally searched for information online that 1) was positive toward a candidate they support; 2) critical of a candidate they oppose; 3) supported

their political view ( $W^1 M = 1.80, SD = 1.32, r = .89$ ;  $W^2 M = 1.95, SD = 1.38, r = .91$ ).

Interestingly, despite concerns that the internet promotes like-minded exposure at the expense of attitude challenging exposure (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008), levels of pro-attitudinal selective exposure in both waves were significantly lower than levels of incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal information ( $ps < .001$ ).

**Political information sharing.** Political information sharing within social media was measured using the average of two items that asked, “in the past month, how often have you 1) reached out to friends, family, or acquaintances individually through social networking sites (SNS) to share information or views about politics and current affairs; and 2) posted information or views on SNS that many people could see to share information or views about politics and current affairs.” Responses were measured on the same six-point scale used to assess information exposure ( $W^1 M = 1.92, SD = 1.35, r = .84$ ;  $W^2 M = 2.03, SD = 1.46, r = .83$ )

**Strength of party affiliation.** To assess the strength of individuals’ affiliation with one of the two major political parties in the US, respondents were asked in the first wave to report their party affiliation from the following options: Strong Democrat, Moderate Democrat, Independent, Moderate Republican, Strong Republican, Other. Because it was not possible to ascertain the strength of their affiliation, those who identified as “Other” ( $N = 36$ ) were dropped from all analyses (including reported descriptive statistics), leaving a final sample of 538 respondents, of which 187 (34.8%) were Democrats, 215 (38.1%) were Republicans, and 136 (25.3%) were Independents. In line with previous research treating strength of partisanship as an



ordinal and linear variable (e.g. Eveland & Shah, 2003; Mutz, 2002), this variable was recoded to assess strength of political party affiliation with three levels: 1 = non-partisans (*Independents*,  $N = 136$ , 2 = moderate partisans (*moderate Republicans/Democrats*,  $N = 240$ , and 3 = strong partisans (*strong Republicans/Democrats*,  $N = 162$ ) ( $M = 2.05$ ,  $SD = 0.74$ ).

**Control variables.** In addition to demographics, we also controlled for variables that theoretically may relate to the independent and mediating variables, as well as influence the dependent variable. Given that individuals who seek like-minded news also use attitude-challenging news (Garrett et al., 2013), we first controlled for counter-attitudinal selective exposure, which was measured using a single item assessing the extent to which individuals sought political information that was critical of a candidate they supported ( $W^1 M = 1.69$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ). Next, prior research indicates that individuals who are more interested in politics and who consume more news are more likely to share political information on social media (Hasell & Weeks, 2016). Thus, we also control for political interest ( $W^1 M = 3.53$ ,  $SD = 1.54$ , six-point scale), traditional media use (average use of local, national, and cable television news and newspapers;  $W^1 M = 3.20$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ,  $\pm = .71$ ; five-point scale 1 = “never” to 5 = “very often”), and online news site use ( $W^1 M = 3.43$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ). Finally, in order to account for overall sharing activity in social media, we also controlled for personal information sharing, which was measured using two items similar to political information sharing, but asked the degree to which social media were used to share personal matters ( $W^1 M = 2.42$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ,  $r = .75$ ).

## Results

To test the theoretical model (see SI, Figure S1), we used the SPSS macro PROCESS (Hayes, 2013), which utilizes ordinary least squares regression. We examine how strength of political party affiliation moderates three relationships, including the links between online counter-attitudinal incidental exposure ( $W^1$ ) and pro-attitudinal selective exposure ( $W^2$ ), pro-attitudinal selective exposure ( $W^2$ ) and political information sharing ( $W^2$ ), and counter-attitudinal incidental exposure ( $W^1$ ) and political information sharing ( $W^2$ ). The mediation part of the model, therefore, tests the indirect effect of online counter-attitudinal incidental exposure ( $W^1$ ) on political information sharing ( $W^2$ ), through pro-attitudinal selective exposure ( $W^2$ ) at various levels of strength of political party affiliation. It is important to note that our model takes advantage of the panel survey design and controls for prior levels of both pro-attitudinal selective exposure and political information sharing. In doing so, the data offer more insights than a cross-sectional survey and are able to demonstrate the extent to which the independent variables predict *change* in the outcome variables (Eveland & Thompson, 2006).

Turning to the test of H1, which predicted that the relationship between incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal political information and pro-attitudinal selective exposure online will become stronger and more positive as strength of party affiliation increases. Although not hypothesized, we first examine the simple relationships between the predictor variables and pro-attitudinal selective exposure ( $W^2$ ), without the interaction term (Table 1, Column 1). We see that neither counter-attitudinal incidental exposure nor strength of party affiliation directly predict significant changes in pro-attitudinal selective exposure. However, when added to the

model (Table 1, Column 2), the interaction between counter-attitudinal incidental exposure in wave one and strength of party affiliation is positive and significant,  $b = .10 (.03)$ ,  $p = .003$  (all two-tailed). This relationship holds despite accounting for prior instances of pro-attitudinal selective exposure ( $W^1$ ), which strongly predicted wave two selective exposure,  $b = .44 (.07)$ ,  $p = .000$ . To better understand the nature of the interaction, we probed the interactive effect using the ‘pick-a-point’ procedure by setting the value of the moderator to each of the three levels of strength of party affiliation (Hayes, 2013). As evident in Table 2, the strength of the relationship between counter-attitudinal incidental exposure ( $W^1$ ) and pro-attitudinal selective exposure ( $W^2$ ) depends on strength of party affiliation. For non- and moderate partisans, incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal information does not facilitate seeking like-minded content. However, when strong partisans are incidentally exposed to information they disagree with, they are significantly more likely to engage in attitude-consistent selective exposure, even after accounting for prior levels of this behavior,  $b = .12 (.05)$ ,  $p = .01$ . As a result, we find support for H1.

The second hypothesis predicted that there is a positive link between pro-attitudinal selective exposure to political information online ( $W^2$ ) and sharing political information in social media ( $W^2$ ) (H2a), which will become stronger as affiliation with a political party strengthens (H2b). We first assess how the variables in the model are associated with political information sharing without the interactions. Unsurprisingly, political information sharing in the first wave strongly predicts sharing in the second wave,  $b = .60 (.04)$ ,  $p < .001$ . Despite the strength of this association, the coefficient for the relationship between pro-attitudinal selective exposure and

political information sharing is positive,  $b = .23 (.05)$ ,  $p < .001$ , indicating that the more people seek like-minded content, the more they share political information on social media (Table 1, Column 3). In the second model we add the interactions, and the interaction between pro-attitudinal selective exposure and strength of party affiliation continues to have a significant impact on political information sharing in the second wave,  $b = .11 (.04)$ ,  $p = .01$ , despite controlling for prior sharing behavior (Table 1, Column 4). As an example of the substantive nature of this effect, a strong partisan would see an additional increase of .22 units in information sharing over non-partisans as a function of a one-unit change in pro-attitudinal selective exposure. When probing the interaction at each level of the moderating variable using the pick-a-point approach (Table 3), we see that for moderate and strong partisans (but not non-partisans), there is a positive and significant relationship between pro-attitudinal selective exposure and political information sharing, which suggests the relationship becomes stronger as strength of party affiliation increases. As a result, we find support for H2a and H2b.

Our third hypothesis predicted that the indirect relationship between incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal political information ( $W^1$ ) and social media political information sharing ( $W^2$ ) through pro-attitudinal selective exposure to political information ( $W^2$ ) would become stronger and more positive as strength of party affiliation increases. We tested this by running the model at each of the three levels of strength of party affiliation using 10,000 bootstrapping samples with 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (Table 4). For both non- and moderate partisans there is no indirect effect of incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal information on

political information sharing through selective exposure, as the confidence interval contains zero in both cases. For strong partisans, we find a significant indirect effect on political information sharing, as the point estimate for the effect is .039 (.022) and the 95% confidence intervals do not cross zero (.003 to .087). This indicates that for strong partisans, a one unit change in counter-attitudinal incidental exposure indirectly results in a .039 unit change in information sharing as a function of counter-attitudinal incidental exposure's influence on pro-attitudinal selective exposure. Although this effect is modest in size, it remains significant despite controlling for prior instances of information sharing, as well as a several week gap in the measurement of the independent and dependent variables. This provides evidence in support of H3.

Finally, our research question examines the direct relationship between incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal information in the first wave and social media political information sharing in Wave 2, as a function of strength of party affiliation. When the interaction is not included in the model, counter-attitudinal incidental exposure ( $W^1$ ) did not bear a direct relationship with information sharing,  $b = .05 (.03)$ , *ns*. Adding the interaction term, the nature of this relationship did not vary by strength of party affiliation, as the coefficient was not significant,  $b = -.05 (.04)$ , *ns*. Given that we did not have strong expectations about this relationship, we conducted further exploratory analyses by probing this interaction (see Hayes, 2013 for a discussion of probing non-significant interactions). We do not find a significant direct effect at any level of strength of party affiliation, though the relationship between counter-attitudinal incidental exposure and information sharing for non-partisans approached the cut-off

for significance,  $b = .09$  (.05),  $p = .06$ . Thus, we do not find strong evidence that accidental exposure to attitude challenging information directly relates to political information sharing.

### Discussion

This study advances our theoretical understanding of online political engagement by examining how *both* online incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal political information and pro-attitudinal selective exposure relate to political information sharing in social media. The results suggest sharing is not uniformly a direct response to exposure to political information. Instead, the factors that drive sharing vary by both information exposure patterns and strength of political party affiliation. Our results highlight some important theoretical contributions.

First, this study furthers our understanding of how partisans encounter political information online and in social media. In particular, it illustrates one potential mechanism through which partisans engage in selective exposure online. For stronger partisans who may be more invested in the political process, incidental exposure to attitude-challenging information encouraged them to seek like-minded political content, perhaps to reaffirm and reinforce their political self-concept. Our results here point to a potential paradox of such counter-attitudinal information online. That is, exposure to disagreeable information online is thought to be democratically valuable, but it may in fact drive some partisans to seek even *more* like-minded content, thus diminishing the benefits of attitude-challenging information. While this study provides evidence that exposure to counter-attitudinal information may drive stronger partisans to seek more information that reinforces existing attitudes and beliefs (e.g. Bennett & Iyengar,

2008; Slater, 2007), we know that the internet continues to promote exposure to disagreeable information through both active choice and incidental encounters (Brundidge, 2010; Garrett et al., 2013). Our findings therefore do not necessarily provide support for so-called online “echo chambers” because the nature of the internet and social media continue to make it difficult to avoid counter-attitudinal information. In fact, respondents reported significantly higher exposure to counter-attitudinal information they saw incidentally than like-minded content they intentionally sought. Yet we do find that incidental exposure to disagreeable information may not have the theorized positive effect on political discourse.

Our results also hint at the potential outsized influence stronger partisans may have in spreading political information within online social networks. We find that stronger partisans are more likely to share news and political information following exposure to pro-attitudinal information. Although our data do not provide insights into what information was shared, it is reasonable to suspect that some of the content distributed is of a partisan nature. While partisan news audiences remain small, stronger partisans may enhance the reach of this content, bringing it to others in their social network who may not actively seek it on their own (Hasell & Weeks, 2016). Not only might stronger partisans increase the audience of partisan news through sharing, they may alter others’ perceptions of important issues, news credibility, and information seeking patterns. Recent work argues that those who rely mainly on shared news in social media may over time develop different perceptions of what political issues are important (Bright, 2016). Other work demonstrates that exposure to news shared by others in social media increases

perceived credibility of the news source and intention to seek more news from that source (Turcotte et al., 2015). Taken together, this suggests that partisans' sharing patterns may be highly influential for the beliefs and behaviors of others in their social networks. Moving forward, it will be important for future research to further tease out the effects of partisans' sharing in social media, paying particular attention to what information is shared and its effects.

This study sheds important theoretical light on who shares political information on social media and why they do it, but it also illustrates the importance of accounting for incidental and selective exposure simultaneously. Although some have speculated on how these two forms of exposure might work together to affect political engagement online (e.g. Bode, 2016; Thorson & Wells, 2016), to our knowledge ours is the first study to empirically test how incidental and selective exposure simultaneously influence political information sharing. Prior research has nearly universally studied these two phenomena independently, when in reality they are in no way mutually exclusive. As we argue and find evidence for here, these two patterns of exposure are likely to influence not only political outcomes of interest, but also each other. Individuals' political information exposure is likely to be a mix of both information they seek and stumble across. By accounting for both political information exposure patterns, we better capture how individuals encounter and respond to information online.

Finally, this study adds to the budding literature on the link between incidental exposure and political engagement. While prior work has conflictingly found incidental exposure to both lessen (Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016) and increase (Kim et al., 2013) gaps in engagement, we



found no direct effect of incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal information on information sharing across levels of strength of party affiliation. Given that our measures of incidental exposure and engagement were different from this extant work, it is difficult to directly compare our findings. It may be that the type of incidental exposure—counter-attitudinal, pro-attitudinal, or neutral—bears different relationships to different forms of engagement. It is possible, for example, that like-minded content encountered incidentally may work similarly to attitude-consistent information that is actively sought and motivate individuals to get involved. Unpacking if, when, and how incidental exposure directly encourages engagement is an important task as this area of research moves forward. Controlled studies that manipulate the volume and type of incidental exposure and its subsequent effects may be particularly useful in better understanding the nature of these relationships.

Our panel survey design offers numerous advantages over traditional cross-sectional studies, most notably the ability to control for prior media use and sharing behavior, which allows us to examine changes in our dependent variables over time. Despite this strength, the study is also limited in a few ways. First, this study does not examine what political information our respondents shared or their motivations for doing so. We are able to demonstrate that engaging in selective exposure is associated with increases in political information sharing, but we cannot establish that content from like-minded media was shared. Establishing what is shared is an important question for future research to address.

Second, although we propose self-affirmation as a theoretical mechanism in our model,

our data do not allow us to directly test this, nor can we entirely rule out alternative explanations. Future work should more specifically test the psychological processes that shape partisans' response to dissonant political information. In particular, experimental designs that replicate our findings would be particularly useful for demonstrating how incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal information results in pro-attitudinal selective exposure in the *short-term*. This is important because reactions to dissonant information may be quite immediate for stronger partisans and the design of the current study is unable to capture the immediate behavioral responses. However, given that partisans are likely to repeatedly encounter counter-attitudinal information during the course of an election, we believe the current study's panel survey design has well captured the over time relationships between the two types of exposure and demonstrated longitudinal effects of this pattern of exposure on political information sharing.

Third, when considering partisan political information and exposure patterns, there are four potential combinations: information can be pro- or counter-attitudinal, which can be encountered incidentally or selectively. We account for three of the four, but our survey did not ask about pro-attitudinal incidental exposure. Although ours is one of the first studies to directly include both incidental and selective exposure, future work investigating information exposure patterns should account for each combination. Relatedly, counter-attitudinal selective exposure was controlled for, but measured using a single item, which prohibits reliability assessments. As with any survey, we also relied on self-reported measures of media use and behavior, which required subjective assessments of exposure to content and engagement. While this is a

limitation in measurement, we believe our hypotheses offer reasonable, theoretically-driven tests of the process of interest, and we have no reason to suspect that any response error was not evenly distributed throughout the sample. Finally, the data for this study were collected in 2012. Given increased adoption of social media as a platform for political communication in the intervening years, it will be important to replicate these findings with more recent data.

Political information sharing in social media is a relatively easy form of political expression and engagement that has become an increasingly prominent behavior online. At the same time, the internet and social media allow individuals to encounter political information in multiple ways, which may affect whether or not they share content. This study demonstrates that there is not a universal path to sharing, but rather sharing depends on both individual characteristics and the nature of the information environment.

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**Table 1.** Predicting Pro-attitudinal Selective Exposure ( $W^2$ ) and Social Media Political Information Sharing ( $W^2$ )

	Pro-attitudinal Selective Exposure ( $W^2$ )	Pro-attitudinal Selective Exposure ( $W^2$ )	Social Media Political Information Sharing ( $W^2$ )	Social Media Political Information Sharing ( $W^2$ )
Counter-attitudinal Incidental Exposure ( $W^1$ )	.02 (.03)	-.19 (.08)*	.05 (.03)	.14 (.08) <sup>#</sup>
Strength of Party Affiliation ( $W^1$ )	.10 (.06) <sup>#</sup>	-.16 (.10)	.09 (.06)	-.01 (.12)
CAIE ( $W^1$ ) x SoP ( $W^1$ )	---	.10 (.03)**	---	-.05 (.04)
Pro-attitudinal Selective Exposure ( $W^1$ )	.45 (.07)***	.44 (.07)***	-.05 (.08)	-.06 (.08)
Counter-attitudinal Selective Exposure ( $W^1$ )	.17 (.07)*	.17 (.07)*	.06 (.07)	.07 (.07)
Pro-attitudinal Selective Exposure ( $W^2$ )	---	---	.23 (.05)***	.01 (.10)
PASE ( $W^2$ ) x SoP ( $W^1$ )	---	---	---	.11 (.04)*
Social Media Political Information Sharing ( $W^1$ )	.08 (.04) <sup>#</sup>	.07 (.04) <sup>#</sup>	.60 (.04)***	.59 (.04)***
Social Media Personal Information Sharing ( $W^1$ )	-.05 (.04)	-.05 (.04)	-.02 (.04)	-.01 (.04)
Age ( $W^1$ )	-.01 (.00) <sup>#</sup>	-.01 (.00)*	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)
Gender ( $W^1$ )	-.07 (.09)	-.07 (.09)	.12 (.09)	.11 (.09)
Education ( $W^1$ )	.04 (.05)	.04 (.05)	-.10 (.05)*	-.09 (.05)*
Political Interest ( $W^1$ )	.11 (.03)**	.11 (.03)**	.09 (.04)**	.09 (.04)*
Traditional Media Use ( $W^1$ )	.04 (.05)	.04 (.05)	-.01 (.05)	-.00 (.05)
Online News Use ( $W^1$ )	.08 (.04)*	.08 (.03)*	.00 (.04)	.01 (.04)

Constant	0.01 (.35)	0.59 (.39)	0.07 (.36)	0.26 (.43)
R <sup>2</sup> ( <i>F</i> )	0.528 (49.03)	0.536 (46.60)	0.551 (48.22)	0.557 (43.67)
(df)	(12, 525)	(13, 524)	(13, 524)	(15, 522)

*Note.* Unstandardized coefficients reported. Standard errors in parentheses. # $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$  (two-tailed).

**Table 2**

Conditional Effect of Counter-attitudinal Incidental Exposure ( $W^1$ ) on Pro-attitudinal Selective Exposure ( $W^2$ ) at Values of Strength of Party Affiliation

<b>Strength of Party Affiliation</b>	<b>Coefficient (s.e.)</b>	<b>-value</b>	<b>-value (two-tailed)</b>
Non-partisans	-.09 (.05)	-1.92	.05
Moderate Partisans	.01 (.03)	0.42	.67
Strong Partisans	.12 (.05)	2.56	.01

**Table 3**

Conditional Effect of Pro-attitudinal Selective Exposure ( $W^2$ ) on Social Media Information Sharing ( $W^2$ ) at Values of Strength of Party Affiliation

<b>Strength of Party Affiliation</b>	<b>Coefficient (s.e.)</b>	<b>-value</b>	<b>-value (two-tailed)</b>
Non-partisans	.12 (.06)	1.83	.07
Moderate Partisans	.22 (.05)	4.95	.000
Strong Partisans	.33 (.06)	5.57	.000

**Table 4**

Conditional Indirect Effects of Counter-attitudinal Incidental Exposure (CAIE) ( $W^1$ ) on Social Media Political Information Sharing (SMPIS) ( $W^2$ ) through Pro-attitudinal Selective Exposure (PASE) ( $W^2$ ) at Values of Strength of Party Affiliation

<b>Strength of Party Affiliation</b>	<b>Point Estimate</b>	<b>95% C.I.</b>
Non-partisans	-.011 (.009)	-.032 to .004
Moderate Partisans	.003 (.008)	-.011 to .020

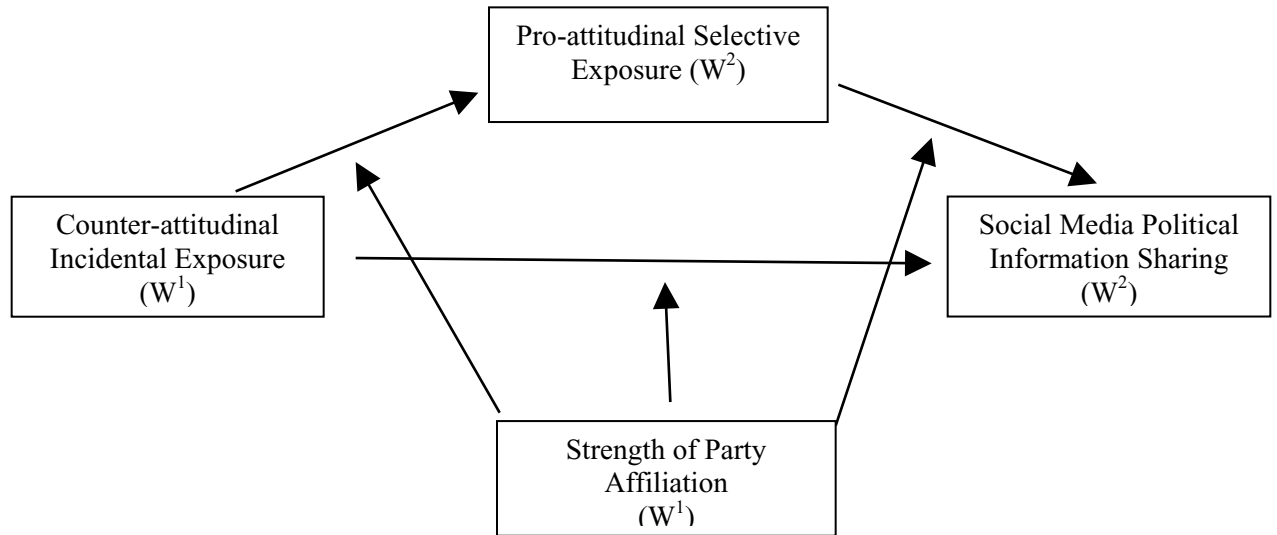
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Strong Partisans	.039 (.022)	.003 to .087
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*Note:* Path estimates are unstandardized coefficients. Indirect effects based on 10,000 bootstrapping samples with 95% biased corrected confidence intervals.

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**Online Supplemental Information (SI):****Figure S1.** Theoretical Model of Social Media Political Information Sharing

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**Incidental Exposure, Selective Exposure, and Political Information Sharing: Integrating  
Online Exposure Patterns and Expression on Social Media**

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