

Partisan Provocation: The Role of Partisan News Use and Emotional Responses in Political  
Information Sharing in Social Media

Abstract

Citizens increasingly rely on social media to consume and disseminate news and information about politics, but the factors that drive political information sharing on these sites are not well understood. This study focused on how online partisan news use influences political information sharing in part because of the distinct negative emotions it arouses in its audience. Using panel survey data collected during the 2012 U.S. presidential election, we found that use of proattitudinal partisan news online is associated with increased anger, but not anxiety, directed at the opposing party's presidential candidate and that anger subsequently facilitated information sharing about the election on social media. The results suggest partisan media may drive online information sharing by generating anger in its audience.

*Keywords:* Partisan news media, emotion, information sharing, social media

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Partisan Provocation: The Role of Partisan News Use and Emotional Responses in Political Information Sharing in Social Media

In the modern media environment, socially shared political information is increasingly important as both a means of political expression and an amplifier of political news (e.g., Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux, & Zheng, 2014). Citizens turn to social media to express political opinions, share news and information, and seek information and opinions posted by others (Glynn, Hoffman, & Huges, 2012; Weeks & Holbert, 2013). About half of Facebook users in the U.S. consume news on the social networking site (Pew, 2014a) and other research found social media provided an important platform for political opinion expression and discussion (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013; Gil de Zuniga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Valenzuela, 2013).

However, prior research has not clearly identified the factors that motivate citizens to share political information with others in their online social networks. This study adds to our understanding of citizens' communicative behavior by highlighting the connection between online partisan news use, negative emotions, and political information sharing in social media. In particular, we focus on how partisan media use elicits anger and anxiety in a manner that may influence the degree to which people post and share political news and information in social media.

Recent research has begun to explore what motivations and conditions drive news and information sharing online and this work indicates that emotional arousal facilitated information diffusion, and that emotional content was more likely to be shared (see Berger, 2011; Berger & Milkman, 2012). Given that politics are inherently emotional (Marcus, 2000), this prior research suggests that citizens who experience strong emotional responses to political content and actors may be more likely to share information in social media. To date,

however, this link remains untested and the current study explored this possibility in the context of one likely source for citizens' emotional responses to politics: partisan news.

Based on theories of emotion, in particular the theory of affective intelligence and cognitive appraisal theories, we posit that partisan media use is conducive to specific, negative emotional arousal that affects the extent to which people share information about political news online. Using data from two-waves of a nationally representative panel survey collected in the United States during the 2012 presidential election, we found support for a theoretical model in which online partisan media use triggered anger (but not anxiety) toward the opposed presidential candidate, which subsequently increased campaign information sharing behavior in social media.

### **Emotions and Politics**

Emotions are pervasive in politics. Political leaders frequently speak in emotional terms, and news coverage of politics can be highly emotional (Marcus, 2000; Graber, 1996). Emotions are defined as “internal, mental states representing evaluative, valenced reactions to events, agents, or objects that vary in intensity...[t]hey are generally short-lived, intense, and directed at some external stimuli” (Nabi, 1999 p. 295). Emotions are an important factor in how people respond to stimuli in their environment and different emotions are associated with unique motivations and goals, cognitive appraisals, and action tendencies (Frijda, 1986; Lazarus, 1991; Roseman, Wiest, & Swartz, 1994). Scholarly attention to the role of emotions in politics has recently begun to focus on the influence of two distinct, negative emotions—anger and anxiety—as these emotions can lead to divergent political attitudes and behaviors

(e.g., MacKuen, Wolak, Keele & Marcus, 2010; Marcus, MacKuen, & Neuman, 2011; Valentino, Brader, Groenendyk, Gregorowicz, & Hutchings, 2011).

### **Partisan News Use and Emotional Responses**

Despite the attention to the roles anger and anxiety play in the political process, research has not fully examined whether explicitly *partisan news* use elicits discrete negative emotions in consumers. Prior research has indicated that general news coverage can evoke negative discrete emotional responses in audience members, including anxiety (or fear) and anger, and these unique emotions subsequently resulted in different political attitudes and behaviors (Goodall, Slater, & Myers, 2013; Nabi, 1999, 2010; Shoshani & Slone, 2008). For example, fear (anxiety) can be elicited through news media if there is a perceived threat to an individual's personal safety or if the story lacks a causal factor for an event, which result in protective behaviors (Goodall et al., 2013; Nabi, 2003). Other research found that news coverage of major world events, most notably the 11 September 2001, terrorist attacks, triggered negative emotional responses, including anxiety (Bucy, 2003; Cho et al., 2003).

Anger can also be elicited in news media in a number of ways. For example, anger can arise if news coverage suggests a perceived offense to the individual or if the story includes a target to blame for some transgression, both of which should result in a desire for retributive action (Goodall et al., 2013; Nabi, 2003). News coverage also elicits anger in people when the story threatens their identity or worldview (Arpan & Nabi, 2011) or when the news focuses on conflict rather than substance (Gross & Brewer, 2007).

News media have always had emotional elements. By simply reporting on current events such crime, war, disasters, triumphs, and successes, the news of the day inherently

elicits emotional responses from viewers and readers who empathize with those affected (Graber, 1996). However, the modern media environment has seen a rise in sensationalism and emotionality. Since the 1960s and 1970s, television news has become more episodic, narrative, and entertainment-oriented (Iyengar, 1991; Shudson, 2003), and emotional appeals have become more explicit and accepted within much of mainstream journalism (Peters, 2011). As new technologies enabled the expansion of the media environment, the news industry has faced increasing internal and external competition for a smaller share of the audience (Prior, 2007, 2013), resulting in shift toward more emotional storytelling and dramatization in an effort to recapture or retain that audience. Indeed, news consumers tend to prefer and select news content that has more negative affect in its coverage (Trussler & Soroka, 2014).

Partisan news media are an extension of this trend. On television, partisan news media tend to reserve the prime-time hours for personality-based, “commentary”-style news shows that have helped networks such as Fox News Channel become highly profitable (Carr & Arango, 2010). These commentary style shows often purposefully attempt to elicit emotions from viewers; the popular television news host Bill O’Reilly explicitly states that he aims to arouse anger in his audience (O’Reilly, 2006). Importantly, audiences perceive these opinionated programs to be more biased and emotional than nonopinionated news, especially when they disagree with the content (Feldman, 2011).

In digital media, partisan news websites, blogs, and forums may similarly encourage emotional arousal through the stories they cover or by emphasizing the merits of one party and refuting the ideas and motivations of the other (e.g., Baum & Groeling, 2008). Further, the likeminded political views that partisan news present help to reinforce or make salient

political identities (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012; Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2011, Levendusky, 2013a), which can evoke anger when that identity is threatened (Arpan & Nabi, 2011). Indeed, recent research found that partisan news use was more likely to elicit generalized anger than was more balanced news coverage (Wojcieszak, Bimber, Feldman, & Stroud, 2015).

We therefore suggest that proattitudinal news use leads people to become angry with members of the opposing party. There is evidence that partisan news tends to focus more on opposing candidates, and the effects of partisan news tend to be based upon views of the opposing candidate rather than the supported candidate (Smith & Searles, 2014). That negativity in news generally increases anger (Park, 2015). Further research has found that exposure to partisan news significantly influenced general negative affective responses towards members of opposition parties (Garrett, Gvirsman, Johnson, Tsfati, Neo, & Dal, 2014; Levendusky, 2013a), and that stronger party identification lead to more negative emotional and physiological responses to political news (Blanton, Strauts, & Perez, 2012).

In sum, there is evidence to suggest that consuming partisan news can not only arouse emotions, but it can direct those emotions towards specific targets. For example, in the context of election news, by blaming the opposing party's candidate for the country's problems or discussing their policy proposals as threats to individuals' well-being, it is possible that use of attitude-consistent partisan news online will foster anger and anxiety toward an opposed presidential candidate. Yet, the possible direct relationships between partisan news use and anger and anxiety aimed at political targets have not been fully explored. Considering prior research, we propose:

**H1:** Proattitudinal online news use ( $W^1$ ) will be positively associated with anger (a) and anxiety (b) directed at the opposing party's presidential candidate ( $W^2$ ).

### **Emotion and Political Information Sharing**

The expression of opinions about news and politics is a key component to a healthy deliberative democracy (Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004). There are a number of ways in which citizens can do this both on and offline, but interactive political information sharing has become an important part of modern political expression (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013; Gil de Zuniga et al., 2012; Valenzuela, 2013; Weeks & Holbert, 2013). Many people avoid discussing political issues in their wider social circles for fear of the confrontation or social isolation that political disagreement might create (Eliasoph, 1998; Mutz & Mondak, 2006; Noelle-Neumann, 1993). However, computer mediated communication allows individuals to overcome fears of confrontation and disagreement because there is less risk of isolation in digital contexts, making political expression more likely, even among those who might fear isolation (Ho & McLeod, 2008). Of course, there are negative aspects of online political expression, especially in anonymous forums, including increased incivility and personal attacks (Gervais, 2014; Halpern & Gibbs, 2013). Despite this, digital media make political expression psychologically easier and less costly in terms of time and effort compared with many other forms of political expression.

As people increasingly use social media as a news source and political discussion platform, understanding the factors that predict political information sharing online is important. Research in this area has identified important demographic and personality characteristics that facilitate political information sharing (e.g., Glynn et al., 2012) as well as

certain gratifications that such behaviors meet (Lee & Ma, 2012). Weeks and Holbert (2013) examined the relationship between news use and information sharing and found that for the general public, use of newspapers and television news, including partisan news, were not directly associated with information sharing. What has not been tested, however, are possible indirect routes through which partisan media may affect information sharing in social media. Many questions therefore remain unanswered regarding the mechanisms driving political information sharing online.

One theoretically promising explanation arises out of recent research examining the relationship between emotion and general news and information sharing (Berger, 2011). In a study of the New York Times website, Berger and Milkman (2012) found that emotionally arousing stories, including those that generated negative emotions, were more likely to be both read and shared, although the study did not focus explicitly on political information. A similar study of Twitter messages found that emotionally negative political messages were more likely to be shared, or retweeted (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2012). These studies suggest that emotion may encourage people to share information or express political opinions online.

This research raises important questions about whether anger and anxiety reported after exposure to partisan media facilitate political information sharing. Anger is an approach emotion that occurs when an injustice is perceived to have occurred and is associated with mobilization, taking action, and behaviors that seek restitution or punish others (Carver & Harmon-Jones, 2009; Frijda, 1986; Lazarus, 1991; Nabi, 2003). Indeed, anger motivates individuals to get involved and participate in politics in the short term (Valentino et al., 2011), increases political interest and attention (Valentino, Hutchings, Banks, & Davis, 2008), and facilitates a desire for additional news and information that confirms prior beliefs



(Arpan & Nabi, 2011; MacKuen et al., 2010). One relatively easy way for people to participate in politics and express their anger is by sharing political information online. If people are angry with an opposed political candidate, one can reasonably suspect that they are more motivated to share information within social media that seeks to discredit or punish the target of that anger. In this sense, sharing provides the outlet for people to engage in the retributive actions associated with anger (e.g., Nabi, 2003). Considering this, we hypothesize:

**H2:** Anger directed at the opposed presidential candidate ( $W^2$ ) will be positively associated with frequency of online information sharing about the election ( $W^2$ ).

The influence of anxiety directed at an opposed political candidate on information sharing is less clear. Affective intelligence theory posits that anxiety is a negative emotional state that occurs when an individual encounters novel or threatening stimuli (Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000). Because anxiety is often associated with uncertainty and a lack of personal control (Smith & Ellsworth, 1985), anxious individuals often engage in behaviors to reduce such feelings, such as increased information seeking (Marcus et al., 2000). Like anger, anxiety has been found to increase attention and interest in politics (Valentino et al., 2008) but its motivational effects on political expression and involvement were less certain. Anxiety at times encouraged low-effort political involvement and at other times decreased political engagement (Valentino et al., 2011). Because anxiety is often associated with uncertainty it may increase information seeking as people seek to reduce those feelings (Smith & Ellsworth, 1985; Valentino et al., 2008).

Building on research based on affective intelligence theory, we suggest that sharing political information may actually be a form of information seeking, as people intend to gauge others' opinions through their dissemination of news or political content. If so, we

would expect anxiety directed at an opposed candidate to be positively related to political information sharing in social media, as people seek to diminish their anxiety. This contention has received support, as heightened anxiety has been shown to increase social information sharing (Berger, 2011). However, an emotional appraisal framework also suggests that rather than encourage sharing behaviors, anxiety may cause people to withdraw and avoid risk, so as not to intensify those feelings with active engagement (Lerner & Keltner, 2001). If anxiety leads to avoidance, we would not expect it to be associated with information sharing in social media. Given that theory offers conflicting accounts of the expected effects of anxiety, we pose the following research question:

RQ1: Is anxiety directed at the opposed presidential candidate ( $W^2$ ) associated with frequency of online information sharing about the election ( $W^2$ )?

We would also that the audience of partisan news often consists of the most politically engaged, knowledgeable, and interested citizens (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013; Prior, 2013; Levendusky, 2013b), that partisan news users are likely recommending, commenting on, and sharing political news stories at high rates. Indeed, some studies have found that partisan media users tended to share more information online (Pew, 2014a), but the use of partisan media was not directly associated with information sharing in social media (Weeks & Holbert, 2013). This socially shared political information is particularly important as it can act as a social signal of endorsement, or denial thereof, and shape reactions to the political news information, influencing how others select and respond to the information (Lee & Ma, 2012; Messing & Westwood, 2014).

Partisans are more likely to have stronger affective responses to political news and information (Arpan & Nabi, 2011; Iyengar et al., 2012; Reid, 2012), and negative news elicits

stronger emotions in general (Soroka & McAdams, 2015). Based on this evidence, we suggest that partisan news users might share more political information because of these specific emotional responses to partisan news online. Further, there is evidence to suggest that anger mediates the influence of proattitudinal news use on intended participation (Wojcieszak et al., 2015), and we would reasonably expect that anger would have a similar influence on information sharing. Our final hypothesis predicts the following:

H3: The effects of proattitudinal online news use ( $W^1$ ) on campaign information sharing behavior ( $W^2$ ) will be indirect, through anger directed at the opposed party's presidential candidate ( $W^2$ ).

However, given the uncertain nature of the relationship between candidate-directed anxiety and information sharing, we pose the following research question:

RQ2: Does proattitudinal online news use ( $W^1$ ) have an indirect effect on campaign information sharing behavior ( $W^2$ ) through anxiety directed at the opposed party's presidential candidate ( $W^2$ )?

### **Method**

This study used data from the first and second waves of a 3-wave, nationally representative panel survey that was conducted during the 2012 U.S. presidential election campaign. GfK Research (formerly Knowledge Networks) was contracted to collect the data and randomly recruited the probability-based sample using either an address-based or random digit dialing sampling method. After agreeing to participate in the panel, members were assigned to a

study sample and notified via e-mail about the survey. A computer and/or Internet access were provided to panel members if necessary. Using AAPOR Response Rate 3 (RR3), the household recruitment rate across the three waves was 15%. Respondents were given incentive points for participation that were redeemable for cash.

The resulting sample was demographically and politically diverse. Demographic characteristics measured in the first wave included age ( $M=49.68$ ,  $SD = 16.39$ ), gender (52.3% female), race (74.7% White, 8.5% Black, 10.6% Hispanic, 6.3% Other), education (90.3% with high school degree, 34.2% with at least a Bachelor's degree), income (median \$60,000 to \$74,999), and political ideology (37.1% conservative, 33.4% moderate, 29.5% liberal).

Data from the first wave were collected between 14 July and 7 August 2012 and included 1,004 respondents. Seven hundred eighty-two respondents (77.9% retention rate) returned for Wave 2, which was fielded between September 7 and October 3. Finally, Wave 3 ran from November 8 to 20 and included 652 respondents, which represents a 64.9% retention rate from Wave 1 and an 83.4% rate from Wave 2. Although the data were collected in three waves, we focused on Waves 1 and 2 for two important reasons. First, the emotional variables of interest were only collected in Wave 2. Second, emotions are by definition short-lived experiences (Nabi, 1999) and theoretically valuable in explaining short term political motivations and behavior (Valentino et al., 2011). Thus, we applied the panel data to explain the development of emotional responses over time but our analyses of the emotion-information sharing link included a lagged dependent variable model that accounts for prior information sharing behavior. All of our analyses applied sample weights from Wave 1.

Because we were interested in political sharing behavior within social media, our analyses were necessarily limited to respondents who reported using an online social network, including “Facebook, Twitter, or LinkedIn.” 581 respondents in the first wave reported using a social networking site (57.9% of total sample). Of those who reported using a social networking site in Wave 1, 446 completed the second wave of the study (76.8% retention rate). The descriptive statistics and subsequent analyses below were drawn from this subsample of social network users.

### Measures

**Political party affiliation.** In wave one respondents were asked, “generally speaking, when it comes to political parties in the United States, how would you describe yourself?” This question was followed by a 7-point response scale ranging from 1 = *Strong Democrat* to 7 = *Strong Republican*. Based on responses to this item, 254 (43.7%) respondents who used a social networking site identified as Democrat (or leaning), 198 (34.1%) were Republican (or leaning) and 95 (16.4%) were true Independents. Because we were explicitly interested in *partisans’* use of and reaction to media, true Independents and those who did not respond to the partisanship item were excluded from analyses.

**Frequency of pro- and counterattitudinal online news use.** Respondents were asked in the first wave of the study to report the frequency with which they used partisan news sources and blogs online.<sup>1</sup> Media use was measured on a 5-point scale (1 = *every day or almost every day* to 5 = *never*) that was reverse coded such that higher values represent more frequent use. A proattitudinal news use variable was computed by using the average of self-identified Democrats’ (or leaning) use of liberal news online and Republicans (or leaning) respondents’ use of conservative news ( $W^1 M = 1.76, SD = 1.02$ ). A

counterattitudinal news use variable assessed the average exposure of Democrats to conservative news sources and Republicans to liberal news outlets ( $W^1 M = 1.35, SD = 0.67$ ).

**Emotional responses toward favored and opposed party candidate.** In Wave 2 respondents reported their emotional responses toward each party's presidential candidate. They were provided the question stem, "when you think about Barack Obama/Mitt Romney, to what extent do you feel...", followed by four emotions presented in random order: angry, anxious, enthusiastic, and hopeful. Response options ranged from 1 (*a lot*) to 5 (*not at all*) and were reverse coded. From these responses four variables were created that assessed anger and anxiety directed at both the supported party's (Anger:  $M = 1.63, SD = 0.89$ ; Anxiety:  $M = 2.38, SD = 1.15$ ) and opposed party's candidates (Anger:  $M = 3.36, SD = 1.41$ ; Anxiety:  $M = 3.37, SD = 1.44$ ).

Anger and anxiety for the supported party's candidate combined Democrats' emotional responses to Obama and Republicans' feelings toward Romney, while the emotional responses toward the opposed party's candidate captured Democrats' reactions to Romney and Republicans' feelings about Obama. Emotional responses toward the supported party's candidate were included as controls in order to account for the possibility that negative emotional responses to politicians in general, rather than toward the opposed candidate, drive information sharing.

Anger and anxiety toward the opposed candidate were correlated,  $r = .49, p < .01$ , as were anger and anxiety toward the supported candidate,  $r = .46, p < .01^2$ . Further, neither anger nor anxiety toward the opposed candidate were related to anger or anxiety toward the supported candidate. Although anger and anxiety at times demonstrated significant relationships with each other, the size of the correlation here is consistent with prior

experimental research that suggests these emotions can have distinct effects on a variety of political outcomes despite their association (see MacKuen et al., 2010; Weeks, 2015). Thus, we followed this work along with other prominent calls suggesting these negative, discrete emotions be treated separately in communication research (Nabi, 2010).

**Political information sharing.** The dependent variable assessed respondents' social media information sharing behaviors in Wave 2 using a 5-point scale (1 = *every day or almost every day* to 5 = *never*) that was recoded so that higher values equated to more frequent sharing. The information sharing variable measured how often respondents had used social networking sites in the past month to "post, forward, or comment on anything related to the presidential candidates or the campaign, including news stories, opinions, images, or videos," (W<sup>1</sup>:  $M = 1.56$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ; W<sup>2</sup>:  $M = 1.58$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ). We included the Wave 1 measure of political information sharing as a control of the lagged dependent variable.

**Control variables.** A series of control variables measured in the first wave were included in the model. Included were the demographic variables age, education, race, and gender. We also included use of non-partisan mainstream news sites, which was measured on a 5-point scale (1 = *every day or almost every day* to 5 = *never*) and captured the extent to which respondents used "the website of a major national news organization that is not frequently characterized as favoring a party or ideology, including *USA Today*, *CBS News*, and *Yahoo! News*" and "nonpartisan online news organizations or blogs such as *RealClearPolitics* or *Politico*" (reverse coded W<sup>1</sup>  $M = 1.51$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ,  $r = .55$ ).

Given that prior research suggests that news sharing and network diversity may be linked (e.g., Choi & Lee, 2015), we also controlled for social network homophily, which measured the degree to which respondents perceived their online social networks to support

the same political party as they do (1 = *none or almost none support the same political party* to 5 = *all or almost all support the same political party*;  $W^1 M = 2.96, SD = 1.17$ ). Our analyses also included the following variables as controls: political knowledge (index of four items,  $W^1 M = 2.20, SD = 1.34, \alpha = .66$ ), strength of political affiliation (1 = *no party affiliation* to 4 = *strong party affiliation*  $W^1 M = 2.17, SD = 1.04$ ), and interest in politics, which combined two items that assessed attention to the campaign and general interest in politics on a 4-point scale ( $W^1 M = 2.54, SD = 0.88, r = .77$ ).

### Results

Statistical analyses were conducted using PROCESS (Hayes, 2013, Model 4), which uses ordinary least squares regression to estimate both direct and indirect effects of pro-attitudinal online news use ( $W^1$ ) on information sharing ( $W^2$ ). PROCESS allows for the simultaneous test of the influence of the independent variable on two parallel mediators, as well as their subsequent effect on the dependent variable. PROCESS also provides full regression outputs for the various predictors of the mediating variables, which in this case are anger and anxiety directed at the opposed political candidate.

The initial hypotheses (H1a and H1b) sought to demonstrate whether partisan media use is related to negative, discrete emotional responses. We predicted that use of proattitudinal online news would be positively associated with both anger and anxiety directed at the opposed party's presidential candidate. We found mixed support for these hypotheses. Use of proattitudinal news online in the first wave was related to increased levels of anger in the second wave, ( $b = .26 (.12), p < .05$ , one-tailed), confirming H1a. Of the control variables, frequency of mainstream news use online ( $b = -.36 (.14), p < .05$ ) was associated with significantly lower levels of anger at the opposed candidate, while having a



homophilous online social network ( $b = .24 (.07), p < .05$ ) and strength of political partisanship ( $b = .32 (.10), p < .05$ ) were related to increases in anger at the opposed candidate in Wave 2.

Turning to anxiety, we find that proattitudinal news use online was not related to anxiety toward the candidate representing the opposed political party in the second wave ( $b = .03 (.13), p = .81$ ). H1b was not supported. The only variables that significantly predicted anxiety about the opposed candidate were political knowledge, ( $b = .15 (.07), p < .05$ ), and social network homophily, ( $b = .23 (.08), p < .05$ ). Overall, our models accounted for 15% of the variance in explaining anger and 13% of variance in explaining anxiety directed at the opposed candidate. (See Table 1, Columns 1 and 2 and Figure 1).

H2 and RQ1 addressed the relationship between emotional responses toward the opposed candidate and campaign information sharing behavior. We predicted that anger directed at the opposed candidate would be positively associated with frequency of sharing, whereas the expected relationship for anxiety was less certain. Unsurprisingly, social media sharing behavior in the first wave was the strongest predictor of sharing in W<sup>2</sup> ( $b = .70 (.05), p < .05$ ); in other words, sharing in the first wave, predicted sharing in the second wave. Yet, we continued to find support for H2 even after controlling for the influence of the lagged dependent variable, as anger directed at the opposed candidate demonstrated a positive and significant relationship with information sharing, ( $b = .06 (.04), p < .05$ ). This indicates that anger remained a significant predictor of information sharing despite a stringent control of previous information sharing behavior.

In response to RQ1, however, anxiety at the opposed candidate had no association with information sharing, ( $b = .01 (.03), p = .85$ , Table 1, Column 3 and Figure 1). Of the two

negative emotions examined in this study, only anger, not anxiety, was related to campaign information sharing. Overall, this model explained 55% of the variance in information sharing in the second wave. Of the control variables, men were more likely to share information than women ( $b = .21 (.09), p < .05$ ) and mainstream news media use was associated with more frequent sharing ( $b = .14 (.08), p < .05$ ), whereas those with lower levels of political knowledge shared more frequently ( $b = -.15 (.04), p < .05$ ). Furthermore political interest ( $b = .13 (.08), p < .05$ ) and stronger political partisanship ( $b = .13 (.05), p < .05$ ) were both significantly related to information sharing.

The final hypothesis (H3) and research question (RQ2) examined the indirect effects of proattitudinal online news use on campaign information sharing behavior, through negative emotional responses directed at the opposed party's presidential candidate. The model included anger and anxiety as parallel mediators and used 5,000 bootstrap samples with bias-corrected confidence intervals to assess the indirect effect. The results indicated that after accounting for sharing behavior in the first wave, proattitudinal online news had a positive and significant indirect effect on  $W^2$  information sharing through anger (point estimate = .02 (.02), 90% CI: .0002 to .053). Proattitudinal news use increased anger toward the opposed candidate in Wave 2, which subsequently facilitated campaign information sharing online. H3 was therefore supported. We did not find support for an indirect effect through anxiety, though, as the confidence interval for the mediation contained 0 (point estimate = .00 (.01), 90% CI: -.008 to .012). In sum, the effect of proattitudinal online news use on social media political information was mediated through anger but not anxiety.

## Discussion

The initial work on general, non-political information sharing suggested that emotion plays an influential role in how and why messages get disseminated in online networks. In this study, we considered the influence of emotion on sharing political information about the 2012 presidential election, and posited that partisan news may help arouse emotional response from audiences. In the following section, we discuss the findings of our research along with the implications for future work.

We found that proattitudinal online news use was related to respondents' anger directed toward the opposing party's presidential candidate. This is consistent with previous research on the effects of partisan selective exposure that finds proattitudinal news use can lead to greater anger and dislike of the opposition (Levendusky, 2013a; Wojcieszak et al., 2015). However, to our knowledge, these findings are the first to indicate that partisan news use was related to discrete emotional responses directed toward a specific candidate. Although perhaps not surprising, this finding has important implications for the study of media and elections. Partisan media can be polarizing and influence attitudes towards those with opposing views (Arceneaux, Johnson, & Cryderman, 2013; Garrett, et al., 2014; Iyengar, et al., 2012; Stroud, 2010; Levendusky, 2013b). Our findings added to this literature by suggesting that partisan media can not only elicit anger, but evoke anger towards a specific person.

We also found that anger was related to sharing information online about the presidential campaign. Anger is an approach emotion that can lead people to take action (Nabi, 1999; Nabi, 2003) and previous research has found that anger can mediate the influence of partisan media on intention to participate (Wojcieszak et al., 2015). Building on this direction of research, our findings demonstrated that anger was associated with increased

information sharing about the campaign and that pro-attitudinal news use had a positive and significant indirect effect on information sharing through anger. In other words, partisan media may encourage political information sharing by arousing anger in its audience.

This last finding has important theoretical implications for research on the role of emotion in politics. When anger motivates information sharing online, that expression is likely attempting to punish the opposed party or right a perceived injustice. This leads to questions about what the nature of shared political information looks like online. If individuals who are sharing information online are the most partisan and most angry, they may serve an important role by highlighting and speaking out against perceived injustices and moral wrongs. However, this expression may also be characterized by incivility or hostility in an attempt to punish the target of the anger. There is some evidence to suggest that incivility in partisan media is associated with increased use of incivility in text-based political expression (Gervais, 2014).

People are sometimes rude or uncivil in online discussions (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013; Stroud, Scacco, Muddiman, & Curry, 2015), but understanding the nature of political discussion online can help explain why many people avoid or are uninterested in politics. The question of whether the anger aroused by partisan news is good for productive political action and expression is still unanswered. If it leads to meaningful discussions, and increased participation—as Wojcieszak et al. (2015) found—then it may serve to increase positive democratic outcomes. If it leads to hostility, distrust, and polarization (e.g., Garrett et al., 2014; Levendusky, 2013a), the influence that anger has on political expression online may prove to be less productive for democracy.

Another implication of these findings is that they showed how partisan news may have influence beyond its immediate audience. The audience for partisan news is small, and there has been a great deal of discussion about how widespread the effects of partisan news might be (Prior, 2013). Several scholars have suggested that although the size of the audience is minimal, partisan news viewers are likely among the most politically active and engaged citizens (Levendusky, 2013a; Stroud, 2011). We found evidence that angry viewers of partisan news were sharing more information online, and these expressions may influence the overall tenor of the political information landscape beyond partisan news consumers.

Katz & Lazarsfeld's (1955) two-step flow model has suggested that those who are politically interested might be able to influence others in their social circle by sharing partisan news content. Partisan news may therefore have an indirect effect on a broader population beyond its initial audience, even if many individuals do not seek out partisan news content. This possibility becomes more likely given that people are increasingly exposed to news and political information incidentally within social networking sites (e.g., Kim, Chen, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2013), even though they are often not signing on with the intent to view or read political news information (Pew, 2014). We did not measure what type of content individuals shared related to the presidential campaigns and cannot speak definitively to the partisanship and emotional valence of the shared information; however, this would be an important question for future research.

With regards to anxiety, our results were inconclusive; we found no significant relationship between partisan media use and anxiety towards the opposing party's candidate, nor between anxiety and information sharing. This may be due to the fact that anxiety is rooted in uncertainty, and proattitudinal partisan news does not generally cultivate

uncertainty in their audience—it instead tends to strengthen preferred attitudes and beliefs (Arceneaux et al., 2013; Stroud, 2010; Wojcieszak et al., 2015; Levendusky, 2013b). Viewers of partisan news, having been more certain of their attitudes, may be less likely to feel anxious about candidates.

As discussed previously, theory would suggest that anxiety can lead to risk aversion (Lerner & Keltner, 2001) and could decrease political information sharing online. This may be seen as a social risk, especially if an individual is concerned about engaging with those who might disagree. However, other research has suggested that anxiety may lead to more willingness to share information (Berger, 2011), and anxiety can increase attention to environmental threats and lead to more information seeking and interest in politics (Valentino et al., 2008; Valentino et al., 2011). Our findings did not support either argument. Anxiety may have depressed the desire to share information in some individuals, and at the same time encouraged others to share information in an effort to reduce uncertainty. Like much of communication research, context is important. The influence of aroused anxiety may be dependent on the context of the shared information. These possible explanations should be explored in future research.

The results of this study should be interpreted with a few limitations in mind. First, this study relied on self-reported data, and may have over- or underestimated the actual news consumption of individuals or their sharing behavior (Prior, 2009). However, the measures proved consistent with theoretical expectations, and the findings were in line with the results of similar previous research.

Second, emotional responses were only assessed in the second wave, making it more difficult to make strong causal claims regarding the relationship between proattitudinal news

use and emotional responses toward an opposed candidate. We know that when given a choice, audiences prefer attitude-consistent sources, although they do not actively avoid the other side (Garrett & Stroud, 2014). Those with strong emotional reactions to the candidates may have been self-selecting into like-minded media. Our use of panel data helps alleviate these concerns, as did our theoretically consistent findings that news consumption can evoke emotional responses. Nonetheless, future research should attempt to track behavioral data that examines both media use and information sharing in order to better understand this relationship, or extend panel data to test for the possibility that partisan news use and emotions create a reinforcing spiral (Slater, 2007).

Third, our final sample size was admittedly low as a result of only examining social media users who identified as Republican or Democrat. Yet, the number of respondents in our study who used social media was consistent with other reports from 2012 (see Pew, 2015). However, the sample may not have had sufficient power to find significant relationships between some of the variables. Given the small sample size and diminished power, our findings may be conservative estimates of the relationships that did in fact emerge. Still, future work should replicate these findings with a larger sample. Finally, our dependent measure of information sharing did not capture the wide range of sharing behaviors available in social media today. Social media behaviors and technologies evolve and advance very quickly; our measure was general, but represented a reasonable operationalization of information sharing behavior at the time of the survey and captured many behaviors that remain prominent.

Despite these limitations, this study provides important theoretical insights into how online partisan news media drive information sharing behavior by identifying anger as the

key mediating mechanism. We showed that partisan media could make citizens angry with specific people and groups, which made them more likely to engage in expression in social media. The importance of understanding information sharing behaviors is twofold. On the one hand, sharing information in social media has become an important part of political expression and engagement; and on the other, citizens are increasingly reliant on social media to consume news and information about politics. Our study suggests that anger is a significant factor in explaining why people share political information in social media.

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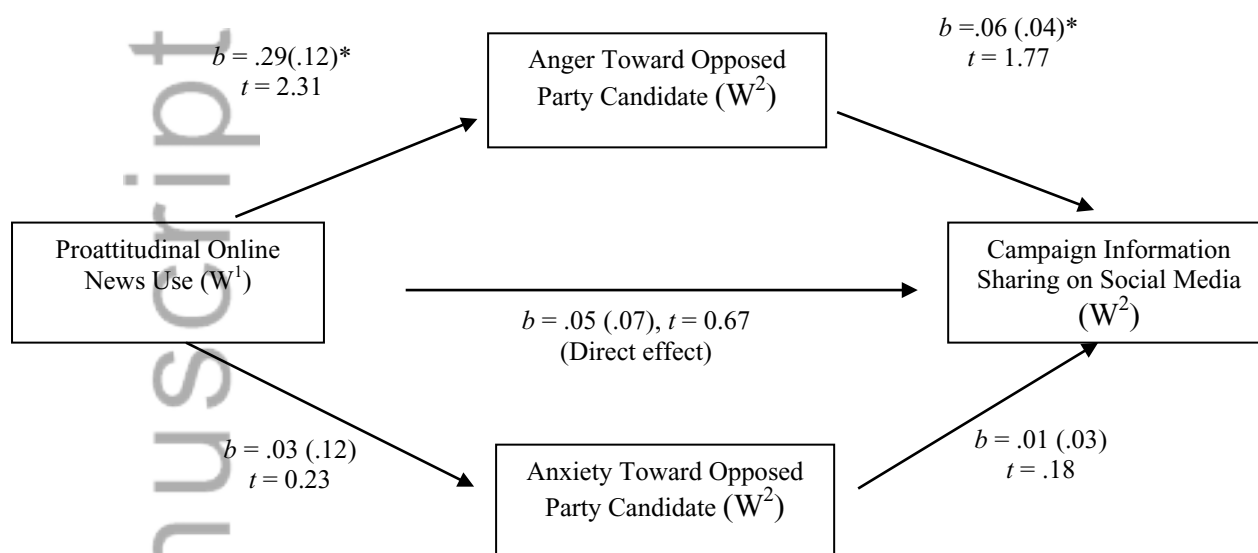
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**Table 1.** Predicting anger, anxiety, and campaign information sharing

	Anger: Opposed Party Candidate (W <sup>2</sup> )	Anxiety: Opposed Party Candidate (W <sup>2</sup> )	Campaign Information sharing (W <sup>2</sup> )
	<sup>2</sup> (b, s.e.)	<sup>2</sup> (b, s.e.)	<sup>2</sup> (b, s.e.)
Proattitudinal news use (W <sup>1</sup> )	.19 (.29, .12)**	.02 (.03, .12)	.04 (.04, .07)
Counterattitudinal news use (W <sup>1</sup> )	.09 (.18, .15)	.01 (.02, .16)	-.08 (-.12, .09)
Nonpartisan news use (W <sup>1</sup> )	-.19 (-.35, .14)**	.05 (.10, .15)	.11 (.14, .08)*
Anger: Opposed Party Candidate (W <sup>2</sup> )	--	--	.09 (.06, .04)*
Anxiety: Opposed Party Candidate (W <sup>2</sup> )	--	--	.01 (.01, .03)
Anger: Supported Party Candidate (W <sup>2</sup> )	.01 (.02, .10)	.10 (.17, .11)	-.04 (-.04, .06)
Anxiety: Supported Party Candidate (W <sup>2</sup> )	.07 (.09, .08)	-.08 (-.11, .08)	.00 (.00, .04)
Political Interest (W <sup>1</sup> )	.00 (.01, .14)	.02 (.03, .14)	.11 (.13, .08)*
Age (W <sup>1</sup> )	-.02 (-.00, .01)	.05 (.00, .01)	-.02 (-.00, .00)
Education (W <sup>1</sup> )	-.10 (-.07, .05)	-.04 (-.03, .05)	.05 (.02, .03)
Political Knowledge (W <sup>1</sup> )	.07 (.08, .07)	.13 (.15, .07)*	-.21 (-.15, .04)**
Gender (male coded high) (W <sup>1</sup> )	-.03 (-.08, .16)	-.07 (-.22, .08)	.12 (.24, .09)
Race (white coded high) (W <sup>1</sup> )	.01 (.04, .18)	.09 (.29, .19)	-.02 (-.04, .10)
Social Network Homophily (W <sup>1</sup> )	.15 (.18, .07)**	.18 (.23, .08)**	.05 (.05, .04)
Strength of partisanship	.18 (.32, .10)**	.12 (.21, .10)*	.11 (.13, .05)**
Campaign Information Sharing (W <sup>1</sup> )	.10 (.15, .09)*	.05 (.07, .09)	.64 (.70, .05)**
Constant	2.15 (.63)**	1.50 (.65)**	-.43 (.35)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.15	0.13	0.55

Note. \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , (one-tailed). N = 317. Standardized regression coefficients reported with unstandardized coefficient and standard error in parentheses.

**Figure 1.** Indirect Effect of Proattitudinal Online News Use on Campaign Information Sharing



*Note:* Indirect effects based on 5,000 bootstrap samples with biased corrected confidence intervals. Indirect effect through anger = .02 (.02) (90% CI: .0002 to .053). Indirect effect through anxiety = -.00 (.01) (90% CI: -.008 to .012). The control variables include frequency of information sharing in Wave 1 (lagged dependent variable), anger toward the supported party candidate, anxiety toward the supported party candidate, counterattitudinal news use, nonpartisan news use, social network homophily, age, race, gender, education, political knowledge, political interest, and strength of partisanship.  $N = 317$ . All coefficients are unstandardized and  $p$ -values one-tailed. \*  $p < 0.05$ .

### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Online liberal news use was measured by averaging two items, including use of “the website of a major national news organization that is frequently characterized as favoring liberal positions or Democratic candidates, such as *The New York Times* or *MSNBC*” and “the website of a politically liberal online news organization or blog, such as *The Huffington Post*, *ThinkProgress*, or the *Daily Kos*” (Spearman-Brown Coefficient = .63,  $p < .001$ ,  $W^1 M = 1.61$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ). Online conservative news use was also measured by averaging responses to two items: “the website of a major national news organization that is frequently characterized as favoring conservative positions or Republican candidates, such as *The Wall Street Journal* or *FOX News*” and “the website of a politically conservative online news organization or blog, such as *The Drudge Report*, *TownHall* or the *Cybercast News Service (CNS News)*” (Spearman-Brown Coefficient = .60,  $p < .001$ ,  $W^1 M = 1.51$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ). There is some discussion as to whether *The New York Times* is a liberal news outlet. We rely on the argument made by Budak, Goel, & Roa (2014), who found that the NYT had liberal slant; even compared to comparable news outlets such as BBC News and CNN.

<sup>2</sup> Anxiety and anger towards the opposition are correlated, but not enough so that the data have a problem with multicollinearity; when testing anger for collinearity with the rest of the model, the tolerance is 0.67 (VIF = 1.56) suggesting that the significance tests are using about 67% of the information of this predictor, which is generally acceptable in behavioral

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research (Baguley, 2012; Hayes, 2005). The results are similar with anxiety; the tolerance is 0.57 (VIF = 1.74).

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Partisan Provocation: The Role of Partisan News Use and Emotional Responses in  
Political Information Sharing in Social Media

Ariel A. Hasell

Department of Communication, University of California-Santa Barbara

Brian E. Weeks

Department of Communication Studies, University of Michigan

*Author note:* Ariel A. Hasell (M.A., University of Washington) is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Communication at the University of California-Santa Barbara and a graduate research fellow at the UCSB Center for Nanotechnology in Society. Brian E. Weeks (Ph.D., The Ohio State University) is an assistant professor in Department of Communication Studies at the University of Michigan. The authors would like to thank Kelly Garrett for access to the data used in this study. Editorial correspondence regarding the manuscript should be addressed to Ariel Hasell, Department of Communication, 4005 SSMS Building, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA 93106. Email: ariel@umail.ucsb.edu. This research was supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. IIS-1149599, awarded to Kelly Garrett. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.