

*Two Sides to Every Story: Causes and Consequences of Selective Exposure to
Balanced Political Information*

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English Summary

Scholars, political observers, and media pundits have worried that citizens prefer mostly pro-attitudinal information about politics and public affairs, which in turn may influence the public to make uninformed decisions, develop extreme political opinions, and be less tolerant towards opposing perspectives. Although the current information environment offers citizens an unprecedented opportunity to see mostly pro-attitudinal information, the debate about the prevalence and consequences of selective exposure in a high-choice media environment is largely inconclusive. Moreover, the majority of the scholarship has focused on studying the selection and effects of one-sided political content (i.e., pro- or counter-attitudinal), and has paid little attention to balanced content, even though it is available in the media environment and consumed by citizens.

This dissertation shifts this dominant attention from one-sided information towards balanced exposure, and contributes to the selective exposure literature by studying 1) whether the selection of balanced, in addition to pro- and counter-attitudinal information depends on whether an individual is personally invested and has strong opinions about a certain issue (issue public membership), and on the type of evidence for a message claim – numerical vs. narrative; 2) how psychological factors, such as individual motivation and attributes of issue attitudes, influence balanced information selection; and 3) how balanced exposure affects information processing and attitude polarization. These questions were answered using a series of online experiments. Information selection was studied using self-selection protocols, in which participants select the stimuli from a limited set of choices. The consequences of balanced exposure were studied using randomized exposure to fixed treatment stimuli. Collectively, the experiments presented in the dissertation uncover the psychological underpinnings of balanced exposure and its attitudinal outcomes about contested and highly relevant socio-political issues, such as climate change, health care reform and refugees.

Results of the dissertation show that:

- 1. The prevalence of selective exposure is overestimated*

Selective exposure is not a prevalent phenomenon among citizens. Most individuals do not want messages that only contain pro-attitudinal information, but instead, they prefer balanced messages that present arguments confirming their opinions, alongside arguments that run counter to their priors.

- 2. Most citizens prefer balanced political content over one-sided content*

Exposure to balanced media content is the preferred choice for different groups of citizens. This includes people who have strong opinions and care about climate change and health care (issue publics), as well as those less invested in those issues. Also, balanced content is selected

by individuals motivated to reach accurate conclusions (accuracy motivation), as well as those seeking to defend their prior opinions (defensive motivation).

3. The type of evidence for a message claim also influences information selection

Although this dissertation studied mostly individual factors that drive balanced exposure, another conclusion is that the type of evidence for a message claim also shapes the type of political information that different citizens seek. Specifically, issue publics and average citizens prefer political messages which contain numerical over narrative evidence. In addition, the preferred form of political information for issue publics is that which uses numbers and statistics to argue two sides of a story.

4. Balanced exposure reduces the influence of motivated reasoning on information processing

Exposure to balanced content plays a crucial role in shaping how people process political information. Balanced exposure encourages more unbiased processing, relative to one-sided messages. More importantly, we learn that whether individuals are motivated to reinforce their opinions or to reach accurate conclusions, they interpret balanced content in a similar unbiased manner. Specifically, when exposed to balanced messages, defensive and accuracy motivated citizens are less likely to accept pro-attitudinal arguments and to refute counter-attitudinal ones, compared to when they are confronted with one-sided messages.

5. Balanced exposure encourages unbiased thinking but does not reduce political polarization

The availability, selection and unbiased processing of balanced political information is not enough to promote moderate political views on contested socio-political issues. Results refute the hope by some that exposure to balanced or counter-attitudinal information can depolarize political opinions. On the bright side, exposure to balanced political content reduces the risk that people's attitudes become more extreme.

This dissertation has important implications for political communications scholars, journalists and citizens. First, most citizens prefer balanced information about politics and public affairs. In addition, some citizens seek balanced content that is backed up by factual and truthful evidence. This in itself is a good reminder for media institutions and journalists advocating the notion that political media coverage should be balanced, objective and fair. Second, this dissertation suggests that the media environment can encourage more unbiased thinking by offering balanced and neutral reporting. If journalists cover political issues in a balanced manner, different citizens would attend these messages, which in turn could encourage them to interpret contested issues more open-mindedly. Third, even though we cannot hope that coming in contact with balanced information is a solution to correct attitude polarization, the availability and exposure to such an information environment may benefit democracy in other ways. To explore these possibilities, future scholarship on selective exposure should shift its traditional focus on

studying mostly one-sided political messages, and instead, extend our understanding of the causes and consequences of balanced information exposure.