



UNIVERSITY OF BERGEN

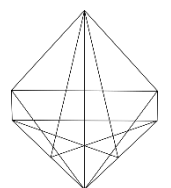
I'VE GOT OUR NEWS AND BAD NEWS: PARTY CUES TRUMP NEGATIVITY BIAS WHEN SELECTING POLITICAL NEWS ONLINE

MAGNUS HOEM IVERSEN
ERIK KNUDSEN

WORKING PAPER SERIES 2017:2

DIGSSCORE DIGITAL SOCIAL SCIENCE CORE FACILITY
UNIVERSITY OF BERGEN
BOX 7802, 5020 BERGEN
MARCH 2017
ISSN 2535-3233

© 2017 BY MAGNUS HOEM IVERSEN AND ERIK KNUDSEN. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.



DIGSSCORE

I've got our news and bad news: Party cues trump negativity bias when selecting political news online

Magnus Hoem Iversen

Department of Information Science and Media Studies

University of Bergen

Erik Knudsen

Department of Information Science and Media Studies

University of Bergen

Abstract

There is a wide range of reasons for why people choose to read the news they do, and one important factor for news choice is selective exposure; the tendency people have to asymmetrically expose themselves to some information over another. Two important phenomena in this respect are selection biases guided by political predispositions, known as politically motivated selective exposure, and gravitation towards content that contains negative information rather than positive, also known as negativity selective bias. Whilst it is repeatedly demonstrated how both partisan and negativity selective bias occur, little research has pitted these two factors against one another and assessed whether one bias overrides the other. Based on a unique experimental design (N=1306) embedded in a probability-based online panel, we successfully demonstrate that even though both biases are present, party preference is a considerably stronger factor than negativity in regards to guiding selection behaviour of political news online.

Keywords: negativity selection bias, partisan selection bias, in-group/out-group, online news, survey experiment

Party cues trump negativity bias when selecting political news online

Journalism as an institution holds a key role in democracy, and should ideally form parts of the basis for citizens' ability to make informed and rational choices (Habermas, 1996), such as in elections. However, although news publication may be varied and diverse in terms of content, presenting various arguments and bringing different sides of political issues to the table, this matters less if people do not read this potentially wide array of information. This is particularly true for the online environment, marked by fragmentation: news readers pick and choose their own media diets, which are much less contingent on the choices of news editors and newsrooms. As such, examining what people actually read and the mechanisms behind news selection is important. The present article attempts to disentangle two key factors for online news choice by combining the literature on partisanship and negativity and examining their strengths through a survey experiment.

There is a wide range of reasons for why people choose to read the news they do, and one important factor for news choice is selective exposure; the tendency people have to asymmetrically expose themselves to some information over another. Selective exposure has long received attention from communication studies, but new developments in both production and dissemination, as well as consumption of online news has sparked a renewed academic interest in the old question. Within the field of political communication, theories of selective exposure have proved particularly salient and received attention in terms of selection biases guided by political predispositions, known as partisan selective exposure (i.e. Stroud, 2010), or gravitation towards content that contains negative information rather than positive (i.e. Stuart N Soroka, 2014).

Whilst it is repeatedly demonstrated how both partisan and negativity selective bias occur, surprisingly little research has called attention to how these biases occur *together*, (see:

Meffert, Chung, Joiner, Waks, & Garst, 2006 for a notable exception) and the fundamental question of whether one bias overrides the other when pitted against one another. As none have reached an answer to this question, we have a remarkably poor understanding of whether it is party preference or negativity bias that guides our choice when selecting political news, and of the strength and pull of the two mechanisms when played out against each other. One probable reason for this is that the existing literature is disjointed. On the one hand, a vast and growing literature points to partisanship as an important factor for selection bias – without taking into consideration that people have a strong tendency to select negative information over positive. On the other hand, research on negativity bias focus on valence – not party preference. In studies that do indeed measure both negativity selection bias and partisan selection bias, researchers has hitherto failed to successfully disentangle the two causes for selection bias.

In this study, we unite the literature on partisan selection bias and negativity bias by empirically examining whether one bias override the other. Based on an experimental design (N=1306) embedded in a representative national survey, designed specifically to test which bias comes out as the strongest, we successfully demonstrate that party preference is a considerably stronger factor than negativity in regards to guiding selection behaviour for political news.

Importantly, as a consequence of our study's setting and context, we find empirical support for politically motivated selective exposure in news content in non-partisan media outlets outside the US American context. This is an important finding, because both the literature on partisan selective exposure and negativity bias has mainly focused on the US American context within a two-party system, and the effects of different partisan news outlets (see Trilling, van Klingeren, & Tsfati, 2016; Trussler & Soroka, 2014 for exceptions of note

pertaining to political selective exposure and negativity bias respectively). Considering the fact that the European context is highly different from the US, we argue that research should examine the relevance of these two concepts among non-partisan media outlets in media systems different from the US. As our study is situated within the context of the distinct ‘Nordic’ media- and political-system, labelled as ‘the media welfare state’ (Syvertsen, Enli, Mjøs, & Moe, 2014), this study thus heeds the call for “more research in countries with multi-party systems, a culture of consensus rather than competition, and comparatively few cleavages in society” (Trilling et al., 2016).

In the following, we outline some current insights into partisan selection bias and negativity bias, before forging a theoretical and empirical link between the two concepts.

Partisan Selection Bias

A considerable amount of literature (e.g. Bolsen, Druckman, & Cook, 2014; Cohen, 2003; Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010) argues that individuals use partisanship to filter political information and thus assign tremendous weight to party cues when they encounter and interpret new information. Over half a century of research has also found that citizens prefer to encounter news that are supportive or consistent with their existing political beliefs (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948; Sears & Freedman, 1967; Zillmann & Bryant, 1985), building on the idea that people wish to avoid cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Cognitive dissonance can occur if we encounter information that challenges our pre-existing beliefs about the world. We are presented with information that simply does not ‘fit into’ our mental image of how the world works. This can involve a form of ‘mental work’ that is laborious and even confusing or unpleasant. Thus, the desire to avoid it.

Within the US American context, citizens' opportunity and ability for selective exposure to congruent information surged with the emergence of cable television and online newspapers. This in turn has prompted a surge in research on selective exposure to political information (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013; Garrett et al., 2014; Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2010; Knobloch-Westerwick, Johnson, & Westerwick, 2015; Levendusky, 2013a, 2013b; Messing & Westwood, 2014). Yet, with a few notable exceptions (Trilling & Schoenbach, 2015; Trilling et al., 2016) the profound body of literature on partisan selective exposure has hitherto mainly focused on the US-context and has consequently centred on partisan selective exposure within a two-party system and exposure to partisan news outlets such as Fox News and MSNBC (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Mummolo, 2016; Prior, 2013; Stroud, 2010, 2011).

The societal importance of the insights on selective exposure is partly grounded in the fear of "echo chambers" (Sunstein, 2001). The worry is that citizens will only be exposed to arguments supporting their current position, and that one at the same time increasingly become hostile to "the other side", leading to polarization (Levendusky, 2013a). The concept of the filter bubble emphasizes the role of the tailoring of media diets on social media through recommendation systems and algorithms, another dimension of online news choice in which users quite literally approve and disapprove of the information they are exposed to that also has self-reinforcing effects over time. This is a challenge to normative democratic ideals, such as those from the tradition of deliberative democracy in which the electorate should encounter both contradictory and supportive information to positions.

Partisan Media and the Norwegian Context

Norway has a long history of partisan media. This has gradually shifted, and the notion of an independent 'professional watchdog' journalistic role has grown stronger,

particularly since the 1970s, as it was during this period that individual newspapers started breaking free from their historically tight affiliations with political parties. The Norwegian newspapers have travelled from party press to a more politically independent press. In other countries, such as the US – political parties and press outlets parted ways at an earlier point in time. However, the increased partisanship of journalism both on television and online in the US (e.g. Stroud, 2011) gives the discussion new relevance. In Norway, one could expect that people have a somewhat broader media diet less oriented towards partisanship. Citizens in Norway tend to read several newspapers, and newspapers of various political affiliation.

Furthermore, the existence of and strong position of NRK, the Norwegian Public Service Broadcaster, could mitigate and lessen selective exposure, as is shown in the Netherlands (Bos, Kruikemeier, & de Vreese, 2016). Norway, like the rest of the Nordic countries, is a ‘consensus democracy’ with an egalitarian population, both socially and economically, and high levels of trust in both private and governmental institutions (Syvertsen et al., 2014, pp. 4-8). This trust extends in part to the media as an institution (Aalberg & Curran, 2012, p. 196). Norway as a media system has been classified as belonging to, along with other parts of Northern Europe, a “democratic corporatist model” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 11). Typical in such a system is a strong public broadcaster, and a media market that is regulated through various means – such as subsidies for the press. Thus, Norway belongs to what Karppinen (2016, p. 2) calls a tradition of public interest-oriented media policy. This ‘media welfare state’-model emphasizes an extensive cultural policy for the media, meant to influence through positive freedom – mainly aimed at countering the effects of market forces (Syvertsen et al., 2014, p. 18). The electorate of Norway can be considered ‘informed’ based on the country’s particularly high newspaper readership both in terms of print and online news (Syvertsen et al., 2014, p. 33). As such, studying how politically motivated selective

exposure plays out in this context can give insights into the phenomenon that extend beyond the scope of studies carried out in the US.

Negativity Selection Bias

A number of observations made within the study of political communication and journalism (Daignault, Soroka, & Giasson, 2013; Lau, 1985; Meffert et al., 2006; Stuart N. Soroka, 2006; Stuart N Soroka, 2014; Trussler & Soroka, 2014), as well as social psychology (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001; Carretié, Mercado, Tapia, & Hinojosa, 2001; Hibbing, Smith, & Alford, 2014; Ito, Larsen, Smith, & Cacioppo, 1998; Norris, Larsen, Crawford, & Cacioppo, 2011; Rozin & Royzman, 2001) have provided evidence for the phenomenon of negative events having a considerably stronger impact on people than positive events. For instance, negative information has a stronger influence on evaluations than positive information, and can elicit stronger responses from individuals. An often used umbrella term for such observations is the 'negativity bias'. This term is relevant to a wide range of topics within human behaviour and psychology, also outside mediated experience and media-use. For the present study however, we can particularly note the significant effect negativity has in relation to the concepts of attention and salience, search and decision-making (Rozin & Royzman, 2001). Such factors are key when examining online news choice as well as citizens' political decisions and processes of opinion formation prior to voting more widely.

Negativity bias has been studied in a mass media context in terms of responses to news stories about the economy, finding that reactions are indeed asymmetric, and that the public response to negative information is considerably greater than its positive counterpart (Soroka, 2006). Some researchers point out that negativity often is considered to be a basic

news value (Leung & Lee, 2014). Others have made calls for more conceptual clarity in terms of what constitutes 'negative news' and made contributions to further operationalization of such terms (Lengauer, Esser, & Berganza, 2012). The existence of the negativity bias in information selection processes means that one can assume that negative information is more attention-grabbing, and therefore more likely to be selected by news consumers (Meffert et al., 2006, p. 29).

Conflicting Predictions: Negativity or Partisan Bias?

The literature on partisan selection bias suggests that people will select information about 'their' party when solely presented with the choice between information about a party they support and a party they do not support. The literature on negativity bias suggest that people will select negative information when solely presented with the choice of negative and positive information. We expect to replicate these results, and argue that such replication is useful to establish that the Norwegian context is not exceptional in terms of the existence of these biases as important mechanisms for news selection. However, the literature on partisan selective exposure and negativity bias leaves us with conflicting predictions, as both negativity and partisanship are important factors in guiding information selection. People are likely to be subjected to partisan news articles, valenced news articles and a combination of both.

Meffert et.al. (2006) found that people to a greater degree selected and spent more time reading articles about their preferred candidate than about the opponent, as well as more negative than positive information. Moreover, people spent more time reading negative information about the preferred candidate, than about the opponent. This can indicate that patterns of negativity bias should be expected to take precedence over patterns of partisan

selective exposure. However, the same study found no significant interaction between the valence of the article and the candidate. In other words, even though Meffert et. al. (2006) addressed the question of whether one bias overrides the other, the answer remained inconclusive.

In order to further our understanding of what bias overrides the other, one could first assess what people select when faced with the choice between reading a story containing negative information ('bad news') for their party, as opposed to positive information ('good news') for an opposing party. In other words, would citizens like to read bad news for their own side, the in-group, or good news for the other side, the out-group? Second, one could assess what people select when faced with positive information for their party, as opposed to negative information about an opposing party. In other words, would citizens like to read good news about their in-group, or to read about bad news for the out-group?

Meffert's et.al (2006) results suggest that when people are faced with a choice between negative information towards their party or positive information between a party they do not support, people will select the negative story as this option contains both the negativity bias and the partisan bias. Based on this result, one can assume that the probability of people selecting information that features both negative information and party cues is enhanced when negativity bias and party cues occur *together*. As such, our first hypothesis is:

H1: People are more likely to select *negative* information about a party they support, than *positive* information about a party they do not support.

Nevertheless, H1 does not solely address whether one bias overrides the other, as this hypothesis relates to a choice in which negative information *and* party cues occurs *together*.

Thus, we cannot distinguish whether it is negativity or party preference that guides the selection. To assess whether negativity actually overrides partisan selective exposure, we must also pit the two factors against each other in a choice between positive information about a party people support and negative information about a party people do not support. In this scenario, we ground our assumption in regards to what Halevy, Bornstein, and Sagiv (2008) calls “in group” and “out group” “hate/love” relations. Through game theory, Halevy et. al.(2008) indicate that people would rather protect their “in group” (select positive information about their party) than harm their “out group” (select negative information about an opposing party). Based on this reasoning, one can assume that people will rather select information about a party they support, than negative information (about a party they do not support), when negativity bias and party cues are *pitted against each other*. This leads us to formulate H2:

H2: People are more likely to select *positive* information about a party they support, than *negative* information about a party they do not support.

Taken together, H1 and H2 predicts that partisan selective exposure overrides the negativity bias. This is because we in H1 predict that people will select the option featuring both negative information and a party they support, and in H2 predict that people will rather choose information about a party they support than negative information.

Method

To test our hypotheses, we executed a survey experiment included in a probability-based, online survey representative of the Norwegian population. Experiments placed within

online surveys are increasingly being used by communication scholars to examine the effects of and differences between various media stimuli. One advantage with this method is that it allows researchers to reach a larger audience than experiments performed in laboratories or in-field. We embedded an experimental design within a larger representative online national survey conducted by the Norwegian Citizen Panel in December of 2014. The panel's respondents were gathered through the postal recruitment of 25,000 individuals over 18 years. The individuals were randomly selected for recruitment from Norway's National Registry: a list of all individuals who either are or have been a resident in Norway, maintained by the official Tax Administration. The recruitment rate was 20%.

The current study is a part of the third wave (2014) of the Norwegian Citizen Panel (N=8515, panel response rate= 60 %). Gender, age and education biases in the response rate were low (Skjervheim & Høgestøl, 2014). A randomly selected subsample of 1648 respondents were presented with our experimental design. 342 of these respondents did not answer one or more of the questions (such as those asking for party preference) in the present study, leaving us a total of 1306 respondents. We found no significant differences in relation to non-response and our key independent variable: party preference. Demographically, 57 % of our respondents had higher education (bachelor level and above), 51 % were female and the median age was between 46 and 55 years.

Experimental design

In order to further our understanding of what bias overrides the other, we constructed a choice task in which participants had the choice between two news articles designed to trigger the two different biases. Participants in four different groups were given a choice between two fictive news stories, in a design made specifically to examine the relative strength of negativity bias and partisan bias when matched up against each other. Figure 1 shows the experiment design and the four different groups.

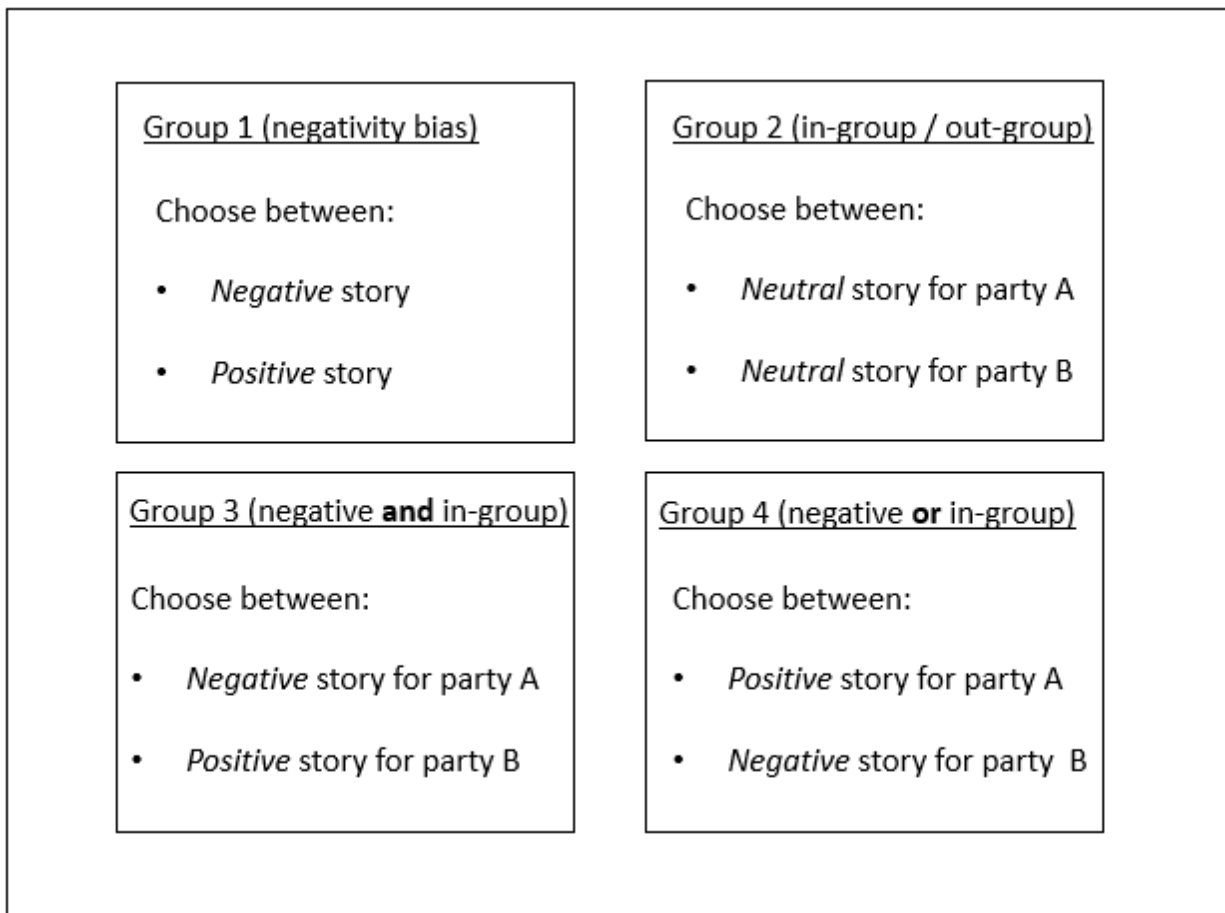


Figure 1: The four different experiment groups.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four groups and prompted to choose one out of two (images of) constructed online news headlines supposedly placed on the top of the front page of a Norwegian online news outlet. The order of the headlines was randomized. We did group comparisons across the four groups on the socio-demographic variables gender and education, indicating that randomization was successful. Yet, we observed significant differences between age groups. All reported results are, however, robust if we include these sociodemographic variables as controls.

In group 1, we measure and separate the effect of valence (positive and negative), and in group 2, we test the effects of the two political parties. These two groups attempt to assess the effects of negativity selection bias and in-group/out-group selection bias respectively. These groups are also important in order to establish the existence of these biases in selection of online news in the Norwegian context. Respondents in the first group chose between an article reporting a positive news story about the economy, and a negative news story about the economy. Respondents in the second group chose between two article headlines reporting either a stable outcome of an opinion poll for the Progress Party of Norway, or a stable outcome of an opinion poll for the Norwegian Labour Party.

Experiment group three and four were specifically met with choices designed to disentangle the two biases. In the third group, participants were given the choice between an article headline reporting a *negative* outcome of an opinion poll for the Norwegian Labour Party, and an article reporting a *positive* outcome of an opinion poll for the Progress Party of Norway. Conversely, in the fourth group, participants had to choose between a *positive* outcome for the Norwegian Labour Party, and a *negative* outcome for the Progress Party of Norway. Combined, group 3 and 4 address H1 and H2.

Stimulus, Issues and Parties

We chose to use constructed, but realistic articles about public opinion polls. The headline in all four constructed articles exist as real life news stories and are therefore a plausible presentation of news stories that the informants actually could encounter in their everyday news reading. In addition, most news articles using opinion polls use both a negative outcome for one party and a positive outcome for another in the same article. However, we chose to separate the good outcome and the bad outcome into two different articles because we wanted to isolate the negative and the positive message as much as possible. Using opinion-poll-stories to test our hypotheses has several advantages. Such stories have become ubiquitous in political news reporting, and are frequently to be seen on the front pages of all Norwegian major news outlets webpages. Furthermore, this type of news story provides a good opportunity to operationalize the concept of “good news and bad news” in connection to certain political parties. As one political party soars in the polls, another is likely to plummet - and vice versa. By presenting stimuli about political parties that are on the opposite end of the political spectrum, and often have voters who dislike the other group, this is an excellent type of news story for creating experimental stimuli to test for both negativity bias and selective exposure.

In terms of what our respondents were faced with in the survey, we strived for a simple and understandable design. In order not to deceive participants, we explicitly stated that they were given a choice between hypothetical news articles. However, we designed the articles to be realistic, resembling actual news stories to a high degree. The vignette read “These fictitious news articles are typical articles that can be found on the top of Norwegian news-sites. Pick the article you would click on, and read more about, if you had encountered these articles on a normal day. You may only choose one article.” What follows is the design

of the top page of VG.no, the online outlet of a big Norwegian newspaper. What was featured below (the actual choice) varied between the four groups. For instance, for group 4, the news article to the left read “Progress Party losing support in latest opinion poll” - and the article to the right read “Labour Party gains support in latest opinion poll”. We chose to employ the design and look of the online news outlet VG-NETT because it is the most visited online newspaper website (in fact, the most visited website of all) in Norway. VG is the largest newspaper in Norway in terms of readership. Furthermore, VG as a publication has no direct historical ties to a political party, and is not considered a partisan news outlet.

The two political parties, the Progress Party of Norway and the Norwegian Labour Party, are in the right and left political wing respectively. We selected these parties because the Progress Party (a populist party) has formed a right-wing minority government with the Conservative Party of Norway, while the Norwegian Labour Party is the largest party in the country and led the former left-leaning coalition in government. We assume that this will spark political polarization. Traditionally, much of the Progress Party’s political rhetoric has focused on attacking and criticizing the Labour Party, since they in many ways represent the political establishment and the Norwegian political elite. Lastly, the two parties selected garner a substantial share of the popular: vote The Labour Party got 30,8% of the votes (55 of 169 mandates), and the Progress Party got 16,3% of the votes (29 of 169 mandates) in the national election of 2013.

Dependent and independent measurements

Our dependent measurement covered the (binary) selection between one out of two (pictures of) articles. Because the content of the articles is different in each of the four groups,

the dependent variable varies across the four different conditions as well. In other words, the study applies four dependent variables.

As independent measurement, we measured partisanship – operationalized as party preference (1 = The Labour Party, 2 = The Progress Party, 3 = Other parties). We did so by asking: “What would you vote if there was an election to the Storting tomorrow?”. In this study, we focus on the two parties featured in the constructed news headlines - The Labour Party and the Progress Party. We refer to the remaining parties as “Other parties” (50.2 %, N=656). Even though both parties garner a substantial share of the popular vote, the responses contained a limited amount of Progress Party voters (8.7 %, N=113) in comparison to Labour Party voters (41.1 %, N=537). However, the amount of respondents proved to be more than enough to compare the selective behaviour among the two parties.

Results

In the following, we first present our general findings of what people *in general* selected in the four different groups, before breaking down the results through our independent variable of party preference. To ease interpretation of our results and design, all results are structured in the same order as displayed in Figure 1.

Table 1. Mean of Selected Article within each group

	M	SE	N
Group 1: Only Valence: Selected Negative Story	.69	.02	(356)
Group 2: Only Party: Selected Neutral Labour Party Story	.60	.03	(276)
Group 3: Selected Negative Labour Party Story	.54	.03	(323)
Group 4: Selected Positive Labour Party Story	.53	.03	(351)

Note: The table shows mean and standard error of selected article, with N in parentheses

All variables vary between 0 and 1.

Table 1 shows the outcome of respondents' choices in the four different groups. The respondents in group one were given the choice between a negative story on the economy and a positive story on the economy. In line with the literature on negativity bias, people are more likely to select negative over positive news, also in Norway. The majority (69 %) of the respondents selected the negative story on the economy. Group two was given a neutral in-group/out-group choice, having to choose between a no-change-in-the-polls story for either the Labour Party or the Progressive party. Results show that people in general are more inclined to select a neutral story about the Labour Party than a neutral story about the Progress Party. This is perhaps not surprising, considering that the Labour Party garners a greater share of the popular vote and sample, than the Progress Party.

The participants in group three were given the choice between a negative story about the Labour Party and a positive story about the Progress Party. In group four, participants

were given an exact opposite choice of group three: a positive story about the Labour party or a negative story about the Progress Party. Table 1 show that people in general are more inclined to select a story about the Labour Party than a story about the Progress Party - regardless of valence. In the following, we will test how the observed selective behaviour vary among partisans within the four different groups.

Selective Behaviour among Partisans

Because our dependent variable contains four different binary outcomes of a selection between two article headlines, we conducted four different regression models, with party preference as the independent variable in each model. All results were replicated and remained statistically significant when we used ANOVA or logistic regression. To ease interpretation, we illustrate the results from these four regression models as mean differences between Labour Party partisans, Progress Party partisans, and partisans among other parties, with 95 % confidence intervals. This is displayed in the four different figures in Figure 2.

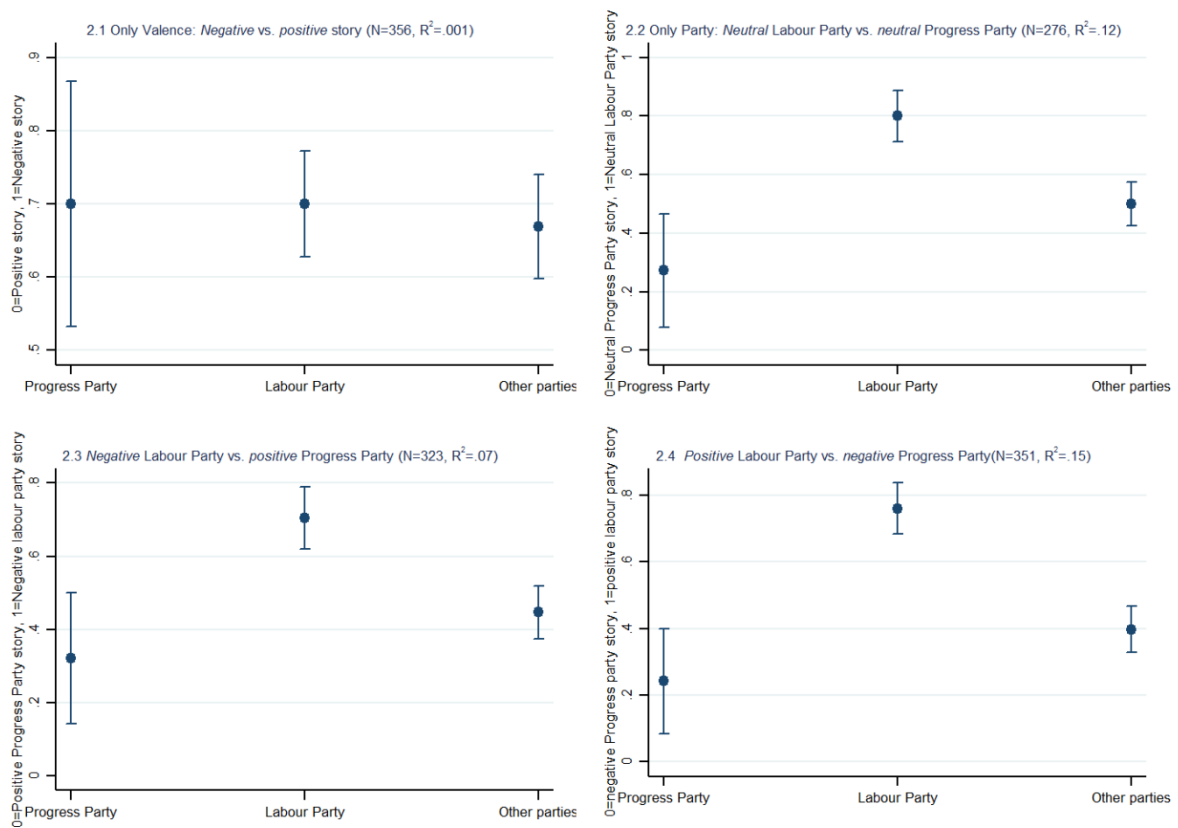


Figure 2. Mean difference in Article Choice in the four different groups, by Party Preference. With 95 % confidence intervals. N and R-squared for each model in parenthesis.

Figure 2 shows which articles in the four different groups partisans are most likely to choose. Starting with 2.1 in Figure 2, we observe no significant differences among partisans. Thus, 2.1 show that people are more likely to choose an article with a negative tone than a positive tone, no matter their partisan affiliation. Turning to 2.2 in Figure 2, we observe that the mean answers among Labour Party voters and Progress Party voters are pushed in the expected, opposing directions. Thus, we observe that people are more likely to select an article that is consistent with their party preference if the story valence is neutral. This is in line with the existing literature on partisan selective exposure.

Turning to our original hypotheses, we originally predicted through H1 that people would be more likely to read an article containing *negative* information about their own party, rather than *positive* information about a party they do not support. On the other hand, through H2, we predicted that people would be more likely to read an article that is consistent with their party preference if their party is framed in a *positive* tone, rather than choosing *negative* information about a party they do not support. Taken together, H1 and H2 thus predicts that people will prefer news stories about “their” party, regardless of the valence of the story.

In order for H1 and H2 to be supported, we need to observe significant differences in article selections among Labour Party and Progress Party partisans, were, for instance, Labour Party partisans prefer negative news about the Labour Party over positive news about the Progress Party, as well as prefer positive news about the Labour Party over negative news about the Progress Party. Indeed, we find support for H1 and H2. The figures 2.3 and 2.4 in Figure 2 follows the same patterns as the valence neutral group (2.2), indicating that Labour Party partisans prefer the Labour Party story, and Progress Party partisans prefer the Progress Party story in 2.2, 2.3 and 2.4. This evidence clearly indicate that people are more likely to prefer articles about a party they would vote for, regardless of whether the news story about their party is framed as ‘bad news’, or as ‘good news’.

Summing up, we observe that even though both biases are present, one selection bias does indeed override the other. When partisans are faced with a choice that pit these two factors for selection bias against each other, party cues override negativity bias quite clearly.

Discussion

Previous work on selective exposure has shown that people tend to select content based on valence and party preference. The present study extends these insights by

elucidating the workings of selective behaviour when the potential for both biases are present. Based on insights provided through the results of Meffert et.al.(2006) and Halevy et. al.(2008) we argue that politically motivated selective exposure should override negativity bias. In our experiment, we explicitly tested whether partisan selective exposure overrides the desire for negative information.

The findings point towards the fact that although negative news is both popular to produce and to consume (Trussler & Soroka, 2014), negativity might not always be the strongest factor when it comes to online news selection. When faced with a concrete choice between two articles with different valence and political parties, partisans select content based on their political predispositions rather than the valence of the story. In other words, partisans select information in line with their party over other parties, regardless of whether the implied outcome for the party in the news story is negative or positive.

To further indicate that these findings should hold for other contexts as well, we also show that Norway is no exception regarding partisan bias and negativity bias, as both partisan selective exposure and negativity bias occur when one of the factors are absent. For instance, partisans select information in line with their party even in the absence of valence. On the other hand, people in general are far more likely to read a negative story than a positive story when party information is absent - regardless of partisan affiliation.

Even though the European context differs from the American by manner of not having very strong partisan media outlets to the left and right side of the political spectrum as for instance Fox News and MSNBC, our finding suggests that one could still speak of selective exposure effects in the European context as well. As audiences can actively decide which news articles they read, we argue that what we could be seeing indications of in this study is

the presence of selective exposure not on an outlet-level, but on the level of individual article choice across media outlets.

The larger societal importance of the results in this study could point towards a certain degree of pessimism on behalf of some of the ideals of a healthy deliberative democracy with a well-functioning media system for public and free expression. In such a system, one can argue, as Sunstein (2001) does, that it is necessary that “people should be exposed to materials they would not have chosen in advance”. It is possible that such varied exposure was more easily facilitated in the days where print editions and broadcast media dominated the media landscape to a larger extent. In such an environment, the media product often took the form of a varied package, bringing news of different sorts and thematic to the consumer. In a fully digitized news environment however, citizens may more freely choose to expose themselves to news stories catering to their own personal interest, as our study also indicates.

Furthermore, as the popularity of social media continue to rise, one can expect this trend to continue, as users of these services increasingly use platforms as Facebook as a source of news and news articles.

A further note of concern, relying on the available evidence from the American context, is that partisan selective exposure seems to spark polarization in the electorate (e.g. Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). Nevertheless, within a European and multi-party setting, we have yet to see an effect of selective exposure on polarization (Trilling et al., 2016). On this note, it should be mentioned that a lot of the potentially negative trends of partisan selective exposure seems to be negotiated and dampened by other factors, such as endorsements through social media - which have been found to dampen the effects of selective exposure (Messing and Westwood, 2011). Another mitigating factor seems to be connected to how interesting the news reader considers the story to be - topic relevance has been found to limit partisan

selective exposure (Mummolo, 2016). Additionally, the strong position of the Norwegian public service broadcaster NRK should mitigate some of these concerns, as research indicates that the presence of a strong PBS indeed does alleviate some of the concerns of selective exposure (Bos et al., 2016).

Limitations

Even though some of the abovementioned factors can dampen some of the troublesome aspects of our results, they also point to some limitations of the present study. We argue that we need more knowledge about selective exposure on the article-level in the European context to fully understand how and when the phenomenon is active and at work among the electorate. It should also be mentioned that we have only attempted to disentangle two key factors for online news choice. There is a wide range of other reasons people choose to read the news they do. These factors, such as perceived topic relevance, endorsements, source credibility and other nuances of everyday media-use should also be measured against the pull of partisanship. These limitations point to further avenues of research. The same can be said for limitations inherent in our experimental design. Employing a choice task in a survey was ideal for testing our hypotheses. In order to establish which bias was the strongest, it was necessary to pit the two against each other. However, this design forces respondents to take a stance and choose. Furthermore, it only allows respondents to select *one* article. Actual online news reading is not so neat and limited. For instance, would respondents want to read more than one article? Or perhaps they did not want to read any of the articles? Faced with the plethora of choices between stories and articles on the wide range of subjects that online news consumers are faced with today, would they have read the poll-

story at all? In order to examine whether our results have relevance outside of the experimental situation, further research to examine these questions are needed.

References

- Aalberg, T., & Curran, J. (2012). Conclusion. In T. Aalberg & J. Curran (Eds.), *How Media Inform Democracy: A Comparative Approach* (pp. 189–201). New York: Routledge.
- Arceneaux, K., & Johnson, M. (2013). *Changing Minds Or Changing Channels?: Partisan News in an Age of Choice*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Baumeister, R. F., Bratslavsky, E., Finkenauer, C., & Vohs, K. D. (2001). Bad is stronger than good. *Review of General Psychology*, 5(4), 323-370. doi:10.1037/1089-2680.5.4.323
- Bolsen, T., Druckman, J. N., & Cook, F. L. (2014). The Influence of Partisan Motivated Reasoning on Public Opinion. *Political Behavior*, 36(2), 235-262. doi:10.1007/s11109-013-9238-0
- Bos, L., Kruikemeier, S., & de Vreese, C. (2016). Nation Binding: How Public Service Broadcasting Mitigates Political Selective Exposure. *PLoS ONE*, 11(5), e0155112. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0155112
- Carretié, L., Mercado, F., Tapia, M., & Hinojosa, J. A. (2001). Emotion, attention, and the ‘negativity bias’, studied through event-related potentials. *International Journal of Psychophysiology*, 41(1), 75-85. doi:[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0167-8760\(00\)00195-1](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0167-8760(00)00195-1)
- Cohen, G. L. (2003). Party Over Policy: The Dominating Impact of Group Influence on Political Beliefs. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85(5), 808-822. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.85.5.808
- Daignault, P., Soroka, S., & Giasson, T. (2013). The Perception of Political Advertising During an Election Campaign: A Measure of Cognitive and Emotional Effects. *Canadian Journal of Communication; Vol 38, No 2 (2013): Media and Advertising*.

Festinger, L. (1957). *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Garrett, R. K., Gvirsman, S. D., Johnson, B. K., Tsfati, Y., Neo, R., & Dal, A. (2014).

Implications of Pro- and Counterattitudinal Information Exposure for Affective

Polarization. *Human communication research*, 40(3), 309-332.

doi:10.1111/hcre.12028

Habermas, J. (1996). *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Halevy, N., Bornstein, G., & Sagiv, L. (2008). “In-Group Love” and “Out-Group Hate” as

Motives for Individual Participation in Intergroup Conflict: A New Game Paradigm.

Psychological Science, 19(4), 405-411. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9280.2008.02100.x

Hallin, D. C., & Mancini, P. (2004). *Comparing media systems: Three models of media and politics*: Cambridge University Press.

Hibbing, J. R., Smith, K. B., & Alford, J. R. (2014). Differences in negativity bias underlie variations in political ideology. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 37(3), 297-307.

doi:10.1017/S0140525X13001192

Ito, T. A., Larsen, J. T., Smith, N. K., & Cacioppo, J. T. (1998). Negative information weighs more heavily on the brain: The negativity bias in evaluative categorizations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75(4), 887-900. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.75.4.887

Iyengar, S., & Hahn, K. S. (2009). Red media, blue media: Evidence of ideological selectivity

in media use. *Journal of Communication*, 59(1), 19-39.

Karppinen, K. (2016). Beyond Positive and Negative Conceptions of Free Speech In E. M.

Svensson, A. Kenyon, & M. Edström (Eds.), *Blurring the lines: Market-Driven and*

Democracy-Driven Freedom of Expression. Gothenburg: Nordicom.

- Knobloch-Westerwick, S., & Hastall, M. R. (2010). Please Your Self: Social Identity Effects on Selective Exposure to News About In- and Out-Groups. *Journal of Communication*, 60(3), 515-535. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2010.01495.x
- Knobloch-Westerwick, S., Johnson, B. K., & Westerwick, A. (2015). Confirmation Bias in Online Searches: Impacts of Selective Exposure Before an Election on Political Attitude Strength and Shifts. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 20(2), 171-187. doi:10.1111/jcc4.12105
- Lau, R. R. (1985). Two Explanations for Negativity Effects in Political Behavior. *American Journal of Political Science*, 29(1), 119-138. doi:10.2307/2111215
- Lazarsfeld, P. M., Berelson, B. R., & Gaudet, H. (1948). *The people's choice: How the voter makes up his mind in a presidential campaign*. . New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce.
- Lengauer, G., Esser, F., & Berganza, R. (2012). Negativity in political news: A review of concepts, operationalizations and key findings. *Journalism*, 13(2), 179-202. doi:10.1177/1464884911427800
- Leung, D. K. K., & Lee, F. L. F. (2014). How Journalists value Positive News. *Journalism Studies*, 16(2), 289-304. doi:10.1080/1461670X.2013.869062
- Levendusky, M. S. (2013a). *How Partisan Media Polarize America*. Chicago University of Chicago Press.
- Levendusky, M. S. (2013b). Why Do Partisan Media Polarize Viewers? *American Journal of Political Science*, 57(3), 611-623. doi:10.1111/ajps.12008
- Meffert, M. F., Chung, S., Joiner, A. J., Waks, L., & Garst, J. (2006). The Effects of Negativity and Motivated Information Processing During a Political Campaign. *Journal of Communication*, 56(1), 27-51. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2006.00003.x

- Messing, S., & Westwood, S. J. (2014). Selective Exposure in the Age of Social Media: Endorsements Trump Partisan Source Affiliation When Selecting News Online. *Communication Research*, 41(8), 1042-1063. doi:10.1177/0093650212466406
- Mummolo, J. (2016). News from the Other Side: How Topic Relevance Limits the Prevalence of Partisan Selective Exposure. *The Journal of Politics*, 78(3), 763-773.
doi:doi:10.1086/685584
- Norris, C. J., Larsen, J. T., Crawford, L. E., & Cacioppo, J. T. (2011). Better (or worse) for some than others: Individual differences in the positivity offset and negativity bias. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 45(1), 100-111.
doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2010.12.001>
- Prior, M. (2013). Media and Political Polarization. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 16(1).
- Rozin, P., & Royzman, E. B. (2001). Negativity Bias, Negativity Dominance, and Contagion. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 5(4), 296-320.
doi:10.1207/s15327957pspr0504_2
- Sears, D. O., & Freedman, J. I. (1967). Selective exposure to information: A critical review. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 31(2), 194-213. doi:10.1086/267513
- Skjervheim, Ø., & Høgestøl, A. (2014). *Norwegian Citizen Panel 2014, Third Wave Methodology Report*. Retrieved from https://scholar.uib.no/sites/default/files/ivarsflaten/files/ncp-methodology-report-wave-3_0.pdf
- Slothuus, R., & de Vreese, C. H. (2010). Political Parties, Motivated Reasoning, and Issue Framing Effects. *The Journal of Politics*, 72(03), 630-645.
doi:10.1017/s002238161000006x

- Soroka, S. N. (2006). Good News and Bad News: Asymmetric Responses to Economic Information. *Journal of Politics*, 68(2), 372-385. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2508.2006.00413.x
- Soroka, S. N. (2014). *Negativity in Democratic Politics: Causes and Consequences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stroud, N. J. (2010). Polarization and partisan selective exposure. *Journal of Communication*, 60(3), 556-576.
- Stroud, N. J. (2011). *Niche news: The politics of news choice*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Sunstein, C. R. (2001). *Republic.com*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Syvertsen, T., Enli, G. S., Mjøs, O. J., & Moe, H. (2014). *The Media Welfare State: Nordic Media in the Digital Era*. University of Michigan Press.
- Trilling, D., & Schoenbach, K. (2015). Challenging Selective Exposure. *Digital Journalism*, 3(2), 140-157. doi:10.1080/21670811.2014.899749
- Trilling, D., van Klingeren, M., & Tsfati, Y. (2016). Selective Exposure, Political Polarization, and Possible Mediators: Evidence From the Netherlands. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*. doi:10.1093/ijpor/edw003
- Trussler, M., & Soroka, S. (2014). Consumer Demand for Cynical and Negative News Frames. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 19(3), 360-379. doi:10.1177/1940161214524832
- Zillmann, D., & Bryant, J. (1985). *Selective exposure to communication*. Hillsdale: Erlbaum.