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AUDIENCE FRAGMENTATION AND POLITICAL INEQUALITY IN THE POST-BROADCAST MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

Markus Prior

Editor's Note

Markus Prior argues that the proliferation of news sources is segmenting the nation into news buffs and entertainment buffs. The news buffs, who feast on the rich flow of news, shape the opinion currents that drive politics. The entertainment buffs are choosing to isolate themselves from politics, indulging in light amusement instead. The inequalities in political interest and participation that distinguish news buffs from entertainment buffs impair the quality of American democracy. A government based on impoverished opinion sources becomes less representative and less effective because the pool of informed citizens is smaller, turnout at elections is reduced, and political polarization is enhanced.

Markus Prior expressed the views quoted in Chapter 12 in Post-broadcast Democracy, a book based on his doctoral dissertation. The book was published when he was an assistant professor of politics and public affairs at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public Affairs at Princeton University. The dissertation won the American Political Science Association's 2005 E.E. Schattschneider Award for the year's best dissertation about American government.

. . . Media Environments and Political Behavior

Before television, news was more difficult. Understanding the news required a relatively high level of ability, so learning about politics was more strongly determined by formal education and cognitive skills. Broadcast

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television provided less educated citizens with more basic information, which increased their political knowledge and their likelihood of going to the polls (at least relative to the more educated). Starting in the 1970s, cable television slowly offered television viewers more programming choices. Some viewers—the entertainment fans—began to abandon the nightly newscasts in favor of more entertaining programs. In the low-choice environment, they encountered politics at least occasionally because they liked watching television—even television news—more than most other leisure activities. Neuman (1996, 19) characterized this pattern as "politics by default." Cable television and the Internet have transformed "politics by default" into politics by choice. By their own choice, entertainment fans learn less about politics than they used to and vote less often.

"Politics by default" made the 1960s and 1970s a period of unusually widespread news consumption. More people watched television news in this period than at any other time. Only television, by virtue of being both easy to follow and hard to resist, drew the less educated into the news audience. That news reaches fewer people today is thus not an irregularity, but rather a return to the days before television. The anomaly that stands out is that so many Americans decided to watch the news in the 1960s and 1970s, even though nobody forced them, and they were happy to abandon the news as soon as alternatives became available.

The transition from the low-choice environment to the high-choice world of cable and Internet reversed trends generated by the advent of broadcast television. For example, broadcast television lowered inequality in political involvement before cable and the Internet increased it again. But the changes underlying the two transitions involved different subpopulations. The advent of broadcast television modified the relationship between ability and political involvement, but it did little to change the effect of motivation. Cable television and the Internet, in contrast, confer greater importance to individual motivations in seeking political information out of the mass of other content. At the same time, they leave the role of ability more or less constant. In other words, broadcast television helped the less educated learn more about politics, whether or not they were particularly motivated to follow the news. The current high-choice environment concentrates political knowledge among those who like the news largely independent of their levels of education or cognitive skills. (Education continues to affect political learning in the high-choice media environment, but media content preferences are increasingly important predictors and only weakly related to education.)

Widespread news consumption was not the only consequence of the unusual broadcast television environment. . . . [T]he 1960s and 1970s stand out because of their relative equality in political involvement, a direct result of the broad reach of broadcast news. Elections, too, were unusual in the 1960s and 1970s. The impact of party identification on vote decisions dropped to its modern low point (Bartels 2000). Electoral volatility was higher than either today or in the middle of the twentieth century (Bartels 1998). Politicians took atypically moderate positions, both in Congress and during their election campaigns (Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2000; Poole and Rosenthal 1997). I have argued that the relative absence of polarization in this period reflects the properties of the low-choice media environment. Because the political views of less educated citizens who were led to the polls by broadcast television were less firmly grounded in partisanship, they were more susceptible to nonpartisan voting cues such as incumbency. Although this did not have a systematic effect in presidential elections, where partisan cues dominate, it did affect congressional elections. The symbiosis between local television stations and members of Congress allowed incumbents to dominate the airwaves and send favorable cues. As a result, incumbents increased their vote shares as television spread across the country.

Beginning in the 1970s, greater media choice widened the turnout gap between news and entertainment fans. Advances in cable technology and the emergence of the Internet continue to feed this gap today. As a result of the fact that those who do not tune out are more partisan, greater turnout inequality produces more polarized elections. Entertainment fans are less partisan than those who continue to follow politics and vote in the high-choice media environment. The stronger partisan preferences of remaining voters reduce the volatility of election outcomes. Elections become more strongly determined by partisanship even though partisanship in the public as a whole has changed to a much lesser degree.

Many Americans live in a high-choice media environment already. More than 80 percent of them have access to cable or satellite television. More than half access the Internet from their homes. With the transition from low choice to high choice so far advanced, have the bulk of the political changes happened already? In some ways, the biggest change that cable television brought about was the removal of the quasi-monopoly for news in the early evening. Once the first dozen cable channels removed this monopoly, the structural reasons for inflated news audiences had largely disappeared. Yet even though cable television removed the biggest bottleneck in the quest for around-the-clock entertainment, Internet access accelerated the effect, according to my analysis. Access to two new media appears to roughly double the impact of preferences compared to either one of them.

Analog cable systems and dial-up Internet connections—currently the modal ways of new media access—are only the first technological steps toward greater choice. The convergence of media is likely to increasingly blur the difference between cable and the Internet. Digital transmission will without a doubt multiply the number of choices and the efficiency of choosing.

In the absence of preference changes, future technological advances such as video-on-demand and widespread broadband access are likely to exacerbate inequality. Media content preferences will only become more important for our understanding of American politics. . . .

. . . Extraordinary circumstances can temporarily disturb these trends. With greater media choice, entertainment fans leave the news audience. But under extraordinary circumstances, many of them return. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, Americans watched news and visited news Web sites in record numbers (Althaus 2002; Prior 2002). . . . [T]he media environment and people's motivations both contributed to these unusual spurts of political involvement. Interest in the news surrounding the attacks was obviously very high. But the media environment, too, was temporarily changed as the broadcast networks provided uninterrupted news coverage for four days and many cable channels, including MTV, TNT, and ESPN, carried news feeds instead of their usual entertainment and sports programming. The military interventions in Iraq in 1991 and 2003 also increased news interest considerably, though not nearly as much as 9/11 (Althaus 2002; Baum 2003b; Gantz and Greenberg 1993). The impact of content preferences is bound to be muted in these moments of crisis. . . .

The list of interesting questions for future research does not end there. In addition to the strength of content preferences, the opportunity to act upon them should condition the effects on political involvement. In the Opportunity-Motivation-Ability framework (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Luskin 1987) that laid the foundation for the Conditional Learning Model, the media environment is not the only element of learning opportunity. Even a strong news fan in a high-choice media environment may not pick up a great deal of information if other things keep her busy. Employment status, child-rearing obligations, and many other demands on time should affect the relationship between preferences, news exposure, and political involvement. Moreover, media content preferences are clearly not the only motivational determinant of content selection. With respect to the choice between news and entertainment, the most obvious other contender seems to be a sense of civic duty. Some people may not like news as much as entertainment, but they still follow it because they consider it their duty as citizens to be informed about the major political issues of the day. We might expect a greater impact of civic duty, too, in the high-choice media environment where entertainment lures whenever news is an option. Convenience, social interactions, and incomplete information about viewing choices can all dilute the relationship between content preferences and viewing decisions. One purpose of media marketing, after all, is to get people to follow programming they would not otherwise select. Yet despite these distorting influences, even the simple distinction between a taste for news and a taste for entertainment has proved to drive content selection and its political consequences to a remarkable degree.

Another possible objection to the power of media choice concerns not the demand for different programming, but its supply. Actual choice between different types of media content, not simply the number of channels or media, is the key variable behind many of the effects described in this book. Access to a medium, the measure I use in the empirical analysis, is nothing more than a convenient simplification. Some have argued that actual choice between different content has not increased much at all as a result of technological advances. Barber (1998–9, 578–9), for example, contends that "despite the fact that outlets for their product have multiplied, there has been little real substantive diversification. . . . The actual content available is pretty much identical with what was available on the networks ten years ago. . . . Media giants make nonsense of the theoretical diversification of the technology."

Although Barber overstates his case and although cable television would still make it easier to select one's preferred content, even if media content had not changed at all, he offers a useful warning against technological determinism and urges continued attention to the impact of media consolidation. The prediction that "a thousand niches will bloom" (Rich 2002) in the high-choice media environment needs an empirical assessment. Even leaving aside the issue of media ownership concentration, the choice between different news formats is clearly not limitless. News is costly, so demand needs to surpass a profitability threshold for news formats to be available (unless news production is subsidized by the government). Television news is available around the clock (although not always live even on most twenty-four-hour news channels), but some issues are covered more than others. Quality of news and the resources devoted to specific issues vary. If the potential audience for an issue is too small, the fixed costs of covering the issue can outweigh the benefits that news providers can expect, so the issue may receive little or no coverage. In principle, similar constraints apply for online news (Hamilton 2004, 190–4). Geographical boundaries and proximity to the media outlet are largely irrelevant for online news, however. Internet users can easily access news from other regions of the country or from foreign media outlets. Although economic constraints are present for online news, "the low fixed costs of website operation and potential for aggregating like-minded individuals from many different areas or countries implies great variety in news provision on the Internet" (Hamilton 2004, 192). . . .

Media Environments and the Interpretation of Political Trends

. . . The decline of network news audiences over the last two and a half decades has been interpreted as a sign of waning political interest and a disappearing

sense of civic duty. Yet this interpretation ignores the circumstances under which high news ratings emerged. Taking into account these circumstances yields a very different conclusion. News consumption can change even while people's media content preferences (and their civic duty and their political interest and their trust in the media) remain constant. In this case, cable television and later the Internet modified the relationship between content preferences and news exposure. The decline in news audiences was not caused by reduced political interest. . . . Interest in politics was simply never as high as audience shares for evening news suggested. A combined three-quarter market share for the three network newscasts takes on a different meaning if one considers that people had hardly any viewing alternatives.

The same caution is warranted when interpreting the recent partisan polarization of elections. Many analysts believe that America has become a deeply polarized nation. This study provides a corrective to this view. Comparing survey data from the 1970s to today's polls, analysts often jump to the conclusion that the public has become vastly more partisan. This sets off a hunt to explain how individuals were converted from ambivalent moderates to rabid partisans. I have provided a less radical explanation for the polarization of elections in recent decades. Greater media choice has made partisans more likely to vote and moderates more likely to abstain. Politics by choice is inherently more polarized than politics by default. This is not to deny that conversion may have played some role. But a far simpler change, higher turnout of partisan news-seekers and lower turnout of less partisan entertainment fans, contributes to polarization. This change polarizes elections but leaves the country as moderate and indifferent as it used to be. . . .

The negative impact of television on political involvement even among people who were primarily attracted by television entertainment was initially limited because the amount and availability of entertainment was limited too. Television may have offered them more vivid and convenient diversion than either movie theatres or radio, but political engagement among entertainment fans took a greater hit after cable television opened the floodgates for entertainment. Again, however, increasing knowledge and turnout rates among news fans compensated at least partly for this decline. . . .

The Voluntary Origins of Political Inequality

. . . Having the opportunity to view hundreds of television channels makes for more satisfying viewing than being limited to just three or four. And being able to choose from among hundreds of television channels and thousands of Web sites is even better. Despite the occasional difficulty in finding the desired content online or doubt about the added value of another dozen new cable channels, few inhabitants of the high-choice media environment would like to turn back the clock.

Yet although this wide variety means greater viewing, reading, and listening pleasures, the implications of greater choice for the health of democracy are more ambiguous. Rising inequality in political involvement and increasing partisan polarization of elections make it more difficult for a democratic system to achieve equal representation of citizens' interests. Unlike most other forms of inequality, however, this one arises due to voluntary consumption decisions. Entertainment fans abandon politics not because it has become harder for them to be involved—many people would argue the contrary—but because they decide to devote their time to media that promise greater gratification than the news. The mounting inequality between news fans and entertainment fans is due to preference differences, not differences in abilities or resources. In this regard, the contrast to the pre-television media environment is stark. Print media and even radio excluded those with low cognitive abilities and little education; entertainment fans in the current high-choice environment exclude themselves. This trend creates a question for modern democracies: When media users get what they want all the time, does anyone get hurt?

The voluntary basis of rising inequality in political involvement clashes with the conventional wisdom on the implications of the "digital divide." Many casual observers emphasize the great promise new technologies hold for democracy. They deplore current socioeconomic inequalities in access to new media but predict increasing political knowledge and participation for current have-nots after these inequalities have been overcome. The notion of Conditional Political Learning leads to the decidedly less optimistic conclusion that any gap based on socioeconomic status will be eclipsed by a preference-based gap once access to new media becomes cheaper and more widely available. . . .

. . . Mere access to the Internet is only one of many aspects of the divide. Differences in hardware, software, and connection speed all introduce additional inequality. Using the Internet in a library or at school is not the same as using it in one's own home. Demographic differences in access to the Internet persist today. Unlike broadcast television and radio, the Internet is a service that is available only for a regular fee (at least in today's business model), not a product that, once purchased, provides free access to media content. It is not a foregone conclusion that almost every American will eventually have easy and efficient access to the wealth of political information online. . . .

It is not immediately clear if the rising inequality in political involvement hurts social welfare. I have so far eschewed assessing my empirical findings in light of some normative standard. In some sense, assessing political involvement among entertainment fans does not need a normative standard: Their political knowledge and turnout rates are dropping. And they surely did not drop from such highs that their involvement in the high-choice environment represents a welcome decline to more healthy levels. Yet, it is not convincing

to argue reflexively that only maximum political involvement creates the conditions under which democracy can function. Both the Downsian perspective of political ignorance as rational and Schudson's (1998; 2000) recent reconsideration of what makes a "good citizen" force us to specify more carefully how well and how equally informed we need an electorate to be.

In Schudson's view, the ideal of an informed citizen who carefully studies political issues and candidate platforms before casting a vote needs adjustment. It was, first of all, always an ideal against which most citizens looked ill-informed and ineffective. But, argues Schudson, it also ignores an arena for citizenship that has expanded dramatically in the last fifty years. Beginning with the civil rights movement, litigation became a way to instigate social change that gave citizens both the opportunity and the obligation to claim their rights: "The new model of citizenship added the courtroom to the voting booth as a locus of civic participation" (1998, 250). Together with increasing regulatory powers of the federal government, the "rights revolution" extended the reach of politics into many areas of private life. This new dimension has added considerable complexity to the role of the citizen, making citizenship "a year-around and daylong activity" (1998, 311). Although Schudson does not deny the benefits of an informed citizenry, it is neither realistic nor necessary, in his view, to expect citizens to be well informed about every aspect of their increasingly complex role in society. Instead, he proposes a modified model of citizenship, the "monitorial citizen." Rather than being widely knowledgeable about politics, citizens merely need to "be informed enough and alert enough to identify danger to their personal good and danger to the public good" (Schudson 2000, 22). In order to fulfill this "monitoring obligation," citizens "engage in environmental surveillance rather than information-gathering" (1998, 310–11).

How do the news junkies, Switchers, and entertainment fans that we have encountered in this book measure up against Schudson's model of citizenship? Even by his relaxed standards, the citizenry in the high-choice media environment seems handicapped by the growing inequality of political involvement. The drop in news exposure and knowledge among entertainment fans reduces the monitoring capabilities among the electorate. According to Schudson (1998, 310), "monitorial citizens scan (rather than read) the informational environment in a way so that they may be alerted on a very wide variety of issues for a very wide variety of ends." Although available data do not allow a precise assessment, this does not sound like the entertainment fans we have encountered in this book. Many of them probably do considerably less than "scan . . . the informational environment." It is doubtful that entertainment fans can be effective monitors. To the extent that the success of Schudson's model depends on monitoring by all or most citizens, my empirical analysis indicates a growing problem for democracy.

An optimist might grant that entertainment fans would not make good monitors but point out that the high-choice media environment provides news junkies with unprecedented resources to perform as monitorial citizens. If it is not necessary for all citizens to engage in monitoring because some citizens can in fact fill in as monitors for others, the expansion of media choice could actually make it easier to spot the dangers. Can news junkies be super-monitorial citizens? News junkies certainly look like excellent monitors. They consume a lot of information—and a lot more than before the choice explosion. Collectively at least, they may be quite close to the ideal of an informed citizenry. They also take advantage of new media technologies to share and debate the results of the monitoring. (Perhaps we should think of bloggers as the quintessential monitorial citizens of our day.) Most importantly, news junkies do not mind the monitoring obligation. They enjoy following the news. According to an optimistic interpretation, the less equitable knowledge distribution benefits democracy (in the absence of a change in the mean) because those who become more knowledgeable guide policy in a more "enlightened" direction.

Empirical evidence dampens the optimism. Because politicians pay more attention to voters than nonvoters (e.g., Griffin and Newman 2005; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993), the views of politically less-motivated citizens may not be reflected in political outcomes as much as before. Polls may not adequately represent the views of the electorate because respondents who lack information give responses that do not reflect their preferences or do not provide substantive responses at all (Althaus 2003).

The optimistic interpretation rises and falls with the validity of one key assumption: The happily monitoring news junkies will keep the interests of the happily news-avoiding entertainment fans in mind. For that to happen, either the super-monitorial news junkies of the high-choice media environment would have to approximate a random sample of the population, in which case their political views would correspond roughly to the views of entertainment fans. Or, if news junkies resemble an elitist sample of activists, they would have to consider the collective interest of the citizenry, rather than their own self interest, while performing their monitoring tasks.

Demographically, news fans and entertainment fans are remarkably similar. Although my analysis produced a few significant demographic differences, they were substantively very small. The only partial exception was a sizable age difference between news and entertainment fans. . . . Yet despite demographic similarities, it is far from obvious that news fans can effectively and fairly represent the interests of their friends, colleagues, and relatives who prefer to avoid the news. In one respect, news fans differ substantially from entertainment fans: They are far more partisan. At the very least, this encourages candidates to take

more extreme political positions, especially in primaries (Aldrich 1995; Fiorina 1999). News junkies are unlikely to advocate the moderate policy positions that entertainment fans seem to favor. . . .

Audience Fragmentation

Recent years have seen a lively discussion of the societal and political implications of new media technologies. First and foremost, people have more choice. Increasingly, they also have the opportunity to customize their media use and to filter out content in advance. Some scholars have sounded the alarm bells over these developments, warning of dire consequences of customization, fragmentation, and segmentation. In *Breaking Up America,* Turow (1997, 2, 7) sees the emergence of "electronic equivalents of gated communities" and "lifestyle segregation." Sunstein (2001) predicts the demise of "shared experiences" and increasing group polarization as media users select only content with which they agree in the first place. Others emphasize the benefits of choice and customization (e.g., Negroponte 1995). In this debate, some seemingly mundane conceptual details have not received enough consideration.

Audience fragmentation, the starting point for this debate, is empirically well established. As the number of television channels increases, the audience for any one channel declines and more channels gain at least some viewers. Audience fragmentation increases the diversity of media exposure in the aggregate. This much is uncontroversial. But audience fragmentation tells us nothing about the diversity of individuals' media use. Individuals may take advantage of greater media choice either by watching a mix of many newly available channels or by "bingeing on their favorites" (Webster 2005, 369). Webster (1986; 2005) uses the concept of "audience polarization" to capture the concentration of viewing of a particular channel. If a few viewers account for most of the channel's viewing, its audience is polarized. If viewing is distributed across a large number of people who individually make up only a small share of the channel's viewing, audience polarization is low. From the viewer's perspective, audience polarization is high when people watch a lot of a particular program format or genre and not much else. . . .

. . . Audience fragmentation in particular need not doom civic life. Certain kinds of fragmentation seem completely harmless. Imagine three individuals in the fall of 2005, John, Larry, and Claire, who all used to watch *Friends.* Now John watches *Desperate Housewives,* Larry watches *South Park,* and Claire watches *Lost.* The proliferation of choices allows people who used to watch the same entertainment programming to now watch different entertainment programming. It is hard to see how this change threatens our society (except perhaps in that John, Larry, and Claire cannot talk about the

same show at work—which might itself be an incentive to coordinate on one show and limit fragmentation).

Likewise, if John, Larry, and Claire all used to watch the *CBS Evening News with Dan Rather,* but now John watches the *NBC Nightly News,* Larry watches *The Situation Room,* and Claire tunes in to *Special Report with Brit Hume,* the political implications of fragmentation are limited. Although they now watch different news programs, the three of them still learn roughly the same things about politics. To the extent that exposure to political information motivates political participation, none of the three would seem to be less likely to participate than in the past.

In one respect, this fragmentation of news audiences does seem to make democracy more vulnerable. If some former Rather viewers switch to very conservative outlets, while others turn to a news source with a decidedly liberal slant, their political views may polarize. Such a trend has raised concerns because it might limit the diversity of arguments that viewers encounter and expose them to biased information. . . .

Even if some media exposure is indeed selective with regard to partisan slant, ideological audience specialization poses a lesser problem than audience specialization along the fault lines of news and entertainment. The latter not only exacerbates inequalities in political involvement, it also contributes to partisan polarization in a very different way. Ideological audience specialization raises the specter of partisan polarization because exposure to ideologically biased political content may persuade moderates or reinforce partisans. . . . [T]here are fewer moderate voters today not because they have been converted by increasingly partisan media, but because they have been lost to entertainment. They are still alive and moderate, but politically less relevant because of their tendency to abstain. . . .

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Part III

INFLUENCING ELECTION OUTCOMES

Doris Graber

When it comes to running for office or campaigning for or against a particular policy, practicing politicians are always seriously concerned about media effects. Along with their campaign organizations, they spend much time, effort, and money to influence the outcome with the help of favorable media attention. If their candidates or causes lose, they frequently blame the tone of media coverage or the lack of adequate media coverage for the defeat. Given the importance of elections in democratic societies, scholars and campaign professionals who actually conduct the campaigns have devoted inordinate amounts of time to studying and analyzing the campaigning process. Research is becoming increasingly sophisticated because new tools are available and because the supply of campaign messages has been mushrooming.

The readings in part III scrutinize several important aspects of news media coverage of election campaigns. Selections depict the kinds of images that emerge from news stories, advertisements, and the Internet. Authors speculate about the political consequences of this coverage and raise questions about the ability and effectiveness of the press in informing the public about the real issues at stake in each election.

Part III begins with an analysis of election coverage that focuses on an extremely important facet—the content presented through audiovisuals. Given the omnipresence of audiovisual messages in nearly all kinds of modern media, the dearth of systematic audiovisual content analysis is truly surprising. Lack of reliable, practical, and low-cost analysis methods has been the major barrier. Maria Elizabeth Grabe and Erik Page Bucy head the small group of scholars who have breached it. They scrutinized sounds and visuals from presidential elections ranging from 1992 through 2004.