



# Politically Motivated Selective Exposure and Perceived Media Bias

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## Abstract

If the individuals who are most likely to perceive media bias no longer encounter, via selective exposure, media content they might consider biased, why are perceptions of media bias so pervasive? We argue that many people who engage in politically motivated selective exposure also perceive “the media” in general to be biased. Relying on a survey of adults in the U.S. state of Wisconsin, which has witnessed particularly contentious and divisive political events since 2011, this study examines self-reported patterns of selective exposure to partisan media while accounting for the role of the local communication ecology in encouraging or discouraging partisan media selectivity. It also tests the idea that selective exposure is related to a generalized perception of media bias—the idea that “the media” in general are biased while self-selected media are not. Finally, the study tests a moderated mediation model showing the structure of relationships among political opinion extremity, selective exposure, and perceived media bias. Results suggest (a) a positive relationship between political opinion extremity and selective exposure, (b) opposite patterns of relationships between selective exposure and perceived media bias about self-selected and general media, respectively, and (c) evidence of moderated mediation among political opinion extremity, selective exposure, and perceived media bias.

## Keywords

selective exposure, perceived media bias, political opinion extremity, news media, partisan media

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People, especially those who are highly involved in politics, tend to perceive media content as being biased against their point of view (Dalton, Beck, & Huckfeldt, 1998). This is also the case for those who have strong partisan affiliations (Gunther, 1992) and those who have strong or extreme political opinions (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). But some scholars have questioned why perceived media bias is so prevalent in an era of selective exposure (e.g., Goldman & Mutz, 2011). After all, if the people who are most likely to perceive media bias engage in selective media-use practices and therefore no longer encounter media content they might consider biased, then why is perceived media bias so pervasive (Glynn & Huge, 2014)?

Recent research suggests that when people are given a choice in media, they tend to perceive less media bias in the content they chose (Arceneaux, Johnson, & Murphy, 2012; Goldman & Mutz, 2011). At the same time, however, they also tend to perceive more bias in “the media” in general (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2015; Glynn & Huge, 2014; Ladd, 2011). These research findings suggest that there may be different patterns of perceived media bias for self-selected media and “the media” as a social institution. The present study undertakes a systematic investigation of this possibility. First, it examines self-reported patterns of selective exposure to partisan media in Wisconsin, a U.S. state that has witnessed contentious and divisive political events since 2011, while accounting for the role of local media and political environments (Friedland, 2001). Next, it examines the relationships between selective exposure and perceived media bias about both self-selected media and “the media” in general. Finally, it elaborates on the role the political opinion by testing a moderated mediation model.

## Selective Exposure

Politically motivated selective exposure is the act of preferentially selecting pro-dispositional media or media content for political reasons (Feldman, Myers, Hmielowski, & Leiserowitz, 2014). Individuals have greater capacity to engage in selective exposure in a high-choice media environment, and some scholars have raised concerns about the democratic implications of like-minded echo chambers (e.g., Feldman et al., 2014; Garrett, Carnahan, & Lynch, 2013; Jamieson & Capella, 2008; Stroud, 2011; Sunstein, 2007). Expanding from Festinger’s initial theoretical insight that people tend to avoid counter-dispositional information (e.g., Festinger, 1964), research suggests that selective exposure is driven more by a tendency to confirm prior beliefs (e.g., Garrett, 2009a, 2009b; Garrett & Stroud, 2014; Valentino, Banks, Hutchings, & Davis, 2009) or to seek useful information (e.g., Atkin, 1985; Knobloch-Westerwick, Hastall, Grimmer, & Brück, 2005). Because motivations are notoriously difficult to observe, previous research has examined factors that underlie motivations, including emotional states (Valentino et al., 2009), informational utility (Knobloch-Westerwick, Carpentier, Blumhoff, & Nickel, 2005), and social identity (Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2010; Stroud, 2011). Similarly, this study treats political preferences as factors that underlie political motivations, and research suggests that selective exposure is particularly prevalent among strong partisans (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009; Stroud, 2008, 2011).

But it is also important to account for inadvertent exposure to partisan media (Sears & Freedman, 1967). The range of media available in a local area helps to shape community narratives (Ball-Rokeach, Kim, & Matei, 2001) and links communities to the broader public sphere (Friedland, 2001). In addition, the distribution of political preferences in local areas can affect an individual's own opinions (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995). Therefore, it is possible that local context, rather than motivation, explains both political preferences and media selectivity. These dynamics are particularly important in Wisconsin, where there is a growing political divide between urban and rural residents (Cramer, 2016), which continues to manifest in mainstream and user-generated media content as people recreate polarized narratives about the series of contentious political events that began in 2011 (Robinson, Knisely, & Schwartz, 2014). Given these dynamics, the current study controls for the role of local context to rule out the inadvertent exposure hypothesis.

## Perceived Media Bias

An important conceptual distinction, although one not always clearly articulated in the literature, is the difference between the perception of bias and the biased perception of bias. The latter concept refers to the identifiable misperception of media content. For example, Vallone and colleagues (1985) showed that people on both sides of the Arab-Israeli issue perceived ostensibly neutral coverage about the Beirut massacre as biased against their side (see also Arpan & Raney, 2003; Dalton et al., 1998; Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994; Gunther, Miller, & Liebhart, 2009; Perloff, 1989), and subsequent research suggests that these biased perceptions can also occur when people are exposed to media with a particular slant (Coe et al., 2008; Gunther & Chia, 2001; Gunther & Christen, 2002; Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, & Chia, 2001).

The former concept, on the contrary, focuses on the perception of media bias whether or not that perception is accurate (Ardèvol-Abreu & Gil de Zúñiga, 2016; Dalton et al., 1998; Eveland & Shah, 2003; Gil de Zúñiga, Diehl, & Ardèvol-Abreu, 2016; Kaye & Johnson, 2016). In that sense, perceived bias is closely related to, but distinct from, media trust (Ladd, 2011). People have a clear notion of “the mainstream media” as a group of major news organizations, and they have relatively consistent attitudes and orientations toward it (Ladd, 2011). In the United States, this perceived bias is relatively prevalent (Glynn & Huge, 2014). Strong partisans, in particular, are more likely to rate the media as biased against them (Barnidge & Rojas, 2014; Eveland & Shah, 2003; Ho et al., 2011; Reid, 2012; Rojas, 2010).

But selective exposure introduces a theoretical problem for perceived media bias. If the people who are most likely to perceive media bias are not exposed to media they would typically perceive as biased, then why is perceived media bias so pervasive? When given a choice in news media or when asked to name a “preferred” news medium, people tend to perceive less media bias (Arceneaux et al., 2012; Goldman & Mutz, 2011). However, when asked about “the media” in general, people tend to perceive more bias (Glynn & Huge, 2014; Ladd, 2011). This research implies that there may be different patterns of perceived media bias about self-selected media and “the

media” in general, and this study takes up a systematic investigation of the differences between the two as they relate to selective exposure and political opinion.

## Hypotheses

People with more extreme political opinions are more likely to seek media content that confirms their prior beliefs (Garrett & Stroud, 2014). Thus, we begin with the confirmatory selective exposure hypotheses, predicting that people with extreme opinions will be more likely to engage in selective exposure while controlling for the influence of local context.

**Hypothesis 1 (H1):** (a) Conservatives will use conservative news media more than than liberal news media, and (b) liberals will use liberal news media more than than conservative news media.

**Hypothesis 2 (H2):** Extremity of political opinion will be positively related to selective exposure.

People with more extreme political opinions are also more likely to think media are biased against their perspective (Perloff, 2015), both in terms of the specific media content they encounter (Gunther et al., 2001) and the media, in general (Eveland & Shah, 2003), presumably because they have a narrower latitude of acceptance for considerations presented in media content (Gunther et al., 2009) or because they have stronger in-group partisan identities (Reid, 2012). Thus, we also test a confirmatory hypothesis for perceived media bias:

**Hypothesis 3 (H3):** Extremity of political opinion will be positively related to perceived media bias.

There are two reasons to expect that selective exposure will have differential effects on perceived media bias for self-selected media and “the media” in general. First, references to specific political issues, institutions, or actors embedded in media cues facilitate cognitive connection with related issues, institutions, and actors (e.g., Dalton et al., 1998; Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan, 1999). For example, if a conservative watches Fox News, they should be exposed to fewer negative cues about Fox News, diminishing perceived bias about that channel. At the same time, they may be exposed to more negative cues about “the media” in general. These kinds of references to the media system or to media organizations on the other side of the fence are relatively common (Arceneaux et al., 2012). People connect these references with what they already believe about the other side, and therefore these cues should increase the perception of bias in “the media” as a social institution.

Second, exposure to like-minded media may enhance in-group affiliation with political parties or ideologies (Garrett et al., 2013; Stroud, Muddiman, & Lee, 2014). References to other media likely increase the chances that people with strong opinions perceive the existence of a political out-group, which also increases the likelihood of

in-group identification (Tajfel, 1982). Thus, people likely perceive a contrast between their preferred media and “the media” in general.

**Hypothesis 4 (H4):** Selective exposure will be (a) negatively associated with perceived media bias about self-selected media but (b) positively associated with perceived media bias about “the media” in general.

We also expect that political opinion extremity will moderate the relationship(s) between selective exposure and perceived media bias. People with more extreme political opinions tend to be more involved in politics generally, which makes them more likely to respond to media cues (Zaller, 1992). These individuals also place higher importance on political identity, and therefore they are more likely to activate political identity in response to these cues (Huddy, 2001). Given that these dynamics theoretically underlie both (a) the negative relationship between selective exposure and perceived bias in self-selected media and (b) the positive relationship between selective exposure and perceived bias in “the media” in general, we expect that these tendencies will be strongest among the people with the most extreme opinions.<sup>1</sup>

**Hypothesis 5 (H5):** Among people with more extreme political opinions, (a) the relationship between selective exposure and perceived bias in self-selected media will be more negative, while (b) the relationship between selective exposure and perceived bias in “the media” in general will be more positive.

In addition, we test whether selective exposure mediates the relationship between political opinion extremity and perceived media bias. In terms of the acceptance of media cues, recent research suggests that media choice may increase the motivation for people to process cues (Robert & Dennis, 2005). Therefore, at least part of the relationship between opinion extremity and perceived media bias should be mediated through selective exposure (i.e., media choice), because choice should increase people’s motivation to process the positive cues about self-selected media and negative cues about “the media” in general.

Research also suggests that choice facilitates social identification. While most early studies rely on arbitrarily assigned social groups (e.g., Tajfel, 1982), the literature also shows that choice can result in stronger in-group identification (e.g., McKenna & Bargh, 1998). Therefore, media choice should mediate the relationship between opinion extremity and perceived media bias because it increases the strength and duration of in-group identity.

**Hypothesis 6 (H6):** Selective exposure will mediate the relationship between political opinion extremity and perceived media bias about (a) self-selected media and (b) “the media” in general.

Given that we expect both moderated and mediated relationships, it follows logically to test whether moderated mediation relationships exist. That is, we test whether

political opinion extremity moderates its own indirect relationship with perceived media bias, with the idea that opinion extremity will enhance the impact of choice on perceived bias.

**Hypothesis 7 (H7):** Among people with more extreme political opinions, the indirect relationship between extremity of political opinion and perceived media bias about (a) self-selected media and (b) “the media” in general will be stronger.

## Study Context

The Wisconsin political environment has been contentious and divisive since February 2011, when the Republican state government proposed a bill that eliminated collective bargaining rights for public employees. The move prompted the largest protests at the state capitol since the 1960s. The bill was eventually passed, but opponents triggered a special recall election of Governor Scott Walker in 2012. Walker went on to win the recall election, and he was also re-elected to a second term in 2014. Since these electoral defeats, political activists have opposed Walker’s proposed higher education cuts and anti-union legislation, albeit to a more limited extent. Throughout these contentious political battles, the state has witnessed sharp divisions along ideological lines (Collins, 2012), which correlate strongly with class- and place-based social identities (Cramer, 2016). Moreover, a recent content analysis of news articles, books, blogs, social media, and citizen forums found that user-generated content mostly elaborated on the binary, polarized narratives first articulated in “mainstream” news sources (Robinson et al., 2014), indicating that these narratives may become increasingly polarized over time. Wisconsin therefore provides an excellent context in which to examine selective exposure and perceived media bias in a polarized or polarizing public context (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013).<sup>2</sup>

## Method

This article relies on a web-based survey administered to a representative sample of adults in Wisconsin. Data were collected over a 48-hour period during December 2013. Responses were obtained online through a private company, Survey Sampling International (SSI).<sup>3</sup> Non-Wisconsin residents and residents 17 years old or younger were screened out of the survey ( $N = 583$ ). The research team also collected demographic, election, and media data for each of Wisconsin’s 72 counties from the U.S. Census Bureau (census.gov), the Wisconsin Government Accountability Board (gab.wi.gov), and the *Mundo Times* (via the Wisconsin Newspaper Association, wnanews.com). These data were merged with the survey data.

## Measures

*Political opinion.* *Political opinion* was measured with five survey items asking about respondents’ general ideologies (see Wojcieszak & Rojas, 2011), as well as their

opinions on several controversial issues (see Franklin, 1984), including abortion, same-sex marriage, gun control, and illegal immigration. These items were measured on 11-point scales (0 = *liberal position*, 10 = *conservative position*), and question anchors were taken from current public opinion surveys from firms including Pew and CBS (see online appendix for question wording). After recoding the items so their ideological valences matched, we averaged these items to create the final opinion variable (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .75$ ,  $M = -.05$ ,  $SD = 2.13$ ). We then folded the scale to create the opinion extremity variable ( $M = 1.67$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ).

**Media exposure.** To measure *selective exposure*, we first needed to measure *media exposure*. The survey gave respondents the opportunity to name up to three specific media outlets or programs<sup>4</sup> for seven types of news media that they “watched, read, or listened to” in the past week, including (a) online news, (b) online political commentary, (c) newspapers, (d) radio news or political commentary, (e) local television news, (f) national television news, and (g) cable television news and political commentary. The highest possible total number of media outlets named was 21 (three for each of the seven media types). We also asked respondents how many hours in the last week they spent with each named media outlet. The average respondent named between three and four media outlets ( $M = 3.94$ ,  $SD = 2.59$ ) and reported spending about 20 hours per week with media ( $M = 19.66$ ,  $SD = 21.39$ ). Local television news, online news, and newspapers made up most of the typical Wisconsinite's media diet, accounting for 76% of named media and 76.6% of media hours. See the online appendix for full descriptive statistics.

**Media partisanship.** Each media outlet named in the survey was coded for its partisanship. The coding scheme, which was adapted from Stroud's (2008) example, prioritized a media outlet's (a) stated partisanship or ideology, (b) candidate endorsements in the 2012 Wisconsin Gubernatorial Recall Election and the 2012 U.S. Presidential Election, and (c) editorials about same-sex marriage, gun control, immigration, and abortion. Predetermined codes were used for certain media categories (local and national television news were coded as neutral, Fox News was coded as conservative, and MSNBC and CNN were coded as liberal). Five coders were employed to evaluate the open-ended survey responses. Before coding the full sample, 10% was tested for intercoder reliability, and, after several rounds of codebook modification, reliability tests exceeded accepted standards for each category (Krippendorff's  $\alpha = .848$  for online news, .878 for online political commentary, .824 for newspaper, and .856 for radio). See the online appendix for full details about the coding scheme and procedure.

For each respondent, the media partisanship codes were weighted by hours spent and then added together within five categories: conservative media, liberal media, neutral media, unknown media, and NA (not applicable). For example, if a respondent watched Fox News for 7 hours, the respondent's score in the conservative category would be 7 (“1” conservative outlet weighted by 7 hours spent). A total media exposure score was then created by adding these category scores together, excluding the NA category.



**Selective exposure.** We calculated four *selective exposure* metrics, all which were constructed as proportions of a respondent's total media exposure. To calculate (a) selective exposure to liberal media, we took each respondent's liberal media score as a proportion of their total media exposure ( $M = .13$ ,  $SD = .22$ ). A similar calculation was used to create (b) selective exposure to conservative media ( $M = .14$ ,  $SD = .24$ ). To construct (c) the directional selective exposure variable, we subtracted the liberal score from the conservative score for each respondent and took the difference over total exposure ( $M = -.01$ ,  $SD = .35$ ). Positive values indicate liberal selectivity, while negative values indicate conservative selectivity.<sup>5</sup> We "folded" this variable by taking the absolute value of the numerator over the same denominator, resulting in (d) the absolute selective exposure variable. Higher values on this variable indicate more partisan selectivity in either ideological direction, while lower values indicate less partisan selectivity ( $M = .22$ ,  $SD = .27$ ).

**Perceived media bias.** The survey asked about (a) perceptions of self-selected news media and (b) perceptions of "the media" in general; both sets of items were based on commonly used measurements of perceived media bias (Gunther & Christen, 2002; Gunther et al., 2001). As a result, we constructed two *perceived media bias* variables based on perceptions of "the media you listed above in the survey" and "the media in general." Each of these variables is based on four questionnaire items asking respondents about (a) news media's ideological leanings ( $-5 =$  biased liberal,  $0 =$  strictly neutral,  $5 =$  biased conservative), (b) news media's portrayal of liberals ( $-5 =$  biased against,  $0 =$  strictly neutral,  $5 =$  biased in favor), (c) news media's portrayal of conservatives ( $-5 =$  biased against,  $0 =$  strictly neutral,  $5 =$  biased in favor), and (d) the percentage of news media's coverage that is unfavorable toward the respondent's political viewpoint. The items were standardized, and the valence of the questions was matched. Factor analyses showed that the items loaded onto a single factor for both self-selected and general media (see online appendix for results). These items were then averaged to create the final variables (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .78$  for self-selected media; Cronbach's  $\alpha = .91$  for general media). Positive values on these variables indicate perceived bias against the individual's viewpoint, while negative values indicate perceived bias in favor ( $M = 0.00$  for both variables;  $SD = .79$  for self-selected media and  $.89$  for general media).

**Control variables.** Because partisan identity could also be related to selective exposure (Stroud, 2008), we included controls for *party identification* (for models using the unfolded selective exposure metrics) and *strength of party identification* (for models using the folded metric). Respondents were asked to identify with a political party (Republican, Democrat, Libertarian, Green, other, or none). Conservative party identification was coded as 1, liberal party identification was coded as  $-1$ , and nonidentifiers were coded as 0 ( $M = .04$ ,  $SD = .84$ ). A second survey item measured ID strength ( $1 =$  not that strong,  $2 =$  strong). Nonidentifiers received a score of 0 ( $M = .56$ ,  $SD = .37$ ).

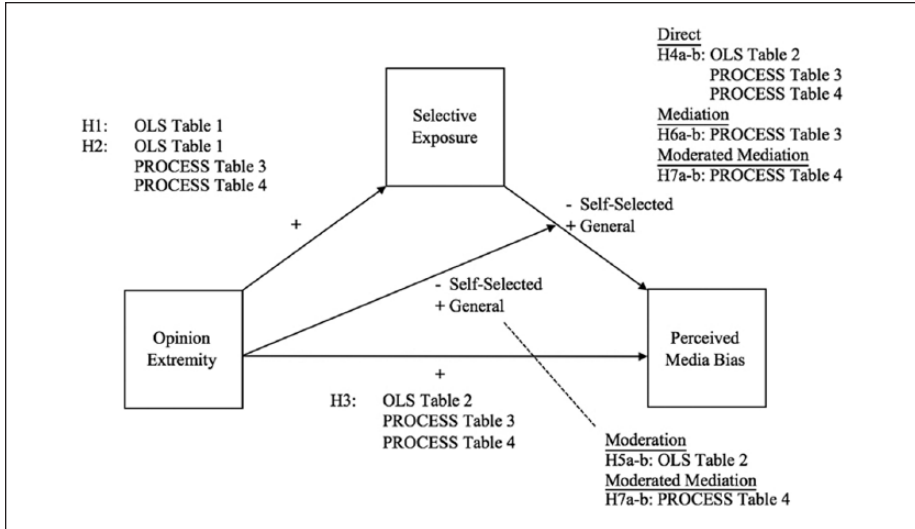
We also included control variables known to be related to either selective exposure or perceived media bias (Eveland & Shah, 2003; Stroud, 2010). *Political talk network size* was created using four survey items that asked respondents how many family



members or friends, coworkers, neighbors, or acquaintances they talked with about politics. These four items were added together ( $M = 8.94$ ,  $SD = 16.28$ ). A measure of *political talk frequency* was created by asking respondents how frequently they talked politics with each of these groups of people. Scores were averaged to create the final variable (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .73$ ,  $M = 2.75$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ). *Political talk diversity* was measured using five survey items asking respondents how frequently they talk politics with people who have different ideas than they do, people on the left, people on the right, people of a different socioeconomic status, and people of a different age. Relevant items were reversed to match the valence of the others, and the average was taken as the final variable (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .80$ ,  $M = 1.90$ ,  $SD = .91$ ). *Political knowledge* was assessed with 10 factual questions (1 = correct, 0 = incorrect or don't know) asking respondents about personalities, institutions, and processes of the U.S. government. Correct answers were tallied ( $M = 7.02$ ,  $SD = 1.88$ ). *Political efficacy* was created by taking the average of four standard survey items measured on 6-point scales (0 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*;  $M = 2.00$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ). *Political interest* was created by averaging three survey items on 6-point scales (0 = *not at all*, 5 = *very*) asking respondents how interested they are in local, national, and international politics ( $M = 2.64$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ).

Finally, we included four demographic variables: gender, age, education, and annual household income. A majority of respondents (59%) were female. The average respondent was about 46 years old ( $M = 45.90$ ), had completed at least some college (education was measured on a 6-point scale where 0 = *some high school* and 5 = *post-graduate degree*;  $M = 2.40$ ), and had an annual household income of between \$30,000 and \$60,000.

*Place-based variables.* Following the concept of local communication ecology (Friedland, 2001), we included five place-based controls that describe the counties in which respondents live in order to isolate political motivation for selective exposure. *Persons-per-square mile* (calculated as county population divided by county land area in square miles;  $M = 813.80$ ,  $SD = 1295.43$ ) and *average annual income* ( $M = \$52,850$ ,  $SD = \$9,503.70$ ) were taken directly from the 2010 U.S. Census (census.gov). In addition, *distance to a metropolitan statistical area (MSA)* was calculated as the distance, in miles, from the center of the county seat to the center of the largest city in the closest MSA ( $M = 23.64$ ,  $SD = 25.49$ ). These calculations were performed using Google Maps (maps.google.com).<sup>6</sup> *Local partisanship* was created by averaging the Republican party vote share for the 2012 Wisconsin Gubernatorial Recall Election and the 2012 U.S. Presidential Election within each county (as reported by the Wisconsin Government Accountability Board, gab.wi.gov). Values above .50 on this variable indicate Democrat voting tendencies, while values below .50 indicate Republican tendencies ( $M = .50$ ,  $SD = .12$ ). An absolute version of the variable was created for use in the models with absolute dependent variables by taking the distance from .50 ( $M = .10$ ,  $SD = .07$ ). Finally, *local newspaper partisanship* was created by coding the partisanship of newspapers, using the same criteria as before (1 = Conservative, 0 = Neutral/Unknown, -1 = Liberal) for all 72 counties<sup>7</sup> and each of the 11 MSAs.<sup>8</sup> Thus, each



**Figure 1.** Summary diagram of key findings.  
 Note. OLS = ordinary least squares.

geographic area received a single score for newspaper partisanship,<sup>9</sup> and these scores were then weighted by adjusted circulation statistics.<sup>10</sup> The weighted county and MSA newspaper scores were averaged ( $M = .02, SD = .08$ ).<sup>11</sup> An absolute version was also created ( $M = .05, SD = .07$ ).

**Analysis**

The analysis unfolds in several phases, each of which employs ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. First, we assess the relationship(s) between political opinion and selective exposure. Next, we examine the relationships among political opinion, selective exposure, and perceived media bias of both self-selected media and the media in general. Finally, we use the SPSS PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013) to test hypotheses related to mediation and moderation. See the online appendix for results of diagnostic tests for statistical models.

**Results**

Figure 1 provides a summary diagram of the study’s key findings. Table 1 shows results relevant to H1 and H2, which predict relationships between the political opinion and selective exposure metrics. The first two models show that the directional political opinion variable (liberal = positive) is significantly related to selective exposure to (a) liberal media ( $\beta = .20, p < .001$ ) and (b) conservative media ( $\beta = -.32, p < .001$ ) in expected directions. Tests comparing the absolute sizes of these two coeffi-

**Table 1.** The Relationships Between Political Opinion and Selective Exposure to Partisan Media.

Variable	Selective exposure			
	Liberal media	Conservative media	Directional (+ liberal)	Absolute
	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$
Liberal opinion	.20***	-.32***	.34***	—
Opinion extremity	—	—	—	.12*
Political talk network size	.07	.02	.03	.10*
Political talk frequency	-.08	.07†	.10†	-.07
Political talk diversity	.09†	.05	.02	.09†
Political knowledge	-.03	.13**	-.11*	.10†
Political efficacy	.01	-.06	.05	-.02
Political interest	.05	.10†	-.04	.08
Conservative party ID	-.02	.03	-.03	—
Strength of party ID	—	—	—	-.02
Gender (1 = female)	-.08†	-.05	-.02	-.05
Age	-.02	-.01	.00	-.01
Education	.02	-.07	.06	-.07
Annual household income	.07	.02	.03	.06
Liberal local partisanship	-.02	.07	-.06	—
Strength of local partisanship	—	—	—	-.11
Persons per square mile	-.11*	-.04	-.03	.02
Distance to MSA	-.12*	-.09†	-.01	-.08
Average annual household income	-.07	.05	-.08	.01
Liberal newspaper partisanship	.02	-.03	.03	—
Strength of newspaper partisanship	—	—	—	.09†
R <sup>2</sup>	.08***	.18***	.15***	.09***
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.05***	.15***	.12***	.06***

Note. Cell entries are standardized beta coefficients ( $\beta$ ) from ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models.  $N = 501$ , except for the last model where  $N = 499$ . ID = identification; MSA = metropolitan statistical area.

† $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

cients show no statistically significant difference between the two coefficients ( $z = -1.88, ns$ ), indicating no inequality in liberal versus conservative media.

The next two models show that the directional political opinion variable is positively related to the directional selective exposure variable ( $\beta = .34, p < .001$ ) in the expected direction. This result indicates that liberals use more liberal media and that conservatives use more conservative media. The second model shows that the absolute versions of these variables are also positively related ( $\beta = .12, p < .05$ ), indicating that

respondents with more extreme political opinions on both sides of the political spectrum are more likely to engage in selective exposure. Taken together, results shown in Table 1 support H1 and H2.

Furthermore, the relationships between political opinion and selective exposure exist above and beyond the influence of local communication ecology. Of these variables, persons per square mile ( $\beta = -.11, p < .05$ ) and distance to MSA ( $\beta = -.12, p < .05$ ) are negatively related to exposure to liberal media. Meanwhile, distance to MSA shows a marginal negative relationship with exposure to conservative media ( $\beta = -.09, p < .10$ ). Thus, these data show that rural Wisconsinites are exposed to less partisan media on both sides, but in particular they are exposed to less liberal media than people who live closer to the center of MSAs.

Table 2 shows results relevant to perceived media bias. First, extremity of political opinion is positively related to perceived bias about both self-selected media ( $\beta = .19, p < .001$ ) and “the media” in general ( $\beta = .36, p < .001$ ). Second, the table shows that selective exposure is negatively related to perceived bias about self-selected media ( $\beta = -.12, p < .001$ ) but positively related to perceived bias about “the media” in general ( $\beta = .11, p < .01$ ). Taken together, these results support H3 and H4. Furthermore, these relationships exist above and beyond the influence of the local communication ecology.

Table 2 shows a negative interaction between extremity of political opinion and selective exposure on perceived bias about self-selected media ( $\beta = -.09, p < .01$ ) but a positive interaction between these two variables on perceived bias about “the media” in general ( $\beta = .06, p < .05$ ). These interactions suggest that as selective exposure increases, the politically extreme are less likely to perceive bias about self-selected media, but they are more likely to perceive bias about “the media” in general. Re-estimating these interactions using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013; Model 1) produced substantively similar results. These results support H5.

Table 3 shows the results for the mediation tests (Hayes, 2013; Model 4). As expected, results show a negative indirect relationship between opinion extremity on perceived bias about self-selected media ( $\beta = -.01, p < .05$ ) and a positive indirect relationship with perceived bias about general media ( $\beta = .01, p < .05$ ). While these results generally support H6, it should also be noted that these indirect relationships are relatively weak compared with the direct relationships between opinion extremity and perceived bias (for self-selected media,  $\beta = .11, p < .05$ ; for general media,  $\beta = .25, p < .05$ ). Thus, selective exposure does mediate the relationship between opinion extremity and perceived bias, but this indirect relationship is largely outweighed by the direct relationship between these variables.

That said, the indirect relationship increases in strength as political opinion extremity increases, as shown in Table 4 (Hayes, 2013, Model 74). For both forms of perceived bias, the indirect relationship is  $\beta = .00$  (*ns*) where opinion extremity is 1 standard deviation below the mean. But as opinion becomes more extreme, the indirect relationship grows stronger. At the mean of opinion extremity, the indirect relationships are statistically significant (for self-selected media,  $\beta = -.01, p < .05$ ; for general media,  $\beta = .01, p < .05$ ). This relationship doubles in strength where opinion extremity is 1 standard deviation above the mean (for self-selected media,  $\beta = -.02, p < .05$ ; for general

**Table 2.** The Relationships Among Political Opinion, Selective Exposure to Partisan Media, and Perceived Media Bias.

Variable	Perceived media bias			
	Self-selected media		General media	
	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$
Selective exposure (absolute)	-.12**	.04	.11**	.01
Opinion extremity	.19***	.29***	.36***	.29***
Political talk network size	.14**	.15**	.11*	.10*
Political talk frequency	-.18**	-.18**	-.14**	-.14**
Political talk diversity	.08	.09†	.10*	.10*
Political knowledge	-.00	.00	.09†	.09†
Political efficacy	-.10	-.10*	-.08†	-.08†
Political interest	.07	.07	-.01	-.01
Strength of party ID	.11*	.10*	.08†	.08*
Gender (1 = female)	-.01	-.01	-.04	-.04
Age	-.02	-.01	.04	.04
Education	.07	.06	.07	.07
Annual household income	.03	.04	.07	.05
Local partisanship (absolute)	-.05	-.07	-.01	.00
Persons per square mile	-.03	-.01	.01	.00
Distance to MSA	-.01	-.01	.01	.01
Average annual household income	.09	.09	.08	.08
Strength of newspaper partisanship	-.07	-.06	-.05	-.05
Opinion extremity × Selective exposure (absolute)	—	-.09**	—	.06*
R <sup>2</sup>	.12***	.11***	.26***	.27***
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.09***	.08***	.23***	.24***

Note. Cell entries are standardized beta coefficients ( $\beta$ ) from ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models.  $N = 499$ . ID = identification; MSA = metropolitan statistical area.  
 † $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

media,  $\beta = .02$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Therefore, while the indirect relationship between opinion extremity and perceived bias is relatively weak compared with the direct relationship, it does increase in strength as opinion extremity increases.

### Discussion

This study makes two important contributions to the literature on selective media exposure and perceived media bias. First, it examines selective exposure to partisan media in a polarized setting that is presumably optimal for media selectivity, and it

**Table 3.** Key Results From Mediation Model.

Effect of opinion extremity	Self-selected media		General media	
	B	SE	B	SE
Direct	.11***	.03	.25***	.03
Via selective exposure (absolute)	-.01*	.01	.01*	.01
Total	.10***	.03	.26***	.01

Note.  $N = 493$  for the self-selected media model and  $499$  for the general media model. Moderated mediation index =  $-.01$  ( $SE = .00, p < .05$ ) for the self-selected media model and  $.01$  ( $SE = .00, p < .05$ ) for the general media model. Model estimated using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013, Model 4).

\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Table 4.** Key Results From Moderated Mediation Model.

Indirect effect of opinion extremity via selective exposure (absolute)	Self-selected media		General media	
	B	SE	B	SE
Where opinion extremity = $-1$ SD	.00	.00	.00	.00
Where opinion extremity = $M$	-.01*	.01	.01*	.01
Where opinion extremity = $+1$ SD	-.02*	.01	.02*	.01
Index of moderated mediation	-.01*	.00	.00	.00

Note.  $N = 493$  for the self-selected media model and  $499$  for the general media model. Moderated mediation index =  $-.01$  ( $SE = .00, p < .05$ ) for the self-selected media model and  $.01$  ( $SE = .00, p < .05$ ) for the general media model. Model estimated using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013, Model 74).

\* $p < .05$ .

does so while controlling for the role of the local communication ecology (Friedland, 2001) in order to rule out the “inadvertent exposure” hypothesis (Sears & Freedman, 1967) and to illuminate the role of local media in selective exposure and the growing partisan divide in Wisconsin (Cramer, 2016). Second, it tests the idea that selective exposure is related to a perception of bias in the media system in general, which has been shown to be related to political learning (Coe et al., 2008), citizen-to-citizen engagement (Eveland & Shah, 2003), and political choice (Dalton et al., 1998). And while prior research suggests different patterns of relationships between selective exposure and perceived media bias about self-selected media and “the media” in general (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2015; Arceneaux et al., 2012; Glynn & Huges, 2014; Goldman & Mutz, 2011; Ladd, 2011), the present study takes on a systematic investigation of the differences between the two.

The study shows that many Wisconsinites are generally engaged in politically motivated selective exposure, a finding that fits with a growing body of literature highlighting the renewed prevalence of selective exposure in an era of partisan media (e.g., Garrett et al., 2013; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009;

Stroud, 2008, 2010). Moreover, this selectivity occurs even when controlling for the role of local context, suggesting that partisan content comes from national and online media rather than from local media. In fact, local television and newspapers account for the lion's share of the typical Wisconsinite's media diet (approximately 75% of all self-selected media; see the online appendix), but these media play little role in creating the partisan media environment or in shaping partisan selectivity (there is a small, marginal relationship between local newspaper partisanship and selective exposure, but this relationship is dramatically outweighed by individual's own political opinions; see Table 1, column 4). Rather, these media tend to adhere to norms of community cohesion (Cramer, 2016), often displaying less public conflict in letters to the editor and online comments and taking fewer controversial stances in editorials (Knisely, 2013). Thus, the study isolates the sources of media partisanship to cable television (Stroud, 2008), online media (Garrett, 2009a), and, to a lesser extent, nationally syndicated radio.

People in rural areas of Wisconsin are less likely to engage with partisan media, especially liberal media. Results show negative relationships between indicators of rural residency (i.e., persons per square mile and distance to MSA) and exposure to liberal media ( $\beta = -.11$  and  $-.12$ ,  $p < .05$ ). While rural residents do not necessarily prefer conservative media either ( $\beta = -.04$  and  $-.09$ , *ns*), they are significantly less likely to select liberal media. This finding fits with emerging research on the Wisconsin public that emphasizes the identity-based divide between rural and urban areas of the state (Cramer, 2016). While evidence from the current study offers no concrete conclusions about this divide, Cramer's work can be used to extrapolate from the findings. For example, Cramer found that distrust of liberal media, in particular, tracks closely with resentment toward specific urban areas in Wisconsin (Madison and Milwaukee) that—at least in their view—have disproportionately controlled the state's institutions and resources. So while these individuals may not be dyed-in-the-wool conservatives, their resentment of both media and institutions may have contributed to their support of Republican candidates in recent elections (Cramer, 2016).

The study also tests the notion that selective exposure is related to a generalized form of perceived media bias. Some scholars have rightly questioned why perceived media bias is so prevalent in an era of selective exposure to partisan media (e.g., Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013, 2015; Arceneaux et al., 2012; Goldman & Mutz, 2011). After all, if the people who are most likely to perceive bias in the media no longer encounter disagreeable media content, they should be less likely to perceive bias. Thus, despite the large body of evidence documenting the prevalence of perceived media bias among the most involved, partisan, or extreme individuals (Dalton et al., 1998; Gunther, 1992; Vallone et al., 1985), some have argued that it may occur less often in the "real world" due to selective exposure (e.g., Goldman & Mutz, 2011).

The current study provides an important counterpoint to this argument, showing evidence that selective exposure is related to a generalized perception of bias in the media system that stems from the contrast between self-selected media and "the media" in general. Results show that selective exposure is associated with lower levels of perceived bias about self-selected media—that is, media that people actually



encounter—but, at the same time, it is associated with higher levels of perceived media bias in the general media system (see also, Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013, 2015; Arceneaux et al., 2012). Furthermore, these tendencies are more pronounced among individuals with more extreme political opinions.

By extension, these tendencies could contribute to the perception of difference between political groups at the local or state level. Assuming that perceived media bias is closely associated with what Cramer (2016) has called “the politics of resentment,” the dissemination of partisan media content (mostly national and/or online media) may track closely with sociopolitical tensions that are external to local communities (Friedland, 2001). Thus, partisan media could potentially contribute to or exacerbate tensions within communities.

The results of this study are limited in several important ways. The first set of limitations relates to the media exposure measures. While the open-ended media exposure questions provide richer data than closed-ended questions, they may underestimate media exposure in comparison with closed-ended survey questions. However, we accepted this trade-off to obtain richer measures of media exposure. In addition, because these measures rely on self-reports, they may be impaired by recall issues and social desirability. Future research employing direct measures of media exposure, for example through web-tracking software, seems especially promising. A related limitation stems from the coding of media organizations rather than media content itself. Certainly, the political valence of news content may vary within a given organization, and capturing this kind of variation is clearly a worthwhile endeavor. But because organizations can also be characterized by the average valence of their content, we believe observing media exposure at this level provides a more parsimonious approach to characterizing an individual’s media diet. Another limitation stems from the measurement of local newspaper partisanship. While our strategy adopted a representative newspaper as an indicator of partisan because of data- and labor-based constraints, it would have been ideal to measure variation in newspaper partisanship within each geographic region, in as far as it exists. Future research could focus on refining ways to characterize the partisanship of local areas.

Survey items measuring political opinion and perceived media bias are also limited. Although the political opinion measures were based on previous literature (Franklin, 1984; Wojcieszak & Rojas, 2011), they did not specifically relate to Wisconsin-based political issues. Future research should focus on testing the relationships shown here with measures of political opinion that specifically relate to local or state issues. The perceived media bias measures were also based on previous research (Gunther & Christen, 2002; Gunther et al., 2001) and specifically asked about “bias.” However, there is a possibility that respondents might have confused perceived message tendency with perceived media bias. Future research should focus on parsing out the difference between perceived media bias and perceived message tendency both conceptually and empirically. Another important limitation involves the Wisconsin case. While this case was selected in order to maximize conditions relevant to the hypotheses, therefore setting up a more falsifiable test of those hypotheses, results may not be generalizable to other contexts and other cases.

Future research might examine whether these findings reported here hold up in other local contexts.

Beyond these limitations, our study is limited by the typical constraints of cross-sectional survey research. We were unable to make causal inferences; however, the analysis of representative, survey-based data provided the advantage of being able to rule out several alternative explanations. Future research should focus on testing causality while maintaining a naturalistic setting. To this end, a panel survey could be conducted that observes media selectivity and perceived media bias over time. For maximum impact, the survey could be designed around a media event covered by different partisan news outlets (e.g., Fox News or MSNBC), which would allow the researcher to isolate the role of choice by maintaining relatively similar content across news channels. Therefore, choice could be manipulated in a realistic way while avoiding a potential confound with media content.

Given these limitations, this study provides some clear evidence that, among Wisconsinites, selective exposure is not only a relatively common phenomenon; it is also related to the perception that “the media” in general are biased. These findings resonate with the now-common experience that the political sphere has grown increasingly combative and contentious, even while people have become more selective in their media choices.

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### **Notes**

1. Hypotheses 5 to 7 were not the original hypotheses that motivated the study. However, this fact should not be taken to mean that hypotheses were formulated after results were known (i.e., “harking”). Rather, hypotheses were developed and tested in good faith according to reviewer comments over repeated iterations of the manuscript.
2. While recent literature on selective exposure has treated polarization as an outcome, the relationship is likely reciprocal in that polarization also drives selectivity (see Stroud, 2010). This article assumes, therefore, that selective exposure is more likely to occur in a polarized political context.
3. Respondents received a small monetary incentive (<\$5) from Survey Sampling International (SSI) for completing the survey. SSI used a three-stage sampling process. First, subjects were randomly selected from an online panel constructed with geographic and demographic parameters. Next, subjects were randomly presented with profiling questions. Finally, subjects were directed to the study based on their likelihood to complete it.
4. Responses that named programs (e.g., The News Hour with Jim Lehrer or The O’Reilly Factor) were recoded to reflect their host outlet (e.g., PBS or Fox News).

5. Preliminary tests show significantly more variance among liberals ( $Var = .14$ ) than among conservatives ( $Var = .09$ ) on the directional selective exposure variable;  $F(177, 165) = 1.51$ ,  $p = .008$ ). However, neither subset is significantly different than moderates ( $Var = .11$ ). Nor does the variance of the combined liberal and conservative subsets differ from the moderate group.
6. The research team identified 11 MSAs based on U.S. Office of Budget and Management classification, including three across the border of neighboring states. The 11 MSAs are Milwaukee-Racine-Waukesha, Madison-Baraboo, Green Bay, Appleton-Oshkosh-Neenah, Eau Claire-Menomonie, Fond du Lac-Beaver Dam, Chicago, IL-Naperville, MI-Michigan City, IN, Wasau-Merrill, Minneapolis-St. Paul-St. Cloud, MN, La Crosse, and Duluth, MN.
7. The county seat newspaper is the designated newspaper responsible for reporting election results within its home county.
8. Wisconsin counties not officially in an MSA were assigned to the nearest MSA, as measured by the distance from the county seat to the urban center of the MSA.
9. Almost half of the newspapers were coded as neutral (46%), while 34% were conservative and 20% were liberal.
10. We divided each county newspaper's circulation, as reported by the Mondo Times (via the Wisconsin Newspaper Association, [www.wnnews.com](http://www.wnnews.com)), by the county's population. Next, we weighted newspaper's partisanship score by the adjusted circulation. A similar method was used for MSA newspapers.
11. For respondents who live in the MSA's largest city, the final variable was the weighted county newspaper score.

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