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The Impacts of Media Consumption of Policy Extremity

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## ABSTRACT

This research quantitatively studies the impact of media consumption on an individual's policy preferences. I tested right-leaning media consumption, left-leaning media consumption, and moderate media consumption against gun control, abortion, and campaign spending. My results reflect that media consumption does have varying effects across policy preferences. Left-leaning media consumption was associated with an increase in extremity across all three policies. Additionally, moderate media consumption had a positive correlation with extremity across all three policies. Right-leaning media consumption was associated with a decrease in policy extremity with gun control and abortion. The relationship between campaign spending and right-leaning media consumption was not statistically significant. While my results were not expected, they lead researchers one step closer to understanding how media consumption interacts with an individual's political opinions.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

My thesis investigates the reasoning behind individuals having differing policy preferences. In the political realm, individual's policy preferences are spread along a wide spectrum with people falling on the extremes of the left and right, with the rest falling between the two. People on the extremes are minorities with 9% of the population identifying as extremely conservative and 7% identifying as extremely liberal. Furthermore, the largest group of individuals are moderates at 37% (Saad, 2022). This variation across the political spectrum has made me ponder why there is such a big difference between individual's viewpoints. I am intending to answer the question - Why are some individuals more likely to hold extreme policy positions? The way that I am analyzing this variance is by looking into media sources and media consumption. I want to be able to determine whether consuming politically biased media content can have an impact on what policy an individual prefers.

This question is crucial to our understanding of how individuals choose who to support in elections and the reasons that they have varying opinions. Policy preferences have continued to determine how the electorate behaves. Furthermore, more extreme views can be detrimental to society. Increasing division of viewpoints has led to strife between the mass public and Congress with a lack of a willingness to compromise with those that you view as polar opposites from yourself. This has been exemplified with individuals separating from friendships because of political division. 39% of Trump voters and 42% of Biden voters had no friend that voted for the opposite candidate (Dunn, 2020). Understanding why individuals are becoming more extreme is

necessary to try to heal divisions and develop a way to create unity in the country. One way to look at what has influenced these differences is the media. The media has become increasingly polarized and diverse. In addition, individuals are now able to pick and choose which media they consume (Lau, 2017). This means that individuals can watch only media that supports their views which can become a self-fulfilling cycle where individuals fall deeper and deeper into polarized media. Understanding the impacts of politically biased media is necessary to determine whether it is partially responsible for the emergence of extreme viewpoints in the mainstream.

In a departure from existing work on media effects, I argue that policy preferences will be shaped in the same way regardless of the policy. Previous studies have generally researched media effects on how an individual views another party or self-reports their political ideology. I have chosen to focus on specific policies in my study to determine if, regardless of how a person might feel about a specific political party, their policy positions change. Additionally, I navigate through a contentious field of whether the media does cause policy preference shifts. Some research supports that there is a causal relationship between media consumption and extremity of views. However, other research has found that there is no statistically significant relationship between the two variables. These mixed results might be due to variations in methodology and how concepts were measured in these studies. My study is intending to discover whether the media has a significant relationship with political opinions.

To investigate the extremity of views of individuals and media effects, I have taken to the American National Election Studies (ANES). Since its inception in 1948, the ANES has conducted research on public opinion and voting habits. For this study, I use the 2020 ANES Times Series Study which has various questions pertaining to media consumption and policy

positions of its respondents. This study includes interviews with respondents from 2016 respondents, a new cross-sectional survey, and post-election responses from individuals included in the 2020 General Social Surveys (GSS). There are 8,280 interviews from before the 2020 election and 7,449 post-election re-interviews (American National Election Studies, 2021). Using the information that the ANES has collected, I intend to analyze both political policy questions and media consumption questions. The media consumption questions include information about what digital media, television, newspaper, and podcast sources that respondents have consumed. The policy preference questions that I use throughout my study relate to abortion, gun control, and campaign spending (American National Election Studies, 2021).

Throughout my study, I have discovered some interesting results regarding the relationship between media sources and media consumption and policy preferences. My analysis illustrates that increased media consumption does have an impact on an individual's policy preferences. However, I did not find my expected results regarding political bias of the source. Increased consumption of moderate and left-leaning news causes an increase in extremity on all three of my policy questions. Right-leaning news consumption decreases the likelihood of an individual being extreme on abortion and gun control. There was no significant relationship between right-leaning news consumption and campaign spending. While the results were not what I was anticipating, they do help support the idea that media do have an impact on an individual's political views, supporting that there is a causal relationship between the two.



## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

Researchers have engaged in a vigorous debate about how the media influences individuals' opinions and actions. In this chapter, I examine how current research has ended up so divided on how media influences an individual. The main agreement that scholars have found is that individuals tend to consume content that is supportive of their previously held beliefs. However, scholars disagree over whether the consumption of this media can influence an individual's political opinions. The two major camps of the debate are those that found no support for the relationship between media consumption and political opinions and on the other side, those that found the media has a significant influence on an individual's political opinions. As I describe below, I contend that this division results from different methodological approaches by previous studies and conflicting media platforms used to analyze media consumption.

#### **Selective Exposure**

Scholars agree that most individuals engage in selective exposure, whereby they choose to view media that supports their viewpoint. This idea took hold as researchers recognized that different media outlets were presenting "widely different events" through their varying attention to stories and choice of content (Hollander, 2008). Scholars have found that news sources generally spread content that supports its audience's political beliefs and attitudes (Hollander, 2008, p. 25). Because individuals prefer to avoid dissonance, they avoid media that goes against their existing beliefs (Van Aelst et al., 2017, p. 13; Stroud, 2010, p. 570; Levendusky, 2013, p. 616; Prior, 2013, pp. 109 - 110). Consequently, it became essential to understand how

individuals' political beliefs were affected by this selectivity. On this point, scholars have found that if given the choice between Fox News, NPR, CNN, and the BBC, Republicans are significantly more likely to choose an article with the Fox News logo on it regardless of actual content. On the other hand, Democrats are significantly less likely to choose a Fox News article and more likely to choose articles from any other news organization (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009, pp. 29 - 32). Assumed bias of a source, regardless of the information contained inside the media, can play a major impact on what an individual chooses to consume.

### **Tuning Out**

Importantly, selective exposure assumes that people will actively seek out political media. However, research has discovered that the expansion of the media has given individuals the opportunity to tune out completely from political news and turn to entertainment news (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2010, p. 29). Generally, people opt out of political news for one of two reasons. The first is that the negativity of political programming turns people away. Others who tune out are broadly less interested in politics and will never watch political news over entertainment (Prior, 2007, pp. 45 - 47). By filtering out political content, stabilization of views can occur. Additionally, the potential effects of political programming can be minimized or even neutralized if an individual chooses not to consume it (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2010, p. 29). The impacts of tuning out on political views have been neglected, comparatively to polarized political media, which has created a need to continue to develop new research.

### **The Confusion in Media Effects**

Research has been greatly divided in its results regarding the consequences of political media. Scholars continue to debate the consequences of individuals ending up in these media

bubbles that confirm their views. One of the reasons for the uncertainty about the impacts of polarized political media is methodology differences. The main ways that studies have been conducted are through a particular medium - the way the content is displayed, the organizational structure of the content, the type of content, or the technology that is used to spread the media - and through the response the content receives (Katz, 2001).

Some studies have found that the media does have a substantial impact on one's political views (Bartels, 1993, p. 274; Duca & Saving, 2017, p. 410; Levendusky, 2013, p. 616; Morris, 2007, p. 707; Druckman & Parkin, 2005, p. 1047; Stroud, 2010). These researchers believe that television networks have the ability to frame news stories in such a way to influence their viewers' political opinions (Morris, 2005, p. 58). Not only are opinions shaped, so is vote choice (Druckman & Parkin, 2005, p. 1047). Consuming partisan media content can lead an individual to favor a politically similar party candidate and feel more negative towards the other party's presidential candidate (Morris, 2007; Stroud, 2010).

However, other studies have concluded that the media has a limited effect on a person's political opinions, which is generally called the minimal effects theory (Harvey, 2014, p. 833). Furthermore, scholars in this camp generally found that there was no relationship between the media and political views or that there was a different factor that was more important (Leeper, 2014, p. 41; Arceneaux & Johnson, 2010, p. 16; Van Aelst et al., 2017, p. 12; Davis & Dunaway, 2016, p. 284). Furthermore, it was shown that media consumption does not have an impact on how people choose to sort themselves into similar partisan groups, otherwise known as political sorting (Davis & Dunaway, 2016, p. 290). Some research has been inconclusive, falling on both sides of the debate. It found that a diverse media landscape could either increase or decrease political polarization depending on the content that is being shown (Lau et al., 2017, p. 248).

These conflicting results clearly show that current studies are not examining the media and its effects in complementary ways which can lead to confusion over how the media can influence the public.

Additionally, scholars have found mixed results regarding how different media environments impact one's political views. The theory of motivated reasoning explains that when individuals consume media that contradicts their beliefs, they will explain it away based on their previous beliefs, allowing for individuals to come away from media sources disregarding what they consumed and digging into their beliefs (Prior, 2013, p. 108). This was exemplified in various studies when individuals were presented with both conflicting and confirming news sources. In a mixed media environment, scholars found individuals becoming even more extreme on their previous beliefs (Leeper, 2014, p. 39; Wojcieszak, 2011, p. 605). However, this is not always the case. Levendusky's study found that having a mixed media environment had no impact on political polarization (Levendusky, 2013, p. 617). The current state of research has led to confusion due to various methodological differences in studies that has led to a necessity to revisit how media consumption and political views interact.

### **Media Sources**

Furthermore, the variety of different platforms available to the consumer can affect news consumption. News content comes in a variety of different sources which vary in display, availability, and distribution. Studies have found that individuals retain information differently based on the medium that they use (Daniel & Woody, 2010; Furnham & Gunter, 1989; Singer & Alexander, 2016). Mediums can vary between their visual displays and if there is an auditory component. Scholars have gone even further to distinguish between content that is read online

versus off-line (Singer & Alexander, 2016; Mangen, Walgermo, & Brønnick, 2013). The three separate mediums that scholars generally focus on are articles, podcasts, and video messages (Daniel & Woody, 2010; Furnham & Gunter, 1989). Each medium has different influences over a person that engages with the content that could influence an individual's viewpoint.

Individuals report that they enjoy listening and watching content more than reading (Daniel & Woody, 2010). However, this preference does not accurately reflect what people remember. When comparing between podcasts and physical articles people generally retain more information regardless of distractions that might have been present. People both report they remember more of the article and can even perform better on a retention quiz (Daniel & Woody, 2010; Furnham & Gunter, 1989). Furthermore, Daniel and Woody (2010) found that individuals who listen to the content are more likely to be distracted by other computer activities, making it harder to concentrate on the material. Regarding physical articles and television clips, individuals tend to recall more from physical articles (Furnham & Gunter, 1989). This phenomenon might be attributed to differences in how much content is available. Articles can delve more into the details than a news channel that has a set amount of time for each subject (Furnham & Gunter, 1989).

Preference against reading physical material goes even further than just audio and visual cues. Individuals prefer to read digital content over physical material and will tend to consume more media over a digital platform than physically (Singer & Alexander, 2016). Additionally, individuals are known to make assumptions that they have understood and retained more information from this digital content (Singer & Alexander, 2016). Nevertheless, studies have found that physical material leads to greater retention and knowledge obtained (Singer & Alexander, 2016; Mangen, Walgermo, & Brønnick, 2013). Lower retention rates could be due to

the process of scrolling on a screen. Having to scroll through an article, makes an individual stop and lose focus of the article (Mangen, Walgermo, & Brønnick, 2013). While the knowledge gained from these different mediums is well-documented, comparing how different mediums shape political views has been limited. Studies mainly focus on one type of medium - television clips (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2010; Lau et al., 2017; Morris, 2007) or articles (Leeper, 2014). They fail to compare how the different platforms interact with each other and how an individual consumption of multiple platforms has an impact on political extremity.

### **Next Steps**

Overall, the literature has shown inconsistencies across the true effects of the media on one's policy positions. Using knowledge gained from previous studies on selective exposure, this current study is aimed at furthering the understanding of how media fragmentation impacts extremity of viewpoints on a gun control, abortion, and campaign spending. Furthermore, the literature has focused its studies on specific platforms and has lacked an in-depth analysis of how consumption across platforms impact policy positions. While there has been extensive literature analyzing the cognitive impact of various media, this study is aimed at expanding this research and discovering if consumption across platforms can impact political polarization.

## Chapter 3

### Theories and Hypotheses

Through this research, I plan to examine why some individuals are more politically extreme than others. I intend to analyze how a media's political slant and platform of the media content influence a person's political opinions. I expect to find that media with a clear political bias will play a significant role in influencing an individual's political opinions. While previous research has been unclear about how, if at all, media do impact individuals' attitudes, I argue that because the media are the sole source of individuals' news and information about politics, their opinions will be shaped by the information their sources provide. Furthermore, I believe that this relationship will be prevalent regardless of how salient a policy is. However, I expect that this relationship will vary based on the political bias of the news consumption and how many news sources a person frequents.

#### Central Concepts

My dependent variable in this research is the extent to which an individual has extreme policy positions. I am defining this as policy positions that are extremely liberal or conservative, i.e., the most extreme position on either side of the political spectrum. These policy positions will be on the fringe of the so-called 'middle ground' policy positions. I am planning to study individuals' policy positions on the topics of abortion, gun control, and campaign spending. Abortion and gun control are considered more salient and controversial topics compared to campaign spending. It is important to have topics with varying levels of saliency and controversy because from a research design standpoint, diversity in topics is necessary in ensuring that I am measuring an appropriate relationship. Additionally, controversial topics equate to importance.

The more controversial a topic is, the more important it is to the American public and the more likely it will be covered in the news.

My two independent variables are source bias and the media platform. Source bias can be defined through how politically biased the media content produced and shared by the source is. Similarly, to the policy positions of an individual, source bias can range on a scale of being extremely biased towards one side of the political spectrum to falling in the middle of the two extremes. Individuals can consume content from sources that are extremely biased, slightly biased, and unbiased. Additionally, two separate sources can both be extremely biased but lay on opposite sides of the political spectrum, meaning that they can lean either to the left (liberal) or to the right (conservative). My other independent variable, media platform, relates to how the media content is displayed to and consumed by an individual. Media platforms vary based on the visual and audio cues given by the platform. The media platforms that I will be using in my research are physical newspapers, digital content, podcasts, and television shows.

### **Research Hypotheses**

I am interested in exploring two separate hypotheses. My first hypothesis focuses on the idea that politically biased sources can play a major role in an individual's political opinions. Based on previous research, I have found variance amongst scholars regarding whether or not the media does have an influence on political views. Focusing on different mediums, I will be able to differentiate from previous studies and include more media source data that varies across partisanship and media platforms, that will allow an in-depth analysis that will examine where previous scholars have failed. I believe that there will be a positive relationship between the



number of biased media outlets consumed by an individual and their extreme political views. My first hypothesis states:

H1: The greater amount of one-sided polarized media one watches, the more likely they will have extreme views.

My second hypothesis focuses on the various policy preferences that I will be researching. I have chosen to analyze two highly salient topics in abortion and gun control and one less salient topic in campaign spending. The different salience of topics correlates to how prevalent the topic is in the media. However, I believe that regardless of how important one topic might be in the media, the media itself will still have the same effect on an individual's level of extremity. Based on this belief, I expect to observe a similar relationship between each politically biased media consumption across all policies. Following this, my second hypothesis states:

H2: Regardless of the policy, media consumption will have the same effect on a person's political views.

In order to understand the extremity of individuals' positions on the four study issues, I also plan to control for several forces that have been shown to affect views on policy. The first of these is an individual's partisanship. An individual's political party preference can have an impact on how extreme their political views are. Political parties provide knowledge, community, and mobilize their constituents which can help sway how an individual thinks about political policies (Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2020). Additionally, the more closely one identifies with or is involved with a certain party the more extreme they are likely to be. In fact, Republicanism and Democratic ideals differ and can impact an individual differently. The

difference between the average Republican and Democrat is substantial with 94% of Democrats being more liberal than the median Republican and 92% of Republicans being more conservative than the median Democratic (Geiger, 2014). However, Republicans are more likely to believe that Democrats are a physical threat to the nation, with 36% believing that Democratic policies threaten the country. In comparison, 27% of Democrats believe the same about Republicans (Geiger, 2014). This tendency to see the other party as a threat is known as affective polarization. To ensure that partisanship and the differences in the ways that parties impact extremity will not confound my study's results, I am planning to control for political party of the respondent. Furthermore, I will analyze other demographic factors that are known to have an influence on political opinions. These demographic factors include age, gender, race, and educational attainment (Davis & Dunaway, 2016).

If political parties are indeed a driving force behind policy preferences, I anticipate that I will find that party preference determines what sources that an individual tends to choose, instead of media consumption influencing political views. Individuals will already have preconceived stable views that influence them to consume certain media. Political opinions will have already been decided due to the individual's party preference, which will influence what media they consume.

My study will expand on current research with evidence regarding what side of the "media effects" debate is correct. By examining the impacts of varying levels of consumption of biased news media, I will be able to gain a different perspective compared to previous studies. Furthermore, this study will analyze the impact of various media platforms to see if there are varying effects across platforms. This will be used to determine if retention rates are correlated with opinion change. Finally, this study will be adding onto previous research by adding in a

component of entertainment mediums that have been previously overlooked. In the next chapter, I will be outlining how my independent and dependent variables will be measured to conclude whether or not there is support for my hypotheses.

## Chapter 4

### Methods Chapter

#### **Research Design**

To test my hypotheses, I will be using the American National Election Studies (ANES) Time Series 2020. The ANES has been running since 1948 in its first inception as the Michigan studies. In 1977, the ANES was officially formed by the National Science Foundation. In the Times Series 2020 edition, the survey ran before and after the 2020 general election and was conducted by one of three ways - teleconference interviews, telephone, or computer-assisted self-interviews. The 8280 respondents answered questions regarding my variables of interest. The media consumption and policy preference questions measure individuals which means that the unit of analysis for my project is the individual. The main benefit of using the ANES is that the questions have all already been tested and verified as valid and reliable survey questions. Furthermore, the ANES provides a nationally representative sample that is necessary to understand the population differences across the United States. However, one limitation using the ANES is that I do not have control over the questions that were asked, meaning that I am limited in my study to only the scope of questions that have been procured.

I will also be using Ad Fontes Media. Ad Fontes Media was developed in 2018 to categorize media sources in terms of political biases and their reliability/accuracy as a source of news. To do this, three separate individuals that self-identify as either, liberal, conservative, or moderate review various pieces of content produced by a source. Then these content piece scores are aggregated to form a single overall score for the source. Having an individual from each main political bias helps ensure that the media content reviewed receives an accurate score. A score of  $-0.7$  and lower is a left-leaning source and  $0.7$  and higher is a right-leaning source.

Between  $-0.7$  and  $0.7$  is categorized as moderate. Ad Fontes Media is a relatively new source which can be of concern because it has not generally been used in previous media studies. However, I believe that this will give my project a new angle. Another issue with any media bias rating, is that there is inevitably some bias that comes to play when rating the different sources. However, one of the positives of using Ad Fontes is that they are very aware of innate human bias and have worked extensively to mitigate these concerns by implementing a reviewer from each side of the political spectrum.

### **Operationalization of Variables**

I have three dependent variables that all fall under the overarching category of policy preferences: individuals policy preferences regarding abortion, gun control, and campaign spending. To measure individuals' preferences on abortion policy, I am using the ANES question that asks, "There has been some discussion about abortion during recent years. Which one of the opinions on this page best agrees with your view?" The answer choices range from allowing abortion in all cases to abortion never being permissible. This is an ordinal variable that I have recoded. The option choices that are the most extreme - allowing abortion in all or no cases - was recoded to equal one because they have the same level of extremity on both sides of the political spectrum. The two option choices that were more middle ground were recoded as 0 because they are less extreme choices. The operationalization of gun control policy preferences is measured with the question: "Do you think the federal government should make it more difficult for people to buy a gun than it is now, make it easier for people to buy a gun, or keep these rules about the same as they are now?". This is an ordinal variable that I recoded so that the answer choice of easier and harder was coded as 1 and the answer choice of keep the same was coded to 0 to show varying levels of extremity. To operationalize preferences towards campaign spending policy I

used responses to the question, “Do you favor, oppose, or neither favor nor oppose placing limits on political campaign spending?”. This is an ordinal variable that I have recoded to represent extremity levels. Favor and oppose was recoded as 1 and neither favor nor oppose was recoded as 0. The exact coding of the policy variables can be found in Appendix B in Table 9.

My primary independent variable is media consumption. I have used media consumption questions that were asked in the ANES to discover the amount of media a person has consumed whether it was a podcast, newspaper, television show, or online content. Using the Ad Fontes Media dataset, I have organized my media sources into the following categories - left-leaning podcasts, left-leaning newspapers, left-leaning online sources, left-leaning television shows, moderate podcasts, moderate newspapers, moderate online sources, moderate television shows, right-leaning podcasts, right-leaning online sources, and right-leaning television shows. The media sources categorization can be found in Appendix A in Table 6,7, and 8. The right-leaning category does not include any newspapers as the ANES did not ask about the consumption of any newspaper that is considered right-leaning based on the Ad Fontes Media dataset. Furthermore, I have created three media consumption indexes. For the moderate and left-leaning media consumption indexes, they range from 0 to 4 with each point increase, meaning that the person consumes at least one of a single type of media content from that ideology. For the right-leaning media consumption index it ranges from 0 to 3 because of the lack of a right-leaning newspaper.

Additionally, I have some control variables that I will be using in my research. I will be exploring race, political ideology, gender, educational attainment, marital status, and the region that the respondent is located. I recoded all of my control variables into categorical variables. Race was operationalized and separated into categories - White, non-Hispanic, Black, non-

Hispanic, Asian, Native American, and Multiple Races. White will be used as my reference category. To operationalize marital status, I combined both married categories (married with partner present and married without partner present). Additionally, I combined widows into this category. I will be comparing the married and widowed category against all other marital statuses. Gender was operationalized by creating a dummy variable for females. The ANES only has a dichotomous gender variable, so I will be comparing females against males. Political ideology was recoded from an ordinal variable into a categorical variable. If a respondent identified as liberal, slightly, moderately, or strongly, I recoded it into being liberal. The same measurement was taken for the conservative side. Individuals who identified in the center without a political lean were put into a moderate category that will be the reference category. Educational attainment was originally a categorical variable that I recoded. I combined all educational attainments below a Bachelors' Degree into one category. If an individual holds a Bachelors' Degree or more, they form the second category. Region is separated into four separate categories - Midwest, Northeast, South, and West. I will be using West as my reference category.

## Chapter 5

### Analytical Chapter

#### Descriptive Statistics

My dependent variables for my study are an individual's policy preferences about abortion, gun control, and campaign spending. Each variable ranges from 0 to 1. As shown in Table 1, the majority of Americans hold extreme policy preferences. For abortion, individuals that hold an extreme policy position are 59% of my sample. Those that do not hold an extreme view make up 41% of the responses. Fifty-two percent of the respondents believe that it should be easier or harder to obtain a gun, the more extreme policy preference, while 48% of the sample records a less extreme policy preference. Table 1 shows that 66% of individuals have an extreme policy position regarding campaign spending, whereas 34% do not.

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Policy Preferences**

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Relative Frequency (%)</i>	<i>Minimum</i>	
<b><i>Gun Control</i></b>	.5204	1.0			0	1
<i>0</i>			3971	47.96%		
<i>1</i>			4309	52.04%		
<b><i>Abortion</i></b>	.5902	1.0			0	1
<i>0</i>			3393	40.98%		
<i>1</i>			4887	59.02%		
<b><i>Campaign Spending</i></b>	.6629	1.0			0	1
<i>0</i>			2791	33.71%		
<i>1</i>			5489	66.29%		



My independent variables are media consumption indexes. The left-leaning media consumption ranges from 0 to 4. As shown in Table 2, the majority of my sample consume no media content. Fifty-seven percent of respondents consume no left-leaning media, 30% consume one type of left-leaning media, 11% consume two, 2% consume three, and only .02% of respondents consume all four types of left-leaning media. The moderate media consumption index ranges from 0 to 4 and the most frequent response was consuming no type of moderate media at 48%. While 34% of respondents consume one type of moderate media, 4% consume two types. At the lower end of respondents, 4% consume three types of moderate media and a small minority of .28% consume all four types. The right-leaning media consumption index ranges from 0 to 3 and the vast majority (70%) consume no right-leaning media. As consumption increases, the frequency of responses declines with 20% consuming one, 8% consuming two, and 2% consuming all three.

**Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Media Consumption Indexes**

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Relative Frequency (%)</i>	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>
<b><i>Left-leaning Index</i></b>	.5876	0.0			0	4
0			4716	56.96%		
1			2453	29.63%		
2			923	11.15%		
3			186	2.25%		
4			2	0.02%		
<b><i>Moderate Index</i></b>	.7365	1.0			0	4
0			4007	48.39%		
1			2803	33.85%		
2			1138	13.74%		
3			309	3.73%		
4			23	0.28%		
<b><i>Right-leaning Index</i></b>	.4207	0.0			0	3
0			5801	70.06%		
1			1666	20.12%		
2			622	7.51%		
3			191	2.31%		

As displayed in Table 3, the model respondent is a conservative white female without a college degree who is married and living in the Midwest. The most frequent political ideology in my sample is conservative making up 45% of the respondents. Midwesterners make up the majority with 37%. For my educational attainment variable, 55% of the sample has less than a Bachelor's Degree, while 45% have a Bachelor's Degree or more. Fifty-nine percent of

**Table 3: Frequencies of Control Variables**

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Relative Frequency (%)</i>	
<b><i>POLITICAL IDEOLOGY</i></b>			<p>respondents are married or widowed. Females are the majority of my sample at 55%. Finally, the vast majority of my respondents are white (78%).</p> <p><b><u>Impacts of Demographics on Media Consumption</u></b></p> <p>While media consumption is my independent variable for my study, the first step that I took to understand my variables was to understand why people consume what they do. To do this, I ran an OLS regression using my media consumption variables as the dependent variables and the demographic variables that I will be using as control variables as my independent variables. The results that were found are seen in Table 4. The first demographic variable that I considered was</p>
<i>Conservative</i>	2741	44.53%	
<i>Moderate</i>	918	14.91%	
<i>Liberal</i>	2497	40.56%	
<b><i>REGION</i></b>			
<i>Northeast</i>	1396	16.86%	
<i>South</i>	1997	24.12%	
<i>Midwest</i>	3081	37.21%	
<i>West</i>	1806	21.81%	
<b><i>EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT</i></b>			
<i>Less than Bachelor's Degree</i>	4502	55.25%	
<i>Bachelor's Degree +</i>	3647	44.75%	
<b><i>MARITAL STATUS</i></b>			
<i>Married and Widowed</i>	4889	59.45%	
<i>Other Marital Statuses</i>	3335	40.55%	
<b><i>GENDER</i></b>			
<i>Male</i>	122	45.19%	
<i>Female</i>	148	54.81%	
<b><i>RACE</i></b>			
<i>White</i>	5963	72.92%	
<i>Black</i>	726	8.88%	
<i>Hispanic</i>	762	9.32%	
<i>Asian</i>	284	3.47%	
<i>Native American</i>	172	2.10%	
<i>Multiple Races</i>	271	3.31%	

political ideology. Using moderate as a reference category, I discovered that conservatives consume less left-leaning media and liberals consume markedly more left-leaning media. This is highly significant with a p-value of less than .001. Furthermore, for the moderate index, conservatives consume considerably less moderate media than moderates. On the other hand, liberals consume significantly more moderate news than moderates. Lastly, I discovered that when analyzing right-leaning news, conservatives consume statistically significant more right-leaning media than moderates. Conversely, liberals consume significantly less right-leaning media when compared to moderates. This means that political ideology is highly significant across all media types and is a big determinant for what an individual consumes.

The next demographic factor that could have an impact was region. However, I discovered that when comparing to the category West, no region variable was statistically significant with a p-value of less than .05. Region does not seem to be that significant with determining what media one consumes. Married and widowed individuals consume a greater amount of all types of media when compared to others. Married and widowed individuals consume .054 more left-leaning news, .073 more moderate-leaning news, and .087 more right-leaning media than individuals who are single and divorced. One thing to note is that the coefficient for right-leaning media consumption is the highest, meaning that while there is a positive correlation throughout all media types, the correlation is biggest for right-leaning media. On the opposite end of the spectrum, females consume significantly less media than men across all media types. Females consume .704 less left-leaning media than men, .838 less moderate media, and .360 less right-leaning media. The moderate media coefficient is extremely high when considering that the variable itself is only out of four.

Table 4: OLS Regression on Media Consumption Indexes

	<i>Left-leaning Index</i>	<i>Moderate Index</i>	<i>Right-leaning Index</i>
<b>POLITICAL IDEOLOGY</b>			
<i>(Moderate = Omitted)</i>			
<i>Conservative</i>	-0.205*** (0.019)	-0.191*** (0.022)	0.495*** (0.018)
<i>Liberal</i>	0.399*** (0.020)	0.244*** (0.023)	-0.133*** (0.019)
<b>REGION (West = Omitted)</b>			
<i>Northeast</i>	0.046* (0.026)	0.024 (0.029)	-0.005 (0.024)
<i>South</i>	.004 (0.022)	0.024 (0.025)	0.020 (0.020)
<i>Midwest</i>	-0.034 (0.024)	0.048* (0.027)	-0.011 (0.022)
<i>Bachelor's Degree +</i>	0.239*** (0.017)	0.264*** (0.019)	0.029* (0.016)
<i>Married and Widowed</i>	0.054*** (0.016)	0.073*** (0.019)	0.087*** (0.015)
<i>Female</i>	-0.704*** (0.059)	-0.838*** (0.068)	-0.360*** (0.056)
<b>RACE (White = Omitted)</b>			
<i>Black</i>	0.175*** (0.029)	0.069** (0.033)	-0.005 (0.027)
<i>Hispanic</i>	-0.022 (0.028)	-0.076** (0.032)	-0.088*** (0.026)
<i>Asian</i>	0.058 (0.044)	0.080 (0.050)	-0.030 (0.041)
<i>Native American</i>	-0.008 (0.055)	-0.056 (0.063)	0.046 (0.052)
<i>Multiple Races</i>	0.074* (0.044)	0.037 (0.051)	-0.052 (0.042)
<i>Constant</i>	0.392*** (0.024)	0.555*** (0.027)	0.246*** (0.023)
<i>Observations</i>	8280	8280	8280
<i>R2</i>	0.155	0.091	0.155
<i>Note</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01 Coding of the dependent variables can be found in Table 9.		

Education does seem to be positively significant in two of the three media types. Those with a Bachelor's Degree or higher consume more left-leaning and moderate news than those not as educated. The last demographic factor that I analyzed was race. Using white as my reference category, I discovered that there is no significant difference between what white individuals consume and Native Americans, Asians or those that identify as having multiple races. On the other hand, there is a significant difference between what black and white individuals consume. Having a p-value of less than .01, Black individuals consume .175 more left-leaning media than white individuals. There is no significant relationship between black individuals and right-leaning media, meaning that there is no significant difference in how white individuals and black individuals consume right-leaning sources. For moderate media consumption, with a p-value of less than .05, black individuals consume .069 more moderate media than white individuals. Overall, this means that black individuals are more likely to consume moderate and left-leaning media than white individuals. Finally, there is a significant relationship between Hispanics and consumption of right-leaning media and moderate media. Hispanics consume less moderate media and right-leaning media than whites. There is no significant difference in how Hispanics consume left-leaning media compared to whites.

### **Differences in Media Consumption**

To test my main hypotheses, I incorporated all my independent variables and control variables into three separate OLS Regressions against my policy preference questions – abortion, gun control, and campaign spending. The result of this regression is in Table 5.

Table 5: OLS Regression on Policy Preferences

	<i>Gun Control</i>	<i>Abortion</i>	<i>Campaign Spending</i>
<b><i>Left-leaning Index</i></b>	0.087*** (0.008)	0.046*** (0.008)	0.051*** (0.008)
<b><i>Moderate Index</i></b>	0.035*** (0.007)	0.018** (0.007)	0.028*** (0.007)
<b><i>Right-leaning Index</i></b>	-0.078*** (0.008)	-0.072*** (0.008)	-0.005 (0.008)
<b><i>POLITICAL IDEOLOGY</i></b> ( <i>Moderate = Omitted</i> )			
<b><i>Conservative</i></b>	-0.139*** (0.013)	-0.119*** (0.013)	0.081*** (0.013)
<b><i>Liberal</i></b>	0.165*** (0.013)	0.183*** (0.013)	0.132*** (0.013)
<b><i>REGION (West = Omitted)</i></b>			
<b><i>Northeast</i></b>	0.026 (0.016)	0.032* (0.016)	-0.030* (0.016)
<b><i>South</i></b>	-0.027** (0.014)	-0.030** (0.014)	-0.030** (0.014)
<b><i>Midwest</i></b>	-0.019 (0.015)	-0.015 (0.015)	-0.026* (0.015)
<b><i>Bachelor's Degree +</i></b>	0.081*** (0.011)	0.026** (0.011)	0.075*** (0.011)
<b><i>Married and Widowed</i></b>	-0.009 (0.010)	-0.051*** (0.011)	0.050*** (0.010)
<b><i>Female</i></b>	0.189*** (0.038)	-0.031 (0.039)	0.230*** (0.038)
<b><i>RACE (White = Omitted)</i></b>			
<b><i>Black</i></b>	0.074*** (0.019)	0.053*** (0.019)	-0.170*** (0.019)
<b><i>Hispanic</i></b>	0.030* (0.018)	0.045** (0.018)	-0.140*** (0.018)
<b><i>Asian</i></b>	-0.011 (0.028)	0.025 (0.028)	-0.157*** (0.028)
<b><i>Native American</i></b>	0.001 (0.035)	-0.009 (0.036)	-0.041 (0.035)
<b><i>Multiple Races</i></b>	-0.080*** (0.028)	0.010 (0.029)	-0.118*** (0.028)
<b><i>Constant</i></b>	0.443*** (0.016)	0.583*** (0.016)	0.541*** (0.016)
<b><i>Observations</i></b>	8280	8280	8280
<b><i>R2</i></b>	0.178	0.132	0.080
<b><i>Note</i></b>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01 Coding of dependent variables can be found in Table 9.		

Based on previous research, I theorized that as individuals consume more politically biased content, the more politically extreme they will be. However, I discovered that my first hypothesis is not supported. Left-leaning media consumption does have a statistically significant positive relationship with extremity for each policy position which does support my first hypothesis. The effect of left-leaning news consumption is strongest on gun control policy with individuals becoming .087 more extreme with each additional left-leaning media type. The weakest effect on a policy preference by left-leaning media consumption was abortion at .046. However, these results were not reflected in right-leaning media consumption. Right-leaning media consumption actually decreases policy extremity for gun control and abortion. Consuming one more type of right-leaning media, decreases the extremity of an individual's view on gun control by .078 and decreases an individual's policy preference on abortion by .072. Additionally, right-leaning media consumption does not have a statistically significant relationship with campaign spending. When analyzing moderate media consumption, I found that as an individual consumes more moderate media, they become more extreme across all policies. This effect is strongest on gun control with every one unit increase of moderate media, an individual becomes more extreme by .035 and weakest for abortion with a coefficient of .018. This further disproves my first hypothesis, as unbiased media consumption increases political extremity across abortion, gun control, and campaign spending. Political ideology mirrored these results.

My second hypothesis also lacks support. I hypothesized that there would be no difference between how media consumption impacts an individual's abortion, gun control, and campaign spending policy preference. First, I chose to compare my more salient policies: abortion and gun control. I discovered similar coefficients for each media consumption index



across these categories. While the coefficients were similar, they were also significant differences between them. For example, the left-leaning media index reflects a positive effect on extremity across these policy preferences, however, the difference between the effect of left-leaning media consumption on gun control and abortion is .041. While this does not seem like a significant number, the context of this number makes it more significant than its appearance. The policy preference questions only range from 0 to 1. Furthermore, the whole effect of left-leaning media consumption on abortion is .046. Nonetheless, these results show a statistically significant positive relationship which can be used to support my hypothesis.

However, when I included the less salient topic of campaign spending in these comparisons, the results fall apart. Campaign spending's coefficients are similar to abortion and gun control for the moderate media index and the left-leaning media index with campaign spending's coefficient actually being in the middle of abortion and gun control which adds to the theme that the policy does not matter when it comes to how media consumption impacts extremity. In spite of that, the difference between policy preferences becomes apparent when examining the right-leaning media index. For gun control and abortion, there is a statistically significant negative relationship between right-leaning media consumption and the extremity of an individual's policy preference. However, for campaign spending, there is no statistically significant relationship between the variables. This means that I have to accept my null hypothesis and that there is a significant difference between how media consumption interacts with different political policies.

The control variables that I included in my regressions produced very interesting results. Political ideology had similar results to their media index counterpart except for Conservatives on campaign spending. Conservatives are less extreme than moderates on gun control and

abortion policy and more extreme on campaign spending policy. On the other hand, liberals are more extreme than moderates on all three of the policy preference questions. Only one region showed a statistically significant difference from the West. Individuals from the South are less extreme than Westerners across all policies. Southerners were less extreme than Westerners by .030 on abortion and campaign spending and .027 on gun control. Educational attainment was also statistically significant. Individuals with a Bachelor's Degree or higher were more politically extreme than those less educated across all policies. This effect was strongest for gun control (.081) and weakest on abortion (.026). Marital status was indicative for abortion and campaign spending policy preferences. However, the results varied significantly. Married and widowed individuals were less extreme on abortion compared to other marital statuses. For campaign spending, these individuals were more extreme than the other marital statuses. Furthermore, there was no statistically significant relationship between marital status and gun control.

Gender was statistically significant for gun control and campaign spending but not for abortion. Females were more extreme than males on their gun control and campaign spending policies. The race variables varied from each other and between policies. The only race to never be statistically different than whites across the policies was Native Americans. Black individuals were more extreme than their white counterparts on abortion and gun control. However, they were less extreme on campaign spending. Hispanics were only statistically different than whites on abortion and campaign spending, being more extreme than whites on abortion and less extreme on campaign spending. Asians were no different from white individuals on gun control and abortion. However, they were less extreme on campaign spending. Individuals who identify

as having multiple races were statistically different than whites on gun control and campaign spending being less extreme than white individuals.

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion

The main findings of my study are that left-leaning and moderate media consumption increases an individual's policy extremity across abortion, gun control, and campaign spending. Right-leaning media consumption decreases policy extremity across abortion and gun control and does not have a statistically significant relationship with campaign spending. These results shed light on the fact that the policy does matter when it comes to how media consumption interacts with a person's policy preference. These results did not support any of my hypotheses. I believe this to be the case because of the way that I chose to analyze my policy preference questions. I chose to use certain policy questions that were not necessarily the most representative of extremity. For example, my gun control variable had the options to make it easier, harder, or leave it be for current regulations on buying a gun. Individuals that watch right-leaning news sources might not want to loosen regulations, which I would have marked as extreme, but could have been more staunchly against making it harder to obtain a gun and still been recorded as being not extreme. Additionally, combining the extremes from both sides of the spectrum could have diluted the effects. Individuals who consume right-leaning news generally differ from those that consume left-leaning news, which is apparent in my results. However, I tried to circumvent this difference by combining the extreme policy positions which might have the unintended consequence of swaying my results.

Furthermore, another limitation that occurred in my study due to using the ANES was that they only asked their respondents about certain media sources. With the expansion of the media, it would have been extremely difficult to ask respondents about every single source. However, due to this sources that are less mainstream and could be more prevalent in certain

demographics fell to the wayside. This means that some individuals news consumption would have been excluded from my study. This could have had a strong impact on my results that I had no way to measure. Furthermore, the ANES lacked any type of right-leaning newspaper. I did try to incorporate this into my study but the lack of a physical newspaper in my right-leaning media index could have swayed my results and made it more difficult to fully grasp an individual's media consumption.

If I was to extend my study, my first goal would be to extend the scope of the media sources I included in my study. I would have had to create my own study and ask respondents to record every source that they frequent. This would allow a study to have a full grasp of media consumption and would create a more comprehensive media index. Additionally, I would create more media indexes separating out media platforms into separate variables. This would allow for me to conclude what media platform had the most impact on an individual's policy preference.

While my results were not what I was anticipating, I believe that my study shed light on how media consumption impacts policy extremity. The debate surrounding how media impacts an individuals' political opinions will remain prevalent. However, I showed that media does have an impact on a person's policy preferences. My study was able to develop a further understanding into how media consumption impacts specific policy preferences that are generally neglected in media effects which I hope future researchers can build upon.

## Appendix A

**Table 6: Right-Leaning Media Index Categorization**

<i>Podcasts</i>	<i>Television Shows</i>	<i>Online Sources</i>
The Dana Show	Fox & Friends	Breitbart News
The Glenn Beck Program	Hannity	Daily Caller
The Mark Levin Show	Special Report with Bret Baier	Fox News
The Sean Hannity Show	The Five	
	The Ingraham Angle	
	The Story with Martha	
	MacCallum	
	Tucker Carlson Tonight	

**Table 7: Moderate Media Index Categorization**

<i>Podcasts</i>	<i>Television Shows</i>	<i>Online Sources</i>	<i>Newspapers</i>
Fresh Air	CBS Evening News with Norah O'Donnell	BBC News	USA Today
Marketplace	CBS This Morning	Bloomberg	Wall Street Journal
	Face the Nation	Buzzfeed	
	Good Morning America	NBC News	
	NBC Nightly News with Lester Holt	NPR News	
	PBS Newshour	USA Today	
	Today	Yahoo News	

**Table 8: Left-leaning Media Index Categorization**

<i>Podcasts</i>	<i>Television Shows</i>	<i>Online Sources</i>	<i>Newspapers</i>
The Thomm	ABC World News	CNN.com	New York Times
Hartmann Program	Tonight		
	All In with Chris Hayes	Huffington Post	Washington Post
	Anderson Cooper 360	New York Times	
	Cuomo Prime Time	The Guardian	
	Erin Burnett OutFront	Washington Post	
	Meet the Press		
	Morning Joe		
	The Last Word with Lawrence O'Donnell		
	The Lead with Jake Tapper		
	The Rachel Maddow Show		

## Appendix B

**Table 9: Coding of Dependent Variables**

<i>Variable Name</i>	<i>Brief Description</i>	<i>Coding</i>	<i>Descriptive Statistics</i>
V201336	There has been some discussion about abortion during recent years. Which one of the opinions on this page best agrees with your view?	1 = By law, abortion should never be permitted. 1 = By law, a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice. 0 = Otherwise	Proportion: .5902
V202337	Do you think the federal government should make it more difficult for people to buy a gun than it is now, make it easier for people to buy a gun, or keep these rules about the same as they are now?	1 = More difficult 1 = Easier 0 = Otherwise	Proportion: .5204
V202225	Do you favor, oppose, or neither favor nor oppose placing limits on political campaign spending?	1 = Favor 1 = Oppose 0 = Otherwise	Proportion: .6629



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**The Pennsylvania State University, Schreyer Honors College** **University Park, PA**  
*College of The Liberal Arts* *May*  
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Honors in Political Science  
Thesis Title: "The Impacts of Media Consumption on Policy Extremity"      Thesis Supervisor: Ray Block

**HONORS**

---

**Dean's List** (Fall 2019, Spring 2020, Fall 2020, Spring 2021, Fall 2021, Spring 2022, Fall 2023)  
**Paterno Fellow**  
**Nevins Fellow**  
**President's Freshman Award**

**WORK EXPERIENCE**

---

**The David Family** **East Setauket, NY**  
*Nanny* *Summer 2019, 2021, and 2022*

- Created a nurturing and active environment for children by maintaining scheduled activities
- Drove to weekly activities and ensured that set academic goals were met

**Our Civic Genius** **Rochester, NY**  
*Intern* *June 2021-July 2021*

- Researched various topics and survey data to find common ground for future endeavors
- Restructured blog posts on the back end of a new website and created and inputted SEO
- Collaborated with colleagues to ensure the smooth launch of new social media accounts

**LEADERSHIP AND INVOLVEMENT**

---

**Pi Sigma Alpha** **University Park, PA**  
*Member* *September 2021-Present*

- Foster relationships between other members of the Political Science Honors Society
- Attend meetings to discuss political events and create programs to support career development

**Donor and Alumni Relations Committee** **University Park, PA**  
*Family Liaison* *September 2020-March 2021*

- Called and emailed donors and alumni to spread THON's mission
- Communicated with and helped Family Relations Committee's with the Four Diamond Families

**Rules and Regulations Committee** **University Park, PA**  
*Member* *September 2019-March 2020*

- Served on a committee of 24 people to spread THON's mission by attending weekly meetings
- Worked to ensure the safety and security of all volunteers, families, and supporters of THON

**Penn State International Affairs and Debate Association** **University Park, PA**  
*Member* *August 2019- May 2020*

- Attended weekly meetings and participated in practice model UN scenarios
- Helped run and guide a PHUNC committee over a two-day major event

**SKILLS**

---

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- Language: Proficient in Spanish; Intermediate in French