PROCESS MODELING OF MISREPRESENTATIVE PARTISAN MODERATORS TO
FACTUAL POLITICIZED ISSUES

by

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ABSTRACT

Using the model for data analysis proposed by Blake, Donaway, and Reineke as adapted from the Hayes PROCESS model, this analysis intends to continue research based on "knowledge gaps", "belief gaps", and "motivated misperception" Blake et. al., first explored (Tichenor, Donohue & Olien, 1970; Hindman, 2009; Meirick, 2012; Hayes, 2013; Blake et. al, 2015). Based on secondary analysis of American National Election Studies data, this study questioned the impact of education, politicized media usage, and partisan ideology on the acceptance of mistaken, partisan-motivated belief. The study found that overall, higher education reduced the likelihood of misbelief, though higher education also intensified the acceptance by partisan-motivated respondents of whatever outcome they believed, true or false.

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INTRODUCTION

On the day before the 2012 United States presidential election, writing in her

Monday Morning blog, Wall Street columnist Peggy Noonan predicted that presidential

challenger Mitt Romney was a certainty to win the election, defeating the incumbent

candidate, Barack Obama. Explaining her rationale, Noonan offered that it felt as if

support for Romney was growing and gaining momentum, that yards were filled with

signs supporting Romney while she saw none for Obama. Though she cited no direct

polling data supporting her position, her observations of both party supporters and

independent constituents led her to suspect that "both Romney and Obama have a sense

of what's coming, and it's part of why Romney looks so peaceful and Obama so rolled"

(Noonan, 2012). In her summation, Romney's campaign was gaining momentum towards

inevitable victory, while President Obama's had become "small and sad and lost"

(Noonan, 2012).

The next night, a similar attitude appeared to unfold during Fox News' live

coverage of the election results, most apparent in former Senior Advisor and Assistant to

President George W. Bush and then political pundit, Karl Rove. Despite the results of an

Obama victory being reported by the outlet during a live broadcast with Rove sitting in,

the former advisor maintained defiance and challenged those at the station to check the

numbers again, stating that the analysts were being premature. As *Newsweek*

correspondent Pema Levy reported in her 2014 article "The Real Reason Why Rove

Went into Denial on Election Night," the Republican strategist appeared to have direct

incentive to speak in such denial, as Rove's Super PAC American Crossroads had been

invested in a Romney victory (Levy, 2014). Similarly, though not as materially invested in Romney's success, Noonan was Special Assistant to Republican patriarch Ronald Reagan, and her writings continue to possess a seemingly conservative leaning.

Still, both of these figures are well-educated veterans of the United States political system, both having been involved deeply with presidential administrations that spanned the maximum of two terms in office. It begs the question, assuming the earnestness of their public statements were sincere, what factors may have led to disconnect between the perceived interpretation of these public figures and the actual unfolding of events? How could this disconnect extend to the broader public? What external influences could be a source of this misleading information, and in what ways do these sources interact with what an audience already possesses to interpret and understand this misinformation?

Theoretical Framework

Questions along these lines are not new to the realms of political or social science. In fact, this study builds on an existing model that sought to understand the mistaken beliefs held by some members of partisan ideologies about the United States government's treatment of its citizenry, including the conspiracies surrounding death panels, Hurricane Katrina, and North Korea's nuclear proliferation (Blake, Donaway, and Reineke, 2015). Understanding the theories that lead to this model, however, begins with Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien's "Mass Media Flow and Differential Growth in Knowledge" (Tichenor et. al., 1970), which concluded that access and utilization of insight through mass media depends significantly on socioeconomic status, which widens any existing gap between those of greater means and those with less. Within 25 years,

this "knowledge gap hypothesis" had spawned more than 70 studies and stimulated important discussion of knowledge and power differentials in democratic societies (Viswanath & Finnegan, 1996).

In one variation of the knowledge gap hypothesis, Hindman contrasted the roles of education and political ideology in predicting knowledge about politically contested facts about climate change, an approach that conceptualized knowledge as something closer to partisan-inspired beliefs. Specifically, Hindman found evidence that gaps could develop in a population regarding knowledge about politically contested facts and that these gaps were at least sometimes based more on political ideology than on education level. He called these gaps "belief gaps," to distinguish them from knowledge gaps (Hindman, 2009). Furthering this research in 2012, Hindman found that knowledge and belief gaps based on educational levels tended to subside over time, while those based on ideology grew (Hindman, 2012).

Regarding bias and perspective, in 1990 Ziva Kunda made the case for motivated reasoning, proposing in the theory that the reasoning process may be influenced by a desired conclusion, leading to the usage of strategies for access, construction, and evaluation, constrained only by a person's ability to construct what they feel to be reasonable justifications (Kunda, 1990). Continuing upon this and other motivated reasoning research, Nir tested subjects on whether they would reach "correct" conclusions based on accuracy, as opposed to "preferred conclusions," based on directed perception of majority preferences of the public as a collective entity. Nir measured controls such as knowledge, political interest, party identification, and media usage, and

found that motivated reasoning affects overestimations of support (Nir, 2011). Using motivated reasoning as a basis as well as Pew survey data, Meirick sought to "examine the roles of partisanship, education, news exposure, and their interactions in the misperception that health care reform would create "death panels" (Meirick, 2012). The study found that radio news exposure appeared to encourage misperception only among Republicans, while newspaper exposure discouraged it, especially among non-Republicans. It also found that Fox News contributed to the misperception's mainstreaming, and found that education could inhibit misperceptions (as a main effect) and promote them (as an interaction with Fox News exposure) (Meirick, 2012).

Responding to Hindman and Meirick's research, Blake et. al. explored the possibility of a more nuanced relationship between education and political ideology as predictors of belief in politically contested assertions (Blake et. al., 2015). Applying process modeling (Hayes, 2013) to American National Election Studies data (ANES, 2012), they found evidence that political ideology predicted belief in each of four conspiracy theories and that attention to partisan media significantly mediated the relationship. Furthermore, education significantly moderated this mediation, such that individuals most likely to believe a given conspiracy theory were those whose political ideology was consonant with the conspiracy theory, were well educated, and who attended to partisan media consonant with their ideology. Ultimately, the model supported a more refined means of evaluating the interaction of education, ideology, and media influence upon a subject's knowledge, or at least perception of knowledge.

By using the same ANES dataset, this research intends to further determine the validity of the Blake et al. model (Blake et. al., 2015). Instead of evaluating misbelief of information surrounding partisan conspiracies, however, the intention is to evaluate partisan-motivated optimism regarding the 2012 United States presidential election. Specifically, the study will assess whether, during the time leading up to the 2012 presidential contest, self-identified Republican respondents who were well educated and who attended to conservative partisan media were relatively more likely that other subjects to predict – incorrectly, it turned out – that the Republican nominee would win the election.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

For decades, researchers have sought to understand the impact mass media have on public affairs knowledge among audiences of all ages and dispositions. Of media exposure, social and political scientists have placed great importance on the news, and while Chafee once concluded that "those who utilize television but not newspapers for news -- a relatively small percentage of the U.S. population, but enough to create significant correlations -- tend to be less educated and in other ways less likely to be knowledgeable about public affairs" (Chaffee, 1986). As time has passed and print media use has declined, this may no longer be the case. While formats vary and are individually temporal in their popularity, the general importance of news exposure and its interaction with the public's understanding of the political system cannot be understated. Even so, other researchers found inconsistency with this perspective, like Price & Zaller, who characterized education as "only a rough indicator of receptivity to news," because when stratified by education, there is still noteworthy variance in attentiveness (Price & Zaller, 1993). Instead, they seemed to confirm that there is a "general audience" for news, and that certain members of the public are merely more receptive due to attention to public affairs, and likelihood of learning about current events is best predicted by preexisting knowledge of political affairs (Price & Zaller, 1993).

With the advent of online news publications towards the end of the 20th century, there came a shift in how these new mediums impacted existing knowledge on media use. According to the research, it seems that the convenience of access may have led to a reduction in attention, which in turn prompted online outlets to provide fewer cues and

grant readers more control (Tewksbury & Althaus, 2000). Though there was a significant volume in viewing of news material with online outlets such as the *New York Times*, whether or not this could be qualified as attention comes into question, as many page views were of indexes of the outlet or a section's home, prompting researchers to believe audience members may be more prone to skimming headlines than actually reading the associated news pieces (Tewksbury, 2003), while cues associated with online formats may inherently redirect attention (Tewksbury & Althaus, 2000). Even so, the effectiveness of repetition in the repeated viewings of the same or similar headlines or other news information led to the possibility that exposure may instead be defined as "the extent to which audience members have encountered specific messages or classes of messages/media content" (Slater, 2004).

As this research progressed, more trends seemed to emerge that revealed the tendency for the audience towards selective engagement with news. With news access no longer limited to the daily newspaper or the scheduled broadcast, personal preference and in particular bias began to reveal itself. Having substantially more control now, readers were more likely to pursue their own interests as opposed to the cues of news editors and producers (Tewksbury, 2003). Much of the fragmentation initially seemed to be a response to the strengths of a particular outlet: CNN for its business content, *USA Today* for its sports, the *New York Times* coverage of politics, etc. (Tewksbury, 2005), and in clear defiance of some of Tewksbury and Althaus' own observations earlier, which noted that *New York Times* readers were less likely to begin with political event news (Tewksbury & Althaus, 2000). Even so, the average viewer did not seem to select public

affairs content as often as other news (Tewksbury, 2003). However, when public affairs were relevant, division persists strongly along politically partisan ideological lines, and both Republicans and Democrats would find outlets that they either prefer, or actively avoid, with both audiences migrating away from any perceived middle ground (Morris, 2005).

Partisan bias continues to be a motivating factor in self-selection of news. In particular, those who identify with the Republican Party or socially conservative values tend to gravitate towards Fox News coverage, for both politicized and non-political issues (Iyengar, 2009). Morris found that, compared to a CNN audience, Fox News watchers were less likely to follow stories that were critical of the Bush administration, suggesting they enjoy news that shared their personal views (Morris, 2005), and this combination of audience and outlet specialization may be the key factor in this polarizing effect (Tewksbury, 2005). And while both CNN and MSNBC have sometimes been scrutinized for their apparently liberal-leaning, Democratic bias, Fox news has distinguished itself for having a demonstrably pro-conservative reputation, one that partisan supporters seek out (Iyengar, 2009). It is fair to mention that, though there is a preponderance of research supporting the biases and impact of Fox News, there are many on the other side of the polarization spectrum such as DailyKos.com and HuffingtonPost.com (Baum & Groeling, 2009), but the literature on these groups' influence, likely due to their smaller sizes and reach, is limited.

The foundations of this media diet is only one part in understanding the basis of this study, however. The other part is the impact that a media diet has on an individual,

particularly when that person is seeking out specific information to accommodate his or

her biases and the media outlet appears to oblige (Iyengar, 2009). Evidence suggests that

cognitive processes (the strategies used for accessing, constructing, and evaluating belief)

themselves are naturally biased (Kunda, 1990). Explaining further, Kunda said:

> Although cognitive processes cannot fully account for the existence of self-
>
> serving biases, it appears that they play a major role in producing these biases in
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> that they provide the mechanisms through which motivation affects reasoning.
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> Indeed, it is possible that motivation merely provides an initial trigger for the
>
> operation of cognitive processes that lead to the desired conclusions. I have
>
> proposed that when one wants to draw a particular conclusion, one feels obligated
>
> to construct a justification for that conclusion that would be plausible to a
>
> dispassionate observer. In doing so, one accesses only a biased subset of the
>
> relevant beliefs and rules (p 493).

Knowledge Gap and Belief Gap

As mentioned earlier, central to the foundation of this study is the hypothesis of

the "knowledge gap." One point that Tichenor et. al. emphasized was not that those who

were less socially privileged were actually uninformed, it's that knowledge growth is

relatively greater among those of higher socioeconomic status. In other words, if viewed

as merely another resource necessary for survival, the income of knowledge follows

linear or curvilinear patterns like more traditional forms of income (Tichenor et. al.,

1970). The researchers also noted that it did not appear that there was a model of

diminishing returns for mass media infusion, and that the type of knowledge being

evaluated was for public affairs or news that may not have general appeal, as information targeted at an audience class could be the exception instead of the rule (Tichenor et. al., 1970).

A few years later, Ettema and Kline offered criticisms of the original "knowledge gap" hypothesis, in particular that there still lacked consistency in causal evidence. They determined that a lack of communication skills, differences in distribution of motivation to learn, and ceilings in research itself, where limitations enforced by measurement (or lack thereof) of differences at the higher end of subject scale become artificially introduced (Ettema & Kline, 1977). Without accounting for these parameters, the authors contend, no actual gap can be predicted. Still, while these parameters are static, Ettema & Kline concede that each will have differential value depending on the context of knowledge, messaging, and social systems being explored (Ettema & Kline, 1977).

When further evaluating the theory of the "knowledge gap," an examination of 58 reports supported the general concept that an increase in education correlated to greater knowledge of a variety of topics (Gaziano, 1982). However, this is not quite the same as not all of the reports studied allowed for the comparison of mass media exposure; those that did, such as time-trend studies, provided evidence that media publicity may have been a factor in decreasing gaps, but Gaziano did not feel that connection was conclusive (1982). Instead, type of topic and geographic scope of topic may have been at play, as topics of greater interest to the subjects or that had been presented in classroom or textbook terms showed reduction in gaps. Ultimately, gaps were less frequent or smaller

overall when dealing with subjects of local interest or appeal to the social strata studied (Gaziano, 1982).

As Ettema & Kline and Gaziano imply, it appears that there is distinct value in a subject's motivation to learn when considering the "knowledge gap" phenomenon. Using a hierarchical regression analysis, Kwak found evidence supporting education-based knowledge gaps having a dependence on motivation level, and that a gap is more likely to exist with a less motivated group than one that is more motivated (Kwak, 1999). Essentially, a gap enabled by lack of education could be overcome by motivation to be involved. The study also found that an increase in news attention reduced subjects' knowledge gap; a final regression analysis involving the three factors of motivation, education, and media attention confirmed these findings (Kwak, 1999). Continuing along these lines, Eveland Jr. & Scheufele also found that gaps in knowledge between higher and lower education groups were greater as media usage decreased (Eveland Jr. & Scheufele, 2000).

Finally, though much of the literature reviewed here is limited to the United States, in more recent years there has been some consideration of exploring knowledge gaps in other countries. Studying responses from the United States as well as the United Kingdom, Finland, and Denmark, Curran, Iyengar, Lund & Salovaara-Moring chose to examine "the implications of the movement towards entertainment-centered, market-driven media by comparing what is reported and what the public knows" (Curren et. al, 2009). Within each nation, the researchers found that public service television's focus on news seemed to encourage higher consumption and reduced knowledge gaps between

different social groups, appearing more successful than the market model. Curran et. al. also felt that the most significant finding of their study was that the entertainment-centric model reduces attention to international affairs and hard news as a whole, contributing to a generalized lack of information (Curran et. al, 2009).

With this previous scholarship in mind, Hindman proposed the "belief gap," an extension and continuation of the knowledge gap hypotheses and its elaboration by subsequent research (Hindman, 2009). In the climate of political polarization that had emerged in the United States since media fragmentation began (Tewksbury, 2003; Morris, 2005; Iyengar, 2009; Baum & Groeling, 2009), Hindman used the questions of global warming and climate change to see if self-identified political ideology would be a stronger predictor of belief gaps that education would be. The study found that ideology was a stronger predictor than education level for the acquisition of belief in evidence of the climate warming, and that self-identified ideology was the best predictor of belief in existence global warming (Hindman, 2009). Further, when heavy media coverage is factored in, beliefs about global warming became more polarized between liberal and conservative ideologies, widening the gap in belief of global warming as an issue (Hindman, 2009).

Hindman would continue this research a few years later with a different issue, that of health care reform in the United States. With this study, Hindman found that beliefs about knowledge accumulated over time when political ideology was a factor, instead of actual knowledge, and in direction that served partisan interest, which could result in an effective loss of actual knowledge (Hindman, 2012). Additionally, the results led to the

conclusion that status based knowledge gaps can narrow under social conflict as social group identification gaps widen (Hindman, 2012). Finally, Veenstra, Hossain, and Lyons investigated whether partisan media and surrounding discussion could directly lead to enhancement of the belief gap (Veenstra et. al., 2014). Though limited by being based on responses to a single survey instead of measurements over time, Veenstra et. al. found that usage of partisan, traditional media outlets was a significant predictor in belief gap enhancement of politically charged issues (Veenstra et. al., 2014).

Motivated Reasoning and Motivated Misperception

It was in 1974 that Erdelyi proposed a "new look" into the existing theory of perception, the central point of this new idea being that personal selectivity is central to all steps of perceptual cognition; in other words, we do not just accept reality as the information we receive, but instead have various internalized measures to choose the meaning of that information (Erdelyi, 1974). Kundu codified this later as "motivated reasoning," suggesting that a person tends to be more interested in biased cognitive processing that leads him or her to a desired conclusion, and to further construct justifications for that reasoning if necessary (Kundu, 1990). When using this theory to evaluate survey respondents, Nir found that increase in partisanship prompted motivation to directionally perceive greater support for a respondent's self-identified political group, while those subjects classified as more rational were concerned with a motivation towards accuracy of conclusion (Nir, 2011). This leads to a theory subsequent to motivated reasoning, that of motivated misperception.

One of the first precursors to the establishment of both motivated reasoning and motivated misperception was a study in which subjects were provided with a fictional story of a realistic event, a positive or negative behavioral case study of a rescue professional. Some of the subjects had to then write a descriptive reasoning for the behavioral relationship portrayed in the case study; afterwards, it was revealed that the entirety of the case was fiction. Subjects were then assessed on their personal beliefs regarding the behaviors portrayed in their case, and evidence was found suggesting that subjects seemed to want to hold to belief despite evidence to the contrary, and that initial beliefs may persist despite weak evidence (Anderson, 1980). This phenomenon of willful acceptance of misinformation was at last held up for prominent attention in recent years when researchers found that many people were misinformed in their beliefs about welfare whether positive or negative, while still being confident that they were correct, thus becoming resistant to corrective measures (Kuklinski, Quirk, Jerit, Schwieder & Rich, 2000).

Thus brings us to motivated misperception. Identifying what appeared to be a regular effort by Republican-centric media to promote the idea that health care reform would lead to the creation of medical care review boards called "death panels," Meirick used the existing theories supporting motivated reasoning along with Pew Research Center data to investigate whether the previously determined processing biases, when paired with partisan media influence, could lead subjects to determine that these "death panels" would actually be a part of the health care reform being suggested (Meirick, 2012). Meirick found evidence of the motivated reasoning phenomenon occurring, and

that those who self-identified as Republicans and had exposure to partisan media

promoting the misperception were more likely to hold them as true (Meirick, 2012).

Further, education had a complex effect in the results; while it inhibited misperceptions

as a main effect, it could also promote them as an interaction, particularly among

Republican respondents (Meirick, 2012). This final conclusion, reinforcement of

misinformation despite contrary knowledge, is not wholly unprecedented in the literature,

either, as "backfire effects" have been seen as a result of a contrarian reaction to evidence

in opposition of a misbelief, prompting a subject to increase his or her belief in the

misperception (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Cook, Ecker, & Lewandowsky, 2015).

Even setting aside willful or subconscious misbelief, there's still plenty of recent

scholarship suggesting a connection between partisan adoption and misinformation

regarding related social issues. Since the beginning of the millennium, many researchers

have concluded that partisan loyalties blind members to their ideologies' interference

with reason, even while maintaining those of differing ideologies must surely be affected

in such a way (Cohen, 2003; Kull, 2003). Once again supporting the conclusions of

Meirick (Meirick, 2012), Nyhan & Reifler (Nyhan & Refler, 2010), and Cook et. al

(Cook et. al., 2015), Gaines, Kuklinski, Quirk, Peyton, and Verkuilen determined partisan

respondents used factual beliefs as points of interpretation to rationalize existing opinions

(Gaines et. al., 2007). In effect, this social and political research environment cultivated

into the direct precursors to this study.

Hypothesis

The theory explored by this research is that partisan-motivated optimism can blind self-described members of a partisan group to observable evidence that contradicts their belief, in the specific case of this study, the belief that candidate Mitt Romney would defeat Barack Obama in the 2012 U.S. presidential race despite evidence to the contrary. Specifically, the following hypotheses will be explored, along with one research question:

H1: Independent of the model's conditional links, higher levels of education will be significantly associated with lower levels of Republican victory expectation.

H2: Conservative ideology's direct relationship with Republican victory expectation will be a function of education.

H3: Conservative ideology's indirect effect on Republican victory expectation based on attention to conservative media will be a function of education level.

Research Question: Do the results differ when the model is applied to predicting general political knowledge?

METHOD

Data

To examine the hypotheses and research question specified, the investigation

drew upon data from the ANES 2012 Time Series Study (American National Election

Studies, 2012). The full ANES dataset included results of face-to-face and Web-based

interviews conducted 5,914 randomly selected U.S. eligible voters from September 2012

through January 2013 with. The panel interviews were conducted in two waves, one

before the November 2012 election, and the other after the election.

Only a subset of respondents provided valid answers to all questions needed to

test the specified hypotheses. Specifically, 4,943 complete responses were available for

analysis after listwise deletion of missing or invalid cases.

Dependent/Outcome Variables

Expectation of a Republican presidential victory. This variable, one of two

variables specified as dependent/outcome variables, represented a dichotomous recode of

a pre-election wave question asking respondents, "Who do you think will be elected

president in November?" (American National Election Studies, 2015, p. 355).

Respondents could choose the Democratic or Republican nominee by name, a

respondent-specified "Other," or "Don't know." Respondents who declined to answer

were coded as "Refused." With predictions of a Democratic win coded as zero,

predictions of a Republican win coded as 1, and all other responses omitted from the

analysis, 68% of respondents foresaw a Democratic win, while 32% predicted a

Republican win.

General political knowledge. The other variable specified as a dependent/outcome variable, this one operationalized "general political knowledge" by awarding one point per correct answer to questions about:

1. Whether the U.S. federal budget deficit had increased since the 1990s.

2. The length of one full term of office for a U.S. Senator

3. The purpose of the Medicare program, and

4. Which of a series of U.S. federal budget items received the least funding: foreign aid, Medicare, national defense, or Social Security.

Calculated as indicated, the measure ranged from zero to four and averaged 2.3 with a standard deviation of 1.1.

Independent / Mediator / Moderator Variables

Conservative ideology. Treated as the model's independent variable, conservative political ideology was measured with a single question asking respondents to classify their political ideology on a seven-item scale ranging from "1. Extremely liberal" to "7. Extremely conservative." Respondents who said they hadn't thought much about the classification, who didn't know, or who declined to answer were excluded from the analysis. The resulting 1-7 measure averaged 4.2, with a standard deviation of 1.5.

Education. Positioned as the model's moderator variable, education was measured in 16 levels ranging from "Less than first grade" to "Doctorate degree." With refusals and "Other" responses coded as missing, the measure averaged 10.6 (between "some college, but no degree" and "associate degree in college-occupational/vocational program") with a standard deviation of 2.5.

Conservative media use. "Conservative media use" is a challenging concept both to conceptualize and to operationalize. "Conservative," "mainstream" and "liberal," as applied to media outlets, are not objective terms. Furthermore, any such measure probably should differentiate between a respondent who uses media from across the political spectrum and a respondent who mainly uses media from only one range of the spectrum. This study constructed an index of conservative media use by awarding one point for indicating usage, to any degree, of a media outlet deemed "conservative" and subtracting a point for indicating usage, to any degree, of a media outlet deemed otherwise. The "to any degree" aspect of the approach was dictated by the available data; respondents were asked only to indicate outlets that they attended to "regularly." No degrees of usage were requested. Outlets were coded as "conservative" or otherwise based on their branding, content, or both. Specifically, outlets coded as "conservative" were: Fox Report, O'Reilly Factor, Fox News (foxnews.com), Hannity, The Rush Limbaugh Show, On the Record with Greta Van Susteren, Huckabee, The Sean Hannity Show, Special Report with Bret Baier, The Five, Glenn Beck Program, Drudge Report (drudgereport.com), America's Newsroom, The Mark Levin Show, The Laura Ingraham Show, The Savage Nation (Michael Savage), and The Neal Boortz Show. Outlets coded otherwise were: Huffington Post, Chris Matthews, MSNBC, *The New York Times* (all platforms), The Ed Schultz Show, and *The Washington Post* (all platforms). To assist interpretation, the resulting index was adjusted upward, so that its minimum value was zero, and all other values were positive. It ranged from zero to 23, with an average of 8.5 and a standard deviation of 2.3.

Procedures

The analysis employed the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2012) to test the

paths of interest in the model described. In particular, the analysis specified Model 8,

with two different models specified, each identical with the exception of its outcome

variable (Y), which was either the dichotomous variable measuring expectation of a

Republican presidential victory or the index of general political knowledge. Conservative

ideology was positioned as the independent variable (X), conservative media use as a

mediator (M), and education as a moderator (W) of both the direct link between

conservative ideology and belief / knowledge and of the indirect link between

conservative ideology and belief / knowledge through conservative media use. The

number of bootstrapping iterations was set at 5,000. All data are cross-sectional and were

collected without the benefit of any sort of experimental design. Accordingly, any use of

terms like "effect" or "result" are meant to suggest theoretical relationships rather than

empirically verified causal associations or directions.

RESULTS

Figure 1 depicts the results of applying the specified conditional process model to expectation of a Republican presidential victory. Education's direct link with belief (W → Y) was found to be significantly negative, supporting H1's assertion that, overall, higher levels of education would be associated with lower expectation of a Republican victory. Also, education's conditional direct effect on the link between conservative ideology and belief (XW → Y) was positive and significant. An examination of the conditional direct effects for the linkage shown in Figure 1 indicated that the positive relationship between conservative ideology and expectation of a Republican victory tended to gain intensity as educational level increased. The findings supported H2's assertion that conservative ideology's direct relationship with expectation of a Republican victory would be a function of education.

Additionally, the figure shows that education significantly moderated the conditional indirect effect of conservative ideology on Republican victory expectation through conservative media use (XW → M → Y). The conditional indirect effect sizes summarized in Figure 1 indicate that the positive link between conservative ideology and expectation as mediated by conservative media use tended toward increased intensity at higher levels of education. The findings supported H3's assertion that conservative ideology's indirect effect on expectation of a Republican victory – specifically, an effect mediated by attention to conservative media – would depend at least partly on education level.

Meanwhile, Figure 2 suggests a generally affirmative answer to the research question asking whether the model would differ when applied to predicting a general measure of political knowledge. First, education's direct role in the model turned positive, predicting higher levels of general political knowledge where, before, rising education had predicted lower expectation that the Republican presidential candidate would win. In another difference, conservative ideology's education-moderated relationship with general political knowledge manifested as significantly negative, with an effect that diminished to non-significance as education level increased. In other words, political conservatives exhibited less general political knowledge compared to respondents elsewhere on the political spectrum, but the effect was most pronounced among lesser-educated conservatives and non-significant at the highest levels of education.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The current political climate of the 2016 United States Presidential election and the partial dissolution of the traditionally binary partisan lines further opens opportunities for future study, as media reporting on candidate controversies may have created a more polarized environment than has existed in decades. Additionally, there is great opportunity to examine voter knowledge, and response to misinformation is unprecedented as some candidate promises being made are not actually within the scope of the executive branch. Ultimately, it seems that while this model has shown itself to be sound, the next step will be to begin future media effect studies with it in mind, instead of relying solely on post-hoc data analysis.

Additionally, the results of this study suggest that some kind of fusion between the knowledge gap hypothesis and the motivated reasoning perspective is in order. The findings suggest that education, an indicator of socioeconomic status, contributes significantly to political knowledge in a fashion consistent with what the knowledge gap hypothesis would predict. Simultaneously, though, the findings suggest that education's contributions can occur in combination with political ideology and even partisan media use in ways consistent with the motivated reasoning perspective.

The belief gap work by Hindman (Hindman 2009, 2012) represents a positive step toward this fusion. But Hindman's modeling assumes, without explaining why, that ideology and education relate to belief as independent, competing predictors, and that belief variance explained by one cannot be even partly explained by the other. Furthermore, Hindman's conceptualizations of the differences between knowledge, belief

and political ideology aren't always clear. It doesn't come as much of a surprise, for example, that political conservatives doubt the reality of human-induced climate change regardless of their education levels. Such doubts are among the attitudes by which political conservatives identify one another and by which they are identified by others. Hindman's 2012 study addressed this conceptual issue by distinguishing between belief that one's family and the country would be better off with the passage of health care reform and knowledge of details indisputably contained in a health care reform bill being proposed at the time of the study. Ideology significantly predicted both, while education significantly predicted neither. But the regression-based modeling remained blind to a possible interaction between ideology and education and did not consider possible multicollinearity effects resulting from including both in the model simultaneously.

By contrast, this study conceptualized belief more clearly, as a potentially ideology-influenced prediction about the 2012 presidential race's outcome, a prediction that later could be compared to objectively verifiable fact. Despite Nir and Meirick's refinements, Kunda's motivated reasoning theory is foundational to this enterprise, as education's intensifying impact further implies the attention of the reasoning process to perception (Kunda, 1990; Nir, 2011; Meirick, 2012), Furthermore, by modeling education as a moderator of ideology's link to belief – and by adding attention to partisan news as a mediator – this study allowed for a more nuanced look at multiple paths through which education might influence belief.

Perhaps the study's most significant contribution to a theoretical understanding of how members of the public acquire accurate political information is its finding that

education can either enhance or hinder that acquisition, depending on ideology and media habits. It appears education generally can help one acquire accurate political information regardless of one's ideology, and regardless of whether the information is primarily neutral or comparably politicized. But if one has partisan tendencies and a penchant for attending to media that are consonant with those tendencies to the point of promoting inaccurate information, education may make one more likely to access, absorb and retain misinformation from those sources.

The study's limitations include its exclusion of factors besides education and attention to partisan media that might be comparably important in mediating or moderating the link between ideology and political knowledge. Additionally, the study's reliance on a cross-sectional dataset precludes investigation of a key process in knowledge gap theory: the gap's predicted widening over time. Future research should consider more potential moderators and mediators, including population variables like gender that appear significant in the development of knowledge gaps (Mondak, 2004). Future research also should attempt to model what happens to the processes modeled here as time passes.

These limitations notwithstanding, the findings presented here offer important insights into how the acquisition of political knowledge varies across levels of political ideology, education and attention to partisan media. Further considering the 2016 presidential race reveals that future opportunity exists in explorations of race and gender as possible outcome variables, over rights issues such as late-term abortion and immigration. Additionally, while the pre-existing data has lent itself to the analysis of

traditionally conservative issues in both this and previous study, there are similar misperceptions along the ideologically liberal spectrum that bear investigation, such as myths regarding vaccination opposition, risks of safety regarding genetically modified organisms (GMOs), and chemical trails believed to be caused by air travel. Finally, there may be unexplored avenue in the application of cognitive dissonance theory and how it interacts to lead to the acceptance and response to these misperceptions, if at all.

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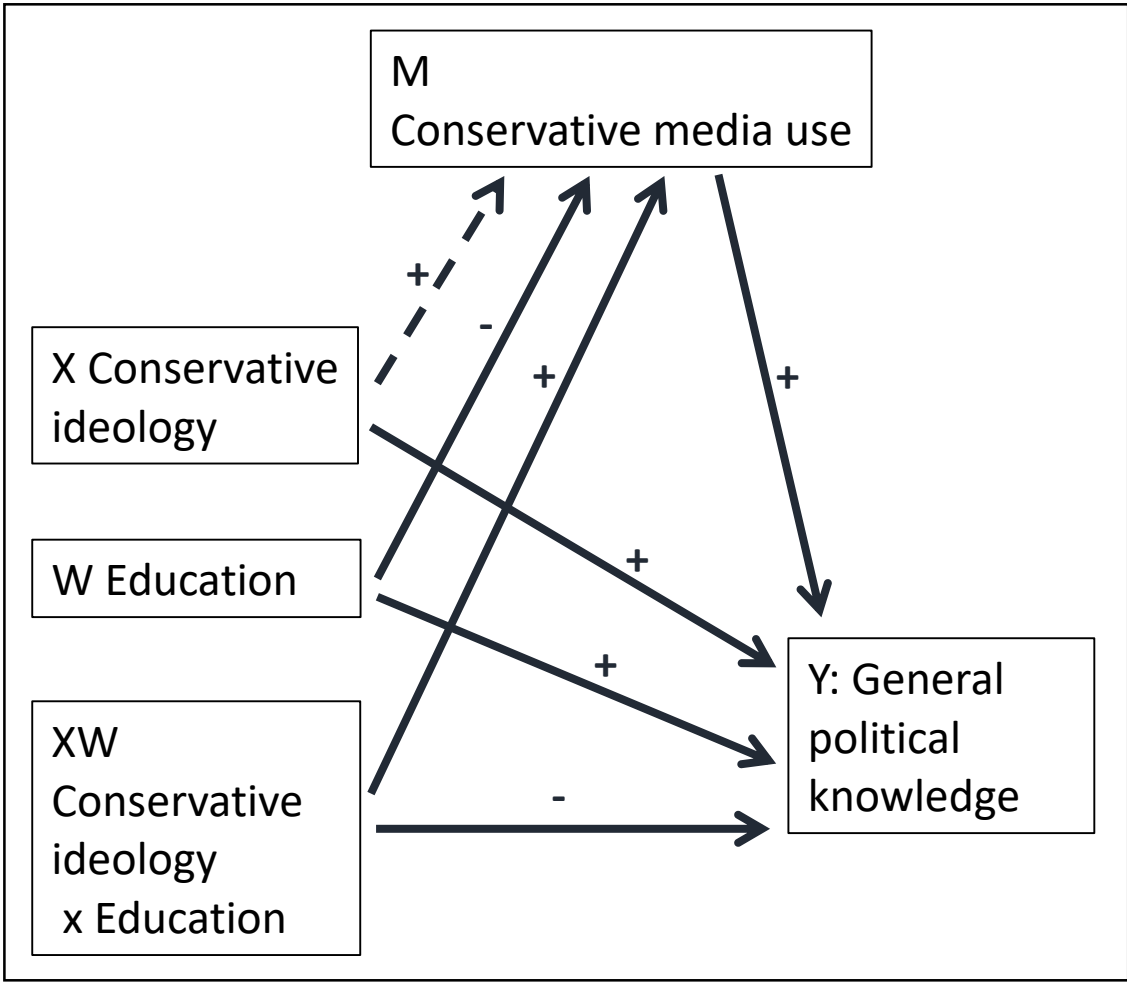
APPENDIX

APPENDIX A: Figures
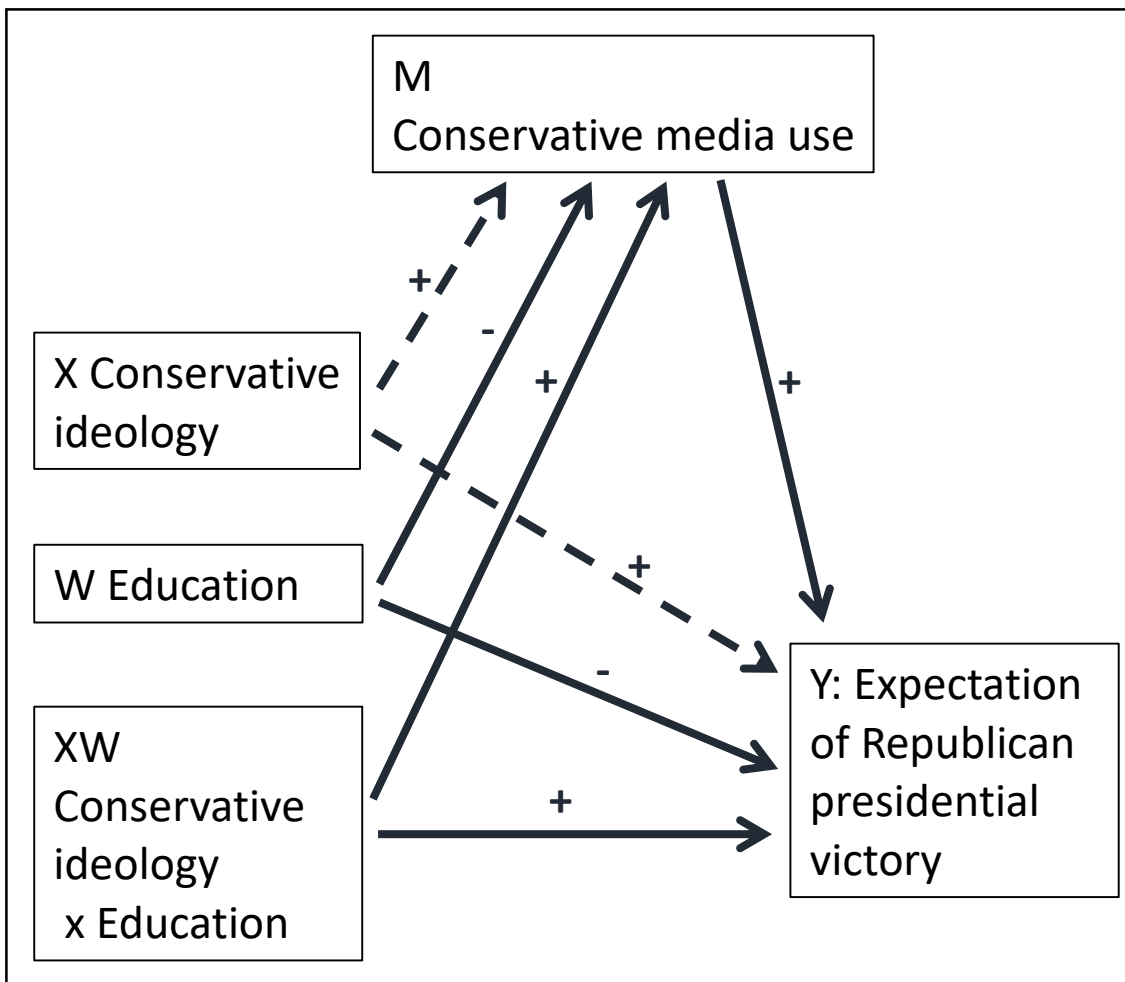
Note: Solid lines indicate significant coefficients (p < .05).

Type	25th Percentile	50th Percentile	75th Percentile
Direct	.624*	.688*	.879*
Indirect	.206*	.225*	.281*

Figure 1. Process model of expectation of a Republican presidential victory in 2012.

Note: Solid lines indicate significant coefficients (p < .05).

Type	25th Percentile	50th Percentile	75th Percentile
Direct	.040*	.028*	-0.009
Indirect	.028*	.030*	.038*

Figure 2. Process model of general political knowledge.