

USING PROCESS MODELING TO EXPLORE THE ROLES OF IDEOLOGY,
EDUCATION AND PARTISAN MEDIA USE IN THE BELIEF IN 'DEATH PANELS'

by

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ABSTRACT

As late as March of 2014, nearly one in three Americans still believed the Affordable Care Act would create "death panels" empowered to designate individuals as too ill or elderly to qualify for health care, a myth promoted in 2009 by one-time Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin. Building on previous research, this study tested how well belief in "death panels" could be predicted by a process model including measures of political ideology, education, and attention to Fox News. In keeping with previous research, the results suggested education tended to reduce misperception, especially among less conservative individuals, and that attention to Fox News positively mediated the positive relationship between conservative ideology and misperception. But inconsistent with previous research, the analysis found no evidence that education moderated this mediation. Theoretical implications are discussed, along with suggestions for future research.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

From the economy and the war in Iraq to immigration and same-sex marriage, the 2008 presidential election brought a wide range of partisan-divided issues to the forefront of voters' minds. Following the Iraq War, health care was once again a major topic of discussion, with Barack Obama, then an Illinois senator, leading the charge and calling for reform. Not since the 1992 Clinton and Bush presidential race had health care reached this level of attention.

Soon after his inauguration, President Obama placed America's healthcare system at the top of his priority list, offering a comprehensive proposal, which eventually led to the Affordable Care Act (ACA) bill, or what became known as "Obama Care." In his address to the Joint Session of Congress on February 24th, 2009, President Obama presented his economic agenda, stating, "It includes a historic commitment to comprehensive health care reform – a down-payment on the principle that we must have quality, affordable health care for every American. It's a commitment that's paid for in part by efficiencies in our system that are long overdue." However, the process was anything but smooth. According to a Pew Research Center survey, Republicans' views appeared to shift after the election, as only 27% said that providing health insurance to the uninsured should be a top priority in 2008, down 17 points from January 2007. Meanwhile, more than twice as many Democrats (65%) and Independents (58%) still viewed universal health care as a major policy goal (2008).

The original draft of the Affordable Care Act bill included a proposal to reimburse doctors for talking to their Medicare patients about “advance directives,” or legal documents that allowed patients to declare decisions about end-of-life care if they were to become too ill or too hurt to express their wishes (Millman, 2014). This legislation sought to fill in the gaps found from a 2003 report conducted by the federal Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, which found that more than half of severely or terminally ill patients didn’t include instructions for care if they became incapacitated. Additionally, only 12% of patients with an advance directive had received input from their physicians during the development of the document (Kass-Bartelmes & Hughes, 2003).

As the Obama administration attempted to promote policy intended to make end-of-life care more consistent with patients’ preferences, former Alaska Governor, Sarah Palin, targeted the proposal on Facebook, presenting the provision as a “death panel.” The Facebook post by Palin, on August 7, 2009 stated,

... And who will suffer the most when they ration care? The sick, the elderly, and the disabled, of course. The America I know and love is not one in which my parents or my baby with Down Syndrome will have to stand in front of Obama’s ‘death panel’ so his bureaucrats can decide, based on a subjective judgment of their ‘level of productivity in society,’ whether they are worthy of health care. Such a system is downright evil.

At a town hall meeting in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, President Obama addressed Palin’s comments as misrepresentations. Obama presented the true intention of

the provision, which was to help patients prepare for end-of-life care on their own terms, putting the power in the hands of the individual not the government (Tapper & Miller, 2009). Although the “death panel” claims were repeatedly found incorrect by *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and many other mainstream media and policy experts across the political spectrum, a Pew Research Center for the People and the Press survey found that 30% of Americans maintained that they believed it to be true (2009). According to an ongoing Kaiser Health Tracking Poll, the belief in “death panels” continues to persist, with approximately 34% of Americans still believing in the myth as late as March of 2014 (The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2014).

Despite the verified inaccuracies of Palin’s claim, her comments became the provision’s deathblow, which was ultimately removed from the legislation before the passage of the ACA. The Pew survey also found that misperception was more pronounced among Republicans, with nearly half of Republicans saying it was true that the legislation would create “death panels,” while 30% said it was not true. By contrast, only 20% of Democrats and 28% of Independents believed the claim to be true, while 64% of Democrats and 51% of Independents said it was false (2009). While both parties are responsible for presenting misleading claims, opponents of the health care reform appear to have been more successful in creating misperceptions and distorting beliefs held by members of the public. As Patrick Meirick (2012) points out in his research of the death panel misperception, these results are not surprising, as political parties “are prone to misperceptions of the other party because party serving misperceptions serve their directional processing goals” (p.40). Most of the time, these directional processing

goals trump an individual's accuracy. In addition, an individual's motivated reasoning and selective exposure further encourages biased processing of information he or she is confronted with.

Previous research around selective exposure and motivated reasoning tends to illustrate interactions between news media and an individual's values. Similarly, research around knowledge and belief gap theories focus on interactions between socioeconomic or ideological variables and news media. As communication technologies have rapidly developed, viewers are now presented with more news media choices than ever before. While the mass media are partly to blame for misinformation, the increase in media choices has further reinforced partisan divide and ideological biases (Tewksbury, 2005). Based on a reexamination of Meirick's (2012) research on individuals holding mistaken beliefs about the presence of "death panel" provisions in the Affordable Care Act, this study tests the applicability of a process model (Hayes, 2013) developed in earlier research (Blake & Chen, 2012; Donaway, 2014) depicting the roles of education and partisan media in predicating erroneous belief that the legislation contained language authorizing "death panels."

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Affordable Care Act

The issue of health care reform is nothing new to American public policy, dating all the way back to Theodore Roosevelt's administration. However, each time, the debate becomes more fragmented and centered on non-policies. Each party takes to the offense, defining and attacking the other side before defining themselves (Morone, 1995). In the case of the Clinton health care plan, this form of attack worked for the Republicans as support for the policy rapidly fell in a matter of months. The disorganization of American politics and the political process itself doomed the reform, not a strategic failure (Morone, 1995).

Following the Clinton health care plan, the Affordable Care Act of 2010 was the next national effort to extend near-universal insurance coverage to the nonelderly population, and thereby provide affordable medical care as a matter of entitlement to nearly all American citizens (Jacobs, 2011). Despite the seemingly sensible goals of the health care reform, the ACA was the subject of intense political controversy from the beginning. While Democrats and liberal lawmakers fought for the passage of the new legislation, many Republicans and conservative representatives argued the reform was unnecessary and unconstitutional, attempting to veto the bill for months. The battle only grew stronger after the passage and initial implementation of the ACA, giving way to a dispute of values, interests and partisan struggles for power (Jacobs, 2011). The political

trajectory of the legislation has led to a number of effects, including the polarization of interests.

For four years, both political parties used reform provisions to engage in a partisan struggle around the ACA. Focusing on proposed changes to the Medicare program, Republicans stimulated seniors' political interests, and attempted to fill in information gaps based on the party's political agenda, claiming the ACA law would deplete the program (Gitterman & Scott, 2011). Meanwhile, President Obama and Democrats reassured the public that the legislation was and would continue to be successful. In June 2015, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' website upheld the position that the ACA was working, highlighting its reduction of uninsured Americans by about 10 million and the inclusion of 11.7 million more who had re-enrolled in plans, as of February 2015. Not surprisingly, this hostile political rhetoric has created a number of persistent myths about the ACA. From conservative radio talk show host, Rush Limbaugh's claims of forced abortions and contraceptive use to Republican Representative Michelle Bachman's assertions of higher taxes and premiums, Obama Care myths not only generate a variety of opinions, but more dangerously, a range of misperceptions. These misperceptions are then further perpetuated by certain news media and embedded into mass discourse through selective exposure and motivated reasoning.

Political Knowledge and Misperception

Through the creation and signing of the Constitution of the United States, the government pledged to guarantee representation to the citizens of America. Today, the

idea of a democratic government vested in the people still remains among the most fundamental aspects of American culture. In order to maintain such a form of government, however, the public must be knowledgeable and informed. More importantly, the public must actively exercise that knowledge quickly and responsibly through political participation.

A key indicator of political engagement is how knowledgeable people are about current issues, as well as political institutions and officeholders (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). According to a 2014 Pew Research Center for the People and the Press telephone survey, only 40% of Americans could “correctly identify the partisan balance in both the House of Representatives and the Senate (that Republicans have the majority in the former and Democrats in the latter).” Of the remaining 60%, about a third answered only one of the facts correctly, while 28% knew neither (Pew Study, 2014). Evidence that the general public tends to be ill informed and unsophisticated about politics is hardly new (e.g., Converse, 1964). This study, however, focuses on processes that underlie a particular type of political ignorance: misperceptions that arise out of ideologically driven disputes over facts and evidence. Relevant research on such misperceptions appears in many areas of media-related literature, especially the areas of persuasion, selective exposure, motivated reasoning, and knowledge and belief gaps.

Persuasion

When processing communication materials, especially materials that are explicitly or implicitly persuasive, an individual relies on a number of factors, including predispositions. The cognitive response theory’s approach to explaining the transmission

of persuasive messages from sender to receiver focuses primarily on an individual's biases (Greenwald, 1968). It assumes that even when an individual is presented with new communication or information, he or she will use existing information and attitudes toward the subject at hand to determine the extent of influence (Petty, Brinol, & Priester, 2009). These prior biases toward the message, whether positive or negative, will determine the amount of influence and persuasion the message has on the intended subject. This cognitive response is fundamental to persuasion and affects how an individual might evaluate a message that includes inaccurate information.

While cognitive response theorists emphasize individuals' existing information and attitudes toward a topic at hand, Petty and Cacioppo's (1986) Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) considers an individual's ability and motivation to process a particular message. While McCombs and Poindexter (1983) found that most people accept a civic obligation to attend to public affairs news, they also tend to be cognitive misers, who look for more efficient strategies when processing messages, due to their limited ability and motivation to carefully scrutinize all information they receive. Under certain conditions, individuals do not pay close attention to a messages' persuasive arguments, but are rather swayed by simple cues and surface-level characteristics, such as the positive or negative feelings that are evoked by the message or the speaker, the perceived trustworthiness of the sources, or the number of arguments presented (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Once again, an individual's predispositions outweigh the reliability of a message. Even if an individual has the time to analyze a communication, his or her willingness to seek out new or incongruent information will undermine ability. While the majority of

news outlets attempt to combat false claims, such as Palin's "death panel" comments, media biases, or selective exposure, further intensify misinformation in certain segments of the public.

Selective Exposure

Advances in technology and the addition of new media, most notably cable television and the Internet, have complicated the process by dramatically increasing the options and preferences that consumers can specify when deciding what information they will receive, when, and how. While an increase in choices is not fundamentally bad, Tewksbury (2003) argues that the growth of online news consumption has major implications on the "long-term health of democratic nations" (p.694). Online news users are more likely to pursue their own interests, and in turn, less likely to consume national and international news. As readers use different sites to access information, they are also increasingly less likely to consume a "common diet of news," leaving them uninformed about public affairs (Tewksbury, 2003).

This narrowing consumption of individualized interests and needs has also produced fragmented audiences. Now, consumers not only seek out a variety of news sources, but sources that align with their ideological perspectives. Iyengar and Hahn's (2009) study suggests a strong relationship between news media and greater polarization of news audiences, especially between Fox News and conservatives. Conservatives were strongly committed to the Fox brand not only when it came to highly publicized issues, but, surprisingly, even when the subject matter contained "soft news" not associated with partisan division. In addition, as an individual's political lean increased, so did the

individual's media preference. When it came to stories, specifically concerning politics, the more interested conservatives avoided CNN, while the more interested liberals preferred CNN (Iyengar and Hahn, 2009). Similarly, a 2012 Pew Research Center for the People and the Press analysis found viewers of Fox News' broadcasts to slant more ideologically conservative than the viewership of any other news source, with 60% of its Fox viewers self-identifying as conservatives, and 23% identifying as moderates. Viewers of Fox's competitors, on the other hand, showed a far more evenly mixed viewership, with around 30% each describing themselves as conservative, moderate or liberal (Pew Study, 2012). Consistent conservatives continue to show a strong commitment to the Fox brand and remain tightly clustered around Fox News, with 47% citing it as their main source for news about government and politics (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2014).

As public opinion and politics have become more polarized, news programming has found a market for slanted and biased news, catering to specific segments of the public rather than the masses, through targeted political messaging. Media mogul, Rupert Murdoch, launched the right-leaning Fox News Network in 1996. Finding its niche in the media marketplace, Fox News branded conservative programming and created an inseparable relationship with the Republican Party and "traditional values." Despite its website's claim of being, "fair and balanced," previous studies have demonstrated that Fox News trends toward opinionated and one-sided commentary (Potter, 2006). Through an examination of 269 cable news transcripts that discussed climate change or global warming from 2007-2008, results indicated that the tone of

coverage varied significantly across networks (Feldman, Maibach, Roser-Fenouf, & Leiserowitz, 2012). Feldman et al. found that Fox News took a more dismissive tone towards global warming than did CNN and MSNBC. Less than 20% of Fox's broadcasts were accepting of climate change compared to more than 70% on CNN and MSNBC. In addition, Fox broadcasts were much more likely to feature a higher ratio of climate change doubters to believers as interview subjects. Despite the scientific community's overall agreement about the reality of, and human involvement in, global climate change, Feldman et al. provide strong evidence that watching different forms of cable news is associated with divergent views on this issue. The more often people watched Fox News, the less accepting they were of climate change and global warming (2012).

Aday, Cluveris and Livingston's (2005) content analyses also revealed that since the terrorist attacks on September 11th, Fox News' war coverage maintained more favorable treatment of the Bush administration and the president's agenda than any other news network. Likewise, a 2012 Pew Research Center for the People and the Press analysis found that Fox News had been notably harsh in its coverage of Barack Obama during the 2012 political campaign. Almost half of Fox's coverage of Obama was negatively positioned, while only 6% had a positive tone. However, this time, Fox News was not the only outlet exhibiting bias. MSNBC's coverage and tone also appeared uneven, with over 70% of Romney's coverage having a negative tone compared to only 3% with a positive slant (Pew Study, 2012). Selective exposure to Fox's biased content also appears to have created a biased audience. Lin's (2009) study's results indicated that a viewer of Fox News programming expressed significantly stronger support for the Iraq

war compared to those who watched CNBC news. Interestingly, CNBC spent as much of its newscast covering the war as its competitors, yet, Lin attributed the lower level of support for the war to CNBC's neutral tone and thoroughness in covering financial and economic news, which helped to convey a more balanced coverage of the war (2009).

An individual's primary news source was also a powerful predictor of belief in the misperception that Iraq was concealing weapons of mass destruction (Kull, Ramsey, & Lewis, 2003). When it came to the topics of weapons of mass destruction, Kull et al. found that Fox viewers had more misperceptions than did viewers of any other news source. When asked whether the United States had found Iraqi weapons of mass destruction since the war had ended, 33% of Fox viewers mistakenly thought this had happened, the highest level of misperception among the audiences compared (2003).

While the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics encourages journalists to maintain a "watchdog" role over public affairs and the government, the media has long been filled with bias. Whether purposefully or inadvertently, facts and information become distorted as media outlets report on issues using skewed portrayals and subjective framing techniques (Entman, 1993). Frames can trigger departures from rational choice, leading opinions in inaccurate directions (Sharpiro & Bloch-Elkon, 2008). Due to the instability of the social world, the political sphere also incorporates similar methods, categorizations and classification schemes, as a method of persuasion. The use of categories is a powerful tool to help shape political beliefs, fears, likes and

dislikes. Simply describing warfare as a “crusade” or “aggression” can evoke two entirely different emotions and influence political support or opposition (Edelman, 1993).

Motivated Reasoning

Another key factor in the distribution of misinformation may be “motivated reasoning,” or the tendency of partisans to seek consistent information and then purposely process it in a way to reach support for their original opinions (Kunda, 1990). Past research has revealed that motivation clearly plays an important role in the cognitive and decision making processes. While individuals desire to hold correct attitudes, they are also motivated to make self-serving decisions. When it comes to accessing, constructing or evaluating communication, there is considerable evidence that people are motivated to seek out information that provides support for pre-existing attitudes and beliefs. This motivation affects people’s ability to reason, encouraging them to rely on a biased set of cognition processes and search their memory for beliefs that support their desired conclusion (Kunda, 1990). For instance, Kunda argues that as beliefs about climate change become increasingly associated with partisan identity, individuals become more motivated to interpret information that reinforces their political views, whether factually correct or not (1990). As our society becomes increasingly polarized, motivated reasoning interacts with identity cues and opinion polarization about highly publicized subject matters become even more amplified.

Meirick (2012), using motivated reasoning to explain likelihood of believing the myth that the Affordable Care Act included “death panels,” found that education and media preferences play complex roles in the link between being Republican and believing

the myth. Use of “radio news” increased belief in the myth among Republicans, while newspaper use decreased it among non-Republicans. Surprisingly for Meirick, though, attention to Fox News appeared to “mainstream” belief in the myth by encouraging it regardless of party affiliation. Also surprising for Meirick, education generally tended to discourage belief in the myth but encourage it in an interaction with Fox News use.

Hart and Nisbet (2012) also demonstrate the importance of motivated reasoning in the interpretation of messages focusing on the support for climate mitigation policies. While past research had assumed that the more information about a scientific topic an individual consumes, the more likely the individual’s opinion would be to move toward the scientific community’s consensus, Hart and Nisbet (2012) found an alternative framework resulting in “boomerang effects” on public opinion and increased political polarization. Their results indicate that not only did message exposure activate motivated reasoning in the participants, but it increased polarization between political partisans in policy support and caused polarization in identification with victims of climate change. Exposure to messages that contained either low or high social distance cues increased support for policy modification among Democrats. Whereas, high social distance cues in messages tended to have a boomerang effect, producing a result opposite of what was intended, on Republicans. Republican participants exposed to high social distance cues showed a decrease in support for climate mitigation policy (Hart & Nisbet, 2012).

Motives for developing and maintaining a political misperception can also include motivations to avoid social isolation (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). An individual who agrees with a prevailing view will have more self-confidence and inclination to express himself

without fear of being isolated by the majority's view. On the other hand, an individual who finds himself in the minority will become more uncertain and less inclined to express opposing opinions openly. This tendency to be silent becomes self-reinforcing, as an opinion will continually be excluded by an increasing tendency to self-censor. This "spiral" widens even further as the prevailing opinion receives more attention throughout the media and mass discourse (Noelle-Neumann, 1974).

In addition to the fear of isolation, group participation, such as political party affiliation, can determine the way an individual does or does not express an opinion. Some critics argue that the opinions distributed within a reference group are better predictors of an individual's willingness to speak out, even more so than the overall public opinion (Scheufele & Moy, 2000). Individuals evaluate themselves based on the value and norms of a reference group, changing their attitudes and behaviors to better socialize within a specific group. Self-interest then becomes self-sacrifice for the good of the group.

Misinformation is nothing new to American politics. Whether it is climate change, health care reform or weapons of mass destruction, past research demonstrates motivated reasoning's ability to promote the spread of misrepresentations. In addition to a misinformed electorate, much literature has also considered the importance of political knowledge gaps and why certain segments of the population are more informed or uninformed.

Knowledge and Belief Gaps

Contemporary economic approaches to political knowledge have focused on the numerous factors of political knowledge and the ways individuals behave and form opinions in the political realm. Similar to an economic market, where consumers make choices and purchase specific products, a political “market” also exists, where citizens choose and vote on issues or political officeholders. While some consumers have the means to consume goods, some citizens also have more access and ability to gain knowledge. The guarantee to have free political expression as an American citizen does not automatically ensure all members of the public the same equal expression of their political needs and desires (Berinsky, 2002).

The knowledge gap hypothesis (Tichenor, Donohue & Olien, 1970) is one way to explain the varying beliefs between segments of the population. This hypothesis relies on several contributing factors, such as an individual’s communication skills and previously stored information, as well as exposure, acceptance and retention of new information. The more education a person has, the more likely it is that he or she had been previously exposed to topics through the media. Equally, the more media exposure an individual has to an issue, the more information and knowledge the individual will have about that topic. Although Tichenor et al. labeled the independent variable as “socioeconomic status,” the research emphasizes education as the main component.

The knowledge gap functions in two distinctive ways, the first being that over time, acquisition of highly publicized issues will proceed at a faster rate for those who have more education than those with less education. Secondly, at a given point in time,

there will be larger information disparities about highly publicized topics than about less publicized topics. Tichenor et al. believe that this widening of the knowledge gap is most apparent with issues regarding the fields of science and public affairs, due to the fact that new information and findings are occurring in the disciplines daily (1970).

Building on the work of Tichenor et al. (1970), Hindman's (2009) belief gap hypothesis re-examined the knowledge gap hypothesis, offering several modifications. The knowledge gap focused on the disproportion of education between the socioeconomic classes of society as the basis for knowledge distribution. Hindman sought to make a distinction between knowledge and beliefs. Whereas knowledge describes the practical understanding of facts and subjects, beliefs are based on opinions rather than factual information. Beliefs are constructed by a number of influences, such as moral systems, reference groups, social institutions, and what Hindman believed to be most persuasive, ideological predispositions (2009).

It is assumed that through agenda setting and framing techniques, those with power within Congress and the mass media, frame issues into specific conservative or liberal packages for audience consumption. Those with power create frames, whether based on facts or beliefs, communicate to a specific audience about what to believe about an issue (Entman, 1993). These issues thus become highly contested and reported on differently, depending on the news outlet. FOX News, for example, tends to lean towards the conservative view of an issue, while MSNBC reports a more liberal viewpoint (Stroud, 2008). Hindman contends, "In an increasingly diverse and fragmented nation, scientific knowledge that is at odds with the interests of powerful groups can be

dismissed as mere beliefs” (2009, p. 793). As the political realm becomes more polarized, the media and social landscapes consequently become more disjointed.

Employing a regression-based methodology, Hindman (2009) found support for his hypothesis. When it came to a highly publicized issue, which thus became highly politically contested, a person’s political ideology was the strongest predictor of “knowledge” about the issue at hand, in the case of Hindman’s study, climate change. The beliefs and opinions a person has about climate change will be influenced most by his or her political ideology and party affiliation, not his or her level of education and prior knowledge. As individuals engage in motivated reasoning, predispositions and ideology appear to be the determining factors in belief formation. In another study, Hindman (2012) focused on the month leading up to the passage of the Affordable Care Act bill. The results not only show a gap between the views of Republican and Democratic participants but, more notably, a significant widening of the gap over time. Hindman’s findings are consistent with the conclusion that media coverage of politically contested issues serve to transmit social identification cues to viewer, and that political ideology may override knowledge that is contrary to those beliefs (2012)

The Roles of Education and Partisan Media Diet

As the above discussion illustrates, the processes by which people acquire and critique political information are complex, and a number of both individual and group factors probably play roles that are not fully understood. One such factor is education. For example, the knowledge gap hypothesis (Tichenor, Donohue & Olien, 1970) considers education, especially in conjunction with affluence, a significant antidote to

ignorance about current events. However, education plays a more qualified role in other explanations of how individuals acquire and critique political knowledge. In the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986), education may become a factor in the ability to process complex information, which is, in turn, only one factor in the likelihood of attitude change. In Hindman's (2009, 2012) work, education's influence on knowledge is undermined by ideology whenever knowledge becomes sufficiently politically contested. Perhaps the most intriguing finding of all for this study, however, is Meirick's (2012) results.

As mentioned earlier, Meirick (2012) focused on the myth, believed by a large minority of Americans that President Obama's health care reform would create "death panels" and deny care to particular segments of the population, primarily those who were considered too old or sick to benefit from medical treatment. Despite the claim's verified inaccuracies, the dataset Meirick analyzed (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2009) showed that 30% of Americans maintained that they believed it to be true. The results of an ongoing Kaiser Health Tracking Poll suggest that the belief in "death panels" persists. In 2010, 30% of Americans 65 and older still believed that the law established government panels to make decisions about end-of-life care for seniors. Similarly, in 2014, 34% of American adults, held strongly to the belief that the law contained a "death panel" provision (The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2014).

Meirick predicted that education would interact with party identification to predict belief in the "death panel" myth. He also predicted that an interaction between party identification and attention to politically partisan media, most notably viewing Fox News,

would predict belief. However, a multiple regression analysis found neither interaction to be significant (2012). Instead, Meirick found that increased education and high exposure to Fox News interacted to significantly increase belief in the “death panel” myth, both in the overall sample and among Republicans in particular, but not among non-Republicans. Attention to Fox News, meanwhile, tended to boost belief significantly among non-Republicans but not among Republicans. This unpredicted finding became the basis for Meirick’s conclusion that watching Fox News tended to “mainstream” belief in the myth.

It is possible, though, that Meirick’s (2012) findings stemmed, at least partly, from the sheer complexity of his modeling, which simultaneously included as many as 17 individual variables and more than a dozen two-way interaction terms in a single regression model. An alternative analytical approach, using a more refined model, could provide clearer, or at least different, insights.

One such approach, introduced by Blake & Chen (November, 2012), used process modeling (Hayes, 2013) to predict belief that Obama was born outside the United States, a belief eventually accepted by most as incorrect after the release of Obama’s long-form birth certificate (Morales, 2011). Based on data from a 2011 Pew Center national survey, the model treated respondent belief as an outcome variable predicted positively by Republican identity through two different routes, one moderated by education and the other mediated by attention to conservative media, including Fox News, and moderated by education. Results suggested that education moderated the positive relationship between Republican identity and belief in the myth, such that although Republicans were more likely to believe the myth than were Democrats, well-educated Republicans were

less likely to believe it than less-educated Republicans. Meanwhile, attention to conservative media mediated the relationship between Republican identity and belief, such that Republicans were more likely than Democrats to attend to conservative media and, in turn, were more likely to believe the myth. Finally, education moderated this mediation, such that the pattern was more apparent among well-educated Republicans than among less-educated Republicans.

A follow-up study by Donaway (2014) tested essentially the same model's ability to predict beliefs, measured in a different Pew Center national poll, that North Korea and Iran posed significant threats to the United States. Both beliefs had become politicized during the 2012 presidential election, prior to collection of the data. The model performed identically, despite using a measure of "belief in Fox News" rather than a more general measure of conservative media diet. Furthermore, applied to the belief that China posed a threat to the United States – a comparably less politicized belief – the model showed no significant education-moderated mediation through Fox News Belief, only the significant tendency of higher education levels to reduce overall belief that China posed a threat.

In short, both studies, using different datasets but the same modeling and analytical approach, produced results more consistent with the outcomes Meirick (2012) expected but did not find. Accordingly, the present study reanalyzed the same dataset Meirick examined but used the approach and model borrowed from the Blake & Chen (2012) and Donaway (2014) studies.

Hypotheses

Based on the above discussion, this study tests a conditional process model in which the relationship between an individual's partisan identity and beliefs about a particular highly politicized issue are mediated by the individual's attention to Fox News, a relationship that is in turn moderated by education level. Two of the model's paths are of particular interest, the first being the education-moderated path leading from Republican identity to attention to Fox News and then to belief in the "death panel" claim. The second path of interest is the education-moderated path leading directly from Republican identity to a belief in "death panels."

Through a reexamination of Meirick's (2012) data and incorporation of Donaway's (2014) analysis, this study hypothesizes that (H1) in the case of a politically contested belief – the inclusion of "death panels" in the Affordable Care Act – being Republican correlates positively with belief through a process mediated by more attention to Fox News and moderated by high levels of education. In addition, the study hypothesizes that (H2) the degree of Republicanism correlates directly and positively with belief in the inclusion of "death panels" through a process that is also moderated by higher education levels.

CHAPTER 3: METHOD

Data

The study drew data from an August 14-17, 2009 telephone poll by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, the same data set used in Meirick's (2012) research. This was a national random-digit-dial telephone survey of United States adults, which included cell phones, as well as landlines. There were 1,003 participants in the survey. In terms of sex, of those who responded, 50.1% were female, and 49.9% were male. The median age category was 55 to 59 years old. In terms of race, 77.9% identified as white or Caucasian, with the rest identifying as some other race or racial combination or choosing not to respond. The data were left unweighted, given that the analysis focused more on relationships within the data than on how well the data represented the broader population.

Dependent/Outcome Variable: Belief in “Death Panels”

The poll examined whether respondents believed that the health care legislation included “death panels.” The poll specifically asked participants, “From what you know, do you think it is true or not true that the health care legislation will create these so-called ‘death panels’?” (Pew Study, 2009).

Following the approach used by Meirick (2012), the analysis dichotomized respondents into those who indicated that they thought the death panel claim was true and those who did not believe the claim to be true, including – again, in keeping with Meirick – those who gave any other answer or who said they “did not know,” or who refused to

answer. The dichotomous recoding assigned a score of 1 to respondents who thought the claim was true and a zero to all others. In the modeling that follows, positive coefficients for paths leading to the dependent variable indicate positive relationships with believing the “death panel” claim to be true. The approach classified 30.5% of 895 non-missing responses as expressing belief in “death panels” and 69.5% giving some other answer, mostly disbelief. In staying consistent with process modeling terminology, this paper occasionally refers to the dependent variable as the “outcome variable,” or the variable modeled as chronologically last in the process’s series of variables.

Independent Variable: Republicanism

The survey asked respondents to identify their political party preferences. Respondents were asked, “In politics, as of today, do you consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat, or an Independent?” and included a probe for leaning toward one party or the other. Respondents could also reply that they did not know, or they could refuse to answer. The analysis recoded the responses into a 5-point scale, with 0 indicating those who had answered “Democrat” with no leaning and 5 indicating those who had answered “Republican” with no leaning. Among those who responded, the measure averaged 1.80 with a standard deviation of 1.60. The measure’s zero point contained 33% of the sample, while 42% occupied one of the middle ranges – 17% at 1, 12% at 2 and 13% at 3 – and 25% at 4.

In staying consistent with the process modeling terminology, the “independent variable,” refers to the variable that is chronologically first in the modeled process’s series of variables.

Mediator and Moderator

Fox News Diet. Given the theoretical importance of selective media exposure discussed above, as well as Fox News' well documented conservative political bias, a media use index was devised to measure how much attention each respondent paid to Fox News, local print and broadcast news, while paying comparably little attention to other sources of national news, such as CNN, MSNBC and nightly network news on CBS, ABC or CBS. The index drew from a series of poll questions asking whether or not respondents got news regularly from each of the following sources: Fox News, CNN, MSNBC, nightly network news, local TV news, newspapers, radio, and the Internet. From a starting point of zero, the index increased by one point each time the respondent indicated he or she regularly got news from Fox, a newspaper, or a local television news broadcast. Newspaper use was significant in Meirick's (2012) modeling and strongly associated with local television news viewing, $X^2(1, N = 1,003) = 24.50, p < .05$, so both measures were included in the index. Additionally, the index increased by one point each time the respondent said he or she did not regularly watch MSNBC, CNN, and a national nightly network news program on CBS, ABC or NBC. The measures of attention to radio news and Internet news were ignored, given that it could not easily be determined what specific news sources respondents had in mind when answering. The resulting index ranged from zero to 6 with a mean of 3.53 and a standard deviation of 1.21. This approach differed from the one used by Meirick (2012), who dummy coded each source individually for the respondent as a regular source of news, or not a regular

source of news, then entered the dummy codes as separate independent variables in his regression analysis.

Education. The analysis measured education using a poll question that asked respondents to place themselves in one of seven ordinal categories ranging from “8th grade or less,” to “Postgraduate Degree, such as Master's, PH.D., MD, JD.” The median fell in the fourth category, “Some college, but no degree.”

Procedure

Following Donaway’s (2014) study, the analysis employed the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013) to test the paths of interest in the model. Specifically, the analysis specified Model 8 to examine the relationship between Republicanism (X) and belief in death panels (Y), as mediated by attention to Fox News (M), and moderated by education (W). The number of bootstrapping iterations was set at 5,000, and plots were used to explore the relationships found.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS, DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Results

The process model depicts the mathematical results and the coefficients produced by an analysis with belief that the Affordable Care Act included “death panels” as the outcome variable (see Appendix A). The analysis produced no evidence that identifying as Republican correlated positively with belief through a process mediated by more attention to Fox News and moderated by high levels of education. Instead, Republicanism’s relationship with belief in “death panels” appeared to be moderated by attention to Fox News regardless of education level. A simple mediation analysis, with belief in “death panels” as the outcome variable, Republicanism as the independent variable, and Fox News Diet as a lone mediator, confirmed that the indirect effect through Fox News Diet was positive, with an effect size of 0.048, and significant, as indicated by a confidence interval wholly above zero (0.012 to 0.086). The findings indicate that respondents higher on Republicanism were more likely to watch Fox News exclusively, a behavior associated with being more likely to believe in “death panels.” Thus, only the mediation aspect of Hypothesis 1 received support, while the moderation aspect of the hypothesis did not.

Hypothesis 2, though, performed better. The analysis found that the interaction between Republican identity and education significantly predicted the belief in the “death panel” claim. Belief was the highest among the most Republican and relatively unaffected by education. However, belief tended not only to weaken as Republicanism

declined, but to weaken faster at lower levels of Republicanism as education increased (see Appendix B for figure that depicts the interaction's pattern by showing the average probability of belief in "death panels" by education at different levels of Republicanism). Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

Meanwhile, education correlated negatively with belief, independently of the Republicanism and education interaction. Partisanship maintained no significant correlation with belief in the "death panel" claim, independently of the model's other components.

Discussion

This study drew on the literature in selective exposure and motivated reasoning, as well as the knowledge and belief gap theories for its framework. The results uncover a complex relationship between education, ideology and attention to Fox News as factors in the public's acceptance of a highly publicized and politically contested issue, like the belief that the Affordable Care Act included "death panels." Overall, education moderated the link between partisan identity and belief in the "death panel" claim. Belief was the highest among the most Republican and was also unaffected by a higher education level. However, belief weakened with the decline in the level of Republicanism, and education simultaneously exerted an increasingly negative effect on belief. These results are comparable to Donoway's (2014) study, which found evidence that education tended to decrease belief in a North Korean threat among all except the most conservative partisans. Independent of education's moderating interaction with partisanship, education correlated negatively with the belief in the inclusion of "death

panels.” Also similar to Donoway’s (2014) results, partisanship maintained no significant correlation with belief in the “death panel” claim, independently of the model’s other factors.

Adding the Fox News Diet, variable into the model also presented interesting interactions. A Fox News Diet positively and significantly correlated with the belief in the “death panel” claim, independently of all other components in the model. Combining all three components of the model simultaneously produces additional relationships with belief. Mainly, education did not moderate partisan media use’s mediation of the relationship between Republicanism and belief in “death panels,” whereas in Donoway’s (2014) model, education’s moderating role in partisan media’s (belief in Fox News) mediation of the partisanship (conservatism) and belief (in North Korean threat) link correlated significantly and positively. Instead, this study’s results show partisan media use’s influence independently of education. Attention to Fox News mediated Republicanism’s relationship with belief in “death panels,” separately from education’s moderating role. Differences in how the partisan media variables were measured could account for these variances in education’s outcomes. The belief that North Korea poses a serious threat to the United States and the belief that the Affordable Care Act includes “death panels” are conceptually different. While the belief in a North Korean threat is a prediction or opinion of what might happen in the future, the Affordable Care Act is a tangible piece of legislation, and the alleged inclusion of “death panels” is verifiably false.

In addition to the distinction between knowledge and belief, the partisan media use component also differs across studies. While exposure to news media is commonly employed throughout literature, the operationalization of the variable has been widely debated. Exposure to news media does not necessarily or accurately define who is receiving news information (Price & Zaller, 1993). When it comes to political campaigns, for example, many effects uncovered through news exposure analyses cannot be specifically attributable to traditional news media, “since respondents most exposed to these specific media were probably also most exposed to debates, candidate advertisements, and other sources of campaign information” (Bartels, 1993, p.276). In addition, self-reports of media exposure can be biased when individuals overestimate their own exposure. Media exposure variables can also produce misleading interactions due an individual’s preexisting attitudes and opinions, especially if media exposure questions are related to specific issues (Bartels, 1993). While Meirick’s (2012) study and the current analysis employed the news source exposure measurement of “attention” to news sources, most notably Fox News, Donoway’s (2014) media use variable focused on the “belief” in Fox News. These different approaches suggest two different interpretations of media usage. In her discussion Donoway explains the limitations of the variable and that belief in Fox News doesn’t necessarily imply attention to the media outlet, but “rather it may be that people believe Fox News based on reputation alone” (2014, p.24).

Although this model worked differently in previous studies, its results support the data on belief in “death panels” Meirick (2012) proposed but was unable to find. Meirick

was unable to detect significant two-way interactions between ideology and education measures, with education amplifying party differences in belief in “death panels,” and between ideology and partisan media measures, with exposure to Fox News viewership amplifying party differences in the belief in “death panels.” This model found significant coefficients for both relationships. While Meirick expected partisan identification and Fox News exposure to interact, triggering Republican viewers to be especially receptive to “death panel” claims made on Fox News, he found no such interaction. Rather, Meirick reasoned that Fox News exposure created a “mainstreaming” effect of beliefs, contributing to the misperception for all Fox News viewers, regardless of party affiliation.

While education did reduce the likelihood of misperception, the interaction of education and party identification as a predictor of misperception was not significant in Meirick’s (2012) study. By contrast, education’s interaction with exposure to Fox News was significantly related to misperception among those with higher education levels, but not those with lower education, suggesting the possibility of a three-way interaction (Republicans), education (high knowledge) and exposure to partisan news media (Fox News). Meirick argued that due to the ability of those with high education to engage in selective exposure, “it makes sense that highly educated people who chose Fox News would be more receptive to a belief in death panels” (2012, 51).

Although Meirick did find interactions between some of the variables, his use of an OLS regression analysis may explain his inability to detect more complex interactions. Using a different modeling approach and fewer variables, this study was able to detect

more intricate relationships and yield results that are more consistent with the underlying theories. Generally, education counteracts misperceptions at all but the highest levels of partisanship; however, partisans who watch Fox News have their misperceptions reinforced in a manner that education doesn't appear to be able to overcome. Education's inability to combat biases is not new to this study. In fact, most motivated reasoning and selective exposure literature highlights an individual's self-serving need to argue or ignore conflicting facts, despite being highly educated (Lewandowsky, Ecker, Seifert, Schwartz, & Cook, 2012). In spite of these limitations, the current study presents several unique interactions between partisanship, education and news exposure in regards to politically contested public issues and promotes future research.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study's results raise critical questions about the power of news media to convey information, or in this case misinformation, across partisan lines. In addition to media factors, evidence suggests another key component to this linkage, education. Education and ideology interacted as predictors of the belief in the Affordable Care Act's inclusion of "death panels." Notably, education tends to decrease misperception among all except the most partisan of those with political motivation to misperceive, indications that point to motivated reasoning. In addition, education's moderating role in partisan identity's relationship to belief in politically contested facts is consistent with the knowledge gap theory's idea that an individual's ability to retain misinformation occurs in much the same way as an individual's ability to retain accurate information. However, selective exposure is also at work in this relationship. Sharpiro

and Bloch-Elkon (2008) wrote that, “Good judgments require more than knowing facts; they depend, as well, on the accuracy of the facts that one ‘knows,’ and the accuracy of one’s interpretations of the significance of the facts” (p.119). Partisan identity’s association with media use continues to activate departures from rational choice and inhibits misperceptions.

The study has limitations. One such limitation is its use of a self-reported media attention measure, for the reasons discussed above. Another is its focus on a particular type of “belief” phenomenon – specifically, belief of an ultimately verifiable fact. Given these limitations, the study’s contributions to the theoretical areas of belief gap and motivated misperception must be regarded as fragments of evidence, which must be considered in the context of studies using other operationalizations of media consumption and belief. Another limitation is the study’s nearly exclusive focus on Process Model 8. It may be that trying different process models in future research would uncover why education’s moderating role in partisan media’s mediation of the relationship between partisanship and belief in politically contested facts appears inconsistent in the modeling this study employed. For example, Process models 4B and 6 allow for multiple mediators to operate in serial, which would allow for the testing of Fox News Diet and education as parallel mediators. Furthermore, alternative moderation configurations should also be considered, as in Process models 2 and 3. Switching variable roles in the model, such as assigning Fox News Diet as the mediator and education level as the moderator could produce significant results as well. Similarly, the addition and analyses of new variables, such as age and insurance status, may also indicate noteworthy

correlations. Not only do young adults and seniors vary significantly in their attainment and interpretations of the ACA, but an individual's current insurance status also plays a key role in his or her preference for health care. Finally, in the future, this study could be controlled for demographic variables before retesting the model. As research continues to examine misperceptions and their consequences across partisan lines, it will be increasingly important to consider all elements of belief formation, both psychological and environmental.

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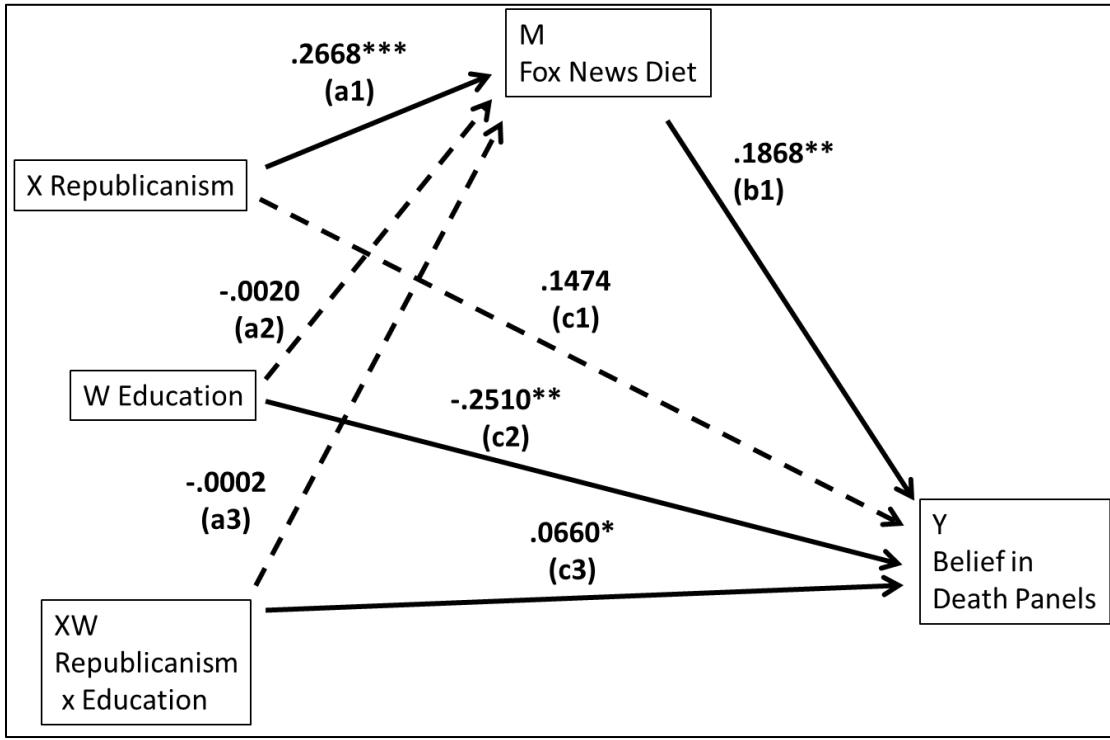
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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

The Mathematical PROCESS Model 8



APPENDIX B

Interaction of Belief, Education and Republicanism

