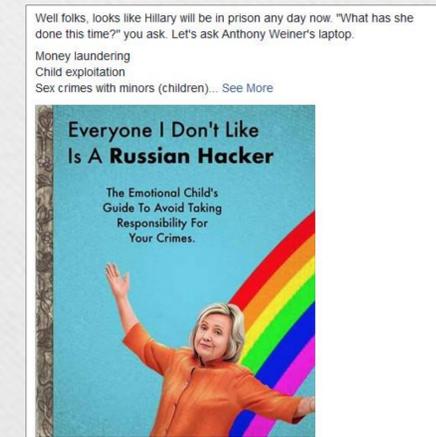


# The Effect of Facebook Posts on Partisan Polarization

Dan Brown  
Government Department, William & Mary

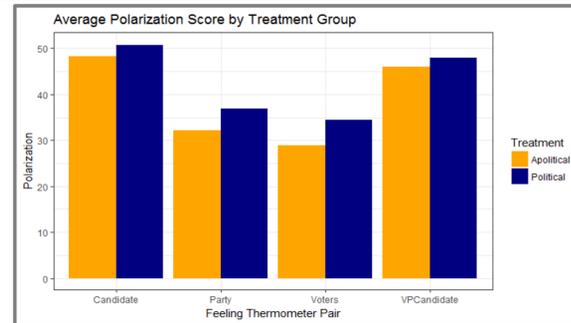
There are a variety of ways in which Facebook users can and often do express political opinions for all their online connections to see. This research is part of a continued investigation into the politically relevant effects these posts have on the individuals viewing them. Does viewing political content on Facebook increase individual partisan polarization? If so, is this effect moderated by individual characteristics, such as political knowledge and partisanship? Do different types of content have different substantive impacts? I addressed these questions using data collected during the Fall 2016 Omnibus project. In that study, the student participants each uploaded three screenshots from their own Facebook accounts. In the political treatment group, participants were instructed to upload screenshots of posts about the election, while the apolitical group uploaded screenshots about sports. I compared the survey responses given by the two groups in order to assess whether or not the political treatment group expressed more polarized political opinions than the control group regarding the 2016 presidential election. Additionally, I designed and implemented a coding scheme for all of the screenshots from the political treatment group in order to gain a greater understanding of the nature of the political content individuals are exposed to on Facebook.



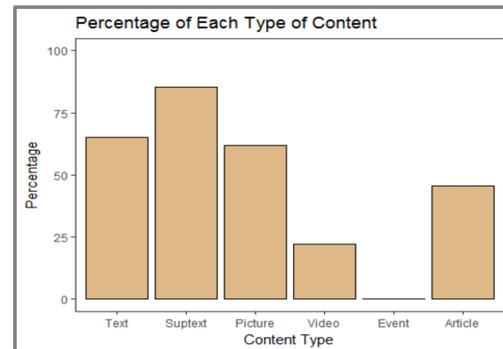
## Survey Overview

- **Sample – William & Mary Omnibus Project**
  - 307 valid respondents, 145 in the political condition, 148 in the apolitical (control) condition
  - Responses collected in 2016 between October 12 and November 18 (surrounding the November 8 election)
- **Design**
  - Pre-survey responses collected
  - Treatment randomly assigned in lab
  - Participants uploaded screenshots based on their treatment
  - Polarization items – used to calculate polarization scores (absolute value of the difference between pairs of like feeling thermometer scores)

## Polarization Scores



## Screenshot Descriptives



## Regression Analysis

- Ordinary least squared models predicting polarization variables
- Included pre-survey data in order to isolate treatment effect

|              | (1)<br>polcandida-s | (2)<br>polvp candi-s | (3)<br>polparty     | (4)<br>polvoters    |
|--------------|---------------------|----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| treatment    | 0.0267<br>(0.993)   | 1.449<br>(0.666)     | 3.831<br>(0.121)    | 4.178<br>(0.106)    |
| partisanship | 17.56***<br>(0.000) | 13.45***<br>(0.000)  | 13.86***<br>(0.000) | 13.12***<br>(0.000) |
| veryintere-d | 4.659<br>(0.195)    | 6.073<br>(0.119)     | -0.988<br>(0.728)   | -0.880<br>(0.770)   |
| sqknowledge  | -0.555<br>(0.582)   | 1.204<br>(0.274)     | 0.389<br>(0.633)    | -0.639<br>(0.451)   |
| _cons        | 14.44<br>(0.072)    | 5.942<br>(0.498)     | 2.331<br>(0.715)    | 7.450<br>(0.261)    |
| N            | 222                 | 241                  | 265                 | 270                 |

p-values in parentheses  
\* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001

## Conclusion

- **Experimental results**
  - Political treatment had no effect on candidate-specific polarization
  - Modest evidence for a polarizing effect on general partisan polarization
  - Sample limitations
    - Omnibus students are more informed and interested in politics than the general population
    - Sample size too small to reliably test for interaction effects
- **Screenshot coding scheme**
  - Provides reliable information on content type
  - Insufficient for collecting information on social cues surrounding Facebook content

