POLITICS, POLARIZATION, AND POSTING ON SOCIAL MEDIA:
THE GENDER GAP AND NORMATIVE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL PRESSURE

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ABSTRACT

Despite the growth in influence and representation of female participants in politics at the highest levels, research on a number of Western industrialized democracies uncovers persistent audience gender gaps in forms of political participation and political knowledge (Bystrom, 2004). Consequently, the term *gender gap* has received ample attention from academics (Banwart, 2007; Bennett & Bennett, 1989). Research has consistently indicated that males are better informed on and more interested in political issues than females (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 2000; Kenski, 2000). Through two distinct studies, this dissertation examined the political gender gap, and how political polarization helps us understand the gap. The first study was a secondary data analysis and the second study was an experiment. In the first study, I examined polarization and news use levels of women compared to men. This study tested polarization as a mechanism for women to become more politically knowledgeable and politically efficacious. As such, the first hypothesis predicted that women would be less polarized than men. Also, due to a cyclical relationship whereby polarization leads to news use and news use leads to greater polarization (Stroud, 2010), the second hypothesis predicted that polarization would mediate the relationship between gender and news use. Moreover, I expected news use to mediate the relationship between polarization and efficacy because people's polarized attitudes would cause them to seek political news. By learning such news, they would feel more competent in understanding civic activities, and they would have greater political knowledge and political efficacy. Therefore, the third hypothesis predicted that women would be less polarized, engage in less news use as a result, and therefore be less knowledgeable about politics. The fourth hypothesis predicted that gender would have an

indirect effect on political efficacy through news use such that women would be less polarized, engage in less news use as a result, and therefore be less efficacious about politics. However, I found that men and women were equally polarized, and gathered equal amounts of news. Rather, I found men gained more in political knowledge over the course of the campaign. In the second study, I explored how partisan support via socially pressurized environments on social media websites influenced political polarization, political engagement, political efficacy, and political knowledge. For these reasons, I theorized a link between polarization and social media use. The first hypothesis for Study II predicted that social reinforcement of political identity on social media would directly increase affective polarization and indirectly increase political information efficacy, intent to participate in politics, and political interest through affective polarization. Conversely, the second hypothesis for Study II predicted that challenges to political identity on social media would directly reduce affective polarization and indirectly decrease political information efficacy, intent to participate in politics, and political interest through affective polarization. Moreover, I asked whether gender differences would influence these polarization processes. Also, since women tend to have lower political efficacy and confidence than men (Mondak & Anderson, 2004), I suspected that affirming social media comments would strengthen women's political attitudes, thereby increasing their polarization levels. Therefore, the research question asked if gender would moderate the polarization process such that the effects of social reinforcement on polarization would be stronger for women than men and, thus, women would gain more in efficacy, intent to participate, and interest than men. However, I found that men were in fact more compelled to participate in politics upon encountering challenges to their

political identities on social media. The chapters are as follows: Chapter One introduces the dissertation; Chapter Two overviews literature outlining the political gender gap, polarization, and several social media concerns; Chapter Three outlines the method; Chapter Four describes the results of the first study; Chapter Five describes the results of the second study; and finally, Chapter Six provides a discussion on both studies.

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Chapter 1: Rationale and Justification

Despite the growth in influence and representation of female participants in politics at the highest levels, research on a number of Western industrialized democracies uncovers persistent audience gender gaps in forms of political participation and political knowledge (Bystrom, 2004). Consequently, the term *gender gap* has received ample attention from academics and political operatives alike (Banwart, 2007). The presence of gender differences in knowledge about political candidates and campaign issues does not by any means imply that females are less intelligent than males, but rather that males are better informed on and more interested in political issues than females (Bennett & Bennett, 1989; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 2000; Kenski, 2000).

The gender gap materializes in several ways. Coffé and Bolzendahl (2010) reveal that on average, females are less politically engaged than males in political parties; they are also less likely to demonstrate and attend political rallies. Moreover, Dow (2009) finds that education is the characteristic that most clearly enlarges the gender political knowledge gap, with males receiving substantially larger returns on political knowledge from education than females. Women and men also tend to differ in their news consumption. The Pew Research Center finds that women consistently express more interest than men in news stories about health, weather, natural disasters, and tabloids, whereas men are more interested than women about international affairs, Washington news, and sports (“Where Men and Women Differ Following News,” 2008). For instance, in 2007, 40% of men and 20% of women were interested in United States tension with Iran; furthermore, 28% of men were interested in immigration, while 18% of women were (“Where Men and Women Differ Following News,” 2008).

Gender differences in political knowledge present a critical problem due to significant implications for representative democracy (Fraile, 2014). The uneven distribution of knowledge between women and men contributes to a bias in the shape of collective opinion (Althaus, 2003), which raises several normative concerns. “If women systematically have lower levels of knowledge than men, they may be less well represented in the democratic system. This would imply a clear disadvantage in women’s capacity to voice their political needs and wishes, and thus to influence the political decision-making process” (Fraile, 2014, p. 262). We must continue to ask why women and men differ in their perceptions of politics so that we may better understand the types of messages that work to generate an *overall* more informed, interested, confident, and engaged electorate (Banwart, 2007).

Since women gained the right to vote, the gender gap in political participation has undergone various shifts. At the time of women’s suffrage, cultural realities reflected an underlying ideology that allocated the realm of domesticity to women (Baker, 1984). “From this domain, as wife, as daughter, and especially as mother, [the woman] exercised moral influence and insured national value and social order” (Baker, 1984, p. 620). Women were viewed as the selfless, nurturing counterpoints to materialistic and competitive men, who were better suited for the rough and violent public world (Baker, 1984). Once women gained the right to vote in 1920, politicians responded to the newly enlarged electorate by underscoring traditional women’s issues such as children’s health, prohibition, public schools, and world peace (Dumenil, 1995). While women responded to these issues, they did not vote in greater proportions than men, and instead shared the

same general voting behavior as men (Anderson, 1996). In fact, it was not until 1980 when women began to vote in greater proportions than men (Bystrom, 2004).

The gender gap also refers to the parties women tend to vote for, with implications for women's political participation. "The emergence of the modern gender gap in America is due to the way that women moved towards the Democrats since 1980 while men moved towards the Republicans on a stable, long-term, and consistent basis, thereby reversing the pattern of voting and partisanship common in the 1950s," (Inglehart & Norris, 2000, p. 442). Moreover, Inglehart and Norris (2000) find that gender differences in voting behavior have been realigning in postindustrial societies, and the main reason is cultural trends that have transformed the values of women and men, particularly among younger generations.

Additionally, the governmental party system may help shape women's political behavior. Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer (2012) argue that more proportional electoral systems increase women's levels of political engagement more than men, thereby decreasing gender differences in political engagement. They argue that since women have long been excluded from two-party political systems, electoral systems designed to encompass multiple views and interests in the decision-making process will have a larger positive influence on women's political engagement than on men's (Kittilson & Schwindt-Bayer, 2012). Given that women share a common social group identity based on their shared history of marginalization, electoral rules that emphasize proportional representation over majoritarianism send signals that the long-standing, male-dominated political environment is open to representation and inclusion of women (Kittilson & Schwindt-Bayer, 2012, p. 994). Thus, as the United States government is not a

proportionally representative system, women may feel more excluded from politics. Thus, several mechanisms – cultural values, voting habits, governmental systems – provide catalysts for differences between women and men when it comes to politics.

This dissertation examines the political gender gap, and how political polarization may help us understand the gap. Specifically, I sought to illuminate how women could exhibit the traits of the “ideal citizen” as participants in the democratic process. Although there are many strategies in the literature to address the gender gap, in this dissertation I propose the particular solution of social pressure in the form of social media commentary. In examining this potential solution, this dissertation primarily examines affective polarization. Prior to an explanation of affective polarization, I will consider the role of socialization.

Socialization

In examining mechanisms that foster the gender knowledge gap, one primary suspect is political socialization. The socialization process in gender roles establishes different beliefs and attitudes about politics (Verge Mestre & Tormos Marín, 2012). Societies transmit gender roles to the new generations, which in turn determines political expectations of teenagers (Hooghe, 2004). Persistent effects of sex-role socialization might bring forward an unconscious ideology that males dominate the political arena (Bem & Bem, 1970). Such socialization may negatively impact women’s subjective political competence in their adult years, making them less interested in politics and less likely to consider themselves qualified to run for elective offices (Fox & Lawless, 2011). Furthermore, some implicit lessons, such as men being the overwhelming majority of leading political figures, deprives citizens of female role models, which may also

contribute to establishing gender differences in political engagement during adulthood (Verge Mestre & Tormos Marín, 2012). In this vein, shifts in the attitudes of female voters following the election of more women to political office have been documented (Verge Mestre & Tormos Marín, 2012). The inclusion of women in political institutions sends important signals to become more politically involved, or at least to feel more politically efficacious (Childs, 2004). As such, women's presence in politics might break traditional associations between men and the political sphere and, subsequently, enhance women's political engagement (Atkeson, 2003).

Although I do not examine it specifically, socialization provides a context for the ensuing discussion on the gender gap. After all, the gender gap is understood to be social, not biological, in origin. To illustrate, due to community-oriented socialization, females may be more interested in local issues while males exhibit more interest in national and international issues (Coffé, 2013). There are also differing societal norms regarding education, occupation, political attitudes, and feelings of political efficacy (Coffé, 2013). These gender differences in political efficacy may be rooted in gender socialization (Conway, 1985) where politics is often perceived as a male-dominated domain, leading females to lose confidence with respect to their ability to influence politics (Wolak & McDevitt, 2011). Females may feel less confidence in their political knowledge due to socialization (Mondak & Anderson, 2004), in that they are more likely to respond "I don't know" to political questions (Atkeson & Rapoport, 2003).

Notably, political socialization and engagement patterns in early adulthood tend to not only affect but also predict political engagement in other stages of adulthood (Delli Carpini, 2000). The danger for our democratic system then is the current pattern of civic

disengagement in which nonvoting young citizens grow into disengaged older citizens (Kaid, Postelnicu, Landreville, Hyun Jung, & LeGrange, 2007). Considering the energy it takes to make an informed voting decision, the need to navigate voting registration, and the socialization processes whereby young adults become either habitual voters or non-voters (Kaid, Fernandes, & Painter, 2011), young females in particular could be in danger of becoming routinely disengaged.

There are several conventional socialization approaches in strengthening female political engagement. First, politically active mothers have role-model effects on their daughters (e.g., Gidengil, O'Neill, & Young, 2008). Second, certain programs aim to increase women's political participation (e.g., National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, 2008), and third, women's psychological engagement is enhanced by increased women's representation in government (e.g., Koch, 1997). To supplement these conventional strategies, this dissertation will propose social pressure in the form of online commenting as a strategy to help us understand the gender gap in politics.

Social Pressure on Social Media

Political socialization, while not a direct focus of this study, may be one reason for possible individual differences between women and men when it comes to social media political commenting activity. As such, social pressure on social media in the form of user commentary is a focal point of this study. Research on the evolution of norms on social networking sites (SNS) has shown that because social settings on SNS are highly ambiguous, offline practices are especially likely to shape online behaviors (McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012). Vraga, Thorson, Kligler-Vilenchik, and Gee (2015) found that some

people are more open toward political expression than others, and that the distinction is related to pre-existing individual differences (p. 284).

Gender may act as a moderating variable due to women's and men's feelings of political efficacy. Lee (2014) examined how participant gender could impact political opinion formation on Facebook, and results indicated that although others' opinions were powerful cues, their influence was moderated by internal political self-efficacy (IPSE); individuals with higher IPSE were less influenced by others' opinions, meaning that IPSE influenced the extent to which they depended on the cues. This result confirms that IPSE can function as a key motivational factor that moderates the effect of political messages (Lee, 2014). Since women have been found to score lower than men on political information efficacy (Tedesco, 2011), it stands to reason that their attitudes may be more susceptible to influence from others in the form of commentary in a social media environment. That is, women may be more impacted by political messages, as they may seek greater guidance for political attitudes in the form of other users' social media comments.

Vraga and colleagues (2015) posit the audience for a political post on Facebook combines people from multiple social spheres of one's life and, because content posted to social networking sites can be copied, shared, and spread widely or could be hidden from some friends by a news feed display algorithm, the "real" audience on Facebook is unspecified. The networked audience on Facebook combines friends and acquaintances from different social spheres, and this "context collapse" creates potentially uncomfortable tension from the intersection of these competing contexts (Marwick & boyd, 2011). "Although Facebook friend networks tend to map closely to offline social

networks, individuals from different parts of that network – friends, family, work colleagues, distant acquaintances – may all be part of the audience for any post to the site” (Vraga et al., 2015, p. 282). Such a networked audience on Facebook can create social norms for users. Norms represent individuals’ basic knowledge of what others do and what others think that they should do (Cialdini, 2003). Norms are situational or mental representations of appropriate behavior that guide behavior in certain situations, and they exist as collective representations of acceptable group conduct as well as individual perceptions of particular group conduct (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005). Normative influence means that people will conform under the direct surveillance of others; conversely, when surveillance of others is removed, people are less likely to conform (Spears & Lea, 1994). Moreover, Lapinski and Rimal (2005) posit that public behaviors are more subject to normative influence than private behaviors. Importantly, Stroud, Scacco, Muddiman, and Curry (2014) found that a single individual can affect behavioral norms in an online comment section, and in particular, an opinion leader can affect the quality of comments left by social media users.

Incivility in the form of social media commentary can also have particularly strong effects on SNS users. Coe, Kenski, and Rains (2014) submit that public discourse has always had its share of incivility, and the current era is no different. Of course, the difference now is that the 21st century’s vast and interactive media environment has created expansive opportunities for public debate, and moments of incivility spread more rapidly and widely than ever before (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). As a result, for many citizens, politics on Facebook is most often associated with rants, drama, and virulent disagreement (Vraga et al., 2015). Such incivility is a common feature of public

discussions, and incivility does tend to delegitimize political arguments, and lower audience evaluations of those making them (Coe et al., 2014).

Yet, there are important differences between those who have high interest in politics and those who do not, and these differences may lead to different reactions to incivility. Vraga and colleagues (2015) found ultimately those SNS users “who were more motivated and able – those who cared deeply about politics and who were less conflict avoidant – were more likely to see the benefits of political expression on Facebook and to contribute to such expression themselves, in spite of (or sometimes because of) the potential risks of disagreement” (p. 288). Perhaps in spite of incivility, people with stronger interests in politics are more open to uncivil commentary since they value the content of the discussion over the tone of the commentary. To better understand what motivates people to value such political discussion, I next discuss political polarization.

Political Polarization

Some scholars argue that ordinary Americans’ movement toward the ideological extremes has been confined to a narrow political class of politicians, activists, pundits, and other assorted political enthusiasts (e.g., Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope, 2011). However, Abramowitz and Saunders (2008) see no disconnect between the American people and those who purport to represent them. Several scholars have found evidence that not only political elites, but also ordinary Americans, divide consistently along party lines over a broad range of issues and legislative preferences (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Jacobson, 2012; Sunstein, 2009). These Americans have grown increasingly divided

along party lines on issues and ideology alike, and the more involved they are politically, the further apart they have moved (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008).

While some Americans may be turned off by the polarized rhetoric of politicians and agenda-setters, many others are engaged by polarization (Abramowitz, 2010).

Abramowitz (2010) argues that the key to understanding polarization in the United States and its consequences for democracy is the role played by a group called the *engaged public*, who are attentive, informed, and active citizens. These citizens closely reflect the ideals of democratic citizenship, and it is this politically engaged segment of the public that is the most partisan and ideologically polarized (Abramowitz, 2010). In fact, Abramowitz (2010) concludes that polarized Americans are actually the most normatively desirable. “Partisan-ideological polarization is greatest among those individuals whose beliefs and behavior most closely reflect the ideals of responsible democratic citizenship, that is, the engaged public” (Abramowitz, 2010, pp. 4-5). Moreover, Fiorina et al. (2011) contend, “While there are a variety of reasons people participate, ranging from the social to the material, probably the most general is that the people who participate are for the most part those who care intensely about some issue or some complex set of issues. They have deep policy, programmatic, or ideological commitments” (p. 199). Through high levels of political interest, attention, and activity, the engaged citizens embody the good side of polarization.

As mentioned previously, research suggests that compared to men, women are less interested in politics, less politically engaged, and less politically participatory (Campbell & Winters, 2008; Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010; Verba, Burns, & Schlozman, 1997). Furthermore, females are less likely to be interested in national and international

issues than males, yet more interested in local issues (Coffé, 2013). It appears that if females are to become more politically interested, engaged, and knowledgeable, social pressure online may be a mechanism that influences political polarization. In essence, polarization may be an effective mechanism to cause women to become more like the “good citizen” (Schudson, 1998). At the same time, caution is needed so as to avoid the bad side of polarization, within which government becomes gridlocked, partisans engage in uncivil discourse, and political violence becomes more probable.

How can polarization be said to engage women without risking the negative effects of polarization? Though political interest explains variance in political knowledge, interest alone does not necessarily lead to gains in political knowledge (Holmes, 2004). In order to learn, people need to seek out political information, and this is most readily available in the media. Past research has uncovered increases in political engagement upon exposure to mass mediated messages such as political campaign debates (McKinney & Chattopadhyay, 2007; McKinney, Rill, & Thorson, 2014) and political advertising (Matthes & Marquart, 2015). Luskin (1990) posits a spiral effect, where those who are interested in politics seek out political information, and such information consumption leads to paying attention to politics more, or possibly becoming more polarized.

While individual factors such as personality traits impact individual polarization levels and political attitudes, these factors are also influenced by interactions within groups such as family, friends, and co-workers. For instance, there are close links among confidence, extremism, and corroboration by others (Sunstein, 2009). In several group contexts, people’s opinions become more extreme simply because their views have been

corroborated, and because they become more confident after learning that others share their views (Sunstein, 2009). In these ways, membership within a group can sway an individual's certainty, confidence, and polarization. If females receive strong affirmation of their political identities from political communication sources via SNS commentary, perhaps they would become more politically engaged through polarization. In effect, priming ingroup and outgroup partisan biases to be more salient in females may spur polarization outcomes. To better understand the mechanisms through which this good side may occur, it is crucial to examine different types of polarization. One such approach is through a lens of social identity.

Iyengar, Sood, and Lelke's (2012) conceptualization of political polarization is based on the affect that one has towards a particular group. Group dynamics are important sites of study for social science scholars, and the concept of social identity has been particularly important in the examination of political polarization. The definitional test of social identity requires not only positive sentiment for one's own group, but also negative sentiment toward those identifying with opposing groups; it is thus suggested that group-based affect is an ingrained human response, occurring even when group membership is assigned randomly (Iyengar et al., 2012, pp. 406-407).

Several questions then arise. What role does gender play in political polarization? Do females need higher levels of polarization in order to achieve greater political engagement? A pro-democratic outcome of polarization could be that females ought to be more politically engaged and knowledgeable, thereby working towards the normative democracy espoused by Abramowitz (2010). This dissertation will examine the role of social pressure on political polarization, and how it could help women come closer to

embodying “the ideal citizen.” In essence, the mechanism for increased political engagement in women could be political polarization. That is to say political polarization may mediate the relationship between gender and political engagement, knowledge, and political information efficacy.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the political gender gap, and how social pressure through social media commentary may help women close the gender gap. Specifically, I will first explore how polarized females are in comparison to males. I will also explore how partisan support via social pressure on social media can be used to impact polarization outcomes. In particular, I am interested in how users’ political posts on SNS influence political polarization, political engagement, political efficacy, and political knowledge for United States citizens.

Summary of Chapter One

In summary, throughout Chapter One, I have covered the background of the specific problems concerning the political gender gap. Included were brief explorations of gender participation gap, and how females are not as politically interested and politically knowledgeable as males are. Inquiries were made as to how political socialization and social pressure in a social media landscape may impact citizens. Also, I examined political polarization and how it may foster pro-democratic outcomes. Following these explorations, I also delineated the purpose of the study and the significance of the study. The final topic I will cover in Chapter One is a project overview.

Project Overview

In this dissertation, I conducted two distinct studies. The first study was a secondary data analysis, which provided an initial vantage point into the possible relationship between gender and political polarization, political knowledge, political partisanship, and political efficacy. To do so, I used the ANES survey from the 2012 election cycle. Through an examination of two distinct survey waves, I conducted a longitudinal analysis, so as to tap into any potential “spiral effects” (Slater, 2007) that may have taken place between news use and polarization levels.

The second study, an experiment, tested for the effects of social pressure in a social media environment whereby affective polarization had the potential to impact several political communication variables for women, particularly regarding ingroup and outgroup political identity. I first instructed participants to imagine they had composed a partisan political post on Facebook, accompanied by comments from other social media users. This experiment tested social pressure and attitude confirmation/disconfirmation as a way to foster the intent to engage politically. Effects on both women and men were examined to see what, if any, differences existed in the social media environment.

In order for both women and men to achieve pro-democratic outcomes, I imagined social pressure in the form of SNS commentary was a potential solution. I suspected that through the mechanisms of social pressure and political polarization, women would achieve higher levels of political interest, political information efficacy, and political engagement, thereby more closely embodying “the ideal citizen.” This dissertation ultimately examined the consequences of social media commentary, political polarization, and the implications for political audience gender. In what follows, I review relevant literature.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The Gender of the Political Audience

Research on a number of Western industrialized democracies uncovers persistent gender gaps in some forms of political participation (Inglehart & Norris 2003; Gidengil, Blais, Neviite, & Nadeau, 2004), and a preponderance of research suggests that females are less interested in politics than males (Campbell & Winters, 2008; Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010). Women are also less knowledgeable about politics, and have lower levels of political efficacy (Beauregard, 2014; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). The political gender gap is a critical problem as a participatory public is crucial for democratic responsiveness, and is seen as an intrinsic democratic good (Verba, 1996). Consequently, “systematic and persistent patterns of unequal participation along existing lines of stratification, such as gender, are threats to both political equality and democratic performance” (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2013, p. 319). Several explanations for this gap have been put forth.

According to Burns, Schlozman, and Verba (2001), one of the main explanations for gender differences in political participation is related to the desire to participate. Verba and colleagues (1997) argue that some psychological involvement with politics is necessary for citizens to willingly participate and employ their resources – time, money and skills – for political activities. Since political participation is a central component of democracy, as well as a means for achieving greater equality, gender inequalities in political participation may reflect and further reify gender stratification throughout society (Lister, 2003).

Several mechanisms impact the psychological involvement to engage politically. First, certain political issues are stereotypically associated with a particular gender. Campbell and Winters (2008) indicate that females are more interested in domestic political issues like health, education, and law than their male counterparts, who are more likely to be interested in general politics, foreign policy, and partisan politics. Coffé and Bolzendahl (2010) second that notion, contending that political interest is an important explanation for gender differences in political participation, noting that females engage in different types of participation because they are interested in different issues, as opposed to being less interested in politics than males.

Fitzgerald (2013) notes that empirical studies typically use an indicator that measures general political interest without devoting enough attention to what “politics” or “political” signifies to people. Concerns exist over the operationalization of “politics,” and part of the gender gap in general political interest may be explained by the fact that interest in politics is primarily understood as interest in national politics, an issue in which males are more likely to be interested than females (Coffé, 2013). Consequently, scholars need to ensure the concept of “politics” is clearly defined, especially as it pertains to gender. There are certainly validity concerns associated with using “politics” as a normed term, as we cheat ourselves theoretically when we do not directly explore its heterogeneous interpretations (Fitzgerald, 2013). In fact, Coffé (2013) notes that females are more likely than males to be interested in local issues, and less likely to be interested in national and international issues than males, thus highlighting the need to clarify what “politics” means to different groups of people.

There are also important distinctions to make in defining what it means to participate politically. While women have been voting in greater numbers than men since 1980 (Bystrom, 2004), other gender gaps in political participation exist. Brundidge, Baek, Johnson, and Williams (2013) find that women tend to engage politically in indirect ways, such as signing online petitions, as opposed to mailing a letter to a government representative. “It is perhaps the case that women feel more comfortable participating online and the more connected they become to politics via [social networking sites], the more they shift their political participation online and away from the traditional offline forms of contacting public officials” (Brundidge et al., 2013, p. 14). Also, Coffé and Bolzendahl (2010) posit that in particular, women’s vibrant participation in informal political efforts and organizations suggests non-formal engagement may be easier for women.

Distinct differences in political knowledge and interest remain between males and females. A primary suspect that fosters the political sex gap is political socialization. Coffé (2013) claims while males exhibit greater levels of interest in national and international issues, females are more interested in local issues because of their community-oriented socialization and differing societal norms regarding education, occupation, political attitudes, and feelings of political efficacy. “The gender disparity on knowledge traces partly to aspects of political socialization and political learning” (Mondak & Anderson, 2004, p. 509). Socialization may also cause females to feel less confidence in political knowledge, in that they are more likely to respond “I don’t know” to political questions, further suggesting that females do not feel as confident as males in their capacity to understand politics (Atkeson & Rapoport, 2003; Mondak & Anderson,

2004). These gender differences in political efficacy may be rooted in gender socialization (Conway, 1985) where politics is often perceived as a male-dominated domain, leading females to lose self-assurance with respect to their ability to impact politics (Wolak & McDevitt, 2011).

The socialization process in gender roles establishes different beliefs and attitudes about politics (Verge Mestre & Tormos Marín, 2012). Societies transmit gender roles to the new generations, which in turn determines political expectations of teenagers (Hooghe, 2004). Persistent effects of sex-role socialization might bring forward an unconscious ideology that males dominate the political arena (Bem & Bem, 1970). Such socialization may negatively impact women's subjective political competence in their adult years, making them less interested in politics and less likely to consider themselves qualified to run for elective offices (Fox & Lawless, 2011). Furthermore, some implicit lessons, such as men being the overwhelming majority of leading political figures, deprives citizens of female role models, which may also contribute to establishing gender differences in political engagement during adulthood (Verge Mestre & Tormos Marín, 2012). In this vein, shifts in the attitudes of female voters following the election of more women to political office have been documented (Verge Mestre & Tormos Marín, 2012). The inclusion of women in political institutions sends important signals to female citizens that lead them to become more politically involved, or at least to feel more politically efficacious (Childs, 2004). Therefore, women's presence in political institutions might help to break traditional associations between men and the public sphere and, subsequently, to enhance women's political engagement (Atkeson, 2003).

However, socialization is not enough to explain the gender gap. “If socialization accounts for the unexplained difference between female and male political knowledge, its effect must manifest through some characteristic or personal attribute that is associated with political knowledge” (Dow, 2009, p. 118). Dow found that educational returns on political knowledge are different for males and females. Research shows that schools impact political knowledge, perhaps more so for boys than for girls (Niemi & Junn 1998; Galston, 2001). That is, pedagogic approaches and curriculums impact the ways boys and girls engage politics, with subsequent implications for male–female political learning (Dow, 2009). “Simply put, the gender gap in political knowledge exists because for any given level of education, men learn and retain more factual knowledge about politics than women” (Dow, 2009, p. 119). In other words, Dow found that even if men and women have the same levels of education, men benefit more in terms of political knowledge gains.

Political Learning

In studies of political learning, the concept frequently used to signify motivations is “political interest” (e.g., Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Some scholars find that political interest explains more of the variance in political knowledge than media exposure or attention (e.g., Holmes, 2004). However, political interest in and of itself will not necessarily lead to gains in knowledge. People have to seek out political information, which is most readily available in the media via television news shows, political advertising, and campaign events such as debates. Those interested in politics will seek out information, therefore consuming more news and presumably paying more attention (Dow, 2009; Luskin, 1990).

Coffé (2013) notes that confidence in one's own capacities to engage in politics and believing in one's own ability to have an impact on politics are important predictors of interest in politics. Not only do females and males have different tastes for politics (Dow, 2009), but they also tend to have different feelings over their capacities to engage in politics and impact political processes. After all, one's belief that he or she lacks the necessary abilities to be politically engaged are likely to dampen political interest (Coffé, 2013). Importantly, young males have been found to feel more confidence in their political knowledge than females (Bystrom, Banwart, Kaid, & Robertson, 2004). Following these considerations, political knowledge and political engagement are examined.

Political Knowledge and Political Engagement

Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) submit that to be an effective, constructive citizen, one must possess political information. The possession of political information drives political knowledge (Eveland & Scheufele, 2000). Possession of such knowledge aids in more informed decision making; moreover, an informed citizen will be more attentive to politics, engage in various forms of participation, commit to democratic principles, become more opinionated, and exhibit higher levels of efficacy (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Political knowledge has been hypothesized and tested in many studies as a consequence of media use and political conversation (Jung, Kim, & de Zuniga, 2011). In essence, knowledge of politics depends on communication – particularly mass communication through the news media (Eveland, Hayes, Shah, & Kwak, 2005). A common critique of those who argue for a causal relationship between communication and political knowledge is that political interest – or some similar concept – can account

for both high levels of communication and high levels of political knowledge (Eveland et al., 2005). Some have implied that news use, political discussion, and political knowledge are simply indicators of a larger concept such as political involvement, sophistication, and expertise (Cassel & Lo, 1997). Yet, despite these criticisms of both conceptual and measurement issues for such concepts, it is true that interest is often empirically related to political knowledge (Marcus & MacKuen, 1993).

Political knowledge impacts one's political engagement (Hargittai & Shaw, 2013). Political engagement consists of multiple dimensions including cognitive engagement and political participation (Hargittai & Shaw, 2013). Moreover, several other factors impact political engagement, including demographic attributes, socioeconomic status, Internet experience and skill, online political information practices, civic engagement, and political interest (Hargittai & Shaw, 2013). Questions then arise over why females tend to have lower political knowledge and political engagement levels compared to males, and what, if any, aspects of contemporary American culture signal to females they cannot play the game of "politics."

Fitzgerald (2013) claims that gaining insight into the nexus between ordinary people and the world of politics is difficult because it tends to reside in spheres that are socially intimate and psychological. She posits that clear correlations exist between people's social and political attributes (such as nationality, gender, and ideology) and the boundaries they draw around "politics," and these ideas relate to people's reported political interest, attention to politics, frequency of disagreement, and number of political discussants (Fitzgerald, 2013). Variance in political interest takes place due to cultural factors, institutional factors, socialization, political orientations, political ideology,

partisan affiliation, organizational participation, social experiences, political knowledge education, gender, and age (Fitzgerald, 2013). Clearly, several factors impact political engagement, and gender matters.

When it comes to political knowledge, women have been found to gain political knowledge through media consumption, particularly during political campaigns. In a study on political learning, using National Annenberg Election Survey data, Ondercin, Garand, and Crapanzano (2011) found that as the 2000 presidential campaign progressed, women provided increasingly more correct answers on political knowledge questions. Moreover, McKinney, Rill, and Thorson's (2014) longitudinal analysis of the 2012 presidential campaign revealed females' levels of political information efficacy increased after viewing a political campaign debate while there was no such change for males. Considering that political interest and feelings of political efficacy have been found to differ between genders, next I discuss how citizens feel about their own levels of political knowledge.

Political Efficacy and Political Information Efficacy

Beyond political engagement, feelings of political efficacy are important for gender differences. Traditional political efficacy has been defined as an individual's feeling that he or she has the ability to influence the political process (Campbell, Gurin, & Miller, 1954). The National Election Studies (NES) have measured general feelings of political cynicism since 1952, and researchers have determined that elements of both internal and external political efficacy exist (McPherson, Welch, & Clark, 1997). External political efficacy refers to the responsiveness of the political system to the demands of its citizens, whereas internal political efficacy refers to an individual's

competence in understanding and participating in civic activities (Kaid et al., 2011). Recently, political communication scholars have established a distinction between political efficacy and political information efficacy (PIE). After all, one important element of political knowledge is the attitudinal element of knowledge attainment – specifically, how confident one is in what one knows about politics (McKinney et al., 2014). In their explication of political efficacy and political information, Kaid, McKinney, and Tedesco’s (2007) theory of political information efficacy is “closely related to internal efficacy, but differs in that it focuses solely on the voter’s confidence in his or her own political knowledge and its sufficiency to engage the political process” (p. 1096). If citizens are more confident in their political knowledge – if they have higher political information efficacy – they are more likely to vote (Kaid et al., 2007).

Several scholars have hoped that the use of new technologies can increase people’s PIE. A number of communicative messages through new technologies have been associated with PIE. For instance, Kaid and colleagues (2007) report that Internet users are among a group of noticeably more politically informed voters. In light of these new technologies that break down barriers to political participation, scholars have explored potential impacts on young voters’ political information efficacy in particular. For instance, Tedesco (2011) found that after exposure to online political campaign messages, young voters have reported greater amounts of political information efficacy. In addition, candidate choice can influence political information efficacy; during a campaign season, individuals who perceive that their chosen candidate will win a presidential election appear to exhibit higher levels of political efficacy and political

information efficacy than those who perceive that their chosen candidate will lose (McKinney et al., 2014; Tedesco, 2011).

In addition, gender differences in PIE have emerged. Past research has found there are differences between males and females over feelings of being politically informed. Young females in particular may be more prone to exhibiting lower levels of PIE than their male counterparts. Tedesco's (2011) study on the 2008 presidential election revealed differences between females and males as political audiences, in that young females lagged behind their male counterparts with regard to confidence in their political information. Moreover, Kaid and colleagues (2011) conducted an experiment with 2008 campaign advertisements as stimuli. Their results suggested that after viewing campaign advertisements, young female citizens learned more about the candidates' issue positions and personal qualities than did males (Kaid et al., 2011). In addition, Banwart's (2007) study on the 2004 presidential election provided support that young females and males do indeed perceive politics, and their roles in the political process, differently. Young male voters were more likely than female voters to report a belief they were well informed about the presidential campaign; yet they both reported high levels of interest in the campaign (Banwart, 2007). Considering the interrelatedness of political interest, political engagement, and political polarization, I next turn to a discussion on political polarization.

Political Polarization

Polarization presents as problematic due to sharp divisions between Democratic and Republican leaders that drive a wedge between party supporters in the electorate and alienate moderate citizens from the political process (Abramowitz, 2010). Voters have

been voting along party lines at the highest rate in 50 years, at both the congressional and presidential levels, so it is hard for congressional members to win in districts where their party is not favored (Kraushaar, 2014). As a result, the 2014 Congresses has been among the most polarized in history (Kraushaar, 2014). So while political scientists and professional observers agree that partisan polarization has fundamentally transformed national politics since the 1970s, consensus breaks down over the extent to which ordinary Americans have participated in this polarizing trend (Jacobson, 2012).

Political polarization is the mechanism whereby political groups move further away from each other. For instance, on issue positions, Republicans and Democrats would move further away from each other over time. That is, competing political groups are pulled away from the middle of the political spectrum, and in turn pulled towards the poles of the spectrum – thereby ending up on opposite ends. Scholars often cite increased elite polarization over time easily due to Congressional voting records. Charts help us visually understand the historical trajectory of voting patterns, with Democrats now less likely to vote with Republicans, and vice versa, compared to several decades ago. As seen in the figure, between 1949 and 2011, there is increasingly less overlap in the voting records of the two major parties (Prokop, 2015).

Of course, no such voting records exist for “everyday” Americans. Therefore, polarization can be measured in a number of ways; one of which is by asking citizens about the extremity of their issue positions in surveys. Dvir Gvirsman (2014) measures

attitude polarization using five items relating to different attitudinal aspects regarding refusal to obey orders, which range from 1 (*oppose*) to 7 (*support*); this scale is then transformed to measure extremity by means of folding (Dvir Gvirsman, 2014, p. 86). “In this folded version, it could range from 1 to 4, with higher scores reflecting more extreme attitudes” (Dvir Gvirsman, 2014, p. 86). As a result, scholars are able to compare the citizens on the extreme ends of the issue, regardless of side, to those citizens who are more moderate.

Greater exposure to the harsh rhetoric of political campaigns is one potential explanation of polarization. Harsh political rhetoric, some scholars contend, “turns the American people off” of politics. According to Fiorina et al. (2011), the ideological disputes that engage political elites and activists have little resonance among the American mass public; rather, everyday twenty-first-century Americans are not very well-informed about politics, do not hold many of their views very strongly, and are not ideological. Moreover, Fiorina et al. (2011) argue that growing polarization of party elites and activists not only turns off large numbers of voters, but also depresses voter turnout in elections, a democratically undesirable goal. In effect, everyday Americans are in are not, in fact, as far to the poles as some scholars suggest. In this view, instead of operating in the poles, these people are choosing to disengage altogether.

However, evidence from the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections indicates that while some Americans are turned off by polarization, many others are engaged in it (Abramowitz, 2010). To be sure, the increasing polarization of American politics in recent years has had both positive and negative consequences for democracy (Abramowitz, 2010). The key to understanding polarization in the United States and its

consequences for democracy is the role played by a group called the *engaged public* – the attentive, informed, active, partisan, and ideological citizens (Abramowitz, 2010). These citizens closely reflect the ideals of democratic citizenship, as they care about government and politics, pay attention to what political leaders are saying and doing, and participate actively; in fact, according to Abramowitz, they are in fact the most normatively desirable. “Growing partisan-ideological polarization among political elites, rather than turning ordinary Americans off on politics, may have contributed to an increase in the size of the engaged public” (Abramowitz, 2010, p. 21). Through high levels of attention and activity, these citizens embody the “ideal citizen.” The engaged public, according to Abramowitz, plays a significant role in politics because its members make up the active Democratic and Republican electoral bases. In essence, polarized people, by operating within the poles, are engaging in the very democratic ideals that society strives for.

In fact, Schudson (1998) highlights Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* discussion on the ideal citizen, who is constantly active in public life and regularly recruited to it through elections, jury service, reading newspapers, and joining private associations oriented to public affairs. But in the second volume of *Democracy in America*, “citizens are absorbed in private life; they are small shopkeepers obsessed with their own material advancement and likely to shun general ideas, philosophy, the arts, or politics itself” (Schudson, 1998, p. 134). Moreover, “The average man necessarily finds most of his energies absorbed by the process of earning a living; the average woman is largely engrossed in household cares. With personal registration every year, and with one or two primaries or elections each year, both of the latter involving long and difficult

ballots, many turn aside from politics, except perhaps when an occasional thrilling contest takes place” (as cited in Schudson, 1998, p. 173). According to these standards, political polarization could in fact lead to desirable democratic outcomes, as these citizens are the ones who regularly pay attention to politics, and not solely the thrilling elections.

In response to Fiorina et al.’s (2011) claim that “ordinary” Americans are not that polarized, Abramowitz (2010) posits that sweeping generalizations about the political beliefs and behavior of ordinary Americans ignore the fact that there are vast differences in political knowledge among the public. As discussed previously, there continues to be a gender gap between men and women regarding political interest, engagement, and knowledge. Considering the aforementioned discussion on political interest, engagement, and knowledge, it is important to consider how these variables interplay with political polarization. That is, it is important to examine if polarized attitudes towards political issues will affect one’s desire to engage in political news use. In turn, the more news use a citizen engages in, the more knowledgeable that citizen would hypothetically be on political news.

Based on the prior considerations of this chapter, several hypotheses are presented. First, one’s belief that he or she lacks the necessary abilities to be politically engaged are likely to dampen political interest (Coffé, 2013), and women have lower confidence than men in their abilities to impact the political process (Mondak & Anderson, 2004). Moreover, young males have been found to feel more confidence in their political knowledge than females (Bystrom, Banwart, Kaid, & Robertson, 2004). Women also tend to have lower feelings over their capacities to engage in politics and

impact political processes than men do (Dow, 2009), and confidence begets polarization (Dvir Gvirsman, 2014). As a result, I would expect them to be less politically polarized compared to men. Therefore, the following hypothesis is posed:

H₁: Women will be less polarized than men.

I also expect polarization to be associated with greater news use. Past research has shown that highly polarized people will engage in more news use (e.g., Garrett & Stroud, 2014; Prior, 2007; Stroud, 2011). After all, those who are polarized are active partisans and highly motivated to know about politics (Abramowitz, 2010), and as a result they actively seek political information. Though there is a cyclical relationship, in that polarization leads to news use which can lead to greater polarization (Stroud, 2010), I anticipate that polarization plays a significant role particularly as it predicts news use as a civic behavior in particular.

H₂: Polarization will mediate the relationship between gender and news use.

To that end, I contend that polarized people are generally more politically efficacious and knowledgeable than non-polarized people. Political efficacy refers to an individual's competence in understanding and participating in civic activities (Kaid et al., 2011). I expect news use to mediate the relationship between polarization and efficacy because people's polarized attitudes cause them to seek political news, and by learning such news, they feel more competent in understanding civic activities, or they have greater efficacy. I also expect news use to mediate the relationship between polarization and knowledge through the same process. A polarized citizen will be motivated to seek political news, and such news use will lead to gains in political knowledge. Therefore, news use will mediate both the relationships between polarization and efficacy, and

polarization and knowledge. Based on these considerations, the following hypotheses are posed:

H₃: Gender will have an indirect effect on political knowledge through news use such that women will be less polarized, engage in less news use as a result, and therefore be less knowledgeable about politics.

H₄: Gender will have an indirect effect on political efficacy through news use such that women will be less polarized, engage in less news use as a result, and therefore be less efficacious about politics.

To summarize the first study's theoretical model, I expect that women will be less polarized, and therefore they will engage in less news use. As a result of less news use, women will have lower political knowledge and lower political efficacy. The hypothesized relationships are presented in Figure 1.

Affective Polarization

If polarization can act as a mechanism to help understand the gender gap in political interest, the question then becomes whether increased polarization can aid women in more closely embodying the “ideal citizen.” In the debate over the American public’s increasing political polarization, the answer depends on how polarization is measured. Policy-based division is just one way of defining partisan polarization. Iyengar and colleagues (2012) contend that the vast majority of the public does not think about parties in ideological terms – their ties to the political world are instead affective, based on a primordial sense of partisan identity that is acquired very early in life and persists over the entire life cycle. Namely, Iyengar and colleagues (2012) argue in favor of an alternative definition of polarization, based on the classic concept of social distance (Bogardus, 1947). Iyengar and colleagues (2012) put forth a social identity theory-based account of affective polarization, where partisan identities are activated by exposure to political messages. A salient partisan identity is characterized by positive evaluation of the ingroup and negative evaluation of the outgroup (Billig & Tajfel, 1973). Slater (2007) has argued that selective exposure to identity-relevant media reinforces social identity, and Knobloch-Westerwick (2012) found that greater selective exposure to attitude-consistent messages activates political self-concept. Moreover, Garrett, Dvir Gvirsman, Johnson, Tsfaty, Neo, and Dal (2014) found that selective exposure activates emotions towards both the ingroup and outgroup, across cross-cultural differences. Ultimately, Iyengar et al. (2012) demonstrate that both Republicans and Democrats increasingly like their ingroup and dislike their outgroup.

Therefore, a good diagnostic indicator, in Iyengar and colleagues’ (2012) view, is the extent to which partisans view each other as a disliked outgroup. The definitional test

of social identity requires not only positive sentiment for one's own group, but also negative sentiment toward those identifying with opposing groups (Iyengar et al., 2012). In addition, partisans tend to dislike their opponents and like their supporters (Iyengar et al., 2012), and women tend to use social media for indirect political purposes and connectivity (Brundidge et al., 2013). Therefore, for women, connectivity on social media could lead to social comparison, thus spurring identification with a particular partisan identity. In this way, social comparison is a mechanism to increase political engagement.

One important aspect of political polarization pertains to group psychology. Sunstein (2009) outlines the well-established phenomenon of group polarization: members of a deliberating group typically end up in a more extreme position in line with their tendencies before deliberation began, and this has been found in hundreds of studies involving over a dozen countries. Group polarization occurs for several reasons. First are informational influences. Most people listen to the arguments made by other people, and in any group with some initial inclination, the views of most people in the group will inevitably be skewed in the direction of that inclination (Dvir Gvirsman, 2014; Stroud, 2011; Sunstein, 2009). Next is social comparison. People usually want to be perceived favorably by other group members; once they hear what others believe, they will adjust their positions at least slightly in the direction of the dominant position (Sunstein, 2009).

Furthermore, there are close links among confidence, extremism, and corroboration by others. A polarized individual who is maximally favorable toward a preferred candidate and maximally unfavorable toward a disliked alternative arguably has very high levels of confidence and certainty (Dvir Gvirsman, 2014; Stroud, 2010, p. 559).

In several contexts, people's opinions become more extreme simply because their views have been corroborated, and because they become more confident after learning that others share their views (Sunstein, 2009). In these ways, certainty, confidence, and polarization intersect. A great deal of work also suggests that group polarization is heightened when people have a sense of shared identity; people may polarize because they are attempting to conform to the position that they see as typical within their own group (Sunstein, 2009). If people's identity is made especially salient, the ingroup norms are likely to become more extreme. "If arguments come from a member of an ingroup, they are especially likely to be persuasive, and they are more likely to seem right" (Sunstein, 2009, pp. 92-93). The psychological mechanisms at work in the group polarization process may enable a heightened sense of political information efficacy, due to people's desire to conform to positions they view as typical in the group.

Recent scholarship in polarization has focused on how new communication technology increases the amount of corroborating perspectives people encounter, and thus increases the amount of political identity affirmation. However, such a process is cyclical, and according to Prior (2007), most people opt out of politics so they do not get political identity affirmation. As a result, it is crucial to examine the potential to increase polarization within a social media setting.

Gentzkow and Shapiro (2011) posit that the Internet could *either* increase or decrease the likelihood that consumers are exposed to diverse news and opinion. However, Sunstein (2009) has expressed concerns that the Internet may be increasing ideological segregation. Cable news and the Internet have changed the "neutral" media environment entirely, and the media outlets of today have greater incentive to become

“niche news” (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Stroud, 2011). In fact, Iyengar and Hahn (2009) argue that the trend toward a more divided electorate has occurred simultaneously with the revolution in information technology, and this trend is by no means coincidental. Even more detrimental, Prior (2007) argues that the proliferation of cable television and the Internet offer people more control and choice, thereby making it easier for some to avoid the news altogether. Consequently, political involvement has become more unequal, and elections are more polarized (Prior, 2007). Dvir Gvirsman (2014) found that users of partisan media were more familiar with arguments reinforcing their views and, as a result, more prone to polarization.

Partisan information consumption can also have an effect on levels of affective polarization, or social identity. In a study on partisan identity, Garrett and colleagues (2014) found that in both the United States and Israel, despite cross-cultural differences, pro- and counter-attitudinal information exposure had distinct influences on attitudes toward members of opposing political parties. Additionally, Levendusky (2013) reports that the slanted presentation of news on partisan outlets can lead viewers to perceive the other party more negatively, to trust them less, and to be less supportive of bipartisanship.

Should scholars and political enthusiasts be concerned about politically polarized citizens – over issues and identity alike? On one hand, partisan selective exposure and polarization may spark more political participation – a democratically desirable goal (Abramowitz, 2010; Stroud, 2010). More political interest and participation, especially from females as outlined above, would be highly desirable as a pro-democratic outcome. On the other hand, partisan selective exposure and polarization may engender a less tolerant and more fragmented public (Stroud, 2010; Sunstein, 2009). The fear is that

increased intolerance and fragmentation will lead to negative repercussions. If polarization is to help us understand the gender gap, researchers must also consider potential symptoms of unhealthy polarization, such as legislative gridlock, incivility, and violence.

The challenge lies in devising ways to counteract detrimental effects of partisan selective exposure, while encouraging beneficial effects. The challenge, according to Stroud (2010), becomes figuring out *how* to increase community-building forces in the face of increasing opportunities for selectivity. One such avenue may be in the form of social networking sites, where a diverse array of opinions exist in the form of user comments. In turn, a discussion on Internet effects follows, particularly regarding social networking sites' potential for political engagement.

Internet Effects

The advent of the Internet age has spurred much examination of political interest. Early advocates of the Internet's function as a political forum predicted that cost and accessibility of political information relates to citizens' level of engagement with political affairs: the lower the cost and higher the accessibility of political information, the higher the aggregate level of citizen engagement, an assertion that is consistent with rational theories of behavior in which the cost of information is an important factor shaping actors' political strategies (Bimber, 2001). Boulianne (2011) argues that online news, as opposed to traditional media sources, has a stronger effect on stimulating political interest than reinforcing political interest, due to ease of access. In addition, as with print news sources, which require turning pages, Internet news consumption demands more attention

than radio or television, and this demand for continued attention may enable political learning (McLeod & McDonald, 1985).

Does the Internet generate political engagement, or is it merely a convenient tool for those who are already engaged in politics? Can social media serve as a medium that is outside traditional political participation, thereby re-engaging the disengaged and disaffected? These questions are particularly important to further examine whether citizens can become more politically engaged through new media use. Of particular interest are the causal relationships among political engagement and media use.

Boulianne (2011) submits that while the relationship between media use and political engagement may be reciprocal in nature, the characteristics of these different media can make the effects run stronger in one direction than the other. Norris (2001) refers to the media's role in stimulating political engagement as a mobilization process. The process works both ways, in that exposure to news media can stimulate the individual's political engagement, but individuals who are already "instrumental" users of news media (i.e., high on surveillance motives) tend to be exposed to more news and retain more information from exposure than those who are not (Eveland, Shah, & Kwak, 2003). In the Internet age, as individuals have more autonomy than ever before in choosing their sources of information to fit their preexisting interests, use of new media (social networking sites, blogs, and so on) targeted to the user's specific interest areas can feed preexisting interest in public affairs even more precisely, thereby reinforcing the individual's political engagement to an even higher degree (Boulianne, 2011).

As mentioned previously, David (2009) finds that some part of differential learning from the news can be attributed to individual differences in motivation, as

different dimensions of motivation have different effects on news-use and attention behaviors. Psychological needs, together with indicators of ability such as educational attainment, play significant roles in the prediction of media use motivations (David, 2009). News use motivations have psychological antecedents that drive them; such generalized predispositions or needs predict goal-driven behaviors (David, 2009). Systematic differences in political knowledge have critical implications for the ability of some groups to perceive and act on their self-interest or their notion of the public interest (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). As mentioned previously, since men express greater confidence in political knowledge than women (Wolak & McDevitt, 2011), it is important to examine differences in news use motivation based on gender.

In the act of paying greater attention, people are more likely to process content more deeply, which magnifies the Internet's influence on political interest (Schoenbach & Lauf, 2002). Online news consumption is associated with increased learning (Tewksbury & Rittenberg, 2008), political knowledge (Kenski & Stroud, 2006), information sharing and political discussion (Hardy & Scheufele, 2005), and political information efficacy (Tedesco, 2007). Social networks can reach those citizens who are initially less motivated or interested in public affairs (Boulianne, 2011), and online news sources offer greater choice in content and do not merely reflect the prominence of stories found in the print edition (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002). Greater diversity in content allows Internet users to better track public affairs, particularly around issues that most interest them (Tewksbury & Rittenberg, 2008) and, in the process, bypass traditional media's potential bias. Because of these factors, Boulianne (2011) concludes that online networks stimulate political engagement.

Social Networking Sites

Social networking sites (SNS) have become some of the most popular destination points for online traffic. SNS are Web-based services that allow individuals to construct accessible profiles within a bounded system, connect with other users of the system, and traverse these connections with others within the system (Kushin & Kitchener, 2009). Moreover, the Pew Research Center reports that the number of Americans who followed candidates and other political figures on social media rose sharply during the 2014 mid-term election: “16% of registered voters now do this, up from 6% in 2010” (Smith, 2014, para. 2). Clearly, the use of SNS for political purposes is on the rise.

Citizens use SNS to follow campaigns, comment on political events, research candidate backgrounds, and view party platforms. On Twitter specifically, live-tweeting during a political campaign debate offers users an opportunity to engage in public conversation, and there are links between viewers’ frequency of candidate mentions in tweets and candidate evaluations (McKinney, Houston, & Hawthorne, 2014). Moreover, live-tweeting during a debate offers users an opportunity to frame what occurred; there are very few differences between elite and non-elite social media Twitter conversations, and elite user views spread farther than non-elite views (Hawthorne, Houston, & McKinney, 2013). In the digital information age, people rely on SNS to seek out information from other users, which can help them decide whom to support (Postelnicu & Cozma, 2008).

There are several implications for political engagement on SNS and selective exposure. Anonymous interactions with one another in the networked space may potentially assuage both Prior’s (2007) concern that entertainment-oriented citizens can

“opt out” of political news, and Sunstein’s (2009) concern that users are fragmenting into ideological enclaves. For example, people may be more interested in participating in and supporting activities that their friends share through social media, and thus more willing to attend those activities online or offline (Kim, Hsu, & de Zuniga, 2013). This process of building identity and meaning through networked relationships on social media may have the larger effect of creating a sense of shared experiences, knowledge, and tasks, which are the social glue and foundation of civic society (Bimber, 2001). The very nature of the online presence, such as the absence of nonverbal cues, may prevent interlocutors from judging opinions based on factors other than the arguments themselves, thereby increasing the participation of disadvantaged individuals and diversifying the views expressed (Blader & Tyler, 2009).

However, Mutz (2006) submits that individuals’ offline social networks are unlikely to be a source of exposure to cross-cutting political attitudes. This is because individuals are selective about who they associate with; they tend to shape their environments in ways that limit exposure to different viewpoints, through their choice of neighborhoods and associational affiliations (Garrett, 2009). And yet on social media, people may encounter a variety of weak ties, people they do not know very well, and strong ties, people they know well (Mutz, 2006). Such social media commenters may provide a diverse array of political opinions. There are also dynamics of interpersonal political communication and persuasion at work. Perceived politicization affects how people interpret and act on information (Dalton, Beck, & Huckfeldt, 1998) and how they articulate their opinions (Lau, Sears, & Jessor, 1990). Moreover, one might avoid

political discussion for purposes of etiquette (Eliasoph, 1998) or out of a desire to avoid conflict (Mutz, 2006).

Yet the lowered sense of social presence experienced online may encourage expression of dissenting views and reduce the social risks and potential negative effects of disagreement (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002). Wojcieszak and Mutz's (2009) study of over 40,000 respondents finds that roughly half of participation in nonpolitical chats or message boards involved some discussion of political topics and controversial public issues; given the relatively minor status of politics in most Americans' lives, this high percentage is surprising, and leads Kim et al. (2013) to conclude that utilization of SNS for political communication can lead to increased levels of trust, at least in terms of civic engagement. Considering that there is a gender gap on political knowledge returns on education (Dow, 2009) and political efficacy (Conway, 1985) and the nature of the online presence potentially increasing the participation of disadvantaged individuals and diversifying the views expressed (Blader & Tyler, 2009), it is crucial to examine the effects of social pressure within an online setting.

In the U.S., the rise of the Internet initially raised hopes that the costs of citizenship would be reduced such that women might have more opportunities for learning and political participation (Browning, 1996). However, instead, most early empirical research suggests that Internet use actually widened gendered political participation gaps (e.g., Bimber, 1999; Katz & Rice, 2002). Bimber (1999) found that when compared with traditional means, women found the Internet a less attractive tool for contacting public officials, while the less traditionally well connected found it a more attractive tool. However, as Brundidge and colleagues (2013) note, much has changed

since the late 1990s, and therefore it is crucial to examine the social media of today, especially in light of findings that the gender digital divide is now gone (Pew Internet, 2010).

I theorize that social pressure plays a role in increasing women's political engagement in a social media environment. I first consider David's (2009) assertion that news use motivations have psychological antecedents that drive them; such predispositions predict goal-driven behaviors. In addition, systematic differences in political knowledge have critical implications for the ability of some groups to perceive and act on their self-interest or their notion of the public interest (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Since men tend to have higher political engagement than women (Kenski, 2000; Bennett & Bennett, 1989), men may be motivated to use social media as another tool with which to gather news and engage in politics, while women have lower motivations to do so since they demonstrate less political engagement offline.

However, women may be more inclined than men to use social media for political purposes. In a secondary data analysis of Pew Research Center data, Brundidge and colleagues (2013) found women are shifting their attention away from offline forms of contact onto online forms of contact, which widens offline gender gaps, while narrowing online gender gaps. Such findings support other literature, which finds that when compared to men, women participate politically in more indirect ways (e.g., Coffé and Bolzendahl 2010). "It is not surprising then that women would reinforce this tendency online, rather than radically altering the ways in which they participate" (Brundidge et al., 2013, p. 13). Such findings indicate that the medium for political engagement is consequential for user gender.

Considering that women tend to participate politically in more indirect ways (e.g., signing an online petition via SNS) than direct ways (e.g., writing a letter to a congressperson) (Coffé & Bozendahl, 2010), I theorize a link between issue polarization and women's SNS use. Social media posts, with their potential for user comments, provide a forum for pro-attitudinal and counter-attitudinal messages, where women can connect with other users to discuss politics. As mentioned previously, Sunstein (2009) posits that group polarization is heightened when people have a sense of shared identity, and people may polarize because they are attempting to conform to the position that they see as typical within their own group (Sunstein, 2009). If the original poster's political opinion is affirmed by social media commenters, then the argument is especially likely to become more persuasive and more extreme (Sunstein, 2009). For instance, a woman who posts a social media status update about a political issue may have her opinion affirmed by commenters, and therefore her attitude may strengthen.

Conversely, since women tend to have lower political efficacy and confidence than men (Mondak & Anderson, 2004), they may be more susceptible to changing their opinions if social media commenters criticize their attitude positions. These group polarization processes in a social media environment may therefore enable the strengthening of political attitudes. As such, I next examine the specific potential implications of social pressure on social media.

Social Pressure on Social Media

Research on the evolution of norms on social networking sites (SNS) has shown that because social settings on SNS are highly ambiguous, offline practices are especially likely to shape online behaviors (McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012). Vraga and colleagues

(2015) found that not only are certain types of politics more valued than others, but that some people are more open toward political expression than others, and that the distinction is related to pre-existing individual differences (Vraga et al., 2015, p. 284). Gender may act as a moderating variable due to women's and men's feelings of political efficacy on SNS. Lee (2014) examined how participant gender could impact political opinion formation on Facebook, and results indicated that although others' opinions were powerful cues, their influence was moderated by internal political self-efficacy (IPSE); individuals with higher IPSE were less influenced by others' opinions, meaning that IPSE influenced the extent to which they depended on the cues. This result confirms that IPSE can function as a key motivational factor that moderates the effect of political messages (Lee, 2014). Since women have been found to score lower than men on political information efficacy (Tedesco, 2011), it stands to reason that their attitudes may be more susceptible to influence from others in the form of commentary in a social media environment. That is, women may be more impacted by political messages from social media commenters, as women may seek greater guidance in forming political attitudes in the form of social media commentary.

Vraga and colleagues (2015) posit the audience for a political post on Facebook combines people from multiple social spheres of one's life and, because content posted to social networking sites can be copied, shared, and spread widely or could be hidden from some friends by a news feed display algorithm, the "real" audience on Facebook is unspecified. The networked audience on Facebook combines friends and acquaintances from different social spheres, and this "context collapse" creates potentially uncomfortable tension from the intersection of these competing contexts (Marwick &

boyd, 2011). “Although Facebook friend networks tend to map closely to offline social networks, individuals from different parts of that network – friends, family, work colleagues, distant acquaintances – may all be part of the audience for any post to the site” (Vraga et al., 2015, p. 282). Such a networked audience on Facebook can foster specific social norms for users.

Norms represent individuals’ basic knowledge of what others do and what others think that they should do (Cialdini, 2003). Norms are situational or mental representations of appropriate behavior that guide behavior in certain situations, and they exist as collective representations of acceptable group conduct as well as individual perceptions of particular group conduct (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005). Normative influence means that people will conform under the direct surveillance of others; conversely, when surveillance of others is removed, people are less likely to conform (Spears & Lea, 1994). Moreover, Lapinski and Rimal (2005) posit that public behaviors are more subject to normative influence than private behaviors. Importantly, Stroud and colleagues (2014) found that a single individual can affect behavioral norms in an online comment section, and in particular, an opinion leader can affect the quality of comments left by social media users.

Incivility in the form of social media commentary can have particularly strong effects on SNS users. Coe and colleagues (2014) submit that public discourse has always had its share of incivility, and the current era is no different. Of course, the difference now is that the 21st century’s vast and interactive media environment has created expansive opportunities for public debate, and moments of incivility spread more rapidly and widely than ever before (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). As a result, for many citizens,

politics on Facebook is most often associated with rants, drama, and virulent disagreement (Vraga et al., 2015). Such incivility, a common feature of public discussions, now tends to not only delegitimize political arguments but also lower audience evaluations of those making them (Coe et al., 2014).

Yet, there are important differences between those who have high interest in politics and those who do not, and these differences may lead to different reactions to incivility. Vraga and colleagues (2015) found ultimately those SNS users “who were more motivated and able – those who cared deeply about politics and who were less conflict avoidant – were more likely to see the benefits of political expression on Facebook and to contribute to such expression themselves, in spite of (or sometimes because of) the potential risks of disagreement” (p. 288). Perhaps in spite of incivility, people with stronger interests in politics are more open to uncivil commentary since they value the content of the discussion over the tone of the commentary. As such, men may be more open to cross-cutting social media commentary, as they tend to have higher political interest scores than women. Conversely, women may be less open to cross-cutting social media commentary. As a result, there may be political attitude differences between men and women in reacting to social media commentary. In light of the considerations on affective polarization, gender, social media commentary, and social pressure, the following hypotheses are posed:

H₁: Social reinforcement of political identity on social media will directly increase affective polarization and indirectly increase a.) political information efficacy, b.) intent to participate in politics, and c.) political interest through affective polarization.

H₂: Challenges to political identity on social media will directly reduce affective polarization and indirectly decrease a.) political information efficacy, b.) intent to participate in politics, and c.) political interest through affective polarization.

RQ₁: Will gender moderate the polarization process such that the effects of social reinforcement on polarization will be stronger for women than men and, as a result, women will gain more in efficacy, intent to participate, and interest than men?

Prior to a full description of the method, I reiterate all Chapter II hypotheses for the first study:

H₁: Women will be less polarized than men.

H₂: Polarization will mediate the relationship between gender and news use.

H₃: Gender will have an indirect effect on political knowledge through news use such that women will be less polarized, engage in less news use as a result, and therefore be less knowledgeable about politics.

H₄: Gender will have an indirect effect on political efficacy through news use such that women will be less polarized, engage in less news use as a result, and therefore be less efficacious about politics.

I also reiterate the Chapter II hypotheses and research question for the second study:

H₁: Social reinforcement of political identity on social media will directly increase affective polarization and indirectly increase a.) political information efficacy, b.) intent to participate in politics, and c.) political interest through affective polarization.

H₂: Challenges to political identity on social media will directly reduce affective polarization and indirectly decrease a.) political information efficacy, b.) intent to participate in politics, and c.) political interest through affective polarization.

RQ₁: Will gender moderate the polarization process such that the effects of social reinforcement on polarization will be stronger for women than men and, as a result, women will gain more in efficacy, intent to participate, and interest than men?

Chapter 3: Method

The project consists of two distinct studies. The first study is a secondary data analysis, which provides an initial vantage point into the possible relationship between gender, news use, political polarization, political knowledge, and political efficacy. The second study, an experiment, tests for social pressure as a mechanism to lead women to more closely embody “the ideal citizen” Tocqueville describes. The experiment tested social comparison and group identity as a mechanism for affective polarization, particularly regarding ingroup and outgroup political identity. I first instructed participants to imagine they had composed a partisan political post on Facebook, accompanied by comments from other social media users. This experiment tested to see if there was a difference in the effect of supportive, critical, or a lack of social media comments on respondents’ PIE, affective polarization, and dangerous polarization over partisan identity. In what follows, I describe the secondary data analysis, followed by a description of the experiment.

Study I

Secondary Data Analysis

The data for this study came from a 2012 random-digit-dial telephone survey conducted throughout the 2012 U.S. presidential campaign, the American National Election 2012 Time Series Study (ANES, 2014). The ANES was previously called the “National Election Studies” or NES (ANES, 2014). To avoid confusion with the other national election studies in other countries, it has been called the American National Election Studies since 2005 (ANES, 2014). The ANES 2012 Time Series Study is the 29th study in a series of election studies conducted during years of Presidential elections

since 1948 (ANES, 2014). Respondents were interviewed during the two months preceding the November election, and then re-interviewed during the two months following the election (ANES, 2014). Furthermore, for the first time in Time Series history, face-to-face interviewing was supplemented with data collection on the Internet (ANES, 2014). The total number of respondents in the first panel was 5,914. The total number of respondents for the second panel was 5,510, so 404 respondents dropped out over the course of the panels.

Moreover, I used a sub-sample of participants that were asked specific news use items and political efficacy items. After data cleaning due to non-responses and inapplicable responses, the total number of participants under analysis was 1,131. The collection of longitudinal data enabled the testing of the hypotheses that polarization would mediate the relationship between gender and political knowledge, as well as the hypothesis that polarization would mediate the relationship between gender and political efficacy.

Measures

Gender. The survey asked respondents to identify their gender. Five-hundred and seventy-one respondents identified as female (50.5%), and 560 respondents identified as male (49.5%). *Gender* was dummy-coded for the analyses such that *Female* was coded as 1 and *Male* was coded as 0.

Race. The survey asked respondents to identify *race*, which served as a control variable. 788 participants identified as *White* (69.7%), 225 identified as *Black* (19.9%), 10 identified as *Native American* (0.9%), 14 identified as *Asian* (1.2%), and 94 identified

as *Other* (8.3%). The *Other* category included participants who chose *Other* and participants who selected multiple races from the available list.

Age. The survey also asked respondents to provide their age range in years. *Age* served as a control variable, and was classified on the following levels: 17-20 (n = 39, 3.4%), 21-24 (n = 51, 4.5%), 25-29 (n = 63, 5.6%), 30-34 (n = 86, 7.6%), 35-39 (n = 67, 5.9%), 40-44 (n = 102, 9.0%), 45-49 (n = 104, 9.2%), 50-54 (n = 125, 11.1%), 55-59 (n = 141, 12.5%), 60-64 (n = 111, 9.8%), 65-69 (n = 89, 7.9%), 70-74 (n = 62, 5.5%), and 75 and above (n = 73, 6.5%). The median age range of the participants was 50-54 years.

Education Level. Regarding education level, the survey asked respondents, “What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?” Response options included: *10th grade, 11th grade, 12th grade no diploma, high school graduate - high school diploma or equivalent, some college but no degree, associate degree in college occupational/vocational program, associate degree in college - academic program, bachelor’s degree, master’s degree, and professional school degree*. The most common education level was *associate degree in college*. 221 (19.5%) of participants had a four-year degree, and 128 (11.3%) had more than a four-year degree.

Income. Regarding income level, the survey asked respondents, “What is your family income?” The ten most frequently appearing outcomes, in dollars, were: *Under 5,000; 25,000-27,499; 30,000-34,999; 35,000-39,999; 40,000-44,999; 50,000-54,999; 60,000-64,999; 80,000-89,999; and 100,000-109,999*. The most common income level was \$40,000-44,999. Furthermore, 93 respondents reported making under \$5,000, 55 reported making \$30,000-34,999, and 42 reported making \$35,000-39,999.

Measurement: Political Variables

Party Identification. The survey asked for *partisan identification*, which also served as a control variable. The question was posed: *Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Democrat, a Republican, an Independent, or what?* 460 participants (40.7%) identified as *Democrat*, 268 (23.7%) identified as *Republican*, 345 (30.5%) identified as *Independent*, and 23 (2.0%) identified as *Other Party*. Two separate dummy codes were created. In the first dummy code, 1 was coded as *Democrat*, and 0 was coded as the omitted reference categories *Republican*, *Independent*, and *Other Party*. Conversely, in the second dummy code, 1 was coded as *Republican*, while 0 was coded as the omitted reference categories *Democrat*, *Independent*, and *Other Party*.

Political Polarization. While there are several ways to operationalize political polarization, Stroud (2010) used respondent reactions to President Bush and Governor Kerry in the 2004 presidential election. Similarly, I used respondent reactions to President Obama and Governor Romney during the 2012 campaign. The 2012 study asked a “feeling thermometer” question, meaning that participants were asked to report their opinions towards each presidential candidate on a scale from 0 to 100, ranging from unfavorable to favorable.

In line with Iyengar and colleagues (2012), Garrett and colleagues (2014), and Stroud (2010), I took the absolute value of the difference of the Obama and Romney feeling thermometer variables to create an overall polarization score. For Time 1, the absolute value of the difference of the Obama and Romney variables created an overall polarization score ($M = 54.22$, $SD = 30.20$). Additionally, for Time 2, the absolute value

of the difference of the Obama and Romney variables created overall polarization score for Time 2 ($M = 53.30$, $SD = 30.17$).

Political Knowledge. Political knowledge is an important focal variable in the model. Political communication scholars have designed several ways to measure political knowledge, and yet, it is a difficult concept to measure. “Issues and candidates change, forcing scholars to revise their measures of political knowledge. Changes in the variance of knowledge scales over time can emerge for purely methodological reasons, either because questions have changed or because the same questions have become more or less difficult to answer” (Prior, 2007, p. 96). Regarding the specific ANES items, scores on knowledge accuracy were coded such that 1 equaled “correct” and 0 equaled “incorrect.”

The ANES survey asked the respondents the following questions to assess their political knowledge for Time 1: *Do you happen to know how many times an individual can be elected President of the United States under current laws?* (Number correct = 1,023; 90.45%); *Is the U.S. federal budget deficit the amount by which the government’s spending exceeds the amount of money it collects now bigger, about the same, or smaller than it was during most of the 1990s?* (Number correct = 963; 85.15%); *For how many years is a United States Senator elected? That is, how many years are there in one full term of office for a U.S. Senator?* (Number correct = 396; 35.01%); *What is Medicare?* (Number correct = 901; 79.66%); and *On which of the following does the U.S. federal government currently spend the least (foreign aid, Medicare, national defense, or Social Security)?* (Number correct = 376; 33.24%).

I used the following items to measure political knowledge for Time 2: *What job or political office does John Boehner NOW hold?* (Number correct = 449, 30.70%); *What*

job or political office does Joe Biden NOW hold? (Number correct = 978, 86.47%); *What job or political office does David Cameron NOW hold?* (Number correct = 209, 18.48%); *What job or political office does John Roberts NOW hold?* (Number correct = 230, 20.34%); *Do you happen to know which party had the most members in the House of Representatives in Washington BEFORE the election [this/last] month?* (Number correct = 723, 63.93%); and *Do you happen to know which party had the most members in the U.S. Senate BEFORE the election [this/last] month?* (Number correct = 613, 54.20%).

Political Efficacy. In the survey, participants were randomly assigned to receive either the standard efficacy questions that had been part of the ANES Time Series for many years, or a revised set of questions introduced on the ANES 2008 Time Series survey that should have demonstrated better measurement properties than the standard battery since they replaced the “agree-disagree” question format that was subject to acquiescence bias. The two sets of Time 1 political efficacy items were combined so there was one set of four items total, and I created an additional dummy-variable so those with the old set received a 1 and those with the new set received a 0. I then added this dummy variable to the model to account for any differences attributable to changes in the measurement. The same went for Time 2 efficacy items, which had also been spliced in two sets of four.

At each time point, participants were asked four items regarding their political efficacy, ranked on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1, *agree strongly*, to 5, *disagree strongly*. Certain items were reverse-coded for consistency. Political efficacy items were the following for Time 1: *Sometimes, politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on; I feel that I have a pretty good*

understanding of the important political issues facing our country; Public officials don't care much what people like me think; and People like me don't have any say about what the government does. The overall mean for the scale at Time 1 was 11.54 out of 20, and the standard deviation was 2.88 ($\alpha = 0.54$).

Participants were also asked to respond to efficacy items ranked on five-point Likert-type scales in Time 2. Political efficacy items were the following for Time 2: *Sometimes, politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on; I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country; Public officials don't care much what people like me think; and People like me don't have any say about what the government does.* The overall mean for the scale at Time 2 was 10.41 out of 20, and the standard deviation was 2.39 ($\alpha = 0.55$).

News Use. Several limitations must be noted regarding the use of news use self-reports. Traditional approaches of news use measurement ask respondents to self-report how many days per week or how many hours per day they spend watching news on TV, on average. First, respondents may not be able to recall the names of the programs they consume; similarly, they may not accurately remember how much of each news source they consumed on that given week, and they could also forget they watched certain shows altogether (Dilliplane, Goldman, & Mutz, 2012). To address these problems, Dilliplane et al. (2012) developed the Program List Technique to decrease the cognitive demands placed on respondents. The technique presents respondents with a list of possible shows they could have watched based on Nielsen ratings, and respondents select the amount of time they spent consuming each one. It is in theory easier for respondents

to report regular viewership of specific programs than to mentally tally the amount of time devoted to abstract categories of programming; after all, viewers are likely think in terms of the programs they *watch*, rather than how much time they spend watching them (Dilliplane et al., 2012).

Prior (2013) however argues that this request places too great of a cognitive burden on participants. He also contends that the criteria for defining “regular exposure” does not distinguish different amounts of exposure in terms of minutes per day or minutes per week. In response, Goldman, Mutz, and Dilliplane (2013) point out that viewers are very likely to remember the names of television programs they regularly watch, and therefore the cognitive burden is not as great as it is for other techniques. In addition, the authors contend that researchers rarely need to examine the level of news consumption nuance that “minutes per day” can provide, and the cutoff point of “during the past week” is sufficient to capture levels of news consumption. Moreover, the virtue of Goldman et al.’s (2013) approach is its strong predictive validity; that is, changes in television exposure correspond to changes in political knowledge over time.

I chose to rely on the ANES surveyors’ presentations of several programs so that participants could recognize and recall watching them. This method enabled me to calculate a single, overall news use variable. I computed this variable by counting the number of programs listed in the participants’ answers of “yes” or “no.” Based on these considerations, I contend the more people consume news, the greater the amount of political information they are exposed to. Considering that changes in news exposure correspond to changes in political knowledge over time (Goldman et al., 2013), this method is an appropriate one.

Several news use variables were used to assess participants' news use habits. Participants were asked to report if they had utilized several media outlets for news use. For each television program item, participants were asked: "Which TV program do you watch regularly?" The following television programs were included in the analysis: *20/20*, *60 Minutes*, *ABC News Nightline*, *ABC World News Tonight*, *America Live*, *America This Morning*, *America's Newsroom*, *Anderson Cooper*, *CBS Evening News*, *CBS This Morning*, *The Chris Matthews Show*, *The Colbert Report*, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, *Dateline NBC*, *Face the Nation*, *The Five*, *Fox Report*, *Frontline*, *Good Morning America*, *Hannity*, *Huckabee*, *Meet the Press*, *NBC Nightly News*, *The O'Reilly Factor*, *On the Record with Greta Van Susteren*, *Rock Center with Brian Williams*, *Special Report with Bret Baier*, *Tavis Smiley*, *Sunday Morning*, *This Week*, and *The Today Show*.

Additionally, participants were asked: "Which radio program do you listen to regularly?" The following radio programs were included in the analysis: *All Things Considered* (NPR), *The Ed Shultz Show*, *Glenn Beck Program*, *The Mark Levin Show*, *Morning Edition* (NPR), *The Neal Boortz Show*, *The Power* (Joe Madison), *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, *The Savage Nation* (Michael Savage), *The Sean Hannity Show*, *Talk of the Nation* (NPR), and *The Thom Hartmann Program*.

Moreover, participants were asked: "Which websites do you visit regularly?" The following websites were included in the analysis: *ABC News* (abc.go.com), *CNN* (cnn.com), *Drudge Report* (drudgereport.com), *Forbes* (forbes.com), *Fox News* (foxnews.com), *Good Morning America* (gma.yahoo.com), *News* (news.google.com), *Huffington Post* (huffingtonpost.com), *Los Angeles Times* (latimes.com), *MSNBC*

(*msnbc.com*), *New York Times* (*nytimes.com*), *Today Show* (*today.msnbc.msn.com*), *USA Today* (*usatoday.com*), *Washington Post* (*washingtonpost.com*), and *Yahoo News* (*news.yahoo.com*).

Finally, participants were asked: “Which newspapers do you read regularly?” The following print newspapers were included in the analysis: *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post*. Finally, the following online newspapers were included in the analysis: *The New York Times* (*nytimes.com*), *USA Today* (*usatoday.com*), *The Wall Street Journal* (*online.wsj.com*), and *The Washington Post* (*washingtonpost.com*).

Examining news use variables allowed me to test the second hypothesis, in which I predicted females would collect less news than males. I counted the number of news items each participant recalled using regularly and assigned each participant a news use score. I then created a “high news use” to “low news use” spectrum on which participants were placed. I included a total of 66 news use items ($M = 5.21$, $SD = 5.34$, $Range = 38$).

Study II

Experiment

Participants. For the experiment, I selected an effect size of 0.2, as it has been used in previous studies on political polarization (e.g., Garrett et al., 2014). Todd Little (2013) writes that at sample size of 100, “the effect size that can be reliably detected would be a Cohen’s d of about 0.20, while at a sample size of 150 the detectable effect size would be a d of about 0.10” (p. 121). A power analysis, with input parameters including one tail, an effect size of 0.2, a p -value of 0.05, and a power value of 0.95 revealed I needed to obtain a sample size of 262 participants. As a result, I aimed for a

total of approximately 300 participants. With approximately 100 participants in each experimental condition, I concluded I would have sufficient power. Participants were students recruited from communication courses at a large Midwestern university. Of the 350 participants contacted, 282 elected to participate and 266 complete cases were recorded for analysis.

Participants were recruited from two communication courses at a major Midwestern university and offered extra credit to participate. Of the 350 participants contacted, 282 elected to participate and 266 complete cases were recorded for analysis. Participants were first asked to provide demographic information. The average age of respondents was 19 years ($S.D. = 1.54$). Of the respondents, 51.9% ($n = 138$) identified as *female* and 48.1% ($n = 128$) identified as *male*. 80.5% ($n = 214$) identified as *White*, 10.9% ($n = 29$) as *African American*, 4.5% ($n = 12$) as *Asian*, 0.4% ($n = 1$) as *American Indian or Alaska Native*, 0.4% ($n = 1$) as *Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander*, and 0.8% ($n = 2$) as *Other*.

Participants first responded to brief items regarding their political information efficacy, affective polarization towards President Obama, and political interest. Next, participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. Condition assignment was based on partisan identity. For instance, if a participant identified as a Republican, she would be placed into a Republican condition; conversely, if she identified as a Democrat, she was placed into a Democratic condition. At that point, the randomization occurred; that is, one of three conditions were randomly generated. In all three conditions, participants were presented with a simulated Facebook post and were asked to imagine they had generated it themselves. Two experimental conditions were possible: a

simulated Facebook post with supportive commentary beneath it, and a simulated Facebook post with critical commentary. The third condition served as a control, containing the same simulated Facebook post from the experimental conditions, but with no accompanying social media commentary. Ultimately, 88 participants were in the supportive condition, 88 were in the critical condition, and 90 participants were in the control condition. After exposure to the stimulus, participants answered post-test questions regarding affective polarization, political information efficacy, political interest, and intention to participate in politics.

Procedures. A three-group between subjects experiment was conducted to test the hypothesized relationships. Participants were asked to take an online survey during March and April 2016 via the online survey software *Qualtrics*. Upon providing demographic information, participants were presented with a series of statements from which they were asked to select a statement that best reflected their political party identification. Upon selection of this statement, *Qualtrics* presented a simulated Facebook status update, previously generated by the primary researcher, reflective of their statement. Participants were instructed to imagine that they posted the comment themselves on Facebook. In the two experimental conditions, several comments by other social media users were attached to the post. In the control condition, no comments were attached to the post, and the status stood alone. Comments in the two experimental conditions differed depending upon experimental condition. Following the stimulus, post-test questions were administered.

Stimulus

Facebook Status. Participants chose to identify as either a Republican or a Democrat, and such agreement provided the conditions. Once the participant selected a party identity, a simulated Facebook status update appeared on the screen. Participants were instructed to imagine they had written this Facebook status update. Within each condition, one of three more potential conditions were randomly presented. The first condition consisted of social media user comments that all supported the participant's ingroup partisan identity, and the second condition consisted of social media user comments that all opposed the ingroup partisan identity. Finally, the third condition contained no social media comments, so as to serve as a control. Such experimental conditions enabled testing for effects differences among supportive comments, critical comments, or an absence of comments on participants' political information efficacy, affective polarization, and political group identity. A complete transcript of the social media user comments following the article in each condition are provided in Figure 1. Images of each condition are provided in Figure 2.

The generation of a Facebook status update depended on participants' responses to the *Prior Partisan Identity* item. Participants who selected any *Democrat* response saw a pro-Democratic Party statement as a simulated Facebook status update: *Listen, I know not everyone cares about politics but I think we should this time around. This is a very important election. The country could go many different ways depending on who gets elected. It isn't just the candidates on the ballot, it's our future. We need a Democrat in the White House!!!* Similarly, participants who selected *Republican* saw a pro-Republican simulated Facebook status update, in that they saw the exact same status, with the term *Republican* replacing *Democrat*.

Supportive Condition. In the supportive conditions, sample social media comments were the following: *I love it! They are going to save the country; Democrats need to get out and vote! We need you more than ever this election; The real question is, can we afford not to elect the Democrats?; and Exactly! Thank you! How could we trust anyone other than us Democrats to fix the country's problems?* Sample social media comments supportive of Republicans were the same, only with the term *Republicans* replacing *Democrats*. Images of these conditions are provided in Figures 2 and 3.

Critical Condition. In the critical conditions, sample social media comments opposing Democrats were the following: *Yes we need a president with backbone but DEMOCRATS you don't have one. Just quit please you will not win; Watch out who you wish for. It will be the biggest "I told you so" ever; It's sad that you want a Democrat in office. I think you are my only friend who thinks this. I feel bad for you; and I'm definitely going to do this except the opposite! Vote to get Democrats out of power!* Again, sample social media comments opposing Republicans were the exact same, only with the term *Republicans* replacing *Democrats*. Finally, in the control conditions, the aforementioned *Prior Partisan Identity* statement led to a simulated Facebook status update, but there were no social media comments that followed. Images of these conditions are provided in Figures 4 and 5.

Variables and Measures

Partisan Identity. Political partisan identity was measured by asking participants to rate their partisan identity on a seven-point scale. Participants were instructed: *Please select the option that best describes your partisan identity.* The responses included: *Strong Republican, Republican, Lean Republican, Independent, Lean Democrat,*

Democrat, and Strong Democrat. Those who selected *Independent* were presented with the statement: “I know you don’t have a preference between the two parties, but if you had to pick, who would you be more likely to vote for: a Democrat or a Republican?” 52 independents were given the forced choice. 35 of these participants indicated they were more likely to vote for a Democrat, while 17 were more likely to vote for a Republican. Ultimately, 126 participants identified as Democrats and 140 identified as Republicans.

Political Information Efficacy. Recently, PIE has been operationalized through a four-item, 5-point Likert-type scale that asks participants to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement to the following statements: *I consider myself well-qualified to participate in politics; I think that I am better informed about politics and government than most people; I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country; and If a friend asked me about the presidential election, I feel I would have enough information to help my friend figure out who to vote for* (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2007). Since this experiment took place during the spring of the 2016 presidential primary contest, the last item was particularly important since the major party nominees were competing to earn the general election nomination. PIE was presented to participants in the pre-test ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 3.81$, $\alpha = 0.89$) and post-test ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 4.13$, $\alpha = 0.92$).

Intent to Participate in Politics. The intent to participate in politics was measured on a 5-point agreement scale from 1, *not at all*, to 5, *very likely*. The items were the following: *How likely are you to vote?; How likely are you to donate to a candidate or campaign?; How likely are you to display a political yard sign?; How likely are you to display a political bumper sticker?; How likely are you to display a political button?;*

How likely are you to attend a political event?; How likely are you to visit a political candidate's website?; and How likely are you to visit a political candidate's social media website? ($M = 2.60$, $SD = 7.23$, $\alpha = 0.89$).

Political Interest. Political interest was measured with two items on a 5-point agreement scale: *I am interested in politics* and *I follow politics closely* ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 2.02$, $r = 0.76$).

Affective Polarization. In their study of affective polarization, Iyengar and colleagues (2012) put forth their measures concerning social distance and stereotypes of party supporters. They drew from Almond and Verba's (1960) measure of feelings concerning inter-party marriage. Responses ranged from 1, *Very unhappy*, to 7, *Very happy*, with 4 indicating, *It would make no difference*. Participants were asked: *Suppose in the future, you have a son or daughter who was getting married. How would you feel if he or she married a supporter of the Republican Party? Would you be pleased, would you be displeased, or would it make no difference?* ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.19$). The same question was asked with *Democratic Party* ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.13$). I next computed how Democrats would feel about their future child marrying a Republican, and then I computed how Republicans would feel about their future child marrying a Democrat. I then combined these two scores into a single "marry the outgroup" item ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 0.88$).

Moreover, I included a "feeling thermometer" question, where participants were asked to report their opinions towards each political party on a scale from 0 to 100, ranging from unfavorable to favorable. The feeling thermometer contained two questions: *How do you feel about Democrats in general?* ($M = 49.81$, $SD = 22.25$) and *How do you*

feel about Republicans in general? ($M = 55.37$, $S.D. = 25.07$). Once again, in line with Iyengar and colleagues (2012), Garrett and colleagues (2014), and Stroud (2010), I took the absolute value of the difference of the *Democrats* and *Republicans* variables to create an overall polarization score ($M = 29.68$, $SD = 27.59$). In addition, I composed a thermometer measuring “feelings toward the outgroup.” I computed Democratic feeling thermometers for Republicans and Republican feeling thermometers for Democrats. Then I combined them into a single “outgroup feeling thermometer” ($M = 38.08$, $SD = 18.61$).

In addition, Almond and Verba (1960) asked respondents to think about what kind of people support and vote for political parties. Drawing from this framework, I asked respondents to indicate how much various positive and negative terms applied to supporters of first the Democratic Party and the Republican Party. Responses ranged from 1, *Not at all*, to 7, *Very much so*, with 4 indicating *Neutral*. The terms included *patriotic people*, *close-minded people*, *hypocritical people*, *selfish people*, *honest people*, *open-minded people*, *generous people*, *mean people*, *interested in national strength and independence*, *intelligent people*, *fascists and militarists*, *betrayers of freedom*, *ignorant and misguided people*, and *people interested in the welfare of humanity* (Almond and Verba, 1960; Iyengar et al., 2012). I analyzed how people felt about Democrats ($M = 4.07$, $S.D. = 13.77$) and Republicans ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 13.54$). Furthermore, I analyzed how Democrats felt about Republicans, and how Republicans felt about Democrats. In this way, I measured how people felt towards the political outgroup ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 11.83$ $\alpha = 0.81$).

Acceptance of Political Violence. Three items were developed by Warner, Hawthorne, and Tschirhart (2015) and measure the acceptability of political violence. For

these items, participants were asked to respond to a scale from 1, *Completely disagree*, to 7, *Completely agree*. The items were the following: *If we can't find a peaceful solution to the problems facing America, true patriots may need to take matters into their own hands; If elections don't fix America's problems, we may need to pursue 2nd Amendment remedies (keep/bear arms); and I can foresee a day when violent measures may need to be taken to protect the United States from itself* ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 3.70$, $\alpha = 0.71$).

Political Group Identification. Pre-test items measured feelings of political ingroup and outgroup identities. Participants responded to each item on a 7-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating *Not at all*, and 7 indicating *Very much so*. The Democratic items were the following: *How important is being a Democrat to your sense of self?*; *Is being a Democrat an important part of who you are?* (composite $M = 2.46$, $SD = 3.17$, $r = 0.90$). The Republican items were the following: *How important is being a Republican to your sense of self?*; and *Is being a Republican an important part of who you are?* ($M = 2.78$, $S.D. = 3.66$, $r = 0.93$).

Chapter 4: Study I Results and Discussion

This study sought to test polarization as a mechanism for women to become more politically knowledgeable and politically efficacious. Compared to men, women tend to have lower confidence and knowledge concerning politics (Bystrom, 2004; Dow, 2009), and political knowledge begets political polarization (Dvir Gvirsman, 2014). As such, I put forth several hypotheses examining gender, political polarization, news use, political knowledge, and political efficacy.

Analysis

All hypotheses were tested in structural equation modeling (SEM) using the *Lavaan* software developed by Rosseel (2012) for the *R* ecosystem. SEM was chosen because it is a way to merge factor analysis and path analysis into one comprehensive statistical methodology (Holbert & Stephenson, 2002). Furthermore, SEM was used due to the ability to correct measurement error in latent variables and analyze weighted means (Little, 2013). To test the hypotheses, I specified a path model so as to examine specific paths for each hypothesis. The path model fit the data well: $\chi^2(135) = 2,790.597$, $p < 0.00$, RMSEA = 0.018 (0.00-0.031), CFI = 0.996, NNFI/TLI = 0.984, SRMR = 0.013.

Hypothesis One. To test the first hypothesis that women would be less polarized than men, I first tested the path from the gender variable to polarization at Time 1. The SEM path model included a standard set of demographic control variables to ensure that the relationship between gender and polarization was not spurious, including political party identification, race, age, education, and income. Political party identification predicted polarization such that Republicans were more polarized than non-Republicans, and Democrats were more polarized than non-Democrats. Race significantly predicted

polarization in that participants who identified as black were more polarized than non-blacks. Age was also significant, such that older citizens were more polarized than younger citizens. Neither education nor income significantly predicted polarization. After accounting for the influence of these covariates, men were not significantly more polarized than women. These results are reported in Table 1.

Due to the longitudinal design of the study, I next controlled for polarization levels at Time 1. Political party identification predicted polarization such that Democrats became more polarized over the course of the campaign, while Republicans did not. Also, respondents who were highly polarized during Time 1 were more likely to be polarized at Time 2. Again, race significantly predicted polarization such that participants who identified as black became more polarized over the course of the campaign relative to people who were not black. Moreover, while older people were more polarized than younger people in Time 1, older people did not become increasingly polarized relative to younger people over the course of the campaign. Also, participants who identified as Asian were more polarized than those who did not. Given how I controlled for polarization at Time 1, this meant that black respondents, Asian respondents, and Democrats became more polarized as the election progressed. Results are reported in Table 1.

Hypothesis Two. The second hypothesis predicted that polarization would mediate the relationship between gender and news use. The path model analysis revealed no statistically significant difference between women and men on news use. Moreover, news use did not predict polarization in Time 2. As expected, Time 1 polarization was positively associated with Time 2 polarization. Control variables significantly associated

with news use included age, income, and identification as black. These results are reported in Table 1.

Hypothesis Three. The third hypothesis predicted that gender would have an indirect effect on political knowledge through news use such that women would be less polarized, engage in less news use as a result, and therefore be less knowledgeable about politics. Men were not more polarized than women, and there were no differences between women and men on news use. However, women were less politically knowledgeable than men at Time 2. Moreover, I tested the indirect effect of gender on knowledge at Time 1, and knowledge at Time 1 on knowledge at Time 2; this effect was significant. In other words, men were higher in political knowledge than women at Time 1, and as a result of this knowledge gap, they gained more information than women over the course of the campaign. In other words, the gender knowledge gap was self-reinforcing. Moreover, men were higher in efficacy at Time 1, and as a result, they became more knowledgeable over time. This finding indicates the gender efficacy gap compounded the gender knowledge gap. These results are reported in Table 2.

Moreover, the greater Time 1 efficacy, knowledge, and polarization participants had, the greater Time 2 knowledge they had. Knowledge measured at Time 1 served as a control for knowledge measured at Time 2, suggesting that variables associated with knowledge at Time 2 were indicative of campaign learning. Admittedly, some participants would have had more knowledge at Time 2 because they had more political knowledge in general; yet, the Time 1 knowledge variable controlled for that. More polarized participants at Time 1 had more knowledge at Time 2 beyond what could be accounted for by Time 1 knowledge, suggesting that polarization facilitated knowledge

acquisition, presumably through attention paid to the campaign. Likewise, more efficacious participants at Time 1 had more knowledge at Time 2 beyond what could be accounted for by Time 1 efficacy. Furthermore, the higher incomes participants earned, the greater Time 2 knowledge they had. Results are reported in Table 1.

Hypothesis Four. The fourth hypothesis predicted that gender would have an indirect effect on political efficacy through news use such that women would be less polarized, engage in less news use as a result, and therefore be less efficacious about politics. The first path indicated that women and men did not differ in news use, and yet, women were less politically efficacious than men. Participants with higher efficacy in Time 1 also gained more efficacy during Time 2. Moreover, I tested the indirect effect of gender on efficacy at Time 1, and efficacy at Time 1 on efficacy at Time 2; this effect was significant. In other words, men were higher in efficacy than women at Time 1 and, as a result, become more efficacious over time. Similar to the aforementioned reinforcing knowledge gap, the efficacy gap was also reinforcing. Finally, participants who identified as Native American became more efficacious over time. These results are reported in Table 2.

Discussion

The first hypothesis predicted that women would be less polarized than men. In fact, there were no significant differences on polarization between women and men. This finding was true for Time 1 and Time 2. The second hypothesis predicted that polarization would mediate the relationship between gender and news use. Highly polarized people gathered more news than people with lower polarization at Time 1;

however, there was no statistically significant difference between women and men on news use.

The third hypothesis predicted that gender would have an indirect effect on political knowledge through news use such that women would be less polarized, engage in less news use as a result, and therefore be less knowledgeable about politics. For both time periods, women were not significantly less polarized than men, and for the first time period, women did not gather less news than men. However, for both time periods, women were in fact less politically knowledgeable than men.

Finally, the fourth hypothesis predicted that gender would have an indirect effect on political efficacy through news use such that women would be less polarized, engage in less news use as a result, and therefore be less efficacious about politics. Again, while women and men did not differ on news use nor polarization, women were found to be less politically efficacious than men. In the end, the hypotheses were not confirmed. I was left to conclude that polarization was not a mechanism through which women would become more politically engaged and more politically knowledgeable over the course of the campaign. However, the significance of the findings regarding efficacy and knowledge illuminate noteworthy implications for women's political engagement.

The first main contribution of this study is the reinforcing cycle whereby gender influenced knowledge, which further influenced knowledge acquisition. That is, men gained more political knowledge over the course of the campaign compared to women. However, such phenomena were not a function of news use, as men and women did not differ in that habit. While news use was associated with increased political knowledge over the course of the campaign, and women gathered just as much news as men, they

still accumulated less knowledge and less efficacy over the course the campaign. That is, political knowledge was a precondition to learning because people needed a pre-existing cognitive architecture so new information had a place to fit in their mental schemas. Essentially, the information-rich got richer.

The second main contribution of this study is the reinforcing cycle whereby gender influenced efficacy, which influenced knowledge. Specifically, indirect effects revealed that men expressed greater efficacy at Time 1, thereby leading to higher knowledge levels at Time 2. Women began with an efficacy baseline lower than men's at Time 1. Men were able to capitalize on their higher levels of Time 1 efficacy, which translated into more knowledge acquisition over the course of the campaign. These results suggest that men benefited more from the campaign season than women. Moreover, through the longitudinal analysis, my results indicated that while political efficacy predicted political knowledge, the opposite relationship was not supported. That is, higher knowledge at Time 1 did not significantly predict higher efficacy at Time 2. In other words, possession of political knowledge did not reinforce the gender gap in efficacy, but the gender gap in efficacy reinforced the gender gap in knowledge.

My findings align with previous studies indicating that compared to men, women are lower in internal political efficacy – their feelings of competence in understanding and participating in civic activities (Kaid et al., 2011). Results also lend support to past findings that women are less politically knowledgeable and less politically engaged than men (e.g., Beauregard, 2014; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Verba and colleagues' (1997) conclude that a psychological involvement with politics is necessary for people to devote their time and skills to political activities – and it is this psychological

involvement where women seem to lag compared to men. Compared to men, women appear to exhibit lower confidence in political efficacy and psychological involvement with politics. My results indicate women start the campaign with lower political efficacy than men, and therefore they do not gain as much in political knowledge over the course of the campaign. Dow (2009) also lends support to this notion, in that for any given level of education, men learn and preserve more factual information about politics than women.

In essence, both the knowledge gap and the efficacy gap created reinforcing cycles that compounded gender differences. Several potential cognitive mechanisms may have been at work. The elaboration likelihood model (ELM), posited by Petty and Cacioppo (1986), may help account for these findings. When it comes to changing people's attitudes, there are two potential processing routes: the central and the peripheral. Through the central route, persuasion will likely result from someone's thoughtful consideration of the true merits of the information presented in support of an argument (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Conversely, through the peripheral route, persuasion results from one's association with positive or negative cues in the stimulus, and the cues received by the individual under this route are generally unrelated to the logical quality of the stimulus (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Such cues will involve factors such as the credibility or attractiveness of the message source (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Ultimately, the likelihood of elaboration will be determined by one's motivation and ability to evaluate the argument being presented (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). It appears as though men may have more motivation and ability to centrally elaborate on political messages, compared to women.

Furthermore, Lavine (2002) highlights two different processing routes through which political opinions may be formed. The memory-based model highlights the reliance on memory and the probabilistic and constructive nature of the attitude response process, emphasizing the notion that most citizens do not have a preformed opinion about most political issues but instead must retrieve and integrate accessible considerations on the spot (Lavine, 2002). On the other hand, the on-line processing model “assumes that citizens have spontaneous affective responses to political actors and events and that they maintain and update a single summary evaluation toward each candidate as new information becomes available throughout the course of an election campaign” (Lavine, 2002, p. 235). Levels of ability and motivation can in fact help determine the kinds of processing people undergo upon encountering political messages.

Two general determinants of engaging with political messages are ability and motivation. “Directly retrievable summary opinions require that citizens possess both the willingness and in some cases the ability to attend to politics and to form evaluative responses toward political objects. Moreover, they require that summary opinions be of sufficient accessibility to guide political choices” (Lavine, 2002, p. 235). Specifically, self-efficacy is a necessary precondition to knowledge acquisition because people who are not comfortable with their political knowledge will be less likely to elaborate on political messages – that is, they will not engage in the central processing that ELM posits. Therefore, these people will be less likely to devote the cognitive resources necessary to integrate their knowledge.

Furthermore, when people have an existing cognitive structure to integrate new political information, they are able to do so. Due to their greater interest in politics,

sophisticates should be especially motivated to selectively focus on the evaluative implications of political information in order to form impressions of candidates and policy issues (Hastie & Park, 1986). Moreover, political connoisseurs have intricate political knowledge structures and efficient, well-rehearsed information processing capabilities (McGraw & Pinney, 1990), and as such, they are “better equipped than their less sophisticated counterparts to perform the cognitive operations necessary to engage in on-line processing” (Lavine, 2005, p. 236). That is, the less sophisticated people in essence do not feel as though they have enough efficacy to elaborate on political information, while the information-rich get richer.

In essence, it is easier for people to integrate new political knowledge when there is an existing framework – or when they have higher political efficacy levels. Political efficacy refers to one’s willingness to engage in the political process, and political confidence refers to the ease in which one integrates new knowledge when engaging politically. People who are low in efficacy and confidence would be, for instance, intimidated by political conversations. That is, those who are reticent to have political conversations are not sure they are qualified, or that they know enough to participate. That disrupts learning and integration of information because people do not engage with the political conversation. It appears that the efficacy gap is exacerbated over time for women, while men gain more knowledge as a result of their higher efficacy levels.

After all, knowing “what is really going” on requires a willingness to engage with the news, and a good amount of prior information. For example, prior to the 2016 Presidential election day, F.B.I. Director James Comey wrote a letter to Congress concerning former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s use of a personal e-mail server.

This is a good example of the benefit of knowing the context of the e-mail controversy, and specifically what was going on with the Anthony Weiner investigation in particular. If all a citizen knew was that there was controversy with Clinton's e-mails, then that person would have a harder time contextualizing the entire e-mail situation that had been going on for months.

Moreover, Verge Mestre and Tormos Marin (2012) note the socialization process in gender roles establishing differing beliefs and attitudes about politics. Women's lower confidence in their abilities to participate politically are no doubt compounded by the lack of role models they see in governmental representation. Processes of socialization whereby women perceive politics as a male-dominated domain may cause them to lose self-assurance over their ability to impact the political process (Bem & Bem, 1970; Conway, 1985; Wolak & McDevitt, 2011). Moreover, men are still the majority of political leaders in the United States, as under twenty percent of the United States Congress is composed of women. Such scenarios can deprive citizens of women political role models, which can also influence gender differences in political engagement within adults (Verge Mestre & Tormos Marin, 2012). Perhaps as more women populate political institutions in America, new significant signals may be sent to women, thereby heightening their political involvement and feelings of political efficacy (Childs, 2004).

Limitations

Like any study, this one is not without limitations. The first limitation is the lack of news use variables in Time 2. News use questions were only asked in Time 1, which prevented analysis of participants' news use habits at two time points. In future examinations of news use habits, researchers would do well to design longitudinal

surveys. Second, due to the limitations of a secondary data analysis, I was not able to expand upon the standard gender binary and examine effects on participants who do not identify as female or male. Future studies would do well to examine multiple gender identity effects regarding news use, political polarization, political knowledge, and political efficacy. Third, I was limited to media self-report variables which may exaggerate overall media use. Fourth, I was only able to model changes in attitudes and knowledge over the course of the election. It may be that the most salient changes in political attitudes occur when a person is initially socialized during youth, and that these attitudes are relatively stable after that point.

Chapter 5: Study II Results and Discussion

In Chapter IV, I examined the compounding effects of gender gaps in political knowledge and political efficacy. In this next chapter, I examine the potential impact of social media echo chambers on these gaps. Much political communication, particularly among young people, occurs on social media (e.g., Boulianne, 2011; Schoenbach & Lauf, 2002). This introduces a new dynamic: social pressure from networks of followers. In offline contexts, social pressure has been associated with strong persuasive effects (Latane & Nidia, 1980; Tanford & Penrod, 1984). In particular, I envisioned that dynamics of social pressure online could impact persuasive effects. In this chapter, I examined how social media communication may either exacerbate or diminish the gender gaps depending on the direction of the social pressure.

Analytic Procedures

I employed structural equation modeling (SEM) using the *Lavaan* software developed by Rosseel (2012) for the *R* ecosystem. To test hypotheses five and six, a single group measurement model was specified with experimental condition, acceptance of outgroup marriage, feeling thermometers, feelings towards political party supporters, political information efficacy, political interest, and intention to participate in politics as the latent variables. The control condition served as a comparison against the experimental conditions. According to Little (2013), a model fit with CFI/TLI of at least 0.90 and RMSEA of at most 0.08 is acceptable. As such, the multiple group model fit the data well ($\chi^2 = 417.87$, $df = 324$, $p < 0.001$, RMSEA = 0.033 (0.023-0.042), CFI = 0.99, NNFI/TLI = 0.98, SRMR = 0.051).

Hypothesis One. The first hypothesis of Study II predicted that social reinforcement of political identity on social media would directly increase affective polarization and indirectly increase political information efficacy, intent to participate in politics, and political interest through affective polarization. Relative to the control condition, there was no evidence of change in any of these items under examination for those in the “supportive” condition. Therefore, H₅ was not supported. These results are reported in Table 3.

Hypothesis Two. The second hypothesis of Study II predicted that challenges to political identity on social media would directly reduce affective polarization and indirectly decrease political information efficacy, intent to participate in politics, and political interest through affective polarization. Relative to the control condition, there was no evidence of change in any of these items under examination for those in the “critical” condition. Therefore, H₆ was not supported. These results are reported in Table 3.

Research Question One. The research question asked if gender would moderate the polarization process such that the effects of social reinforcement on a social media post would be stronger for women than men and, as a result, women would gain more in PIE, intent to participate, and interest than men. To examine this question, I specified a multiple group measurement model with experimental condition, affective polarization, political information efficacy, political interest, acceptance of political violence, acceptance of outgroup marriage, and intention to participate in politics as the latent variables. In particular, I introduced the grouping variable of *Gender* into the model. I generated latent means and standard deviations for each group. Again, the multiple group

model fit the data well ($\chi^2 = 908.53$, $df = 683$, $p < 0.001$, RMSEA = 0.050 (0.041-0.058), CFI = 0.96, NNFI/TLI = 0.95, SRMR = 0.070).

Results suggested no confirmation for this research question. In each case, exposure to social reinforcement was associated with no differences between women and men regarding political information efficacy and political interest. However, three findings were significant regarding other political measures. First, compared to participants in the control condition, the “critical” condition increased intentions to participate for men but not for women. Moreover, when I examined the items regarding the acceptance of political violence, the “supportive” condition caused less acceptance of political violence for women, but not for men. Finally, I uncovered a significant effect surrounding the potential for acceptance of the political outgroup into the family. Republican men in all three conditions were more opposed to outgroup marriage. However, Republican women were not significantly more likely to oppose outgroup marriage. Nor did such a finding exist for Democratic respondents. These results are reported in Table 4 and represented in Figure 6.

Discussion

The second study examined the effects of social media commentary on several political communication variables, with a particular focus on potential gender differences. The first hypothesis for Study II predicted that social reinforcement of political identity on social media would directly increase affective polarization and indirectly increase political information efficacy, intent to participate in politics, and political interest through affective polarization; however, I found no support for this. Moreover, the second hypothesis for Study II predicted that challenges to political identity on social

media would directly reduce affective polarization and indirectly decrease political information efficacy, intent to participate in politics, and political interest through affective polarization. Again, there was no support for any of these hypotheses.

However, I did find that compared to participants in the control condition, the “critical” condition increased intentions to participate for men but not for women. Moreover, when I examined the items regarding the acceptance of political violence, the “supportive” condition caused less acceptance of political violence for women but not for men. I also found that Republican men were significantly more likely to oppose a potential future son-in-law or daughter-in-law of the opposite political persuasion. The implications of these findings will be discussed, as well as limitations and directions for future research.

The first implication of the study concerns men’s behavioral intentions. Men appeared to have a stronger response to commentary that criticized their political posts, in that they felt stronger intentions to participate in politics. That is, men appeared to engage further with politics after encountering challenges on social media. One reason for this could be the conflictual nature of politics, or even the conflictual nature of social media in particular. Conflict management could be one theoretical outlook to contribute to our understanding of these findings.

Conflict involves a situation in which people’s concerns, or the things they care about, appear to be incompatible (Thomas, Thomas, & Schaubhut, 2008). Gender is a significant variable in the empirical literature on conflict management. In a meta-analysis of conflict styles from 36 studies, Holt and DeVore (2005) found that males in individualistic cultures reported higher levels of competition, while females reported

higher levels of compromise. On a whole, Thomas and colleagues (2008) contend that while some of the empirical evidence has been mixed, in general, there is fairly consistent agreement that gender differences in conflict style reveal higher competition among men. Moreover, Brahnam, Margavio, Hignite, Barrier, and Chin (2005) found that women were more likely to utilize a collaborative conflict resolution style.

Gender differences in people's personal conflict management styles may mirror the conflict management styles they are engaged by on social media. In essence, socialization impacts men and women's preferred conflict resolution styles, thereby potentially impacting responses to political social media posts. Men tend to be more confrontational, aggressive, and competitive (Rosenthal & Hautaluoma, 1988). Perhaps men are more prone to appreciating confrontation and aggressive political attacks, as such challenges may mirror what they tend to utilize in their own conflict management styles.

It is possible that women have been socialized to respond negatively to conflict on social media, while men have been socialized to view such behavior as engaging and even desirable. Perhaps women wish to see the political process play out in a more collaborative fashion, with parties working together across the aisle. But as women encounter political news on social media, they may learn that partisans in their networks are engaging in the opposite – lobbing more personal character attacks towards each other, especially during the high-tension environment of a polarizing presidential campaign. Perhaps women are more impacted by a perceived lack of conflict resolution among the discussants; at the same time, supportive commentary is not particularly compelling for them either.

Perhaps women feel disengaged from the social media conversation about politics altogether – unmoved by support or criticism alike – and this mirrors their offline lag in political knowledge and political confidence compared to men. Therefore, there are no changes in their polarization levels outside of what can be explained solely by partisanship. Also, there are no changes to their intentions to participate in the political process as a whole. However, women appeared to be repelled by the idea of political violence if they were in the “supportive” condition. Therefore, it could be that supportive social media commentary on a political post can activate women’s traditional collaborative conflict management preferences, such that they are more prone to withdraw from suggestions of political violence.

The theory of motivated reasoning could add to our understanding of why men appear to be more energized than women after encountering political criticism on social media. This theory posits that citizens are biased information-processors (Taber & Lodge, 2006). Two types of goals take place; the first are accuracy goals, or the desire to reach a correct conclusion, and the second are directional goals, or the desire to reach a favored conclusion that supports existing beliefs (Taber & Lodge, 2006). These authors posit that upon encountering political objects, people’s automatic affective responses activate directional goals, leading to motivated reasoning. Citizens will seek out new evidence that is consistent with their prior views, evaluate attitude-consistent arguments as stronger, and spend substantial energy in denigrating arguments that run counter to their existing beliefs (Kunda, 1990). Again, since men tend to have higher political engagement than women (Kenski, 2000; Bennett & Bennett, 1989), it appears that men are motivated to use social media as another tool with which to engage in politics, while

women have lower motivations to do so since they demonstrate less political engagement offline. That is, upon encountering criticism, men may be driven to get out and take further action to ensure that their political outlook results in a tangible political action – such as vote, donate money to a political campaign, or place a political sign in the yard. These actions could be motivated by a desire to ultimately reach the “correct” conclusion – such that the participant is in fact going to ultimately “win” the political argument. The “correct” conclusion could further be achieved if one were to avoid a member of the “political outgroup” marrying into the family – something that men appeared to desire more than women did.

In essence, instead of connectivity for women on social media leading to social comparison and stronger identification with a particular partisan identity, it appears that men were motivated to engage more politically over encounters with commenters they believed were wrong. While these explanations for the study findings are all possible, they remain speculative. This study provides a useful basis for future experiments that employ simulated social media echo chamber designs.

Limitations

Some limitations were associated with the second study. First, the null findings may have resulted from an insufficiently potent stimulus. It is difficult to simulate the experience of having one’s actual ideas attacked; moreover, the manipulation may have been overly mild, or may not have read as realistic to participants.

Another limitation was the simulated Facebook environment. While participants were instructed to imagine they had composed the status, the design of the experiment was of course not their true Facebook environment. In their true Facebook feeds, they

would have likely been exposed to the strong ties and weak ties in their social networks. Commentary from people the participants knew in real life would likely have stronger effects on their reactions. A simulated social media post may lack potency in an experimental setting. As scholars navigate the social media landscape, a tension exists between tapping into people's true social media habits without violating their privacy. However, outside of utilizing participants' actual Facebook feeds, the simulated social media design of the study was the ideal option for this experiment. Future scholars should continue to design potent social media experimental conditions.

Moreover, the convenience sample is a limitation. By surveying participants from one university, there is no regional diversity, no age diversity, very little socioeconomic diversity, and very little racial diversity. Finally, a limitation lies with the experimental sample. Older people might react differently to political conflict on Facebook than younger people. The Midwest also has a particular culture that may have affected the second study's results. Finally, while all young people in my sample were college students, not all young people go to college.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Review of Studies

The term *gender gap* has received ample attention from academics (Banwart, 2007; Bennett & Bennett, 1989; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 2000; Kenski, 2000) due to persistent audience gender gaps in forms of political participation and political knowledge (Bystrom, 2004). Gender differences in political knowledge by no means imply that females are less intelligent than males, but rather that males are better informed on and more interested in political issues than females (Bennett & Bennett, 1989; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 2000). The purpose of this study was to examine the political gender gap, and explore whether polarization could help women become more like the ideal citizen – that is to say, more politically participatory and more politically engaged.

Because we strive for and idealize a representative democracy, we should be concerned about the gender gap. Althaus (2003) states the uneven distribution of knowledge between women and men contributes to a bias in the shape of collective opinion, and this advances numerous normative concerns. When one gender has systematically lower levels of political knowledge compared to another, there is a lack of equal representation in a democratic system (Fraile, 2014). Considering how women have consistently demonstrated a lack of political knowledge compared to men (Bystrom, 2004), there are substantial problems for equality in government. Not only would women have diminished capabilities voicing their political needs and desires, but they would also have weakened influence over political decision-making processes (Fraile, 2014). I sought to address these concerns in two studies.

The first study, a secondary data analysis, provided an initial vantage point into the possible relationships among gender, political polarization, political knowledge, political partisanship, and political efficacy. In Study 1, I used the ANES survey from the 2012 election cycle. Through an examination of two distinct survey waves, I conducted a longitudinal analysis, so as to tap into any potential “spiral effects” (Slater, 2007) that may have taken place between news use and polarization. I first explored the association between polarization among women and men and their news use habits. I anticipated that women would be less polarized than men. I also hypothesized that polarization would mediate the relationship between gender and news use, and that gender would have an indirect effect on political knowledge through news use such that women would be less polarized, engage in less news use, and therefore be less knowledgeable about politics. Finally, I expected that gender would have an indirect effect on political efficacy through news use such that women would be less polarized, engage in less news use as a result, and therefore be less efficacious.

In the second study, I explored social pressure, or how partisan support or non-support could potentially increase polarization in a social media environment. I anticipated that social pressure in the form of social media commentary could help engage women further in political communication. In particular, I was interested in how political posts on social media influenced affective political polarization, political engagement, and intentions to participate in politics. In theorizing a link between polarization and social media use, I predicted that social reinforcement of political identity on social media would directly increase affective polarization and indirectly increase political information efficacy, intent to participate in politics, and political

interest through affective polarization. I also predicted that challenges to political identity on social media would directly reduce affective polarization and indirectly decrease political information efficacy, intent to participate in politics, and political interest through affective polarization. In what follows, I discuss the implications of the results for both studies.

Study I

The first study's first hypothesis predicted that women would be less polarized than men, while the second hypothesis predicted that polarization would mediate the relationship between gender and news use. The third hypothesis predicted that gender would have an indirect effect on political knowledge through news use such that women would be less polarized, engage in less news use as a result, and therefore be less knowledgeable about politics. Finally, the fourth hypothesis predicted that gender would have an indirect effect on political efficacy through news use such that women would be less polarized, engage in less news use as a result, and therefore be less efficacious about politics.

The first main contribution of this study was the reinforcing cycle whereby gender influenced knowledge, which further influenced knowledge acquisition. That is, women began the study with less knowledge than men, and gained less knowledge as the campaign progressed. This occurred in spite of the fact that women gathered the same amount of news as men. The second main contribution of this study was the reinforcing cycle whereby gender influenced efficacy, which influenced knowledge. Since men had higher efficacy than women at Time 1, they gained more knowledge than women by Time 2. These results suggest that while information-rich men got richer, women did not.

Ultimately, the possession of political knowledge did not reinforce the gender gap in efficacy, but the gender gap in efficacy reinforced the gender gap in political knowledge. In essence, both the knowledge gap and the efficacy gap created reinforcing cycles that exacerbated gender differences in political knowledge.

However, some caveats must be addressed. While my news use tallying method indicated that men and women used equal amounts of news, it could have been that this measurement did not fully reflect the amount of news men and women in fact used. Lumping all media outlet items together into one variable may be accounting for these results. Such a strategy might also miss any possible distinctions among effects of using local news, national news, and international news. Previously, I mentioned that women and men have been found to consume different types of news. As such, future studies should distinguish between these types of news.

For instance, other items within the ANES study measured news use differently, such as “During a typical week, how many days do you watch, read, or listen to news on the Internet, not including sports?” and, “During a typical week, how many days do you watch national news on TV, not including sports?” Responses included zero (none) to seven days. However, depending on how news use was measured, I may have in fact found that men and women did in fact use news differently. Before conclusive claims are made, more thorough measures of news use should be tested.

My results must also be contextualized based on the measure of political polarization. Polarization was measured over affect towards two presidential candidates: Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. While I employed this measure based on past uses (Stroud, 2010), it is possible that my results would have been different had I employed a

more thorough measure of polarization. Researchers should be careful not to overclaim a complex concept based on simple measures. Still, Iyengar and colleagues (2012) argue in favor of measuring affective polarization, whereby social group identities are activated upon encountering political stimuli; after all, presidential candidates are prototypes of the political parties they represent. Future studies would do well to contextualize findings according to the measurement of polarization.

Another caveat is the consideration that political knowledge was measured differently at Time 1 than it was at Time 2. Time 1 measured civics knowledge questions, while Time 2 measured participants' knowledge of which offices governmental representatives held at that time. In terms of accurately measuring knowledge acquisition over the course of a political campaign, researchers should learn more about and continue to strive for effective measurements. Still, civics knowledge measurement during Time 1 can serve as a good control for future campaign knowledge. Based on these results, there are several possible explanations for what took place during the 2012 presidential campaign.

In explaining these findings, several potential cognitive mechanisms may have been at work. The elaboration likelihood model could explain men's greater political knowledge and political efficacy. Verba and colleagues (1997) found that a psychological involvement with politics is necessary for people to devote their time and skills to political activities – and it is this psychological involvement where women seem to lag compared to men. As I discussed in Chapter IV, there are two routes for processing political information: the central model and the peripheral model. Since men appear to have a greater psychological involvement with politics, they could use the central route

for processing political information. Therefore, they have stronger cognitive architectures for use and retaining political knowledge. Additionally, women are more likely to respond “I don’t know” to political questions (Atkeson & Rapoport, 2003), and their feelings of “not knowing much” about politics may reflect their lower psychological involvement with politics in comparison to men’s involvement.

In particular, since men began the study with higher levels of political efficacy, they had stronger pre-existing schemas through which they were better equipped to gain political knowledge. Since women began the study with lower levels of political efficacy, their cognitive architectures were not as well-equipped to acquire more political knowledge. Since men consequently devote more cognitive and psychological involvement to political information and activities, it makes sense that they would be more politically knowledgeable than women, who have lower psychological involvement with politics. Thus, it appears that even if men dedicate the same amount of time to news use as women, and are exposed to the same information as women, prior advantages in efficacy and knowledge allow men respondents to integrate the information more readily into their long-term memories. My findings also align with Dow’s (2009) finding that education is the characteristic that most clearly enlarges the gender political knowledge gap, as males receive substantially larger returns to political knowledge from education than females. Apparently, men receive larger returns on their news use habits as well.

Moreover, news use habits may systematically differ between these two genders. The Pew Research Center (2008) found that women and men tend to differ in their news consumption, in that women consistently express more interest than men in news stories about health, weather, natural disasters, and tabloids, whereas men are more interested

than women in international affairs, Washington news, and sports. Therefore, it is reasonable to suspect that even if women and men are consuming equal amounts of news, their political knowledge will differ because they are consuming different *categories* of news. It could very well be that since men have pre-existing cognitive architectures for political news, they are drawn to such news, whereas women do not have such architectures and therefore are drawn to different news categories. Additionally, Thorson (2016) reports that when women comment on an Internet news post, they are more likely than men to be bullied and threatened, and thus fear or dread may be important reasons to not participate. Such systematic news use activities and interactions may impact women's political participation.

Study II

In the second study, I conducted an online experiment to examine the impact of social pressure on social media for women and men. The first implication of the study concerned affective responses. I had initially anticipated that if females received strong affirmation of their political identities from networks of followers on social networking sites, perhaps they would become more politically engaged through affective polarization. However, men appeared to have a stronger affective response to commentary, in that they felt stronger intentions to participate in politics after receiving criticism. I posit that these stronger intentions in participation are a form of exacerbated political polarization, and in effect, the cuing of outgroup partisan biases may have activated political attitudes for men participants. One such mechanism to explain this phenomenon could be social identity theory.

In the first chapter, I discussed Iyengar and colleagues' (2012) conceptualization of political polarization based on the affect that someone had towards a particular group. Social identity refers to positive sentiment for one's ingroup, and negative sentiment for the outgroup (Iyengar et al., 2012; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Therefore, in the experiment, ingroup identity salience was primed through supportive commentary, while outgroup salience was primed by critical commentary. I had anticipated women's social identity to be primed towards the ingroup; however, I found men's sense of social identity was primed towards the outgroup. In other words, women's social identity with a political ingroup did not activate their political attitudes, while men's social identity was activated upon encountering the political outgroup.

In the first chapter I also discussed the distinct differences between those who have high interest in politics and those who do not, and these differences may lead to different reactions to incivility between the two genders. Vraga and colleagues (2015) found ultimately those SNS users "who were more motivated and able – those who cared deeply about politics and who were less conflict avoidant – were more likely to see the benefits of political expression on Facebook and to contribute to such expression themselves, in spite of (or sometimes because of) the potential risks of disagreement" (p. 288). Moreover, Vraga and colleagues (2015) also found that pre-existing individual differences cause some people to be more open toward political expression than others, and since men tend to have stronger interests in politics, they may more open to uncivil commentary since they value the challenge of a debate over the tone of the commentary.

Gender differences in people's personal conflict management styles may help explain these findings. Empirical literature on conflict management indicates that gender

serves as a factor in preference for conflict management. That is, people's personal styles of conflict management may be activated by conflict on social media. Men have been socialized to be more aggressive and competitive (Rosenthal & Hautaluoma, 1988), and they present higher levels of competition in their conflict management styles. In contrast, women are more prone to compromise and collaboration (Brahnam et al., 2005; Holt & DeVore, 2005; Thomas et al., 2008). As such, it may be that men interpreted criticism from the political outgroup as competition, and therefore underwent a change in political attitudes, whereas no such effect took place for women. With lower interests in politics, combined with a preference for collaboration, women may be less impacted by critical political commentary on social media.

Differences in gender socialization may in part explain these phenomena. Men may observe their gender as the privileged one within the political arena, and therefore they may experience stronger desires to argue, debate, and generally discuss political issues, since that is the activity they see reflected in their systems of government. In contrast, women have a shared marginalized social group identity based on their history of relegation to the political sidelines (Kittilson & Schwindt-Bayer, 2012). Wolak and McDevitt (2011) second this notion, asserting that politics is often perceived as a male-dominated domain, leading women to lose confidence in their abilities to influence such politics. When women view their gender as the marginalized one, their political attitudes may not be activated in the same ways that men's are activated. Perhaps this influence extends to the social media atmosphere, where political posts may be viewed as male-dominated conversations, and therefore do not serve as catalysts to increase women's confidence in participating.

Conclusion

This dissertation demonstrates how the current media environment may not yet provide an opportunity to close gender gaps in political knowledge and political efficacy. The first study revealed women were less politically efficacious and less politically knowledgeable than men. The progression of time over the 2012 campaign exacerbated this gender gap. That is, prior gaps in knowledge exacerbated the knowledge gap, and prior efficacy gaps also reinforced the knowledge gap. As such, the gender gap was not merely a gap; it was in fact a reinforcing spiral.

Moreover, the second study revealed how a critical simulated social media post on Facebook actually mobilized men to be further politically engaged, whereas women's political engagement did not change. While I tested multiple mechanisms – news use, polarization, and social pressure – none of them resolved the gender gap. If gender socialization is the fundamental cause of the gender gap, it may be that only strategies aimed at younger women will address and correct this gap. One future direction to better understand the gender gap is to analyze real-world social media content in real time. For example, Wells and Thorson (2015) utilized a big data measurement of people's Facebook news feeds in order to examine why people varied in the extent to which they came across news content in their news feeds, and also examine how the arrangement of news content corresponded with political knowledge. Future researchers might conduct a similar examination to interrogate gender differences among social media users.

Political communication researchers should continue to understand the reasons behind the gender gap, with the ultimate goal of narrowing it. They may do so by discovering new mechanisms on social media to bring women into the political process,

thereby eliminating systematically lower levels of political knowledge among women compared to men, and thereby increasing equal gender representation in the democratic system (Fraile, 2014). To that end, political communication scholars should continue to design social media experiments in which commentary is examined for its potential to create normative social pressure. Due to varied opinions one finds on any given social media thread, future designs would do well to incorporate even greater diversity in social media commentary. Furthermore, future scholars would do well to examine potential gender differences in a national survey from the latest presidential campaign of 2016, especially in light of the historic nomination of the first woman presidential candidate to a major political party.

Yet, in light of the 2016 presidential milestone for women's political representation, it appeared that young women were not in fact all that concerned about equal representation solely based on a co-gendered presidential candidate. In fact, the New Republic reports that during the 2016 Democratic presidential primary race, young women were more excited about the candidacy of Bernie Sanders, to the tune of 61 percent of young women who supported Sanders, compared to 28 percent who supported Hillary Clinton (Bruenig, 2016). It may very well be that women view candidates in terms of who best represents their interests, *regardless of* that candidate's gender.

To that end, previous research has indicated that one reason for the gender gap is that women and men think about politics differently, whereby women are concerned about "feminine issues" and men are concerned about "masculine issues." For instance, Campbell and Winters (2008) report women tend to be more interested in domestic political issues such as health care, education, and law than their male counterparts, who

are more likely to be interested in general politics, foreign policy, and partisan politics. While women voters may very well appreciate seeing women candidates such as Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin achieving greater prominence on the presidential campaign trail, they may be making their vote choices based on who will best address their needs – and they see men candidates such as Bernie Sanders as fitting that bill more effectively.

Moreover, demographic voting trends from the 2016 election add an interesting side note to the findings of the first study. While perhaps we would have expected to see great gains in women's votes for the first woman presidential candidate of a major party, 53% of white women voted for Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump (Golshan, 2017). As such, perhaps it is not so much the sole heuristic of co-gendered cues that will draw women further into the political process, but rather, the perceived ability of a candidate to truly and comprehensively address the political issues that resonate with women. As such, future researchers should manipulate online experimental conditions to test social pressure impact on women's prioritization of candidates based on candidate gender, candidate issue stances, or some combination of both. For instance, Internet surveys could be designed whereby participants are presented with a candidate biography on a website, or a candidate's social media page, replete with commentary that addresses candidate gender, "feminine issues," "masculine issues," or some combination of all of these.

In terms of other solutions, several programs exist to increase women's political participation (e.g., All In Together, 2017; National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, 2008; Ready to Run, 2017). In addition, Koch (1997) posits women's psychological engagement can be enhanced by increased women's representation in

government. Particularly after the 2016 election, many women are becoming politically active and motivated. For the time being, it appears that news use and social media activities are not yet the catalysts through which to narrow the political gender gap.

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Table 1: Study I Paths

	B	(s.e.)	LLCI	ULCI	β
<u>News use</u>					
Female	.446	.323	-.183	1.07	.043
Age	.385	.047	.294	.480	.237***
Rep	-.636	.408	-1.38	.141	-.053
Dem	-.610	.387	-1.44	.120	-.057
Education	.016	.021	-.023	.063	.029
Income	.085	.020	.045	.123	.130***
Black	2.28	.510	1.26	3.30	.174***
Native American	-1.09	.744	-2.51	.404	-.037
Asian	-.432	1.27	-2.56	2.27	-.010
Other Race	-.797	.690	-2.09	.642	-.027
<u>Time 1 Political Efficacy</u>					
Female	-.191	.056	-.293	-.078	-.159**
Age	.031	.009	.015	.047	.166***
Rep	-.003	.073	-.142	.139	-.002
Dem	.055	.067	-.078	.182	-.045
Education	.004	.003	-.003	.011	.063
Income	.009	.004	.002	.016	.122*
Black	.048	.074	-.471	-.133	.032
Native American	-.315	.160	-1.00	-.121	-.094
Asian	-.017	.235	-.900	.246	-.003
Other Race	-.087	.193	-1.00	-.311	-.025
<u>Time 1 Political Knowledge</u>					
Female	-.351	.064	-.474	-.226	-.161***
Age	.068	.010	.048	.086	.199***
Rep	.040	.077	-.109	.189	.016
Dem	-.052	.074	-.196	.093	-.023
Education	.005	.004	-.002	.015	.043
Income	.038	.004	.029	.046	.275***
Black	-.296	.086	-.471	-.133	-.108***
Native American	-.528	.222	-1.00	-.121	-.087*
Asian	-.318	.288	-.900	.246	-.034
Other Race	-.662	.177	-1.00	-.311	-.107***

Time 1 Affective Polarization

Female	.455	1.77	-3.08	3.99	.008
Age	.644	.280	.090	1.23	.069*
Rep	17.2	2.35	12.8	22.0	.248***
Dem	17.9	2.18	13.5	22.0	.293***
Education	.085	.091	-.087	.280	.027
Income	.187	.115	-.038	.412	.050
Black	8.57	2.56	3.80	14.1	.114***
Native American	-2.19	4.42	-10.8	7.03	-.013
Asian	3.57	8.40	-12.1	21.2	.014
Other Race	3.50	5.30	-7.51	14.1	.021

Time 2 Political Knowledge

News use	.041	.009	.023	.058	.123***
Time 1 Efficacy	.624	.138	.381	.922	.217***
Time 1 Knowledge	.493	.049	.394	.588	.310***
Time 1 Polarization	.007	.002	.004	.010	.118***
Female	-.390	.097	-.577	-.184	-.113***
Age	.002	.015	-.028	.032	.004
Republican	.227	.124	-.024	.461	.057
Dem	-.047	.114	-.265	.181	-.013
Education	.011	.006	.000	.025	.059
Income	.031	.006	.020	.044	.143***
Black	-.110	.123	-.346	.141	-.025
Native American	-.192	.252	-.673	.324	-.020
Asian	.071	.286	-.464	.641	.005
Other Race	.206	.254	-.273	.753	.021

Time 2 Affective Polarization

News use	.021	.123	-.220	.262	.004
Time 1 Efficacy	-.048	1.77	-3.66	3.38	-.001
Time 1 Knowledge	-.309	.655	-1.53	1.00	-.011
Time 1 Polarization	.715	.022	.672	.758	.719***
Female	.087	1.23	-2.34	2.55	.001
Age	-.324	.206	-.737	.075	-.035
Rep	3.19	1.79	-.259	6.53	.046
Dem	3.21	1.52	.205	6.10	.053*
Education	-.042	.076	-.208	.098	-.013
Income	.090	.087	-.079	.245	.024
Black	6.51	1.73	3.05	9.73	.087***
Native American	.136	3.87	-7.82	7.37	.001
Asian	-11.7	3.95	-19.8	-3.61	-.046**
Other Race	.244	3.94	-7.90	7.56	.001

Time 2 Efficacy

News use	-.001	.006	-.013	.009	-.012
Time 1 Efficacy	1.20	.123	1.03	1.51	1.15***
Time 1 Knowledge	-.006	.031	-.071	.051	-.011
Time 1 Polarization	-.000	.001	-.002	.001	-.020
Female	.021	.058	-.081	.142	.034
Age	-.008	.009	-.026	.009	-.039
Rep	.074	.071	-.057	.210	.051
Dem	.016	.071	-.118	.161	.013
Education	-.002	.002	-.006	.003	-.033
Income	-.002	.004	-.010	.005	-.022
Black	.014	.075	-.140	.160	.009
Native American	.419	.193	.077	.819	.120*
Asian	.168	.228	-.287	.613	.031
Other Race	.103	.162	-.202	.459	.029

Asterisks on β reflect results of the Wald test of significance; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Confidence intervals are unstandardized regression coefficients

Table 2: Study I Indirect Effects

1000 Bootstraps resamples

Path	B (SE)	LLCI
ULCI		
Gender > Polarization > Knowledge T2 .027	.003 (.000)	-.023
Gender > Efficacy T1 > Efficacy T2 -.103	-.017*** (.036)	-.249
Gender > Knowledge T1 > Knowledge T2 -.095	-.228** (.072)	-.374
Gender > Efficacy T1 > Knowledge T2 -.046	-.119** (.045)	-.218

Asterisks on β reflect results of the Wald test of significance; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Confidence intervals are unstandardized regression coefficients

Table 3: Study II Hypotheses One and Two

	B	(s.e.)	LLCI	ULCI	β
<u>Supportive Condition</u>					
Polarization	-.96	2.76	-6.37	4.45	-.02
PIE	-.15	.09	-.32	.02	-.05
Intent	-.13	.50	-1.11	.85	-.02
Interest	-.67	1.16	-.30	1.63	-.02
<u>Critical Condition</u>					
Polarization	-2.76	2.76	-8.17	2.65	-.07
PIE	-.05	.08	-.21	.11	-.02
Intent	.16	.50	-.81	1.14	.02
Interest	.20	.95	-1.70	2.12	.01

Asterisks on β reflect results of the Wald test of significance; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Confidence intervals are unstandardized regression coefficients

Table 4: Study II Research Question One

	B	(s.e.)	LLCI	ULCI	β
<u>Supportive Condition: Women</u>					
PIE	-.05	.02	-.23	.07	-.03
Intent	-3.53	6.86	-2.58	4.63	-.04
Interest	-.14	.27	-5.47	3.71	-.04
Violence	-.70	.29	-.27	.79	-.26*
Oppose Marriage	.13	.18	-.28	.41	.07
<u>Supportive Condition: Men</u>					
PIE	-.09	.08	-.77	.10	-.04
Intent	59.12	34.30	-7.58	4.81	.08
Interest	-.14	.24	-2.52	1.74	-.03
Violence	.26	.27	-1.27	-.13	.10
Oppose Marriage	.07	.18	-.20	.51	.04
<u>Critical Condition: Women</u>					
PIE	-.02	.022	-.16	.12	-.012
Intent	-.25	6.37	-2.58	5.01	-.003
Interest	-.09	.26	-3.56	4.98	-.02
Violence	-.13	.27	-.76	.34	-.05
Oppose Marriage	-.06	.18	-.24	.48	-.03
<u>Critical Condition: Men</u>					
PIE	-.03	.08	-.50	.19	-.02
Intent	65.46	30.77	-4.01	3.97	.08*
Interest	.10	.25	-1.84	1.36	.02
Violence	-.22	.28	-.66	.39	-.08
Oppose Marriage	.12	.18	-.42	.27	.07
<u>Oppose OutGroup Marriage: Men</u>					
Supportive	.07	.18	-.20	.51	.04
Critical	.12	.18	-.42	.27	.07
PreFT	.001	.003	.00	.02	.03
PreInt	-.01	.005	-.01	.02	-.22
PrePIE	.14	.12	-.86	-.11	.16
DemPID	-.10	.09	-.35	.05	-.12
RepPID	-.19	.09	-.24	.18	-.23*

Asterisks on β reflect results of the Wald test of significance; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Confidence intervals are unstandardized regression coefficients

Figure 1

Figure 2

(Your Name)
February 21 at 1:33pm · ▼

Listen, I know not everyone cares about politics but I think we should this time around. This is a very important election. The country could go many different ways depending on who gets elected. It isn't just the candidates on the ballot, it's our future. We need a Democrat in the White House!!!

Like Comment

Amanda Segal I love it! They are going to save the country.
Unlike · Reply · 1 · February 21 at 1:33pm

Mark Johnson Democrats need to get out and vote! We need you more than ever this election. The real question is, can we afford not to elect the Democrats?
Like · Reply · February 21 at 1:34pm

Becca Iattoni Oh I am so glad you said that! They have done some really great things! Thank you for posting this. I don't think people appreciate how important this election is. Everything is on the line. I wish I could like this post 100 times.
Like · Reply · February 21 at 1:35pm

Justin Wright I'm definitely going to go out and vote for the Democrats! With so much at stake, we really need to make sure the Democrats are in power in 2016!
Unlike · Reply · 1 · February 21 at 1:36pm

Carissa Scott Exactly! Thank you! How could we trust anyone other than us Democrats to fix the country's problems?
Unlike · Reply · 1 · February 21 at 1:36pm

Taylor Marte Democrats have my vote and that will not change. A Democrat will be our next President. Let's go Democrats!
Like · Reply · February 21 at 1:37pm

Joy Al Wazedi I agree with you wholeheartedly. Democrats are after all the ones who accomplish their goals. I'm supporting the candidates who can accomplish their goals!
Like · Reply · February 21 at 1:38pm

Kenneth Zano I'm with you. The Democrats are more qualified to fix our problems. End of story.
Like · Reply · February 21 at 1:39pm

Mary Jo Miller Democrats aren't the only ones who will fight for your family. I will and so will each of us who elect them to the next President of the United States, PERIOD!!!
Unlike · Reply · 1 · February 21 at 1:40pm

Scott Hayes You are so right. Couldn't have said it better myself!
Like · Reply · 1 hr

Whitney Jones All the way to the White House!!!
Like · Reply · 1 hr

Tyler Ratner It is high time for eight years of an awesome Democrat as President. Totally going all the way to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.
Like · Reply · Just now · Edited

Umme Cox Democrats in the White House are SO MUCH BETTER.
Like · Reply · Just now · Edited

Write a comment...

Figure 3

(Your Name)
February 21 at 4:26pm · ▼

Listen, I know not everyone cares about politics but I think we should this time around. This is a very important election. The country could go many different ways depending on who gets elected. It isn't just the candidates on the ballot, it's our future. We need a Democrat in the White House!!!

Like Comment

Amanda Segal Democrats are so awful. They will never become president in 2016. Never.
Like · Reply · February 21 at 4:30pm

Mark Johnson Watch out who you wish for. It will be the biggest "I told you so" ever.
Like · Reply · February 21 at 4:30pm

Becca Iattoni Sure, keep destroying the country by voting these corrupt, arrogant liars into the White House.
Like · Reply · February 21 at 4:30pm

Justin Wright It's sad that you want a Democrat in office. I think you are my only friend who thinks this. I feel bad for you.
Unlike · Reply · 1 · February 21 at 4:30pm

Carissa Scott After all they have done to ruin the country? What can you possibly like about them?
Like · Reply · February 21 at 4:38pm

Taylor Marte I'm definitely going to do this except the opposite! Vote to get Democrats out of power!
Unlike · Reply · 1 · February 21 at 4:39pm

Joy Al Wazedi Stop the Democrats in 2016!
Like · Reply · February 21 at 4:43pm

Kenneth Zano I would never trust another Democrat in the White House. Not after the last one.
Like · Reply · February 21 at 4:43pm

Mary Jo Miller Democrats go to the big banks for donations. Are you serious? They are owned by these people.
Like · Reply · February 21 at 4:44pm

Scott Hayes LOL! You're done. The Democrats are done. Please just get out of politics!
Unlike · Reply · 1 · February 21 at 4:44pm

Whitney Jones Yes we need a president with backbone but DEMOCRATS you don't have one. Just quit please you will not win.
Like · Reply · February 21 at 4:45pm

Tyler Ratner If you knew anything about what was going on in America you wouldn't be saying this.
Like · Reply · February 21 at 4:45pm

Umme Cox Did I actually see you say Democrats??? Now THAT is scary! Please, please, please think hard about that and think about our future... Please.
Unlike · Reply · 1 · February 21 at 4:46pm

Write a comment...

Figure 4

(Your Name)
February 21 at 3:47pm ·

Listen, I know not everyone cares about politics but I think we should this time around. This is a very important election. The country could go many different ways depending on who gets elected. It isn't just the candidates on the ballot, it's our future. We need a Republican in the White House!!!

Like Comment

Amanda Segal love it! They are going to save the country.
Unlike · Reply · 1 · February 21 at 4:00pm

Mark Johnson Republicans need to get out and vote! We need you more than ever this election. The real question is, can we afford not to elect the Republicans?
Like · Reply · February 21 at 4:00pm

Becca lattoni Oh I am so glad you said that! They have done some really great things! Thank you for posting this. I don't think people appreciate how important this election is. Everything is on the line. I wish I could like this post 100 times.
Like · Reply · February 21 at 4:07pm

Justin Wright I'm definitely going to go out and vote for the Republicans! With so much at stake, we really need to make sure the Republicans are in power in 2016!
Unlike · Reply · 1 · February 21 at 4:08pm

Carissa Scott Exactly! Thank you! How could we trust anyone other than us Republicans to fix the country's problems?
Unlike · Reply · 1 · February 21 at 4:09pm

Taylor Marte Republicans have my vote and that will not change. A Republican will be our next President. Let's go Republicans!
Like · Reply · February 21 at 4:13pm

Joy AlWazedi I agree with you wholeheartedly. Republicans are after all the ones who accomplish their goals. I'm supporting the candidates who can accomplish their goals!
Like · Reply · February 21 at 4:13pm

Kenneth Zano I'm with you. The Republicans are more qualified to fix our problems. End of story.
Like · Reply · February 21 at 4:14pm

Mary Jo Miller Republicans aren't the only ones who will fight for your family. I will and so will each of us who elect them to the next President of the United States, PERIOD!!!
Unlike · Reply · 1 · February 21 at 4:14pm

Scott Hayes You are so right. Couldn't have said it better myself!
Like · Reply · 7 mins

Whitney Jones All the way to the White House!!!
Like · Reply · 6 mins

Tyler Ratner It is high time for eight years of an awesome Republican as President. Totally going all the way to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.
Like · Reply · Just now · Edited

Umme Cox Republicans in the White House are SO MUCH BETTER.
Like · Reply · Just now · Edited

Write a comment...

Figure 5

(Your Name)
February 21 at 4:18pm · ▼

Listen, I know not everyone cares about politics but I think we should this time around. This is a very important election. The country could go many different ways depending on who gets elected. It isn't just the candidates on the ballot, it's our future. We need a Republican in the White House!!!

Like Comment

Amanda Segal Republicans are so awful. They will never become president in 2016. Never.
Like · Reply · February 21 at 4:22pm

Mark Johnson Watch out who you wish for. It will be the biggest "I told you so" ever.
Like · Reply · February 21 at 4:22pm

Becca Iattoni Sure, keep destroying the country by voting these corrupt, arrogant liars into the White House.
Like · Reply · February 21 at 4:23pm

Justin Wright It's sad that you want a Republican in office. I think you are my only friend who thinks this. I feel bad for you.
Unlike · Reply · 1 · February 21 at 4:23pm

Carissa Scott After all they have done to ruin the country? What can you possibly like about them?
Like · Reply · February 21 at 4:24pm

Taylor Marte I'm definitely going to do this except the opposite! Vote to get Republicans out of power!
Unlike · Reply · 1 · February 21 at 4:25pm

Joy Al Wazedi Stop the Republicans in 2016!
Like · Reply · February 21 at 4:26pm

Kenneth Zano I would never trust another Republican in the White House. Not after the last one.
Like · Reply · February 21 at 4:26pm

Mary Jo Miller Republicans go to the big banks for donations. Are you serious? They are owned by these people.
Like · Reply · February 21 at 4:27pm

Scott Hayes LOL! You're done. The Republicans are done. Please just get out of politics!
Unlike · Reply · 1 · February 21 at 4:27pm

Whitney Jones Yes we need a president with backbone but REPUBLICANS you don't have one. Just quit please you will not win.
Like · Reply · February 21 at 4:27pm

Tyler Ratner If you knew anything about what was going on in America you wouldn't be saying this.
Like · Reply · February 21 at 4:29pm

Umme Cox Did I actually see you say Republicans??? Now THAT is scary! Please, please, please think hard about that and think about our future... Please.
Unlike · Reply · 1 · February 21 at 4:29pm

Write a comment...

Figure 6

VITA

Molly Greenwood was born in Merrill, Wisconsin. She attended high school at Merrill High School in Merrill, Wisconsin before moving to Eau Claire, Wisconsin to attend the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. In the spring of 2007, she received the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. She then attended graduate school at Marquette University, where she received a Master of Arts in Communication Studies in the summer of 2009. After interning for a United States Senator in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, she worked in administrative and communication roles for three years. In 2012, she began her work as a doctoral student in the Department of Communication at the University of Missouri. She successfully defended her dissertation in April 2017.