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Selective Exposure, Political Polarization, and Possible Mediators: Evidence From the
Netherlands

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Abstract

One of the main lines of reasoning in the contemporary debate on media effects is the notion that selective exposure to congruent information can lead to political polarization.

Comparatively little experimental evidence, however, is available to empirically back up the claim of a causal relationship. Even less is known about the mechanisms behind such an effect. We conducted an online experiment with a sample matching the characteristics of the Dutch population closely (N = 501), and investigate how selective exposure can lead to polarized attitudes and which role frames, facts, and public opinion cues play. While we find that facts learned and perceived public opinion can help explaining attitude change, we cannot confirm that people generally polarize.

keywords: *polarization, selective exposure, immigration, framing, public opinion, learning*

In recent years, the topic of selective exposure has increasingly drawn the attention of political communication scholars. Selective exposure theory suggests that people tend to expose themselves to political information they agree with beforehand, which in turn increases political polarization (e.g., Stroud, 2011). One reason for this is the transformation of the media landscape: It has frequently been argued that the high level of control, which users enjoy in online environments, leads to a predominant exposure to like-minded messages. This could eventually cause the “leveling effects” of mass media to vanish (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008) and polarization to occur. Bennet and Iyengar state that the traditional mass media formed a counterforce to political polarization by regularly exposing people to opposite viewpoints, given the journalistic norm of balancing, which dictates that for the most part at least two sides of a political controversy get a say in mainstream coverage. As the era of limited media choices has come to an end and cable television, but most importantly, a huge number of online media have entered the scene, the notion of selective exposure has gained influence in both scientific and societal discourse. But while it has been repeatedly shown that people become more extreme in their attitudes when they expose themselves to reinforcing information, little is known on how this process works exactly (Dvir Gvirsman, 2014; + ONE REFERENCE BLINDED). In this paper, we outline and investigate three possible mechanisms through which selective exposure may lead to polarization: frame acceptance (1), perceived opinion climate (2), and knowledge gain (3).

Framing theory may offer a first explanation. Exposure to partisan media’s framing could lead to polarization, as the audience accepts the partisan frames (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). Secondly, exposure to partisan media might make the users overestimate the amount of people that share the opinion voiced by the partisan outlet (Tsfati, Stroud, & Chotiner, 2013), which may cause polarization because people adjust their opinions toward the perceived group opinion (Stroud, 2010). Thirdly, polarization might be caused by learning more about

the topic: More knowledge can support motivated reasoning and therefore might make people more polarized as well.

To systematically assess these three possible explanations, we conduct a survey-embedded experiment to investigate whether the effect of selective exposure on political polarization is mediated by these three components. We test these effects in the context of the Dutch immigration debate. The 1990s are known as a period of increased immigration in many European countries (Boswell, 2005), but especially in the Netherlands (Berkhout & Sudulich, 2011). The immigration issue has been part of the Dutch political agenda ever since, but in varying levels of prominence (Van Klingeren, Boomgaarden, Vliegenthart, & De Vreese, 2014). Immigration has altered the demographic composition of the Netherlands and introduced alternative habits, religions and cultures within a relatively short time frame, and accordingly, it is considered an important issue to the people of the Netherlands. It is an issue on which people are likely to have formed an opinion already, which is an important precondition for selective exposure to occur.

Our study contributes to the literature not only by investigating the mediated effects we propose, but also by testing selective exposure in the context of a European multi-party system: While many selective-exposure studies are conducted in two-party systems, predominantly in the United States of America, and operationalize partisanship as party identification, we define exposure to attitude-confirming or disconfirming information on the issue level. This helps us better understand the mechanisms and effects of selective exposure: Our issue-specific approach contributes to the generalizability of selective exposure research to a context where clearly-identified ideological outlets are less prevalent (in comparison to, for example, Fox News or MSNBC that have clear ideological leanings in the US context).

Theoretical Background

Selective Exposure and Political Polarization

The idea that people mainly expose themselves to political information that fits their prior attitudes has been voiced since the beginning of modern communication science (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944; Sears & Freedman, 1967; Zillmann & Bryant, 1985). Based on the idea that people would strive to avoid cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), it was assumed that they choose media outlets that do not confront them with viewpoints that conflicted with their cognitions. However, the practical relevance seemed to be limited by the fact that there were not many media outlets to choose from. Due to the advent of cable television and the Internet, this has changed radically – and research on so-called selective exposure has relished a revival (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013; Garrett et al., 2014; Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2010; Levendusky, 2013; Messing & Westwood, 2011).

While it is one thing to show that such selective exposure occurs, it is another matter to investigate its effects. From a media effects perspective, one of the most interesting questions is to what extent selective exposure leads to increased polarization of the audience. There is a strong theoretical argument to be made for such an effect. In his model of reinforcing spirals, Slater (2007) argues that partisan content makes people more partisan, which in turn makes them even more likely to consume partisan content – fueling a spiraling process of polarization. And indeed, there is evidence for such a polarizing effect (e.g., Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Stroud, 2010, 2011; Warner, 2010). However, the spiraling process is at least partially counteracted by the fact that audiences overlap and very few people rely on attitude-reinforcing partisan media exclusively (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011; Trilling, 2013). Accordingly, in a comprehensive review, Prior (2013) concludes that selective exposure can have an influence on polarization, but that attitudinal polarization is less of a threat than pessimists fear.

Nevertheless, there is little disagreement with the general rationale that selective exposure to attitude-consistent political materials leads to attitude polarization of the

individual¹. Therefore, we proceed to have a closer look at the possible this effect and the possible explanations for its occurrence. It also leads to our first hypothesis:

H1: Ideologically-consistent exposure will lead to attitude polarization.

Frame Acceptance

The idea that media frames influence audience interpretations is the basis of a branch of scholarship that studies framing as a media effect. Literature suggests that alternative interpretations of events in media texts can influence audience interpretations of events, their attributions of responsibility and, consequently, their moral judgments (Chong & Druckman, 2007), cognitions, attitudes and behaviors (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). For instance, investigating a topic similar to the one under study here, Van Klingeren (2014) has shown how differently framed messages can change people's attitude towards immigration issues.

Research has identified a large variety of different frames, ranging from very detailed issue-specific frames to broader generic frames (De Vreese, 2005; Matthes & Kohring, 2008). With regard to the topic under study – integration and immigration – in the Dutch context, this is no different. Scholten (2011) argues that the nexus surrounding the Dutch immigration issue is diverse and has evolved tremendously over time, both in politics and science. He describes that in the late 1970s and early 1980s the topic was mostly discussed in terms of social-cultural emancipation; the problem-frame on citizenship and social-economic participation arose in the late 1980 and early 1990s. The latest change, since the 2000s, has been on transnationalism and assimilation, again stressing the cultural aspects of the issue. As these fluctuations demonstrate, the economic and socio-cultural perspectives have always intrinsically been part of the immigration debate; hence, our focus is on these two frames.

Jamieson and Cappella (2008) argued that exposure to conservative media (like the talk radio show of the conservative host Rush Limbaugh) promotes political polarization by offering and promoting alternative interpretations to those offered by mainstream media. They

argue that exposure to the framing of political reality and reframing of mainstream media information makes the audience more likely to interpret reality “in a way that is both systematic and consistent with Limbaugh’s rhetoric”. They argue that “this creates for his listeners a polarized view of political phenomena” (p. xiv). However, while Jamieson and Cappella offered framing as a mechanism explaining why exposure to conservative media promotes political polarization, their empirical evidence is limited, as they do not investigate whether acceptance of frames mediates the association between ideological exposure and polarization. Yet, Sniderman and Theriault (2004) give some first evidence that exposure to congruent frames leads to more extreme attitudes. Even if two competing frames are offered simultaneously, people tend to accept the frame that is congruent with their prior attitude, which strengthens their attitude even more (Sniderman & Theriault, 2004). Druckman, Fein, and Leeper (2012) contribute to the debate by investigating repeated framing effects. Among other things they find that when given the opportunity, people tend to seek opinion-consistent information, additionally they find that the persuasiveness of a counter-attitudinal frame is downgraded when people are repeatedly confronted with attitude consistent frames. If we extrapolate to the context of mainstream ideological media, even if one is exposed to frames in mainstream media and counter-frames in ideological media (as is the case for most of the ideological media audiences according to the literature as reviewed above), polarization towards prior opinions will likely take place.

H2: Ideologically consistent exposure leads to frame acceptance, which leads to attitude polarization.

Perceived Public Opinion

Another possible mechanism through which selective exposure promotes political polarization is through the potential effects of ideological media on audience perceptions of the public opinion. First of all, selective exposure might lead to a biased perception of public

opinion. For instance, it is not uncommon to overestimate public support for one's preferred candidate (Nir, 2011). As a consequence of this, people's preferences can be reinforced, because, as Stroud argues, "people want to be perceived well by their fellow group members and hence adjust their opinions toward the perceived group mean" (2010, p. 558). Based on survey data from both Israel and the United States, Tsfati, Stroud, and Chotiner (2013) demonstrate such an effect empirically: Congruent exposure to partisan media seems to lead to overestimation of public support for one's own position, which in turn leads to polarization.

More in general, we hypothesize:

H3: Ideologically consistent exposure leads to a perception of public opinion that is in line with the own attitude, which leads to attitude polarization.

Knowledge Gain

Yet another possible mechanism explaining how selective exposure can lead to polarization is that the readers of (partisan) information learn new facts that can support their argument. Learning effects resulting from exposure to mediated political information have been documented across a wide variety of genres in a variety of contexts (e.g., Chaffee & Kanihan, 1997), and mediated information serves as an important factor shaping political attitudes (Zaller, 1992). At the same time, motivational factors seem to play a big role in political learning (e.g., Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). If we assume that people with a strong attitude towards a topic are motivated to engage with the topic, we can expect that partisans who use partisan media learn from the (partisan) facts they are exposed to, which might lead to even stronger attitudes. This is also what the motivated-reasoning approach (Kunda, 1990) would assume: While some pursue *accuracy goals* and strive to reach the correct conclusions, others will pursue *directional goals* and process information (and thus learn) in a way that they derive the conclusions they want to derive. Motivated reasoning seems to make people ignore counter-attitudinal arguments (Matthes & Valenzuela, 2012) – especially those who

Lodge and Taber (2000) call *partisan reasoners*. More in general, Zaller (1992) has argued that knowledge of facts matters for attitude formation. We expect:

H4: Ideologically consistent exposure leads to knowledge gain, which leads to attitude polarization.

Forced Versus Self-Selected Exposure

A central component within the selective exposure framework is the element of *selection*. Although not always explicitly stated, it is assumed that polarization is not merely an effect of exposure to attitude-reinforcing content, but of exposure to *self-selected* attitude-reinforcing content. One could argue, for example, that forcing people to expose themselves to some kind of content might even have opposite effects, as people might start counterarguing to justify their view – which, in fact, would be a good mechanism to reduce cognitive dissonance and therefore be in line with theory (see, e.g., Van Klinger, 2014). Others might argue the opposite and expect that exposure to unfamiliar arguments might be potentially more powerful. A well-known finding in the cognitive dissonance paradigm shows that the effects of behavior on attitude formation is strongest when the behavior is not forced on experimental participants but rather self-selected (Hobden & Olson, 1994). The polarizing effect of ideological media could be viewed as a dissonance-reducing effect of exposure behaviors on attitudes. Viewed this way, the effect of congruent exposure on attitude polarization should be stronger when ideological exposure is selected and not forced on participants.

To investigate whether selective exposure effects are stronger because of people's selectivity or whether they occur simply because of the content people are exposed to, no matter whether they are free to choose or they are forced to use a specific item, we pose a research question to test the moderating role of self-selection:

RQ1: Do the expected effects differ between those who are allowed to select for themselves and those who are assigned an article to read?

Method

Case Under Study

We test our hypotheses in the Netherlands. Due to its multi-party system, the political landscape in general is not too polarized and, since pillarization has faded since the 1960s, Dutch voters have become pretty volatile in the last decade (e.g., Van der Meer, Lubbe, Van Elsas, Elff, & Van der Brug, 2012). Nevertheless, some issues have sparked heated debates in the last decade. The issue of immigration and integration is maybe the most prominent of them all. Accompanied by the rise of the right-wing populist Freedom Party (PVV), a party that mainly focuses on the topic of immigration and integration. Due to the long-standing prominence of the topic in the media, we expect virtually everyone to have an opinion on the topic (Van Klingeren et al., 2014). This makes it a suitable test case for selective exposure research.

Design

An online survey-experiment was conducted by drawing a representative quota sample of the Dutch population from a research company's database (Panelclix). This database consists of about 140,000 people. Non-compliance was avoided by giving the respondents financial incentives. The data were collected between the 13th and the 17th of February 2014. 625 respondents started the experiment. It was agreed with the research company beforehand that only those questionnaires that were completed and where participants took at least 20 seconds² to read the stimulus material would be considered valid data, which resulted in a sample size of 501. The final sample was representative with respect to age (18 to 81), gender and education (see appendix for the comparison with population parameters).

Stimulus Material and Manipulation Check

Two articles about the topic of immigration were carefully developed and typeset to mimic a real-world newspaper article as closely as possible. One article had a pro-immigration title and was written in a pro-immigration way. A second article was the same in terms of subject, factual content and order of content as the first article, but was written from an anti-immigration standpoint and showed an anti-immigration title. The control group was exposed to an article on the celestial sphere, which was unrelated to anything earthly.

More specifically, both the pro and the contra article included an economic frame, a cultural frame, a reference to the public opinion, and factual information. The facts used were always the same (e.g., unemployment rates, number of women wearing a headscarf); however, the interpretation (i.e., whether the rates are high or low; whether this is a sign for integration or not) was exactly the opposite. For instance, the sentences “The percentage of Non-Western Immigrants without a job increased from 13.1 to 15.5 per cent. Among natives, there was an increase from 4.2 to 5.0 percent.” were followed by “This indicates that immigrants try less hard to connect to the labor market.” (in the contra article) and by “This indicates that it is harder for immigrants to connect to the labor market.” (in the pro article).

To determine whether the participants perceived the article they were exposed to as a pro or anti-immigration article, as we intended to, we asked the respondents how they positioned the author of the article with regard to the topic of immigration. The scale ranged from 1 to 10, 1 being anti-immigration, 10 being pro-immigration. The people who were exposed to an anti-immigration article on average scored 3.4 ($SD = 1.81$) on the scale; the ones who were exposed to the pro-immigration article had an average score of 7.0 ($SD = 1.47$). The difference was significant ($t(437) = -22.64, p < 0.001$), which indicates the manipulation was successful.

Furthermore, we checked whether people noticed the two frames that were incorporated in the stimulus material, i.e., cultural and economic frame. As the article clearly

referred to both economic and cultural aspects of immigration (e.g., unemployment and wearing headscarves), we expected people to recognize both frames. To check this, we asked people to indicate on a ten point scale to what degree they thought the article they had just read was discussed in terms of health, art, sexuality, economy and culture. They clearly recognized the cultural ($M = 6.81, SD = 1.78$) and economic frame ($M = 7.63, SD = 1.43$), and, in line with the expectations, did not recognize the three non-present items (respectively $M = 3.87, SD = 1.75; M = 3.48, SD = 1.75; M = 3.55, SD = 1.94$). These results indicate successful manipulation.

Procedure

In the first part of the questionnaire, the participants were asked, among other things about their political position and their opinion on immigration. After a brief distraction, during which people were asked to sketch something unrelated based on a description they were given and tell us what they had drawn¹, $n = 145$ of the participants were randomly assigned to one of the two treatment (forced condition), $n = 62$ to the control group (control condition). The remaining $n = 294$ was asked to select (self-select condition) one of the two articles while being shown the headings only³. In the forced condition, $n = 70$ saw the pro article, $n = 75$ the contra article. In the self-select condition, $n = 142$ selected the pro article, $n = 152$ selected the contra article. We deliberately oversampled the self-select condition by a factor of 2 to account for the fact that those who self-selected a specific article again can be divided into those whose prior attitude is congruent with the article and those with incongruent attitudes. In general, the design we employ follows the designs proposed by Arcenaux & Johnson (2013, p. 60) and Gaines & Kulinski (2011). After reading the article, the respondents were asked to fill out the second part of the questionnaire, which contained

¹ The respondents were asked to draw, or if without paper, think about what the following description represented: please draw a perfect square that is open at the top, then draw two half circles next to each other on top of the square, what does this show? If done correctly, the image would show a slice of bread (the shape that it typically comes in in the Netherlands).

the same questions with regard to immigration, the mediators, a manipulation check and several control questions.

Variables⁴

Dependent variable. Attitude towards immigration was measured before and after exposure to the stimulus. To maximize reliability and comparability, we relied on items used in the European Social Survey (see Meuleman & Billiet, 2012). We slightly adjusted the question wording to abbreviate the items. We used the ESS-items⁵ that measure *economic threat perceptions*; *cultural threat perceptions*; and *conditions under which immigrants should be admitted*, which taps into someone's general attitude towards immigration. An example for a question tapping into economic threats is: "Most immigrants work here and pay taxes. They also use medical and social services. Altogether, do you think that people who come here, cost more than they contribute, or do they contribute more than they cost?" An example for a cultural threat item is: "Do you think that cultural life in the Netherlands in general is undermined or enriched by people from other countries who come and live here?"

While the first six items (economic and cultural threats) loaded on one factor (eigenvalue_{pre} = 2.84, explained variance_{pre} = 83.9%, eigenvalue_{post} = 3.64, explained variance_{post} = 84.2%), the *condition-for-admittance*-items seemed to measure a different construct, which is why we excluded them and averaged the first six items to construct a scale ($M_{pre} = 5.54$, $SD_{pre} = .85$, $min_{pre} = 2.83$, $max_{pre} = 8.0$, $\alpha_{pre} = .80$; $M_{post} = 5.64$, $SD_{post} = .84$, $min_{post} = 2.83$, $max_{post} = 8.67$, $\alpha_{post} = .86$). A higher value implies a more positive attitude (Figure 1). We subsequently calculated the *attitude change* $\Delta att = att_{post} - att_{pre}$ ($M = .10$, $SD = .64$, $min = -3.17$, $max = 3.33$) which we used as dependent variable in our structural equation model.

-- FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE --

Mediators.

Frame acceptance. To assess how participants frame the immigration issue after being exposed to the stimulus, we asked an open-ended question (“If you think of immigration, what do you think of foremost? Name up to three aspects and put the most important one on top”). A coding scheme was developed that distinguished between five frames. Each of the first two authors coded each answer independently, resulting in a high intercoder agreement (Frame first open answer: Krippendorff’s (nominal) $\alpha = 0.746$, second answer: $\alpha = 0.834$, third answer: $\alpha = 0.783$). Afterwards, both coders discussed the cases on which they disagreed and decided on the final coding. 48.7% used an economic frame in at least one of their answers, 51.5% a cultural frame, 14.6% a humanitarian frame, 20.16% a crime frame, and 5.6% a “the-country-is-full” frame.

To find out whether the cultural and economic frames used in the article were *accepted*, we also coded the valence of the given answers for each cultural and economic frame that was mentioned (-1 = anti-immigrant, 0 = not mentioned, +1 = pro-immigrant). Coding was again reliable: Krippendorff’s (ordinal) $\alpha = 0.783$, 0.771 and 0.689 respectively. And again, both coders discussed the cases on which they disagreed and decided on the final coding. We constructed two variables that indicated whether the cultural and the economic frame were accepted.

To this end, we recoded the direction of the valence in order to match the direction of the frame the participant was exposed to. For instance, someone mentioning a pro-immigrant cultural frame, while being exposed to a pro article, the value was coded as +1. We subsequently determined whether more frames were valenced opposite to the article’s direction (coded as -1, $n_{econ} = 88$ (17.6%), $n_{cult} = 57$ (11.4%)), in line with the article (coded as +1, $n_{econ} = 12$ (2.4%), $n_{cult} = 42$ (8.4%)). Most people, however, either did not mention one of the frames or mentioned them both in line with and against the direction of the article (coded as 0, $n_{econ} = 401$ (80.0%), $n_{cult} = 402$ (80.2%)).

Knowledge gain. We tested how many of the facts that were presented in the article were correctly recalled by the participants. After manipulation respondents were asked to decide whether the seven statements we presented them were correct, incorrect, or whether they did not know (which we counted as incorrect). Examples include “Among immigrants, unemployment rose by 2.4 percentage points” (which is correct), and “Turkish Muslims wear headscarves more often than Moroccan Muslims” (which is wrong).

Based on this, we constructed a variable with a theoretical range of 0 (everything wrong) to 1 (everything correct), $M = .56$, $SD = .24$, $min = 0$, $max = 1$.

Perceived opinion climate. We measured perceived opinion climate with one item (“How do the Dutch in general think about immigrants?”) on a 10-point scale ranging from “The Dutch in general are very negative about immigrants” (1) to “...very positive about immigrants” (10), $M = 4.39$, $SD = 1.48$, $min = 1$, $max = 8$.

Results

We estimated a structural equation model with *attitude change* (Δatt) as the dependent variable. We used four condition-dummies (forced exposure to pro-immigration article, forced exposure to contra-immigration article, pro-article selected, contra-article selected; the control group served as the omitted category, thus the coefficients for the dummies compare each experimental groups to the control group) and included the interaction terms of these dummies with the centered attitude at t_0 . This enables us to distinguish the effects of, for example, the self-selected pro-article with those who agree with it beforehand (=congruent exposure) and those who disagree (counterattitudinal exposure). The structural equation model in Table 1 exhibits an acceptable model fit (RMSEA = .072, 90%CI[.040–.105], $pclose = .119$). A RMSEA of 0.05 is commonly regarded as good, 0.08 as mediocre, 0.10 as the cutoff-point for poor fitting models (MacCallum, Browne, & Sugawara, 1996). The non-significant $pclose$ -value also indicates a rather good model fit. If we construct a model

without the two frame-acceptance moderators (which do not affect the model and play no significant role in the selective exposure process, as the descriptive statistics already indicated and as we will further show below), we get an excellent RMSEA $< .0001$. However, for the sake of clarity and consistency with our hypotheses, we chose to present the full model.

-- TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE --

H1 predicts an effect of congruent exposure on polarization. One may therefore expect a positive main effect of the pro conditions and a negative main effect of the contra conditions. We see that this is indeed the case (Table 1) for positive conditions. However, those in the negative condition did not become more negative over time. This indicates that congruent ideological exposure does not always lead to more extreme views and therefore to polarization.

RQ1 suggests that the effect people who were able to select articles themselves might experience stronger effects. Having a look at the *total* effects (Table 2), we see that being in one of the pro conditions leads to a positive attitude change of +.34 points on the 10-point scale in the case of self-selection, or +.23 in the case of forced treatment. This seems to suggest that indeed self-selected articles have a stronger impact, but given the relatively high standard errors (.09 and .10, respectively), these two coefficients do not differ significantly from each other. Also, there seems to be no immediate effect of being exposed to a contra stimulus. However, there is a *negative* interaction between self-selecting the contra article and prior attitude (Figure 2). This means that people who are positive but selected the contra-article got more negative and vice versa. This seems to indicate a *mitigating* effect: When self-selecting the contra article, people actually get less extreme moving to a more moderate position on the scale⁶. In sum, our results do not indicate that self-selection leads to more polarization than assigned articles, if it leads to any polarization at all.

-- TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE --

-- FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE --

Mediating Effects

Frame acceptance. Self-selecting the contra article leads to accepting a contra-valenced culture frame, independent of one's prior attitude. Regarding acceptance of the economic frame, prior attitude has an influence in the expected direction, no matter which stimulus was read – with the exception of those who selected the pro article, whose acceptance of frames was moved in the direction contrary to their prior attitude. In most cases however, the stimulus does not have any effect on frame acceptance. Moving along to the second part of the mediation, we see that acceptance of neither the cultural nor the economic frame is related to the dependent variable: attitude change. Hence, exposure to the stimulus has little influence on any type of frame acceptance, which in turn does not affect polarization. Thereby, our second hypothesis is not confirmed.

Perceived public opinion. As expected, perceived public opinion indeed predicts attitude change: If people perceive the average public opinion as more positive towards immigrants, their attitude changes towards a more positive evaluation as well. Perceived public opinion itself, however, is not consistently predicted by the stimulus people received. In fact, only in the case of those who self-selected the pro article, a significant effect of the stimulus on perceived public opinion could be observed. Still, the signs of the coefficients for the negative conditions point in the expected direction, too. Thus, while someone selecting the pro article is likely to indeed perceive public opinion as more positive and in turn can become more positive himself, we cannot confirm such an effect across the board, which means we find only very limited support for H3.

Knowledge gain. In all conditions, people acquired knowledge about the topic at a similar rate, while none was acquired in the control group. However, people do not seem to use these facts for *motivated reasoning* in line with the article – the more they got to know,

the more negative their attitude became. The magnitude of the effect is almost exactly the same for all stimuli (b 's between .21 to .24, all SE 's = .04). As also the path from knowledge to the dependent variable attitude change is significant ($b = -.29$, $SE = .11$), one could say that exposure to any stimulus (compared to the control group) has an indirect effect of approximately $-.07$ on *attitude change* via the mediator *knowledge*, which is also confirmed by the bootstrapped coefficients presented in Table 2. As there are no differences between the stimuli, and also prior attitude is completely unrelated, we have to conclude that the knowledge gain cannot be attributed to any kind of selective exposure mechanism. Hence, H4 cannot be confirmed. Instead of the different effects due to selective exposure, we find a clear persuasion effect: No matter what someone's prior attitude, no matter what the attitude voiced in the article is, and no matter whether they align or not: People seem to learn at the same rate, and the learning seems to influence their attitude in the same direction.

Conclusion and Discussion

With this study we set out to take a look inside the black box of selective exposure effects and see how selective exposure leads to polarization. We innovated upon extant research not only by looking at potential mediators that cause voters to polarize, but by testing the selective exposure mechanism in a European setting, namely the Netherlands. One of our main findings is that we see little evidence for an effect of selective exposure on polarization at all. A substantial part of our sample did *not* polarize – in fact, some became even more moderate. This is an interesting and unexpected finding; how can this be explained?

There are some plausible explanations. First of all, the fact that this study was done in a European multi-party system may have contributed to this non-finding. Whereas most previous selective exposure studies were done in the US, hence in a two party system where partisan media play an important role, the context of this study does not have any clearly partisan media. Even when voters in the Netherlands are selective in their media outlets, they

are still exposed to relatively neutral messages. This means they are not used to clearly valenced messages, and therefore our stimulus material might be discarded as too extreme or simply seen as someone's opinion that should not be taken too seriously. Consequently, short-term effects of a single article are fairly unlikely, even though the set-up of our experiment did not differ too much from that of earlier selective exposure studies.

Second, it might be the specific topic under study. Maybe immigrant attitudes are too strong to alter with a single message, although previous studies suggest otherwise (Van Klingeren et al., 2014). Also party preference – a common variable in selective exposure studies – is a very stable trait; and, in addition, we do see some groups change their opinion, especially those selecting a positive article becoming more positive.

Third, even though the issue generally is perceived as controversial, most people might entertain a relatively moderate opinion. This indeed is the case: As the descriptive statistics and the histogram we presented shows, both in the pre- and the post-measurement, the attitude towards immigrants is approximately normally distributed, which implies that most people hold opinions quite close to the mean. It makes sense that people of a centrist position do not “radicalize” – they would not even perceive themselves to be in favor of one or the other side. For them, the notion of congruent exposure does not make much sense. This is very much the opposite of the situation in studies where most people are able to identify themselves as, e.g., either Democrats or Republicans. For selective exposure to fuel a process of polarization, thus, it might be necessary that there actually *is* a certain amount of polarization to start with. We therefore suggest to further investigate whether this is a precondition for selective exposure to occur and to have an effect on polarization. In particular, we call for more research on selective exposure in countries with multi-party systems, a culture of consensus rather than competition, and comparatively few cleavages in society.

Forth, counteracting forces might be at play which are not fully understood yet. For instance, in contrast to the predominant view that cross-cutting exposure to divergent viewpoints prevents polarization, Arceneaux and Johnson (2013) argue that polarization is most likely to occur when viewers watch programs that *oppose* their beliefs. They write that “in the process of defending their attitudes, individuals end up adopting more extreme views than those they held before” (p. 88). Future research, we suggest, should try to systematically disentangle whether such counterarguing outweighs the effect of attitude reinforcement.

Notwithstanding our general lack of support for the polarization thesis, we see that both knowledge and perceived opinion climate can fuel a change in attitude. In our case, knowing more about immigration actually made people more negative about immigration. We see little evidence, however, that people *selectively* process the new information, as the theory of motivated reasoning would assume: People do not use the information to bolster their pre-existing attitudes and consequently polarize. On the contrary, the information seems to have the same effect on everyone, no matter which interpretation is given, and no matter what the pre-existing attitudes are. This indicates a straightforward persuasion effect rather than motivated reasoning. The model also showed that perceived public opinion can explain how someone changes his attitude after being exposed to some information. Especially after choosing for the positive article, people seem to change in the direction in which they perceive the majority opinion to be – a classic bandwagon effect.

In this study, we have presented a model to predict attitude change after exposure to messages that were either in line with or conflicting with people’s prior attitude, and that they were either allowed to select themselves or were forced to read. We showed the role perceived public opinion and knowledge can play, but all in all, our findings were not in line with what we expected based on selective exposure research. We offered several mechanisms that might be at play and could explain our findings. Disentangling these mechanisms,

especially in not-so-polarized societies, seems one of the core challenges for contemporary selective exposure research. Our study can serve as a starting point for designing such research, by providing both theoretical arguments and some first empirical evidence on the complex interplay between selective exposure, cognitions, and polarization.

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Footnotes

¹ For a different perspective, see Arceneaux & Johnson (2013).

² When instructed to read as fast as possible, it took a convenience sample 25 to 30 seconds to read the article, which is why we assume that even a very fast reader cannot read it carefully in less than 20 seconds.

³ To keep conditions as similar as possible, also the respondents in the forced condition were shown both headings before (without choice) being directed to the stimulus material.

⁴ For the sake of transparency, we acknowledge that the dataset also contained information on need for cognition, need to evaluate, political knowledge, and political orientation. As these are not relevant to our hypotheses, we do not describe them any further.

⁵ We used items D21, D26 and D27; D28, D40 and D41; D10, D12 and D16.

⁶ The statistical phenomenon of regression to the mean only partly explains the effect.