# Think the Vote: Information Processing, Selective Exposure to Social Media, and Support for Trump and Clinton

THOMAS J. JOHNSON
The University of Texas at Austin, USA

MAGDALENA SALDAÑA
Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Chile

BARBARA K. KAYE
University of Tennessee, Knoxville, USA

This study proposes a three-way interaction model that examines how (1) partisan selective exposure to political information on social media, (2) information processing, and (3) ideology influenced support for Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump for president. Findings indicate that processing election information systematically affected support for Clinton among those who were exposed to diverse information; otherwise, heuristics were the main cue to process political information. Conservatives supporting Trump relied on heuristic processing and avoided information that challenged their beliefs. Liberals, in contrast, were more likely to systematically process election information, but the effect was significant only for those who exposed themselves to diverse information. As such, systematic processing might not make a difference in highly polarized environments, where strong partisans are unlikely to engage with different viewpoints and expose themselves to diverse information.

*Keywords: systematic processing, heuristic processing, selective approach, selective avoidance, ideology, Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton*

As pollsters sifted through the wreckage of their 2016 election predictions, trying to explain how Hillary Clinton lost when they determined she was anywhere from 70% to 99% certain to capture the election (Mercer, Deane, & McGeeney, 2016), social media in general, and Facebook in particular, rose to the top of the list of culprits. Although much of the blame for influencing the election has been placed on Facebook, other social media, especially Twitter, share some of that culpability (Sanders, 2016) by contributing to political polarization and pushing ideologically agreeable political stories to the top of users' newsfeeds.

Thomas J. Johnson: tom.johnson@austin.utexas.edu
Magdalena Saldaña: magdalena.saldana@uc.cl
Barbara K. Kaye: bkk@utk.edu

But it is often the users themselves who set newsfeed preferences. *Partisan selective exposure* is the term for when users seek supportive media (partisan selective approach) and/or purposely avoid opposing information (partisan selective avoidance) (Metzger, 2007; Metzger & Flanagin, 2015; Stroud, 2011; Stroud & Collier, 2018). However, exposure to political information does not alone set political attitudes; exposure works with the cognitive processes to form opinions about issues and candidates. The two basic types of mental processing are heuristic and systematic. Heuristic processing depends on cognitive shortcuts, such as a candidate's political party, whereas systematic processing involves analysis and comparisons of candidate stances (Lau & Redlawsk, 2006).

Whether voters process information heuristically or systematically is strongly related to partisan selective exposure (Lau & Redlawsk, 2006). The systematic process is short-circuited by partisan selective exposure, because when people are only exposed to ideologically compatible information, there is no reason for them to deeply consider or systematically process what they are reading—they already agree, so they need only to follow heuristic cues. Moreover, partisan selective exposure and cognitive processing are influenced by motivated reasoning, the need to find ideologically supportive information, and/or the need to arrive at accurate conclusions (Kunda, 1990).

The 2016 presidential election was no doubt contentious in part because messages sent out by rabidly partisan social media users often presented half-truths and distorted the facts (Faris et al., 2017). Misinformation on social media powerfully fed voters negative portrayals of political candidates, especially Hillary Clinton (Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017). Voters had to decide which social media information to attend to and which to ignore, and then sift through and cognitively process ideologically compatible and incompatible reports. This article thus examines how partisan selective exposure to social media (political blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, YouTube) and cognitive processing interacted with ideology to influence the decision that Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton was the most suitable candidate for the presidency. A three-way interaction model depicts the relationships among the variables. Data were collected during the final days of the 2016 presidential campaign from a nationwide representative sample created by an established survey organization.

## Literature Review

### *Partisan Selective Approach and Selective Avoidance*

Voting decisions are largely based on the types of political information voters selectively avoid or attend to, but such behavior is often ideologically motivated in that it conforms with existing beliefs and attitudes and thus blocks new or challenging information. Whether individuals avoid contrary information or curiously seek many different perspectives depends on personal characteristics, particularly ideology and strength of party identification.[1] Strength of party ties and ideological conviction drive partisan selective

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[1] Party identification is the long-term emotional connection to a political party and is a key predictor of voting behavior and a strong mobilizer of political action (e.g., Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Dalton, 2019; Lewis-Beck, Jacoby, Norpoth, & Weisberg, 2008). Ideology is "a configuration of ideas and attitudes in which the elements are bound together by some form of constraint or functional

exposure, such that strong partisans are more likely than independent thinkers to heed information that supports their views and avoid challenging information (Fischer, Jonas, Frey, & Schulz-Hardt, 2005; Stroud & Collier, 2018; Taber & Lodge, 2006). That Democrats prefer liberal-leaning messages and Republicans seek conservative ones conforms with selective exposure in that each group approaches like-minded information and avoids alternative viewpoints (Stroud, 2011; Stroud & Collier, 2018).

Partisan news consumers selectively approach political material that reinforces their positions as a way to connect to like-minded individuals (Gvirsman, 2014; Johnson & Kaye, 2013) and to boost their ideological self-identity (Hameleers, 2019). Attending to such reinforcing information strengthens their views and makes them less resistant to change, which could constrain their willingness to consider other suitable candidates (Hameleers, 2019; Holbert, Garrett, & Gleason, 2010). In contrast, partisan selective avoidance is deliberately sidestepping challenging political information (Beam, Hutchens, & Hmielowski, 2018; Garrett, 2009; Garrett & Stroud, 2014), which widens political polarization and heightens intolerance to opposing viewpoints (Garrett, 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick & Johnson, 2014; Stroud, 2010).

### *Partisan Selective Approach to and Selective Avoidance of Social Media*

During the 2016 presidential election campaign, members of the public were drawn to social media where they could selectively approach or avoid specific information about the candidates (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015; Zhu, Skoric, & Shen, 2017). But users discovered that although social media generally exist to maintain social connections, they differ in their delivery, audience, content, and structure. For instance, Facebook fosters selective approach by ensuring that its algorithms place stories and comments that are most interesting and agreeable at the top of each user's newsfeed, so users first encounter attitude-consistent rather than attitude-challenging information (Bakshy et al., 2015; Winter, Metzger, & Flanagin, 2016). Facebook also aids selective avoidance; users can hide comments or unfriend anyone who posts disagreeable content (Zhu et al., 2017). Despite users' best efforts, Facebook's social networks are made up of "friends" and "friends of friends" who might express various political perspectives (Bakshy et al., 2015), so users could stumble across challenging news even when just seeking social tidbits (Masip, Suau-Martínez, & Ruiz-Caballero, 2018).

Algorithms, however, do not solely determine selective approach or selective avoidance; social media users themselves approach and avoid particular information by the social media sites they choose to connect to, by whom they friend, and by the headlines they click on. But because social media are accessed for the purpose of finding information, not avoiding it, and users often come across political information incidentally when they are looking for other types of information, social media users are more likely to

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interdependence" (Converse, 1964, p. 243). But while only a small percentage of voters have a true ideology—that is a belief system of logically consistent issues—party loyalists more consistently sort themselves into ideologies (Republicans as conservatives, Democrats as liberal) so that the correlation between party ID and ideology has become increasingly strong over time (Barber & Pope, 2019; Levendusky, 2009). This study thus treats party identification and ideology as conceptually distinct, but operationalizes the terms as self-identification to a specific party or ideological identification.

practice partisan selective approach than partisan selective avoidance (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Park & Kaye, 2020).

Social media users come across an array of political information posted by many different sources, although users typically access information that supports their political views. Therefore, this study hypothesizes that:

H1:     *Social media users were more likely to seek political information about the 2016 election that supported their views than to avoid information they thought would be ideologically challenging.*

### Partisan Selective Approach and Avoidance, Ideology, and Social Media

Conservatives and liberals operated in very different media environments during the 2016 election. Conservative Republicans relied most heavily on Fox News and *Drudge Report,* and those who shared news on Facebook and Twitter did so in a right-wing feedback loop that was anchored by *Breitbart News* and included other conservative sources such *Daily Caller* and *Infowars*, which featured a mixture of facts and falsehoods that focused on and lauded Trump's agenda and attacked Clinton's stances (Benkler, Faris, Roberts, & Zuckerman, 2017; Faris et al., 2017). Although liberal Democrats also indulged in partisan sites, such as *Huffington Post*, MSNBC*,* and *Daily Beast,* they balanced their information diet by also consuming traditional media such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and CNN*.*

Considering the differences in partisan selective exposure between Democrats and Republicans, and liberals and conservatives, this study hypothesizes:

H2a:    *Republicans are more likely than Democrats to have selectively avoided challenging information on social media about the 2016 election.*

H2b:    *Conservatives are more likely than liberals to have selectively avoided challenging information on social media about the 2016 election.*

### Partisan Selective Approach and Avoidance, and Voter Choice

Selectively approaching or selectively avoiding political information on social media both influence voter choice, but in different ways. Selectively approaching and heeding politically supportive information with little regard to opposing views cements existing ideology and strengthens support for the party candidate, while selective avoidance breeds political polarization and intolerance (Garrett, 2009; Garrett & Stroud, 2014; Knobloch-Westerwick & Johnson, 2014; Stroud, 2010, 2011).

The 2016 presidential election was fraught with conflicting accounts of the candidates' behaviors and their issue stances. Whether voters heeded positive reports or ignored negative stories could have influenced their decision to vote for either Trump or Clinton; thus, the next two research questions ask:

RQ1:    *Did selective approach on social media influence support for either Clinton or Trump?*

*RQ2:     Did selective avoidance on social media influence support for either Clinton or Trump?*

### Heuristic-Systematic Model and Support for Clinton or Trump

Pollsters' reflections about how they could have been so wrong about the outcome of the 2016 presidential election have pointed to many explanations (Mercer et al., 2016), but have generally not considered the effect of information evaluation. Decision making, such as whom to vote for, depends on various cues and motives. How people make voting decisions is informed by the heuristic-systematic model (HSM; Chaiken, 1980). This model distinguishes between heuristic processing, or reliance on easily comprehensible cues and cognitive shortcuts (Chaiken, 1980; Chaiken & Ledgerwood, 2012; Metzger & Flanagin, 2015), and systematic processing, or attempts to thoroughly understand information through "careful attention, deep thinking and intensive reasoning" (Chaiken & Ledgerwood, 2012, p. 246).

Whether individuals rely on heuristic or systematic processing depends on both the ability to evaluate messages (e.g., knowledge, training, time availability) and the need to arrive at an accurate conclusion or make a correct decision (Chen & Chaiken, 1999; Metzger, 2007). When individuals have little time or ability to evaluate, or for noncritical information, they rely on heuristic cues, such as whether the information confirms their beliefs. But to learn more about an issue of personal importance, such a politician's voting record, people will carefully and systematically sift through notes, compare reports, and exert cognitive effort to evaluate and understand the topic (Chen & Chaiken, 1999; Metzger, 2007; Metzger & Flanagin, 2015).

Although heuristic and systematic processing are different, they both reinforce existing beliefs. Heuristic processing streamlines the decision-making process by discounting contrary information while focusing on agreeable information. Existing beliefs are also reinforced when systematic processing biases congruent facts more favorably than incongruent information (Chen & Chaiken, 1999; Kahan, 2013).

How voters processed information gleaned from social media could have influenced the 2016 election. Trump voters tended to make voting decisions heuristically, whereas Clinton supporters did so systematically (Fording & Schram, 2017; Pennycook & Rand, 2018).

This study tests the assertion that heuristics played a major role in support for Trump, and systematic thinking influenced support for Clinton, with the following two hypotheses:

*H3:     Heuristic processing is a stronger predictor of support for Trump than Clinton.*

*H4:     Systematic processing is a stronger predictor of support for Clinton than Trump.*

### Partisan Motivated Reasoning and Voting

Why voters decided to cast their ballot for Trump or for Clinton could be further explained by the theory of partisan motivated reasoning, which claims that voters are driven by the desire either to protect existing opinions (directional goals) or to make the right decisions (accuracy goals) (Kunda, 1990). Individuals with *directional goals* rely on heuristic cues that support their opinions (selective approach) and

avoid cues that question their worldview (selective avoidance) (Bolsen, Druckman, & Cook, 2014; Kunda, 1990; Taber & Lodge, 2006; Tsfati & Nir, 2017). Individuals with *accuracy goals* process political information systematically by considering a range of opinions, both supportive and challenging, on which to base their decisions (Bolsen et al., 2014).

As the theory of partisan motivated reasoning suggests, both liberal and conservative partisanship is strongly linked to both selective approach/avoidance and information processing, and these variables exert a powerful influence on voting decisions (Lau & Redlawsk, 2006). For example, conservatives tend to be directionally goal oriented and thus seek politically agreeable information (Garrett & Stroud, 2014), which they process heuristically—a profile that reflects Trump voters (Jost & Amodio, 2012; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). Conversely, liberals are more likely than conservatives to be driven by accuracy and thus seek both supportive and contrary political information, which they process systematically—a profile that reflects Clinton supporters (Fording & Schram, 2017; Pennycook & Rand, 2018).

This study so far has examined the individual influences of selective approach/avoidance, information processing, and ideology on support for a candidate. According to the theory of partisan reasoning, it could also be that these variables interact to influence voting decisions, such that the effect of information processing (heuristic or systematic) on support for a candidate might be contingent on ideology and selective approach/avoidance. This study thus advances the following research questions, which are tested using a three-way interaction model:

RQ3:    *How did partisan selective exposure, information processing, and ideology interact to influence support for Clinton?*

RQ4:    *How did partisan selective exposure, information processing, and ideology interact to influence support for Trump?*

**Method**

This study investigates the relationships among selective approach to/avoidance of political information on social media, information processing, and ideology, and their effect on preference for Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump for president. Data were generated from a survey that was administered from October 31, 2016, through November 2, 2016, to a national online panel hosted by the polling company Survey Sampling International. Panel members were informed of the survey and sent a link via e-mail. The survey was completed by 644 adults, who were compensated for participating in the survey. Quota sampling ensured representation of the U.S. population in terms of age, gender, and political party affiliation.

***Dependent Variables***

*Candidate support.* Support for Hillary Clinton and for Donald Trump was measured by asking respondents, "Which option best reflects your attitude toward Hillary Clinton/Donald Trump, in terms of support for the presidency?" using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *not supportive at all* to *very supportive*.

### *Independent Variables*

*Heuristic and systematic processing*. Heuristic processing was gauged with, "I rarely spend much time thinking about the news information with respect to the 2016 presidential election," "I often skim through news stories on the 2016 presidential election," "I tune in to the news on the 2016 presidential election very irregularly," "I am not that interested in details. It is sufficient to get the general idea about the 2016 presidential election," and "I am not interested in specific background information about the 2016 presidential election." Systematic processing was assessed by asking respondents to indicate their agreement on a 5-point Likert-type scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* with the following statements: "The more viewpoints I get about the election, the better," "It is quite important to me to know as much as possible about the 2016 presidential election," "When I come across an article on the presidential election, I am likely to read it thoroughly," "I am likely to focus on presidential election stories in the news very attentively," and "It is important to me to know all arguments of the discussion of the 2016 presidential election in detail." These questions were adapted from the Schemer and associates' study (Schemer, Matthes, & Wirth, 2008) that tested the reliability and validity of these measures.

Before creating separate indices of heuristic and systematic information processing, a confirmatory factor analysis was performed with the 10 items described earlier. The items loaded in two factors (see Appendix). The first five items were used to build an index of systematic information processing (α = .88, $M$ = 3.7, $SD$ = .84), and the remaining five items were combined into an index of heuristic information processing (α = .82, $M$ = 2.9, $SD$ = .92).

*Selective approach and selective avoidance*. This study followed an approach advocated by Tsfati (2016), in which respondents were asked how likely they were to seek information that supported their point of view and how likely they were to seek challenging information. By using this approach, respondents answered how likely they were to purposely seek for information supporting (selective exposure) or challenging (selective avoidance) their political opinions on Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and YouTube. Responses were marked on a 5-point Likert-type scale that ranged from *very unlikely* to *very likely* and were then combined into an index of selective approach (four items; α = .89, $M$ = 2.5, $SD$ = 1.2) and an index of selective avoidance (four items; α = .91, $M$ = 3.6, $SD$ = 1.2). The questions for challenging information were recoded so that high scores indicate selective approach and selective avoidance.

*Political predispositions*. Interest in the 2016 presidential election was marked on a 5-point Likert-type scale that ranged from *not at all interested* to *very interested* ($M$ = 3.5, $SD$ = 1.1). Ideology was measured on a 5-point scale where respondents placed themselves in a range from *very liberal* to *very conservative* ($M$ = 2.9, $SD$ = 1.04). Respondents also identified the political party with which they were most closely tied: Republican (23.4%), Democrat (35.1%), Libertarian/Other (5.3%), and Independent (36.2%).

Trust in the government and self-efficacy were assessed by statements taken from the Craig, Niemi, and Silver (1990) study, which examined the validity and reliability of efficacy and trust items used in the 1987 National Election Studies pilot study. Self-efficacy was assessed by "I consider myself well qualified to participate in politics," "I feel I could do as good of a job in public office as most other people," "I think that I am better informed about politics and government than most people," and "I have a pretty

good understanding of the important political issues facing our country," using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* (four items; α = .77, *M* = 3.6, *SD* = .81).

Trust in the government comprised "Most of our leaders are devoted to the service of our country," "I can trust the government most of the time to do what is right," "Politicians never tell us what they really think," "I don't think public officials care much about what people like me think," and "The government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves," using a 5-point Likert-type scale that ranged from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. The polarity was reversed on the last three statements (five items; α = .70, *M* = 2.4, *SD* = .70).

*Demographics*. Respondents were asked their gender, an estimate of their 2016 income, and their age as of their last birthday. Respondents marked their highest level of education from a list that ranged from *less than high school* to *terminal degree* such as PhD, MD, or JD.

### *Data Analysis*

A paired sample t test was used to compare the mean scores of selective approach and selective avoidance for all respondents, and independent sample t tests were used to compare the mean scores of Republicans to Democrats and conservatives to liberals, regarding selective avoidance. Ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions controlled for demographics (age, gender, education, income, race) and political predispositions (party identification, election interest, trust, efficacy) to ascertain whether partisan selective approach/avoidance on social media and information processing influenced support for Clinton or Trump in the last presidential election. Party identification was entered in the model using three dummy variables (Republican, Independent, and Other), with Democrat as the baseline category.

Finally, to test the predicted three-way interaction among ideology, information processing (heuristic/systematic), and selective approach/avoidance, the Hayes' PROCESS macro for SPSS–model 3 was used (Hayes, 2013). Analyses controlled for the respondents' demographics and political predispositions. Figure 1 illustrates the model proposed in this study, built on Chaiken's (1980) heuristic-systematic model.
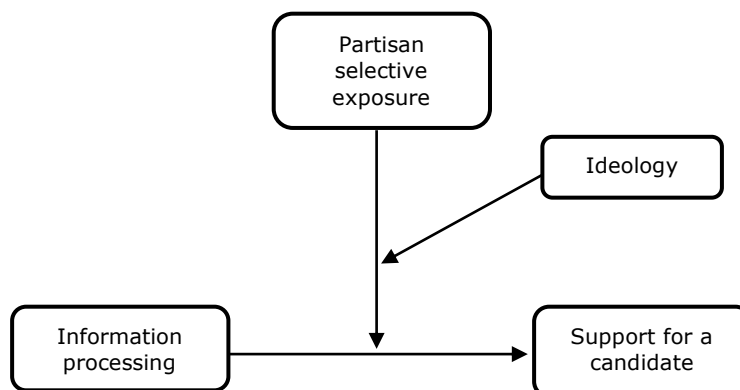


*Figure 1. Three-way interaction model tested in this study.*

## Results

Of the 644 respondents, slightly more than one third (36.6%) were likely/very likely to connect with Facebook friends who shared their political outlooks, and about the same percentage (38.1%) avoided Facebook friends or groups who did not share their political viewpoints. Almost one quarter (24.4%) of Twitter users limited themselves to like-minded tweeters, and 41.8% avoided challenging tweets. Online videos were screened by 27.9% of users seeking agreeable topics, and just over 40% (40.4%) did not watch videos they believed would present an alternative viewpoint. Only 20.4% of Reddit users confined themselves to supporting information, with 44.5% avoiding challenging information.

In terms of ideology, respondents were moderate ($M$ = 2.9, $SD$ = 1.04, range 1–5), and support for both candidates was moderate as well: Clinton: $M$ = 2.7, $SD$ = 1.5, Trump: $M$ = 2.3, $SD$ = 1.4, range 1–5. Yet, 34% indicated that they were supportive/very supportive of Clinton for president, whereas only 23% said the same about Trump. These numbers were in line with party identification; 35% of respondents were Democrat, and 23% were Republican. Respondents were slightly more likely to rely on systematic ($M$ = 3.7, $SD$ = .84, range 1–5) than heuristic information processing ($M$ = 2.9, $SD$ = .92, range 1–5) when considering whom to vote for in the 2016 presidential election. Quota sampling yielded 49.1% male to 50.9% female, a ratio that reflects the population of U.S. voters. Slightly more than 8 in 10 (83.2%) identified as White/Caucasian, and the remainder (16.8%) were non-White or multiracial. The vast majority (82.7%) attended college or earned a bachelor's degree or higher. They earned an average $82,600 in 2016 and were about 44 years of age.

### Partisan Selective Exposure on Social Media

A paired sample $t$ test that was used to test H1 indicates that during the 2016 election, respondents were significantly more likely to selectively avoid crosscutting information ($M$ = 3.46, $SD$ = 1.2, range 1–5) than to selectively approach reinforcing information ($M$ = 2.5, $SD$ = 1.2, range 1–5) on social media, $t_{(640)}$ = −13, $p$ < .001, $df$ = 639. Because H1 suggested the opposite, it is not supported.

### Partisan Selective Exposure and Ideology

H2 compared Republicans with Democrats (H2a) and liberals with conservatives (H2b) regarding selective exposure. Both H2a and H2b are supported by independent sample $t$ tests indicating that Republicans ($M$ = 3.6, $SD$ = 1.1) were significantly more likely than Democrats ($M$ = 3.3, $SD$ = 1.3) to have selectively avoided challenging information, $t_{(377)}$ = 2.47, $p$ < .01, $df$ = 349, whereas conservatives ($M$ = 3.8, $SD$ = 1.1) were significantly more likely than liberals ($M$ = 3.4, $SD$ = 1.3) to have avoided oppositional political information on social media, $t_{(595)}$ = 3.81, $p$ < .001, $df$ = 594, during the 2016 campaign.

### Partisan Selective Exposure and Candidate Support

RQ1 and RQ2 asked whether selective approach and selective avoidance on social media influenced support for either Clinton or Trump. After controlling for demographics and political predispositions, results from the regression models indicate that selective approach did not predict support for Clinton, but it did predict support for Trump ($\beta$ = .18, $p$ < .01). In other words, seeking positive information about Clinton did

not translate into support for her, but reading favorable information about Trump did lead to supporting him. Conversely, selecting challenging reports about Clinton (instead of avoiding them) actually boosted support for her. Selectively avoiding negative information about Trump had no significant effect on support for him (see Table 1).

### *Information Processing and Candidate Support*

H3 suggested that heuristic processing is more strongly associated with support for Trump than Clinton, whereas H4 predicted that systematic processing would be a stronger predictor of support for Clinton than for Trump. After controlling for demographics, political predispositions, and selective exposure, results indicate that heuristic processing predicts support for both Clinton ($\beta$ = .08, $p$ < .05) and Trump ($\beta$ = .13, $p$ < .001), and the effect is stronger for Trump, according to $\beta$ coefficients. Systematic processing does not predict support for either candidate. Consequently, H3 is supported, whereas H4 is rejected (see Table 1).

### *Table 1. OLS Models Predicting Support for a Candidate.*

|  | Support for Clinton | Support for Trump |
|---|---|---|
| Demographics |  |  |
|     Gender | −.02 | .09* |
|     Race | .02 | .06 |
|     Education | .05 | −.08* |
|     Age | .05 | .01 |
|     Income | .02 | −.04 |
| Political predispositions |  |  |
|     Political interest | .03 | .13** |
|     Efficacy | −.01 | −.06 |
|     Trust | .25*** | −.09* |
|     Ideology | −.20*** | .26*** |
|     Republican (dummy) | −.51*** | .44*** |
|     Independent (dummy) | −.39*** | .15*** |
|     Other (dummy) | −.21*** | .07* |
| Selective exposure |  |  |
|     Selective approach | −.03 | .18** |
|     Selective avoidance | −.11* | −.04 |
| Information processing |  |  |
|     Systematic processing | .01 | .04 |
|     Heuristic processing | .08* | .13*** |
|     Total $R^2$ (%) | 54*** | 38*** |

*Note*. $N$ = 576. Cell entries are final-entry OLS standardized beta ($\beta$) coefficients. Dummy variables were created for party ID using Democrats as the baseline category.
* $p$ < .05. ** $p$ < .01. *** $p$ < .001.

### *Interactions*

RQ3 inquired as to whether partisan selective exposure, information processing, and ideology interact to predict support for Clinton, and RQ4 asked the same about Trump. The Hayes' PROCESS macro for SPSS–model 3 (Hayes, 2013) was used to answer both questions. Four models (Model 1, Model 2, Model 3, and Model 4) were run to assess interaction effects on support for Clinton and Trump, considering all categories of partisan selective exposure and information processing. Analyses controlled for respondents' demographics (age, gender, education, income, and race) and political predispositions (party identification, election interest, trust, and efficacy).

*Support for Clinton*. Systematic processing, selective approach, and ideology (Model 1 in Table 2) interact to significantly predict support for Clinton ($\beta$ = 1.89, $p$ < .001), but in an unexpected direction.

**Table 2. Three-Way Interaction Models Predicting Support for a Candidate: Information Processing, Selective Approach, and Ideology.**

|  | Support for Clinton | | Support for Trump | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | *Model 1* | *Model 2* | *Model 1* | *Model 2* |
| Demographics | | | | |
| Gender | −.02 | −.01 | .08* | .07* |
| Race | .02 | .01 | .06 | .05 |
| Education | .06 | .05 | −.07* | −.08* |
| Age | .04 | .05 | 0 | 0 |
| Income | .02 | .01 | −.03 | −.03 |
| Political predispositions | | | | |
| Political interest | .03 | .03 | .14** | .13*** |
| Efficacy | −.02 | −.03 | −.06 | −.05 |
| Trust | .25*** | .24*** | −.08* | −.09** |
| Ideology | .53 | −.52* | −.32 | .88*** |
| Republican (dummy) | −.48*** | −.49*** | .43*** | .44*** |
| Independent (dummy) | −.38*** | −.37*** | .16*** | .15*** |
| Other (dummy) | −.20*** | −.20*** | .07 | .07* |
| Selective exposure | | | | |
| Selective approach | .99* | −.40 | −.45 | .66* |
| Selective avoidance | −.11* | −.10* | −.03 | −.02 |
| Information processing | | | | |
| Systematic processing | .49** | 0 | −.55* | .03 |
| Heuristic processing | .08** | −.15 | .12*** | .38 |
| Interactions | | | | |
| Systematic processing * Selective approach | −1.41** | | 1.08 | |

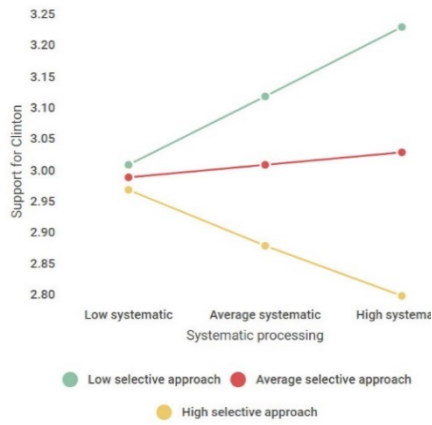| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Systematic processing * Ideology | −1.05*** | | .97* | |
| Selective approach * Ideology | −1.45** | | .49 | |
| Systematic processing * Selective approach * Ideology | 1.89*** | | −.96 | |
| | | | | |
| Heuristic processing * Selective approach | | .28 | | −.35 |
| Heuristic processing * Ideology | | .18 | | −.56 |
| Selective approach * Ideology | | .30 | | −.80* |
| Heuristic processing * Selective approach * Ideology | | −.06 | | .65 |
| Total $R^2$ (%) | 55*** | 40*** | 55*** | 40*** |

*Note.* $N = 576$. Cell entries are final-entry OLS standardized beta (β) coefficients. Dummy variables were created for party ID using Democrats as the baseline category.
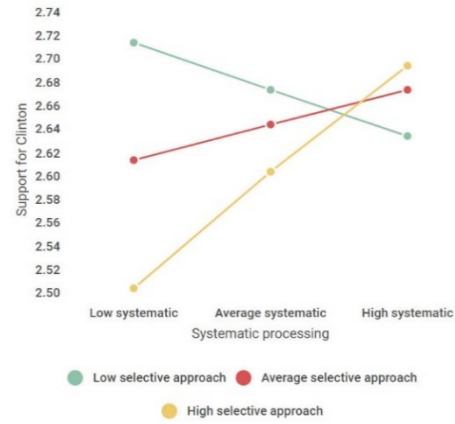* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Interaction effects plotted in Figure 2 show that Clinton supporters were strong liberals who relied on systematic processing, but who attended to both positive and negative news about her instead of only selectively approaching agreeable information.

Similarly, results in Model 3 (Table 3) indicate significant interaction effects among systematic processing, selective avoidance, and ideology on support for Clinton (β = −1.43, p < .05). Plots in Figure 3 show that this effect is relevant mostly for moderates and conservatives—relying on systematic processing increases the likelihood of supporting Clinton when they do not avoid cross-cutting information (low selective avoidance). Model 2 and Model 4 tested interactions among heuristic processing, selective approach/avoidance, and ideology, finding no significant effects (see Tables 2 and 3). As such, Clinton supporters relied on heuristic cues when evaluating information, but the effect of heuristics was not contingent on other variables.
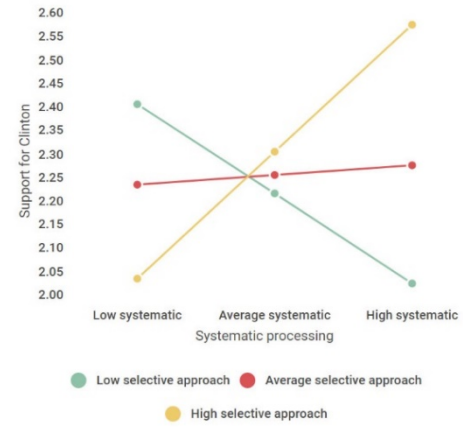
**Figure 2. Three-way interaction model tested in this study: How systematic processing, partisan selective approach, and ideology affect support for Clinton.**

*Table 3. Three-Way Interaction Models Predicting Support for a Candidate: Information Processing, Selective Avoidance, and Ideology.*

|  | Support for Clinton | | Support for Trump | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | Model 3 | Model 4 | Model 3 | Model 4 |
| Demographics |  |  |  |  |
| Gender | −.01 | −.01 | .08* | .07* |
| Race | .02 | .01 | .07 | .06 |
| Education | .06 | .05 | −.07* | −.08* |
| Age | .05 | .05 | 0 | 0 |
| Income | .02 | .02 | −.04 | −.03 |
| Political predispositions |  |  |  |  |
| Political interest | .04 | .03 | .13*** | .13** |
| Efficacy | −.02 | −.03 | −.06 | −.05 |
| Trust | .25*** | .24*** | −.08* | −.09* |
| Ideology | −1.11* | .12 | .07 | −.43 |
| Republican (dummy) | −.48*** | −.49*** | .42*** | .43*** |
| Independent (dummy) | −.37*** | −.37*** | .15*** | .14*** |
| Other (dummy) | −.20*** | −.20*** | .07 | .07 |
| Selective exposure |  |  |  |  |
| Selective approach | −.02 | −.02 | .17** | .17*** |
| Selective avoidance | −.58 | .41 | .23 | −.59 |
| Information processing |  |  |  |  |
| Systematic processing | −.47 | 0 | .23 | .03 |
| Heuristic processing | .08* | .27 | .11*** | −.07 |
| Interactions |  |  |  |  |
| Systematic processing * Selective avoidance | .73 |  | −.66 |  |
| Systematic processing * Ideology | 1.10 |  | −.16 |  |
| Selective avoidance * Ideology | 1.24* |  | −.16 |  |
| Systematic processing * Selective avoidance * Ideology | −1.43* |  | .70 |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Heuristic processing * Selective avoidance |  | −.32 |  | .28 |
| Heuristic processing * Ideology |  | −.08 |  | .44 |
| Selective avoidance * Ideology |  | −.60 |  | 1.09* |
| Heuristic processing * Selective avoidance * Ideology |  | .23 |  | −.62 |
| Total $R^2$ (%) | 55*** | 40*** | 55*** | 40*** |

*Note.* $N$ = 576. Cell entries are final-entry OLS standardized beta (β) coefficients. Dummy variables were created for party ID using Democrats as the baseline category.
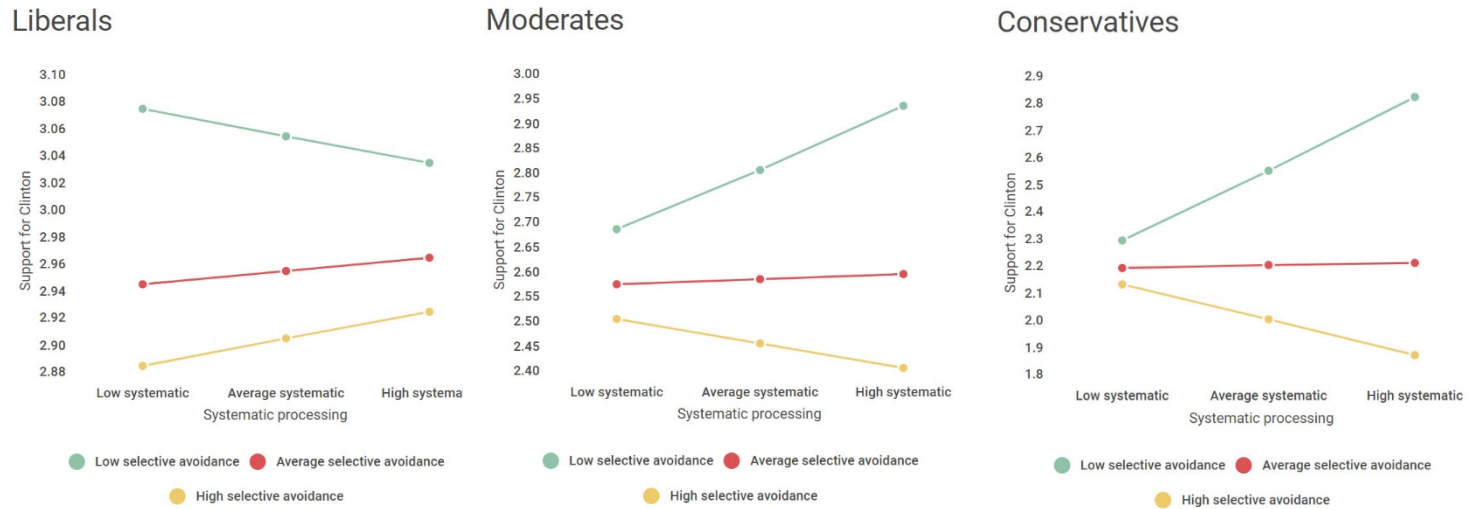* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

**Figure 3. Three-way interaction model tested in this study: How systematic processing, partisan selective avoidance, and ideology affect support for Clinton.**

*Support for Trump.* Models 1, 2, 3, and 4 showed no significant interaction effects on support for Trump (see Tables 2 and 3). As such, the effects of selective approach and heuristic processing on supporting Trump are not contingent on other variables.

## Discussion

After Trump's surprising victory in the 2016 election, political observers scrambled to try to explain how Clinton lost despite a lead in the polls. Several pundits blamed social media because algorithms push agreeable opinions and positive news to the top of the news feeds; thus, users largely received news that supported their political views (Bakshy et al., 2015; Winter et al., 2016; Zhu et al., 2017). In an effort to further explain the election results, this study puts forth a three-way interaction model that examines the effects of (1) partisan selective exposure to political information on social media, (2) information processing, and (3) ideology on support for Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump.

### *Reality Is (Often) Complex*

This study found that candidate support is the result of several factors, many of them interrelated and contingent on each other. Before testing the three-way interactions, results showed that heuristic processing predicted support for both Trump and Clinton, whereas systematic processing did not affect support for either candidate. The polarized environment probably explains the effect of heuristic processing on both candidates. During the 2016 presidential election, about 90% of both Republicans and Democrats relied on party identification to decide whom to support. As shown in the regression models, Republicans and independent voters were significantly less likely to support Clinton and significantly more likely to support Trump. Even those who defined themselves as Libertarian or Other followed this trend. Polarization explains the effect of heuristics on support for Clinton and for Trump. Although polls suggested that voters valued Clinton's experience, the main reasons given for voting for Clinton was that (a) she was a woman, and (b) she was not Trump. Similarly, Trump voters said that they voted against Clinton more than they voted for Trump because they did not trust Clinton, and she lacked integrity (Saad, 2016). As such, the nature of the campaign explains the heavy use of heuristic processing by supporters of both candidates.

Findings also show that respondents were more likely to avoid what they thought would be oppositional information (partisan selective avoidance) than to seek agreeable information (partisan selective approach) about the election, and conservatives were more likely than liberals to selectively avoid challenging information. However, looking at the effect of information processing and selective exposure as isolated variables might show a misleading and incomplete picture. The evidence from this study indicates that thinking deeply about an election can make a difference for some individuals while not affecting others. Those who systematically processed election information they found on social media tended to support Clinton if they were liberal, but only if they also attended to oppositional information. This interaction effect of information processing, ideology, and selective exposure suggests that thinking about and reflecting on an election occur mostly among those who are open to diverse information and therefore do not avoid news that challenges their existing beliefs. It might also be the case that reading negative news could compel voters to throw their weight behind a candidate they feel is being unjustly targeted. Results also suggest the importance of examining both selective approach and selective avoidance. Liberal Clinton supporters sought out information that both supported and challenged their beliefs, suggesting that they systematically processed information; this counters individual variable analysis, in which heuristic processing characterized Clinton supporters.

For those who only exposed themselves to agreeable information (partisan selective approach) or rejected cross-cutting news (partisan selective avoidance), systematic processing did not boost their support for a candidate in the 2016 election. This last point is extremely important because it shows that systematic processing might not have made a difference in highly polarized environments where strong partisans were unlikely to encounter different viewpoints and expose themselves to diverse information.

Findings for Trump were much less complex than for Clinton. Conservatives who relied on heuristic processing and who avoided information that challenged their beliefs were more likely to support him. None of the three-way interactions explained voting for Trump.

Perhaps these findings are best explained through the theory of motivated reasoning. Trump supporters seemed to have directional goals: the desire to protect existing opinions through selective approach by only heeding social media information that conformed to their beliefs and values. Conversely, Clinton supporters were more accuracy oriented, meaning that their goal was to seek a range of perspectives even if it meant attending to challenging information.

### *Significance of Study*

The 2016 presidential election was one of the most controversial and polarizing elections in U.S. history. That Trump won surprised many voters, and Trump himself was even taken aback (Poniewozik, 2016). Pundits and the electorate were stunned by the outcome and wondered what could have happened. Much blame has been placed on social media, fake news, and Bernie Sanders' candidacy for splitting the Democratic vote (Faris et al., 2017). Those speculations aside, this article offers a three-way interaction model that provides insight into voters' thinking process. Attempting to explain voter choice through the combination of information processing, ideology, and partisan selective exposure seems particularly important in the current hyperpartisan political environment, in which traditional media are avoided in favor of social media for political news.

This study is important because it explored the three-way interaction effects of political ideology, information processing, and partisan selective exposure, and found that highly polarized contexts lead to less diverse social media news-consumption habits, which in turn leads to less reflective voters. For liberals, systematic processing boosted Clinton's chances of winning only among those who approached positive and negative information. Otherwise, heuristics were the main cue to process political information.

In summary, this study's findings indicate that supporters of both Trump and Clinton relied on heuristic cues to decide whom to support, while the benefits of systematic processing of social media information were not straightforward. Leaving aside the effects on those open to diverse information, systematic processing did not influence support for Trump, whereas it had a negative effect on support for Clinton. As such, how voters process political information, and under which conditions they do it, might explain the results of the 2016 election. If liberals processed information in systematic ways, and if the polarized environment favored a less diverse news diet, the context of high systematic processing/high selective exposure might have led to a significant part of the liberal electorate not voting for Clinton, or not voting at all—explaining why Clinton ended up with less support than the political pundits predicted.

### *Limitations and Suggestions for Future Studies*

This study's survey was administered by a nationwide survey organization that matched panel respondents to the general population on gender, age, and party identification, but not to other measures such as income and education. Therefore, the results may not be fully generalizable. Several other limitations include the cross-sectional design, which hinders the examination of cause and effect; testing the separate effects of party ID and ideology, but not the combined effects, although the variables are strongly correlated (Barber & Pope, 2019; Levendusky, 2009); and the possibility of respondents giving socially desirable answers to how they use social media, although using self-reports to measure selective approach and avoidance has been validated by previous research (Tsfati, 2016).

This study could be expanded by future research in several ways: including more direct measures of selective approach and selective avoidance, such as friending/unfriending and following/unfollowing; combining the effects of party identification and ideology; and adding control variables that influence selectivity, such as political knowledge, and those that are linked to ideology, including the need for cognition, the need for closure, and authoritarianism. Also, this study was conducted during one of the most contentious elections in history. Future reseachers may want to study midterm elections or how these measures influence support for partisan issues.

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**Appendix**

### *Table A1. Factor Analysis for Information Processing.*

| Items | Systematic information processing | Heuristic information processing |
|---|---|---|
| It is quite important to me to know as much as possible about the 2016 presidential election. | **.85** | −06 |
| When I come across an article on the presidential election, I am likely to read it thoroughly. | **.85** | −.02 |
| I am likely to focus on presidential election stories in the news very attentively. | **.82** | −.09 |
| It is important to me to know all arguments of the discussion of the 2016 presidential election in detail. | **.81** | −.07 |
| The more viewpoints I get about the election, the better. | **.73** | .11 |
| I am not that interested in details. It is sufficient to get the general idea about the 2016 presidential election. | −.17 | **.82** |
| I am not interested in specific background information about the 2016 presidential election. | −.09 | **.81** |
| I rarely spend much time thinking about the news information with respect to the 2016 presidential election. | −.11 | **.79** |
| I tune in to the news on the 2016 presidential election very irregularly. | .05 | **.74** |
| I often skim through news stories on the 2016 presidential election. | .19 | **.66** |
| Eigenvalues | 3.51 | 2.83 |
| % Variance | **35.20** | **28.30** |

*Note.* Extraction method: principal component analysis. Rotation method: varimax with Kaiser normalization. The analysis converged after three iterations to produce two dimensions. Primary loading of an item on a factor is indicated in bold.

### *Table A2. Summary Statistics for Survey Items.*

| Survey question | *M* | *SD* |
|---|---|---|
| *Candidate support* | | |
| Which of the options best reflects your attitude toward these candidates? | | |
| 1 = Not supportive at all; 2 = Not very supportive; 3 = Somewhat supportive; 4 = Supportive; 5 = Very supportive | | |
| Hillary Clinton | 2.69 | 1.50 |
| Donald Trump | 2.27 | 1.41 |
| *Systematic processing* | | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:<br>1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly agree | | |
| The more viewpoints I get about the election, the better. | 3.72 | 1.02 |
| It is quite important to me to know as much as possible about the 2016 presidential election. | 3.91 | .99 |
| When I come across an article on the presidential election, I am likely to read it thoroughly. | 3.59 | 1.06 |
| I am likely to focus on presidential election stories in the news very attentively. | 3.65 | 1.05 |
| It is important to me to know all arguments of the discussion of the 2016 presidential election in detail. | 3.72 | 1.02 |
| *Heuristic processing* | | |
| Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:<br>1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly agree | | |
| I rarely spend much time thinking about the news information with respect to the 2016 presidential election. | 2.77 | 1.23 |
| I often skim through news stories on the 2016 presidential election. | 3.28 | 1.12 |
| I tune in to the news on the 2016 presidential election very irregularly. | 3.03 | 1.18 |
| I am not that interested in details. It is sufficient to get the general idea about the 2016 presidential election. | 2.65 | 1.22 |
| I am not interested in specific background information about the 2016 presidential election. | 2.63 | 1.25 |
| *Selective approach* | | |
| How likely are you to purposely connect to/read/watch the following sources mainly because you think they SUPPORT your political point of view?<br>1 = Very unlikely; 2 = Unlikely; 3 = Neither likely nor unlikely; 4 = Likely; 5 = Very unlikely | | |
| Connect to Facebook "friends" or groups that you think SUPPORT your political point of view? | 2.82 | 1.40 |
| Connect to Twitter feeds that you think SUPPORT your political point of view? | 2.34 | 1.37 |
| Connect to political videos (YouTube, Snapchat, or Instagram) that you think SUPPORT your political point of view? | 2.54 | 1.36 |
| Connect to Reddit or Slashdot news items that you think SUPPORT your political point of view? | 2.22 | 1.36 |
| *Selective avoidance* | | |
| How likely are you to purposely connect to/read/watch the following sources mainly because you think they CHALLENGE your political point of view?<br>1 = Very unlikely; 2 = Unlikely; 3 = Neither likely nor unlikely; 4 = Likely; 5 = Very unlikely | | |
| Connect to Facebook "friends" or groups that you think CHALLENGE your political point of view? | 2.55 | 1.33 |
| Connect to Twitter feeds that you think CHALLENGE your political point of view? | 2.29 | 1.33 |
| Connect to political videos (YouTube, Snapchat, or Instagram) that you think CHALLENGE your political point of view? | 2.36 | 1.30 |
| Connect to Reddit or Slashdot news items that you think CHALLENGE your political point of view? | 2.22 | 1.36 |
| *Ideology* | | |
| Do you generally consider yourself to be:<br>1 = Very liberal; 2 = Liberal; 3 = Moderate; 4 = Conservative; 5 = Very conservative | 2.92 | 1.04 |
| *Party ID* | | |
| In politics today, do you consider yourself: | | |

| 1 = Republican (23.4%); 2 = Democrat (35.1%); 3 = Libertarian/Other (5.3%); 4 = Independent (36.2%) | | |
|---|---|---|
| *Self-efficacy* | | |
| Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements: | | |
| 1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly agree | | |
| I consider myself well qualified to participate in politics. | 3.60 | 1.12 |
| I feel I could do as good of a job in public office as most other people. | 3.38 | 1.16 |
| I think that I am better informed about politics and government than most people. | 3.44 | 1.06 |
| I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country. | 3.89 | .83 |
| *Political interest* | | |
| How interested are you in politics in general? | 3.54 | 1.10 |
| 1 = Not at all interested; 2 = Not very interested; 3 = Somewhat interested; 4 = Interested; 5 = Very interested | | |
| *Trust in the government* | | |
| Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements: | | |
| 1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly agree | | |
| Most of our leaders are devoted to the service of our country. | 2.99 | 1.10 |
| Politicians never tell us what they really think (reverse coded). | 2.12 | .92 |
| I don't think public officials care much about what people like me think (reverse coded). | 2.25 | 1.01 |
| The government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves (reverse coded). | 2.07 | .95 |
| I can trust the government most of the time to do what is right. | 2.73 | 1.16 |