The Effects of Political Conflict News Frame on Political Polarization: A Social Identity Approach

YOUNGJU KIM
Konkuk University (Glocal-campus), South Korea

SHUHUA ZHOU
University of Missouri, USA

News media and journalists tend to focus on political conflicts between major parties rather than on issue content. Does this news reporting behavior encourage the psychological process of polarization? By linking framing with social identity and self-categorization theories, this study explores how news frames affect political polarization through the party identification process. Results of this experimental study showed that the political conflict news frame played an important role as a contextual/situational factor that momentarily increased people's political identity salience, resulting in perceptual and attitudinal political polarization. Implications are discussed.

Keywords: polarization, framing, identity salience, party conflict news

Evidence about elite polarization is consistent in the literature (Hetherington, 2001; McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2006), but there is inconsistent evidence about mass level polarization (for a review, see Fiorina & Abrams, 2009). Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes (2012) argued that this might be due to how researchers have defined the concept of political polarization. Previous studies on political polarization mainly focused on attitude polarization. Recently, however, alternative concepts have started to be considered, such as affective polarization (Garrett et al., 2014; Iyengar et al., 2012) and perceived polarization (Hwang, Kim, & Huh, 2014; Levendusky & Malhotra, 2013). This study examined the mass political polarization phenomenon in light of the question of how media/news coverage affects three different dimensions of political polarization (i.e., perceived polarization, affective polarization, and attitude polarization).

Scholars have suggested that increasing partisan media and intensifying selective exposure invoke partisan identities by which audiences understand issues through the lens of partisanship and form polarized opinions (Garrett et al., 2014; Stroud, 2010). There have been few studies on how political polarization is affected by the presentation of political reality, not just by partisan media but also by journalistic practices of news reporting. As prior studies on news framing effects suggest, the way people understand an issue is likely to vary depending on how it is presented in the news media. Given that news frames serve to limit

Youngju Kim: youngjukim83@gmail.com
Shuhua Zhou: zhoushuh@missouri.edu
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and direct the things audiences consider when they think about politics (Tewksbury, Jones, Peske, Raymond, & Vig, 2000), a systematic investigation of how news frames can contribute to political polarization would broaden our understanding of the role of news media in political polarization.

How do the media portray or frame the political world in general? Scholars have expressed concern about the concentration on conflict-oriented news coverage of politics, which often emphasizes friction between political parties. Critics complain that overrepresenting conflict tends to ignore the consensus process and make an issue look like a simplistic two-sided competition rather than offering substantive information and diverse perspectives on complicated issues (Bennett, 2012; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). As social identity theory (SIT) suggests (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), when the news media present an issue as a political conflict between Republicans and Democrats, audiences can perceive the issue to be more politically polarized and may consequently develop more polarized perceptions, affects, and attitudes. According to SIT, intergroup conflict is one of the strongest factors in making group identity salient (Grant, 1991; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). When group identity is salient, it becomes a basis for social perception and judgment (Reid, 2012). In particular, a conflict situation can act as a threat to an in-group from the out-group and be more likely to lead to biased perception (Hornsey & Imani, 2004). Along this line of reasoning, news frames that heighten political conflict between two parties may lead to mass political polarization.

Corresponding to recent growing concerns about political polarization, the overall purpose of this study is to explore whether and how media's political conflict news frames make people's perception, emotion, and attitude on social issues or policies more politically polarized. This study predicts a process: [party conflict news frame → party identity salience → political polarization].

Political Conflict Frame and Political Polarization

The increasing number of news channels, from cable networks to Internet sources, leads to competition between news channels to hook audiences. To get audience attention, news outlets or journalists tend to emphasize conflict, focus on disagreement rather than consensus, and even portray a divide as being wider than it actually is (see Conners, 2016). For instance, studies on news coverage of the presidential debates found that it highlighted political conflict, focusing more on attacks and defenses of candidates than on their remarks or accomplishments (Conners, 2016; Reber & Benoit, 2001).

As Bennett (2012) indicated, one of the flaws in the American news style is the overwhelming tendency to downplay the big pictures of public issues and simplify complex policy information and the complicated workings of government institutions. Instead, the media concentrate on political combat over issues. Different from the political bias in news (favoritism toward one candidate or another), conflict bias is heightened media attention to a conflict or a confrontation to the detriment of other topics (Conners, 2016). Scholars are concerned about this tendency in public policy news because of its potentially destructive consequences, such as overshadowing substantive issue-based coverage (Bennett, 2012; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997), undermining informed citizen engagement (Graber, 1994), and causing political cynicism (Strömbäck & Dimitrova, 2006).

When dealing with controversial issues, journalists tend to cover competing aspects in a balanced way, giving all sides relatively equal time or space and avoiding identifying which side has better solutions. This "issue dualism" has been considered fair and objective coverage (Patterson, 1993). Nevertheless, subtle differences in the presentation of information through the practice of framing in journalism can influence people's political attitudes (e.g., Pan & Kosicki, 2005; Price, Tewksbury, & Powers, 1997).

Framing is a process of selection and salience (for a review, see Entman, 1993). By making certain information more noticeable, memorable, or meaningful to the audience, salience makes individuals selectively pay attention to the specific aspects of a message and activate related information, thereby influencing subsequent interpretations and judgments (Tewksbury et al., 2000). Indeed, news frames make certain considerations more salient by highlighting specific values and facts, thus promoting a particular direction of problem definition, attribution of cause, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for an issue (Druckman, 2001).

It is only natural to consider the consequences if news coverage highlights tension or conflict between opposing political groups. According to the social identity approach, a particular identity among several social identities (e.g., race, gender, party identity) can be activated and become salient in an individual's mind depending on the situation (Turner & Reynolds, 2010). Political identity may become situationally more salient when individuals are exposed to political conflict frames in news; that is, people perceive greater between-group difference and less within-group difference resulting from news coverage that features conflict frames. Because people have a tendency to adopt a position to maintain an identity, and so long as an identity is salient, simply knowing the position of partisans on a political issue is often sufficient to form one's attitude.

Underlying Cognitive Processes of Framing Effect on Political Polarization

Polarization means there is marked differences in terms of perception, attitude, or affect among members of social groups defined on the basis of nominal parameters (e.g., gender, race, age). A greater difference indicates a greater degree of polarization between two groups (Page & Shapiro, 1992). In other words, "if an individual becomes more politically partisan, the distance between him/her and those who identify with the opposite party increases, creating between-party polarization" (Prior, 2007, p. 218). Along this line, political polarization should be understood in the context of intergroup relations, such as the differences between Republican and Democratic party identifiers.

SIT has been widely applied to explain intergroup relations (Abrams & Hogg, 1990). This theory argues that intergroup conflict arises from psychological processes of perceptual categorization, social comparison, and identity enhancement. Individuals classify themselves into distinct groups of "us" and "them" in competitive terms. The mere perception of belonging to distinct groups (social categorization per se) is sufficient to trigger a bias favoring the in-group over the out-group in evaluation and behavior. The perceptual categorization process is meaningful in that the individual's perceived representative social group highlights intragroup similarities and intergroup differences (Hogg, 2005).

As Bullock (2011) mentioned, the effects of group cue differ depending on various moderating factors, such as the amount of exposure to policy content, types of issues, or individual factors. Situational factors may also promote the categorization process. Political conflict situations might be an influencing factor that amplifies the effects of party cue on political polarization. In group dynamics, there is a tendency to evaluate in-group members positively and out-group members negatively (Jetten, Spears, & Manstead, 1999). Researchers argue that in-group favoritism and out-group derogation are more pronounced in situations involving a threat to the individual's identity (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). Findings on message effects show that exposure to counterattitudinal messages often leads to negative feelings toward the other side (de Dreu & van Knippenberg, 2005) and opinion polarization (Edwards & Smith, 1996). Research on disconfirmation bias also shows that people attempt to denigrate others' arguments against their own preexisting attitudes or positions, which often leads to defensive bolstering and opinion polarization (Taber & Lodge, 2006). In an intergroup context when one's social identity is highly salient, it is likely that people will make intergroup judgments based on what they know about their in-groups and display attitudes they think they ought to hold (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Smith & Hogg, 2008). When people make a decision based on the group, there is a tendency to shift toward more extreme attitudes or decisions from their initial positions (Flint, Hernandez-Marrero, & Wielemaker, 2006).

Party Identification Effects on Three Types of Political Polarization

Different types of political polarization have their own implications. Beyond actual attitude polarization, the media's overrepresentation of political confrontation may distort people's perception of political polarization as well as induce intergroup hostility. The perception of social reality is important in that it influences cognitions, emotions, and behaviors. As previous studies have shown, affective polarization and perceived polarization (even if people's actual attitude is not polarized) produce meaningful consequences for the political process, such as a spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) and low expectation of deliberation (Hwang et al., 2014). However, a direct comparison of each type of polarization has not been convincingly done. Therefore, this study attempts to investigate three different dimensions of political polarization as dependent variables: perceived polarization, affective polarization, and attitude polarization.

Perceived Polarization

Researchers on social identity have found evidence that people overestimate the difference between their own and other groups (see Hogg & Abrams, 1988). A derivative of in-group bias is to make people think their own side is better, less biased, and more moderate while seeing the other side as extreme and diametrically opposed (Maoz, 2003). "False polarization" is the difference between perceived polarization and actual polarization (Lelkes, 2016; Westfall, van Boven, Chambers, & Judd, 2015) and the tendency of individuals to overestimate the extremity of the attitudes of the people involved (Monin & Norton, 2003). Although people on both sides hold relatively moderate positions, they believe that others, both in-group and out-group, hold more extreme attitudes than they really do, and therefore the gap between the two sides is believed to be larger than the actual gap.

Affective Polarization

Affective polarization is "the extent to which feeling toward candidates or political parties is separating such that people increasingly like their own party and dislike (or even hate) the opponent" (Jennings, Galarza, & Warner, 2016, p. 83). The concept of affective political polarization includes an aspect of contempt and hatred toward the opposing political group (Iyengar et al., 2012). This group-based emotion is related to the perceptions of "us" versus "them." Social identification spurs intergroup bias in group emotions that increases not only positive affect toward the in-group but also negative affect toward the out-group. Thus, party identification is a necessary element in testing how partisans view each other as a disliked out-group. Lelkes (2016) reviewed the trend of polarization at the mass level from 1972 to 2012 and found that changes of feeling thermometers have been driven almost entirely by feelings toward the out-party.

Attitude Polarization

Political attitude polarization is the tendency of individuals to change their issue positions to be less centrist and to increase the extremity of the most politically relevant attitudes to make them consistent with their party identity (Layman & Carsey, 2002; Prior, 2013). Bafumi and Shapiro (2009) found that the mean positions of Democrats and Republicans and liberals and conservatives are increasingly divided on a large set of political issues, including abortion, gay rights, the role of religion, race, and civil rights. When faced with uncertainty over an issue, individuals monitor group opinions through interpersonal communication or mass communication. Rather than forming attitudes about policy independently, individuals form their attitude in concert with the groups they belong to (Bullock et al., 2002). Therefore, it can be inferred that knowing the in-group position contributes to attitude polarization. Studies of political attitudes have shown that party cues activate latent partisan biases on nonpartisan issues and move opinion to be consistent with the in-group position (Cohen, 2003; Druckman, 2001).

Study Context and Hypotheses

A framing effect occurs when a story frame affects people's understanding and interpretation of a specific issue (Gamson, 1992). If a news story portrays a conflict between two political parties on an issue, audiences may activate their party identity rather than any other identity. According to the theories of social identity and self-categorization, under conditions of social identity salience, people come to perceive others more as exemplars or members of social groups to which they belong than as unique individuals. As shown by Tajfel and Turner (1986), the mere presence of group identity information can spark the biases associated with in-group–out-group cognition, emotion, and attitude.

Furthermore, a conflict situation or opposition from out-group members could be seen as an external threat that heightens the salience of intergroup differences (Hornsey et al., 2002). As these differences become more salient, intergroup processes are engaged more intensely (Stangor, Lynch, Duan, & Glas, 1992). Intergroup conflict appears frequently in news coverage in general. Even if a news story reports the views of each side evenly, exaggerated depictions of conflict can produce meaningful intergroup consequences such that people may believe compromise is unlikely and the differences between parties are

deep and intractable. In the context of political news coverage, enhanced party identification in a conflict situation contributes to group stereotyping processes in terms of intergroup attitude (Friedkin, 1999), affect (Garrett et al., 2014), and perception (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). This hypothetical process of the effects of party conflict frame on political polarization will be empirically examined in this study.

This study examines the effects of party conflict frame with two elements of news frame: presence of party cue and level of conflict. First, if an issue is framed politically with the presence of party cues, party identity will be salient rather than other social identities. In addition, a group conflict situation can intensify the group identification process. To test the effects of group conflict in combination with the party cue, the second message factor of group conflict is manipulated by highlighting conflict or consensus of the two opposing sides. In sum, this study employed a between-subjects experimental design: group cue (party frame vs. scientific frame) and level of group conflict (conflict frame vs. consensus frame). The following hypotheses about the underlying cognitive psychological process of framing effects on party identity salience, perceived polarization, affective polarization, and attitude polarization are proposed:

H1a: *Party identity will be more salient when participants are exposed to a party frame than when they are exposed to a scientific frame.*

H1b: *The effect of party cue on party identity salience will be greater when participants are exposed to a conflict frame than when they are exposed to a consensus frame.*

H2a–H4a: *Perceived polarization (H2a), affective polarization (H3a), and attitude polarization (H4a) will be greater when participants are exposed to a party frame than when they are exposed to a scientific frame.*

H2b–4b: *The effect of party cue on perceived polarization (H2b), on affective polarization (H3b), and on attitude polarization (H4b) will be greater when participants are exposed to a conflict frame than when they are exposed to a consensus frame.*

In addition, the basic assumption of the effects of party conflict frame on political polarization is the party identification process through the salience of party identity, which is based on SIT. Whether it is perceived, affective, and/or attitudinal, polarization occurs through intergroup processes. Hypotheses 2c–4c are proposed to test this mediation process:

H2c–4c: *The salience of party identity will mediate the effects of news frame on perceived polarization (H2c), on affective polarization (H3c), and on attitude polarization (H4c).*

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk), which is a crowdsourcing Web service that coordinates the supply and demand of tasks that require human intelligence to complete.

When participants sign up with MTurk, they are given a URL for the Web-based experiment. A total of 705 participants completed the survey and received a small monetary reward through MTurk's compensation system. After excluding unreliable responses, 577 participants remained. With SIT as a foundation, the polarization study compared two opposing groups of party identifiers to look at party identity salience and political polarization. Therefore, the data for participants who identified themselves as independent ($n = 150$) were excluded from the analysis. After these exclusions, the data from 427 partisan participants were used for the main analyses.

Manipulation

The experimental news article is about a controversy over the issue of genetically modified food (GMF).[1] Although the news story was fabricated, the controversial points about GMF were based on real arguments reported by mainstream news. One side claimed beneficial aspects of GMF, whereas the other side argued problems with GMF. The news article described the arguments of the two conflicting sides in a balanced way (e.g., assigning similar length for each side). The news story was designed to look identical to the format of the real Associated Press online news site to simulate ecologically natural circumstances. Other possible confounding features of the news article, such as lists of the latest news headlines, photos, and advertisements were not included.

Two sets of experimental conditions were manipulated. First, group cue in the news story was manipulated. For the party frame condition, the group cues of political parties (i.e., Republican Party and Democratic Party) were used to frame the controversy as a political confrontation about GMF. For the scientific frame condition, the news story was the same, but the group cues of Republican Party and Democratic Party were replaced with two opposing groups of scientists so that the news story could be perceived as an argument among scientists, not politicians. Second, the level of conflict was manipulated. For the conflict frame, the news story highlighted confrontation between the two groups, while in the consensus frame, the story highlighted consensus between the two groups by showing that the discussion on GMF was intended to find a middle ground.

Administration

In the Web-based experiment, participants were asked to complete an informed consent form with a brief description of the study. Before being exposed to the manipulated news article, they were asked attitude questions related to the GMF issue. They were then shown one of four randomly assigned online stories: party conflict frame, party consensus frame, scientific conflict frame, and scientific consensus frame. After exposure, participants were given questionnaires inquiring about their perceptions, emotions, attitudes, party identity, and demographics.

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[1] This issue was chosen because it is not a well-known issue, and audiences may not have strong preexisting attitudes of beliefs about it.

Measurements

Party Identity

Participants were asked to indicate their party identity on a 7-point scale, with 1 = *strong Republican*, 4 = *independent*, and 7 = *strong Democrat* (M = 4.20, SD = 1.72). As mentioned earlier, because the study compares two different groups of party identifiers, the data for participants who identified themselves as independent (n = 150) were excluded from the analysis. The remaining participants consisted of strong Republican (n = 25), Republican (n = 95), weak Republican (n = 75), weak Democrat (n = 75), Democrat (n = 88), and strong Democrat (n = 69) identifiers. A dummy variable of party identity was constructed for the analyses by coding Republican participants (i.e., strong Republicans, Republicans, and weak Republicans) as 0, and Democratic participants (i.e., strong Democrats, Democrats, and weak Democrats) as 1.

Salience of Party Identity

Reaction time measure is commonly used in psychology for measuring accessibility. The reaction time measure looks at the speed with which a person responds to social category information (see Ruble et al., 2004, for review). Using the cognitive accessibility measure from a previous study (Valentino, Hutchings, & White, 2002), this study employed a lexical task to measure participants' reaction time. Immediately after viewing the experimental news message, participants were asked to distinguish between words and nonsense letter strings that flashed on the computer screen. Participants were asked to press the "D" key for YES if it was a word, and the "F" key for NO if it was a nonsense letter string.[2] Participants were asked to perform this task as quickly and as accurately as possible and were given several trial letter strings for practice. A randomized series of letter strings were then flashed on the center of the screen, one at a time. Five words were intended to be party related ("politics," "republican," "democrat," "liberal," and "conservative") and three science-related ("science," "gene," and "biology"). Nongroup identity filter words were also shown as distractors ("car," "yellow," and "mountain"). Nonsense letter strings were also included ("awor," "clipr," "dryck," "fsapt," "gammr," "poprq," "seltf," and "lramp"). The length of time between the appearance of the letter string and the key being pressed by the participants was recorded by the computer. The basic assumption of this task was that participants would take less time to identify party-related words when party identity was salient and activated (M = 379.91 ms, SD = 110.61 ms for party-relevant words, ranging between a minimum of 163.40 to a maximum of 666.75 ms).

Perceived Polarization

This study applied Hwang and associates' (2014) measure for perceived polarization. Participants were asked to estimate typical Republican and Democratic issue position on GMF on a scale of 1 (*strongly oppose*) to 7 (*strongly support*), with the value of 4 being neutral. Perceived polarization was constructed by calculating an absolute value of the difference between participants' reported values of perceived Republican opinions and Democratic opinions (M = 1.86, SD = 1.98).

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[2] They were not allowed to click the mouse because moving the mouse cursor requires time and could have contaminated the response time detection.

Affective Polarization

This study used the scales of affective polarization by Iyengar and associates (2012) and Garrett and colleagues (2014) to measure in-group and out-group feeling thermometer ratings and stereotypes of trait ratings. Participants were first asked about their feelings toward both "The Democrats" and "The Republicans" on a thermometer scale ranging from 1 (*very unfavorable/dislike* toward the group), to 7 (*very favorable/like* feelings toward the group). Then, political in-group and out-group feelings were constructed based on participants' party affiliation. Finally, affective polarization was calculated as the absolute value of the difference between participants' feelings toward the political in-group and out-group (*M* = 2.82, *SD* = 1.98).

In addition, stereotypes of trait ratings were measured. Participants were asked to indicate their ratings about both "The Democrats" and "The Republicans" separately in terms of the following traits (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*): patriotic, intelligent, honest, open-minded, generous, closed-minded, hypocritical, selfish, and mean. Favorable trait evaluation was constructed by taking the average value of the positive traits (i.e., patriotic, intelligent, honest, open-minded, and generous) and the reverse-coded value of the negative traits (i.e., closed-minded, hypocritical, selfish, and mean). Then, in-group and out-group favorable evaluations were constructed based on their reported party affiliation. Polarization of favorable trait evaluation was measured by calculating the absolute value of the difference between participants' favorable evaluation of political in-group and out-group members (*M* = 1.62, *SD* = 1.56).

Attitude Polarization

Participants were asked to indicate their overall attitude about GMF using a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree with GMF*, 7 = *strongly agree with GMF*) before and after their exposure to the manipulated news article. Because Republicans advocate GMF whereas Democrats oppose GMF, and the manipulated news story depicts such political parties' real positions on the issue, pre- and postsupport for party issue position were constructed by recoding participants' pre- and postissue attitude values to match their political party's issue position. Finally, a measure of attitude conformity was constructed to investigate whether the manipulations in effect make participants align their issue attitude with their supported party's issue position by subtracting the postsupport value for party issue position from the presupport value (*M* = .13, *SD* = .78, range: −6 to 6).

Results

Effects on Party Identity Salience

A two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to test the effect of group cue and the interaction effect of group cue and level of conflict on salience of party identity. Compared with the scientific frame condition (*M* = 390.32, *SD* = 107.65, *n* = 214), participants exposed to the party frame (*M* = 369.45, *SD* = 112.80, *n* = 213) recorded significantly faster reaction times to party-related words, $F(1, 423) = 4.03$, *p* < .05, η_p^2 = .009. Thus, the main effect of party frame on party identity salience was supported (H1a). The interaction effect was also significant, $F(1, 423) = 5.352$, *p* < .05, η_p^2 = .012 (H1b). More specifically, post hoc pairwise comparison tests revealed that in the conflict frame condition, participants who were exposed to the party cue recorded significantly shorter reaction times (*M* = 345.35, *SE* = 10.66) than those who were exposed

to the scientist cue (M = 391.04, SE = 10.76), F(1, 423) = 9.102, p < .01, η_p^2 = .021. However, the difference between the participants who were exposed to the party cue (M = 392.88, SE = 10.51) and the scientist cue (M = 389.64, SE = 10.37) was not significant in the consensus frame condition.

Effects on Perceived Polarization

A two-way ANOVA was performed to test the effect of group cue and the interaction effect of group cue and level of conflict on perceived polarization. Participants in the party frame condition indicated higher perceived polarization (M = 2.59, SD = 2.03) than those who were in the scientific frame condition (M = 1.14, SD = 1.64), and the difference was statistically significant, F(1, 423) = 67.113, p < .001, η_p^2 = .137 (H2a). Consistent with H2b, the interaction effect on perceived polarization was also statistically significant, F(1, 423) = 4.508, p < .05, η_p^2 = .011. The conflict frame produced a greater difference in perceived polarization between the party frame group and the science frame group than did the consensus frame, although the party frame produced greater perceived polarization than the science frame for both the conflict (M = 2.85, SE = .18 for party frame; M = 1.01, SE = .18 for science frame), F(1, 423) = 51.87, p < .001, η_p^2 = .109, and consensus frame conditions (M = 2.34, SE = .18 for party frame; M = 1.27, SE = .18 for science frame), F(1, 423) = 18.903, p < .001, η_p^2 = .043.

Effects on Affective Polarization

A two-way ANOVA was performed to test the effect of group cue and the interaction effect of group cue and level of conflict on affective polarization. For the feeling thermometer measure, the main effect of the group frame was that participants in the scientific frame condition indicated a slightly higher difference of feeling thermometer (M = 3.00, SD = 1.99) than those who were in the party frame condition (M = 2.64, SD = 1.95), but the difference was not statistically significant, F(1, 423) = 3.73, p > .05, η_p^2 = .009 (H3a). Moreover, the interaction effect was not significant, F(1, 423) = 2.177, p > .05, η_p^2 = .005 (H3b). Next, the results of stereotypes of trait ratings showed that the main effect of group frame on stereotypes of trait ratings was significant, F(1, 423) = 3.886, p = .049, η_p^2 = .009, with higher numerical ratings in the scientific frame condition (M = 1.76, SD = 1.60, n = 214) than in the party frame condition (M = 1.47, SD = 1.50, n = 213; H3a). The interaction effect was not statistically significant, F(1, 423) = 3.122, p > .05, η_p^2 = .007 (H3b).

Effects on Attitude Polarization

A two-way ANOVA was performed to test the effect of group cue and the interaction effect of group cue and level of conflict on attitude polarization. The main effect of party frame on attitude polarization was that participants who were exposed to the party frame indicated statistically significantly higher attitude conformity (M = .28, SD = .90) than those who were exposed to the scientific frame (M = −.03, SD = .61), F(1, 423) = 17.874, p < .001, η_p^2 = .041 (H4a). Moreover, the interaction effect on attitude polarization was statistically meaningful, F(1, 423) = 3.935, p < .05, η_p^2 = .009 (H4b). More specifically, post hoc pairwise comparison tests revealed that in the conflict frame condition, participants who were exposed to the party cue showed significantly greater attitude polarization (M = .46, SE = .07) than those who were exposed to the scientist cue (M = −.02, SE = .08), F(1, 423) = 18.806, p < .001, η_p^2 = .043. Meanwhile, the difference between the participants who

were exposed to the party cue (M = .11, SE = .07) and the scientist cue (M = −.05, SE = .07) was not statistically significant in the consensus frame condition.

Test of Mediation Process and Sensitivity Analysis

To examine the causal path from the news frame manipulation to political polarization via party identity salience (H2c–H4c), we first conducted regression path analyses. As seen in Figure 1, there were significant effects of party conflict frame (i.e., interaction effect of group cue and level of conflict) on party identity salience (i.e., reaction time to party-related words; b = −48.93, SE = 21.15, t = −2.31, p < .05). In addition, the mediator (i.e., party identity salience) had a significant effect on perceived polarization (b = −.003, SE = .001, t = −3.26, p < .01) and on attitude polarization (b = −.001, SE = .00, t = −2.80, p < .01). However, the mediator did not have a significant effect on affective polarization in terms of the feeling thermometer (b = .001, SE = .001, t = .66, p > 0.5) and stereotypes of trait ratings (b = −.0003, SE = .0006, t = −.54, p > 0.5).
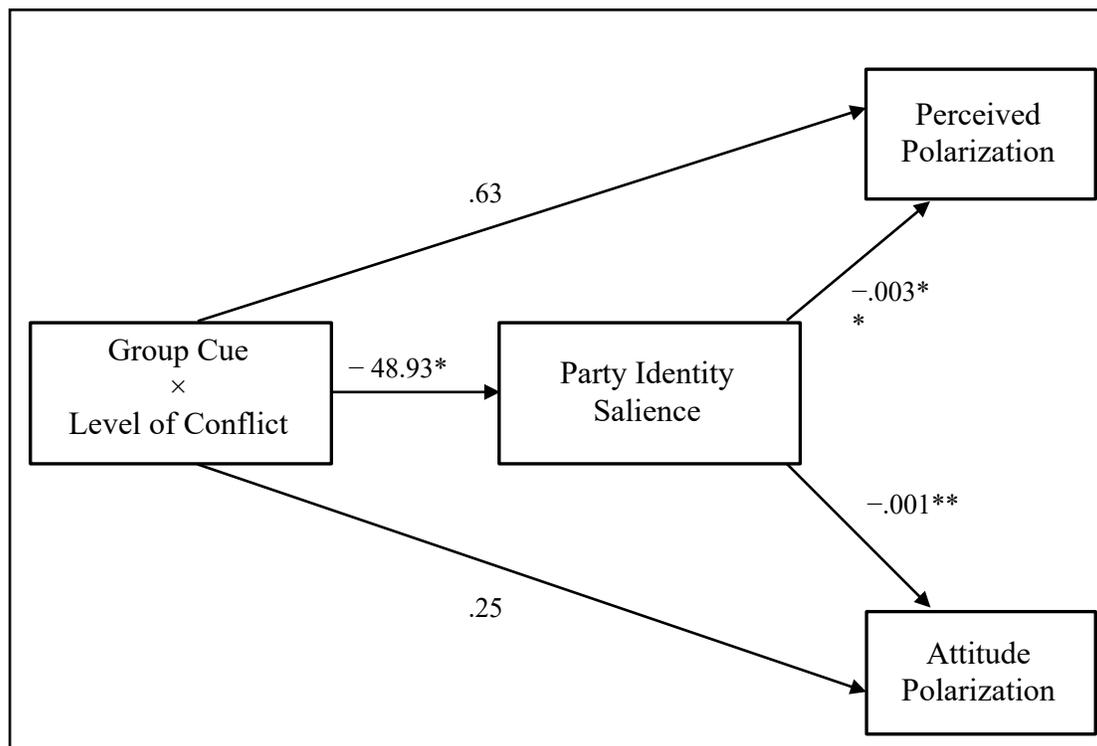

Figure 1. Mediation effects of political conflict news frame on perceived and attitude polarization through party identity salience. **Note. Reported values are unstandardized coefficients. *p < .05. **p < .01. Main effects of group cue and level of conflict are controlled in this path diagram. Party identity salience was measured by reaction time to party-related words so that the smaller values (faster reaction time) indicate stronger party identity salience.**

To examine whether the mediation effects are statistically significant, we conducted a causal mediation test. It is worth noting that even in experimental studies such as this, the randomization of the treatment variable cannot rule out the possibility that a confounding factor may affect both the mediator and the outcome variable. However, the traditional regression approach to mediation analysis usually rests on an unverifiable assumption of sequential ignorability of the mediator—there is no unmeasured confounding of the mediator–outcome relationships (Imai, Keele, & Tingley, 2010). To address this problem of the traditional regression approach, we used the approach developed by Imai and colleagues (2010; Tingley, Yamamoto, Hirose, Keele, & Imai, 2014). In this approach, one first estimates the average causal mediation effect (ACME) under the sequential ignorability assumption and then estimates how robust this estimate of the mediation effect is to violations of the assumption with sensitivity analysis. Sensitivity analysis quantifies how strong the confounder would have to be to change the conclusion being drawn about the direct and indirect effect under the sequential ignorability assumption by estimating ACME depending on different values of the sensitivity parameter rho(ρ)-correlation between the residuals of the mediator and outcome. The ACME, average direct effect (ADE), and the total effect are reported in Table 1. The results confirmed the hypothesized model of [party conflict news frame $\rightarrow$ party identity salience $\rightarrow$ political polarization (in terms of perceived polarization and attitude polarization)]. As we expected, party identity salience had a significant positive mediation effect on the relationship of party conflict news frame and perceived polarization (ACME = .13, 95% CI [.014, .28], $p < .05$), showing that about 16.16% of the total framing effect was mediated by party identity salience. In contrast, the ADE on perceived polarization was not significant. The results also revealed that the effect of the party conflict frame on attitude polarization was significantly mediated by identity salience (ACME = .05, 95% CI [.004, .11], $p < .05$), accounting for 15.07% of the total framing effect, whereas the ADE of the party conflict frame on attitude polarization was not statistically significant. In contrast, the mediation effects of identity salience on affective polarization variables were not significant.

Table 1. Results of the Causal Mediation Analysis.

DVs	Estimate	95% CI lower	95% CI upper	*p* value
Perceived polarization				
ACME	0.127	0.014	0.28	0.024
ADE	0.624	−0.072	1.33	0.084
ATE	0.752	0.039	1.46	0.036
Attitude polarization				
ACME	0.047	0.004	0.11	0.028
ADE	0.245	−0.035	0.5	0.082
ATE	0.291	0.009	0.56	0.046
Affective polarization (feeling thermometer)				
ACME	−0.029	−0.150	0.06	0.54
ADE	−0.545	−1.238	0.17	0.12
ATE	−0.574	−1.257	0.11	0.10
Affective polarization (stereotypes of trait ratings)				
ACME	0.020	−0.048	0.11	0.564
ADE	−0.543	−1.125	0.03	0.064
ATE	−0.523	−1.095	0.05	0.076

Note. ACME = average causal mediated effect; ADE = average direct effect; ATE = average total effect.

The subsequent sensitivity analysis suggests that the mediation effects of party identity salience on both perceived polarization and attitude polarization remain positive unless ρ is less than −0.15, which appears to be modestly-to-moderately robust in the face of unobserved covariate confounders (see the top panels of Figure 2). Sensitivity can be further evaluated by arranging the coefficients of determination (R^2) for the mediator and outcome models as axes in a graph, to see how much variance an unobserved confounder would need to eliminate the mediating effect of party identity salience (see the bottom panels of Figure 2).
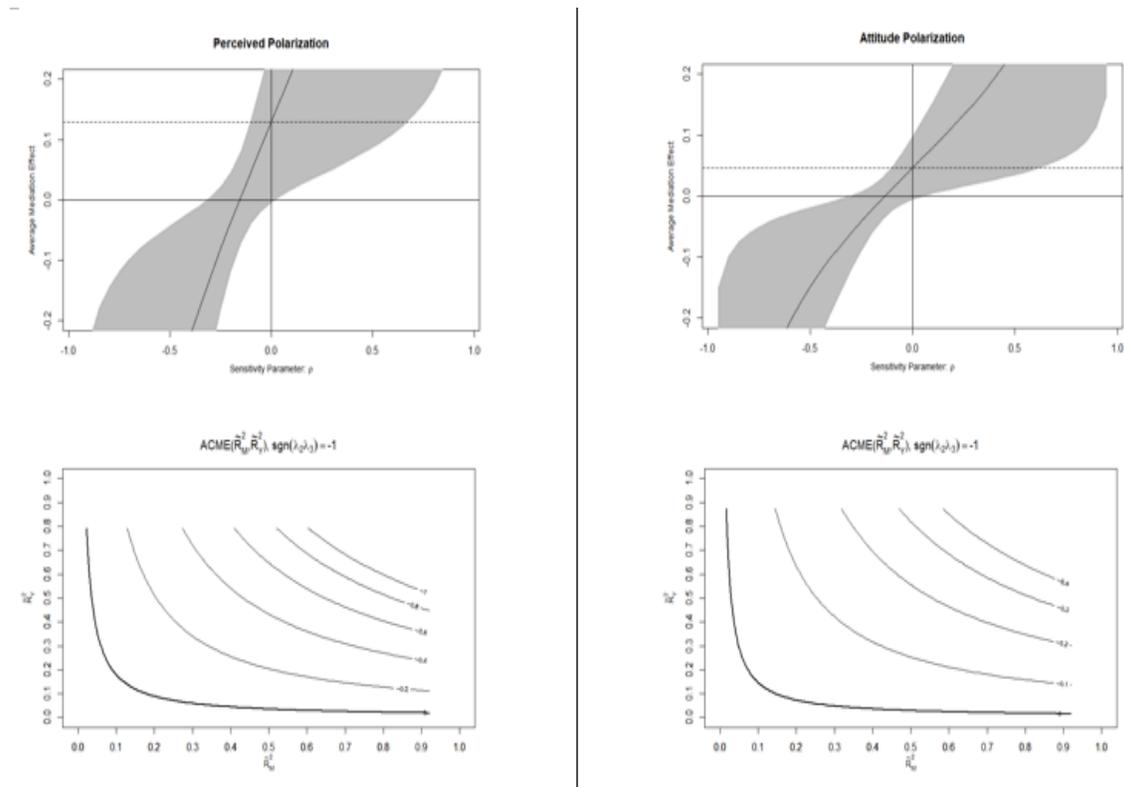
Figure 2. Sensitivity analysis for the outcomes of perceived polarization and attitude polarization. **Note.** *The panels in the top row show the sensitivity analysis with the estimated values of ACMEs as functions of the sensitivity parameter ρ. The horizontal dashed lines are the ACMEs without correlation (ρ = 0), which is computed under the assumption of sequential ignorability. The thick lines represent the point estimates of the ACME and the gray regions their 95% confidence intervals. In the bottom panels, the contour lines represent the estimated ACME as a function of the proportion of the total mediator variance (horizontal axis) and the total outcome variance (vertical axis) explained by an unobserved confounder. The thick "0" contour line indicates how strong the unobserved confounder must be to bring the ACME down to zero.*

According to the graph, an unobserved confounding variable or set of variables would need to account for 14.14% of the variance in both the mediator and the attitude polarization variable to bring the ACME down to zero. The results also show that the positive mediation effect of identity salience on perceived polarization is maintained if the unobserved confounder explains less than 13.49% of the original variance in both the mediator and the outcome.

Conclusions

This study examined how conflict-centered news reports on politics, labeled "party conflict news frame," affect audiences' psychological processing of news content that leads to political polarization. Rather than simply assuming the role of contextual identity salience in the group polarization process, this study attempted to empirically measure the level of party identity salience and how it affected different levels of polarization. For the salience goal, this study employed a lexical task to measure participants' reaction time to a series of party-related words after exposure to a manipulated news article. The results revealed a significant effect of the manipulation on party identity salience, consistent with the social identity and self-categorization approaches to identity salience. People have multiple identities; the identity that they typically use when they process incoming information is largely dependent on the situational salience of the identity.

This study showed how media coverage of an issue could play an important role in the formation of biased perceptions of mass polarization by framing a scientific issue as a politically controversial issue. In addition, highlighting intergroup conflict as opposed to intergroup consensus in the news story significantly amplified the effect of party cue on the perceived partisan divide over the issue. Given that the GMF issue is not a well-known political issue, and participants were exposed to only a single news story about it, these findings indicate that the party conflict news frame had an influence on the formation of perceived partisan polarization.

The results also revealed that the party conflict news frame positively influences attitude polarization. It is worth noting that previous studies have not provided consistent evidence supporting the effects of an intergroup conflict message on attitude conformity to in-group norms. For example, Hwang and associates (2014) investigated the effects of uncivil online intergroup debate on perceived polarization and attitude polarization by experimentally manipulating online news users' comments on a politically polarized issue (health-care reform). They found that exposure to uncivil online intergroup debate had a significant effect on the perception of mass polarization, but not on attitude polarization. In contrast, using a fabricated (e.g., Price, 1989) or nonpoliticized issue as in the current study might maximize the attitudinal effects of the social identification process because study participants might first come to know about the issue and group positions on the issue through the manipulated messages. Levendusky and Malhotra (2016) found that news coverage that depicted the electorate as polarized caused voters to increase perceived polarization and affective polarization, but to moderate their issue position. Levendusky and Malhotra considered politically polarized depictions in media coverage as an "anticue" exemplar that made people move away from polarization and moderated their attitudes. Rothschild and Malhotra (2014) found that public opinion as expressed via poll results affected attitude conformity (although it appeared to be issue dependent) and explained this result as a kind of bandwagon effect of polls. The current study findings seem to contradict these previous studies, but the experimental stimuli were different too. Levendusky and

Malhotra's experimental news article depicted polarization of Republican and Democratic voters, and Rothschild and Malhotra used poll results from Americans, but the current study's news article portrayed the conflict as being between Republican and Democratic elites. As each study suggested different mechanisms of polarization effects, the actual and perceived subject of polarization might influence the process and consequence of attitude polarization. Future studies are needed to clarify this.

Although the findings of this study provided empirical support for the perceptual and attitudinal effects of the party conflict frame, neither party cue nor its interaction with level of intergroup conflict had statistically significant effects on affective polarization. One possible explanation for the null finding is that the emotions of the study were not measured by issue-specific items, but by overall impressions and emotions toward political in-groups and out-groups. Affective polarization about general political in-group and out-group members may be formed and developed by long-term intergroup experiences through cumulative interpersonal interactions, experience, and media exposure.

Among the three types of political polarization, significant mediating effects of party identity salience were found on perceived polarization and attitude polarization. Because the current study strictly controlled other message factors (i.e., facts, reasons, and arguments presented in the news story) to be constant across experimental conditions, the significant mediation effects of party identity salience indicated that the causal effects of the party conflict frame occurred mainly through the social identification process, but not through the conventional message persuasion process. The role of party identity salience in mediating the effects of framing on perceptions and attitudes could also explain why news frame did not produce polarization among the independent participants of the study.[3] This was consistent with Lelkes' (2016) argument that the trend of polarization was driven entirely by partisans.

Discussion

By linking framing with social identity and self-categorization theories, this study explored how news frames affect the political polarization of audiences through the party identification process. The first implication the current study offers is a new way to explore the role of news frames in explaining intergroup political polarization by theorizing effects of framing on party identification process. The results of this study confirm that news frames can accentuate party identity salience and that party identity salience is a key factor for explaining partisan audiences' political polarization over an issue. The party conflict news frame plays an important role that momentarily increases political identity salience, resulting in perceptual and attitudinal political polarization.

Second, the findings provide empirical evidence that applicability-based framing effects are distinguishable from other accessibility-based cognitive effects (e.g., priming effects). As scholars have pointed out (Price et al., 1997; Scheufele, 2000), the accessibility-based cognitive effect model assumes that once a certain construct is activated and becomes salient, the salient construct is more likely to be used automatically in later information processing, regardless of the individual's preexisting experience.

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[3] The analyses in this study showed that the party conflict news frame influenced neither party identity salience nor perceived, affective, and attitude polarizations among independent participants ($n = 150$).

However, framing effects involve different cognitive processes in which the framed information influences the relevance or applicability of a certain construct by providing interpretive contexts that are consistent with preexisting cognitive schema. That is, a news frame is assumed to have an effect only when audience members think that it not only resonates with their preexisting schema but also is relevant to a given situation.

Third, this study highlights the process of political polarization, which has been less investigated compared with whether news coverage merely affects political polarization or not. Although social identity and self-categorization theory highlight the importance of identity salience in the social identification process, the process by which a particular identity becomes activated and is used in a given situation is less understood. The current study suggests that various contextual and individual difference factors can differently activate specific social identities within one's social self-schema. As a result, the mere presence of a party identity within an individual's social self-schema does not automatically prompt increased party identification among partisan participants. Rather, increased party identification of partisan participants is most pronounced when the news frame depicts the two political parties as being at odds and thus signals that party identity is relevant in thinking about the issue.

This study not only advances theoretical understanding of the underlying mechanism of framing effects on political polarization but also provides practical implications. News is the key source of information that affects public perception. However, news media reporting has been criticized because of its preference for sensational reports and horse-race journalism. Scholars have pointed out that the strategy frame is pervasive in reporting about not only political campaigns but also routine politics and policy debates (Lawrence, 2000). Media frames encourage people to activate and use frame-consistent thoughts in the process of issue interpretation (Bennett, 2012). People may form or change their issue attitude not because they have scrutinized the issue itself, but because of their biased information processing resulting from frequent consumption of the party conflict news frame.

It is important and necessary to think about what media can do to reduce or eliminate the causes of polarization. As the results of this study suggested, people can overestimate the difference between partisan issue positions when they are exposed to party conflict news frames. Nevertheless, other researchers (Sherman, Nelson, & Ross, 2003) have shown that participants saw more common ground and were more optimistic about the likelihood of successful negotiation when similarities were made more salient by revealing the actual positions of opponents rather than the assumed views of counterparts. Similarly, the red–blue electorate map conceals the actual numbers, so people assume the level of conflict between groups to be far greater than the actual difference. Therefore, offering detailed information about an issue or event can help to reduce erroneous presuppositions. Furthermore, presenting common ground rather than summing up the issue using a red–blue or black–white division in news coverage can reduce polarization.

Although the findings of this study provide valuable implications for research on mass political polarization, the study has limitations. First, the experimental article was manipulated as either a scientific conflict frame, a party conflict frame, a scientific consensus frame, or a party consensus frame. In the strictest sense of framing, the manipulation of conflict versus consensus seems to be factual differences in what happened at an event rather than media choices to emphasize one or another facet of a complex issue.

However, framing has been used to emphasize selection, salience, or both (Entman, 1993). In other words, the fact that news stories are factual does not exclude them from the framing process. A journalist's selection of certain facts among multiple facts also lends the selection process to the essence of framing. However, it should still be acknowledged that the current study used the concept of framing in a less rigorous manner.

Lastly, experimental results in artificial settings may not reflect real-world phenomena. The current study design in which participants were exposed to a single news story does not allow the researcher to investigate long-term effects. Given that audiences encounter diverse information about a given issue through various communication channels in the real world, the findings in this study may not be generalized to explain any long-lasting effects. Testing the main theoretical propositions of this study using diverse research designs such as survey and longitudinal panel experiment is required to not only identify the long-term effects of consuming party conflict frames but also investigate the effects of cumulative exposure to similar media reports over a long period of time.

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