"Selective Sharing" on Social Media

A preliminary experimental survey on partisan bias and its motivations

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Context:

Social media is thought to be an information divider, one in which partisan users post news that reinforces their and their friends' biases strengthening political echo chambers. Yet, though we know social media users share partisan-friendly information, there is no direct evidence that they are biased in doing so; it is, rather, possible users share an unbiased selection of the news they are exposed to. We also know little about the underlying motivations and conditions that drive those biased decisions (if they exist).

Questions

- *Do* partisan users selectively post information that aligns with their partisan views?
- What motivates them to post partisan-friendly news stories?

Propositions

- Yes, given a set of stories they are exposed to, partisan users will be more apt to share party-friendly stories.
- A primary motivating factor is to strengthen the sharer's inclusion in their (partisan) group. (They accomplish this by posting information that affirms their loyalty and value including information that extols the ingroup or denigrates the outgroup, that expresses shared values and that show). Users higher in "Need to Belong" should thus be more apt to post partisan stories.

The Study

To test the 2 propositions I conducted an online survey with 524 subjects (in 5 batches over 2 weeks). Subjects were recruited from Mturk and include 12% African Americans, 15% Asian Americans, 8% Latino Americans, 61% White Americans, 42% Democrats, 29% Independents, and 26% Republicans.
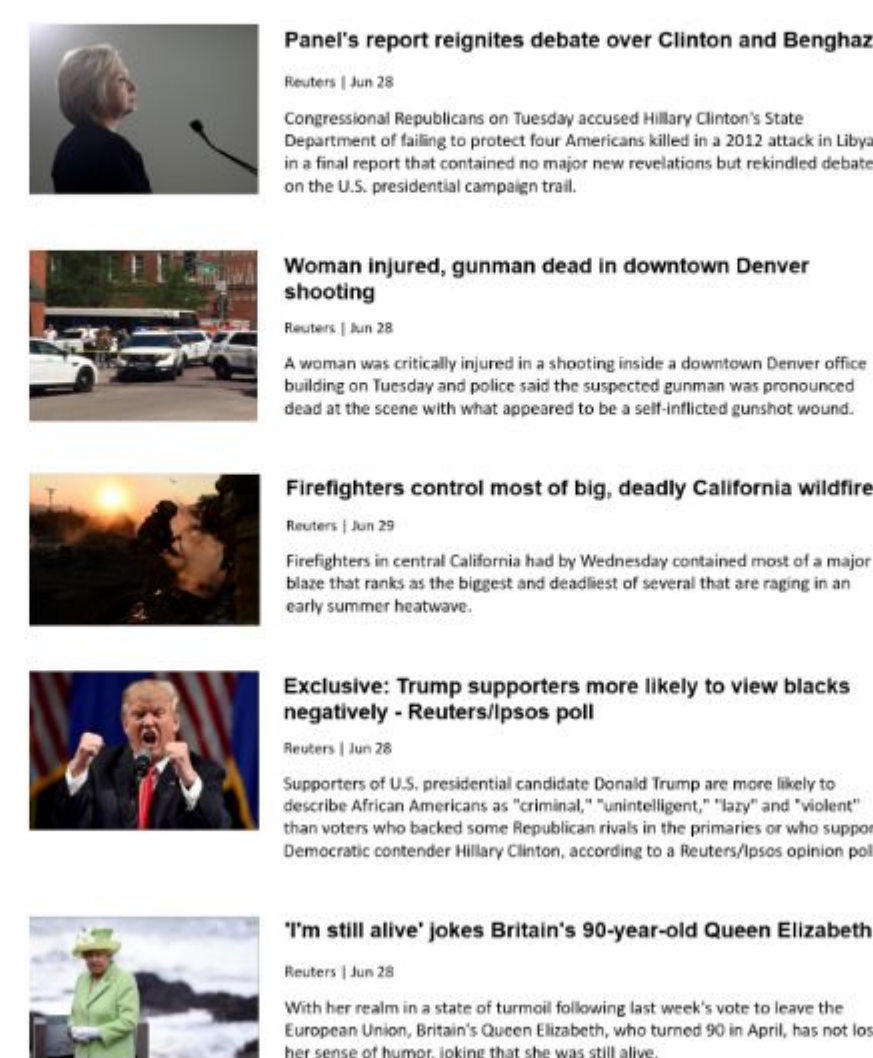
The IV:
Subjects were asked which party they most identify with.

Do you identify with any of the groups below? Please pick the one that you identify with most.

| Democrats | Republicans |
| Independents | Other political group |

The DV:
Participants were were presented with current stories from Reuters and asked "which story would you be most likely to share on social media?" Each participant saw 4 sets of 5 stories which included: 1 story favorable to Democrats, 1 story favorable to Republicans, 1 informative story, 1 "fluff" story, and one arbitrary story.

Story favorable to Republicans.

Arbitrary story.

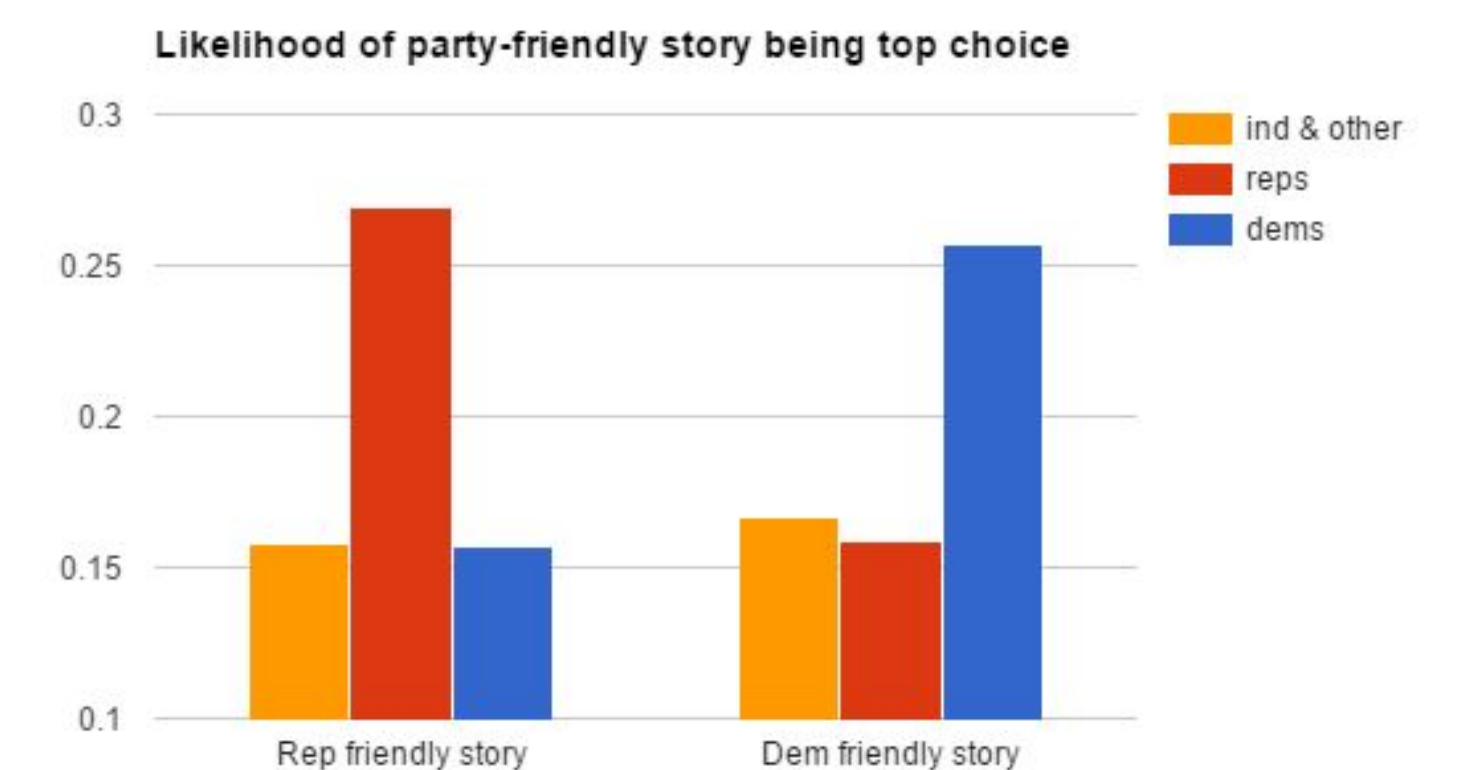Informative story.

Story favorable to Democrats.

Fluff story.

Moderators:
Participants answered a battery of questions to assess 14 personality measures including Need to Belong.

Results

Partisan Bias
Both Republicans and Democrats were over 60% more likely to share stories that were favorable to their party, compared to non-partisans and those who identify with the other party.

Likelihood of party-friendly story being top choice

Surprising Moderators
Contrary to predictions, Need to Belong did not make partisans any more likely to share party-friendly stories. Republicans, however, were less biased in their sharing if they considered themselves leaders or more extraverted. Self-confident democrats were likewise less biased. In contrast, all partisans were more biased if they reported valuing intelligence.