

## Effects of Media Exposure on the Political Polarization Patterns of Students in Pakistan

**Muhammad Zahid Bilal**

Assistant Professor, Department of Communication Studies, University of Okara, Punjab, Pakistan. Email; [zahid.bilal@uo.edu.pk](mailto:zahid.bilal@uo.edu.pk)

**Arshad Ali**

Assistant Professor, Center for Media and Communication Studies, University of Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan.

**Sami Ullah**

Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, University of Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan.

**Abstract** *Political polarization remains central to the political behavior scholarship. In this study, political polarization patterns among the youth of Pakistan with reference to selective exposure approaches of media were examined. Survey from 420 students of Pakistan public sector universities was conducted. It was found that selective exposure to media is still strong in Pakistan, however diverse exposure is also being witnessed in Pakistan. Now the people are also diverting towards diverse exposure. Consequently, political polarization among the university students of Pakistan is still strong. Findings imply that media in Pakistan is playing an important role in strengthening the democracy in Pakistan. Furthermore, it is also concluded that media played a key role to determine voters' choice during Elections-2013 in Pakistan.*

### Key Words

Selective exposure, diverse exposure, political polarization, Pakistan elections-2013

### Introduction

Pakistan has a very diverse range of political parties, including parties leaned towards religious, conservative and liberal approaches. Among these political parties, two parties have emerged as main political parties in the parliamentary system of Pakistan since 1970. Left wing oriented party Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and right wing leaning party Pakistan Muslim League (PML) have been sharing the power time and again till 2008. It was observed that no other political party could come into power breaking the hegemony of these two political parties. It was general perception that the monopoly of this bipolar system could not be challenged and that there is no space for the third party.

However, in elections – 2013, it was witnessed that a third political force was in the making. Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) emerged as a strong political party. PTI challenged the status quo and came up on the mainstream political circle of Pakistan. New leadership persuaded people and specifically youth to cast their votes. Record voter turnout was observed during elections-2013 (Gallup, 2013). Politically charged youth seemed much politically aware about democratic values, system and rights. These circumstance and emergence of third political force need to be studied to have the better understanding of changing dynamics of politics in Pakistan. Thus, this study is an attempt to know the political awareness of a common man as how they become aware of their rights and how this awareness influences polarization patterns among youth.

During elections 2013, the media's role was very important. Before 2002, Pakistani media was controlled and less pluralist. But now there are a diverse and vibrant media. PEMRA has issued licenses to 91 channels, out of which, 84 are functional. Furthermore, there are more than 200 FM radio stations working in Pakistan. More than 3500 cable distributors have brought more freedom of choices to audience (PEMRA, 2014). This diversity of channels has decentralized the flow of information. Youth is able to get the diverse and multiple views and analysis as compared to the past controlled media environment. On the other hand, consumption of diversity may be seen as a factor of taking strong positions regarding political ideology that could push them toward political polarization. In the context of this emerging media environment, present study aims to explore the political awareness and polarization patterns among university students. It also seeks to examine the role of selective and diverse exposure in polarization patterns among university students.

### **Selective Exposure and Polarization**

Polarization is the phenomenon active in all political systems. It is known as having an extreme viewpoint about affiliate party. It is beyond moderation and individuals do not have the flexibility to tolerate any else's perspective. Most of the studies on political polarization were conducted in America as an emerging phenomenon in American politics. A strong polarity has been witnessed there (McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2006). In this polarized environment, media outlets often report political news from ideological perspectives (Arceneaux, Johnson, & Murphy, 2012; Groseclose & Milyo, 2005). These media ideological biases may lead to polarization among the voters and influence the elections outcome (Bernhardt, Krasa, & Polborn, 2008). In Pakistan, we are also observing the era of partisan media due to the polarization among the individuals of society.

Although partisan media framed issues and events of society according to specific political stance, yet partisan individuals evaluate and perceive media content differently (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). In this way, audience expose themselves to specific information which reinforces their political beliefs (Garrett et al., 2014). In an experimental study of American scholars Iyengar and Hahn (2009) revealed that republicans and conservatives mostly prefer news stories on Fox News and they tend to keep them away from NPR and CNN. On the other side, Democrats and liberals give more attention to CNN and NPR, and they tend to avoid Fox News.

On the other side, that polarization patterns of individuals may vary according to the nature of political issues. While exploring the dynamics of political polarization, Baldassarri and Bearman (2007) argue that polarization on one issue need not lead to polarization on all issues. Similarly, according to Prior (2013) also argued that it is difficult to say that ordinary Americans are becoming partisan. On contrary, Dilliplane (2014) found that partisan news play a vital role in vote choice rather than simple reinforcement of voting choice.

In this study, the role of media is investigated regarding polarization with the relation to "selective exposure theory". Selective exposure is the phenomenon in which audience expose themselves to a specific type of information which reinforce their beliefs (Sears & Freedman, 1967; Taber & Lodge, 2006). People give more attention to their preferred candidates and they resist information on the issues contradictory to their perception of importance issues. (Iyengar, Hahn, Krosnick, & Walker, 2008). Similarly, Stroud (2008) found that there is a relationship between political ideology and media exposure on different media types.

Fischer and Greitemeyer (2010) stated that during decision making, people often focused on selective information related to their choice and they avoid the contradictory information. Feldman (2011) also found that the opinions which are more in agreement with the predispositions of the audience make them less biased. Therefore, partisan media and selective exposure both contribute in strengthening polarization patterns among partisans.

Furthermore, scholars claim that online media has changed the exposure patterns from selective to diverse exposure (Conover et al., 2011; Gruzd, 2013; Valentino, Banks, Hutchings, & Davis, 2009). Messing and Westwood (2012) argued that social media platforms have changed the media consumption patterns of audience, providing them heterogeneous exposure, which are critical in shaping social values instead of partisan affiliation.

Nevertheless, exposure to social media platforms is also creating polarization among the consumers. A blog study shows that people inclined to give more attention to the likeminded political blogs (Lawrence, Sides, and Farrell, 2010). They found blog readers more segmented and actively seeking political content than non-blog readers. Hargittai, Gallo, and Kane (2008) web link analysis also show that famous political bloggers used to link other like-minded bloggers. This Pro- and counter-attitudinal content exposure is influencing observations and orientation towards opposite party (Garrett et al., 2014). Hence, selective and diverse exposure debates are going side by side either its print, electronic or social media.

One aspect of selective exposure that people expose themselves to specific information which reinforces their beliefs. In the present study another aspect being investigated is that people also pay attention to the information contrary to their pre-dispositions in line with the findings of Garrett (2019) which says that there is a small empirical evidence to argue that individuals will avoid entire messages that are contrary to their beliefs (Garrett, 2009). Therefore, it is not necessary that exposure to selective information lead to reinforcement (Meffert & Gschwend, 2012). Campante and Hojman (2013) investigated the link between media and political polarization. They argue that people have moderate views, prefer to watch different ideologies and arguments.

From these literature we may conclude that media exposure either its partisan or non-partisan creates a healthy environment for working democracy. It brings pluralism of ideas and political views among the society. This study aims to measure the effect of selective as well as diverse exposure of media content on polarization patterns of university students. Therefore, researcher found support for hypothesizing following statements.

**H1a:** There would be a positive relationship between media exposure and selective exposure of university students of Pakistan.

**H1b:** There would be a positive relationship between media exposure and diverse exposure of university students of Pakistan.

**H2:** Selective exposure would be a best predictor of political polarization among the university students of Pakistan.

**Methods**

Cross-sectional survey design was used as methodological design in this study. Population of study was the university students of Pakistan. A sample of 420 subjects was selected through cluster sampling technique. Five clusters of universities were made on the basis of provinces; Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, and Islamabad capital territory. Data was collected from students of: Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad; University of Gujrat, Punjab; Government Collage University, Punjab; Punjab University, Punjab; University of Karachi, Sindh; Behria University, Sindh; Peshawar University, KPK; and University of Balochistan. Sample distribution presents in table 1 .

**Table 1.** Sample Distribution

		Gender		Total
		Female	Male	
Province	Punjab	56	64	120
	Sindh	75	36	111
	KPK	22	60	82
	Baluchistan	27	17	44
	Islamabad	44	21	65
Total		224	198	422

**Measures of Study**

**Demographic Information Sheet**

Respondents were asked questions about their demographic information, including; gender, province and institutional affiliation.

**Scale for Media Exposure**

Media exposure was operationalized as the people consuming habits of media, including electronic media, and online media. A 10-item scale was developed to measure media exposure. Respondents opinion were measured at five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Items were about; watching news bulletins, political discussions, political content, talk shows, watching campaigns of political parties, use of social media for political information, political discussion and vote casting awareness. Cronbach alpha reliability was obtained 0.87.

**Scale for Selective Exposure**

Selective exposure was operationalized as the respondents' tendency towards likeminded media content. It was measure through 5-item scale. Responses were measured at five-point Likert scale. Ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Items were about; watching favorable information and supporting information towards specific political party. Cronbach alpha reliability was 0.72.

**Scale for Diverse Exposure**

Diverse exposure was operationalized as the respondents' tendency towards contradictory media content to specific party. It was measure through 5-item scale. Responses were measured at five point Likert scale. Ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Items were about; watching unfavorable information and exposure towards information against respondent's specific political party. Cronbach alpha reliability was obtained 0.73.

**Scale for Political Polarization**

Polarization was operationalized as the respondents' consistent attitude towards specific political party. It was measured through 15-item scale. Responses were measured at five point Likert scale. Ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Items were about; strong political association, affiliation, blind following, family party, rational analysis of party, defending political party, vote casting to same party, less inclination towards other parties,

persuading others to specific party, and changing political affiliation. Cronbach alpha reliability was obtained 0.78. For data analysis and results, we used descriptive and inferential statistics by using SPSS version 20.

### Findings and Discussions

The present study found that educated youth of Pakistan has become very democratic oriented in their media exposure (Table 2). Youth of Pakistan does not only tend towards selective media messages, but also get themselves exposed to diverse exposure (Table 2). In this way, it is argued that media in Pakistan is promoting democratic values among university students. It is playing crucial role in strengthening democracy in Pakistan. Hence H1a and H1b are supported. It implies that Pakistani media has become pluralistic and it is promoting the political messages of all the political parties in an effective way. People are getting not only the like-minded messages but also the messages of the other political parties.

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics of Scales

	<b>N</b>	<b>Range</b>	<b>Min.</b>	<b>Max.</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
Media Exposure Scale	422	40	10	50	34.17	7.66
Political Polarization Scale	422	49	21	70	42.22	8.75
Selective Exposure Scale	422	20	5	25	15.58	4.06
Diverse Exposure Scale	422	20	5	25	16.13	3.87

Further this study highlights that selective as well as diverse exposure are high among university students and they have become more polarized (Table 2). Political polarization among university students correlates with selective exposure and diverse exposure (Model 1). Therefore, regression analysis was executed to further validate the best predictor of political polarization in university students. Results indicate selective exposure as the best predictor of polarization, and diverse exposure as the second predictor of polarization (Table 3, Model 1). In this way, it is argued that media exposure in Pakistan has become selective and partisan based. This selective mechanism is influencing polarization patterns among youth. As it has been previously argued that selective exposure promotes political polarization (Arceneaux et al., 2012; Fischer & Greitemeyer, 2010; Garrett, 2009; Iyengar et al., 2008; Messing & Westwood, 2012; Sears & Freedman, 1967; Stroud, 2008; Valentino et al., 2009). Hence, H2 is supported that selective exposure of media is the best predictor of political polarization of Pakistani youth.

**Table 3.** Predictor of Political Polarization among the University students of Pakistan

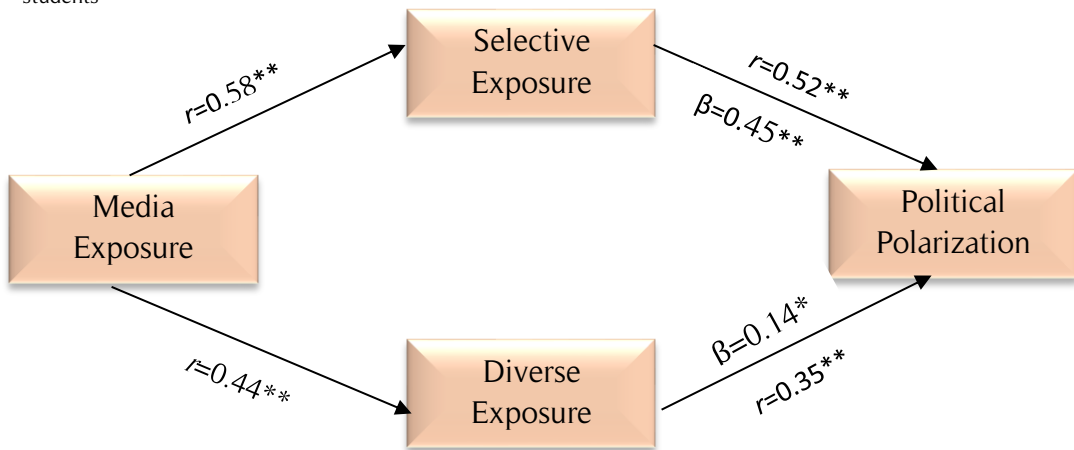
<b>Model Summary<sup>b</sup></b>						
<b>Model</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>R Square</b>	<b>Adjusted R Square</b>	<b>Std. Error of the Estimate</b>		
1	.532 <sup>a</sup>	.283	.280	7.429		
a. Predictors: (Constant), Diverse Exposure Scale, Selective Exposure Scale						
b. Dependent Variable: Political Polarization Scale						
<b>Model</b>	<b>Unstandardized Coefficients B</b>	<b>Std. Error</b>	<b>Standardized Coefficients Beta</b>	<b>T</b>	<b>Sig.</b>	<b>95.0% Interval for B Lower Bound Upper Bound</b>
(Constant)	21.87	1.74		12.6	.00	18.458 25.296
Selective Exposure Scale	.97	.100	.453	9.7	.00	.777 1.170
Diverse Exposure Scale	.32	.105	.142	3.0	.00	.114 .527

*a. Dependent Variable: Political Polarization Scale*

However, findings also claim that media in Pakistan is not only reinforcing existing attitudes, but also providing opportunities towards diversity of views. Selective exposure and diverse exposure go side by side as it was found in previous studies (Conover et al., 2011; Gruzd, 2013; Valentino et al., 2009). This is a healthy indicator for working democracy in Pakistan.

**Model 1**

Relationship of Media Exposure, Diverse Exposure, Selective Exposure and Political Polarization among University students



\*\* Significant at 0.01 level

\* Significant at 0.05 level

Furthermore, study found that significant gender differences exists in media exposure of respondents. Independent sample t-test indicates that male respondents' media exposure is higher than female respondents (Table 4). It shows that women interest in political news and their media consumption is still relatively low in Pakistan. Policy makers must strive hard to bring equality in political participation of women.

In sum we can conclude that youth in Pakistan is actively seeking political information not only relevant to their predispositions, but also they are diverting towards diverse views and opinions. Most of the youth is inclined towards selective messages of media, which leads them towards strong polarization. On the other hand, youth is also inclined towards diverse views on media which results in decline of polarization among them.

**Table 3.** Gender Differences in Democratic Orientation, Media Exposure, Selective Exposure, Diverse Exposure and Political Polarization among the University students.

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
	F	Sig	t	df	Tow Tailed Sig
Media Exposure Scale	2.230	.136	-4.135	420	.000
			-4.098	391.381	.000
Political Polarization Scale	1.638	.201	-.717	420	.474
			-.714	403.470	.476
Selective Exposure Scale	1.891	.170	-.937	420	.349
			-.928	389.417	.354
Diverse Exposure Scale	.586	.445	-1.396	420	.164
			-1.398	416.207	.163

**Conclusion**

The present study strongly argues that media exposure is bringing awareness in the society of Pakistan. The findings of the study state that diversity of media landscape have changed the prior trends of selective exposure and people go for contradictory arguments which increase their knowledge. There not only is an acceptance of the views which reinforce the public's beliefs, but counter attacks on political parties are also acceptable. Electronic and social media expose all kinds of investigative reports and it seems attractive. Youth of Pakistan tends to expose themselves to all kinds of news to get diverse knowledge. Education, media and emerging political parties have changed the

concept of politics in Pakistan. In the political system of Pakistan, the trend of right wing and left wing allies have been demolished and a good debate within right and left wing has been started on performance and ideology. The mentality of the youth of Pakistan has been changed. With the presence of sound and moderate public opinion, a healthy democracy emerges.

## References

- Arceneaux, K., Johnson, M., & Murphy, C. (2012). Polarized political communication, oppositional media hostility, and selective exposure. *The Journal of Politics*, 74(01), 174-186.
- Baldassarri, D., & Bearman, P. (2007). Dynamics of political polarization. *American sociological review*, 72(5), 784-811.
- Bernhardt, D., Krasa, S., & Polborn, M. (2008). Political polarization and the electoral effects of media bias. *Journal of Public Economics*, 92(5), 1092-1104.
- Campante, F. R., & Hojman, D. A. (2013). Media and polarization: Evidence from the introduction of broadcast TV in the United States. *Journal of Public Economics*, 100, 79-92.
- Conover, M., Ratkiewicz, J., Francisco, M., Gonçalves, B., Menczer, F., & Flammini, A. (2011). *Political Polarization on Twitter*. Paper presented at the ICWSM.
- Dilliplane, S. (2014). Activation, conversion, or reinforcement? The impact of partisan news exposure on vote choice. *American Journal of Political Science*, 58(1), 79-94.
- Feldman, L. (2011). Partisan differences in opinionated news perceptions: A test of the hostile media effect. *Political Behavior*, 33(3), 407-432.
- Fischer, P., & Greitemeyer, T. (2010). A New Look at Selective-Exposure Effects An Integrative Model. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 19(6), 384-389.
- Garrett, R. K. (2009). Politically motivated reinforcement seeking: Reframing the selective exposure debate. *Journal of Communication*, 59(4), 676-699.
- Garrett, R. K., Gvirsman, S. D., Johnson, B. K., Tsfati, Y., Neo, R., & Dal, A. (2014). Implications of Pro-and Counter attitudinal Information Exposure for Affective Polarization. *Human Communication Research*, 40(3), 309-332.
- Groseclose, T., & Milyo, J. (2005). A measure of media bias. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 1191-1237.
- Gruzd, A. (2013). *Examining Polarization in Political Social Media: A Case of Twitter and the 2011 Canadian Federal Election*. Paper presented at the Proceedings of the Annual Conference of CAIS/Actes du congrès annuel de l'ACSI.
- Hargittai, E., Gallo, J., & Kane, M. (2008). Cross-ideological discussions among conservative and liberal bloggers. *Public Choice*, 134(1-2), 67-86.
- Iyengar, S., & Hahn, K. S. (2009). Red media, blue media: Evidence of ideological selectivity in media use. *Journal of Communication*, 59(1), 19-39.
- Iyengar, S., Hahn, K. S., Krosnick, J. A., & Walker, J. (2008). Selective exposure to campaign communication: The role of anticipated agreement and issue public membership. *The Journal of Politics*, 70(01), 186-200.
- McCarty, N., Poole, K. T., & Rosenthal, H. (2006). *Polarized America: The dance of ideology and unequal riches* (Vol. 5). US: MIT Press.
- Meffert, M. F., & Gschwend, T. (2012). *When Party and Issue Preferences Clash: Selective Exposure and Attitudinal Depolarization*. Paper presented at the Annual conference of the International Communication Association, Phoenix.
- Messing, S., & Westwood, S. J. (2012). Selective exposure in the age of social media: Endorsements trump partisan source affiliation when selecting news online. *Communication Research*, 1(22), 1-22. doi:10.1177/0093650212466406
- Prior, M. (2013). Media and political polarization. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 16, 101-127.
- Sears, D. O., & Freedman, J. L. (1967). Selective exposure to information: A critical review. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 31(2), 194-213.
- Stroud, N. J. (2008). Media use and political predispositions: Revisiting the concept of selective exposure. *Political Behavior*, 30(3), 341-366.
- Taber, C. S., & Lodge, M. (2006). Motivated skepticism in the evaluation of political beliefs. *American Journal of Political Science*, 50(3), 755-769.
- Valentino, N. A., Banks, A. J., Hutchings, V. L., & Davis, A. K. (2009). Selective exposure in the Internet age: The interaction between anxiety and information utility. *Political Psychology*, 30(4), 591-613.
- Vallone, R. P., Ross, L., & Lepper, M. R. (1985). The hostile media phenomenon: biased perception and perceptions of media bias in coverage of the Beirut massacre. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 49(3), 577.