

Ideological asymmetry

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This encyclopedia entry explores ideological asymmetry in political communication, underscoring how personal biases, social media, and partisan identities shape interactions with political information. It explores how susceptibility to disinformation varies with political orientation due to psychological predispositions and targeted media strategies. The discussion extends to theories like motivated reasoning and the Identity-based Model of Political Belief, which explain the selective acceptance of information that aligns with existing beliefs and partisan identities. The role of populism is highlighted, emphasizing how affective polarization and narrative framing on social media platforms amplify ideological divides. Additionally, the entry addresses the strategic use of visual content in political messaging, which enhances emotional engagement and deepens ideological asymmetries. Overall, the examination of how digital platforms cater to specific demographics and ideologies reveals a complex landscape of political communication marked by significant ideological asymmetries.

Ideological asymmetry; Disinformation; Social media; Partisan Identities; Populism, Polarization

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Ideological asymmetry in political communication refers to the phenomenon where different ideological groups—particularly distinct right-wing or left-wing factions—exhibit varied biases and vulnerabilities when engaging with political content. This asymmetry is evident in the heightened susceptibility of certain groups to disinformation and populist narratives, influenced by psychological predispositions and strategic targeting of these groups on social media platforms. Social media platforms further exacerbate this asymmetry by connecting like-minded individuals, creating echo chambers that amplify biased perspectives and tailor political discourse to specific ideological leanings. These platforms not only host episodic campaign-driven content but also foster a continuous, pervasive style of communication that shapes daily political engagement. By leveraging algorithms that promote content resonance, social media may intensify ideological divides, making the selective exposure more pronounced among different ideological groups. In addition, populist actors may exploit the predispositions of particular groups by emphasizing 'us vs. them' narratives that resonate strongly with the said ideological groups, further deepening ideological divide between them.

Conversely, ideological symmetry refers to the shared cognitive processes across different political groups, such as the universal tendencies towards confirmation bias and motivated reasoning. Regardless of ideological stance, individuals are inclined to seek, interpret, and remember information that supports their pre-existing beliefs. Both alternative and mainstream media exploit these cognitive biases through similar mechanisms, utilizing emotionally charged content that appeals broadly, thus reflecting symmetry in the basic human propensity to align new information with existing beliefs. Social media platforms contribute to this symmetry by structuring their algorithms to engage users with content that matches their ideological preferences, thereby reinforcing universal patterns of selective exposure.

Disinformation Dynamics in Ideological Contexts

The concept of ideological asymmetry in political communication offers insights into why different political groups might react differently to disinformation. First, research indicates that conservatives might be more vulnerable to disinformation, a trend potentially linked to psychological predispositions that intertwine with ideological beliefs and cognitive biases (Baptista & Gradim, 2022). For example, in the US, studies reveal that conservatives have shown

greater susceptibility to disinformation, which could also be influenced by the prevalence of disinformation tailored to right-wing audiences (Guess et al., 2018).

The strategic targeting and customization of disinformation campaigns that resonate with conservative ideologies are significant, particularly in their effectiveness at exploiting selective exposure. This heightened susceptibility among conservatives is not just a product of cognitive biases but also reflects the strategic use of social media and digital platforms by right-wing groups.

Secondly, the theory of motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990) suggests that individuals are inclined to align new information with their existing beliefs, thereby accepting disinformation that corroborates their ideologies (Szebeni et al., 2021). Coupled with the principle of selective exposure—where individuals prefer information that confirms their beliefs and avoid contrary information—this creates a significant ideological skew in how information is processed (Stroud, 2008).

Building on this, the third explanation, the Identity-based Model of Political Belief (Van Bavel & Pereira, 2018) extends our understanding of ideological asymmetry. The model proposes that individuals are not only motivated to accept misinformation that aligns with their partisan identities but that this tendency is uneven across the political spectrum, thus significantly shaping political beliefs and contributing to asymmetry in misinformation acceptance. Studies supporting this model (e.g., Sternisko et al. 2023), illustrate how differing strength and type of partisan identities can lead to varying degrees of susceptibility to misinformation. By highlighting that people with extreme partisan views—whether left or right—may be more likely to accept information that supports their ideological stances, we can see how asymmetries emerge based on the intensity and nature of those partisan identities.

The Role of Social Media in Shaping Ideological Discourse

Social media platforms are not merely channels of communication; they are dynamic arenas for ideological battles. These platforms enable politicians to deliver highly targeted messages that resonate with specific ideological factions, which fosters potent echo chambers that not only

reinforce existing biases but also enhance the spread of disinformation. These echo chambers illustrate how social media can amplify a wide range of political voices, ensuring that even the most niche viewpoints have the opportunity to be heard and resonate within their communities.

Strategic targeting and customized disinformation campaigns are particularly effective within conservative circles, exploiting their heightened susceptibility to selective exposure. This vulnerability among conservatives is not solely due to cognitive biases; it is also a calculated effect of social media manipulation by right-wing groups. Recent studies, such as Shin (2020), highlight the asymmetric pattern of selective exposure, where conservatives and liberals exhibit different tendencies in their media consumption behaviors. This differential engagement suggests that tailored disinformation can be more effectively planted and spread within conservative circles, particularly when it aligns with the pre-existing biases that these platforms amplify. This strategic use of media is significant at least in the Western context, where platforms like YouTube and TikTok have become crucial for engaging far-right audiences who may not interact as much with traditional media. Additionally, politicians are exploring new platforms like Twitch, traditionally associated with gaming, to connect with younger and more niche audiences. This demonstrates the strategic adaptability of social media in political engagement, particularly highlighting social media's role in amplifying right-wing narratives.

Simultaneously, the social media platforms foster symmetry by allowing like-minded individuals, regardless of how marginal or niche their views might be, to find each other and engage without traditional editorial filters. This capability is crucial in fostering ideological symmetry, as these platforms use algorithms to tailor content to individual preferences, reinforcing users' existing beliefs while providing a space for diverse ideological expressions that differ from mainstream media views (Bail et al., 2018). In these environments, social media platforms do not just perpetuate existing views but actively shape the political discourse and serve as a fertile ground for ideological engagement.

On social media platforms all users, irrespective of their political leanings, experience a similar pattern of content engagement. Social media algorithms are designed to present users with content that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs (Cinelli et al., 2021), thus reinforcing universal

cognitive biases like confirmation bias and motivated reasoning. This mechanism ensures that every ideological group is equally empowered to amplify its narrative and engage with content that resonates with its members' views. Furthermore, the role of social media in political communication extends beyond simply reinforcing existing beliefs. By allowing diverse ideological expressions and facilitating connections among ideologically aligned individuals, social media platforms contribute to a broader symmetry in political engagement. This symmetry reflects in how different political groups utilize digital spaces to foster community, share content, and mobilize support, highlighting the balanced impact of social media across the political spectrum.

Populism and ideological asymmetry

Populism, when combined with the rapidly evolving social media landscape and the deepening of affective polarization, creates a fertile ground for ideological asymmetry. Affective polarization, defined as the intensification of political attitudes and an increased aversion to opposing parties, strengthens partisan identities. This intensification promotes the acceptance of disinformation and conspiracy theories that align with one's political views, while simultaneously rejecting conflicting information (Iyengar et al., 2019). The interplay between these heightened partisan identities and the diverse landscape of online platforms adds significant complexity to the ideological asymmetry observed in political communication.

Moreover, the role of populism in this context is crucial. Populists often capitalize on affective polarization by framing political discourse in terms of 'us vs. them'. This narrative strategy effectively exploits existing divisions and resonates strongly on social media, where emotional and divisive content is more likely to be engaged with and shared. As a result, populist leaders and movements can more easily spread their messages, leveraging the personalized nature of social media feeds to reach and mobilize supporters who are already primed by their digital environments to receive such messages. The synergy between populism and the tailored algorithms of social media platforms, thus, not only sustains but deepens ideological asymmetry, creating a more fragmented and polarized political landscape.

Populist communication relies heavily on emotional engagement and sensational content (Hopster, 2021) rather than only factual discourse. Affective framing and the use of vivid, emotive language are designed to resonate with specific ideological biases, amplifying the intended political messages (Grabe & Bucy, 2009). In social media, viral sensational claims, real time conversation and being able to measure engagement, which enforces the illusion of “general will”, (Hopster, 2021) favor populist politicians’ appeal to their supporters and deepen ideological divides in a society. These tactics demonstrate ideological symmetry because they tap into a broad preference for emotionally charged content across the political spectrum. The symmetric aspect of these strategies is reflected in their universal application by political actors from different ideological backgrounds. Populist leaders employ these methods not because they align with a specific political ideology, but because they effectively engage and mobilize support through emotional resonance.

However, as political communication increasingly adopts (audio-)visual forms, paralleling the evolution of social media, these visual strategies highlight the ideological asymmetries within populism. Moffitt's study (2022) indicates that there are significant differences in the visual representation of “the people” between populists of different ideologies. Comparing the Instagram profiles of former president of the United States Donald Trump, a right-wing populist, and senator Bernie Sanders, a left-wing populist, Moffitt's research reveals that Trump's images of "the people" are more homogeneous across gender, race, and age. In contrast, Sanders' representations are more diverse, suggesting an asymmetrical ideological representation. This variation in visual representation further underscores the nuances of ideological (a)symmetry, illustrating how different ideologies can manifest through the platforms and medium of communication chosen, reinforcing the evolving nature and complexity of this political communication concept.

This encyclopedia entry underscores the pervasive impact of ideological asymmetry in political communication, highlighting how biases, digital media strategies, and partisan identities collectively shape the political landscape. Through the mechanisms of disinformation dynamics, motivated reasoning, and selective exposure, political entities and social media platforms craft messages that resonate with specific ideological groups, thereby intensifying political and

affective polarization and reinforcing echo chambers. The synergy between populism and digital customization further deepens these divides, making ideological asymmetry a fundamental, though complex, facet of modern political discourse.

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