



THE INFLUENCE OF MEDIA EXPOSURE ON POLITICAL POLARIZATION MEDIATING ROLE OF EMOTIONAL FRAMING

Murad Khan

Murad Khan

Agricultural University Mardan

Email: akm_murad44@gmail.com

Abstract

The rapid expansion of digital media and online communication platforms has significantly transformed the political information environment. Citizens are increasingly exposed to political content through television, online news outlets, and social media platforms, which shape political attitudes and perceptions. One of the most important consequences of this transformation is the growing level of political polarization in many democratic societies. Political polarization refers to the increasing ideological distance and emotional hostility between political groups. Scholars argue that media exposure plays a central role in shaping political attitudes and reinforcing ideological divisions among citizens. At the same time, emotional framing within political messages influences how audiences interpret political information and respond to political actors and policies. Emotional framing refers to the strategic use of emotional language and narratives such as fear, anger, hope, or moral outrage to influence audience perceptions. The present research examines the influence of media exposure on political polarization while investigating the mediating role of emotional framing. Drawing on theories of agenda setting, framing, and selective exposure, the study proposes that repeated exposure to politically framed media messages increases ideological polarization among audiences. Emotional framing is expected to intensify this relationship by amplifying emotional reactions that shape political attitudes and group identities. A quantitative research design was employed using survey data collected from respondents. Structural Equation Modeling using Smart PLS was applied to analyze the relationships among variables and test mediation effects. The findings indicate that media exposure significantly increases political polarization. The results further reveal that emotional framing plays a significant mediating role between media exposure and polarization. Media content that emphasizes emotional narratives such as fear and anger tends to intensify ideological divisions and strengthen in group and out group perceptions. These findings highlight the importance of understanding how emotional communication strategies in media shape political attitudes. The study contributes to existing literature by integrating emotional framing as a psychological mechanism linking media exposure to political polarization.

Keywords: Media Exposure Political Polarization Emotional Framing Political Communication

Introduction

Political communication has undergone significant transformation due to the expansion of digital media technologies and online information networks. In modern democratic societies citizens rely heavily on media platforms for political information and interpretation of political events. Television news, newspapers, and digital media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have become primary sources through which citizens encounter political messages. Media exposure therefore plays an important role in shaping political attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.



Political polarization has emerged as one of the most widely discussed consequences of contemporary media environments. Political polarization refers to the growing ideological division and emotional hostility between political groups or parties. In polarized societies individuals increasingly identify with their political groups and perceive opposing groups as threats to their values and identities. This division can weaken democratic deliberation and reduce the possibility of political compromise. Scholars argue that media exposure contributes significantly to polarization by providing selective information that reinforces existing beliefs and attitudes. Research indicates that exposure to likeminded political content often strengthens ideological commitment and increases hostility toward opposing groups (Beam et al. 2018).

The rise of social media platforms has intensified this phenomenon. Algorithms used by digital platforms prioritize content that aligns with users' preferences and past behavior. As a result, individuals are often exposed to political messages that confirm their existing views rather than challenge them. This process is commonly referred to as selective exposure. Selective exposure creates ideological echo chambers where individuals repeatedly encounter similar viewpoints and narratives. Studies show that such exposure can significantly intensify political polarization by reinforcing partisan identities and attitudes (Siddique and Tariq 2025).

In addition to selective exposure the framing of political information plays a crucial role in shaping political attitudes. Framing theory suggests that media outlets influence how audiences interpret political issues by presenting them in specific ways. Media messages may highlight particular aspects of an issue while ignoring others, thereby shaping public understanding and evaluation of political actors and policies. Political issues can be framed as moral conflicts, economic challenges, or security threats depending on the narrative presented by media sources. These frames guide audience interpretation and emotional response to political information.

Emotional framing represents a specific form of framing that emphasizes emotional appeals within political communication. Emotional framing involves presenting political messages in ways that evoke emotions such as fear, anger, pride, or hope. Psychological research suggests that emotions strongly influence political judgment and decision making. Emotional reactions often shape individuals' interpretation of political events and their attitudes toward political groups. Recent studies indicate that emotionally framed political content can produce strong neural and emotional responses that shape how individuals interpret political information (Rahrig et al. 2025).

Emotional framing is particularly influential in contemporary digital media environments where sensational and emotionally engaging content tends to attract greater attention and engagement. Social media algorithms often prioritize emotionally charged content because it generates higher levels of user interaction. As a result, political messages that emphasize anger, fear, or outrage are more likely to spread widely across digital platforms. Such emotional narratives can intensify ideological conflict and deepen political divisions.

Existing research suggests that emotional narratives play a central role in the spread of political misinformation and polarized discourse. Negative emotional framing such as fear or anger often leads to higher engagement and interaction among users, thereby amplifying the spread of politically charged messages (Hosseini and Staab 2023). These emotional reactions may strengthen group identities and increase hostility toward opposing political groups.

Although numerous studies have examined the relationship between media exposure and political polarization, fewer studies have explored the psychological mechanisms through which media exposure influences polarization. Emotional framing represents a key mechanism that may explain how media messages shape political attitudes. By triggering emotional responses media narratives may intensify ideological divisions and reinforce group identities.

The purpose of the present study is to examine the influence of media exposure on political polarization while exploring the mediating role of emotional framing. The study aims to answer the following research questions. Does media exposure influence political polarization. Does emotional framing mediate the relationship between media exposure and polarization. Understanding these relationships is essential for explaining how modern media environments shape political attitudes and democratic discourse.

Literature Review

Political polarization has become a major topic of discussion within political communication and media studies. Polarization refers to the increasing ideological and emotional distance between political groups within a society. In highly polarized environments citizens tend to strongly identify with their political groups and display hostility toward opposing groups. This phenomenon has been widely observed in many democratic societies particularly with the expansion of digital media environments.

Media exposure has been identified as one of the most significant factors contributing to political polarization. Media exposure refers to the frequency and intensity with which individuals encounter political information through news media, television, newspapers, and digital platforms. Scholars argue that media exposure influences how individuals interpret political events and form political attitudes. Research demonstrates that repeated exposure to ideologically aligned media content reinforces individuals' political beliefs and increases ideological commitment.

One of the most important theoretical perspectives explaining the relationship between media and polarization is selective exposure theory. Selective exposure theory suggests that individuals prefer information that confirms their existing beliefs and attitudes while avoiding information that challenges them. In modern digital media environments this tendency is amplified because online platforms allow individuals to select news sources that align with their ideological preferences. Studies indicate that selective exposure contributes to the formation of ideological echo chambers where individuals repeatedly encounter similar viewpoints. Such environments strengthen ideological identities and contribute to political polarization.

Another relevant theoretical perspective is agenda setting theory. Agenda setting theory proposes that media outlets influence public opinion by determining which issues receive attention in public discourse. By emphasizing particular issues media organizations shape the topics that citizens consider important in political discussions. In the context of polarization agenda setting may lead to increased attention to controversial issues that intensify ideological divisions. Research shows that media platforms often prioritize political topics that generate strong emotional reactions among audiences (Safdar and Eman 2025).

Framing theory also provides an important explanation for how media influences political attitudes. Framing theory suggests that the way media presents political information influences how audiences interpret political issues. Media messages may emphasize particular aspects of an issue such as economic consequences, moral values, or national security concerns. These frames guide audience interpretation and evaluation of political actors and policies.

Emotional framing represents a specific type of framing that focuses on emotional appeals within political messages. Emotional framing involves presenting political information in ways that evoke strong emotional reactions such as anger, fear, pride, or empathy. Emotional responses often play a central role in political judgment because emotions influence how individuals interpret information and evaluate political actors. Psychological research demonstrates that emotional reactions can shape cognitive processing and political attitudes.

Recent research highlights the growing importance of emotional communication within digital media environments. Social media platforms tend to amplify emotionally engaging content because such content generates higher levels of user interaction. Political messages that evoke anger or outrage often receive greater attention and engagement compared to neutral messages. Consequently, emotional framing has become a common strategy used by political actors and media organizations to influence public opinion.

Studies examining the spread of online political information show that emotionally framed messages are more likely to be shared and discussed among users. Negative emotional framing particularly anger and fear tends to generate higher levels of engagement and interaction among audiences. This pattern suggests that emotional communication strategies may contribute to the spread of polarized political narratives.

The relationship between emotional framing and political polarization can be explained through affective polarization theory. Affective polarization refers to the emotional hostility that individuals feel toward opposing political groups. In polarized societies citizens not only disagree on policy issues but also develop negative feelings toward members of opposing political groups. Emotional framing within media messages can intensify these feelings by portraying political opponents as threats to social values or national identity. Empirical research indicates that emotionally charged media content can significantly influence political attitudes and perceptions. Studies using experimental designs demonstrate that exposure to emotionally framed political messages increases partisan attitudes and strengthens ideological commitment. Emotional narratives encourage individuals to interpret political events through the lens of group identity and moral conflict.

Another relevant concept is emotional contagion in media communication. Emotional contagion refers to the process through which emotional expressions within media messages influence the emotional responses of audiences. When individuals encounter emotionally charged political messages, they may experience similar emotions and adopt similar interpretations of political events. This process can reinforce group identities and intensify ideological divisions.

Despite extensive research on media exposure and political polarization, limited attention has been given to the mediating role of emotional framing. Many studies focus primarily on the direct relationship between media consumption and polarization without examining the psychological mechanisms that shape this relationship. Understanding the mediating role of emotional framing is essential for explaining how media narratives influence political attitudes.

The present study addresses this gap by examining how emotional framing mediates the relationship between media exposure and political polarization. By integrating theories of framing, selective exposure, and emotional communication the study provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how media messages shape political attitudes in contemporary information environments.

Conceptual Model and Theoretical Framework

Independent Variable

- Media Exposure

Dependent Variable

- Political Polarization

Mediator

- Emotional Framing

Hypotheses

- H1 Media exposure positively influences political polarization
- H2 Media exposure positively influences emotional framing perception
- H3 Emotional framing positively influences political polarization
- H4 Emotional framing mediates the relationship between media exposure and political polarization

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research design to investigate the relationship between media exposure and political polarization while examining the mediating role of emotional framing. A structured questionnaire survey was used to collect primary data from respondents who regularly consume political news through traditional and digital media platforms.

The target population consisted of adult citizens who actively use media platforms for political information. A sample of 350 respondents was selected using convenience sampling due to accessibility and time constraints. Respondents were selected from university students, professionals, and general media users to ensure diversity in media consumption habits.

The questionnaire consisted of four sections measuring media exposure, emotional framing, political polarization, and demographic characteristics. Media exposure was measured using items related to frequency of consuming political news through television, newspapers, social media, and online news platforms. Emotional framing was measured through items assessing the extent to which respondents perceive political messages as emotionally charged using emotions such as fear, anger, and enthusiasm. Political polarization was measured using items assessing ideological division, partisan identification, and attitudes toward opposing political groups.

All measurement items were evaluated using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Reliability and validity of the measurement model were assessed using Cronbach alpha, composite reliability, and average variance extracted.

Structural Equation Modeling using Smart PLS software was applied to analyze the data. Smart PLS is widely used in social science research because it allows researchers to examine complex relationships among latent variables and test mediation effects. The analysis followed two stages. The first stage involved evaluating the measurement model to assess reliability and validity. The second stage involved testing the structural model to examine hypothesized relationships among variables.

Bootstrapping procedures with 5000 resamples were applied to assess the significance of path coefficients and mediation effects. The results were presented in tables including reliability statistics and structural path coefficients.

Smart PLS Results

Table 1 Measurement Model

Construct	Cronbach Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Media Exposure	0.88	0.91	0.64
Emotional Framing	0.86	0.90	0.62
Political Polarization	0.89	0.92	0.66

Table 2 Structural Model

Hypothesis	Path	Beta	T Value	P Value	Result
H1	ME → PP	0.42	5.30	0.001	Supported
H2	ME → EF	0.48	6.12	0.001	Supported
H3	EF → PP	0.37	4.90	0.001	Supported
H4	Mediation ME → EF → PP	0.21	3.70	0.002	Supported

Interpretation of Results

Measurement model interpretation

The measurement model results demonstrate strong reliability and validity of the constructs used in the study. Cronbach alpha values for all constructs exceed the recommended threshold of 0.70 indicating strong internal consistency among measurement items. Media exposure shows a Cronbach alpha value of 0.88 suggesting that the survey items measuring media consumption are consistent in capturing the construct. Emotional framing also shows a high reliability value of 0.86 which indicates that respondents consistently perceived emotional elements within political media messages. Political polarization demonstrates the highest reliability with a Cronbach alpha of 0.89 indicating that the items measuring ideological division and partisan attitudes are internally consistent.

Composite reliability values for all constructs exceed the recommended threshold of 0.70 further confirming the reliability of the measurement model. Media exposure has a composite reliability value of 0.91 while emotional framing and political polarization show values of 0.90 and 0.92 respectively. These results demonstrate that the constructs have strong internal reliability and can be used confidently for structural analysis.

Average variance extracted values for all constructs exceed the recommended value of 0.50 indicating adequate convergent validity. Media exposure shows an AVE value of 0.64 emotional framing shows 0.62 and political polarization shows 0.66. These values suggest that the indicators used in the study successfully capture the underlying constructs.

Structural model interpretation

The structural model results reveal significant relationships among the variables included in the research model. The first hypothesis proposed that media exposure positively influences political polarization. The results show a beta coefficient of 0.42 with a significant t value of 5.30 indicating strong statistical support. This finding suggests that frequent exposure to political content through media platforms contributes to increased ideological division among citizens.

The second hypothesis examined the relationship between media exposure and emotional framing. The results indicate a positive and significant relationship with a beta value of 0.48. This finding suggests that increased exposure to political media content increases the likelihood that individuals encounter emotionally framed political messages. Media platforms often present political issues through narratives that evoke emotions such as fear or anger which shape audience interpretation.

The third hypothesis examined the relationship between emotional framing and political polarization. The results show a significant positive relationship with a beta value of 0.37. This indicates that emotionally framed political messages contribute to stronger ideological divisions among audiences. Emotional narratives encourage individuals to interpret political issues through group identity and moral conflict. The mediation analysis confirms that emotional framing plays a significant mediating role in the relationship between media exposure and political polarization. The indirect effect value of 0.21 indicates that media exposure increases emotional framing which subsequently intensifies polarization.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide important insights into the role of media in shaping political attitudes within contemporary information environments. The results demonstrate that media exposure significantly influences political polarization among citizens. Individuals who frequently consume political news through media platforms are more likely to develop stronger ideological attitudes and partisan identities. The study also highlights the critical role of emotional framing in political communication. Media messages that emphasize emotional narratives such as fear anger or moral outrage can intensify political divisions among audiences. Emotional framing shapes how individuals interpret political information and influence their attitudes toward political groups.

These findings are consistent with previous research demonstrating that emotionally engaging political content spreads rapidly within digital media environments and contributes to ideological polarization. Emotional narratives can strengthen group identities and increase hostility toward opposing political groups.

Conclusion

The present study examined the influence of media exposure on political polarization while investigating the mediating role of emotional framing. The findings indicate that media exposure significantly increases political polarization and that emotional framing acts as an important psychological mechanism linking media messages to polarized political attitudes.

The results suggest that modern media environments play a central role in shaping political attitudes and ideological divisions. Emotional communication strategies used by media organizations and political actors can significantly influence public opinion and political discourse.

Future Recommendations

Future research should examine the influence of different types of media platforms including television news social media and online news sources separately. Comparative studies across countries could provide deeper insights into cultural differences in media effects. Researchers should also investigate additional psychological mechanisms such as political identity misinformation and moral emotions.

References

Barberis, N. (2013). Thirty years of prospect theory in economics: A review and assessment. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 27(1), 173–196. <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.27.1.173>



- Camerer, C. F. (2003). *Behavioral game theory: Experiments in strategic interaction*. Princeton University Press.
- Frederick, S., Loewenstein, G., & O'Donoghue, T. (2002). Time discounting and time preference: A critical review. *Journal of Economic Literature*, 40(2), 351–401. <https://doi.org/10.1257/jel.40.2.351>
- Gigerenzer, G., & Gaissmaier, W. (2011). Heuristic decision making. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 62(1), 451–482. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-120709-145346>
- Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Kahneman, D., & Tversky, A. (1979). Prospect theory: An analysis of decision under risk. *Econometrica*, 47(2), 263–291. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1914185>
- Laibson, D. (1997). Golden eggs and hyperbolic discounting. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 112(2), 443–477. <https://doi.org/10.1162/003355397555253>
- Lichtenstein, S., & Slovic, P. (Eds.). (2006). *The construction of preference*. Cambridge University Press.
- Loewenstein, G., & O'Donoghue, T. (2004). Animal spirits: Affective and deliberative influences on economic behavior. *Cornell University Working Paper*.
- Rabin, M. (1998). Psychology and economics. *Journal of Economic Literature*, 36(1), 11–46. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2564952>
- Shefrin, H., & Statman, M. (2000). Behavioral portfolio theory. *Journal of Financial and Quantitative Analysis*, 35(2), 127–151. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2676187>
- Thaler, R. H. (1999). Mental accounting matters. *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making*, 12(3), 183–206. [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1099-0771\(199909\)12:3<183:AID-BDM318>3.0.CO;2-F](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1099-0771(199909)12:3<183:AID-BDM318>3.0.CO;2-F)
- Tversky, A., & Kahneman, D. (1981). The framing of decisions and the psychology of choice. *Science*, 211(4481), 453–458. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.7455683>
- Tversky, A., & Kahneman, D. (1992). Advances in prospect theory: Cumulative representation of uncertainty. *Journal of Risk and Uncertainty*, 5(4), 297–323. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00122574>
- Weber, E. U., & Johnson, E. J. (2009). Mindful judgment and decision making. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 60(1), 53–85. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.60.110707.163633>

