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Political Events in a Partisan Media Ecology: Asymmetric Influence on Candidate Appraisals

Jiyoun Suk [a], Dhavan V. Shah[b], Leticia Bode [c], Stephanie Edgerly [d], Kjerstin Thorson [e], Emily Vraga [f], Chris Wells[g], and Jon Pevehouse[h]

aDepartment of Communication, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, USA; bSchool of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI, USA; cCommunication, Culture, and Technology Program, Georgetown University, Washington, DC, USA; dMedill School of Journalism, Media, and Integrated Marketing Communications, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, USA; eDepartment of Advertising and Public Relations, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, USA; fHubbard School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, USA; gEmerging Media Studies, Boston University, Boston, MA, USA; hDepartment of Political Science, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI, USA

ABSTRACT

Political campaigns often feature jarring revelations against candidates. This study examines how audiences come to understand major campaign events, the extent to which they shape evaluations of candidates, and how their impact is filtered through an increasingly partisan news media environment. Using national rolling cross-sectional survey data collected over the 2016 U.S. presidential election period, we show partisan asymmetries in the way major campaign events influenced candidate appraisals. Event effects during the 2016 campaign were dependent on various media use patterns and concentrated among Independents. In particular, the reopening of the investigation into Clinton's email server by James Comey reduced her favorability, especially when paired with liberal and conservative partisan media use. By providing a nuanced picture of partisan selective exposure and campaign effects, our findings reinforce that the role of campaigns in candidate appraisals should be understood at the intersection of media use, partisanship, and specific events during a contentious race.

Analysts seeking to disentangle the array of factors that shaped support for Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton during the 2016 U.S. election have noted the possible role of several key political events, some very late in the campaign.

However, evidence has proven "frustratingly inconclusive" due to the challenges of distinguishing event effects from partisan preferences and media consumption patterns intertwined with candidate appraisals (Cohn, 2018). While partisanship is paramount in election outcomes, there is good evidence that idiosyncratic political events have meaningful effects. This article examines how unexpected political events relate to the basis of candidate support—feeling thermometer ratings and supporters' vote certainty—within the polarized media environment of the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

Two moments during the election loom large: the early October release of the Access Hollywood video revealing Trump's lewd conversation about women (the same day, coincidentally or not, WikiLeaks released John Podesta's hacked emails) and the announcement, in late October, of the reopening of the Clinton email server investigation by FBI Director James Comey. In the shifting media landscape, including the growth of partisan content and hybrid formats, we propose that candidate appraisals are intertwined with media consumption patterns, including partisan media, social media, legacy national and local news media. These relationships, therefore, must be considered when examining how major political events are related to candidate appraisals. In doing so, we also consider the possibility of partisan asymmetries in the role of campaign events and media use on candidate appraisals and enthusiasm for participation in the election (Grossman & Hopkins, 2016).

To understand these questions, we use national rolling cross-section survey data collected throughout the 2016 U.S. election period. We first document the relationship of demographic characteristics, partisanship, and a range of media use on candidate evaluations and vote certainty to examine partisan audiences' tendency to align their candidate support with their viewing preferences. After accounting for individual differences, we investigate the role of political events during the campaign and consider whether the impact of events on candidate appraisals depends on media use patterns. Our findings suggest a remarkable asymmetry between partisan groups, both in terms of the strength of the relationship of media use with candidate appraisals and the strength of event effects. We provide a nuanced picture of partisan selective exposure and campaign effects, calling for scholarly attention to the potential of differential effects on voter attitudes and behaviors.

Political events and the role of media use

The longstanding debate over whether campaign events like debates and scandals "matter" for determining election results has shifted to a discussion over when, why, and for whom campaigns hold sway (Jacobson, 2015). That is, while partisanship dominates vote choice (Jacobson, 2015), studies show that political events are persuasive in several ways: There is a cognitive dimension of

providing accessible information to help evaluate candidates (Iyengar & Simon, 2000), thus "enlightening" otherwise uninformed voters (Gelman & King, 1993), and a behavioral dimension of driving turnout and shaping vote choice.

Campaign literature provides insights into the duration of such political information during campaigns. Studies find that people spend little effort in processing political information and forget what they learn quickly (Bartels, 2014; Hill et al., 2013); that is, candidate appraisals tend to be memory-based and driven by accessible information (Zaller, 1992) rather than the effortful process of updating candidate evaluations after each message. This may explain the impermanence of political information; most political events, including debates and scandals, have immediate, fleeting effects on candidate preference (Vonnahme, 2014). Similarly, aggregate-level analysis of political advertising effect generally demonstrates rapid decay rate (Bartels, 2014; Hill et al., 2013), suggesting the transience of campaign information.

This ephemeral nature, however, does not indicate a lack of significance. Generally, a candidate's involvement in a scandalous event results in immediate, unfavorable evaluations (e.g., Sikorski et al., 2020). Studies also show that partisan preferences lay the groundwork for campaign effects: Hillygus and Jackman (2003) find that Independents and undecided voters are particularly susceptible, as are mismatched partisans who support the opposing candidate. At the same time, it is noteworthy that while candidate evaluations are a significant precondition for the voting outcome, scholars have noted that attitudes toward candidates do not always directly convert to vote choice (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993), complicating the picture of campaign effects.

One important factor to consider in this discussion is the role of media. Individuals learn about campaign events from media, with selective media coverage shaping candidate appraisals by reinforcing certain facts and frames, albeit with limited durability (Shaw, 1999). For example, approval of President Bill Clinton after the Monica Lewinsky scandal was largely a function of the interplay of contrasting conservative and liberal framing of impeachment (Shah et al., 2002). Along these same lines, in an aggregate-level analysis of the 1992 and 1996 U.S. presidential election, favorable television coverage of Democratic events decreased Republican vote share while that of Republican events boosted it (Shaw, 1999).

As such, media not only have the potential to shape candidate evaluation and vote choice but also shape how events are interpreted by amplifying their visibility. Undertheorizing news media's role as an unequal amplifier of campaign events on the right and left was more tenable when the media environment was dominated by a few large outlets that maintained journalistic norms of balance in their election reporting, yielding an absence of strong partisan cues in political news content. This is no longer the case in an increasing partisan media environment.

The media environment and partisan asymmetry

Contemporary elections exist in a highly partisan media landscape. The growth of partisan outlets, coupled with audience selectivity and self-sorting, has drawn some people into message flows that align with their political predispositions (Edgerly, 2015). In the hybrid media environment, the merging of political information into entertainment formats like news satire (Young, 2019) and right-wing talk radio (Friedland et al., 2022) has broadened the sources on which people rely for ideologically inflected political news to form attitudes and gain knowledge.

Research reveals an imbalance of political coverage among different partisan news outlets, fragmenting coverage to correspond to partisan media's political leaning (Chan & Lee, 2014). By highlighting specific events or issues, partisan media create "a coherent liberal or conservative vision of the news" (Levendusky, 2013, p. 612). Partisan media are more likely to deliver coverage favorable to their candidate, presenting horse-race and poll coverage favorable to in-party candidates and unfavorable for out-party candidates (Searles et al., 2018), emphasizing more positive attributes of in-party candidates (Hyun & Moon, 2016), and featuring frames favorable to the in-party over the out-party (Aday, 2010).

Such slanted coverage by partisan media can further fragment understandings of candidates or evaluations of issues. For example, evidence shows that Fox News viewers were more likely than MSNBC viewers to perceive terrorism as the most important national issue (Stroud, 2011) and to believe that the war in Iraq was worthwhile (Muddiman et al., 2014). Exposure to different partisan media also resulted in a separate agenda-setting process regarding candidate evaluations (Camaj, 2019; Hyun & Moon, 2016). This is because like-minded partisan media heighten party identities by providing emotional, ideologically palatable arguments (Baum & Groeling, 2008; Berry & Sobieraj, 2014; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Slater, 2015), further polarizing those who are already partisans (Levendusky, 2013). Ideologically, like-minded content from partisan news sources thus contributes to increased support and votes toward a particular party or candidate and brings partisans in line with their preexisting orientations (Dilliplane, 2014; Smith & Searles, 2014; Stroud, 2011).

Despite the selective exposure tendency, it is also common to encounter both sides of the political spectrum, either intentionally or unintentionally. On the one hand, exposure to counter-attitudinal partisan media may reinforce preexisting predispositions due to motivated reasoning to counterargue (Leeper & Slothuus, 2014; Taber & Lodge, 2006). People evaluate media content relative to their own opinions, such that they perceive partisan sources in line with their viewpoints as more credible, fair, and balanced than other sources (Edgerly et al., 2020; Feldman, 2011). On the

other hand, some evidence shows that counter-partisan media can have a strong effect on converting candidate preferences (Dilliplane, 2014), motivating partisans to reconsider their vote inclinations. As such, evidence on counter-attitudinal media exposure has produced somewhat mixed findings.

Research also provides insights into the asymmetry of how the two parties operate and interact with news media; Grossman and Hopkins (2016) note that the Democratic Party relies on issue-based interest groups, whereas the Republican Party has operated as a political vehicle of an ideological movement. This difference has allowed the Republican Party to build a core conservative media infrastructure, whose agenda has included undermining trust in the mainstream media and other news sources. In contrast, the Democratic Party relies on multiple media sources that reflect the interests of various issue-based groups. This leads to a polarized, asymmetric trust in media among partisans: Republicans trust Fox News, Breitbart, and other conservative outlets; Democrats trust a larger variety of centrist and liberal sources (Jurkowitz et al., 2020).

In a sense, partisans can differ in their receptivity to media sources. Political psychology literature shows that conservatives exhibit a greater tendency for ideological confirmation and cognitive stability than liberals (e.g., Boutyline & Willer, 2017). In an experiment, Republicans showed a stronger selective avoidance tendency toward counter-attitudinal stories, whereas Democrats gravitated more toward selective exposure to pro-attitudinal stories regardless of their counter-attitudinal content (Garrett & Stroud, 2014), suggesting a more aversive reaction of Republicans when encountering counter-attitudinal messages. In the current media landscape, in which counter-attitudinal media exposure is not uncommon (Nelson & Webster, 2017), receptivity to partisan media may shape understanding of major campaign events.

Besides partisans, persuadable Independents are an important group in campaigns. Compared to partisans who are politically aware and attached to political groups even in non-campaign periods, Independents tend to be more accepting of new information as they attend to the election, increasing the likelihood of influence by campaign events or messages (Shaw, 1999). Likewise, studies find that Independents were especially prone to converting prior attitudes during the campaign (Hillygus & Jackman, 2003) and showed high responsiveness to campaign events (Grant et al., 2010). Taken together, we expect to see heterogeneous impacts of media portrayals of major campaign events across partisan groups and Independents.

The picture is complicated by the fact that partisan content is widely circulated via social media. Egocentric networks in the online public sphere have expanded personal communities beyond social structures and physical boundaries (Rojas, 2015). With weaker, context-collapsed boundaries,

social media use often leads to exposure to political diversity. In a sense, how one's online social network is composed is an important contingency factor that determines the curated online information flows and opinion climate (Thorson & Wells, 2016). While partisans are active disseminators of political information (Weeks & Holbert, 2013), their online news sharing pattern is ideologically cloistered and fragmented, especially on the right. During the 2016 U.S. election, conservative news sources, anchored around Breitbart, were widely shared through right-wing social media networks, whereas a greater variety of sources—mainstream and left-leaning news— were circulated in liberal networks, another asymmetry in information sources and networks between the left and the right (Faris et al., 2017).

In this social media landscape, even attentive individuals are unlikely to learn about campaign issues from the same sources, let alone with the same frames or facts (Waisbord, 2018). Therefore, it is likely that one's socially curated information flows on social media will be dependent on the partisan composition of online social networks. It remains unclear how social media use within liberal and conservative networks shapes candidate support during controversial elections replete with campaign revelations.

The shifting partisanship of legacy and local news

Legacy media and local news have historically been understood as nonpartisan, though that is also changing. Legacy media—network television news and major newspapers—have avoided explicit partisan positions, and research has found little evidence of political bias in election coverage by mainstream legacy media (D'Alessio & Allen, 2000). However, claims of liberal media bias are routinely directed at mainstream outlets (Watts et al., 1999), and news commentary and opinion pieces within legacy and local news sources present strong partisan slants (Coppock et al., 2018). Studies suggest that public perception of ideological bias drives news use patterns (Morris, 2007) and that legacy media are no longer seen as a neutral arbiter of journalistic facts, but just another set of outlets along the partisan continuum.

Whatever the slant of their content, audiences for legacy news—e.g., *The New York Times* and CBS News—in 2016 were primarily Clinton supporters rather than Trump supporters, suggesting a left-leaning audience for legacy media (Faris et al., 2017). Many of these news sources were critical of Trump and highlighted his personal and professional failings. On balance, coverage of Clinton in these news outlets was less negative, though only marginally (Patterson, 2016). Trump's rhetoric attacking legacy news media as opposition forces likely pulled his supporters further from such outlets, which were perceived as aligned with the left.

The local TV news landscape has also grown more complex. As a key source of information for local communities, local broadcasters remain the most widely consumed news source (Shearer, 2018). Local TV news has been critiqued for its comparative lack of attention to local politics and campaigns, yet local TV news ranks among the most trusted news sources (Fowler & Ridout, 2009). However, recent evidence shows an increasing conservative slant of certain local TV stations, especially those owned by Sinclair Broadcast Group, covering 40% of American households with its nearly 200 stations (Martin & McCrain, 2019). Critics noted that conservative coverage through local stations intensified during the 2016 election (Gillette, 2017), with these affiliates highlighting information about Republican candidates and featuring conservative commentaries (Hedding et al., 2019).

The context of the 2016 U.S. presidential election

The 2016 U.S. election involved several idiosyncratic events that received considerable media attention: October 7 saw the release of both Trump's Access Hollywood Tape containing lewd sexual remarks and hacked emails from Clinton's campaign chairman, John Podesta. On October 28, FBI Director James Comey announced the reopening of the investigation into Clinton's use of a private email server. We propose that these events shape candidate evaluations, contingent on partisan preferences and sources through which voters learn about events. We look at two outcomes: (a) candidate feeling ratings and (b) supporters' vote certainty. Candidate evaluations may not correspond to vote certainty, especially in 2016 U.S. election.

The 2016 U.S. election exhibited unique patterns of news consumption and sharing, driven, in part, by partisan alignments and candidate support (Faris et al., 2017). As noted, partisan audiences prefer particular outlets, though most are not cloistered in echo chambers. Moreover, even when these outlets cover the same news events—which is not always the case—they may do so in different ways. In our study, we document how partisanship is aligned with media preferences before examining the impact of campaign events. We offer two general RQs:

RQ1: How will use of (a) partisan news, (b) partisan social media, (c) legacy news, and (d) local news be related to feeling thermometer ratings toward Clinton and Trump?

RQ2: How will use of (a) partisan news, (b) partisan social media, (c) legacy news, and (d) local news be related to vote certainty toward Clinton and Trump?

Then, we examine the role of events as filtered through media use on candidate evaluations and vote certainty, accounting for the relationship underlying partisan preferences for different types of media use and in-party candidates:

RQ3: Will the impact of campaign scandals—Access Hollywood Tape and Comey Letter—on feeling thermometer ratings toward Clinton and Trump be moderated by individuals' (a) partisan news, (b) partisan social media, (c) legacy news, and (d) local news use?

RQ4: Will the impact of campaign scandals—Access Hollywood Tape and Comey Letter—on vote certainty toward Clinton and Trump be moderated by individuals' (a) partisan news, (b) partisan social media, (c) legacy news, and (d) local news use?

Methods

We used a rolling cross-sectional survey collected from September 20 to November 7, 2016.[1] Our sample included about 100 respondents per day, using quota sampling from Qualtrics' online panel to approximate U.S. Census data regarding age, race, education, and income. Each day consisted of a new sample, resulting in a final sample of 4,901 respondents. This design allows us to observe general patterns of individual-level variables and help answer if and when candidate appraisals responded to major campaign events.

Measurement

Feeling thermometer ratings

Respondents evaluated their feelings toward Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump on a scale of 0 to 100 ($M = 44.96$, $SD = 37.37$ for Clinton; $M = 30.96$, $SD = 36.15$ for Trump).

Supporters' vote certainty

Respondents first answered their vote choice if the election were being held today. And, 51.9% of respondents answered that they would vote for Clinton, 32% for Trump, and the rest for other third-party candidates. Then they rated their chance of voting in November from 0 (*Definitely will not vote*) to 10 (*Definitely will vote*), which was dichotomized by recoding the 65% who said they *definitely will vote* (10) to 1 and all others

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[1]The study was approved by University of Wisconsin-Madison's institutional review board (IRB) on September 14, 2016.

to 0. We constructed a vote certainty variable for each candidate combining these two variables. For the final variable, Clinton supporters' vote certainty was created by coding 1 for those who supported Clinton and reported they would definitely vote (36% of respondents). Similarly, Trump supporters' vote certainty was created by coding 1 for those who supported Trump and expressed certainty that they would vote (22% of respondents). The value of 1 for the final variable, therefore, indicates the determination to vote among supporters. For more descriptions of the dependent variables—feeling ratings and vote certainty—see Supplementary Materials A.

Liberal media

Respondents answered the following question for a list of media sources: "Please indicate how often in the last week you've consumed content from each source." For the liberal media use, we averaged the frequency of consuming (a) MSNBC cable news programs (e.g., Rachel Maddow, Chris Matthews), (b) liberal political blogs (e.g., Daily Kos, Talking Points Memo), and (c) news satire (e.g., The Daily Show, Last Week Tonight with John Oliver), asked on a 5-point scale from *Never* (0) to *Very often* (4). (Cronbach's = .77, $M = .624$, $SD = .92$).

Conservative media

For conservative media, we averaged the frequency of consuming (a) Fox cable news programs (e.g., Bill O'Reilly, Sean Hannity), (b) conservative political blogs (e.g., Instapundit), and (c) conservative radio (e.g., Rush Limbaugh; all reported on a 5-point scale) during the past week (Cronbach's $\alpha = .78$, $M = .682$, $SD = .91$).

Social media use with partisan networks

Respondents first answered if they used Facebook and Twitter, then estimated partisan compositions (%)—*Democrats, Republicans, Independents*, or *Uninterested in politics*—of their Facebook friends and Twitter followings. The estimates for Democrats and Republicans for Facebook friends and Twitter followings were averaged. Responses for those who reported not using social media were recoded to 0. On average, respondents' estimate of having Democrats as friends/following on social media was 21.33% ($SD = 20.00$) and of having Republicans was 15.67% ($SD = 16.28$). To be specific, Democrats estimated, on average, that 28.5% of their social network contacts were Democrats, and 12.0% were Republicans. Republicans estimated 13.9% of their contacts to be Democrats, and 23.9% Republicans. Overall, this suggests that partisan social media users interacted more with

like-minded networks. Independents showed a comparable level of partisan estimates among their contacts: 14.3% Democrats and 12.7% Republicans.

Legacy news media

We averaged the frequency of using national broadcast news (e.g., CBS, ABC, or NBC) and national newspapers (e.g., *The New York Times*) during the past week on a 5-point scale (Spearman-Brown ρ = .44, M = 2.26, SD = 1.05).

Local news media

We also asked the frequency of watching local television news during the past week on a 5-point scale (M = 3.03, SD = 1.42).

Event measures

As discussed, literature has documented the transience of political events during the campaign. Following prior research (e.g., Weinschenk & Panagopoulos, 2018), to account for the immediate or short-lived nature of the events, we constructed an Event with Immediate Effect variable to reflect a singular effect on the day of the event that quickly dissipates in the following days (coded zero for the rest of the days).

Of course, the effects may not be restricted to the day of the event, but nonetheless decline over the subsequent days (e.g., Bartels, 2014; Hill et al., 2013). For example, Fan (1988) empirically tested the persuasive effects of information with exponential decay, using a one-day half-life across six different issues (see also Shah et al., 2002 for its application to a political campaign). Such decay rates are also well-documented in the psychology literature on memory retention (e.g., Rubin & Wenzel, 1996). Thus, we operationalize an Event with Decayed Effect with the maximum value on the day of the event and half-life of one day, decaying by 50% each day (see Supplementary Materials A for details).

Demographics

Gender (Female = 68%), age (M = 44), race/ethnicity (73.8% White), education level ($Mdn.$ = some college), household income ($Mdn.$ = $50,000–$74,999), and Party ID (1 = *Strong Democrat*; 7 = *Strong Republican*; M = 3.54, SD = 1.84) were asked. In our sample, 35.4% were Democrat (including strong identifiers), 19.5% Independents leaning Democrats, 19.5% pure Independent, 10.6% Independents leaning Republicans, and 19.4% Republican (including strong identifiers).

Analytic strategy

For our analysis, we first regress each dependent variable on individual-level predictors and daily dummy variables (for a similar approach, see Kosmidis, 2014; Matthews & Johnston, 2010), controlling for daily errors. This allows examination of the relationships of media sources with outcome variables as they exist within these daily cross-sections.

To observe relationships with events and candidate appraisals, we use the unexplained component from the first regression, i.e., the residual. We run a second regression on the residuals to estimate the effects of events above and beyond individual differences. For each event, we examine main effects along with their interactions with each media source. This provides a conservative test of event effects since unconditioned event effects should be controlled in the first model. We capture the conditional effects of events on the type of media consumption by modeling the residuals. That is, we consider the role of media sources in shaping responses to major events and how their interplay shapes candidate appraisals (see Supplementary Materials A for more). To summarize:

Step one:

$$
\begin{aligned}
Candidate\ Outcome_i = {} & \beta_0 + Age_i * \beta_1 + Female_i * \beta_2 + Black_i * \beta_3 \\
& + Hispanic_i * \beta_4 + Edu_i * \beta_5 + Income_i * \beta_6 \\
& + PartyID_i * \beta_7 + LiberalMedia_i * \beta_8 \\
& + ConservativeMedia_i * \beta_9 + LiberalSocialMedia_i \\
& * \beta_{10} + ConservativeSocialMedia_i * \beta_{11} \\
& + LegacyMedia_i * \beta_{12} + LocalMedia_i \\
& * \beta_{13} + DailyDummy1 - 48 * \beta_{14-62} + \varepsilon_i
\end{aligned}
$$

Step two:

$$
\begin{aligned}
\varepsilon_i = {} & \delta_0 + Media_i * \delta_1 + PoliticalEvent_i * \delta_2 \\
& + Media_i X PoliticalEvent_i * \delta_3 + \varepsilon_i'
\end{aligned}
$$

where each media type and two event measures are estimated separately. For vote certainty, which is a binary variable, we first use a logistic regression and fit the OLS regression of the resulting (Pearson) residual for the second step.

Results

For RQ1, we conducted a series of regression models predicting each candidate's feeling ratings. As shown in Table 1 (left panel), Democrats,

Women, Blacks, Hispanics, and more educated people showed positive Clinton feelings, whereas Republicans, men, non-Blacks, non-Hispanics, and less educated people had positive Trump feelings. Conservative media use was associated with higher Trump ratings and lower Clinton ratings, liberal media with higher Clinton ratings and lower Trump ratings. Social media use with more Republican networks was associated with higher Trump ratings, while social media use with more Democrat networks was tied to higher Clinton ratings and lower Trump ratings. Also notable, legacy media use was positively related to Clinton favorability and negatively to Trump favorability, and local news use was positively associated with Trump favorability, suggestive of partisan leanings in legacy and local media use, either due to audience selection behavior or partisan slant in coverage. These findings help establish partisan preferences in terms of news sources that can shape how audiences respond to events. See Supplementary Materials D for additional analyses with Net Feeling Rating.

The right panel of Table 1 presents logistic regression results predicting supporters' vote certainty for each candidate from the same set of independent variables, which answers RQ2. For conservative media, a unit increase was associated with a 323% increase in odds of Trump supporters' vote certainty while it decreased the odds of Clinton supporters' certainty by 60.3%. For liberal media, the odds of Clinton supporters' certainty

Table 1. Regressions predicting (a) feeling thermometer ratings and (b) supporters' vote certainty.

	(a) Feeling Thermometer				(b) Supporters' Vote Certainty			
	Clinton (N = 4867)		Trump (N = 4865)		Clinton (N = 4875)		Trump (N = 4875)	
	B	SE	B	SE	Odds Ratio	SE	Odds Ratio	SE
Age	.120***	.028	.185***	.029	1.017***	003	1.030***	.004
Female	2.056*	.815	−3.853***	.861	1.125	.102	.872	.095
Black	9.839***	1.227	−4.899***	1.296	1.500**	.183	.326***	.095
Hispanic	5.232***	1.273	−5.649***	1.345	1.116	.147	.752	.151
Education	1.373***	.305	−1.590***	.322	1.128***	.037	.867**	.037
Income	−.499	.315	−.400	.333	1.223***	.042	1.214***	.052
Party ID (high = Strong Republican)	−11.665***	.250	8.800***	.264	.439***	.014	2.428***	.092
Liberal media	6.365***	.611	−2.191**	.645	1.927***	.143	.394***	.041
Conservative media	−2.982***	.534	12.749***	.564	.397***	.029	3.231***	.281
Social media with Democrat network	.138***	.021	−.076***	.022	1.016***	.002	.997	.004
Social media with Republican network	−.022	.025	.202***	.026	.994	.003	1.014***	.003
Legacy media	2.652***	.521	−1.525**	.550	1.357***	.077	.823**	.061
Local media	.312	.318	1.263***	.336	1.013	.036	1.221***	.053

Daily dummy variables are included in the models but deleted for space.
*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

increased by a much more modest 92.7% and that of Trump supporters' certainty decreased by 60.6%. This parallels the asymmetry observed for candidate feeling ratings. Notably, a one-unit increase in the percentage of Democrats in social media network is expected to have about a 1.6% increase in the odds of Clinton supporters' vote certainty, whereas a one-unit increase in the percentage of Republicans in social media network corresponded to a 1.4% increase in the odds of Trump supporters' vote certainty. Each unit increase in legacy media use corresponded to a 36% increase in Clinton supporters' vote certainty and a 18% decrease in Trump supporters' vote certainty. A unit increase in local media use increased Trump supporters' certainty by 22% while not influencing Clinton supporters' certainty. These results also mirror the findings for legacy and local news on candidate ratings, further establishing partisan preferences for particular news sources during the height of the campaign.

To get a more precise picture of the relationships, we plotted the predicted probabilities of each media use on vote certainty, dependent on partisanship,[2] keeping all other variables at means. Higher liberal media use predicts higher probabilities of Clinton supporters' vote certainty across all partisans, compared to those with the lowest liberal media use (see Figure 1). Higher conservative media use is associated with higher probabilities of Trump supporters' vote certainty across all partisans (see Figure 2). We again observe asymmetries in the predictive power of partisan media use as they relate to candidate vote certainty. While strong Democrats who consume the smallest amount of liberal media still show a 63.8% probability of Clinton supporters' vote certainty, strong Republicans with the lowest level of conservative media use have only a 48.1% probability of Trump supporters' vote certainty. For out-party media use, strong Democrats with the highest conservative media use have a 33% probability of Trump supporters' vote certainty, while strong Republicans with the highest liberal media use have a 15% probability of Clinton supporters' vote certainty. Counter-partisan media was linked to reduced certainty of voting for their party's candidate, though whether this is a media effect or self-selection remains unanswered based on these cross-sectional analyses. For social media use, a higher composition of in-party members in social media networks corresponded to higher probabilities of candidate vote certainties, especially when partisans evaluated their candidates. Cross-cutting social media use (i.e., social media use with higher out-party members in networks) was associated with a relatively modest drop of certainty about their candidates for strong partisans, compared with that of partisan media.

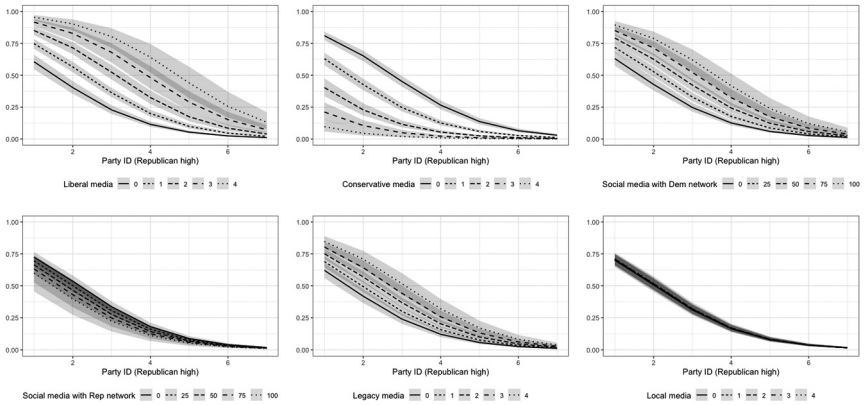[2]We treated leaners as partisans (see Baker & Renno, 2019).

Figure 1. Predicted probabilities of Clinton supporters' vote certainty by media type. Other variables are held constant at their mean. Shades are 95% CIs. Party ID: 1 = Strong Democrat, 7 = Strong Republican. Social media scale = the percentage of perceived partisans in one's social networks.

Figure 2. Predicted probabilities of Trump supporters' vote certainty by media type. Other variables are held constant at their mean. Shades are 95% CIs. Party ID: 1 = Strong Democrat, 7 = Strong Republican. Social media scale = the percentage of perceived partisans in one's social networks.
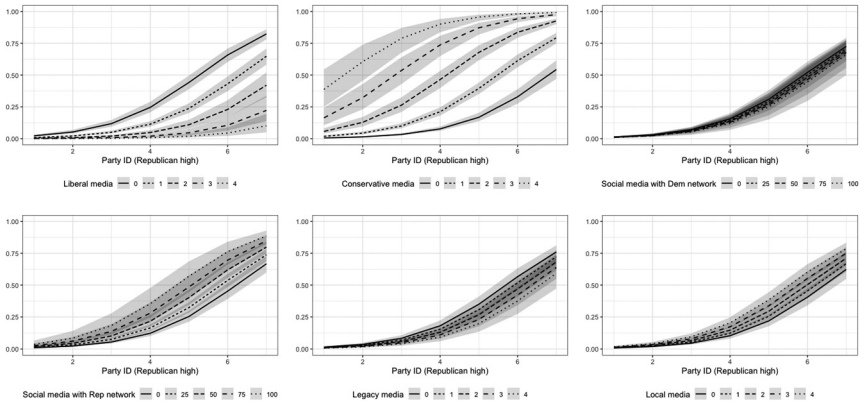
Similar patterns were visible in legacy versus local media use. More legacy media use was associated with greater vote certainty among Clinton supporters (see Figure 1) and less certainty among Trump supporters (see Figure 2), and this pattern was most pronounced when partisans evaluated their candidate. For strong Democrats, a drop from the highest to the lowest level of legacy media use corresponded to probabilities of Clinton supporters' vote certainty declining by 21.1%, while for strong Republicans, an increase from the lowest to the highest

level of legacy media use was linked to probabilities of Trump supporters' vote certainty falling by 18.1%. Local media consumption was unassociated with Clinton supporters' vote certainty across party ID, but for Trump supporters' certainty, an increase from the lowest to the highest level of local media had an increase in probabilities by 17.8%, especially among strong Republicans; strong Democrats had an increase by 8%. Overall, the results reveal asymmetrical alignments between media consumption and vote certainty, which must be considered when accounting for event effects.

Event analysis with feeling thermometer ratings

We conducted event analyses based on residuals of feeling rating regressions. We estimated key political events (in immediate and decayed estimates) and their interactions with different media use, focusing on liberal, conservative, legacy, and local media, in separate models for each event and each media use.

We observed no direct effect of the Access Hollywood Tape and Podesta E-Mail release (which happened on the same day) on both candidates' ratings across the entire sample, nor was there a direct effect of the Comey Letter. This analysis was conducted to guard against the possibility of unmediated event effects but does not provide a test of our RQ3. Our interaction results between political events and different media use for RQ3 revealed that the Access Hollywood Tape and Podesta E-Mail release did not interact significantly with any uses of media when predicting Clinton or Trump ratings. However, the interaction of the Comey Letter (with immediate effect measure) and conservative media use was negatively associated with Clinton ratings (see Table 2, top panel). Interestingly, there was also a significant interaction with liberal media, suggesting that the use of either conservative or liberal media was associated with amplifying the negative impact of the Comey Letter on Clinton ratings.

To better understand the pattern, we looked into partisan subgroups. While Democrats and Republicans showed limited interaction effects for the Comey Letter (see Supplementary Materials B), interactions between the Comey Letter and media sources were pronounced among Independents. Interactions of the Comey Letter (decayed, especially) and each partisan media use negatively predicted Clinton ratings (see Table 2). Taken together, most event effects were visible when interacted with partisan media use, especially among Independents (see Supplementary Materials C for visualizations of the results).

Table 2. Interactions between the Comey Letter and media uses on candidate ratings among all sample and independents.

	Immediate Effect Measure		Decayed Effect Measure	
All Sample	Clinton feeling (N = 4867)	Trump feeling (N = 4865)	Clinton feeling (N = 4867)	Trump feeling (N = 4865)
Comey * Liberal	−6.813*	3.150	−3.544	4.910#
Comey * Conservative	−6.550*	1.228	−3.520	3.286
Comey * Legacy	−4.720#	1.236	−3.576#	3.452
Comey * Local	−1.290	−1.843	−2.023	.348
Independents only (N = 939)				
Comey * Liberal	−10.339#	7.646	−11.647*	3.340
Comey * Conservative	−8.535	.043	−12.402*	.456
Comey * Legacy	−7.336	4.567	−9.892#	3.440
Comey * Local	−1.987	4.126	−3.234	4.614

#$p < .10$, *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.
The dependent variables are residuals from first-stage model of candidate feeling ratings.

Event analysis with supporters' vote certainty

For RQ4, we performed the same analysis for vote certainty. We find no direct event or interaction effects with media for both candidates. Unlike feeling rating results, vote certainty was not influenced by either major campaign events, a range of media, or the combinations of events and media. Partisan subgroup analyses were not performed because only small subsets of Democrats ($N = 59$) and Republicans ($N = 37$) expressed vote certainty for the opposite candidate.

Discussion

This study aimed to first document underlying patterns of partisanship, media use, and candidate appraisals in the shifting media ecology during the 2016 U.S. election. Second, we examined the interplay between key political events and media use in shaping candidate support. We show that the Comey Letter reduced Clinton favorability, but this depended on the use of partisan media. It was not related to supporters' vote certainty. The fact that both liberal and conservative media use similarly conditioned the impact of the Comey Letter to have negative effects on Clinton favorability is especially noteworthy. While partisan media has an immediate and continuing effect, both conservative and liberal media appear to condition negative Clinton evaluations, with no significant relationships with Trump evaluations. While different media sources are associated with distinct levels of candidate feeling ratings and supporters' vote certainty (first model), it is notable that the associations between media and candidate evaluations are generally similar when interacted with events (second model). We offer several explanations regarding this.

First, this can be related to how liberal and legacy media portray the negative event about their candidate. Our findings show that the direction of associations and coefficients of legacy media's interaction with the Comey Letter are similar to that with partisan media, suggesting learning objectively negative information across a range of news outlets drives down candidate favorability. Evidence further suggests a significant asymmetry between the left and right media ecosystem, where liberal media are more likely to rely on factuality underlying events, whereas conservative media react more to the claims of the left (e.g., Shah et al., 2021). Liberal media's reliance on events and facts and conservative media's reactions to counter liberal elites and frames likely highlighted the failings of Clinton. During the 2016 U.S. election, the left and center paid attention to scandals or failings of both Trump and Clinton, while the right media primarily focused on negative coverage of Clinton and more reserved appraisals of Trump (Faris et al., 2017). Our results suggest that these differences in coverage likely had an impact on viewers' evaluations. While content analysis is beyond the scope of our study, we hope future studies incorporate both the content and event effects during campaigns to disentangle the relationships between media, events, and candidate evaluations.

Second, it is notable that the event-media interaction was especially pronounced among Independents. Consistent with prior findings (e.g., Hillygus & Jackman, 2003), our findings suggest that undecided voters or Independents are more likely to change their vote choices based on campaign events. In turn, partisans remain relatively less affected. This can be explained by a motivated reasoning mechanism or biased information processing among partisans (especially Democrats, in the case of the Comey Letter) to remain unaffected by the damaging event of their candidate. In other words, learning about a negative event may not always lead to a negative evaluation for the candidate, especially when people are motivated to interpret it in a biased way to protect their partisan identities (Bolsen et al., 2014). We invite future studies to examine how partisans interact with different media sources while examining their content.

However, we see different event effects when considering candidate evaluations and vote certainty. The combination of the Comey Letter and different media use did not influence vote certainty. Contrary to conventional beliefs that the Comey Letter cost Clinton the presidency, our results suggest that its effects were large and consistent in lowering Clinton favorability but was not necessarily related to supporters' vote determination. Nonetheless, the reduction in favorable evaluations among Independents may have been enough to cost her key states. These results provide an important qualification to recent empirical studies that conclude the Comey letter exerted a limited impact on voting (e.g., Weinschenk & Panagopoulos, 2018). Also, it should be noted that our vote certainty

variable reflects the magnitude of certainty but does not capture complete shifts of support. It is possible that those who were particularly affected by the event and shifted their support to another candidate might not have been captured in the measurement.

Equally important is the absence of event effects for the Access Hollywood Tape release, which occurred on the same day as the Podesta E-Mail release. The absence of an effect from such a jarring scandal demands deeper inquiry. Did the lack of discernable effects result from conservative media focusing on the conveniently available WikiLeaks release of the hacked emails instead of the Access Hollywood Tape? Was it that both liberal and conservative media attended to both stories, generating negative coverage for both candidates, muting any effect? Or did conservative media frame the Access Hollywood Tape differently than liberal outlets? Or was it partisan-motivated reasoning that counteracted the potential impact of those events? Future research should address this questioning by examining news content.

Importantly, we show the alignment of underlying media consumption patterns with party identifications and their asymmetrical associations with candidate support. Conservative media appear to have played a stronger role in Trump vote certainty than liberal media did in Clinton vote certainty; in other words, Democrats consuming conservative media showed a higher likelihood of Trump vote certainty than Republicans consuming liberal media showed Clinton vote certainty. In line with the literature, we find partisan differences in the receptivity of counter-attitudinal media, with growing insularity among Republicans (Grossman & Hopkins, 2016).

For the social media variables, our results show that social networks perceived as containing a higher proportion of co-partisans are related to in-party candidate support while social networks perceived as containing out-group partisans are linked to a modest reduction in candidate support. This suggests the importance of perceptions of network composition in shaping information flows and political sensemaking. Unlike partisan media, embeddedness in partisan social media networks, at least as we measure it, shows a less notable asymmetry and smaller relationship with supporters' voter certainty. On social media, where users play a more active role in structuring information flows and exposure (Thorson & Wells, 2016), individuals may experience a mixture of political and apolitical content through their social networks, which attenuate the potential influence of political content exposure. Of course, comments, recommendation systems, and social endorsements further contextualize how political information is communicated on social media, which calls for a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics in future studies.

Furthermore, local media use was associated with higher Trump vote certainty, especially among Republicans, possibly due to shifting audience

composition of local media. Of course, partisans critical of their party's nominee likely sought out media consistent with their unfavorable viewpoint toward Clinton or Trump. While our analysis does not make any causal claims given the dual possibility of self-selection, it nonetheless reflects distinct media consumption patterns on voter preferences and certainty, consistent with prior evidence.

Several notes on our survey design and analytic approach should be acknowledged, and the limitations accompanying them. There are different methods for analyzing rolling cross-sectional data. Studies have controlled for daily-effects by adding day of campaign as a covariate (Kosmidis, 2014; Matthews & Johnston, 2010), which is similar to the first step in our analysis. Some interacted the days of the campaign with the individual-level variables of interest to see its temporal dependence (Kosmidis, 2014; Matthews & Johnston, 2010). We note that the single day-of-covariate approach does not fully control for unobservable sample differences inherent in the RCS design, which is an advantage of our approach. In our analysis, research questions center around identifying patterns among events, media use, and candidate appraisals above and beyond temporal dynamics of opinion shifts. Our approach provides a conservative test of the relationship between political events and different media uses. Other studies also employ time-series analyses (Rudolph & Evans, 2005) for aggregate-level relationships. However, such analyses do not allow us to rule out daily sampling errors or individual differences.

Johnston and Brady (2002) also suggest that the RCS design is powerful when accompanied with a post-election panel wave. Combining RCS and panel design to make RCS the first wave and re-interview after the event can increase advantages of both designs, but this does not apply to our study context. We hope future studies expand the RCS design and integrate a panel component to observe the within-subject dynamics of campaign effects.

Our study has several other limitations. One arises from the particular context of the 2016 U.S. election, an unprecedentedly competitive election. Despite our contributions, we cannot rule out the possibility that other factors unaccounted for in our models, such as sexist attitudes and religiosity, or other controversial statements by Trump and Clinton, sparked outrage. Second, our results rely on self-reported measures of media use. Social media partisan networks variables, in particular, ask the *perception* of partisan composition in their social media networks. While we note that self-reported surveys provide insights beyond simple message reception (McGuire, 1972), we encourage future studies to employ observational data and examine actual media consumption patterns and how they are linked with candidate support. Third, we treated each event similarly in its ability to influence candidate support. Future research should test this assumption with a deeper look at how events can be categorized to have

differential impacts on voters, whether personal or sexual versus professional. Relatedly, we did not ask respondents if they were aware of events and did not consider specific moments within the day when each event happened. For example, it is possible that respondents participated before the event was reported later in the day. However, we note that our approach to events construction (both immediate and decayed) followed practices in research using event data (e.g., Box-Steffensmeier et al., 2014; see Supplementary Materials A), and most importantly, the consistency of results across different events' specification buttresses the robustness of our general argument.

Further, RCS designs can be vulnerable to partisan nonresponse, where certain partisan groups are refusing to respond to polls due to negative campaign cycles (Gelman et al., 2016). While our sample has no systematic bias of non- or over-response by partisan groups,[3] we note that disentangling "real" effects from daily sample composition is an important issue for future research implementing RCS survey or multiple cross-sections at a number of time points. Lastly, our reliance on cross-sectional surveys can limit a causal interpretation. However, our events' specification and analysis inform how candidate evaluations can be associated with event occurrences, which signals a potential impact of campaign events. Nonetheless, as suggested by Johnston and Brady (2002), we encourage future studies of the RCS design to accompany a panel survey for stronger inferential power.

In conclusion, our study supports prior research showing that the role of campaigns in candidate appraisals can be understood at the intersection of media use, partisanship, and specific events that occur during a contentious race. Importantly, such effects are not uniform across media types nor symmetrical across partisan groups. Revisiting the narratives of the 2016 U.S. campaign effects and the interactions with a complicated media landscape is critical for understanding not only upcoming U.S. elections but also democratic functioning in the polarized political climate.

Disclosure statement

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[3]Our ANOVA test confirms no systematic bias in our sample, $F(48, 4846) = 1.157$, $p = .213$.

Notes on contributors

Jiyoun Suk (Ph.D., University of Wisconsin–Madison) is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Connecticut.

Dhavan V. Shah (Ph.D., University of Minnesota) is the Maier-Bascom Professor in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Wisconsin and Director of the Mass Communication Research Center.

Leticia Bode (Ph.D., University of Wisconsin-Madison) is an associate professor in the Communication, Culture, and Technology master's program at Georgetown University.

Stephanie Edgerly (Ph.D., University of Wisconsin-Madison) is an associate professor in the Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications at Northwestern University.

Kjerstin Thorson (Ph.D., University of Wisconsin-Madison) is an associate professor in the Department of Advertising + Public Relations and the School of Journalism at Michigan State University.

Emily Vraga (Ph.D., University of Wisconsin-Madison) is an associate professor in the Hubbard School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Minnesota.

Chris Wells (Ph.D., University of Washington) is an associate professor in the Emerging Media Studies at Boston University.

Jon Pevehouse (Ph.D., Ohio State University) is Vilas Distinguished Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

ORCID

Jiyoun Suk 🔵 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4690-2395
Leticia Bode 🔵 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9859-2918
Stephanie Edgerly 🔵 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2934-0151
Kjerstin Thorson 🔵 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5762-4688
Emily Vraga 🔵 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3016-3869

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