

MASTER'S THESIS

Explicating political sophistication and its relationship with selective exposure: effects and mechanisms

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ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to add to the existing knowledge about the effects of the political sophistication of citizens on selective exposure in terms of the preference for like-minded media over attitudinal incongruent media.

The traditional selective exposure majorly account for this phenomenon from a motivational perspective. Differing from previous studies, this thesis employs a cognitive approach to examine the level of political sophistication and selective exposure based on dual-process framework which grows out of heuristic and cognitive bias literature.

This thesis first explicates the concept of political sophistication by proposing three dimensions, namely factual political knowledge, conceptual political knowledge, and the conceptual complexity of political thinking to indicate the construct of political sophistication. The cognitive nature of the three dimensions as well as their relationships with the extent of selective exposure, which is perceived as a form of confirmation bias, are discussed based on a tripartite model of dual-process theory. Two mediators, namely attitude extremity and perspective taking ability, are proposed and examined to see whether either or both of them play a role to mediate the influence of each dimension of political sophistication on the extent of selective exposure. The underlying mechanisms for the hypothesized model are expounded.

The results suggest that the effect of the three dimensions on the extent of selective exposure are fully mediated by the two mediators, respectively. Different dimensions of political sophistication have different effects on attitude extremity and perspective taking ability, and these effects play a key role in the selection of like-minded media outlets. Both the conceptual complexity of political thinking and conceptual knowledge are positively correlated with the perspective taking ability; the same is not true for factual political knowledge. Moreover, both factual political knowledge and conceptual political knowledge are positively correlated with attitude extremity, while no significant correlation is observed between conceptual complexity and attitude extremity in the study sample. The effects of factual political knowledge and conceptual political knowledge on the extent of selective exposure are mediated by attitude extremity. The mediation effect of perspective taking ability on the relationship between conceptual complexity of political thinking and selective exposure, which can lessen the extent of selective exposure, is observed to be significant but weak when attitude extremity is included in the model. The implications of the different roles played by the three dimensions in the cognitive process, as well as contributions, practical significance and limitations are discussed on the basis of the abovementioned findings in conclusion part.

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