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# Opinion Leaders, Perceived Media Hostility and Political Participation

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## Abstract

Opinion leaders play a significant role in public opinion formation by highlighting, defining and framing political issues for their circle of friends. While we know opinion leaders are more likely to participate in politics, we are less sure about how they process mediated information and what motivate them to participate more actively than individuals who are less politically active. Data from a national representative survey in Colombia show not only that opinion leaders perceive more media bias and hostility, but also that the degree of their perceived media hostility is capable of motivating higher levels of political talk and participation.

## Keywords

Corrective actions; hostile media perceptions; opinion leaders; polarization, political participation, political talk

Seven decades ago, Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944) developed the two-step flow theory of communication to explain how voters make up their minds in presidential elections. According to their findings, influence about voter choice does not flow directly from the news media to the public. Instead, opinion leaders serve as mediators who disseminate information and opinions to the masses. Opinion leaders, in other words, play a significant role in public opinion formation by setting and suggesting political agendas for their social circles (Weimann & Brosius, 1994).

Due to opinion leaders' significant impact on society, it is vital for communication and political science researchers to examine what motivates them to participate politically. Previous research has shown that personal involvement with an issue is an important factor in predicting opinion leaders' participation, as is level of issue interest (Shah & Scheufele, 2006). This study proposes that perceived media hostility can also contribute to opinion leaders' active behavior, as part of a tendency to counteract perceived 'wrong' interpretations promoted by the media (Rojas, 2010). If that is indeed the case, opinion leaders on both sides of an issue will likely push their followers to more extreme views, and thus contribute to political polarization.

This study therefore aims to investigate whether opinion leaders experience more perceived media bias and hostility, and whether such perceptions of hostile media motivate opinion leaders to increase engagement in politics. To shed light on these questions, we collected a national representative sample in Colombia and examined the relationships between opinion leadership, perceptions of media bias and hostility, and forms of political behavior.

## Opinion Leadership

According to Wright (1986), an opinion leader is ‘someone who, through day-to-day personal contacts and communication, influences someone else’s opinions and decisions on some matter and seems to do this fairly regularly or for many people, or both’ (p. 89). Due to direct contact with followers in their immediate environment (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), they are said to be much more influential than the media when it comes to transmitting information to less politically active individuals (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948). In particular, the influence of opinion leadership is expected to be maximized when leaders gain high levels of confidence and trust from their followers (Zhao, Kou, Peng, & Chen, 2018). In other words, they have the capability to set the agenda for others in society (Weimann & Brosius, 1994). According to Rogers (1995), innovators and early adopters are more likely to adopt new ideas and hold higher degree of opinion leadership than early majority, late majority, and laggards. The notion of being innovative is regarded as a critical characteristic for opinion leaders (Goldenberg, Han, & Lehmann, 2009), who actively promote new ideas toward members of their social surroundings (Childers, 1986; Rogers, 2003).

According to Flynn, Goldsmith and Eastman (1996), even though it is the influence of opinion leaders on others’ decisions that is vital to the concept of opinion leadership, when measured by self-reports, this construct has mostly been measured using Childer’s (1986) version of King and Summers’ (1970) product-specific opinion leadership scale. Childer’s scale continues to be a fruitful measure more than three decades after it was first delineated, with Eiamkanchanalai and Assarut (2016), and Jungnickel (2018) among numerous examples of current usage. Similar to Rogers’ idea of a ‘diffusion of innovations’ (2003), this issue-specific scale measures the extent to which individuals spread ideas and products related to a specific issue. It is assumed that opinion leaders who are influencers are likely to communicate to others about their involvement in a particular subject (Engel et al., 1990).

In fact, there are opinion leadership scales which measure such construct in more general terms (Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009). These scales assume to a certain degree that those who acquire particular traits, such as being outgoing or confident, are more likely to exert influence on others. However, we contend that opinion leadership is domain specific (Childers, 1986; Roch, 2005), primarily because opinion leadership requires interest in and knowledge of an issue (Gatignon & Robertson, 1991). Even though an opinion leader may impact others’ views when it comes to political news, for instance, he or she may still be a follower when it comes to entertainment or sports news. It follows that opinion leadership requires domain-specific interest and knowledge. Therefore, an issue-specific scale (i.e., Childer’s scale) will be adopted for this particular study.

By adopting Childer’s scale, we measure whether individuals provide a substantial amount of information about politics to others, whether they are likely to be asked about politics compared with others in their circle of friends, and whether they are likely to convince their friends to agree with their political views. In other words, opinion leadership measures the degree to which individuals give advice and exert their influence on others on a certain issue or topic. This is consistent with how an opinion leader behaves as ‘an influential node’ (Song, Chi, Hino, & Tseng, 2007) impacting the opinions and behaviors of others. This influence may occur by persuading and giving recommendations, or by serving as a role model who others can imitate (Weimann, 1994), both with or without the intention to influence. In summary, because opinion leaders influence others’ attitudes and behaviors, it is critical to understand what factors influence their motivations for being politically

engaged. This study suggests two possible factors that contribute to opinion leaders engaging in political conversations and participation: perceptions of media bias and perceptions of media hostility.

## Hostile Media Perceptions

According to the hostile media perception (HMP) literature, partisans on both sides of an issue perceive media content to be biased in favor of the opposing side and against their own side (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). In an experiment showing partisans identical news broadcast segments about the Arab-Israeli conflict, Vallone, Ross and Lepper found that both sides perceived the news coverage to be biased against their own point of view. In general, the literature has examined such phenomenon with regard to two conceptualizations: perceived media bias and perceived media hostility.

Perceived media bias captures individuals' perceptions of bias in media content or the media as an institution in general. In other words, scholars conceptualize HMP as the extent to which one perceives media stimuli about specific issues to be biased (Vallone et al., 1985). Related studies have been done on media representations of immigration, genetically modified foods and primate research (Gunther & Christen, 2002; Gunther & Schmitt, 2004; Tsang, 2018), and more generally in regard to political ideology (Ho et al., 2011). Participants in these studies were exposed to media stimuli and then asked to report whether and to what extent they viewed the content as biased (Christen, Kannaovakun, & Gunther, 2002; Gunther & Schmitt, 2004).

Contrary, other scholars have conceptualized HMP as perceived media hostility, which refers to the perceived ideological distance between personal position and perceived media position (Rojas, 2010; Wojcieszak, 2010). In this sense, HMP was computed as the difference between perceived media ideology and personal opinion scores. HMP can therefore be defined as the extent to which individuals perceive media as misaligning with their own point of view. In short, while perceived media hostility takes one's personal issue position into consideration, perceived media bias does not.

## Opinion Leaders and HMP

There is a substantial body of HMP research that shows that individuals who are deeply engaged with an issue are more likely to perceive hostile media biases (e.g., Gunther & Schmitt, 2004; Vallone et al., 1985). Gunther (1992) argues that personal involvement with an issue or group is one major factor for HMP, as higher involvement can prompt more biased scrutiny of media content. Besides issue involvement, opinion extremity was also found to relate positively to HMP (Gunther & Christen, 2002). In general, the literature demonstrates that individuals who are highly engaged with politics are more likely to experience HMP (Gunther, Miller, & Liebhart, 2009). Given that opinion leaders can be defined as 'people who are most concerned about [an] issue' (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944), they often hold higher levels of interest, knowledge and recognition of social issues than the general public (Weimann, 1994). Similar to how individuals who are politically aware are more likely to perceive bias in media (Gunther 1992), we suspect that opinion leaders are also more likely to perceive media bias and hostility than non-opinion leaders. This study therefore expects that:

**H1:** Opinion leadership relates positively to perceived media bias.

**H2:** Opinion leadership relates positively to perceived media hostility.

## **Political Participation**

Besides perceived media bias and perceived media hostility, opinion leaders are expected to have higher levels of participation in political discussion and a range of political activities (Shah & Scheufele, 2006). According to Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995), political participation can be defined as individuals engaging in various kinds of political behaviors aimed at influencing public policy decisions. Building on Verba, Schlozman and Brady's conceptualization, a range of activities can be counted as political participation, including voting, participating in rallies, volunteering for a movement or political party, contacting elected representatives, donating money to a political party or movement, and either boycotting or buying products or services for political reasons.

In general, Weimann (1994) and others have shown that opinion leaders tend to participate more in political activities, whether out of higher levels of political interest, consumption of political news or political efficacy. Opinion leaders are likely to be more concerned about and interested in an issue than the general public (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944). Due to their interests, opinion leaders are expected to be more active in picking up information from their surrounding environment, including news outlets. Such news consumption is in turn connected to higher levels of political participation (Shah & Scheufele, 2006; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005). Consistent with Inglehart's (1990) finding that political interest correlates positively with political engagement, Kavanaugh et al. (2006) found that opinion leaders who are active on blogs tend to have higher levels of political interest and are more likely to engage in political activities. In addition, given that opinion leaders are likely to be more concerned and more knowledgeable about an issue, they are expected to hold higher political efficacy. In other words, they are likely to be more confident in their ability to understand politics and to influence the political process and policy decisions, whether through voting, attending demonstrations, or by participating in political deliberation (McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999). We can therefore expect that opinion leaders are more likely to engage in political participation.

In addition, studies have found linkages between opinion leadership and expressive forms of online activities, such as email forwarding and chatting (Sun, Youn, Wu, & Kuntaraporn, 2006) as well as public expressions (Park, 2013). While political talk can be seen as a form of political participation (Kenski & Stroud, 2006), some scholars regard political talk as an opportunity for deliberation, which differs from political participation through attending a rally or donating money to a politician (McClurg, 2006; Mutz, 2006). This study expects opinion leadership to relate positively with political talk (Ikeda & Boase, 2011), as engaging in political conversations not only help people formulate political identities (Walsh, 2004) but also to encounter more "contact with diverse perspectives, opportunities for issue deliberation, and exposure to civic resources and recruitment" (Shah et al., 2007, p. 683). It is therefore expected that opinion leaders are in general most likely to engage in political participation and political talk.

**H3:** Opinion leadership relates positively with political talk.

**H4:** Opinion leadership relates positively with political participation.

## Corrective Action

This study contributes to the literature by contending that opinion leaders are motivated by their perceived media bias and hostility to engage in political conversations and participation. Such expectation of positive relationship between HMP and participation is consistent with the corrective action hypothesis, which posits that individuals with higher levels of HMP will more often participate politically. The rationale behind this assertion is that people will voice their own opinions in order to try to ‘correct’ the presumed influence on others of what they perceive to be hostile media (Rojas, 2010). It follows that opinion leaders, perceiving mass media to be transmitting ideologies distant from their own, are more likely to enter public debate in order to correct such perceived ‘wrongs’ (Rojas, 2010). In other words, individuals are able to not only express their views in public, but also to persuade others to join them in ‘correcting’ public opinion.

Barnidge and Rojas (2014) found that individuals who perceive higher levels of HMP tend to discuss politics more often. And the more one discusses politics the more one is likely to feel confident in his or her political acumen, creating a virtuous circle between participation and individual self-efficacy (Gastil & Dillard, 1999; Gastil & Xenos, 2010). Indeed, studies have found that individuals who perceive partisan bias in the media are more likely to engage in activities aimed at overcoming such perceived unfairness (Hwang, Pan, & Sun, 2008). Hwang, Pan and Sun found that individuals who view the media to be biased against their views can arouse media indignation and in turn motivate others to engage in discursive activities, such as signing a petition, attending a public forum, volunteering for a group, or engaging in political talk with others. Following this logic, it can be argued that more frequent engagement in political talk may lead individuals to become more confident in their political attitudes, especially when exposed to likeminded others in the participatory process.

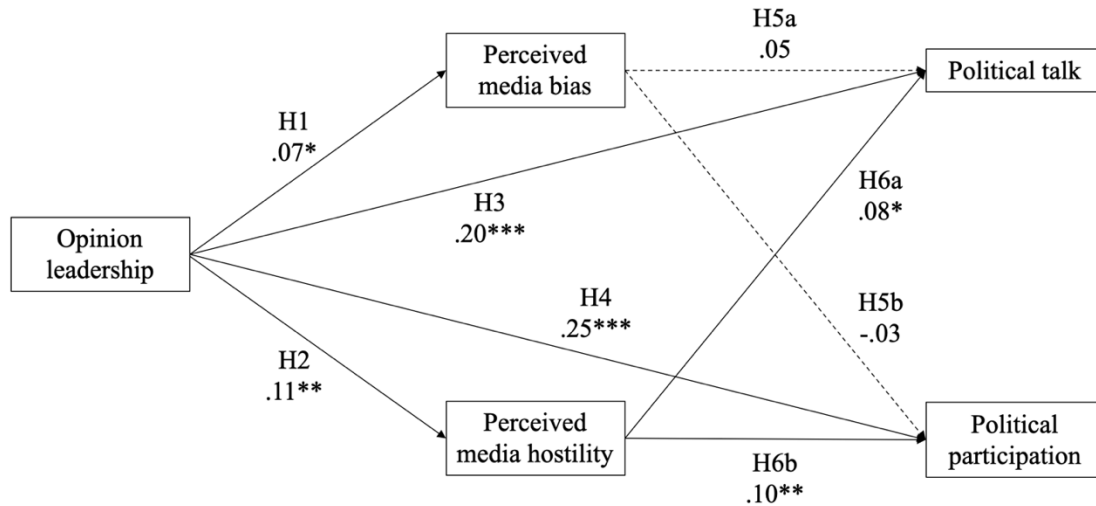
This study therefore expects that, at least in part, the perception of media as biased or hostile may contribute to motivating opinion leaders to talk about politics and participate more actively in political discussions. In this study, we seek to advance the notion of corrective action (Rojas, 2010), going beyond general political conversation (Barnidge & Rojas, 2014) to explore whether opinion leaders are more likely to take action in order to correct for perceived media biases. For this reason, this study expects opinion leaders to be positively related to political talk and political participation aimed at ‘correcting’ available information in the public sphere; not only so, such relationships are mediated by perceived media bias and hostility (see Figure 1).

**H5:** Perceived media bias mediates (a) the relationship between opinion leadership and political talk, as well as (b) the relationship between opinion leadership and political participation.

**H6:** Perceived media hostility mediates (a) the relationship between opinion leadership and political talk, as well as (b) the relationship between opinion leadership and political participation.

### *Context*

Colombia’s political system is a presidential system that requires multi-party coalitions for elections and governance. Democratic elections have been held regularly for over 100 years. Parties represented in Congress, include conservative parties that have supported family values, a strong military and big landowners, a political center that seeks social reforms, to more progressive parties



**Figure 1.** Hypotheses. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

that propose a wider role for government and land redistribution. Classified as a flawed democracy (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019), Colombia has struggled with limited political participation, political violence and drug-related violence. In 1998, then president Andres Pastrana Arango (1998-2002), launched a peace process with FARC, then the largest guerrilla group in the country, that ultimately failed. Following this failed peace initiative, Álvaro Uribe won the 2002 presidential election, promising to vanquish the guerrilla through military action. Under his presidency Uribe escalated the governmental offensive against the leftist rebels, with military successes that led to his reelection in 2006.

Juan Manuel Santos, president Uribe's defense minister, won the 2010 presidential elections mostly offering a hawkish continuity to Uribe's project. However, unexpectedly, president Santos distanced himself politically from Uribe and initiated secret peace talks with FARC. In August of 2012, Uribe denounced these secret negotiations that were soon acknowledged by the government that then proceeded to formalize them. These negotiations ended in a successful peace negotiation that was signed in 2016, and that resulted in FARC becoming a political party. Despite the successful negotiations the country to this day remains divided in its support for the process. Our data were collected in the weeks following the announcement that these negotiations would take place, offering unique insight into a moment in Colombia's history of heightened political conversation, when opinion leaders who support and oppose these negotiations were actively engaged in information consumption and conversations.

## Method

This study relies on Colombian national survey data collected by a local professional polling firm, Deproyectos Limitada, from August 29, 2012 to September 17, 2012. Respondents were drawn from 10 cities in Colombia as part of a biennial study of communication and political attitudes. The sample was designed to represent Colombia's adult urban population, as 75 percent of Colombia's 46 million inhabitants live in urban areas (2012).

A multistep, stratified, random-sample procedure was used to randomly select households based on city size and census data<sup>1</sup>. The number of households was determined for a given city, and a



number of city blocks were then selected randomly according to housing district and strata. Finally, individual households were randomly selected within each block, and the study used the ‘adult in the household who most recently celebrated a birthday’ technique to identify an individual respondent at random. Up to three visits to each household were made, as necessary, in order to increase the participation rate. A total of 1,031 face-to-face completed responses were obtained, for a response rate of 83% (response rate 1 was calculated using AAPOR guidelines), of which 548 were females (53.2%), aged from 18 to 93 years ( $M = 41.12$ ,  $SD = 16.21$ ). About 59% had secondary school, or lower, education levels, while the remainder had partial or full college education. While most of the sample self-identified themselves as politically independent (42.7%), 20.1% reported as leaning to the left and 37.2% leaning to the right.

## ***Measures of Key Variables***

### ***Opinion Leadership***

Given that Childer’s (1986) study shows that the scale has high internal consistency and is in fact one-dimensional, not all items were included in order to keep the questionnaire short. Respondents were asked to rate themselves on a scale from 0 to 5 (0 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) on four statements: (1) “When I talk about politics, I give a great deal of information.” (2) “Compared with my circle of friends, I am very likely to be asked about news and current issues.” (3) ‘In a discussion of politics, I most likely convince my friends of my ideas.’ (4) ‘In general, I am among the first in my circle of friends to know about news and current issues.’

The first three statements were drawn from Childers’ opinion leadership scale (1986, p. 186), while the fourth statement was drawn from Venkatraman’s modification of Childer’s scale (1989, p. 60). This additional measure of consumer-domain innovativeness is widely recognized in the marketing literature (Godsmith & Hofacker, 1991). The scores of all items were combined to form a continuous opinion leadership scale ( $M = 1.74$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ,  $\alpha = .81$ ). In the sample, 17.9% of respondents ( $n = 183$ ) reported 0, meaning they did not see themselves as performing as opinion leaders with respect to politics. After grouping all the scores into 6 groups (all the zeros in group 0, 0.1 to 1 in group 1, 1.1 to 2 in group 2, and so forth, a normal distribution of responses was obtained (see Figure 2). With a median of 1.50, the majority of respondents did not see themselves as political opinion leaders.

### ***Perceived Media Bias***

This measure was constructed by taking the absolute value of the difference between respondents’ perceived media ideology and the neutral position. First, respondents were asked to place the mainstream Colombian media position along an 11-point spectrum (left = 0, 5 = center, right = 10). Then a score of 5 (neutral) was subtracted from each score, and the absolute values were taken. In other words, perceived media bias is measured relative to the neutral position, and the further away from 0 or the larger the scores, the more biased the media is perceived to be ( $M = 1.65$ ,  $SD = 1.65$ ).

### ***Perceived Media Hostility***

This variable is computed by taking the absolute value of the difference between respondents’ perceived media ideology and their personal ideology (Barnidge & Rojas, 2014). While perceived



media ideology was measured using the exact same spectrum as above, asking respondents to place the mainstream Colombian media position along an 11-point spectrum from left (0) to right (10) with 5 being the center, perceived ideology was measured by asking respondents to indicate their personal political ideology along the same 11-point spectrum. Higher values indicate higher hostility toward the respondent ( $M = 1.60$ ,  $SD = 1.83$ ).

### ***Political Talk***

The measure of political talk was adopted by Moy and Gastil's (2007) study, in which conversation frequency with family members, friends and coworkers were measured. Following recent studies on political conversation (Rojas, 2008), this study measured political talk by asking respondents how often in the past month they commented on news or discussed politics with (a) family, (b) coworkers or classmates, (c) neighbors, and (d) friends or acquaintances ( $M = 1.98$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ,  $\alpha = .81$ ).

### ***Political Participation***

Building on previous studies on corrective action (Rojas, 2010), political participation was measured by asking respondents whether they had done the following at any point in the previous 12 months: (a) attended a political rally, (b) attended a public meeting of their city, (c) participated in a local municipal council, (d) signed a petition, (e) worked for a movement or political party, (f) wrote a letter to the editor of a newspaper or magazine, (g) called in to a live radio or television show to express their opinion, (h) attended a meeting of an educational institution, (i) donated money or things to a political party or movement, (j) donated money or other items to a church or charity, (k) donated money or other objects to a group that does social or environmental work, (l) attended a social or political protest, (m) done volunteer work, (n) worked on a community project, (o) protested by blocking a street, or (p) stopped buying a product or service due to disagreement with the politics of the company that provides it. The higher the score, the more they participated ( $M = 1.88$ ,  $SD = .16$ ,  $\alpha = .82$ ).

### ***Control Variables***

For all models, four demographic control variables – gender, age, education and income – were included.

### ***Political Interest***

Political interest was measured by averaging the responses to three questions gauging interest in (a) local, (b) national and (c) international politics, using a 6-point scale from 0 (not at all) to 5 (a lot) ( $M = 1.96$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ , Cronbach's  $\alpha = .93$ ).

### ***Political Efficacy***

Political efficacy was measured by three questions assessing respondents' (a) ability to influence local government, (b) perceived responsiveness of the government to individuals' initiatives, and (c) perceived concern of the government for citizens like them. These items were rated on a 6-point scale, ranging from 0 (total disagreement) to 5 (total agreement), and were averaged to form an index of political efficacy ( $M = 1.82$ ,  $SD = 1.49$ ,  $\alpha = .83$ ).

### *Political Extremity*

Ideological extremity was measured by asking respondents to place themselves on an 11-point political ideology scale, from 0 (left) to 10 (right), with 5 labeled ‘center.’ The item was then folded, so that an answer of 5 was coded as 0, while zeros and tens were coded as 5 ( $M = 1.33$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ). Larger values therefore signal higher extremity.

### *News Exposure*

Respondents were asked to rate how often they read, watch or listen to (a) radio news, (b) national daily newspapers, (c) regional or local newspapers, (d) national news magazines, (e) national television news, (f) television shows on news and current events, (g) regional television news, (h) international cable news, and (i) Latin American cable news. The average of all the above items were obtained to form a measure of news exposure ( $M = 2.13$ ,  $SD = .98$ ,  $\alpha = .75$ ).

## Results

Multiple regression analyses were conducted to test our hypotheses. With regards to H1 and H2, media bias and media hostility were input as the criterion variables. The predictors were added into the analysis in three blocks. The first block included the demographics, while the second block included additional control variables. Opinion leadership – the key to both H1 and H2 – constituted the third block. Given some might challenge that the concept of opinion leadership could overlap with those of the dependent variables of interest – political talk and political participation, correlational tests were run to ensure that they were distinct measures. Empirically, the correlation between talk and opinion leadership was  $.36$ ,  $p < .001$  and the correlation between participation and opinion leadership was  $.34$ ,  $p < .001$  (see Table 1). Hence, the data showed that opinion leadership and the dependent variables are distinct measures.

Table 2 summarizes the results. Among the demographic variables, age related positively to perceived media bias ( $b = .07$ ,  $p < .05$ ) – in other words, older people perceived more bias than younger people did. As expected, political interest and ideological extremity related positively to both perceived media bias ( $b = .18$ ,  $p < .001$  and  $b = .11$ ,  $p < .01$ , respectively) and perceived media hostility ( $b = .35$ ,  $p < .001$  and  $b = .25$ ,  $p < .001$ , respectively). In other words, the more individuals were interested in politics and the more they held extreme political ideologies, the more likely they were to perceive media bias and media hostility. However, political efficacy was negatively related to perceived media bias ( $b = -.25$ ,  $p < .001$ ) as well as to perceived media hostility ( $b = -.14$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Lastly, news exposure was negatively related to perceived media hostility ( $b = -.09$ ,  $p < .05$ ), but not to perceived media bias ( $b = -.07$ , n.s.).

**Table 1.** Pearson Correlations Among All Key Variables.

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Opinion leadership	-				
2. Perceived media bias	.10**	-			
3. Perceived media hostility	.10**	.50***	-		
4. Political talk	.36***	.20***	.19***	-	
5. Political participation	.34***	.03	.07*	.21***	-

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

**Table 2.** Regression Results with Political Talk and Participation as Outcome Variables.

	Perceived media bias	Perceived media hostility	Political talk	Political participation
Gender	-.02	.02	.02	.02
Age	.07*	-.02	.01	-.07*
Education	.07	.07	.15***	.05
Income	.04	-.05	-.02	-.06
R <sup>2</sup> change	2.2	0.5	8.8	2.2
Political interest	.18***	.11**	.30***	.09*
Political efficacy	-.25***	-.14***	-.06*	.14***
Ideological extremity	.35***	.25***	.01	-.02
News exposure	-.07	-.09*	.12***	.10**
R <sup>2</sup> change	20.0	8.9	16.4	9.4
Opinion leadership	.07*	.11**	.20***	.25***
R <sup>2</sup> change	0.4	0.9	3.4	5.1
Perceived media bias			.05	-.03
Perceived media hostility			.08*	.10**
R <sup>2</sup> change			1.1	0.8
Total adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.34***	.03	.07*	.21***

\*\*\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

As H1 and H2 predict, opinion leadership related positively to perceived media bias ( $b = .07$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $R^2$  change = 0.4) and perceived media hostility ( $b = .11$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $R^2$  change = 0.9), after controlling for all other factors. The findings therefore suggest that the more one acted as an opinion leader, the more one is likely to perceive media bias and hostility.

We then examined the relationship between opinion leadership and political talk and participation. While H3 states that opinion leadership was expected to relate positively with political talk, H4 states that opinion leadership was expected to relate positively with political participation. Multiple regression analyses were again conducted, with political talk and participation serving as dependent variables. The first, second and third blocks of independent variables were identical to the previous models. The fourth block included perceived media bias and perceived media hostility.

Among the demographic variables, age related to participation negatively ( $b = -.07$ ,  $p < .05$ ) – in other words, younger people participate politically more. In addition, better-educated people were more likely to discuss politics with other people ( $b = .15$ ,  $p < .001$ ). As expected, political interest and news exposure related positively to both political talk ( $b = .30$ ,  $p < .001$  and  $b = .12$ ,  $p < .001$ , respectively) and participation ( $b = .09$ ,  $p < .05$  and  $b = .10$ ,  $p < .01$ , respectively). Furthermore, political efficacy was positively related to participation ( $b = .14$ ,  $p < .001$ ); however, it was negatively related to political talk ( $b = -.06$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Notably, opinion leadership did have a significant relationship with the dependent variables. As shown, opinion leadership related positively to both political talk ( $b = .20$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2$  change = 3.4) and participation ( $b = .25$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2$  change = 5.1). H3 and H4 are therefore both supported.

As opinion leadership has a significant direct impact on perceived media hostility and perceived media hostility has direct effects on both political talk and participation, opinion leadership may be considered to have an important indirect effect on political talk and participation that is mediated by perceived media hostility – as predicted by H5 and H6. Based on 1,000 bootstrap samples, the 95%

confidence interval for the indirect effect of leadership on political talk through perceived media hostility is .004 to .026. As zero is not in this interval, we can say with 95% confidence that the indirect effect is positive ( $b = .012$ ). Such significant indirect effect on participation was also found, with a 95% confidence interval from .001 to .021 ( $b = .01$ ). As the 95% confidence interval again excludes 0, the quantity being tested is considered statistically significant at the .05 level, and H6a and H6b, with regard to perceived media bias and hostility as mediators, are thus supported.

Regarding H5, Table 2 shows that the coefficients of the linear interaction term between perceived media bias and political talk, as well as perceived media and political participation, are not statistically significant. H5a and H5b are therefore not supported in this study.

## Discussion

This study suggests that opinion leaders are likely participate more actively than their peers who are politically less active, due to the degree of their perceived media hostility. First, opinion leaders are more likely to perceive higher levels of media biases and hostility than others. Second, they are more likely to engage in political conversations and participation due to their perceived media hostility. In summary, the more they view media content or outlets to be hostile to their personal position, the more they tend to engage in expressive behaviors, such as engaging in political discussion or participating politically.

Our findings suggest that the more individuals identify themselves as opinion leaders, the more likely they are to discuss politics and to participate politically. In other words, respondents who reported being an innovator among their circle of friends tend to attend political events (rallies, protests, and city meetings, etc.) and engage in political activities (signing petitions, donating money, and volunteering, etc.) more actively. In addition, self-reported opinion leaders were found to comment on news and discuss politics with others more. This is consistent with previous research showing a positive relationship between opinion leadership and expressive forms of online activities, such as email forwarding and chatting (Sun et al., 2006). Park (2013) also found opinion leadership to relate positively to mobilization and public expressions. Furthermore, Shah and Scheufele (2006) suggest that opinion leaders tend to engage in civic participation out of an interest in politics and a general willingness to seek out information.

In addition, opinion leaders have been found to have a tendency to perceive higher levels of media bias and hostility, even after controlling for ideological extremity, political efficacy and political interest. This is consistent with HMP studies suggesting that level of personal involvement with an issue is a predictor of HMP (Christen et al., 2002; Gunther & Schmitt, 2004; Vallone et al., 1985). Most importantly, perceived media hostility is found to mediate the positive relationship between opinion leadership and both political talk and political participation. In this sense, opinion leaders are likely to be more active in information-sharing through talk and participatory activities due to perceived media hostility, but not due to perceived media bias. Perceiving media bias is not itself sufficient to drive opinion leaders to increased political participation. However, perceiving media to be hostile to one's own personal position is. It is therefore possible that opinions leaders' participation is likely driven by perceived media hostility. This is consistent with the corrective action hypothesis (Rojas, 2010), which posits that the more opinion leaders feel the need to 'correct' the voices around them, the more they feel like they have to act in order to make their own voices heard.

Noelle-Neumann (1993) suggested a link between media bias perceptions and behaviors.

People who see more partisan bias in media are more likely to participate in activities to overcome such perceived unfairness (Hwang et al., 2008). The present study makes use of such a link to explain why opinion leaders have a tendency to participate more on top of political interests and involvement. Following the logic of corrective action, they might be compensating for bias to correct perceived 'wrongs' (Rojas, 2010). Together with their high involvement in political talk and political participation, as well as their influence on their peers, we can infer that opinion leaders might be spreading more extreme views through persuasion and acting as role models to overcorrect for biases they perceive to be present in mainstream media.

On the one hand, these corrective actions could lead to polarization and a fragmented public sphere, as opinion leaders from both sides are likely to participate in opposite directions. On the other hand, these corrective actions could be a measure to compensate for actual media biases elicited by media outlets, especially in regions where media outlets are heavily biased toward a particular side. In this case, opinion leadership can create a more vibrant public sphere with alternative voices. Regardless, as opinion leaders are capable of swaying others' reactions on a variety of issues (Weimann & Brosius, 1994), we should remain aware of their influence on political polarization. More research remains to be conducted into opinion leaders' motivations and into the content they are disseminating. In other words, while we know opinion leaders participate more (Park, 2013), we remain unsure about how their participation influences society.

### ***Implications***

The findings of this study speak to whether deliberative democracy and participatory democracy are in fact compatible (Mutz, 2006). According to Pateman (1970), participatory democracy is sustained by actions performed by a large group of people regularly participating in a variety of events. Deliberative democracy, by contrast, suggests that direct interaction and discussion toward a consensus among citizens is vital (Cohen, 1997). As opinion leaders tend to engage in political behaviors aimed at mobilizing and persuading others, in order to compensate for the impact of perceived media bias, their followers might be driven to be more extreme, and thus less willing to be deliberative. This might in turn contribute to political polarization. Nonetheless, such mobilization might increase political participation, which is consistent with Mutz's (2002) findings on the negative relationship between ambivalence and willingness to participate politically. According to Mutz, individuals who are confident in their own perspectives tend to participate more, and vice versa. From this perspective, the findings reported in this study can be seen as promising for participatory democracy but not for deliberative democracy. Because opinion leaders spread new information and opinions to the masses (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944) by advocating a specific agenda (Weimann & Brosius, 1994), more research should be performed to see if the perceived biases found in this study result in more extreme attitudes among followers and in turn political polarization.

### ***Limitations***

While this study contributes to the literature on the motivations of opinion leaders, these cross-sectional data cannot fully establish the causal order. First, this study assembles relationships based on the theoretical assumption that opinion leadership precedes political participation. Second, this study utilizes data from the specific case of Colombia, and thus inferences of the results must be made with caution. Third, even though corrective action (Rojas, 2010) is used to explain such findings, presumed influence was not analyzed in this study. Future research should therefore replicate such findings with perceived influence variables in a range of countries.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> Our sample is somewhat more educated than the population but other than that the two are fairly consistent. Election results provided by the national electoral authority are available at: <https://www.registraduria.gov.co/-Historico-de-Resultados,3635-.html>



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