

# Media, Polarization, and the 2016 Election

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Matthew Gentzkow



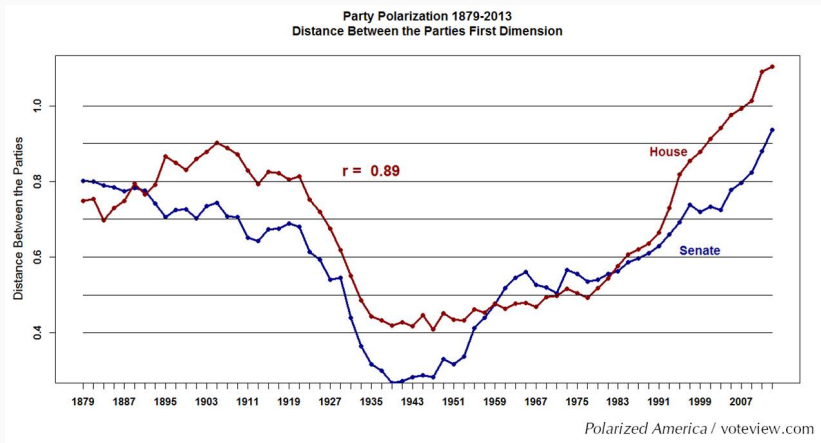
# Questions

1. Are Americans more polarized than ever before?
2. Is it the Internet's fault?
3. Did fake news change the 2016 election outcome?

# Trends in Polarization

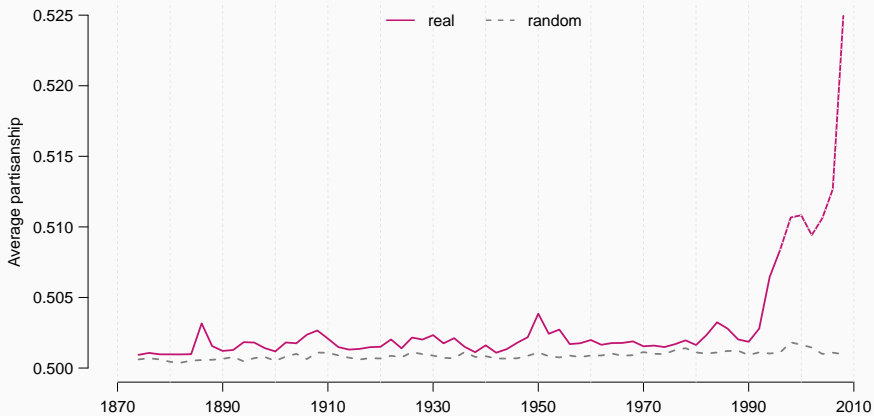
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# Congress: Roll Call Votes



Source: Poole & Rosenthal

# Congress: Partisan Language



Source: Gentzkow et al. 2016

## Voters: Prior literature

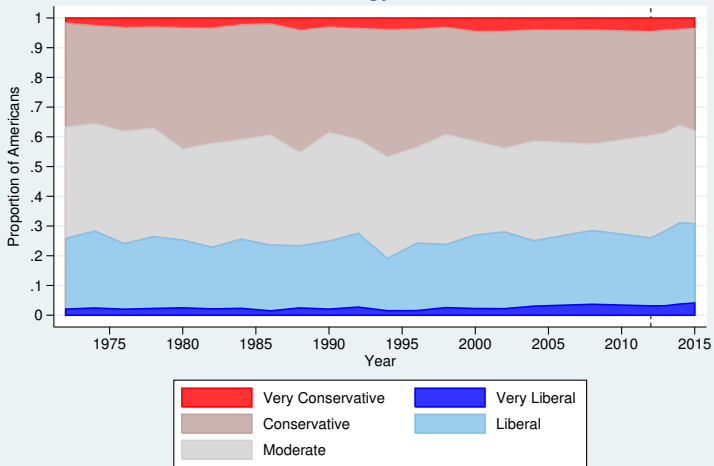
- Fiorina and Abrams (2008)
  - “The most direct evidence... shows **little or no evidence of increased polarization.**”
- Ansolabehere et al. (2006)
  - “The great divide across the American states is **not really much of a divide at all.**”
- Glaeser & Ward (2006)
  - The proposition that “America’s political divisions are increasing” is one of the “**myths of American political geography.**”

## Where *don't* we see evidence of increasing divisions?

- Views on individual issues
- Self-described ideology
- Party identification
- Residential segregation

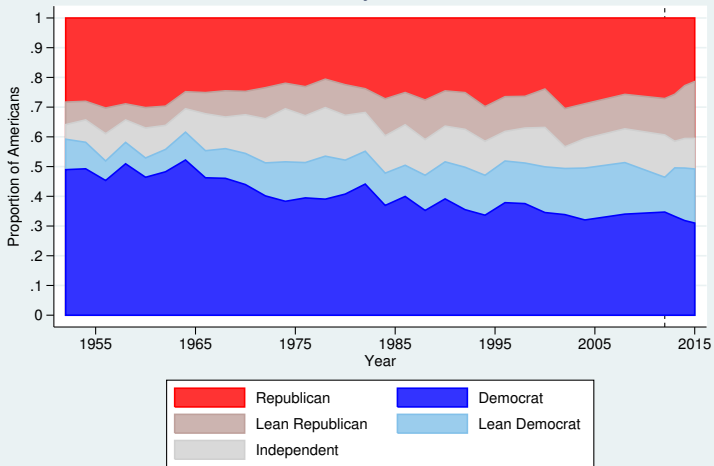


## Political Ideology, 1972 – 2015



Source: ANES (1972-2012), Pew (2013-15)

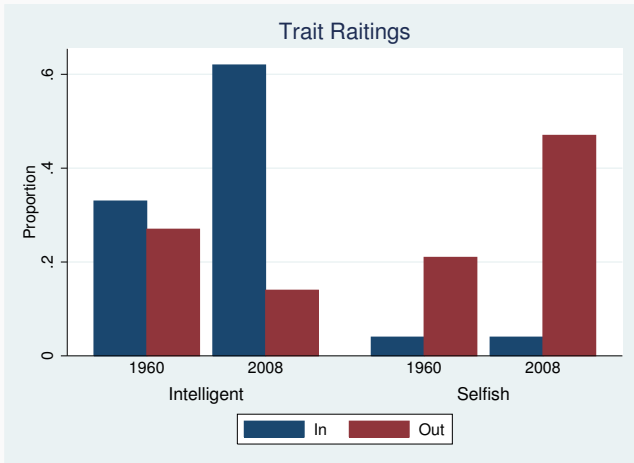
## Political Party, 1952 – 2015



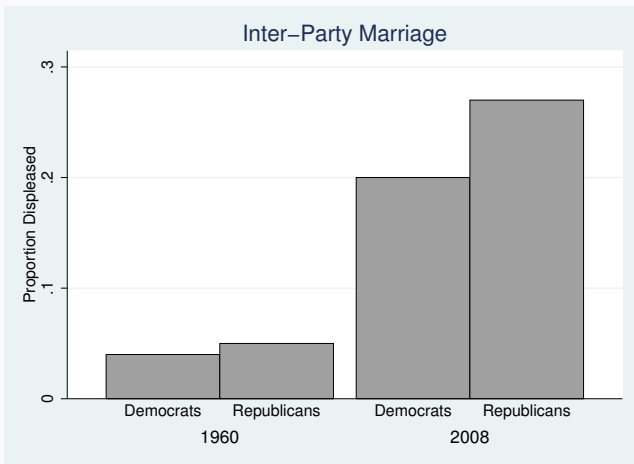
Source: ANES (1952-2012), Pew (2013-15)

## Where *do* we see evidence of increasing divisions?

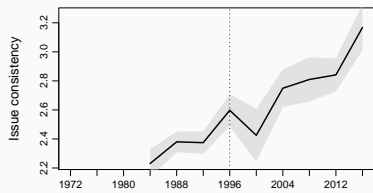
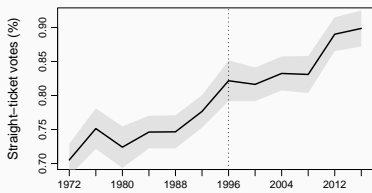
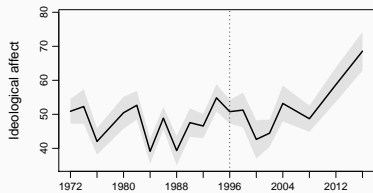
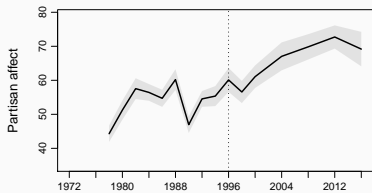
- Correlation between issue views and party
- Correlation of views across issues
- Straight ticket voting
- Hostility / negative feeling toward those on the other side



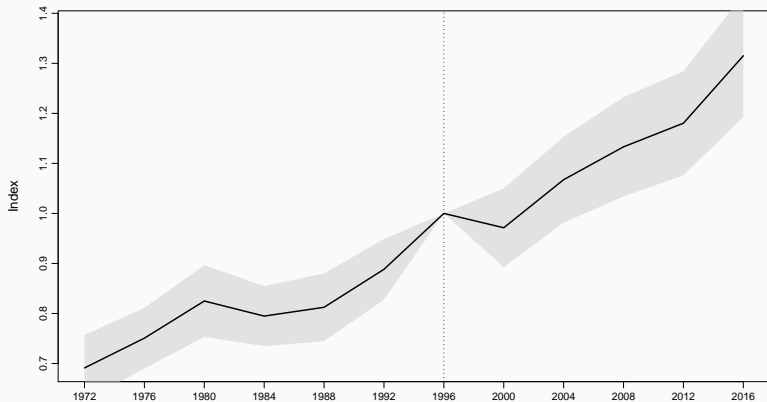
Source: Five-Nation Civic Culture Study (Almond and Verba 1960);  
YouGov/Polimetrix poll (2008)



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YouGov/Polimetrix poll (2008)



# Index of 9 Polarization Measures



## Bottom Line

- Polarization of politicians clearly increasing
- Over the last decade, increasing evidence that this is true for voters as well
- Shows up most clearly in *feelings* about the other side



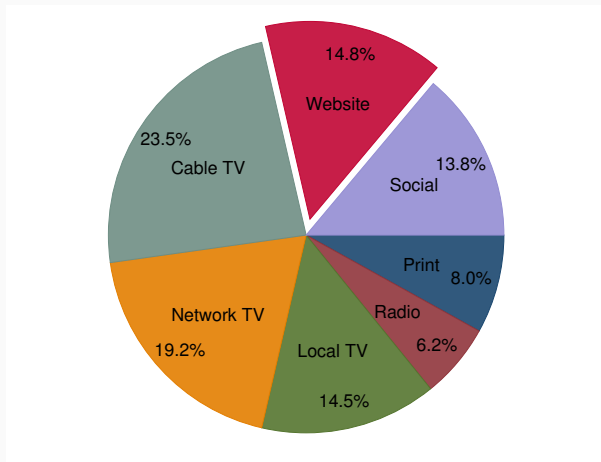
# Digital Media and Polarization

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## Birds-Eye View

- As of 2013, all digital media platforms accounted for **8%** of total news consumption time (McKinsey)
- In 2016, **18%** of Americans said they got news and information from social media “often” (Pew)
- In 2016, **14%** of Americans said social media was their “most important” source of election news (Gentzkow & Allcott 2017)

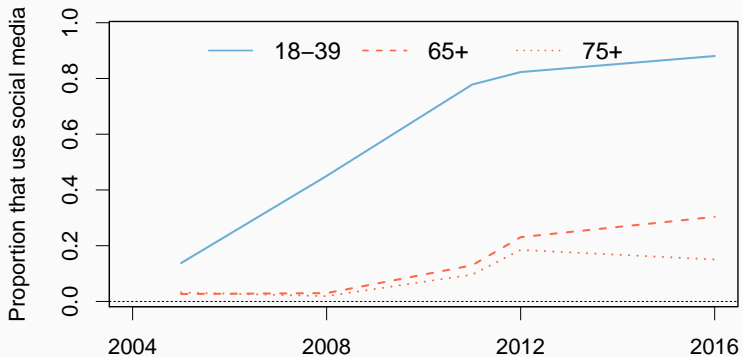
## “Most important” source of 2016 election news:



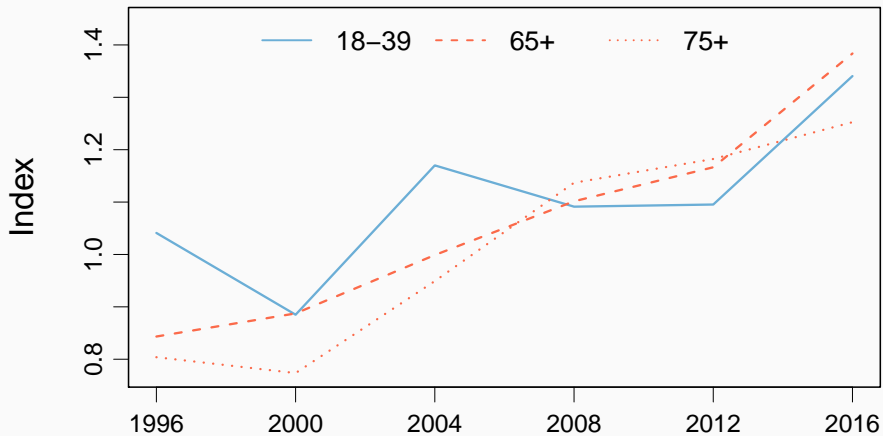
Source: Gentzkow & Allcott 2017

**Are the groups getting more polarized those that use social media the most?**

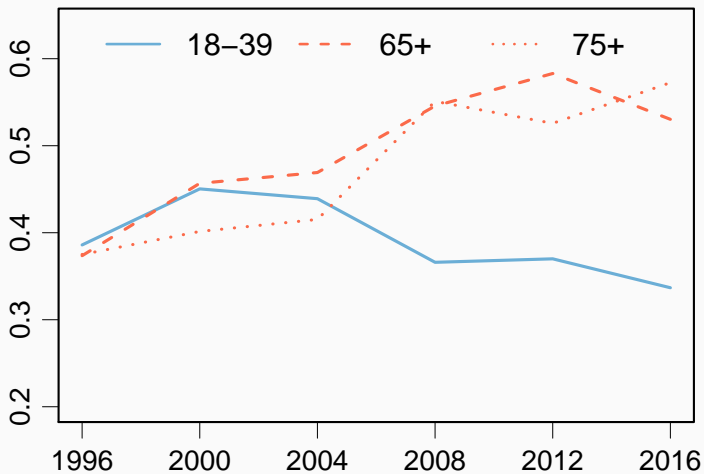
# Social media use by age



# Polarization by age



## Republican voting by age



**Are people in online echo chambers?**



## Gentzkow & Shapiro (2011)

- How ideologically segregated is online news consumption?
- How does it compare to offline media?
- How does it compare to face-to-face interactions?

# Measures

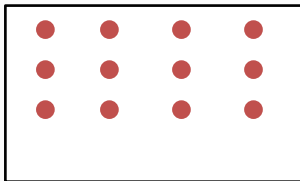
- Outlet's *share conservative* is share of daily visitors who are conservative
- Individual's *conservative exposure* is average share conservative on outlets they visit
- *Isolation Index* is difference in conservative exposure between average conservative and average liberal

## Example

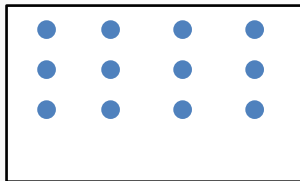
- Two outlets: nytimes.com and foxnews.com
- 12 conservatives
- 12 liberals
- Each consumer visits exactly one site

# Case 1

foxnews.com

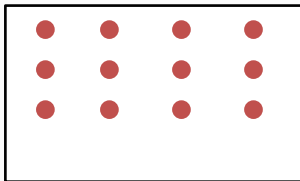


nytimes.com

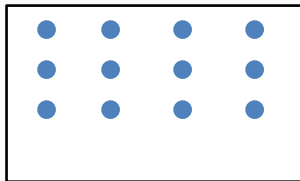


# Case 1

foxnews.com



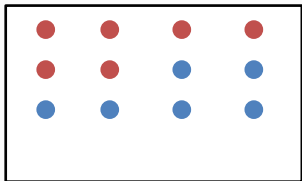
nytimes.com



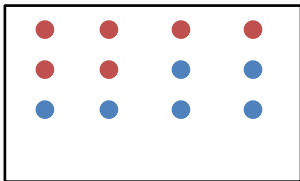
- Conservatives' conservative exposure = 1
- Liberals' conservative exposure = 0
- **Isolation index = 1**

## Case 2

foxnews.com

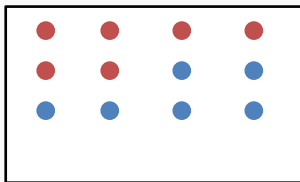


nytimes.com

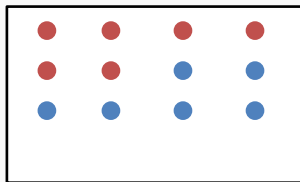


## Case 2

foxnews.com



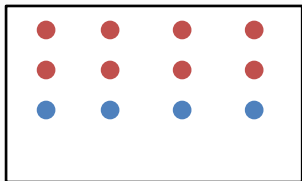
nytimes.com



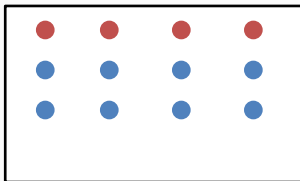
- Conservatives' conservative exposure = .5
- Liberals' conservative exposure = .5
- **Isolation index = 0**

## Case 3

foxnews.com



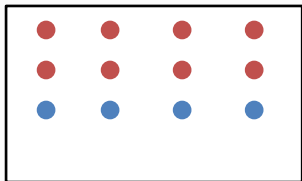
nytimes.com



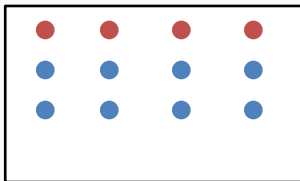


## Case 3

foxnews.com

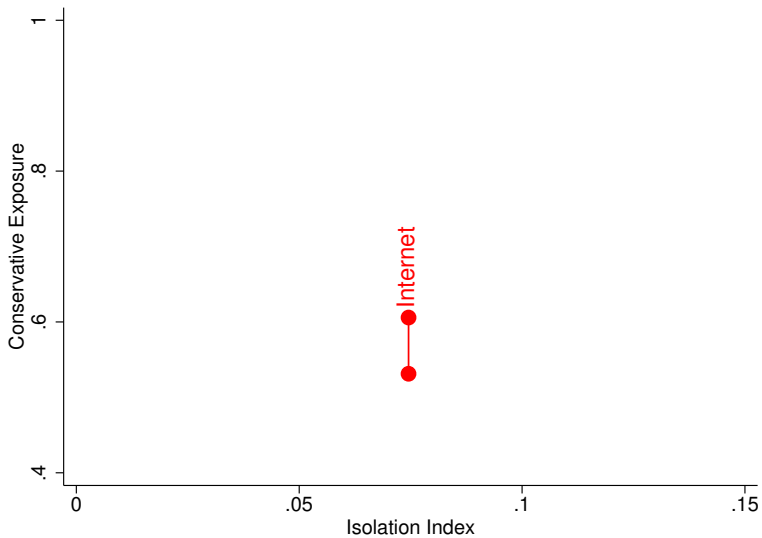


nytimes.com

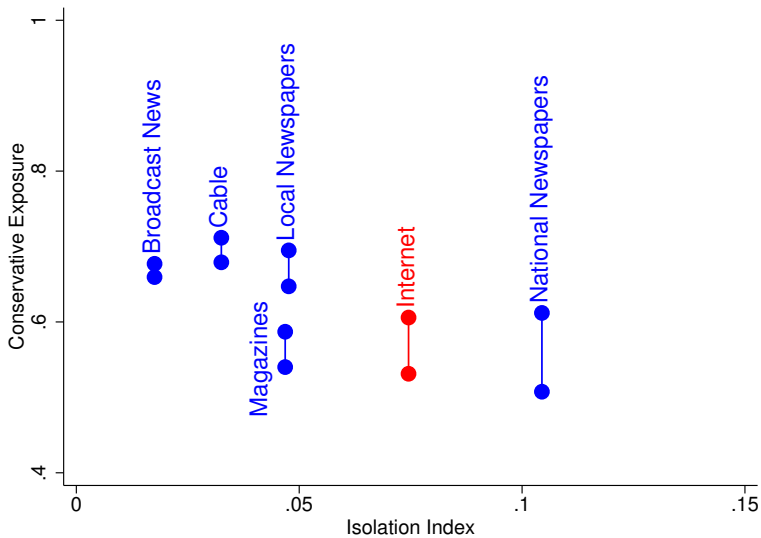


- Conservatives' conservative exposure =  $(\frac{2}{3}\frac{2}{3}) + (\frac{1}{3}\frac{1}{3}) = \frac{5}{9}$
- Liberals' conservative exposure =  $(\frac{2}{3}\frac{1}{3}) + (\frac{1}{3}\frac{2}{3}) = \frac{4}{9}$
- **Isolation index** =  $\frac{1}{9}$

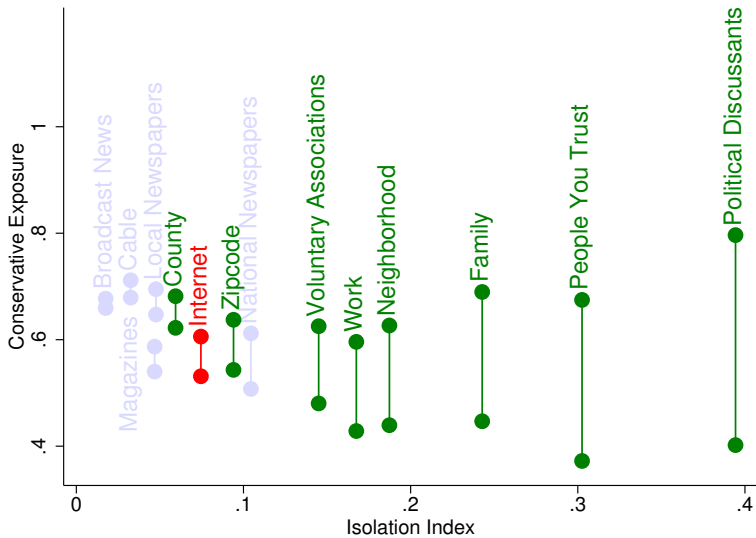
# Echo Chambers



# Echo Chambers



# Echo Chambers



# Why?

1. Most consumption still concentrated in large centrist sites
2. Those who visit extreme sites are also heavy users who sample across the spectrum

## Echo chambers in 2016

- Substantial segregation on Facebook, similar to face-to-face networks (Adamic et al. 2015)
- Still a small enough part of the news diet that overall picture has not changed dramatically (Flaxman et al. 2015)

# Fake News

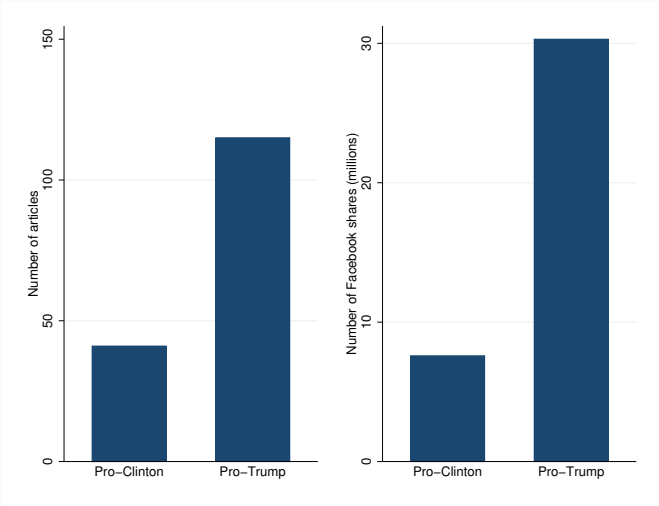
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## Sources

- Online audience data
- Fact checking websites
- New online Survey (late Nov, 2016)



# Quantity of Fake News



# Exposure to Fake News

- Method 1
  - Upper end of prior estimates: 1 share  $\leftrightarrow$  20 reads
  - Implies  $\approx$  3 fake news stories per voter

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- Method 2
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- Method 3
  - Survey: Test recall of fake and placebo stories
  - Implies  $\approx$  1.1 fake news story per voter

# Summary

- Best guess: Average voter read and remembered on the order of **1-5 fake news stories**
- Could this have changed the election outcome?

## Conclusion

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# Conclusion

- Polarization is real
- Digital media are increasingly important, but probably not the driving force
- Other explanations?
  - Cable TV
  - Politicians → voters
  - Structural factors