

Partisan “New Media” and Opinion Change, 2002-2004

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When gathering news about public affairs, citizens may now choose from a broader selection of political “new media” outlets that provide programming closely aligned with their opinions and worldviews. This study explores whether partisan opinion-based communication such as that broadcast on talk radio influence the views of their audiences. It finds that between 2002 and 2004 Democrats who regularly listened to political talk radio developed distinctly cooler feelings toward President Bush and other high-profile GOP leaders. Although these findings provide no decisive proof of media effects, they do raise questions about partisan new media’s contributions to polarization in the electorate at large. As more partisan outlets become available, existing political cleavages may widen.

Until recently, scholars found little evidence of what most political actors have long assumed: that the media may have a powerful impact on public opinion. Instead of shaping political attitudes and behavior in meaningful ways, the media seemed to have only “minimal effects” on the way Americans thought and acted. But the research consensus shifted when scholars began disentangling a number of methodological and theoretical problems (e.g., Bartels 1993). John Zaller (1996, 18), for one, found empirical evidence to decisively rebut the minimal effects paradigm:

Exactly as common intuition would suggest, mass communication is a powerful instrument for shaping the attitudes of the citizens who are exposed to it, and it exercises this power on an essentially continuous basis.

Apparently, one reason for such scant evidence was that citizens are exposed to a variety of competing messages, which often cancel each other out. That meant, for example, that during the 2004 election campaign, a week of mostly negative coverage of President Bush would have been offset by a week of positive stories. Significant media effects are difficult to tease out partly because the overall tone of standard news media coverage rarely favored one side over the other.

Recent media trends make this “canceling out” phenomenon less prevalent. Although mainstream media news outlets continue to strive for objectivity and balance, they often fall short (Groseclose and Milyo 2005)—perhaps more so today than during the “objective media” era of the 20th century (West 2001). Journalists have become more aggressive in their

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reporting and more likely to *interpret* the news rather than merely report the facts of a particular story; in other words—to paraphrase the “Five W’s” of basic news writing—they focus more on the “why” and “how” of the story than the “who,” “what,” and “when.” Sometimes the prevailing interpretations sway decidedly in one particular direction. This was the case in the early stages of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Bennett 2003), which was slanted in a pro-White House direction, and during the 1992 presidential election, which saw significantly more negative stories about President George H.W. Bush than Governor Bill Clinton (Shah et al. 1999).

Another relevant change in the media environment—the focus of this paper—is the emergence of partisan “new media” sources. Citizens on the right and left may now choose from a more diverse set of media sources that provide news and political talk closely aligned with their political views. On cable television, the Fox News Channel broadcasts news and talk shows that lean to the right and attract conservative audiences (Morris 2005). On the internet, partisan “bloggers” post links to news stories accompanied by personal commentary by the individual hosting the site; anecdotal evidence suggests that left-leaning web sites such as the Daily Kos prevail on the “blogosphere.” Political talk radio programs provide their mostly right-leaning audiences with outlets for hearing fellow conservatives talk politics on the air with a charismatic host. Other talk shows, such as the radio programs broadcast on Air America, feature decidedly liberal messages (delivered to much smaller audiences). The emergence of these partisan outlets is important because the more audiences seek out these sources at the expense of traditional news media outlets, the less they potentially expose themselves to messages that are incompatible with their beliefs (Mutz and Martin 2001).

What is the potential impact of partisan new media messages? In this study, I examined whether partisans who reported regular exposure to opinion-based media outlets experienced significant opinion change over time. Specifically, I attempted to assess the effect of regular listening to political talk radio on partisan subjects’ feelings toward President Bush and other high-profile Republican leaders.

New Media

The growing availability of new political media sources is a positive development in many respects. Americans are no longer as dependent on the mainstream media for information about public affairs. Although they still rely on daily newspapers, local television news programs, and the nightly network news, more and more citizens are supplementing—but not replacing—their traditional media diet with news, talk and commentary from such

sources as talk radio, cable TV talk shows, late-night comedy, and internet blogs. Many of these sources provide an entertaining and sometimes informative take on the day’s news. Citizens—as long as they have cable TV service and internet access—may choose from a wider array of political information sources than anyone imagined during the dominance of a more homogenous “mass media,” when many scholars were concerned about the media’s propensity to encourage mainstream thinking and conformity (for example, see Gerbner et al. 1982). Indeed, it would be a mistake to lament the fact that Americans are less reliant on the Big Three networks for political information. After all, traditional broadcast news media so often fail to provide the information voters need to make informed decisions (Patterson 1993).

Unfortunately, this new “fragmented media” environment is fraught with problems (West 2001). For one, it is easier for some citizens to tune out politics. On broadcast outlets, large chunks of the programming day—particularly the early evening—are dedicated to news. This meant that in the 1960s and 1970s, before cable was king, most Americans who wanted to watch television between the hours of 6 and 7pm had almost no choice but to watch the news. News was the only show on the majors networks during that time; “choice” constituted either selecting between one of the three network news programs, syndicated programming on a local independent channel, or turning off the television. Even unmotivated viewers gained substantive political information via television—even if it was inadvertent. Today, however, citizens who are less engaged in public affairs are more likely to opt for entertainment programming (Prior 2007). Whereas less engaged citizens were once compelled to experience “politics by default” (Neuman 1996), they now may completely avoid news about public affairs. As a result, there are wider gaps in knowledge and participation between motivated and non-motivated citizens (Prior 2007).

Yet choice has been a boon for news junkies. Engaged citizens can—and do—take advantage of a vast array of political programming on cable television and on the internet (Prior 2007). They are better informed as a result (Prior 2007). But some of these new media outlets have their own shortcomings. Talk show hosts and late-night comedians are not journalists. The programs they host are not conventional news organizations. They are thus less constrained by journalistic norms such as objectivity, fairness, and balance (Barker and Knight 2000). Indeed, according to Lee and Cappella “the norm is one-sidedness” (2001). These sources also lack the checks and balances needed to ensure accuracy in the information they present (Davis and Owen 1998). Granted, journalists and the mainstream news organizations they work for are not always objective, fair and balanced either (Groseclose and Milyo 2005; Schiffer 2006). Their mistakes are sometimes

egregious and can carry serious implications, as was the case when the *New York Times* published dozens of inaccurate stories written by reporter Jayson Blair. On the whole, however, conventional news organizations succeed in their efforts to be fair and accurate (Niven 1999). That is not the case with political talk shows, which are more concerned about entertaining their audiences, heightening conflict between the left and right, communicating particular points of view, spreading gossip, or all of the above (Davis and Owen 1998).

The effects of these differences are unclear, but potentially serious. For one, new media consumption has been associated with misinformation and distorted perceptions of political realities. Morris (2005), for example, found that viewers of the Fox News Channel were likely to underestimate the number of US casualties suffered in Iraq despite paying close attention to the news about the war. In a different study of Fox News, viewers of the network were far more likely than audiences for other news outlets to believe that the U.S. had found weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and evidence of a link between Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda (Kull et al. 2003). Others have associated misinformation with exposure to talk radio (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Hofstetter and Barker 1999), the new media outlet that is analyzed in this paper. Although it is unclear whether the new media content is extraordinarily misinformed or distorted, these findings serve as a reminder that people often “fill in” knowledge gaps selectively with information that is consistent with existing beliefs (Kuklinski et al. 1997). Partisan talk shows and other new media may foster such reasoning (Hofstetter and Barker 1999).

The focus of this paper is the new media’s potential effect on individual *attitudes*. The findings of other related studies suggest that partisan media outlets may contribute to opinion polarization in the electorate (Jones 2001; Mendelsohn and Nadeau 1996). In Canada, a fragmented media environment in Quebec seems to magnify differences between French Canadians and other citizens (Mendelsohn and Nadeau 1996). In the US, conservative Americans who listened to right-wing talk radio shifted further to the right in the mid-1990s (Jones 2001). Studies such as these underline the assumptions of group polarization theory, which holds that people’s views on particular issues tend to be enhanced or become more extreme after discussing those issues with like-minded people (e.g., Myers and Lamm 1975; Isenberg 1986).

The current paper’s research questions are designed to build on this line of work. Between 2002 and 2004, did Republicans who regularly listen to talk radio develop warmer feelings toward the President, the Vice President, and other high-profile Republicans? Did the opposite occur for Democratic listeners of talk radio? By exploring these questions, I seek to develop a

more nuanced understanding of the potential impact of new political media that communicate partisan messages.

Talk Radio

In some ways, talk radio is not “new media” at all. Radio is old technology. Local radio programs that invite listeners to call in and express their political views have been in existence for decades, and were quite popular in the 1970s. Yet a number of technological and legal factors—including the ubiquity of toll-free phone calling and the dismantling of the Fairness Doctrine—have facilitated the emergence of call-in talk shows that are national in scope (Cappella et al. 1996, 6).

By the mid-1990s, political talk radio was a leading source of alternative media (Davis and Owen 1998). Like other forms of new media, talk radio programs are free to provide listeners with an entertaining, often inflammatory form of political commentary. With opinion playing such a prominent role, talk radio programs tend to attract audiences of people who agree with what the hosts say (Owen 1997). United by shared political perspectives, listeners to any given program may experience a form of group identification with a mediated, virtual community made up of similarly minded people. This community consists of people who share not only an interest in public affairs, but also a general agreement with the political views expressed on the air. By listening to other members of such a community, people learn values, norms, ways of thinking and speaking (Herbst 1995, 23). Listeners who identify with, or somehow belong to, a talk radio audience can turn to their program for political cues—sometimes called information shortcuts or heuristics (Chaiken 1980; Mondak 1993). By listening to the discussion on the air, members of this community can find out, on a very specific level, “what people like me think.” Perhaps partisan talk shows help audience members make sense of an otherwise confusing political world overflowing with policy details, ideological distinctions, and strategic political maneuvering.

Does opinion change follow? What effects do talk radio messages have on their audiences? On the whole, the most popular talk radio shows attract decidedly conservative listeners (Bennett 2002; Bolce et al. 1996; Cappella et al. 1996; Owen 1997), although liberal or moderate shows and audiences do exist in smaller numbers (Lee and Cappella 2001). With Rush Limbaugh and other like-minded hosts dominating the airwaves, the medium provides a safe haven of sorts for conservatives disgruntled with the so-called “liberal media” (Jones 2004). Listening to talk radio has been associated with negative feelings toward President Clinton (Owen 2000) and Al Gore (Holbert 2004), positive feelings toward George Bush (Holbert 2004), and

Republican vote choice (Barker 1999). Talk radio messages thus may have a greater potential to *reinforce* existing predispositions rather than persuade listeners to change their minds (Lee and Cappella 2001; Owen 1997; Yanovitsky and Cappella 2001). Furthermore, the anti-government messages that prevail on talk radio may deepen listeners' negative attitudes toward government institutions (Pfau et al. 1998). Even though attitude reinforcement is sometimes portrayed as a "minimal effect" (Zaller 1996), it can be consequential, especially if members of the audience are becoming more conservative over time (Barker 2002; Barker 2000; Jones 2004). This is especially important in light of evidence that talk radio can also have a *mobilizing* effect, spurring listeners to contact elected officials (Pan and Kosicki 1997) and stimulating other types of political participation (Hofstetter 1996; Hollander 1996).

In sum, existing research suggests that talk radio and other forms of new media communicate messages that can shape opinions and spur behavior. Although their tendency to attract like-minded audiences makes dramatic persuasion effects "tricky" to demonstrate (Barker 2000), subtle shifts in opinion can have important consequences.

Methods

One approach to exploring media effects is to analyze individual opinion change over time, analyzing patterns among different types of media users. For this study, I did just that by looking at the 840 American National Election Study panelists who participated in the 2000, 2002 and 2004 surveys.¹ The key dependent variables were feelings toward key Republican figures prominent in the news (and therefore presumably on political talk shows): President Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, First Lady Laura Bush, John Ashcroft and Colin Powell, as measured by feeling thermometers.² The key independent variable was talk radio exposure. Since I eventually analyzed changes in these thermometer scores and the extent to which talk radio listening explains these shifts, I controlled for other factors that may help explain this sort of opinion change.

The two key variable sets warrant elaboration:

Feeling thermometers. After examining the data, I realized that changes in these particular thermometer scores between 2000 and 2002 would be distorted by the effects of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Accordingly, I limited my analysis to opinion change between 2002 and 2004, setting aside the feeling thermometer scores for 2000. In 2002, the feeling thermometer questions were asked during the pre-election survey; in 2004, during the post-election survey.

Talk Radio. Only in the 2000 post-election survey were respondents asked whether they listened to talk radio—or, radio programs “in which people call in to voice their opinions about politics.” Subjects who said “yes” were then asked two follow-up questions: whether they (1) listen every day, most days, once or twice a week, or only occasionally and (2) pay very close attention, fairly close attention, occasional attention, or very little attention. For my analysis, regular talk radio listeners were the 165 panelists who said they listen to call-in political radio at least “once or twice a week” and pay at least “fairly close attention.” My first assumption then was that these respondents—because they indicated regular, close attention in 2000—were still listening in 2002 and 2004. Although this is admittedly a stretch, I hope that the elimination of inattentive occasional listeners made drop-offs less likely.³

Results

Univariate analysis revealed no surprises: overall, feelings cooled toward the President, Vice President and Attorney General between 2002 and 2004, but remained warm for the less polarizing First Lady and Secretary of State. Still benefiting from his perceived leadership during 9/11 and the war on terrorism, President Bush’s mean thermometer score was 65.5 in 2002—nine points higher than two years earlier. Between 2002 and 2004, however, it dropped about seven points to 58.5. Vice President Cheney’s mean thermometer score started lower in 2002 (59.9), but also declined by about seven points by 2004. John Ashcroft dropped from 55.8 to 49.3 on average. Laura Bush, by contrast, was regarded warmly both years, finishing 2004 with a mean thermometer rating of 68.3—a two point increase from 2002. Similarly, Colin Powell maintained his popularity, dropping insignificantly from 72.0 in 2002 to 69.9 in 2004.

Did new media exposure help explain the shifts that occurred and the differences in ratings? Turning to the panelists who participated in both years, I computed change scores by subtracting the 2002 thermometer rating from its 2004 counterpart. I then compared mean change scores across various groups distinguished in terms of their talk radio habits.

The first comparison was between regular talk radio listeners and non-listeners. Here, no patterns emerged. Regular talk radio listeners felt cooler toward President Bush, Cheney, and Ashcroft in 2004 than in 2002, but no more so than non-listeners. As with non-listeners, Laura Bush and Colin Powell maintained their high ratings among talk radio listeners.

Yet this first-order analysis overlooks the partisan elements of political talk radio and other new media outlets (see discussion at the beginning of this paper). Although talk radio is most popular among conservative

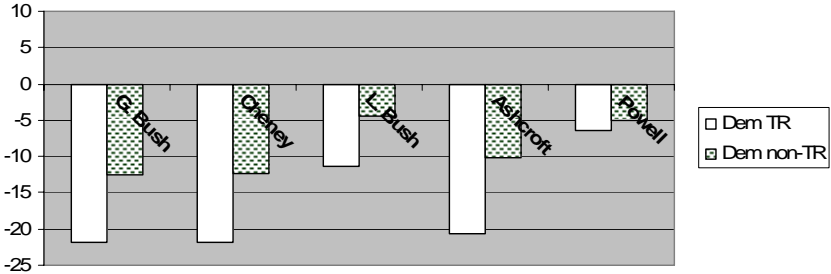
Republicans, left-leaning talk is broadcast on National Public Radio, local political call-in shows hosted by Randi Rhodes and Michael Jackson, and stations with a predominately African-American audience (Squires 2000); presumably, they also attract like-minded audiences.⁴ In any case, it would be mistake to lump together all talk radio programs and their listeners. Unfortunately, only in 1996 did the NES include a question measuring exposure to a particular radio program, the one hosted by Rush Limbaugh. To help compensate, I separated talk radio listeners and non-listeners into six groups along partisan lines:⁵

- (1) Republicans who regularly listen to talk radio (N = 80)
- (2) Democrats who listen regularly to talk radio (N = 36)
- (3) Independents who listen regularly to talk radio (N = 49)
- (4) Republicans who do not listen to talk radio (N = 180)
- (5) Democrats who do not listen to talk radio (N = 236) and
- (6) Independents who do not listen to talk radio (N = 250)

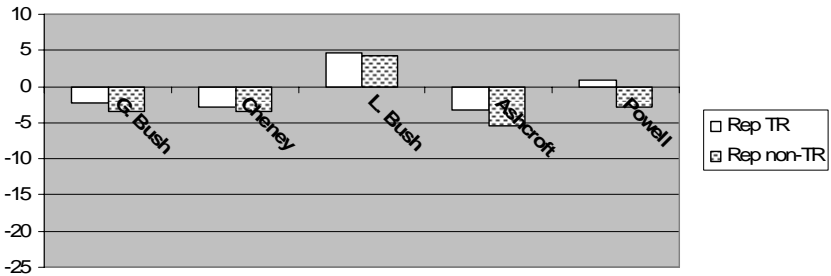
I thus operated under another key measurement assumption: that self-identified Republicans who listened to talk radio primarily tuned in to conservative programs such as Limbaugh's, and that self-identified Democratic and independent listeners mostly tuned in to radio programs that were similarly compatible with their beliefs. No doubt many of these subjects listened to a variety of political talk shows, not all of them consistent with their personal partisan orientations. Indeed, the Limbaugh audience includes quite a few liberal Democrats (Barker 2002). But I will assume that most of the programming favored by the typical talk radio regular leans in the direction of their existing leanings.

These results also followed likely patterns. Democrats on the whole were bound to develop cooler feeling toward the three most polarizing Republicans studied here: President Bush, Cheney and Ashcroft—and that proved to be the case here (Figure 1). But the decline was precipitous among regular talk radio listeners who identified themselves as Democrats. On average, Democrats who regularly listened to talk radio rated President Bush 21.8 points cooler on the thermometer scale in 2004 than they did in 2002. That is nine points steeper than the decline among Democrats who did not listen to talk radio (down 12.6 points; $p < .01$). Independents who listened regularly to talk radio also rated Bush significantly lower (down 8.1 points), slightly more so than independents who did not listen to talk radio (Figure 3). Among Republican regular listeners, by contrast, feelings toward Bush cooled only slightly—down 2.2 points (Figure 2).

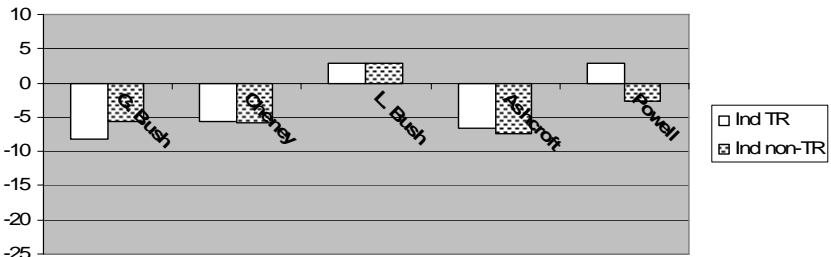
**Figure 1. Democrats
Feeling Thermometer Changes 2002 vs. 2004**



**Figure 2. Republicans
Feeling Thermometer Changes 2002-2004**



**Figure 3. Independents
Feeling Thermometer Changes 2002-2004**



Total = All Respondents (N = 831)

Rep non-TR = Republicans who did not regularly listen to talk radio (N = 180)

Ind non-TR = Independents did not regularly listen to talk radio (N = 250)

Dem non-TR = Democrats did not regularly listen to talk radio (N = 236)

Rep TR = Republicans who regularly listened to talk radio (N = 80)

Ind TR = Independents who regularly listened to talk radio (N = 49)

Dem TR = Democrats who regularly listened to talk radio (N = 36)

Source (data): American National Election Study 2000-2002-2004 Full Panel File, Center for Political Studies.

For Vice President Cheney and John Ashcroft, the declines followed similar patterns. Cheney was down 22 points among Democrats who regularly listened to talk radio, ten points sharper than among non-listening Democrats (down 12.3 points; $p < .01$). Ashcroft's rating also dropped ten points sharper among Democratic talk radio regulars ($p < .01$). Among independents, the differences between talk radio regulars and non-regulars were negligible. But among Republicans, regular talk radio listeners exhibited more support for Cheney and Ashcroft than their non-listening fellow partisans. Although Cheney was down only slightly among Republicans who listen regularly (down 2.8 points) and those who do not (down 3.4 points), Ashcroft's decline was sharper among non-listening Republicans (down 5.4 points compared with a decline of only 3.3 points for talk radio regulars).

The differences were perhaps most striking with First Lady Laura Bush. Recall that overall her thermometer scores rose slightly between 2002 and 2004. Comparing groups, however, this steady pattern held for only independents and Republicans—regular talk radio listeners and non-regulars alike, with Republicans increasing by a slightly higher amount. Democrats who reported regular listening to talk radio rated her significantly *lower* in 2004 than in 2002, cooling by 11.4 points compared with a relatively minor 4.4-point decline among non-listening Democrats ($p < .01$).

For Colin Powell, it was Republican and independent talk radio regulars who bucked the trend. Whereas the other groups developed slightly cooler feelings toward Bush's Secretary of State, warmer feelings emerged among independents and Republicans who listened to talk radio regularly. Still, the differences between the groups were relatively slight.

In sum, one group in particular underwent significant opinion shifts between 2002 and 2004: Democrats who regularly listened to talk radio. Toward the President, Vice President, First Lady, and Attorney General, they cooled more than not only Republicans and independents, but also fellow Democrats who were not regular talk radio listeners. Also noteworthy is that Republicans who listened to talk radio—more so than their non-listening GOP counterparts—held steady in their feelings toward these three Republican figures, cooling relatively slightly between 2002 and 2004.

If partisan talk listeners underwent significant opinion change between 2002 and 2004, how much of these shifts can be explained by their exposure to talk radio? Was there a causal relationship between talk radio listening and increasingly cool feelings toward high-profile Republicans? It would be difficult to answer this question without controlled media-effects experiments (e.g., Iyengar 1991; Iyengar and Kinder 1983; Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1996). But OLS regression analysis using panel data moves us a step closer. For a more rigorous test of the prospect that new media exposure is a key factor explaining these shifts, I regressed each of the thermometers

scores for 2004 on (1) their 2002 counterparts (2) a measure of talk radio listening and (3) two other variables that plausibly could have influenced changes in feelings toward these political figures. By incorporating the lagged value of the dependent variable, I have created a model of attitude change. This allowed me to focus on factors that may have contributed to opinion shifts between 2002 and 2004 (presumably, the effects of more stable factors are reflected in the lagged dependent variable). One potential source of influence—and the one that is of greatest interest here—was exposure to talk radio, for which I created a dummy variable (1 = respondent regularly and closely listened to talk radio). Other possible influences on attitude change between 2002 and 2004 included whether the respondent (1) perceived the war in Iraq—which started in 2003—was worth the cost⁶ and (2) is financially better or worse off compared with a year before. Other relatively stable control measures (e.g., ideology) should be captured in the lagged versions of the dependent variables.

Table 1. Talk Radio and Feelings toward Key Republican Figures: Democrats vs. Republicans

	G. Bush T 2004	Cheney FT 2004	L. Bush FT 2004	Ashcroft FT 2004	Powell FT 2004
Democrats					
Regular talk radio	-.09**	-.10**	-.10*	-.10**	.05
Support for Iraq War	.39**	.36**	.23**	.23**	.09*
Economic pessimism	-.05	.02	-.07	-.02	-.14**
2002 FT	.42**	.48**	.47**	.61**	.50**
<i>Adj. R</i> ²	.47	.47	.32	.51	.32
<i>N</i>	415	397	383	299	393
Republicans					
Regular talk radio	.05	.09*	.09*	.09*	.08
Support for Iraq War	.34**	.34**	.29**	.29**	.15**
Economic pessimism	-.01	.04	-.06	.03	.00
2002 FT	.53**	.51**	.40**	.48**	.47**
<i>Adj. R</i> ²	.57	.51	.33	.41	.27
<i>N</i>	381	373	375	325	374

*p ≤ .05

**p ≤ .01

FT = Feeling Thermometer Rating (1-100)

Source (data): American National Election Study 2000-2002-2004 Full Panel File, Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan.

Is partisan talk radio associated with opinion change even when controlling for all of these other potential sources of influence between 2002 and 2004? For the most part, that appears to be the case. Table 1 shows separate results for Democrats and Republicans on the relationship between regular talk radio listening and feelings toward all five subjects, controlling for the lagged dependent variable and the two other controls.⁷ For Democrats, regular talk radio listening was associated with significantly cooler feelings toward four of the five subjects. For Republicans, three of the five subjects significantly benefited from regular talk radio listening. These relationships held even when several other plausible sources were held constant.

Discussion

It would be a mistake to overstate the strength of the evidence presented here. The models are inherently incomplete. The measurement assumptions entailed several compromises. As is always the case when attempting to analyze attitudinal change, other explanatory factors were either overlooked in theory or unmeasured or both. Indeed, other studies of talk radio and other forms of new media (e.g., Barker 1999)—including research by the current author—have benefited from more precise measures of key concepts.

Yet, it also would be a mistake to use measurement limitations as a reason to set aside NES data for analyzing the new media phenomenon during this time frame. And the essence of these results is worth underlining: that exposure to a partisan new media outlet is associated with significant movement in opinion over time. Although there is nothing extraordinary about attitudinal shifts among like-minded people, it is noteworthy that particular forms of media use seem to help explain these changes—even when available measures are limited. To be sure, the shifts suggest a *reinforcement* effect—perhaps more evidence of minimal consequences—rather than full-fledged persuasion. It is possible that talk radio listeners are the type of people who polarize during the course of a presidency.⁸ Few of the respondents changed their minds about the President, Vice President and First Lady. Democrats were inclined to feel coolly about them and Republicans were inclined to feel warmly. But those who tuned in to a particular form of media shifted further than their fellow partisans—in opposite directions. Such shifts did not occur among people who did not listen regularly to talk radio.

The widespread availability of nationally distributed partisan new media is a fairly recent phenomenon (Davis and Owen 1998). But their appeal is hardly mysterious. When given the opportunity, “people invoke

their own political preferences when they search out sources of information—they attempt to locate a bias that reflects their own predispositions and self-perceived interests” (Huckfeldt et al. 1995, 1049). Survey evidence suggests that “conservatives and liberals are increasingly choosing sides” in terms of where they get their news about public affairs (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2004, 13). The findings of this study hint at what may happen when people tune in to partisan new media on a regular basis. From partisan political outlets, like-minded members of the audience experience political communication primarily among people who think like themselves. They hear and see charismatic talk show hosts elucidate and articulate *why* they feel the way they do. The views they already support are less likely to be “cancelled out” by other perspectives (at least until they change the channel or read the newspaper). Armed with the knowledge that their views are shared by millions of others, their feelings sometimes shift every so slightly. In this case, Democrats shifted a bit further to the left, Republicans to the right.

Perhaps partisan media outlets already contribute to “the magnification of social cleavages” and other forms of opinion polarization (Mendelsohn and Nadeau 1996). Although it is easy to exaggerate the depth and breadth of polarization in the US electorate (Fiorina 2005), there are deep divisions between a broad swath of Democratic and Republican voters (Abramowitz and Saunders 2006). The public’s news consumption habits seem to reflect these cleavages (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2004). As partisan new media outlets become more widely available, existing divisions may become further accentuated.

NOTES

¹For providing the data, I am grateful to the National Election Studies / Center for Political Studies at the University of Michigan. I am solely responsible for errors and interpretations of these data.

²Admittedly, the choice of these particular individuals was partly determined by the availability of indicators in more than one wave. Indeed, this explains why no Democrats were used in the analysis. Whereas in 2000 Al Gore and Bill Clinton dominated political discussion, John Kerry was the party’s standard bearer in 2004. By contrast, all five Republicans maintained high profiles across all three waves.

³Analysis of related measures suggests that media use can be fairly stable for regular viewers and readers. Among respondents who said they read a newspaper at least four days a week in 2000, about 80 percent reported the same level of newspaper reading two years later. Among regular TV viewers of the national news in 2000, about 76 percent reported watching the national news in 2002.

⁴Because it was not created until 2004, Air America Radio—a national network for progressive talk shows—falls outside of the time frame for this analysis.

⁵As a measure of party identification, I used the NES's summary party identification variable that combines the question, "Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?" with the follow-up measure of party strength, "Would you call yourself a strong Democrat/Republican or a not very strong Democrat/ Republican?" and the probe for independents, "Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican Party or to the Democratic party?" For my analysis, Republicans and Democrats included both strong and weak identifiers along with independent leaners, leaving only a handful of "pure" independents.

⁶Respondents were asked, "Taking everything into account, do you think the war in Iraq has been worth the cost or not?" I treated this as a dummy variable with 1 = worth it.

⁷Because so few panelists identified themselves as pure independents, I did not include a separate regression for this category of respondents.

⁸For raising this point, I give full credit to one of the anonymous reviewers who evaluated this manuscript.

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