Research Report

Avoiding the Other Side? An Eye-Tracking Study on Selective Exposure and Selective Avoidance
Effects in Response to Political Advertising

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Abstract

Partisan selective exposure, the phenomenon of selectively attending to information that is in line with one's political views, has received extensive research attention. Researchers have thus far largely neglected, however, to examine the tendency to avoid attitude-discrepant information—that is, selective avoidance. Selective avoidance can be considered a different phenomenon that is not necessarily implied by nor only occurs simultaneously with selective exposure. This study investigates these two separate phenomena, for the first time, using eye-tracking methodology. We exposed participants to political ads by liberal and conservative parties placed next to neutral political ads and tracked eye-movements unobtrusively. Findings showed that individuals paid more visual attention to political ads that were consistent with their partisan ideology. Additionally, we found that individuals tended to avoid political ads that were inconsistent with their partisan ideology, which provides some evidence for selective avoidance processes. Theoretical and practical implications of those findings are discussed.

Keywords: selective exposure, selective avoidance, political advertising, partisan ideology, eye-tracking

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Avoiding the Other Side? An Eye-Tracking Study on Selective Exposure and Selective Avoidance
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Exposure to diverse political viewpoints is a necessary condition for the existence of a deliberative democracy (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996). The fast-moving development of communication technologies and changing patterns of political information, characterized by increasing abundant information and diverse sources to choose from, theoretically offer citizens increasing options to expose themselves to diverse opinions (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017). Yet, researchers have repeatedly observed two different biases in individuals' political information behavior, which although related, can be theoretically and empirically distinguished (Garrett, 2009; Jang, 2014). Selective exposure refers to an individual's tendency to expose oneself primarily to attitude-consistent opinions (Hart et al., 2009), while the tendency to avoid attitude-discrepant information—regardless of whether or not competing attitude-consistent content is available—is referred to as selective avoidance (Jang, 2014). Treating the two phenomena as separate is crucial, because people can seek opinion-reinforcing information without avoiding opinion-discrepant information and vice versa (Garrett, 2009).

In the context of political advertising, these biases have received scant research attention thus far. In the age of ad blockers, filter algorithms, and TV streaming services, it has never been easier to avoid political advertising with relatively low effort. These new characteristics of media use challenge both advertisers and political actors who are trying to convey their messages to the voters. For those reasons, politicians are still inclined to use media channels that hamper complete selective avoidance, such as political poster ads, which are still one of the most important means of political advertising in many European countries (Dumitrescu, 2010; Schott & Wolf, 2018). Yet, only because political posters are present in public spaces during election campaigns or because political ads pop up on a computer screen, people do not necessarily *pay attention* to this content. Therefore, more research is needed—in particular using behavioral measurement—to investigate

people's actual visual attention rather than their sole exposure to information that corresponds or disagrees with their political views.

Using eye-tracking methodology, first evidence suggests that when being able to choose between attitude-consistent and -discrepant ads, voters selectively attend to political ads, which are in line with their political predispositions (Marquart et al, 2016). We extend those findings in two important ways. First, we systematically distinguish between selective exposure—that is, a preferred visual attention to attitude-consistent information, and selective avoidance—that is, a visual aversion to attitude-discrepant information (Garrett et al., 2014). Second, unlike Marquart and colleagues' work (2016), our study includes not only attitude-consistent and -discrepant information but also neutral information. Only when neutral information is available, selective avoidance can be effectively assessed independently from selective exposure (Jang, 2014). We investigate these two phenomena using the unbiased and straightforward eye-tracking methodology, which represents an important contribution to the field as a whole (King et al., 2019).

Selective Exposure, Partisan Ideology, and Political Advertising

Selective exposure can be understood as “any observable bias of exposure to available communication content, captured through behavioral measures of media use” (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015, p. 960). Based on this definition, selective visual attention can be considered an important subtype of selective exposure, which has been insufficiently accounted for in existing research. The phenomenon of selective exposure has often been explained with Festinger's (1957) dissonance theory, which posits that individuals experience an uncomfortable psychological state if their beliefs, knowledge, and/or actions are inconsistent (e.g., Cotton, 1985; Jang, 2014). To reduce this experience of dissonance, individuals can selectively choose information that is consistent with their prior attitudes (Cotton, 1985; Festinger, 1957). Going beyond the explanation of cognitive dissonance, newer approaches such as the Selective Exposure Self- and Affect-Management (SESAM) framework by Knobloch-Westerwick (2015) take into account different influence factors found in earlier studies such as self-concept, affective states, cognitions, and behaviors that affect

the selection of a message among other available alternatives (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015). More specifically, the SESAM model posits that media exposure motivations such as a desire for self-consistency as well as anticipated media impacts, for instance, expected positive affect, drive selective exposure behavior. Additionally, media stimuli can activate a certain self-concept, which guides the subsequent selection and processing of other messages (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015; Marquart et al., 2016).

In the field of political communication, partisan ideology has been identified as an important driver of selecting attitude-consistent information, a phenomenon called partisan selective exposure (e.g., Garrett, 2009; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Marquart et al., 2016). For instance, Iyengar and Hahn (2009) have observed that conservatives and liberals follow different patterns in news selection and tend to select news based on anticipated agreement with their political opinions. Along similar lines, Taber and Lodge (2006) found that individuals prefer to read attitude-consistent arguments, when they are free to self-select the arguments. In line with the SESAM model, the tendency to select content that corresponds with one's partisan ideology has been explained by individuals' need for reinforcing their political views (Garrett, 2009) as well as a more positive evaluation of arguments that are attitudinally congruent (Taber & Lodge, 2006).

To capture selective exposure behavior as accurately as possible, scholars have recently gone beyond self-reported measurements and have systematically turned to behavioral measures (Jang, 2014; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015; Marquart, et al., 2016). For instance, in the context of political poster advertising, Marquart and colleagues (2016) used eye movements as indicators of selective exposure behavior. The study showed that voters spend more visual attention to attitude-consistent rather than attitude-discrepant political posters (Marquart et al., 2016). In an attempt to replicate and extend that research, we investigated whether or not individuals also pay more visual attention to attitude-consistent stimuli when the alternative information is neutral and unrelated to one's political views (Jang, 2014). Specifically, we expected that:

H1: Higher support for a liberal party increases the average time spent looking at liberal political ads (placed next to neutral political ads).

H2: Higher support for a conservative party increases the average time spent looking at conservative political ads (placed next to neutral political ads).

Selective Avoidance as a Distinct Phenomenon

Selective avoidance is the evasion or circumvention of information that differs from individuals' views (Jang, 2014). The underlying process of selective avoidance might be the desired reduction of cognitive dissonance aroused by the incongruity of a message and one's political beliefs (Festinger, 1957). Although being theoretically related to selective exposure, researchers have argued that selective avoidance should be considered two different rather than inverse processes for at least two reasons: (1) Non-seeking acts do not always entail avoidance behaviors (McLoud & Becker, 1974) and (2) selective avoidance does not exclusively occur together with selective exposure (Jang, 2014). Instead, selective avoidance refers to the act of selectively screening out counter-attitudinal information irrespective of whether competing attitude-consistent information is available or not (Garrett, 2009). Thus, selective avoidance does not simply mean the preference for attitude-consistent over attitude-discrepant content. By extension, selectively avoiding attitude-discrepant content does not automatically mean exposing oneself to attitude-consistent content but could also imply not exposing oneself to any information or preferring neutral information (Jang, 2014).

Following this line of reasoning, previous scholarship has empirically demonstrated the independence of approach and avoidance behaviors in political information seeking. For instance, Garrett (2009) observed that when having control over their political information exposure, individuals' tendency to prefer attitude-consonant information is higher than their avoidance of attitude-discrepant information. In the same vein, Garrett and colleagues (2013) found that voters who visited attitude-consistent political websites did not necessarily also avoid attitude-discrepant online information. They conclude that although individuals seem to prefer attitude-consistent

sources, they are not driven to systematically avoid sources of attitude-discrepant information. Yet, there is evidence for selective avoidance behavior when the counter-attitudinal information is particularly high in ideological relevance (e.g., Nam et al. 2013), which suggests that political advertising provides an important context to investigate acts of selective avoidance.

Similar to selective exposure, earlier studies on selective avoidance (e.g., Garrett et al., 2013) have been limited by the use of self-report measurements, and studies measuring actual behavior are scarce (but see Jang, 2014). Therefore, for the first time, we track eye-movements to investigate selective avoidance. Transferred to the visual context, selective avoidance is the act of not paying attention to attitude-discrepant content regardless of whether competing attitude-consistent content is available or not. Thus, visual selective avoidance behavior can take place independently from visual selective exposure behavior and vice versa. Since previous research suggests that selective avoidance can only be effectively assessed independently of selective exposure when neutral information is available (Jang, 2014), we operationalized selective avoidance by assessing the time individuals spend on looking at attitude-discrepant political ads next to neutral political ads. The resulting time provides insight into the tendency for selective avoidance.

Specifically, we expected that individuals who sympathize with a liberal party would avoid—that is, spend less time looking at—conservative political ads. By the same token, those who identify with a conservative party would selectively avoid liberal political ads. More formally, we hypothesized:

H3: Higher support for a liberal party decreases the average time spent looking at conservative political ads (placed next to neutral political ads).

H4: Higher support for a conservative party decreases the average time spent looking at liberal political ads (placed next to neutral political ads).

Method

We conducted a within-subject experiment in November 2015 for which we recruited individuals with liberal and conservative party support via personal networks and flyers ($N = 76$, $M_{age} = 24.95$, $SD = 4.8$, 18–49 years, $n_{female} = 40$, $n = 35$ with university degree). To encourage participation, three 20-euro Amazon gift cards were raffled. Participants attended the recording sessions individually in the laboratory. Upon giving their consent and successful calibration, participants were instructed to look at a total of 12 political ads on the screen based on their own interest. The ads were referred to as election campaign poster ads and were organized in 6 pairs, that is, we had 3 pairs of liberal poster ads combined with neutral poster ads and 3 pairs of conservative poster ads combined with neutral poster ads. The order of political ads within each candidate was randomized as was the left-versus-right placement on the computer screen. Each pair of political ads appeared for 6 seconds, which is in the range of time spent looking at political ads in real life (see Marquart et al., 2016). After the eye-tracking session, participants completed a short survey and were debriefed.

Stimuli

For the neutral political ads, we used two political candidates with no party affiliation and stressed their neutrality on the posters. For the liberal political ads, we used poster ads by the liberal Austrian Green party (see Appendix), and for the conservative political ads, poster ads by the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP). We chose these two parties because they can be placed at opposite positions in the political spectrum, but nevertheless have a rather high educated and thus comparable electorate. Following Jang (2014), we used non-party candidates for the neutral political ads. We chose typical top candidates of both parties, which was a male candidate for the conservative party and a female candidate for the liberal party. To avoid gender biases, we selected female and male candidates for neutral political ads and placed the female neutral candidate next to the liberal (female) candidate and the male neutral candidate next to the conservative (male) candidate. All stimuli had a similar layout displaying the candidate, a party logo, and a slogan.

Measures

We measured selective exposure as the time spent looking at an attitude-consistent poster next to a neutral poster and selective avoidance as the time spent looking at an attitude-discrepant poster next to a neutral poster. We used a stationary SMI iView X Red eye-tracker that measures pupil movement in relation to the stimulus on the screen. Eye position was sampled at 120 Hz and we measured fixation time in milliseconds for each of the 12 political ads (see also King et al., 2019). To obtain a measure for the average fixation time for each group of political ads, we computed the mean of the three political ads per each candidate. The average fixation time in milliseconds for the liberal political ads was 2451.46 ($SD = 812.34$), for the conservative political ads 2785.04 ($SD = 637.98$), for neutral ads placed next to the liberal political ads 2741.53 ($SD = 766.47$), and for neutral ads placed next to conservative political ads 2484.35 ($SD = 632.04$).

We assessed party support by asking how strongly (1 = *not strongly at all*, 5 = *very strongly*) participants identified with the liberal Green party ($M = 3.21$, $SD = .97$) and the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) ($M = 2.72$, $SD = 1.00$). We did not combine those measures into one index because predispositions to the parties are not necessarily exclusive, even though both represent opposite sides of the political spectrum. Additionally, we assessed participants' gender (0 = male, 1 = female), age, and education (1 = low education, 2 = high education) as covariates.

Results

We conducted a series of linear regressions with age, gender, education, and liberal or conservative party support as predictor variables and the mean of the three political ads' fixation times as criterion variable¹ (see Table 1).

First, we found that liberal party support increased the average time spent looking at liberal political ads, $b = 320.91$, $SE = 92.00$, $\beta = .38$, $p = .001$, which confirmed our first hypothesis (H1). Similarly, our findings showed that conservative party support had a significant positive effect on the average time spent looking at the conservative political ads, $b = 181.34$, $SE = 71.91$, $\beta = .29$, $p = .014$. Thus, we could also confirm our second hypothesis (H2).

Next, we investigated the effect of party support on selective avoidance. Specifically, our third hypothesis stated that liberal party support would decrease the average time spent looking at the conservative political ads placed next to neutral political ads. The findings did not support our expectation: Liberal party support did not have a negative effect on the average time spent looking at the attitude-discrepant conservative political ads, $b = -141.58$, $SE = 76.18$, $\beta = -.22$, $p = .067$. The effect failed to reach statistical significance. That is, we had to reject H3.

Finally, our fourth hypothesis assumed that more support for a conservative party would decrease the average time spent looking at liberal political ads placed next to neutral political ads. In support of that hypothesis, we found a significant negative effect of conservative party support on the average time spent looking at the liberal political ads next to the neutral political ads, $b = -240.11$, $SE = 91.47$, $\beta = -.30$, $p = .011$. It should be noted that the overall regression model (F-value) was only significant for the test of H1, which might be explained by the small sample size in our study.

Discussion

Previous research has identified partisan ideology as an important driver of selective exposure to political advertising showing that individuals tend to spend more time looking at attitude-consistent rather than attitude-discrepant ads (e.g., Marquart et al., 2016). Extending those findings, we demonstrated, for the first time, that individuals also spend more visual attention to attitude-consistent political advertising when the alternative stimulus constitutes unrelated, neutral political ads. This is a key finding of our study that has not been shown in previous research, especially not using eye-tracking methodology.

In addition, we provided some first evidence for selective avoidance of political ads that are inconsistent with one's partisan ideology, which is particularly relevant for means of political advertising, which have often been described as simply not avoidable, such as political poster advertising (e.g., Dumitrescu, 2010). Specifically, we found that conservative participants showed a significant tendency to avoid (i.e., spend less time looking at) political ads that were inconsistent

with their partisan ideology, while for liberal participants this behavior was not detectable. However, in order to determine whether there is indeed a meaningful difference between liberals and conservatives with regard to their visual selective avoidance behavior, more research is needed. An alternative explanation for the difference between selective exposure and avoidance behavior in our study might be individuals' stronger tendency to prefer attitude-consonant information than their avoidance of attitude-discrepant information found in Garrett's study (2009).

Overall, our findings have important theoretical implications. Revealing that individuals prefer attitude-consistent political ads over neutral ads challenges cognitive dissonance theory as theoretical explanation for selective exposure behavior, because neutral content should not arouse cognitive dissonance (i.e., a state of mental discomfort due to a message-belief incongruence). Instead, media exposure motivations such as a desire for self-consistency or anticipated positive affective states—as suggested by the SESAM model (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015)—might better explain visual partisan selective exposure and selective exposure in general. The desired reduction of cognitive dissonance aroused by the attitude-discrepant posters might, however, explain the selective (visual) avoidance of attitude-discrepant political ads found in our study, although a desire for self-consistency or anticipated affective states are also potential explanations for avoidance behavior (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015). Therefore, more research is needed to discern the exact mechanisms responsible for the acts of visual exposure to and avoidance of political ads.

From a methodological perspective, our study overcomes the limitations of self-reported measurements, as we used an unbiased and straightforward measurement of selective visual exposure and avoidance: pupil movement. This is a key contribution to the existing research, as eye-tracking enables the direct investigation of partisan selective exposure and selective avoidance during the process of political information intake itself.

Despite those contributions, our study posed some notable limitations. First, since the use of eye-tracking was costly and time-consuming, our sample was based on a convenience sample of $N = 76$, which is a typical sample for eye-tracking studies in media psychology research (see King et

al., 2019). However, although a power analysis revealed that this sample size was sufficient to detect small effects², we encourage future researchers to employ larger samples in eye-tracking research in general. Moreover, our experiment was conducted in the laboratory, which ensures high internal validity but limits external validity. In particular, because we exposed participants to political ads on a computer screen, our findings might be more externally valid for (pop-up) online ads than for posters. This limitation could be overcome by the use of mobile eye-trackers in a real-world setting. Furthermore, we only used one candidate for each party and the conservative candidate was male while the liberal candidate was female. However, because those candidates were always shown next to same-sex, politically neutral candidates, we believe that we minimized the influence of candidate gender on our findings. Additionally, we ensured that pre-existing familiarity did not vary systematically with party support. Nevertheless, future studies should use a more diverse array of political candidates. Last, upcoming studies should take into account additional media outlets such as social media as well as further individual-level moderators (e.g., attitude strength, see Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009).

Overall, our study suggests that although acts of visual selective exposure and avoidance might be correlated and have similar outcomes such as attitude polarization (e.g., Taber & Lodge, 2006), they occur independently of each other and should be theoretically and empirically distinguished in future research. Our findings can also be embedded in the debate of selective avoidance as a threat for deliberative democracies. While some scholars warn that especially selective avoidance could foster attitude polarization, fragmentation, and echo chambers (e.g., Garrett, 2009; Jamieson & Cappella, 2008; Jang, 2014), others mitigate those concerns by showing that exposure to counter-attitudinal information is not as rare as previously thought (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017; Weeks et al., 2016). Against this background, our findings suggest that although individuals might be regularly exposed to attitude-discrepant political information, they might not necessarily also pay attention to this content—at least not in the context of political advertising. Thus, with regard to visual attention, we cannot rule out the existence of so-called filter bubbles.

Yet, this visual non-consideration might even be a greater threat to deliberative democracy, because it cannot be fixed by merely changing social media algorithms. Investigating the consequences of visual selective exposure and avoidance for political attitude strength and polarization should therefore be an important avenue for future research.

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Footnotes

¹ We also ran repeated-measurement ANOVA (using a median split for party support), which showed the same results. Additionally, we did not find interaction effects of the within-subject factors and party support, which suggests that the influence of party support did not vary across the individual political ads. Therefore, the effects found in this study were not driven by single posters but were equal across all posters.

² A power analysis with $1 - \beta = .80$ and $\alpha = .05$ revealed a minimum sample size of $N = 64$ to detect small effects ($f^2 = .10$) in a multiple regression analysis with four predictors.

Table 1.

Linear Regression Analysis of Fixation Time (milliseconds)

	Mean of the three political ads' fixation times (milliseconds)			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	Liberal political ads	Conservative political ads	Conservative political ads	Liberal political ads
	β	β	β	β
Support for liberal parties	.38**		-.22 ⁺	
Support for conservative parties		.29*		-.30*
Age	-.15	.12	.07	-.21
Education	.12	-.13	-.09	.17
Gender	-.18	.17	.21 ⁺	-.11
F	3.67**	2.27 ⁺	1.52	2.31 ⁺
Adj. R²	.13	.06	.03	.07

Note. N = 76.

⁺ $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Appendix: Stimulus Material

Example stimuli used in the experimental design: The three liberal political ads by the Austrian Green Party. (The full stimulus material is available from the authors upon request).

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