

# Exposure to Partisan News and Its Impact on Social Polarization and Vote Choice: Evidence From the 2022 Brazilian Elections

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## Abstract

Studies have found limited evidence consistent with the theory that partisan and like-minded online news exposure have demonstrable effects on political outcomes. Most of this prior research, however, has focused on the particular case of the United States even as concern elsewhere in the world has grown about political parallelism in media content online, which has sometimes been blamed for heightened social divisiveness. This article investigates the impact of online partisan news consumption on voting behavior and social polarization during the 2022 elections in Brazil, a country where the public’s ties to political parties have historically been more limited or nonexistent but where ideologically aligned news content online has markedly increased in recent years. Drawing on a unique dataset linking behavioral web-tracking data of 2,200 internet users in Brazil and 4 survey waves with the same respondents, conducted before, during, and after the 2022 presidential elections, we find no significant relationship between the use of partisan media on either vote choice or

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social polarization overall; however, we do find some weak and inconsistent effects of trust in news moderating the impact of partisan media on social polarization.

### **Keywords**

Partisan journalism, news consumption, social polarization, election campaign, Brazil, media effects

Does using partisan and ideologically one-sided news media make people more polarized and impact vote choice during a contested Presidential election? To what extent are these impacts conditional on prior levels of trust in news? These questions are at the heart of this study, which aims to investigate the effects of online partisan news consumption on vote behavior and social polarization during the 2022 elections in Brazil, a country that has become more ideologically divided in recent years and where politically aligned media content online has sometimes been singled out as a possible contributing factor. Given the traits of Brazilian media and political environments, which combine citizens' weak ties with political parties, mandatory voting, and high reliance on online sources of information, we argue that *if* the public were generally influenced by partisan news (Wittenberg et al. 2023), this ought to be a case where effects are apparent. This is a key benefit of our research design compared to others focused on democracies where people have strong ties with political parties: when citizens do not have these strong attachments, information-related aspects could be stronger determinants of political outcomes.

Using a unique dataset linking behavioral web-tracking data of 2,200 internet users in Brazil (resulting in forty-two million link clicks and app uses) to four online survey waves with the same respondents, conducted before, during, and after the 2022 presidential elections, this study assesses the dynamic relationship between partisan news consumption, social polarization, vote choice, and trust in news over time. Consistent with prior studies in the United States context, we find no significant relationship over time between exposure to partisan news online and increases in social polarization or changes in vote behavior. We also find inconsistent moderating effects of trust in news on people adopting more affectively negative views toward social groups that hold differing political views than their own. To our knowledge, this is the first study to investigate these relationships in Brazil, one of the largest democracies in the world, which has seen a succession of political and economic crises over the last decade, and where, historically, the public's ties to political parties have been weaker than in Western democracies.

### **Political Consequences of Partisan News Consumption**

In recent years, the political consequences of exposure to partisan news and like-minded content have been a source of concern for scholars and, more broadly,

democratic societies (Guess et al. 2023; Kubin and Von Sikorski 2023; Van Bavel et al. 2021). Worries about the political impact of partisan news have focused on a range of problems, including social division, polarization, misinformation, and disagreement over basic facts, which in turn may lead to contestations over political processes, elections, or even political violence (An et al. 2014; Druckman et al. 2019; Levendusky 2013; Rossini et al. 2023; Stroud 2010).<sup>1</sup> In this respect, partisan news may impact the wider public regardless of whether most individuals ever use these sources. Several recent studies, however, have cast doubt on whether this concern is warranted, generally finding only a limited or null effect on political outcomes in part because very few see such content, and those who do tend to already hold extreme ideological views (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Guess et al. 2021; Prior 2013; Wojcieszak et al. 2023).

In this section, we review existing literature about the relationship between partisan news exposure and social polarization to motivate the specific hypotheses we introduce below. By social polarization, we refer to a particular type of affective polarization pertaining to divergent feelings toward other social groups—namely animosity toward people who align themselves on opposing sides politically while holding more favorable attitudes toward co-partisans. While similar to the larger literature on affective partisan polarization (Iyengar et al. 2012, 2019), which typically focuses on feelings held about political parties or politicians, social polarization is more concerned with measures of social distance, typically operationalized as feelings about inter-party marriage involving hypothetical relatives (see also Baldassarri and Bearman 2007). By adopting an approach focused on social polarization, we are covering broader forms of affect that do not necessarily rely on disliking other groups due to ideological preferences or ingroup attachments, but on a preference for avoiding political discussions altogether in contentious contexts (Wells et al. 2017). This approach is particularly suitable for the Brazilian political environment, where people do hold negative affect toward some groups but are not necessarily aligned with an opposing side (Areal 2022).

### *Partisan News Consumption and Social Polarization*

The impact of partisan news consumption on society has been the subject of a considerable amount of scholarly attention for decades. Looking at the impact of partisan news consumption on TV in the United States, Levendusky (2013) shows that partisan media tends to lead to more socially and affectively polarized attitudes by making citizens who are already somewhat extreme even more extreme. Likewise, Lu and Lee (2019) use American survey data to show that exposure to TV sources favoring a party strengthens affective polarization among supporters. However, scholars disagree about the extent to which partisan media polarize the public if audiences are selectively choosing to consume or avoid such content. Arceneaux and Johnson (2010) find that the polarizing effects of cable TV dissipate when audiences are provided with a range of media content options and can choose to watch entertainment channels instead.

As these previous studies show, concerns about the political consequences of partisan news consumption existed well before the internet (for a review of these studies,

see Prior [2013]). However, the high-choice digital media environment has fueled further interest in this topic. Over the last decade, partisan news consumption online has often been blamed for increasingly polarized political environments and associated with the rise of populist leaders in many countries. At the same time, we know much less about this relationship in places where political parties are not necessarily the main drivers of political preferences, but where we also see increases in political violence and polarization over time.

Recent studies, mostly conducted in the United States, show that people's online news consumption is low, and partisan news consumption is even lower (Guess 2021; Nelson and Taneja 2018; Wojcieszak et al. 2023). When it comes to the impact of partisan news consumption, the picture is more mixed, but studies also tend to find limited or null effects of online partisan news consumption on political attitudes. Guess et al. (2021) find no impact of increasing use of partisan news brands (measured by tracking what people accessed) on feelings toward parties or perceptions of polarization. Using a similar approach involving behavioral tracking, Wojcieszak et al. (2023) find no evidence that exposure to partisan websites increases affective polarization in the United States. Testing effects of exposure to partisan websites from the opposing side, Casas et al. (2023) likewise observe no changes to issue preferences or affective polarization.

Some studies, however, do find effects on polarization associated with information consumption online. Beam et al. (2018) find a depolarization effect among Facebook news users attributed to increases in exposure to counter-attitudinal news seen on the platform. In one of the few studies not based on the United States, Padró-Solanet and Balcells (2022) find that more diverse media diets are associated with lower levels of ideological polarization among Spanish respondents, but with higher affective polarization toward groups from other territories in the country, indicating that news consumption's impact might vary according to cleavages beyond ideology. Bail et al. (2018) considered the effects of following a counter-attitudinal Twitter bot over partisan citizens in the United States, finding that Republicans became more conservative post-treatment. Törnberg (2022) argues that digital media contributes to polarization and conflicts along partisan lines because it leads people to greater exposure to nonlocal interactions where they encounter information nonexistent in their local networks, while Garrett et al. (2014) use survey data from the United States and Israel to demonstrate that using partisan websites leads to more polarized attitudes about candidates and their supporters.

A significant limitation of many prior studies of partisan media is they are mainly focused on a handful of Western political information environments with two-party systems, but there is evidence that polarization dynamics vary in multiparty systems (Knudsen 2021; Reiljan 2020). Some studies look at how news consumption impacts polarization in Global South countries, but not focusing on the particular role of partisan news. Huang and Kuo (2022) find no relationship between TV use and polarization in Taiwan, similar to Suk et al.'s (2022) results in Mexico, while Wu and Shen (2020) indicate that exposure to news with a negative tone is associated with polarization in Hong Kong. In India, Neyazi et al. (2024) find that exposure to sexist content on WhatsApp has no effect on affective polarization, but it makes certain groups more

likely to vote. This scarcity means we have limited knowledge about how to generalize partisan news consumption dynamics to other countries where concern about partisan content online has also grown but where people's ties with parties are limited, even as there are still sharp disagreements about public affairs and social division. The uniqueness of the American media and political context invites further investigation in other parts of the world to better understand in a more generalizable manner what political consequences partisan news consumption online may engender.

The recent Brazilian presidential elections offer an ideal test to examine how partisan news consumption relates to social polarization, and to our knowledge, this is the first study to investigate these relationships in this context.<sup>2</sup> Brazil has become increasingly polarized around the presidency of its former leader Jair Bolsonaro, who in 2022 ran for re-election and was defeated by former President Lula da Silva (50.9%–49.1%). Bolsonaro supporters—and the President himself—made frequent attacks against the electoral system and claimed fraud had been perpetrated against him (but provided no evidence). Bolsonaro supporters protested the results, culminating in a mob storming the buildings of the Congress, the Supreme Court, and the Presidency in Brasília in early January 2023. These supporters often cited false information to justify their outrage (Nicas, 2022), and other studies document the importance of a Bolsonaro-supporting media ecosystem as sources of information online (Ricard and Medeiros 2020; Santos 2021; Santos et al. 2022). Although Brazil differs from most Western democracies in that its citizens have weak ties with parties (Samuels 2006; Speck et al. 2015), this trait is common in Latin America and in other Global South countries.

Fuks and Marques (2022) show affective polarization has been growing over the last two decades in the country, particularly when people express their feelings about leaders instead of parties, while Ortellado et al. (2022) find that affective polarization in Brazil tends to be stronger among politically interested groups. In 2022, Brazilians also reported being cautious about entering political discussions, and 15 percent of them said they had stopped talking to someone due to politics (Mont'Alverne et al. 2022), illustrating the contentious context in which the election took place. It is against this backdrop of a contested election that we consider this case. In a country with relatively high levels of internet penetration and use of digital sources for news, a varied media ecosystem that includes partisan brands both on the left and on the right, and with a tradition of low levels of political engagement but also mandatory voting, we argue that *if* the public were generally influenced by partisan news (Wittenberg et al. 2023), this ought to be a case in which effects should be apparent. This leads us to propose the following hypothesis:

(H1) More consumption of partisan news brands will be associated with higher levels of social polarization over time.

### *Partisan News Consumption and Vote Choice*

Some previous studies have also considered whether ideologically aligned news media may affect people's vote choices. By presenting facts in such a way to support a

particular conclusion, such news (as Levendusky [2013] defines it) can serve as a vehicle to advance a particular point of view, party, or candidate. Studies on the impact on vote choice of news consumption, especially editorial endorsements (Erikson 1976; Robinson 1972), date back decades (Dalton et al. 1998; Druckman and Parkin 2005; Kahn and Kenney 2002). More recent work has examined partisan news consumption and found that undecided partisans who are exposed to like-minded news tend to be more likely to vote for their party's candidate and against the opposition (Dilliplane 2014). The reverse is true as well. Levendusky (2013) also finds the impacts of partisan media on elections, making people more likely to cast doubt on the legitimacy of the winner when their party loses.

In the Brazilian context, where there is compulsory voting, we have limited specific evidence on how news consumption impacts vote choice. Examining Presidential elections in 2002 and 2006, Mundim (2012) finds different impacts of news coverage on people's willingness to vote for specific candidates, and there is no pattern of which candidate or political party benefits from it. In a survey about the 2018 elections, Mundim et al. (2023) find no association between news consumption in general and voting for Bolsonaro, but they show that using platforms is positively associated with it, which suggests there may be distinctly different patterns associated with specific forms of digital news. These previous results lead us to propose the following:

*(H2a)* Consuming news from left- [right-] leaning sources will be associated with an increased likelihood of voting for the left- [right-] leaning candidate, Lula [Bolsonaro].

We also seek to examine the effects of partisan media specifically among those who are most ideological since it is plausible that those who hold extreme views in support of or opposition to the two candidates may behave somewhat differently in response to media use than the rest of the population (Bail et al. 2018). We posit, then, that perhaps H2a presents too conservative a test for the effects of partisan news since effects may be concentrated among those with previously established preferences.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, we also test for the effects of partisan media specifically among those aligned with one candidate or the other:

*(H2b)* Among those with prior candidate preferences, consuming ingroup [outgroup] partisan news will be associated with increased [decreased] likelihood of voting for the ingroup [outgroup] candidate.

### ***Partisan News Consumption and the Role of Trust in News***

While partisan news consumption may affect both social polarization and vote choice, these effects may also depend to some degree on attitudes held about the news media itself. In other words, whether people trust the news they are exposed to could affect how they are affected by any partisan news to which they are exposed. Despite evidence that people who use traditional news sources tend to have higher levels of trust in the news (Kalogeropoulos et al. 2019b) and that people who consume a given brand

are more likely to trust it (Toff et al. 2021), previous studies show that people often still use news they do not trust (Tsfati and Cappella 2003, 2005). This may be even more common online where people are often incidentally exposed to news they did not actively select (Fletcher and Nielsen 2018; Kalogeropoulos et al. 2019a). In the US context using tracking data, Wittenberg et al. (2023) previously demonstrated that news consumption of ideologically aligned sources can affect Americans' political attitudes, but many citizens consume a wide variety of media online. There is also evidence that accessing counter-attitudinal sources might reinforce people's previously held beliefs (Garrett et al., 2014; Guo and Chen, 2022), that people's levels of trust in news moderate effects of news consumption (Anspach and Carlson 2022; Mont'Alverne et al. 2024) and that trust can be a stronger predictor of people's attitudes than news consumption patterns (Ejaz et al. 2024). This suggests that how people feel about news may be an important intermediary factor.

Therefore, we hypothesize that trust in news may also help to explain, in a conditional manner, whether exposure to partisan news media is associated with differing political attitudes. Divergent levels of trust in the news may reinforce or attenuate media effects since we should not assume that only partisan citizens are consuming the content or that exposure to partisan content will necessarily make people more polarized along the same lines regardless of their perceptions of how trustworthy news is to begin with. This leads us to propose the following hypotheses:

*(H3)* Levels of trust in news in general will moderate the relationship between partisan news consumption and social polarization.

*(H4)* Levels of trust in news in general will moderate the relationship between partisan news consumption and vote choice.

Lastly, we are also interested in investigating the consequences of partisan news consumption on trust in news. Even if the impacts of partisan news consumption on affective polarization and vote behavior tend to be limited, it could affect people's relationships with traditional media, since partisan brands often define themselves at least in part by explicitly criticizing mainstream news brands (Chadha and Bhat 2022; Figschou and Ihlebæk 2019), arguing their perspectives are excluded from mainstream media and questioning traditional cornerstones of professional journalism such as objectivity (Hemmer 2016)—and some, focusing on the American context, reason there has been a radicalization of the media system itself driven by right-wing news organizations (Benkler et al. 2018). In this vein, Guess et al. (2021) show that, despite null effects of consuming partisan sources online on polarization, such exposure may reduce levels of trust in mainstream news. There is also evidence that, when asked about their levels of media trust broadly, respondents average across mainstream sources to form their general evaluations (Tsfati et al. 2023). Therefore, asking about trust in news in general should capture people's broad impressions about the trustworthiness of their media environments.

In Brazil, left- and right-wing partisan brands are known for spreading criticism about traditional news organizations. Left-wing websites present several critiques

about how mainstream media covers the Workers' Party (Magalhães and Albuquerque 2017), while right-wing brands in the country claim they present "the real news" (Mont'Alverne et al. 2023). In 2022, 32 percent of Brazilians said they often see or hear criticism of journalists or news organizations on news websites (Mont'Alverne et al. 2022), and another study has found a national-level association between exposure to such criticism and lower levels of trust in news (Newman et al. 2023). These findings lead us to propose our last hypothesis:

(H5) Higher levels of partisan news consumption will be associated with lower levels of trust in news in general over time.

### ***Context of the 2022 Brazilian Elections***

Brazil is an upper-middle income country that remains overall free but with serious challenges to political rights, civil liberties, the independence of news media, and safety of journalists.<sup>4</sup> An important element of the Brazilian political environment is citizens' weak ties to political parties in a multiparty system with limited incentives to avoid party fragmentation (Carey and Shugart 1995; Samuels 2006; Speck et al. 2015). Left and right divisions are fluid and subject to political circumstances at the time of asking (Russo et al. 2022), although there are consistent minorities over time that identify as left- or right-wing. Levels of political interest tend to be low in Brazil.<sup>5</sup>

Support for specific political leaders, rather than parties, is one of the main traits of Brazilian political culture, where it is common for politicians to change party affiliation throughout their careers and organize campaigns according to individual strategies (Mainwaring 1991; Nicolau 2002). Political parties have been historically viewed with suspicion, usually ranking among the least trusted institutions in the country (Ribeiro 2011); in 2020, only 13 percent of Brazilians said they trust political parties (Latinobarómetro 2021). There has also been an increase in party disaffection in general, and against the Workers' Party specifically (Fuks et al. 2021)—a party that anchors voting choice and feelings about politics in Brazil, either for or against it (Mundim et al. 2023; Rennó 2020). This means that affective polarization in Brazil is driven by citizens who dislike an outgroup or political leader, but who do not necessarily see themselves as part of a coherent ingroup (Areal 2022). These particularities of the Brazilian environment, when compared with most Western countries, require adjustments in how to analyze polarization, vote choice, and partisanship, to be explained in the methods section.

Consuming information online is a central trait of the political information environment in Brazil. In 2022, 52 percent of Brazilians said they get their news online at least once a day (Mont'Alverne et al. 2022). Legacy media also plays an important role: according to the same study, 58 percent of Brazilians said they get their news from television daily. The media environment in the country has seen significant changes in recent years. It has been historically dominated by large news conglomerates, but mainstream news organizations were also frequent targets of attacks by Bolsonaro (Barão et al. 2022; Marques 2023). In previous Workers' Party governments, their



supporters were also in conflict with these outlets (Albuquerque 2016; Marques et al. 2021), in a context of suspicion toward traditional news organizations. Platforms are increasingly important: 58 percent of Brazilians said they used WhatsApp for news daily in 2022 (Mont'Alverne et al. 2022), and there is evidence that political groups use it to disseminate partisan content and misinformation (Rossini et al. 2023; Santos 2021). Over the last decade, trust in news in general in the country also precipitously declined from 62 percent in 2015 to 43 percent in 2023—though this still leaves trust slightly above the global average (Newman et al. 2023). This context of weak political affiliation, alongside the high reliance on platforms for information—which increases the likelihood of incidental exposure—suggests that partisan news exposure in Brazil might not be as endogenous to partisanship as it is in other contexts.

## Data and Methods

This article uses a unique source of panel data combining behavioral tracking on mobile and desktop (rather than self-reports about news consumption) of 2,200 internet users in Brazil with four survey waves conducted before, during, and after the elections. We collected 14 weeks of mobile and desktop/laptop tracking data (URL clickstream and app uses), resulting in a total of forty-two million link clicks/app uses, and ran four survey waves with the same individuals during that period. We partnered with the research firm Netquest, which runs a panel in Brazil that seeks to be quasi-representative in key demographic areas. In wave 4, we had 1,321 participants (60% of our initial sample), and no particular demographic group was more likely to drop out from the panel (more details about the sample and attrition in Supplemental Information file, Appendix B).

Our sample includes both mobile and desktop tracking data. This is particularly important considering the prevalence of mobile devices to access the internet in Brazil (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística 2021) and is an advancement over similar studies (Weeks et al. 2021; Wojcieszak et al. 2023). Web-tracking data has advantages over self-reported measures of news consumption because it does not depend on people's recall and self-reporting of their media habits, which can underestimate the range of news outlets respondents actually accessed (Wittenberg et al. 2023).

In Brazil, the official campaign period spanned August 16 through October 29, 2022. First round of voting occurred on October 2, and the second round on October 30. We collected behavioral tracking data for blocks of time as specified below (Table 1):

## Variables

*Partisan News Exposure.* We measured exposure to digital news using behavioral tracking data, recording each time a respondent clicked on a link or mobile app from one of twenty-four news organizations for five seconds or more. This list was derived from a broader set of the forty most widely used news organizations in Brazil, based on ComScore and the Digital News Report (Newman et al. 2022). Organizations used by less than 2 percent of our sample were excluded, ensuring we covered the most

**Table 1.** Dates in Which Behavioral Tracking Data and Survey Were Collected.

Blocks	Dates	Rationale for inclusion
Block 1	July 24–August 20, 2022 Survey: August 8–25	Includes the period before the official electoral campaign starts and the first week of campaign.
Block 2	September 11–October 1, 2022 Survey: September 16–October 1	Includes the last three weeks of official campaign, and election day (first round).
Block 3	October 2–November 5 Survey: October 31–November 10	Includes the entire second round campaign, election day, and one week after the second round.
Block 4	December 5–December 19 Survey: December 5–December 19	One month after the second round, when protests against the election results were taking place.

important news sources, including major and niche outlets. To ensure representation of relevant partisan brands, we combined ComScore data with lists of partisan news websites produced by Santos (2021) and Magalhães and Albuquerque (2017).

To assign a political leaning to each brand, we adapt an approach previously employed by Fletcher et al. (2020, 2021), which defines brands as right- or left-leaning based on their audiences' ideological self-placement on a left-right scale. This survey-based measure is built by computing the average political leaning for the sample overall, and then, for each of the twenty-four news outlets, we calculated the average political leaning of its audience and recorded the difference between the individual outlet average and the average for the entire sample. This produced an audience political leaning score that ranges from  $-0.5$  to  $0.5$ , where scores higher than  $0$  mean that the audience is more right-leaning than the population on average, and lower than  $0$  mean the audience is more left-leaning. To code brands as having a left- or right-leaning audience, we considered the average of their scores (mean =  $0.04$ ) and one standard deviation above or below it ( $SD = 0.14$ ). In other words, brands with a score higher than  $0.18$  are coded as right-leaning, while those with scores lower than  $-0.1$  are coded as left-leaning. Some brands, however, are notoriously partisan—and refer to themselves as such<sup>6</sup>—and have very close scores to partisan ones. In these cases, we opted to code them as partisan brands, aligned with the idea that purely quantitative approaches need to retain face validity by examining the results considering the context they are part of (Muddiman et al. 2019). Note: we use this measure as a proxy for news organizations' political leaning, but these measures are not based on analysis of the editorial content produced by these outlets. In Table 2, we summarize the list of news outlets and how they were coded.

In line with other recent tracking studies, these twenty-four news outlets (combining partisan and non-partisan) represent just 0.8 percent of the 42 million links and apps people clicked on during the entire duration of our study. Non-partisan brands represent the overwhelming majority of clicks (93%) to news organization websites, while left-leaning brands account for 4.7 percent and right-leaning for 2.3 percent. Clicks to partisan news sites were not evenly distributed across the sample. In Figure 1, we provide a visual summary that shows how skewed news consumption is, especially of right- and left-leaning brands. The majority of the sample did not use these brands at all, and a

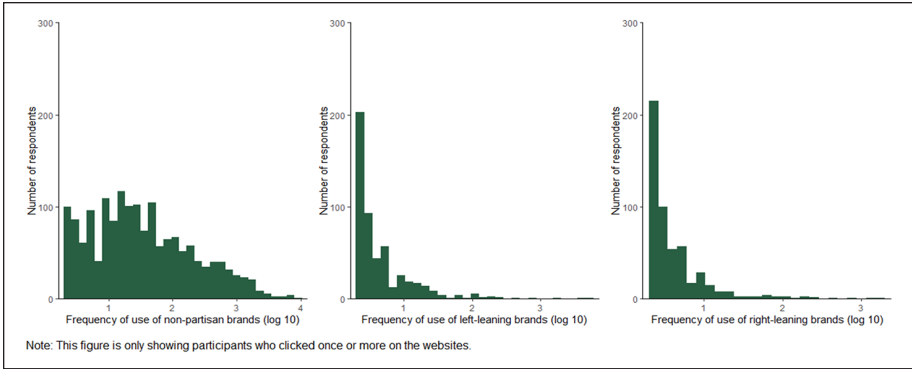
**Table 2.** Audience's Political Leaning Scores of News Outlets.

News outlet	Score	Audience's political leaning
Diário do Centro do Mundo	-0.20	Left
Brasil 247	-0.18	Left
Folha de S. Paulo	-0.09	Left
Fórum	-0.09	Left
Brasil de Fato	-0.08	Left
BBC Brasil	-0.05	Not partisan
G1	-0.04	Not partisan
Globo	-0.02	Not partisan
O Povo	-0.02	Not partisan
O Globo	-0.02	Not partisan
UOL	-0.01	Not partisan
O Estado de S. Paulo	-0.01	Not partisan
Metrópoles	-0.01	Not partisan
CNN Brasil	0.00	Not partisan
Poder 360	0.03	Not partisan
Band	0.04	Not partisan
SBT	0.06	Not partisan
R7	0.07	Not partisan
Record TV	0.11	Not partisan
Jovem Pan	0.16	Right
Gazeta do Povo	0.18	Right
Oeste	0.22	Right
O Antagonista	0.23	Right
Jornal da Cidade Online	0.39	Right

small number of participants used them more often (see Supplemental Information file, Appendix C for more descriptives of news consumption).

*Social Polarization.* Drawing from Iyengar et al. (2019) and based on the measure developed by Klar et al. (2018), we posed social polarization questions regarding supporters of the Workers' Party (PT) and Jair Bolsonaro.<sup>7</sup> Respondents were asked if they would feel happy or unhappy if their child married someone who votes for PT/Bolsonaro, with three variations: (1) the spouse votes for PT/Bolsonaro, (2) the spouse votes for PT/Bolsonaro but rarely talks about politics, and (3) the spouse votes for PT/Bolsonaro but frequently talks about politics. Responses were coded on a 1–5 scale from very unhappy to very happy and treated separately, to capture differences between animosity against party/candidate supporters or general discontentment in talking about politics in the family, which are important aspects to understand social polarization.

To measure social polarization, we created a scale by subtracting responses, ranging from -4 (very unhappy if their child marries a PT voter and very happy if they



**Figure 1.** Distribution of frequency of use of non-partisan, left-leaning, and right-leaning brands.

marry a Bolsonaro voter) to 4 (very happy if their child marries a PT voter and very unhappy if they marry a Bolsonaro voter). Positive scores indicate positive affect toward PT supporters and negative toward Bolsonaro supporters, while negative scores indicate the opposite.

We developed three scales of social polarization to compare the impact of political discussions within the family, an aspect highlighted by Baldassarri and Bearman (2007). For brevity, we primarily report results for scenarios where the spouse frequently talks about politics but include full results in Supplemental Information file, Appendix F. This approach aligns with Torcal et al. (2023), who used similar questions in multiparty democracies in the Global North and South.

**Vote Choice.** Study participants were asked about their intended vote choice in waves 1 and 2, and their actual vote choice in wave 3, which occurred after the second round of voting. Voting in Brazil is mandatory and the turnout rate in 2022 was 79 percent,<sup>8</sup> similar to the turnout rate in previous elections. Each of these measures was recoded as binary variables: intended or actual vote choice for Lula (37.4% of the sample) and another for Bolsonaro (28.8%).<sup>9</sup>

**Trust in News.** Trust in news was measured following the approach recommended by Strömbäck et al. (2020), asking “Generally speaking, to what extent do you trust, or not trust information from the news media in Brazil?” with response options on a 1–5 scale, where 1 is do not trust at all and 5 is trust completely. This question was asked at the general level as worded here as well as at the brand-specific level for twenty-two individual news organizations, which are those with the highest reach in Brazil or are relevant niche brands.

## *Analytic Approach*

To test our hypotheses, we estimated random effects within-between models, which allow us to combine the benefits of fixed effects with random effects models (Firebaugh et al. 2013). By looking at variation for the same respondents (“within”), we can assess over-time changes for individuals, which is key for our goal of understanding the impact of partisan news consumption on affective polarization and voting choice, allowing us to isolate what effects are caused by changes in partisan news consumption. Within-between models allow us to control for both time-variant variables (if they are measured) and time-invariant variables (regardless of whether they are measured or not), and avoid the dropping of cases in imbalanced panels where data from respondents is missing from a particular wave. This approach is also used in a similar study looking at news consumption over time (Wojcieszak et al. 2023).

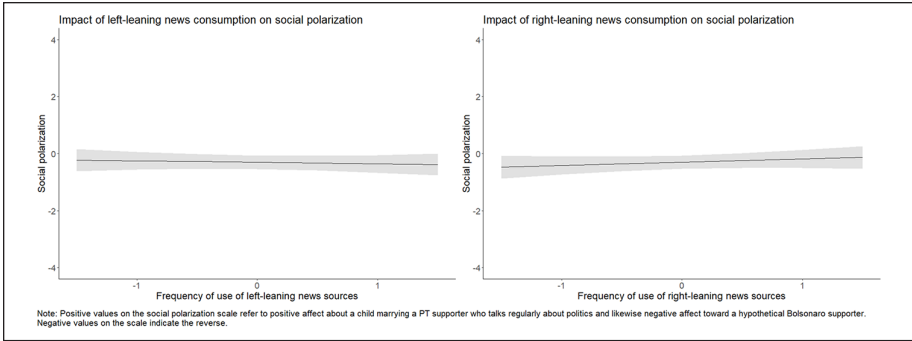
Our three social polarization measures are the dependent variables we use to test H1 and H3, and vote choice is the dependent variable used to test H2a, H2b, and H4. In H5, we use trust in news as our dependent variable. All models include controls for demographic and political variables (age, gender, education, religion, political interest, and favorability toward Lula). Details about the control variables are available in Supplemental Information file, Appendix A.

## **Results**

### *Partisan News Consumption and Social Polarization*

To test H1, we examined our social polarization questions as a function of partisan news consumption over time. We find no evidence consistent with H1 (Figure 2 and Table 3). While we do find an association between using partisan brands and social polarization, it is one that is largely static across the campaign rather than one that changes in parallel with partisan news use. This is apparent when looking at between-person effects. Those who use left-leaning brands are more likely to be socially polarized in favor of PT supporters (and against Bolsonaro supporters). Likewise, users of right-leaning brands, on the other side, are more socially polarized in favor of Bolsonaro supporters (and against PT supporters).<sup>10</sup> But within-person increases or decreases in the frequency of partisan news consumption over the course of the campaign (within effects) are not related to levels of social polarization.<sup>11</sup>

As a robustness check, we also tested for possible asymmetry in the sample by estimating separate models with subsets that support or do not support Lula, the candidate who was ultimately elected in 2022. These models, available in Supplemental Information file, Appendix F, do not differ from the null effects we found in the general sample.<sup>12</sup>



**Figure 2.** How levels of partisan news consumption predict levels of social polarization in the direction of positive affect toward supporters of PT and negative toward Bolsonaro supporters.

**Table 3.** Within-Between Models Examining How Levels of Partisan News Consumption Predict Social Polarization.

Within effects	Social polarization when supporter frequently talks about politics
Use of left-leaning brands	-0.054 (0.103)
Use of right-leaning brands	0.112 (0.109)
Use of non-partisan brands	-0.004 (0.041)
Political interest	-0.044* (0.022)
R <sup>2</sup> Marg.	0.123
R <sup>2</sup> Cond.	0.731

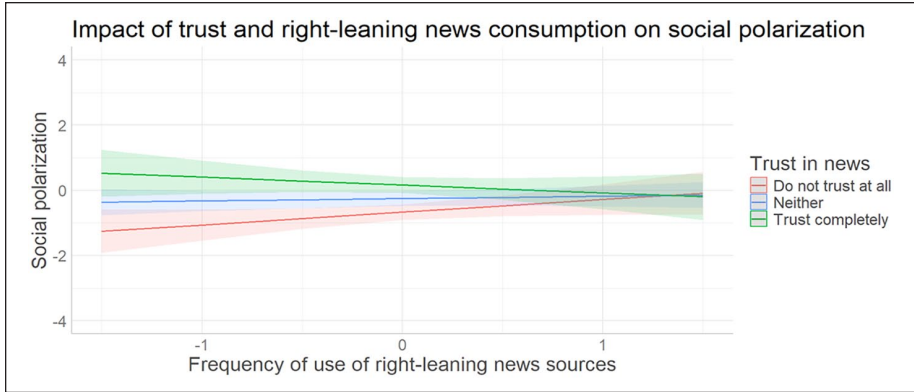
+*p* < .1. \**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

### Partisan News Consumption and Vote Choice

Besides possible impacts on polarization, we next examine how partisan news consumption may influence vote choice (H2a). Here, too, we find no significant effects related to within-person changes in the frequency of use of left- or right-leaning brands, respectively, on vote choice for Lula ( $\beta=0.01, p=.55$ ), or Bolsonaro ( $\beta=-0.03, p=.25$ ). When considering only those with previous candidate preferences (H2b), we find no effects of outgroup or ingroup news consumption, except for small effects of frequency of use of outgroup news in predicting vote for Lula among those who support him ( $\beta=0.08, p=.1$ , not significant at the .5 level), showing that in particular cases, partisan news consumption can reinforce choices in a way that counters outlets’ ideological leaning.

### The Role of Trust in News as a Moderating Factor

Our third hypothesis focuses on the role of trust in news as a moderator in the relationship between partisan news consumption and social polarization (Figure 3 and Table 4).



**Figure 3.** Impact of partisan news consumption and trust in news in social polarization.

**Table 4.** Within-Between Models Examining the Impact of Trust in News and Partisan News Consumption on Social Polarization.

Cross-level interactions	Social polarization when supporter frequently talks about politics
Trust in news in general*Use of non-partisan brands	-0.049 (0.036)
Trust in news in general*Use of right-leaning brands	-0.158+ (0.094)
Trust in news in general*Use of left-leaning brands	0.045 (0.102)
R <sup>2</sup> Marg.	0.139
R <sup>2</sup> Cond.	0.722

+p < .1, \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001.

We interacted between-person trust in news with the within-person use of different kinds of news consumption, but results are inconsistent and weak.

Increasing usage of right-leaning brands and higher levels of trust in news increases social polarization toward Bolsonaro supporters (and against PT supporters) when hypothetical spouses frequently talk about politics. In other words, if people are more trusting in news and increase their consumption of right-wing brands, they tend to have more positive affect toward Bolsonaro supporters and negative affect toward PT supporters. Conversely, those with low trust in news who increase their consumption of right-leaning brands tend to become more socially polarized toward PT supporters. However, this pattern does not hold when the hypothetical spouse rarely talks about politics or when we do not specify how much they would talk about politics. This indicates that expectations about how much people would have political conversations among families impact levels of social polarization. We do not find any significant results in the interactions between trust in news and using left-leaning brands.

We also tested trust as a moderator using trust in right-leaning brands and trust in left-leaning brands instead of trust in news in general but found no significant

**Table 5.** Within-Between Models Examining the Impact of Trust in News and Partisan News Consumption on Voting Choice.

Cross-level interactions	Vote for Lula	Vote for Bolsonaro
Trust in news in general*Use of non-partisan brands	0.008 (0.009)	-0.002 (0.008)
Trust in news in general*Use of right-leaning brands	-0.007 (0.021)	-0.013 (0.021)
Trust in news in general*Use of left-leaning brands	0.001 (0.023)	-0.004 (0.022)
R <sup>2</sup> Marg.	0.14	0.13
R <sup>2</sup> Cond.	0.84	0.82

+ $p < .1$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

effects (Supplemental Information file, Appendix F). It is possible that trust in news in general captures broader expressions of how people feel about the media environment, and the results are not driven by selective trust (or distrust) in specific sources.

When subdividing the results according to people's level of support for Lula to test for asymmetrical effects, we find significant effects of the interaction between trust in news in general and use of right-leaning brands on social polarization for those who do support Lula (Supplemental Information file, Appendix F). Higher trust and more usage of right-leaning brands are associated with this group being more socially polarized favorably toward Lula supporters ( $\beta = 1.1$ ,  $p < .05$ ), probably because those who already support the left-wing candidate reinforce their views after being exposed to right-wing brands. We find no significant effects of the interaction when subsetting only those who do not support Lula.

Even if trust does not moderate all relationships of news consumption and affective polarization, we still find effects in some cases, partially confirming H3. These results show how trust in news can reinforce or attenuate effects associated with news consumption patterns.

For H4, we test the impact of trust in news in moderating the relationship between partisan news consumption and voting choice (Table 5). In general, the interaction is not significant, which leads us to reject H4.

Lastly, for our final hypothesis (H5), we test for effects of partisan news exposure on trust in news in general. We find no significant change in trust in news associated with right-leaning ( $\beta = 0.026$ ,  $p = .71$ ) or left-leaning ( $\beta = 0.06$ ,  $p = .38$ ) news consumption over time, rejecting H5.<sup>13</sup>

## Discussion

This article adds to the small but growing literature on the political consequences of partisan news consumption by examining its impact on both social polarization and vote choice during the 2022 Brazilian elections. By assessing these effects in a multi-party context of a young democracy during a critical time when institutions were challenged and political violence was frequent—traits similar to other Global South



countries and increasingly some Global North countries as well—our study illustrates the nuanced complexities around the role partisan news outlets may play in contributing to social cleavages. Our findings, while null or limited in many areas, are important because these phenomena are rarely studied outside of select Western contexts but also because they are based on advanced methodological approaches by pairing panel survey data with large-scale behavioral tracking data, especially the inclusion of mobile devices, a limitation encountered by other similar studies (Wojcieszak et al. 2023). The traits of Brazilian media and political environments also strengthen the validity of our findings and reinforce the relevance of our case. The combination of weak ties with political parties, mandatory voting, and high levels of reliance on online sources of news means that information sources could be stronger determinants of political outcomes than in contexts where partisanship is more stable.

Our study joins those that also found null or limited effects associated with partisan news consumption (Guess et al. 2023; Weeks et al. 2021; Wojcieszak et al. 2023). A multiparty system where people have limited connections with political parties and fluctuate between ideological camps would seem a most favorable case to find effects since many citizens might theoretically be more influenced by news consumption, but still, we find null effects, in line with the minimal effects paradigm. We should note, however, that null effects here may be a consequence of assumptions implied in the modeling strategies adopted by our study and others similar to ours: the notion that on average most respondents would react in the same way to media effects. Polysemic responses may be more likely, and in proportions that may be difficult to discern with the present sample sizes. Detecting such effects, which may well be asymmetrical, requires larger or more targeted sampling approaches and analytical strategies that account for more heterogeneous responses. Even if partisan news exposure has minimal or no effects on the general public, that does not mean such sources may not matter a greater deal to small segments of deeply politically involved individuals, including policymakers and the small coterie of elites who hold power. Therefore, we cannot suggest on the basis of these data that partisan news has no impact at all.

It is also possible that the null effects are consequences of Brazilians' low levels of political interest and general patterns of news consumption online. As other studies (usually in the United States) indicate, politics and hard news are a small portion of what people consume online (Mukerjee et al. 2022; Wojcieszak et al. 2023), and it is possible that they visited partisan websites for non-political news, particularly in a context of limited political interest. This impression is reinforced by the fact that political interest is, in our results, a consistent predictor of social polarization, but we are limited in our speculation because we have not examined the content of the links themselves.

Despite null effects overall, we can also point to the importance of our findings around trust in news as potentially a key moderator when it comes to the impact of partisan news on social polarization, reinforcing or attenuating media effects. These results, echoing similar findings in Wittenberg et al. (2023), were most pronounced when respondents considered a hypothetical individual who talks frequently

about politics—a source of concern for many individuals (Klar et al. 2018). While the moderating effect of trust appears to be associated with attitudes about media in general, rather than specific partisan brands, these findings illustrate how expressions of trust in news likely capture important predispositions around how people think about the news they are exposed to overall rather than necessarily a direct effect of particular partisan news exposure. Our study, thus, indicates that trust is possibly a mechanism through which news consumption impacts social polarization beyond mere exposure by itself—although we should be cautious about extrapolating these conclusions, considering that the effects are inconsistent and weak when found. Moreover, unlike Guess et al. (2021), we do not find any significant effects on trust in news in general associated with exposure to partisan news over time. This may be due to statistical power—only a small portion of the sample accessed varying levels of partisan news—or particularities of the Brazilian media market, which is dominated by legacy media organizations that tend to be non-partisan. It may also be the case that the findings in Guess et al. (2021) are largely due to effects among those who rarely otherwise consume partisan news as that study incentivized participants to increase their opportunities for exposure to partisan news consumption, whereas our study merely tested for effects where respondents happened to encounter and click on such sources on their own.

Accordingly, this study comes with limitations. First, although we rely on tracking data rather than self-reports, like many studies we did not analyze the content of the links clicked, so our measures of partisan news exposure are coarse in that respect. Second, operationalizing social polarization in Brazil requires adjustments compared to how such measures and similar affective polarization measures are used in US-focused studies due to differences between political systems and the (non)centrality of political parties. These adjustments, however, make it difficult to compare across geographies. Third, while we employ an increasingly common audience-based approach to categorizing news outlets by ideological leaning, as ours is the first to apply these methods in Brazil, we encourage further studies examining alternative categorization approaches. Fourth, while our null results are in line with research in other countries on this topic, it is possible that this particular election in Brazil may be unique and result in more hardened attitudes less likely to change over time. This remains to be analyzed in other studies. In addition, although we did see fluctuations in levels of social polarization over the course of this single election cycle, it is possible that such attitudes as they relate to news exposure might simply be baked in well in advance of the four-month period of the campaign. Future studies may require longer time horizons to study what may be more gradual cumulative effects of media. Lastly, we encourage replication of this design in Brazil and in other contexts to strengthen the evidence and to throw light on the blind spots of our investigation.

### **Author's Note**

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## Author Contributions

C.M.: Study design, data analysis, manuscript drafting. A.R.A.: Study design, manuscript drafting. S.B.: Study design. B.T. and R.F.: Study design, data analysis, manuscript drafting. R.K.N.: Study design, manuscript drafting.

## Consent to Participate

The questionnaire was approved by the Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) of the University of Oxford [R72293]. Participants gave written consent for data collection and participation in the survey before starting responding to it.

## Data Availability

Supplemental material may be found in the online version of this article. Replication data and documentation are available at <https://osf.io/emd2y/>.

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## Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

## Notes

1. Some scholars argue that inequalities, not polarization, should be the main concern, as divisiveness may result from necessary social justice struggles, potentially fostering greater political participation (Kreiss and McGregor 2023).
2. We use the term “partisan news” throughout this article as it is a widely used phrase to describe the phenomenon even though in the Brazilian context, this refers to news that is ideologically aligned in support or opposition to particular leaders or broader ideological camps rather than specific political parties.

3. Opinion polls before the election show that voters' preferences did not change much during the campaign, probably because both Lula and Bolsonaro have strong support and rejection bases. For more, see <<https://www.poder360.com.br/brasil/datafolha-lula-tem-50-dos-votos-validos-e-bolsonaro-36/>> and <<https://www.poder360.com.br/eleicoes/genial-quaest-lula-tem-53-dos-votos-validos-bolsonaro-47/>>.
4. See the World Bank (<https://data.worldbank.org/country/BR>) and Reporters Without Borders (<https://rsf.org/en/country/brazil>) for more details.
5. For more details on ideology and political interest over time, see Latinobarómetro's data from 1995 to 2020: <https://www.latinobarometro.org/latOnline.jsp>
6. See, for example, Brasil de Fato's About section (<https://www.brasildefato.com.br/quem-somos>) or Diário do Centro do Mundo's article on the role of progressive websites (<https://www.diariodocentrodomundo.com.br/para-que-servem-e-por-que-existem-os-sites-progressistas-por-paulo-nogueira/>).
7. Given low levels of partisanship in Brazil and the fact that Jair Bolsonaro changed parties during his career (including during his term as President), we asked about attitudes toward his supporters rather than toward supporters of his party. Meanwhile, PT is historically the only party most people in Brazil have strong feelings about (either in favor or against). It is also the party with the largest proportion of identifiers—22 percent in our sample, in line with other surveys in Brazil. The second-ranked party was the Liberal Party (PL), Bolsonaro's current party, with just 11 percent saying it represents them. More than half (52%) said no party represents them.
8. See more on the Electoral Justice website: <https://sig.tse.jus.br/ords/dwapr/r/seai/sig-eleicao-comp-abst/home?session=206869853500016>
9. Our sample tends to have more people who did not vote for any of the candidates than the actual electorate. The difference between the proportion of the actual electoral result might be due to differences in our sample compared to the Brazilian population overall.
10. Those who use non-partisan brands, are also socially polarized in a similar way as those who use left-leaning brands, but the magnitude of this relationship is smaller.
11. Although not central to this hypothesis, we do find a positive association between political interest and social polarization in favor of Bolsonaro and against PT over time. In other words, those who become more politically interested are more likely to be happy if their child marries someone who votes for Bolsonaro and unhappy if they marry a PT supporter. To further explore the relationship between partisan news consumption and political interest, we interacted with these variables, but the results are mostly null, which might be a consequence of limitations of our sample size.
12. Alternatively, we have tested whether consumption of ingroup or outgroup partisan-leaning brands leads to social polarization, but we also found null results in this case.
13. In Supplemental Information file, Appendix H, we present results for the impact of partisan news consumption on trust in some right- and left-leaning brands we asked about in our survey, where we also found null results—that is, consuming more right-leaning brands did not make people more likely to trust them, and the same happens with left-leaning ones.

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