CHAPTER 5

POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION IN THE 2014 MIDTERM ELECTIONS FOR THE US SENATE: THE CASES OF IOWA, NORTH CAROLINA, AND GEORGIA

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At the height of the 2014 US midterm elections, the Pew Research Center published a report on polarization in the American public (Dimock, Doherty, Kiley, & Oates, 2014). In their report, they argued that ideological division and party antipathy between Democrats and Republicans is higher now than at any point in the past few decades. Though political science has long debated whether ideological polarization is on the rise (Abramowitz, 2010; Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope, 2011), Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes (2012) have demonstrated a rise in affective polarization, or the extent to which feeling (affect) toward candidates and political parties is separating such that people increasingly like their own party and dislike (or even hate) the opponent. A great deal of research has demonstrated the role of partisan media in fostering polarization (Feldman, Myers, Hmielowski, & Leiserowitz, 2014; Garrett et al., 2014; Levendusky, 2013; Stroud, 2010), and some have examined the effects of campaign communication on affective polarization (Iyengar et al., 2012; Warner & Greenwood, 2014; Warner & McKinney, 2013). However, as with much of political communication research, these studies have neglected midterm and down-ballot elections. This chapter offers a corrective to this by exploring the role of political communication in three hotly contested campaigns for the US Senate in the 2014 midterm elections. Residents of Iowa, North Carolina, and Georgia were surveyed to assess the relationships among political communication, political interest, political confidence, and affective polarization toward the candidates for US Senate.
The Growth of Polarization

Political polarization has been the source of considerable scholarly attention and controversy. Though there is little debate about the polarization of political elites in the United States (McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2006), the extent to which the public is polarized is subject to some disagreement. Fiorina and colleagues (2011) argue that, though political elites are quite polarized, the mass public tends to hold mostly moderate ideological positions. However, Abramowitz (2010) argues that elite polarization has permeated the American public and that voters have developed clear and distinct ideologies. Rather than changing parties, Layman and Carsey (2002) suggest that individuals will adjust their political views to align with their chosen party. Thus, changes in the political elite cue changes in the public.

Though the debate about ideological polarization remains unsettled, affective polarization, or the increase in favorable evaluations of in-party candidates and unfavorable evaluations of out-party candidates, is clearly on the rise (Iyengar et al., 2012). In fact, data presented by Abramowitz (2010), Fiorina et al. (2011), and the Pew Research Center’s report all tell the same story: candidate evaluations are polarizing. Drawing on the group polarization phenomenon (Sunstein, 2009), well documented by decades of social identity research (Hornsey, 2008; Tajfel, 1970), Iyengar and colleagues (2012) argue that the recent increase in affective polarization is driven by greater negative affect toward the partisan out-group. In other words, Democrats increasingly dislike Republicans, and Republicans increasingly dislike Democrats.

By redirecting polarization research away from policy preferences and toward affect, Iyengar and colleagues (2012) have also facilitated a shift away from the rational voter model of media and campaign effects toward the rationalizing voter model forwarded by Lodge and Taber (2013). A rational voter receives pertinent information, carefully considers it according to her interests and preferences, and votes accordingly. Conversely, the rationalizing voter processes information in real time and uses this information to form and update affective evaluations of the objects under consideration. This process is biased by previous affect such that attitude-consistent information is privileged and incongruent information is more likely to be ignored or counterargued. Attitudes toward political objects are constantly being updated when people encounter new messages through the “affect transfer” process (Lodge & Taber, 2013, p. 56); existing attitudes can transfer positive and/or negative feelings from related (and sometimes unrelated) attitudes to the object under consideration. This mechanism can help explain how affective polarization develops and how it implicates voting behavior particularly regarding a midterm election when previously unknown candidates are introduced into the already polarized campaign environment.

Though the possibility of partisan-selective exposure and affective polarization is often presented as a threat to the health of democratic culture (Sunstein, 2009), the polarization that may result from fragmented media use and political communication is not necessarily negative. In fact, “partisan media exposure should motivate political participation” (Stroud, 2010, p. 121). Abramowitz (2010) has argued that polarized citizens are also the most engaged, interested, and knowledgeable. With