

Exploring the Influence of Propaganda, Digital Media, and Political Polarization in PRN15 State Elections

Muhamad Fazil Ahmad,¹ Faradila Iqmar Omar²

Wan Rohila Ganti Wan Abdul Ghapar³

¹Faculty of Applied Social Sciences, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin

²Faculty of Management and Muamalah, Universiti Islam Selangor

³Faculty of Law and International Relations, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin

mfazilahmad@unisza.edu.my

ABSTRACT

The profound impact of political polarization on the democratic framework necessitates a thorough examination of the potential role of Propaganda in exacerbating this phenomenon. The objective of this research is to analyze the complex connection between Propaganda and political polarization during PRN15 in six (6) states (Kedah, Kelantan, Terengganu, Penang, Selangor, and Negeri Sembilan). Additionally, this study aims to investigate the role of digital media as a mediator in this intricate relationship. The pervasive presence of digital media in contemporary society has led to increased scrutiny regarding their influence on the proliferation of Propaganda and the exacerbation of political polarization. This study employs a rigorous statistical methodology, utilizing bivariate and multivariate regression analyses, to examine the causal relationship between Propaganda and political polarization. Additionally, it investigates the role of digital media as an interactive variable that may mediate this association. The investigation will additionally explore the intermediary function of digital media within this correlation. The study was conducted using a statistical design that incorporated bivariate and multivariate regression analyses. This study investigates the impact of Propaganda levels on political polarization, as well as the role of digital media as an interaction variable in this relationship. The findings demonstrate a noteworthy and affirmative correlation between Propaganda and political polarization, even in light of coding that may appear contradictory. The findings additionally demonstrate that digital media has the potential to substantially amplify the impact of Propaganda on political polarization.

Keywords: *Political Polarization, Propaganda, Digital Media, Regression Analyses, Mediating Influence*

Mengkaji Pengaruh Propaganda, Media Digital, dan Polarisasi Politik dalam Pilihan Raya Negeri PRN15

Muhamad Fazil Ahmad,¹ Faradila Iqmar Omar²

Wan Rohila Ganti Wan Abdul Ghapar³

¹Faculti Sains Sosial Gunaan, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin

²Faculti Pengurusan dan Muamalah, Universiti Islam Selangor

³Faculti Undang-undang dan Hubungan Antarabangsa, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin

mfazilahmad@unisza.edu.my

ABSTRAK

Kesan mendalam polarisasi politik terhadap struktur demokratik menuntut pemeriksaan menyeluruh terhadap peranan potensi Propaganda telah memburukkan fenomena ini. Objektif penyelidikan ini adalah menganalisis hubungan kompleks antara Propaganda dan polarisasi politik semasa PRN15 di enam (6) negeri (Kedah, Kelantan, Terengganu, Pulau Pinang, Selangor, dan Negeri Sembilan). Selain itu, kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji peranan media digital sebagai perantara dalam hubungan rumit ini. Kehadiran media digital yang meresap dalam masyarakat kontemporari telah meningkatkan pemerhatian terhadap pengaruh mereka terhadap penyebaran Propaganda dan memburukkan polarisasi politik. Kajian ini menggunakan metodologi statistik yang teliti, dengan menggunakan analisis regresi bivariat dan multivariat, untuk mengkaji hubungan sebab-musabab antara Propaganda dan polarisasi politik. Tambahan juga, ia mengkaji peranan media digital sebagai pembolehubah interaktif yang mungkin memediasi hubungan ini. Penyelidikan ini juga meneroka fungsi perantara media digital dalam korelasi tersebut. Kajian ini telah dilakukan dengan menggunakan reka bentuk statistik yang menggabungkan analisis regresi bivariat dan multivariat. Ianya juga mengkaji impak tahap Propaganda terhadap polarisasi politik, serta peranan media digital sebagai pembolehubah interaksi dalam hubungan ini. Penemuan menunjukkan hubungan yang signifikan dan positif antara Propaganda dan polarisasi politik, walaupun dalam konteks kod yang mungkin kelihatan bercanggah. Penemuan ini juga menunjukkan bahawa media digital berpotensi untuk memperkuatkan impak propaganda terhadap polarisasi politik secara besar-besaran.

Kata kunci: *Polarisasi Politik, Propaganda, Media Digital, Analisis Regresi, Pengaruh Pengantara*

INTRODUCTION

Third-phase autocratization and democratization are underway (Skaaning, 2020). Autocratization is driven by political division, populist parties and personalities, and public support for prospective autocrats. Populism and polarization fuel autocracy. Political polarization divides issues into two possibilities. Candidates distinguish to aid selection. Polarization divides voters. The phenomenon does not threaten democracy. Hostile attitudes and national hurt may harm these parties. Somer, McCoy, and Luke (2021) say it damages political polarization. People accept autocratization when their party rules, study finds. The "thin" populist idea stresses social order. Citizens are "pure people" or "corrupt elites." Populism challenges liberal democracy by viewing 'the people' as one. Populism hurts minorities. People use division to obtain power, weakening democratic governments. Disinformation and propaganda may divide and rule. Populist regimes and actors use this to destroy opposition trust and gain support. It studies political polarization and propaganda. PRN15, "Pilihan Raya Negeri ke-15," is Malaysia's fifteenth State General Election. Elections are held in Kedah, Kelantan, Terengganu, Penang, Selangor, and Negeri Sembilan. The next election allows residents of these states to pick their state lawmakers, making it crucial in Malaysia's political landscape. Local elected officials will manage and deliberate. Recent political changes in Malaysia are noteworthy. Two key advances need attention: Political parties, factions, and ideas in Malaysia are increasingly divided and at odds. Political disputes often arise. Thus, political dialogue gets increasingly divided with competing views. The extensive usage of digital media: Digital platforms like the internet and social media have transformed Malaysian politics. These online platforms allow political parties and officials to contact more people, convey their ideas, and interact. This phenomenon offers new ways to transmit reliable and unreliable information. Political polarization and widespread digital media use have impacted Malaysian politics. This impacts political communication, voter choice, and discussion. Recent political polarization and the emergence of internet media make the PRN15 election important for researching Malaysian politics. Academics and politicians seek to discover how these developments influence voting, voter behavior, and Malaysian democracy. Liberal democracy's challenges limit propaganda and division studies. Polarization, autocratization, democracy, and populism have been studied. Also evaluate the topic's social media presence. Populist politicians and authoritarian governments' social media promotion and popular backlash have been studied most. This shows Propaganda's decline. Polarization and autocratization are linked, study shows. According to Boese et al. (2022), polarization and government propagation of erroneous information on social media in domestic contexts may interact like autocratization. These two concepts are essential to autocratization, although their relationship is unknown. This research examines digital media's impact on correlations. Is internet propaganda polarizing? Worldwide disinformation and divided fears characterize it. Studying this interplay will uncover new links between these components, advancing research. The study will begin with a polarization, propaganda, and digital media literature review. The function of digital media in propaganda will be studied. Link theory and processes will be discussed. Discussion of methodology and findings follows. Results analysis and interpretation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This part reviews the scholarly literature on the causes of political polarization and links them to theoretical frameworks that explain how propaganda exacerbates it. This study will also review digital media literature in this context. In their complete review, Felix et al. (2022) defined "digital media" to include social media and internet usage to simplify.

The detrimental effects of political polarization

Political polarization is commonly understood as the divergence in ideological perspectives between citizens, political parties, and elites. In recent years, there has been an observed phenomenon referred to as affective polarization, which is considered a component of political polarization by certain scholars in the field of political science. Affective polarization, as posited by social identity theory, pertains to the phenomenon wherein individuals experience good emotions towards individuals aligned with their own political party, while harboring negative sentiments towards followers of opposing political factions. The ramifications of political polarization on democracy are detrimental when it infiltrates and molds society, such as when political disparities impact interpersonal connections beyond the realm of political discourse (Kincheloe, 2018).

Social sorting causes emotional polarization. Partisan identification is a person's political party affiliation. Integration occurs when an individual's partisan allegiance merges with other aspects of their social identity, such as race, religion, and other factors. The convergence of political and social identities creates homogenous and mutually exclusive groupings, which can worsen affective polarization. Political leaders excite people and achieve their aims via divisive speech and techniques. Polarizing discourse will be further examined in the next section. Malaysia's two different and homogenous groups demonstrate the negative effects of emotional polarization on democracy. Malaysia is a multicultural nation with an ethnically balanced proportion of Malays/bumiputeras and non-Malays. Race, religion, language, and culture are strongly ingrained in Malaysia's political culture (Pennycook, 2017).

Torcal and Comellas (2022) conducted a recent study that demonstrated the global nature of social sorting and affective polarization. Hence, this study offers a broader international outlook to a research domain that has predominantly concentrated on the United States. Boxell et al. (2022) found that social sorting and affective polarization vary by country due to contextual dependence. Proposing the inclusion of additional variables to consider in order to ascertain the potential for affective polarization to become detrimental.

In addition to the above causes, institutional features and the economy may worsen polarization. Studies suggest that majoritarian political structures and economic inequality fuel polarization. Economic inequality is a major societal issue that elites can utilize to deepen political conflict. Economic imbalance is linked to animosity toward a social group, according to Gidron et al. (2018). Mason (2015) also found a link between seeing a threat and aligning with another group. Consequently, experiencing economic disadvantage within society might potentially result in the development of hostility and resentment against individuals perceived as different or belonging to a distinct group. Based on the notion that polarization can have detrimental effects when groups adopt divergent stances. Unemployment and income disparity are examples of economic inequality.

Majoritarian politics polarize. The system favours the dominant majority, underrepresenting disadvantaged groups and encouraging political parties to fight for votes. Majoritarian systems employ electoral, two-party, centralization, unicameralism, and minimal-winning coalitions. Viewing elections as a 'zero-sum game' may cause discord. Winners are disproportionately strong when the losing group has minimal representation until the following election. Linz (1990) agrees about Party presidentialism's downsides. Presidential governments decrease political participation and power-sharing, boosting risks for everybody. McCoy and Somer (2019) showed that more divided nations have greater majoritarian systems and party presidentialism. Political division is not largely attributable to socioeconomic or structural factors, say proponents. Working with contentious politicians is required (Bonikowski, 2017).

Digital media mediation A scientific study concluded that social media and internet connectivity can increase political and social polarization. Conflicting study results cause uncertainty. Internet use raised polarization more among the oldest group (75+), who use social media less, according to Boxell et al. (2017). Polarization is caused by several factors. In Dutch survey data, Nordbrandt (2021) found that affective polarization affects social media use but not vice versa. As polarization developed, people who avoided or used Facebook less were more affected by it, leading to a greater dependency on Facebook. Evidence implies a relationship, but direction is unclear (Feldstein, 2021).

Digital media increases political polarization, according to several research. Internet access promotes partisan media consumption, which raises hatred against outgroups, according to Lelkes et al. (2017). Based on content, Levy (2021) finds that social media can enhance or diminish polarization. Numerous academic studies consistently demonstrate that individuals' exposure to information and viewpoints that align with their own beliefs leads to detrimental polarization.

The utilization of these channels by populists and polarizers enables them to circumvent traditional media outlets and disseminate their message, hence potentially intensifying political polarization. Populism entails a discernible dichotomy between the collective body of citizens, commonly referred to as the 'people', and the privileged stratum of society, commonly known as the 'elites', which encompasses conventional media outlets. The advent of digital media and the internet has provided a platform for populist actors to disseminate their own political news and narratives without being subject to restriction (Hameleers, 2020).

Researchers have focused on the echo-chamber effect of digital media on political polarization. Echo chambers may polarize people by isolating them from information and viewpoints that disagree with them. They can strengthen radical ideas and shelter them from counterarguments. Providing incorrect information can shelter people from the truth. Echo chambers operate through the mechanism of selective exposure, whereby individuals in the contemporary media landscape are limited to consuming media that reinforces their existing beliefs.

Research on echo chambers has demonstrated that individuals tend to form networks that are homogeneous in nature, both offline and online, depending on their social identification, particularly their partisanship. This may reinforce beliefs and exacerbate divisiveness. Network homophily, or homogenous networks, meaning people prefer to engage and share information with people who share their beliefs or qualities, such as partisanship. Thus, homophobia can limit information, political views, and social connections.

However, multiple studies show that digital media have exposed people to vast volumes of political information, which may contradict their opinions. According to Fletcher et al. (2021), most consumers get their news from mainstream web sites like CNN. The idea that echo chambers induce polarization seems overdone to him. He also suggests that the echo chamber effect may affect the tiny number of people who consume partisan media, which could polarize others if they are politically active. Since partisan media increases political polarization.

Jair Bolsonaro illustrates how homogenous networks and confirmation bias may propagate propaganda through digital media. For the 2018 Brazilian general election, far-right candidate Bolsonaro used WhatsApp to distribute propaganda in his favor. WhatsApp, which Brazilian

mobile phone carriers give away for free, lets people chat in large groups with friends and send brief messages, making it a fantastic propaganda platform for Bolsonaro. He sent misinformation, deceptive claims, and slanderous political opponents using these elements. Showing how digital media may propagate propaganda without independent media and other verification methods.

How Propaganda fuels pernicious polarization

Vraga and Tully (2021) found that most study links digital media use to disinformation. Misinformation is false information spread without the purpose to harm, unlike propaganda. Since actors' intentions are hard to determine, these can be hard to distinguish. Due to its speed and ability to connect political players with "the people," digital media can propagate disinformation.

Different sorts of propaganda exist. Lack of context on social media leads to misinterpretations, disinformed political notions, and fake news. Some experts say propaganda spreads incorrect information in the "post-truth" era. Thus, separating truth from lies becomes harder. Populists center 'the people' in their communication. Which demonizes the media, 'elites', and other groups not considered 'the people'. This allows science and facts to be substituted or altered with other realities and propaganda for their agenda.

Myanmar's Rohingya Muslim tragedy shows how disinformation kills. The Myanmar army and Buddhist fundamentalists killed Muslims in Rohingya communities. The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army attacked military and police posts before these attacks. Driven hundreds of thousands away. These cases were triggered by a weak public service media and press system and global conflict press prohibitions. Political change concerns spawned a government-backed Buddhist ultra-nationalist movement in Myanmar after democracy. Facebook educates half Myanmar. People can network, study, and express themselves online. It has also made unproven and hypothesized information seem legitimate, especially in homogeneous friend and family networks. Rohingya rumors of taking over the country have proliferated on Facebook. Confirmation bias and homogenous networks highlight propaganda and contradicting narratives, increasing polarization and intergroup conflict.

Polarizing individuals employ arguments that validate their own perceptions, and numerous studies indicate that individuals are more inclined to accept and propagate propaganda that aligns with their preexisting opinions. This implies that individuals who have similar perspectives may find themselves in echo chambers characterized by misinformation, hence facilitating the spread of propaganda through social media platforms. This phenomenon has the potential to exacerbate political polarization and foster societal fragmentation.

The availability of precise and reliable information plays a pivotal role in the realm of politics. The utilization of propaganda by polarizing players has the potential to undermine the credibility of their adversaries and the political framework, hence fostering a greater receptiveness among individuals. In order to ensure electoral accountability and make informed decisions aligned with their political preferences, individuals require precise information regarding political actors, issues, and parties, hence mitigating the potential for electoral victories driven by propaganda.

The literature has shown how inflammatory discourse and confirmation bias can polarize society to harmful proportions. Piazza (2023) suggests that misinformation and political polarization reinforce each other, suggesting a link between propaganda and political polarization.

Based on the aforementioned information, the primary hypothesis under examination pertains to the correlation between Propaganda and political polarization. The hypothesis is presented as follows:

H1: There is a positive correlation between the extent of propaganda distributed by political parties and the degree of political polarization.

The second hypothesis builds upon prior scholarly investigations pertaining to digital and social media platforms, aiming to examine the extent and manner in which these platforms serve as mediators in the relationship between Propaganda and polarization. This is an example of how the formulation appears.

H2: The increased utilization of digital media platforms is expected to amplify the impact of government-propagated propaganda on political division.

Model and mechanisms

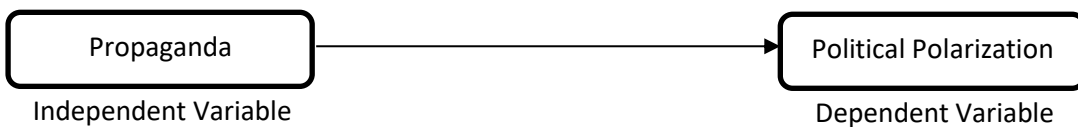


Figure 1: This study shows the relationship between propaganda and political polarization.

Populist and other polarizing actors often deploy propaganda. Political players demonize their opponents, dehumanize the out-group, and create fake realities through words to sway public opinion. Polarization is created by using propaganda to exacerbate and exploit social difficulties and grievances to split people into mutually suspicious ‘us’ and ‘them’ groups.

The promotion of democracy has the potential to reduce levels of accountability. In order to actively engage in politics and make informed political decisions that serve their best interests, individuals require access to precise and reliable information. This includes the ability to hold political candidates accountable during electoral processes. The absence of verifiable and accurate data pertaining to political candidates, problems, and global affairs hinders the democratic discourse and the establishment of responsibility between the populace and their elected officials.

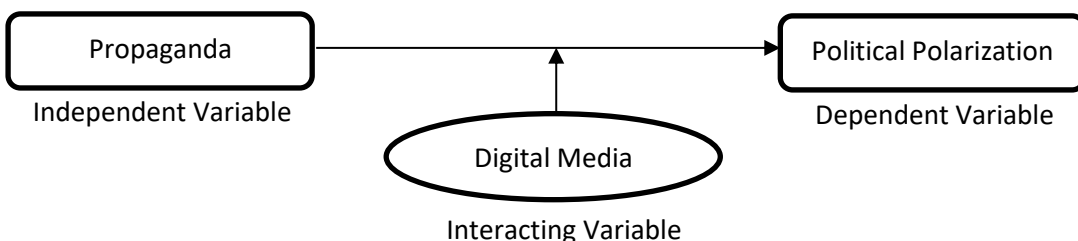


Figure 2: Model explains how digital media interacts with propaganda and political division.

Confirmation bias occurs when individuals believe and share information that supports their beliefs. The influence of social identity on political ideas is growing, and confirmation bias and propaganda can further divide society. Due to social identities, confirmation bias can affect objective reasoning. Which might make us resent opposing views, opinions, and content and

label their speakers as uninformed or biased. Disinformed echo chambers can spread propaganda online to people who agree with misinformation. People who participate in homophilic networks are more likely to be radical and intolerant of opposing viewpoints since they are exposed to contentious ideas and perspectives. Especially when people chose information that accords with them and form divided groups around common narratives. Stereotyping opposing groups can turn homogenous groupings against each other. Fostering social isolation and intolerance divides.

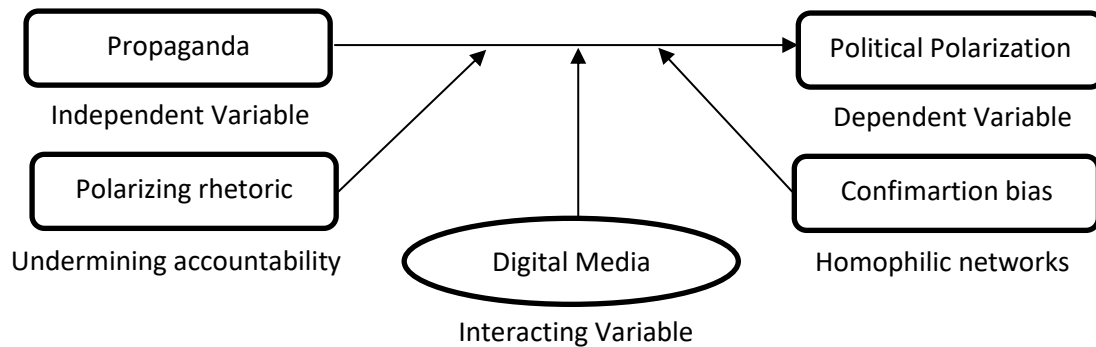


Figure 3: The model presented above depicts the comprehensive theoretical framework that elucidates the interconnections and causal mechanisms among the variables.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study examines the relationship between propaganda and political polarization, with a focus on digital media's mediation role. The best way to study causal linkages was with a statistical research design. This approach allows various factors to be compared and analyzed to determine how one phenomenon affects another. Statistical analysis also controls issues that may confound variable relationships.

Data Collection and Variables

The study covers 2023 PRN in six (6) states (Kedah, Kelantan, Terengganu, Penang, Selangor, and Negeri Sembilan), making it relevant to current dynamics. This study used the Varieties of Democracy Institute's V-Dem dataset version 12 (2022). The V-Dem dataset is highly acknowledged and held in high regard within academic circles because to its extensive coverage of several nations throughout the globe, including Malaysia. This resource offers extensive information pertaining to several facets of democracy and government, rendering it well-suited for conducting comparative analysis. This dataset includes approximately 450 self-governing metrics from political experts from all states. This set of statistics includes information on propaganda, political polarization, election systems based on majorities, GDP per capita, and democracy.

Operationalization of Variables

The independent variable in this study is Propaganda. In order to measure this concept, the study utilizes the indicators offered by V-Dem, which assess the degree of misleading information distribution carried out by government agents and major political parties using social media platforms. The selected indicator for the primary study pertains to the domestic dissemination of incorrect information by the

government. The continuous characteristic of the variable is consistent with the continuous operationalization employed in the study.

The V-Dem Political Polarization Indicator measures political polarization in this study. This metric measures how political differences affect social dynamics by measuring the reluctance of people from different political parties to cooperate. The study uses the World Development Indicators database statistic "Individuals using the internet (% of population)" as the digital media interaction variable. This metric measures the percentage of a demographic that uses the internet, indicating internet accessibility.

Control Variables: In order to minimize the potential impact of other factors that could account for political polarization, a variety of control variables are incorporated. These include:

- Economic inequality, as exemplified by the unemployment rate, serves as an indicator of economic imbalances that could lead to societal polarization.
- The GDP per capita is a measure that takes into account the economic disparities of nations, which may have implications for the feasibility of establishing a self-sustaining public service media system.
- The Impact of Majoritarian Election Systems on Levels of Polarization.
- The levels of democracy are indicative of the extent of political freedom and expression.
- Parti party presidentialism pertains to the classification of a political system.
- Digital media access may serve as a potential confounding factor for the interaction variable.

Data Analysis and Regression Analysis

The acquired data is subjected to a multivariate regression analysis for analysis. The present study is conducted in a systematic fashion, wherein control variables and the interaction variable are integrated into the model. This methodology facilitates the identification of the impact of the independent variable (Propaganda) on the dependent variable (political polarization), while also considering the potential influence of confounding factors.

The regression analysis provides vital insights into the relationship between the variables, as evidenced by the B-coefficients and p-values. The coefficients and p-values provide valuable insights into the magnitude of the impact of Propaganda on political polarization and the statistical significance of this relationship.

Limitations

Empirical studies inevitably encounter intrinsic limits in data collection and analysis. Certain states may experience a dearth of data pertaining to particular variables, resulting in the absence of observation points. Furthermore, the selected operationalizations may fail to capture all the intricacies and subtleties associated with the variables. Nevertheless, the research aims to optimize the utilization of accessible and pertinent data in order to derive significant findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Disentangling Propaganda and Political Polarization

The initial hypothesis proposed that an increase in the dissemination of government propaganda within a country would result in a corresponding increase in political polarization. According to the findings of Boese et al. (2022), it appears that this phenomenon is observed during the implementation of a bivariate regression analysis, as indicated in Table 1. The analysis demonstrates a statistically significant and inverse association between government propaganda and political polarization. A decrease in the value of Propaganda is associated with an increase in the dissemination of Propaganda as a result of coding. The analysis of the B-coefficient (-0.578***) reveals a statistically significant relationship, indicating that a rise of one step in polarization is associated with a corresponding increase in Propaganda. Upon examination of the R2 value (0.337), it becomes apparent that the levels of dispersed Propaganda has significant explanatory capacity in relation to the variability observed in degrees of polarization.

	(1) Political polarization
Government Propaganda	-0.578*** (0.0249)
_cons	-0.0873*** (0.0282)
N ²	3827
R	0.337
adj. R ²	0.337

Table 1: Regression table on Propaganda and polarization.

The initial analysis provides support for H1. The examination of the presence of control variables will determine if the aforementioned condition remains valid.

In contrast to the influence of control variables, the purpose of this study is to determine the extent to which fluctuations in the levels of political polarization may be attributed to the spread of propaganda by political parties. The findings are detailed in Table 2, which may be seen below.

Political polarization	Model 1	Model 2
Government Propaganda	-0.429*** (0.0530)	-0.611*** (0.0247)
Proportional	0.291* (0.221)	
Majoritarian	0.211 (0.143)	
EDI	0.525 (0.312)	0.512*** (0.134)
GDP p. c.	-0.194*** (0.0463)	-0.281*** (0.0199)
Unemployment rate	0.0236**	0.0267***

	(0.00728)	(0.00333)
Assembly-elected party president	-0.0363	-0.0638
	(0.187)	(0.0837)
Presidential	-0.0311	-0.167**
	(0.108)	(0.0521)
_cons	-0.242	0.180
	(0.238)	(0.0962)
N	920	3154
R ²	0.278	0.289
adj. R ²	0.272	0.285

Table 2: The present study employs regression analysis to examine the relationship between the independent variable (IV), dependent variable (DV), and control variables. The term "others" include parallel vote, borda count, and single-non-transferable-vote.

Figure 1 contains all variables employed for controlling purposes. However, the limited number of electoral systems variables, 920, has reduced the generalizability of the findings as a whole. Consequently, it was omitted from Model 2. Although Majoritarian election systems have been suggested as a possible contributor to polarization, Model 1 analysis indicates that the observed association is not statistically significant ($p = 0.211$). Enforcing such a restriction on the sample size, denoted by N, may have implications for the external validity of the study, resulting in a preference for increasing generalizability. All subsequent analyses have incorporated this procedure.

Upon the exclusion of electoral systems, it becomes apparent that there has been a decline in the correlation between government propaganda and political polarization. Nevertheless, the observed effect remains statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) and this is likely attributable to the larger sample size. The obtained outcome provides support for Hypothesis 1 (H1) and is consistent with the findings given by Boese et al. (2022). In Model 2, the coefficient of determination (R²) is 0.289. It is proposed that the inclusion of control variables strengthens the explanatory capacity of fluctuations in propaganda levels for polarization levels. However, it is important to note that establishing causality remains challenging due to potential unaccounted factors, such as homophily, that could potentially influence the observed association.

Polarization is positively correlated with electoral democracy ($r=0.525$). Freedom of expression and independent media may enhance polarization in electoral democracy. Initially, the relationship is not statistically significant, suggesting chance. However, eliminating election systems makes the association statistically significant (0.512^{***}). According to popular belief, democratic principles may foster polarization. This may be due to more observations. Democracy is neither a cause or facilitator of polarization, but a framework for it.

The theoretical framework posits that party presidentialism is associated with polarization due to its inherent characteristics that resemble a zero-sum game. Nevertheless, the findings indicate a shift in the link between party presidentialism and polarization. Initially, the relationship was negative and non-significant (-0.0311), but it has now become significant (-0.167^{***}). Likely attributable to the heightened presence of N. This finding contradicts the

hypothesized impact of party presidentialism, which was expected to have a positive correlation. Proposing that its role in exacerbating polarization may be less significant than originally assumed.

There exists a notable correlation between polarization and two key economic indicators, namely GDP per capita and unemployment rate, with respective coefficients of -0.281*** and 0.0267**. The negative correlation between GDP per capita and polarization levels suggests that there is an association between lower GDP per capita and higher degrees of polarization. There exists a modest positive correlation between the unemployment rate and polarization, indicating that an increase in unemployment rates is linked to elevated levels of polarization. Providing corroborating evidence in line with existing scholarly literature. Unemployment can be attributed to underlying societal differences that are manipulated by polarizing actors (McCoy & Somer, 2019). The relationship between GDP per capita and the potential limitations faced by countries with lower GDP in establishing an autonomous public service media institution capable of countering propaganda should be explored.

Jensen and Lee (2021) found that election systems influence political polarization. However, this analysis suggests that majoritarian election systems have minimal effect on polarization. Contradicts Jensen and Lee's 2021 findings. In contrast to Jensen and Lee (2021), proportional systems have a positive correlation with polarization (0.291). The dataset's limitations and disproportionate representation of proportional election systems may explain this phenomena. In summary, the preliminary research demonstrates that there is a considerable positive association between propaganda and political polarization. Following that, the interaction variable is going to be included into the analysis.

The Mediating Role of Digital Media

When taking into account the interaction variable, the findings of the study suggest that the influence of propaganda is significantly amplified ($\beta = -0.111^{***}$). In order to successfully complete a study of H2, it is very necessary to first develop a precise definition of what constitutes "high" internet use. A fake variable that represents internet use was created so that this could be accomplished. A cutoff point of 72.1% was decided upon in order to differentiate between high levels of internet use and low and moderate levels of usage (for additional information, see to appendix C). The influence of propaganda on polarization is statistically significant with a value of -0.328 (p 0.001) when the proportion of people who use the internet falls below 72.1% of the total population. The influence is still substantial from a statistical point of view despite the fact that it is now at a lower level than it was before the interaction variable was taken into account. The influence of propaganda sees a significant increase in countries that have a high percentage of people using the internet, particularly those with a use rate of more than 72.1%.

H2, Higher usage of digital media will enhance the effects of propaganda on polarization, according to the second hypothesis.

	Political polarization
Government Propaganda	-0.328*** (0.0172)
Dum_Internet	-0.0160 (0.0599)
Internet interaction effect	-0.111***

	(0.0358)
_cons	-0.0643**
	(0.0219)
N	3511
R	0.239
adj. R	0.238

Table 3: Table of regression including the independent variable, the dependent variable, and the interaction variable. "Internet" refers to internet utilization, which makes "Digital media" operational.

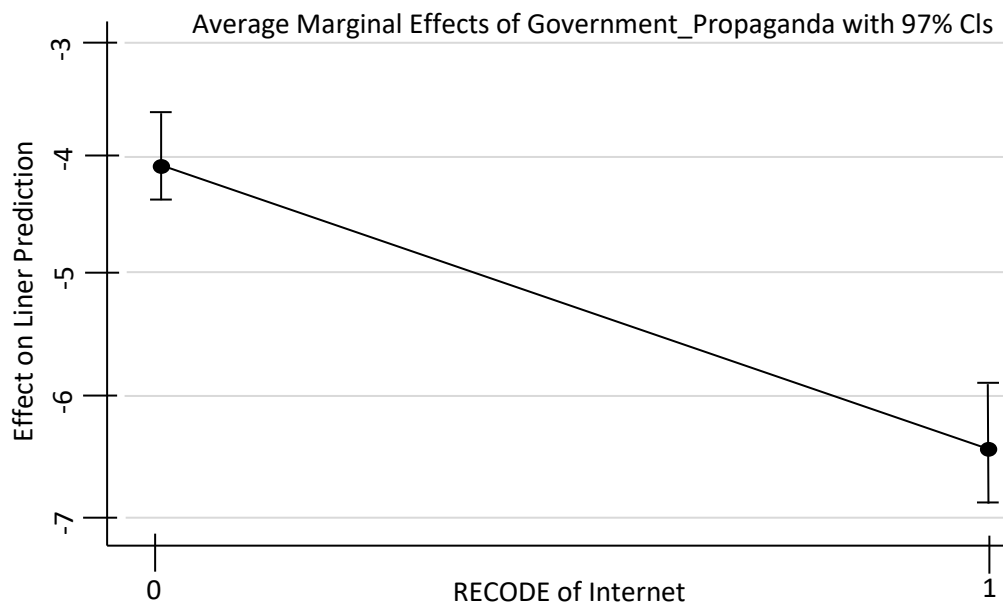


Figure 4: Demonstrates how high Internet usage exacerbates the polarizing effect of government propaganda.

The graph (Figure 4) illustrates the varying impact of Propaganda in relation to levels of internet usage. In heavy usage circumstances, the impact of Propaganda on polarization exhibits a significant increase, with the coefficient shifting from (-0.328***) to a more pronounced value of (-0.629***). The significance of the interaction is seen in the absence of the line passing the zero point. The findings presented in this study offer empirical evidence in favor of Hypothesis 2 and additionally provide further substantiation for Hypothesis 1. Furthermore, it undermines the backing for the literature positing that the utilization of digital media or internet will lead to a reduction in polarization. Subsequently, the inclusion of control variables will be implemented.

Political polarization	Model 1	Model 2
Government Propaganda	0.458***	-0.456***
	(0.0559)	(0.0262)
Proportional	0.391**	
	(0.221)	
Majoritarian	0.241	
	(0.139)	

EDI	0.522 (0.311)	0.586*** (0.134)
GDP p. c.	-0.239*** (0.0429)	-0.413*** (0.0221)
Unemployment rate	0.0229** (0.00735)	0.0189*** (0.00338)
Assembly-elected party president	-0.0585 (0.186)	-0.0811 (0.0842)
Party presidential	-0.0680 (0.108)	-0.212*** (0.0527)
dum_Internet	0.513** (0.162)	0.367*** (0.0774)
1.dum_Internet#c.Government_Propaganda	-0.383*** (0.0860)	-0.289*** (0.0399)
_cons	-0.244 (0.237)	0.220* (0.0968)
N	700	3073
R ²	0.281	0.306
adj. R ²	0.282	0.305

Table 4: The present study employs regression analysis to examine the relationship between the independent variable (IV), dependent variable (DV), and the intervening variable (Int. V), while also controlling for all relevant control factors.

Second hypothesis (H2): Internet usage would exacerbate the polarizing effect of propaganda. In the past, this appears to be the case. The results demonstrate a notable increase (-0.289***). The inclusion of the "election systems" variable increased the effect of propaganda when Internet usage was considered (-0.471***). Internet usage's rising influence remains significant.

Polarization is nevertheless influenced by factors such as GDP per capita (-0.413***) and the unemployment rate (0.0189**). In the absence of the "election systems" variable, the GDP per capita continued to decrease while simultaneously increasing. Because it grows with increasing N, GDP per capita may be a factor that contributes to polarization. When compared to countries with a higher GDP per capita, those with a lower GDP per capita may have a harder time establishing an independent public service media system that can combat propaganda with objective news or information. The examples provided previously in the text illustrate how the GDP and people's use of the internet may have an effect on polarization.

The unemployment rate association remained significant and favorable as N grew (0.0189***). Higher unemployment means more divisiveness. High unemployment rates can divide people because they feel economically disadvantaged. Thus creating a social division that populists can exploit.

Political systems have negative effects even without the "election system" variable (-0.0811 & -0.212***). Party presidentialism became substantial when N grew (-0.212), but not in the expected direction. Suggestion that party presidentialism may not polarize as much as assumed.

There exists a positive correlation between polarization and proportional voting systems, with a coefficient of 0.391**. In contrast to previous scholarly works. It is imperative to acknowledge that this phenomenon may be influenced by additional underlying factors that were not considered in the present study or by its association with another variable. The Economic Development Index (EDI) had a slight increase, and the correlation between the EDI and the variable of interest became statistically significant following an increase in the sample size ($\beta = 0.586$, $p < 0.001$).

Upon the inclusion of the interaction variable, the numerical values exhibit an increase. When accounting for the influence of extensive internet usage (referred to as "dum_internet"), it can be observed that higher levels of democracy are associated with an increase in polarization.

The findings indicate that the distribution of propaganda by the government has a positive correlation with the intensification of political polarization. Boese et al. (2022) argue that the dissemination of false information and the exacerbation of polarization can potentially contribute to the reinforcement of autocratization. This study's findings cannot be definitively established due to the absence of additional analysis and the failure to account for factors such as homophily. The findings of this study provide support for the aforementioned proposition by examining the relationship in question while accounting for control variables and the interaction variable.

CONCLUSION

Indeed, to summarize. The primary analysis and rigorous validation affirm the initial hypothesis positing that official propaganda contributes to the escalation of political division. The study included measures to account for potential confounding variables and additional factors in order to evaluate the correlation between propaganda and polarization. Despite the inclusion of many control factors, it is evident that propaganda played a significant role in the exacerbation of political division. The observed impact on polarization levels was substantial in both the primary study and the subsequent robustness assessment.

The second premise of the study posited that the utilization of digital media will lead to an escalation in political division through the amplification of political party propaganda. The hypothesis was supported by both the robustness check and the main analysis. The robustness check conducted on party propaganda revealed that internet usage exerted a significantly greater mediation influence.

This finding provides empirical evidence in favor of the notion that digital media has the potential to exacerbate political polarization. Additionally, it underscores the significance of the propagandist's characteristics in shaping the degree of polarization. The findings of the study indicate that excessive utilization of the internet leads to varying effects on the dissemination of propaganda. Digital media has played a greater role in disseminating party propaganda compared to government propaganda. This observation implies that despite the growing utilization of digital media by governments for propagandistic purposes, they continue to employ alternative means as well. Similar to traditional forms of media. Political parties that are not in government may not have equal opportunities to utilize these channels for disseminating propaganda, hence they are compelled to rely on digital media platforms. The role of digital media in mediating party propaganda is enhanced. Digital and social media platforms, together with "alternative media" websites, facilitate the dissemination of party propaganda.

Another finding was the correlation between party propaganda and democracy. The inclusion of the government propaganda link was posited in the primary analysis. Democratic societies can contribute to the escalation of polarization. In contrast to party propaganda, which exhibits a negative correlation with polarization. The reduction of polarization is facilitated by an increase in democratic practices. An investigation is necessary to have a deeper understanding of the correlation between propaganda, polarization, and democracy, specifically focusing on the disparity between government and party propaganda.

Limitations exist in this investigation. The findings' external validity is affected by data restrictions. Adding more observations was possible by removing the "election system," improving the study's generalizability. The study has good external validity due to its large sample and many observations. Additionally, statistics may be inaccurate. After merging the datasets, we manually changed the data to avoid duplicating nations. The first version included political systems, whereas the second covered additional topics. Human error threatens study findings and research validity. The dataset was verified numerous times to reduce risk. In conclusion, internet use and propaganda differ slightly. This component may affect results, but it's not important. V-Dems' inclusive definition of social media may exclude other digital media users. The interaction variable can include these people. Internet use may exceed social media use, depending on the situation. The absence of social media usage data in this study makes it difficult to deduce the interaction variable's mediating influence. However, VDems' broad understanding of social media should not affect the results. Despite these issues, the study's internal validity is good.

This study examines the relationship between propaganda and political polarization and compares propaganda from different sources. It provides information for studying this connection and polarization factors. Even when the Propaganda variable and interaction variable differ, the results help researchers understand how digital media affects this association.

This study found a strong link between propaganda and political polarization. Suggestion that propaganda is a major cause of political divisiveness. The study also found that digital media mediates this link. Although this study cannot prove causality, it has provided new information that can advance political polarization research.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We extend our gratitude to the Faculty of Applied Social Sciences, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin for their support in facilitating this research. We also acknowledge the contributions of the research team for their diligent efforts in conducting this study.

REFERENCES

- Boese, V. A., Lundstedt, M., Morrison, K., Sato, Y., & Lindberg, S. I. (2022). State of the world 2021: autocratization changing its nature?. *Democratization*, 29(6), 983-1013.
- Boese, Vanessa A., Martin Lundstedt, Kelly Morrison, Yuko Sato, and Staffan I. Lindberg. "State of the world 2021: autocratization changing its nature?." *Democratization* 29, no. 6 (2022): 983-1013.
- Bonikowski, B. (2017). Ethno-nationalist populism and the mobilization of collective resentment. *The British journal of sociology*, 68, S181-S213.
- Boxell, L., Gentzkow, M., & Shapiro, J. M. (2017). Greater Internet use is not associated with faster growth in political polarization among US demographic groups. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 114(40), 10612-10617.
- Boxell, L., Gentzkow, M., & Shapiro, J. M. (2022). Cross-country trends in affective

- polarization. *Review of Economics and Statistics*, 1-60.
- Feldstein, S. (2021). *The rise of digital repression: How technology is reshaping power, politics, and resistance*. Oxford University Press.
- Felix, R., Rauschnabel, P. A., & Hinsch, C. (2017). Elements of strategic social media marketing: A holistic framework. *Journal of business research*, 70, 118-126.
- Fletcher, R., Robertson, C. T., & Nielsen, R. K. (2021). How many people live in politically partisan online news echo chambers in different countries?. *Journal of Quantitative Description: Digital Media*, 1.
- Gidron, N., Adams, J., & Horne, W. (2018, August). How ideology, economics and institutions shape affective polarization in democratic polities. In *Annual conference of the American political science association*.
- Hameleers, M. (2020). My reality is more truthful than yours: Radical right-wing politicians' and citizens' construction of "fake" and "truthfulness" on social media—Evidence from the United States and the Netherlands. *International Journal of Communication*, 14, 18.
- Jensen, C. B., & Lee, D. J. (2021). Potential centrifugal effects of majoritarian features in proportional electoral systems. *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, 29(1), 1-21.
- Kincheloe, J. (2018). *How do we tell the workers?: The socioeconomic foundations of work and vocational education*. Routledge.
- Lelkes, Y., Sood, G., & Iyengar, S. (2017). The hostile audience: The effect of access to broadband internet on partisan affect. *American Journal of Political Science*, 61(1), 5-20.
- Linz, J. J. (1990). The perils of party presidentialism. *J. Democracy*, 1, 51.
- McCoy, J., & Somer, M. (2019). Toward a theory of pernicious polarization and how it harms democracies: Comparative evidence and possible remedies. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 681(1), 234-271.
- McCoy, J., & Somer, M. (2019). Toward a theory of pernicious polarization and how it harms democracies: Comparative evidence and possible remedies. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 681(1), 234-271.
- McCoy, J., Rahman, T., & Somer, M. (2018). Polarization and the global crisis of democracy: Common patterns, dynamics, and pernicious consequences for democratic polities. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 62(1), 16-42.
- Modgil, S., Singh, R. K., Gupta, S., & Dennehy, D. (2021). A confirmation bias view on social media induced polarisation during Covid-19. *Information Systems Frontiers*, 1-25.
- Nordbrandt, M. (2021). Affective polarization in the digital age: Testing the direction of the relationship between social media and users' feelings for out-group parties. *New media & society*, 14614448211044393.
- Pennycook, A. (2017). *The cultural politics of English as an international language*. Taylor & Francis.
- Piazza, J. A. (2023). Political polarization and political violence. *Security Studies*, 1-29.
- Reiljan, A. (2020). 'Fear and loathing across party lines'(also) in Europe: Affective polarisation in European party systems. *European journal of political research*, 59(2), 376-396.
- Somer, M., McCoy, J. L., & Luke, R. E. (2021). Pernicious polarization, autocratization and opposition strategies. *Democratization*, 28(5), 929-948.
- Torcal, M., & Comellas, J. M. (2022). Affective polarisation in times of political instability and conflict. Spain from a comparative perspective. *South European Society and Politics*, 27(1), 1-26.
- Vraga, E. K., & Tully, M. (2021). News literacy, social media behaviors, and skepticism toward information on social media. *Information, Communication & Society*, 24(2), 150-166.