

# Opinions on the Internet:

## Social Influence and Political Decision Making Processes on Social Media

Tyler Fraser MacDonald

### Introduction

#### Traditional Political Science on JDM

- Heuristics and the party identification model
- may have been in past, individuals consumed political information privately, and there was a social taboo on discussing politics (Eliasoph, 1998)
- 79% post about politics, 98% friends post about politics, 91% discuss politics with friends, even though 1 in 5 disagree most of the time.

#### Traditional Political Science on Social Media

- Fail to acknowledge importance of social influence and proliferation of social media in Political Science.
- over 61% of all American voting age adults social media
- Facebook most popular, over 1 billion daily active users each user dedicating an average of 50 minutes daily, 120 minutes on average in this study (students age 18-22).

(Bargh and McKenna, 2004; Lenhart et al., 2010; Thusoo et al., 2010; Facebook, 2016; Zuckerberg, 2016; Steward 2016)

#### Why Does this Matter?

- The politicized nature of social media can have detrimental effects on the democratic process.
- 4 in 10 adults say that political and cultural discussions on social media cause them stress.
- high levels of stress can lead to disengagement as a means of coping and relieving stress.

APA, 2016; Carver and Connor-Smith, 2010

#### Aim

- What effect does social influence have on an individual's political identity and decision making when the individual is increasingly exposed to their peer group's views in a digital format (social media)?

#### This experiment tested for two hypotheses:

1. If individuals are exposed to the views of their peer group in a digital format, and those views are different from their own views, individuals change their own view to better fit in with the group.\*
2. If individuals are exposed to the views of their peer group in a digital format, and their views are too similar to the individuals views, the individual will change their own view to relieve the psychological discomfort of being too similar.\*

\*These Hypotheses are based on the theory of Optimal Distinctiveness (Brewer, 1991) which posits social identity as a balancing act. Being like the group enough that one feels like they belong, but feeling different enough that one's desire to be unique is not compromised.

### Methods

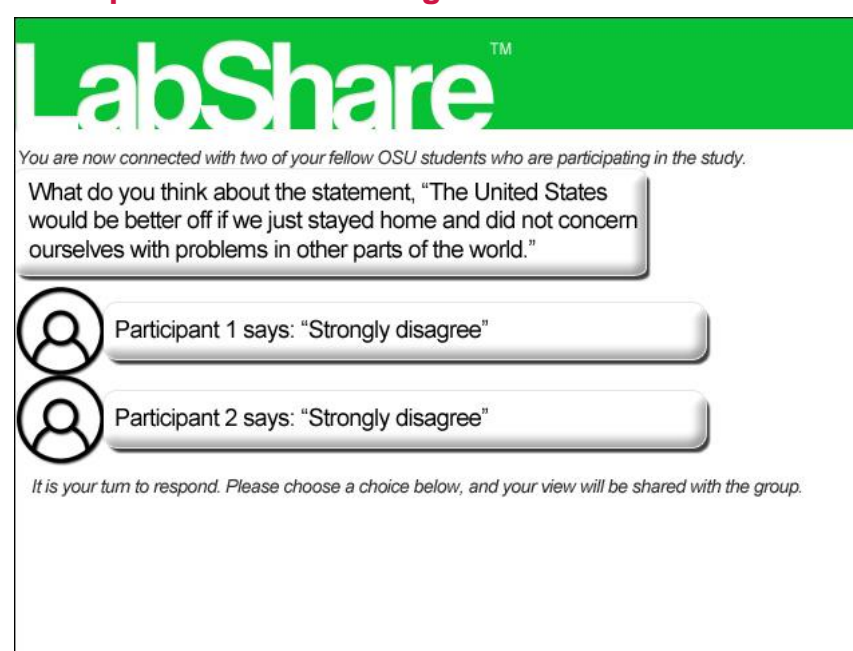
#### Study Details

- At the beginning of the study, participants were given a pre-test to establish their baseline opinions on two types of policy: Economic and Foreign.
- participants were informed that they will interact with two other participants, who were in fact confederates.
- An interactive digital window was designed through which the groups shared their own responses and see the responses of others in the group (see below).
- Participants were also given a post test.

#### Three Conditions

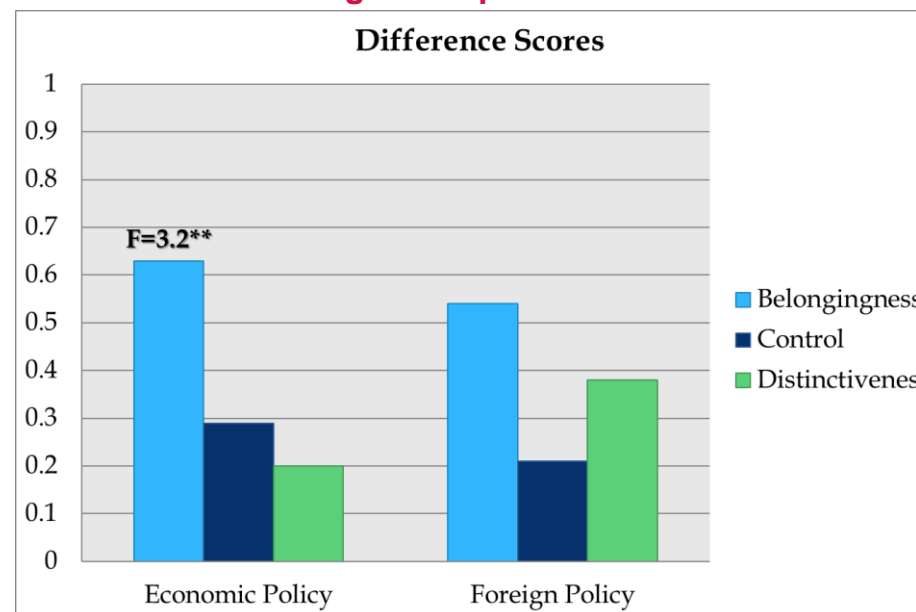
1. **Belongingness Condition**  
Confederates share a view that agrees with each other but disagrees with the participants original stated view.
2. **Distinctiveness Condition**  
Confederates share a view that agrees with each other and agrees with the participants original stated view.
3. **Control Condition**  
Do not share their opinions openly in a group. Establishes a baseline of comparison.

#### Example of Interactive digital window



### Results

Table 1: Do we change our opinions?



#### Belongingness Group

Policy	Control	Distinctiveness
Economic Policy	-42% conformed	-8% differed
Foreign Policy	-21% conformed	-13% differed
	-50% held view	-66% held view

#### Distinctiveness Group

Policy	Control	Distinctiveness
Economic Policy	-80% conformed	-20% differed
Foreign Policy	-88% conformed	-12% differed

#### What causes this change?

Policy	Control	Distinctiveness
Economic Policy	-Social influence (F=2.97**)	-Party ID (F=7.36***)
Foreign Policy	-Party ID (F=7.36***)	-Democrat (r=0.178)

Table 2: Are these changes ephemeral?

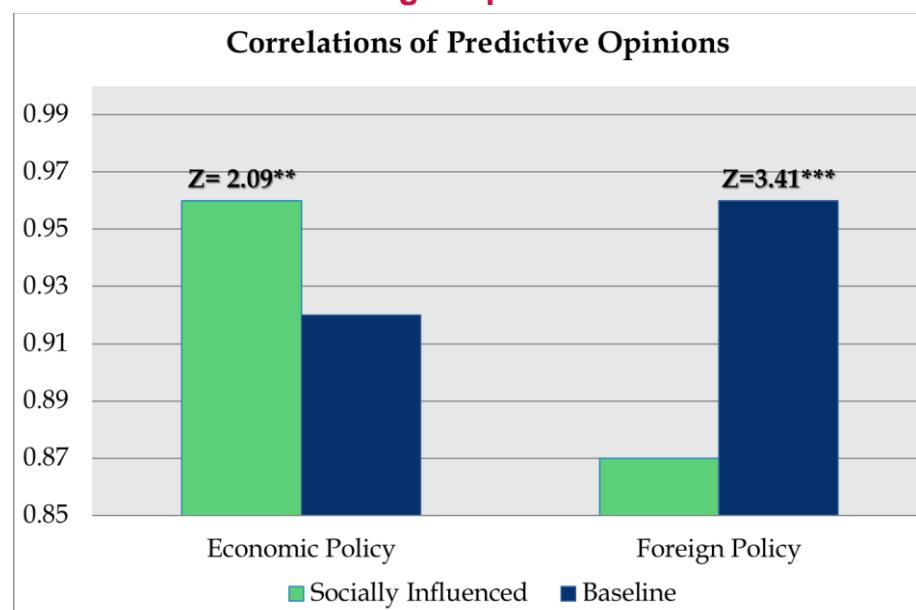


Table 3: Economic Policy Item Extremity Percentage Differences

	Extreme	Firm	Moderate	Neutral
Time 1	34.2%	37%	24.7%	4.1%
Time 3	31.9%	40.3%	27.8%	0%

Table 4: Foreign Policy Item Extremity Percentage Differences

	Extreme	Firm	Moderate	Neutral
Time 1	24.7%	34.2%	38.4%	2.7%
Time 3	18.1%	44.4%	36.1%	1.4%

### Social Influence on Social Media cont.

- Significant Positive Correlation between need-to-belong and Social Media Usage (r=.27\*\*)
- Marginally Significant Positive Correlation between Time spent on social media daily and need-to-belong (r=.21\*)
- These finding suggests that greater social media usage may lead to a higher individual need to belong.

Table 5: Opinion Suppression on Social Media

Variables	Self-reported changing or repressing of views to better fit in on social media		
	Model 1 B	B	95% CI
Time on Social media per day (minutes)	0.264**	0.001	[0.00, 0.01]
Need to belong	0.318**	0.117	[0.01, 0.23]
Need to be distinct	0.098	0.055	[-0.13, 0.24]
Need for cognition	0.014	0.007	[-0.13, 0.14]
Need to evaluate	-0.109	-0.044	[-0.15, 0.06]
Public difference scores on Foreign Policy	-0.235*	-0.103	[-0.22, 0.02]
Public difference scores on Economic Policy	-0.128	-0.084	[-0.26, 0.09]
Political Knowledge	0.05	0.011	[-0.05, 0.07]
Party Identification	0.231	0.109	[-0.08, 0.3]
Political Ideology	-0.418**	-0.215	[-0.42, -0.01]
R <sup>2</sup>	.171		
ΔR <sup>2</sup>	.022		

Note. N = 67. CI = confidence interval. \*p < .1. \*\*p < .05.

### Takeaway

- Social Media and "what our friends think" can effect out political judgments and decisions.
- Social influence on social media can have strange effect on our political decisions, not easily explained through pre-existing models

### Behavioral Solutions

1. Make yourself open to diverse social groups and remain open minded to differing opinions (Fisher and Ellis, 1980), allow yourself to see and understand the other side
2. Assume the logical opposite of your beliefs and see how well the data fit (Gilbert, 1991).

FOR REFERENCES, SEE HANDOUT.

This research was made possible by:

DECISION SCIENCES  
COLLABORATIVE