The Relationship Between Fox News Use and Americans' Policy Preferences Regarding Refugees and Immigrants

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Guided by the reinforcing spirals model, this study examines whether exposure to cable news is associated with policy preferences, particularly those aimed at immigrants and refugees. Analyses of two sets of survey data ($N = 200$, $N = 4,271$) show that, after controlling for demographics, other news use, and political ideology, consuming Fox News has a unique relationship with Americans' policy preferences. Respondents who reported consuming Fox News (online or on TV) preferred stricter policies aimed at immigrants and refugees; however, use of MSNBC and CNN was not related to these policy preferences. A content analysis revealed that FoxNews.com published far fewer stories ($N = 123$) about immigrants and refugees in the time periods immediately preceding the surveys than did CNN.com ($N = 211$). However, these FoxNews.com stories provided a different contextualization by emphasizing authority and subversion and deemphasizing care. These findings suggest that Fox News is creating/reinforcing its consumers' migration-related policy preferences, whereas no such relationship exists for MSNBC and CNN consumers.

Keywords: *Fox News, cable news, policy preferences, immigrants, refugees, reinforcing spirals*

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While the contemporary media environment is characterized by an ever-expanding array of media technologies, television still reigns supreme as Americans' preferred news medium (Gottfried & Shearer, 2017). Specifically, cable news is a primary source of political and public affairs information for many adults in the United States, and cable news viewership has increased in recent years (Pew, 2017a). In fact, Americans identified cable news as the most helpful source of information about the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Gottfried, Barthel, Shearer, & Mitchell, 2016). The success and range of cable news providers' influence are not limited to television. In October 2017, the online versions of Fox News and CNN were reaching 96 million and 119 million unique visitors per month, respectively (Schwartz, 2017). Whether via television viewing or online access, cable news providers enjoy a broad and growing audience.

There is a clear partisan divide within these cable news audiences. Conservatives and Republicans make up most of Fox News's audience, while liberals and Democrats tend to view content from CNN and/or MSNBC (Gil de Zúñiga, Correa, & Valenzuela, 2012; Holcomb, 2014; Stroud, 2011). Important differences exist between these two ideologically divided audiences. For example, a recent Pew study found that nearly half of conservatives named Fox News as their primary source of information about news and politics, whereas liberals did not cluster quite so tightly around one source, naming multiple outlets such as NPR and *The New York Times* instead (Mitchell, Gottfried, Kiley, & Matsa, 2014). Central to normative concerns about partisan selectivity in cable news use is the idea that these divided audiences may be exposed to radically different perspectives (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Stroud, 2011).

Among the issues dividing the American public are those related to migration and relocation policies. Migration policy has persisted as an issue of importance for the U.S. public (Gallup, 2018) and government (Valverde, 2018) for decades. The 2016 U.S. presidential election campaign in particular brought policy related to immigrants and refugees to the forefront of public and media attention. Migration was a central issue to that election, as Donald Trump made it the lynchpin of his platform. Support for Trump was often based on his migration-related policies (Daniller, 2019), including building "the wall" and deporting "Dreamers." Moreover, Pew Research Center (2018) reported that immigration surpassed healthcare as the top issue for voters leading up to the 2018 U.S. midterm elections. Some of the policy actions in this time frame included the move to end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, banning travelers from majority-Muslim countries, building a border wall between the United States and Mexico, punishing "sanctuary cities" (Rose, 2017, Semotiuk, 2017) and, most recently, separating children from their parents after they crossed the southern border (Domonoske & Gonzales, 2018) and restricting the number of refugees entering the United States to the lowest number since 1980, when the Refugee Act was passed (Shesgreen & Gomez, 2018). Each of these issues has received prominent news coverage, garnered the public's attention, and resulted in a public with diverse and divided opinions about immigrants and refugees, and the U.S. policies aimed at them.

Cable news in particular has heavily covered immigration and migration policy in recent years (Leetaru, 2019). Additionally, voters have come to believe that these issues are both relevant and important (Jones, 2019), which has resulted in cable news providers continuing to report on these issues. These reciprocal processes illustrate the potentiality of a reinforcing spirals effect of such coverage of immigrants and refugees. The reinforcing spirals model (RSM) accounts for the circular and reinforcing relationship that exists here, and because it is expressly related to identity-relevant attitudes (Slater, 2015), it provides the

necessary theoretical underpinning for this investigation. In line with the RSM, this study does not attempt to determine whether these policy preferences predate media use or vice versa; rather, it attempts to understand whether there is a relationship between cable news use and policy preferences, particularly those directed toward immigrants and refugees.

This study seeks to advance theory by merging ideas about selective exposure and the RSM and by testing these processes in the context of cable news and policy preferences toward immigrants and refugees. The issue of migration provides an ideal context for testing these processes because the American public is divided on these issues. Although a majority of Americans agree that immigrants strengthen the country, there are stark differences among partisans. Whereas 84% of Democrats agree with the sentiment, only 42% of Republicans think that immigrants strengthen the country (Pew, 2017b). Similarly, only 26% Republicans in 2018 thought the United States had a responsibility to accept refugees, whereas 74% of Democrats believed this to be true (Hartig, 2018). Furthermore, one might expect left-wing and right-wing cable news channels to present widely divergent agendas on the topic of migration (e.g., Leetaru, 2019), permitting tests of the relationships between these channels' content and their consumers' policy preferences.

Recognizing the partisan differences among cable news audiences, this research investigates the potential role of cable news use in shaping and reinforcing Americans' preferences about policies related to both immigrants and refugees. Recent scholarly discussions have made clear the need for and importance of research that examines the potential influence of cable news on American politics. Specifically, Yglesias (2018) argued that "the United States (and, indeed, the world) would benefit enormously from more focus from scholars of political communication on the specific dynamics and role of Fox News in American political life" (p. 1). Heeding this call, this study looks beyond the influence of political orientations and tests the relationships between use of cable news, particularly Fox News, and policy preferences to better understand the potential implications of these media outlets.

The Content and Effects of Fox News

A consistent pattern has emerged from research investigating the content and effects of Fox News. Its coverage of issues supports conservative- and Republican-leaning positions, and Fox News users hold policy preferences that mirror that coverage. Morris (2005) even concluded that Fox News viewers were more likely than CNN viewers to enjoy news content that supports their own views. For example, Fox News viewers have more negative perceptions of non–Fox News media and Democratic leaders (Morris, 2007). Moreover, even after controlling for party identification, Fox News watchers in 2004 were more inclined than their counterparts to believe the war in Iraq was going well (Morris, 2007) and underestimate the number of casualties (Morris, 2005). Using data from 2008–2009, Gil de Zúñiga and colleagues (2012) found that, again, even in controlling for political ideology, exposure to Fox News was significantly associated with negative attitudes toward Mexican immigration. Similar to results from Morris (2005, 2007), the effect did not hold true for CNN viewers.

Combining survey data with a content analysis, other research revealed that Fox News coverage was dismissive of climate change, as were Fox News viewers (Feldman, Maibach, Roser-Renouf, &

Leiserowitz, 2012). Interestingly, this particular research indicates a direct persuasion effect for Republicans. Republicans who viewed Fox News were less likely to accept climate change, and Republicans who viewed CNN/MSNBC were more accepting of climate change—an effect that did not hold for Democrats, who were accepting regardless of which news outlet they used. These findings suggest that Republicans' attitudes toward climate change more strongly reflect the cable news coverage they view, regardless of their (or the outlet's) position. This prior research leaves open the question of Fox News's relationship with other policy preferences, particularly those related to refugees and immigrants. Specifically, the present study of cable news use and policy preferences includes controls for demographics, political ideology, and other news use to better understand these relationships.

Selective Exposure and Reinforcing Spirals

Selective exposure theory suggests that individuals tend to select and consume media messages in accordance with their political predispositions (Stroud, 2008, 2010). Research on selective exposure illustrates a bias in individuals' information seeking, where they tend to seek out information that aligns with their existing beliefs (Garrett, 2009b; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Stroud, 2008). The more individuals engage in selective exposure, the more likely they are to be susceptible to the effects of a biased point of view (Hart et al., 2009; Winter, Metzger, & Flanagin, 2016), resulting in a more politically polarized society (Stroud, 2010).

As has been illustrated in prior research, partisanship and political ideology are strong predictors of selective exposure (Barnidge et al., 2020; Stroud, 2008). In terms of party affiliation, Republicans are more likely to watch Fox News (Levendusky, 2013), whereas Democrats tend to watch CNN (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012)—although it is important to note that partisan selectivity does not necessarily indicate that people avoid attitude-inconsistent media (Garrett, 2009a), particularly in an online news environment (Flaxman, Goel, & Rao, 2016). As such, selective exposure theory helps explain why political partisans tend to select ideologically congruent cable news media (Garrett, 2009b; Hart et al., 2009; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick & Kleinman, 2012; Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009; Stroud, 2008, 2010, 2011). However, it is limited in terms of explaining the potential outcomes of partisan media consumption— in this case, the potential persuasiveness of partisan cable media in relation to audiences' policy preferences.

The RSM helps bridge this gap. Based in systems theory and social identity theory, the RSM posits that the processes of selective exposure and media effects work in tandem to create and support individuals' social identities as well as their opinions and behaviors (Slater, 2007, 2015). The RSM helps unpack the circular and reinforcing effects of media use and opinion formation, change, and/or fortification. Although it is clear that partisanship plays an important role in media selections (Stroud, 2010), the "RSM is concerned with selection of differentiated media content consistent with and reflecting the values of subgroups within a larger society" (Slater, 2015, p. 371). One of the more novel contributions of the RSM is that it treats media use as both a predictor and an outcome. That is, attitudes predict media choice; consumption of that media then affects attitudes (Slater, 2015). This assumption recognizes the schemata or psychological architecture present within audience members that also impacts their perceptions of social groups in conjunction with media coverage.

In the most recent version of the model, Slater (2015) specifically pointed to the implication of threat in structuring the ways in which individuals consume media. That is, the RSM permits and expects the perception of threat to be a motivating factor in media consumption, while acknowledging that media consumption may create or reinforce this perception of threat. Prior research has indicated that conservatives tend to have stronger responses to perceptions of fear and threat (Carney, Jost, Gosling, & Potter, 2008; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Jost et al., 2007), which may then indicate that Fox News consumers—who tend to be conservative—also are likely to respond to perceptions of threat. As prior research has shown, public perceptions and immigration policy preferences are likely a product both of media messages and the receivers' cognitive schemata (e.g., Scheufele & Iyengar, 2017). Moreover, Blumer's (1958) group threat theory posits that resentment toward newly arrived out-group members is based primarily on in-group members' fears of displacement in the social and economic order. As the number of newly arrived out-group members increases, the perceived threat posed by this out-group increases (Schlueter & Scheepers, 2010). Given that the inclusion of immigrants and refugees in the United States poses a perceived threat to the status quo, it is possible that Fox News consumers are prompted by this perception of threat to rely on Fox News content in order to understand these individuals and related U.S. policies. This presumption coincides with the RSM, wherein a sense of threat, here focused on immigrants and refugees, prompts an increase in ideologically consistent news consumption, or the consumption of particular news outlets creates a perception of threat. Both of these possibilities are easily associated with the creation or reinforcement of preferences for stricter migration policies. Importantly, because this likelihood to sense threat is less intense for liberal individuals (Carney et al., 2008; Jost et al., 2003, 2007), the relationships found between Fox News and its viewers would not be mirrored for CNN and MSNBC and their viewers.

The previously reviewed research on cable news use indicates the uniqueness of Fox News's coverage and Fox News viewers' perceptions across a range of issues. Using two surveys to examine this RSM explanation, this study predicts that such a pattern will hold true for policy preferences regarding immigrants and refugees:

H1:   *Fox News use will have a negative relationship with policy preferences regarding immigrants and refugees, such that the Fox News audience will prefer stricter policies.*

Because the relationships between policy preferences and the other top cable news outlets are less clear, this study also investigates whether such relationships exist for CNN and MSNBC:

RQ1:   *Is use of (a) CNN or (b) MSNBC related to policy preferences regarding immigrants and refugees?*

The question then remains whether Fox News content illustrates why this creation/reinforcement of attitudes and policy preferences persists for Fox News consumers. This study will examine this possibility by also conducting a content analysis of cable news content focused on immigrants and refugees. If, for example, Fox News and CNN cover a particular issue with equal frequency, the specific content of that coverage can have an independent and parallel relationship with information processing. This means that the reasons provided by one outlet can be persuasive for one audience, while the reasons provided by another outlet may not be persuasive for that audience. To begin, this study considers whether the quantity

of coverage may be related to policy preferences by examining news stories about immigrants and/or refugees published on FoxNews.com and CNN.com:

RQ2:   *Do CNN and Fox News differ in the amount of coverage given to immigrants and refugees?*

Previous work has noted that partisan differences can be drawn from the language contained in media content. For example, moral foundations have been used to help illustrate partisan-based reasoning (e.g., Bowe & Hoewe, 2016). The five moral foundations, which were identified by Graham and colleagues (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Graham et al., 2013), are care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation. Prior research has shown that particular moral foundations tend to be emphasized by different political parties (Weber & Federico, 2013). Democrats tend to focus on individualizing foundations such as care/harm and fairness/cheating, whereas Republicans tend to rely on binding foundations such as loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation (Weber & Federico, 2013). If one moral foundation is emphasized over another, it may shape news consumers' perceptions of that particular political topic. Based on these prior findings related to moral foundations, this study assesses the moral arguments offered by CNN.com and FoxNews.com in their coverage of immigrants and refugees. These moral arguments will help illuminate the differences in the information these news outlets offer, particularly for issues related to immigrants and refugees:

H2:   *Fox News and CNN will differ in the moral language used to cover immigrants and refugees in that (a) Fox News will use more binding language, and (b) CNN will use more individualizing language.*

Study 1

As an initial exploratory test of the first hypothesis and research question, Study 1 was conducted to determine which sources of news, if any, were related to Americans' public policy preferences regarding immigrants and refugees.

Method

Respondents and procedure. Respondents for Study 1 were recruited from and completed a survey about their news use and policy preferences through Mechanical Turk (MTurk) in October 2017. MTurk was used because it provides a larger and more diverse sample when compared with the collegiate student samples often used in exploratory research (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Ross, Irani, Silberman, Zaldivar, & Tomlinson, 2010).

A total of 200 respondents completed the survey. Respondents ranged in age from 19 to 75 (*M* = 34.63, *SD* = 9.88), and 54% were men. They were asked to identify the race/ethnicity that best described them, selecting all options that applied: 81% were White or Caucasian, 9% were Asian or Pacific Islander, 8.5% were Black or African American, 4.5% were Hispanic or Latino, and 1% were Native American. The greatest percentage of respondents reported having completed a four-year college degree (38%). Roughly half of respondents were asked about their preferences about policy aimed at refugees (*n* = 101), and the other half answered questions focused on policy regarding immigrants (*n* = 99). These groups were

determined by random assignment, and this step was taken to avoid contamination in responses (e.g., policy preferences toward one group influencing those toward the other).

Respondents began the survey by consenting to participate. They then completed questions about policy preferences directed at either refugees or immigrants, followed by a battery of questions related to news consumption. The survey ended with demographic questions. Finally, respondents were thanked and paid for their participation.

Variables. Respondents answered five questions about their preferences regarding U.S. policy toward either immigrants or refugees (Hoewe, 2018). Using 7-point scales (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*), respondents addressed the following items: "The U.S. should allow [immigrants/refugees] to move to the U.S.," "[Immigrants/refugees] should have an easier time getting into the U.S.," "The U.S. accepts too many [immigrants/refugees]," "I would like it if the U.S. accepted more [immigrants/refugees]," and "I would be unhappy if the U.S. accepted more [immigrants/refugees]." With two items reverse coded, these questions formed reliable scales, where higher scores indicate greater support for the U.S. allowing more individuals into the country (immigrants: M = 4.48, SD = 1.68, α = .93; refugees: M = 4.75, SD = 1.75, α = .95).

To assess news use, respondents were asked to indicate how often they used numerous news sources. Each source was assessed using a 6-point scale (1 = *never* to 6 = *every day*). Respondents reported their viewing, reading, and listening-to (i.e., TV, online, and radio) for each of the primary cable news networks. They reported slightly more use of CNN (M = 2.64, SD = 1.52) than MSNBC (M = 2.27, SD = 1.34) or Fox News (M = 1.86, SD = 1.34). To consider other potential news-related relationships with policy preferences, a summed measure of print, television, radio, and online news consumption also was created. Using the same 6-point scales, it included respondents' use of the following news sources: local and national newspapers (in print and online), local and national news television (not cable news), and radio news programs (M = 16.81, SD = 6.15). The final news consumption variable asked about respondents' habits of using social media to get news, inquiring about Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Snapchat, Reddit, and any other social media platforms. Again, using 6-point scales, these items were summed to form an aggregate measure of social media news use (M = 16.07, SD = 5.85).

Lastly, respondents were asked to identify their political ideology with three items. Using 7-point scales (1 = *very conservative* to 7 = *very liberal*), they reported their (1) general ideology and their views in regard to (2) social and (3) fiscal issues (M = 4.73, SD = 1.73, α = .94).

Results

Two models were run to test the relationships between news use and preferences for U.S. policy regarding the admission of immigrants or refugees into the country. Both models used hierarchical ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to isolate the different potential relationships with these policy preferences. The first block of each model consisted of demographic information about the respondents, including age, gender, education level, and race/ethnicity (dichotomized to 0 = White and 1 = non-White). The second block consisted of respondents' political ideology, which then permitted a test of the potential relationships

between news use and policy preferences beyond partisan differences. The third block tested the relationships between policy preferences and general news use (print, radio, and online) and social media news use. The final block isolated the relationship between cable news consumption and policy preferences, particularly examining use of CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News.

Table 1 illustrates the results of the first model, which tested these variables' relationships with preferences toward U.S. public policy directed specifically at refugees. As would be expected, there was a significant relationship between political ideology and these policies, where more liberal individuals supported allowing more refugees into the United States and more conservative individuals indicated significantly less support. Beyond that, there were no significant relationships between any demographic indicators and general or social media news consumption and views of U.S. policy toward refugees. However, one predictor was significant in the final block of the model: Reading, watching, and/or listening to Fox News significantly predicted preferences against admitting refugees into the country (supporting H1). Addressing RQ1, a similar relationship did not emerge for consumption of news through CNN or MSNBC.

Table 1. Hierarchical Regression Model Results for U.S. Refugee Policies.

	β	t	R^2	Adj. R^2	R^2 change	F
Step 1			.03	.00	.03	0.85
Age	−.12	−1.11				
Gender	.15	1.44				
Race/ethnicity	.05	0.47				
Education level	.01	0.09				
Step 2			.47	.44	.43***	16.73***
Political ideology	.68	8.81***				
Step 3			.47	.43	.00	11.72***
Print, radio, online news use	.02	0.27				
Social media news use	−.02	−0.20				
Step 4			.49	.44	.02	8.75***
CNN use	.06	0.64				
MSNBC use	.03	0.25				
Fox News use	−.18	−2.03*				

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

The second model included respondents' preferences regarding U.S. policy directed at immigrants. The findings in this model are nearly identical to those of the previous model. Political ideology and Fox News use significantly predicted these preferences (see Table 2, which provides additional support for H1). Age also was a significant predictor, where older individuals preferred stricter immigration policies. Of note, including Fox News use in its own block (as the final step in the model) resulted in a significant R^2 change for that block ($p < .05$). The R^2 change for the CNN use and MSNBC use block of the model remained nonsignificant. This effect was consistent for policy preferences toward refugees and immigrants.

2044 Hoewe, Peacock, Kim, and Barnidge

Table 2. Hierarchical Regression Model Results for U.S. Immigrant Policies.

	β	t	R^2	Adj. R^2	R^2 change	F
Step 1			.08	.04	.08	2.11
Age	−.29	−2.90***				
Gender	.00	0.04				
Race/ethnicity	−.07	−0.68				
Education level	−.04	−0.36				
Step 2			.44	.41	.36***	14.55***
Political ideology	.61	7.69***				
Step 3			.45	.40	.01	10.41***
Print, radio, online news use	−.02	−0.25				
Social media news use	−.07	−0.84				
Step 4			.47	.41	.03	7.79***
CNN use	.02	0.17				
MSNBC use	.02	0.18				
Fox News use	−.23	−2.03*				

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Taken together, these results illustrate the strong relationship between political ideology and U.S. policy preferences regarding both refugees and immigrants. However, even after controlling for political ideology, the only news consumption variable that was significantly related to these preferences was use of Fox News. In both models, greater use of Fox News was related to more negative views of U.S. policy that would admit refugees and immigrants into the country.

Study 2

To determine if these results were idiosyncratic to the sample collected in Study 1, a second round of analyses was conducted. This time, the sample was a nationally representative one that used similar variables, permitting replication of Study 1.

Method

Respondents and procedure. Data collected from the 2016 American National Election Studies (ANES) survey were used. This dataset included responses from a generalizable sample of 4,271 Americans. The questions asked in this survey ranged from voting intentions to news use to policy preferences. Respondents' ages ranged from 18 to 90 (*M* = 49.58, *SD* = 17.58), and 48% were men. Respondents also indicted their race/ethnicity: 71.1% indicated they were non-Hispanic White, 10.5% were Hispanic, 9.3%, were non-Hispanic Black, 3.5% were non-Hispanic Asian or Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 0.6% were non-Hispanic Native American, and 4.1% selected some other category. The greatest percentage of respondents reported completing some college (35%).

Variables*.* Respondents were asked two questions regarding their preferences for U.S. policy regarding refugees and immigrants. First, they were asked, "Should Syrian refugees be allowed to come to the U.S.?" Though this question addressed a particular group of refugees, it offers a timely example of respondents' policy preferences directed at refugees. Respondents indicated their responses using a 7-point scale (after reverse coding: 1 = *oppose a great deal* to 7 = *favor a great deal*). Second, respondents were asked their opinions about "U.S. government policy toward unauthorized immigrants." Similarly, this prompt offers a view of policy preferences focused on a particular group of immigrants. A 4-point scale was used to assess respondents' preferences (1 = *make all unauthorized immigrants felons and send them back to their home country* to 4 = *allow to remain and eventually qualify for U.S. citizenship without penalties*). These questions were used as the dependent variables in the two models reported below: preferences for U.S. policy regarding Syrian refugees (*M* = 3.26, *SD* = 2.04) and unauthorized immigrants (*M* = 2.61, *SD* = 0.88).

This ANES survey also included questions related to news consumption. Respondents indicated their use of the following news sources using dichotomized measures (1 if respondents indicated use, and 0 if not): newspapers, television news, Internet-based news, and radio news. These items were summed to form a print, television, online, and radio news use variable (*M* = 3.14, *SD* = 1.48). Cable news use also was indicated, but the questions asked in the ANES survey included only CNN and Fox News (not MSNBC). Respondents indicated if they consumed news using CNN.com (14.1% indicated usage) or FoxNews.com (15.0% indicated usage).

The final variable considered was political ideology. Respondents indicated their ideology on a 7-point scale (after reverse coding: 1 = *extremely conservative* to 7 = *extremely liberal*), with mean values falling slightly beneath the midpoint (*M* = 3.87, *SD* = 1.55).

Results

The models considered in Study 2 were created as similarly to those in Study 1 as possible. As such, two hierarchical OLS regression models were run to consider preferences for policy regarding refugees and immigrants separately. The first block consisted of the same demographic variables as Study 1, and the second block contained respondents' political ideology. The third block consisted of the news consumption aggregate variable, and the final block contained use of CNN.com and Fox News.com.

The first model, as shown in Table 3, examined preferences for U.S. policy aimed at refugees. Several of the demographic variables were significantly related to policy preferences, which is not surprising given the large sample size in this dataset. Older respondents and White respondents were significantly more opposed to policy admitting refugees, whereas more educated respondents were more in favor of admitting refugees. The ANES survey data also included respondents' income; when their income is included in this model or the subsequent one, it is not related to respondents' policy preferences for refugees or immigrants. Additionally, when the ANES weights are applied to either model, the only finding that changes is that gender becomes significantly related to refugee policy preferences.

Table 3. Hierarchical Regression Model Results for U.S. Refugee Policies (ANES Data).

	β	t	R^2	Adj. R^2	R^2 change	F
Step 1			.09	.09	.09***	47.46***
Age	−.17	−7.78***				
Gender	.04	1.65				
Race/ethnicity	−.08	−3.55***				
Education level	.24	11.03***				
Step 2			.39	.39	.30***	245.08***
Political ideology	.57	30.71***				
Step 3			.39	.39	.00	204.77***
Print, radio, online news use	−.03	−1.53				
Step 4			.40	.39	.01***	157.92***
CNN use	.02	0.84				
Fox News use	−.09	−4.69***				

Note. ANES = American National Election Studies.
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Similar to Study 1, political ideology was significantly related to policy preferences, where more liberal individuals were more favorable toward allowing refugees into the United States, and more conservative individuals did not favor this policy. Additionally, there were no significant relationships between general news consumption or CNN.com use and these policy preferences, which addresses RQ1. However, identical to the results in Study 1, FoxNews.com use was significantly related to respondents' preferences regarding policy directed at refugees, where consumption of Fox News predicted a desire for more restrictive policy (providing additional support for H1).

The second model in this study examined preferences for U.S. policy directed at immigrants (see Table 4). In this case, all four demographic variables were significant. Directionality of the three reported in the previous model was maintained. Gender was the additional predictor, where women were more likely to support more favorable policy for immigrants than were men.

Table 4. Hierarchical Regression Model Results for U.S. Immigrant Policies (ANES Data).

	β	t	R^2	Adj. R^2	R^2 change	F
Step 1			.05	.04	.05***	22.66***
Age	−.06	−2.46*				
Gender	.05	2.28*				
Race/ethnicity	−.11	−4.69***				
Education level	.17	7.67***				
Step 2			.21	.21	.17***	104.84***
Political ideology	.43	20.35***				
Step 3			.21	.21	.00	87.44***
Print, radio, online news use	−.02	−0.75				
Step 4			.22	.22	.01**	67.85***
CNN use	.01	0.68				
Fox News use	−.08	−3.83***				

Note. ANES = American National Election Studies.
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

The remaining relationships duplicate those of the previous model and the models reported in Study 1. Political ideology was significantly related to policy preferences, where more liberal individuals were more positive toward policy aiding immigrants. After controlling for political ideology and other news use, again use of FoxNews.com was significantly related to immigrant policy preferences. Respondents who reported consuming Fox News were more likely to support stricter policies directed at immigrants. These results also provide support for H1.

Taken together, the results of Study 1 and Study 2 illustrate the unique relationship between Fox News use and Americans' policy preferences, beyond the variance explained by political ideology and other news consumption.

Study 3

A content analysis was used to determine what differences appeared in the news coverage produced by CNN.com and FoxNews.com, particularly concerning immigrants and refugees, in the time periods immediately before the surveys in Study 1 and Study 2 were conducted. Study 3 focuses on online news content for the following reasons: First, online news tends to report the same news topics and values as those that are broadcast on their mainstream news outlet counterparts (Maier, 2010). According to Gaskins and Jerit (2012), Internet news plays a replacement role for mainstream news media, and there are cross-platform news consumers across legacy media and online news platforms (Pew, 2019). For instance, those who often consume CNN television news are more likely to access news on CNN.com. Second, respondents in Study 1 and Study 2 were asked to indicate their online news use for Fox News and CNN. Study 3 then illuminates the contents of that online news.

Method

The news stories were collected from the online content published by these two cable news networks. All stories included the word "immigrant" or "refugee" in the headline or lead, resulting in a sample of news stories that specifically focused on these two groups of people. The CNN stories were collected from the Lexis-Nexis database (because CNN.com does not offer an advanced search tool), and the Fox News stories were collected from the network's website (because Lexis-Nexis does not have FoxNews.com content). The time frame for collection included the two months immediately before the surveys in Study 1 and Study 2 were undertaken. This time period was selected because, by means of recency, the news stories published in these months were more likely to influence respondents' attitudes in the two surveys. As such, news stories were collected for August and September 2017 (the two months immediately before the survey in Study 1) and July and August 2016 (the two months immediately before the survey in Study 2).

Variables and coding. Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC), a computer-assisted content analysis program, was used to conduct the coding. This software includes a standard dictionary of words as well as options to add additional categories of words, which the program will then search for within the sample of text. In this study, the Moral Foundations Dictionary was used because of its ability to identify established relationships between descriptive language and political leanings (e.g., Bowe & Hoewe, 2016; Graham et al., 2009). The Moral Foundations Dictionary includes the five moral foundations identified by Graham and colleagues (2009, 2013): care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation. This dictionary accounts for the vice and virtue components of each moral foundation (e.g., harm and care). Table 5 illustrates the descriptive statistics for each of these moral foundations based on the news outlets considered in this study. These numbers are reported in terms of the percentage of words in the stories that include language related to that particular moral foundation.

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics for Moral Language in News Stories About Immigrants and Refugees.

	CNN.com		FoxNews.com	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Care/harm	0.95	0.68	0.83	0.65
Fairness/cheating	0.20	0.36	0.17	0.23
Loyalty/betrayal	0.82	0.55	0.85	0.57
Authority/subversion	0.79	0.60	1.13	0.82
Sanctity/degradation	0.08	0.12	0.07	0.22

Note. Mean values represent the percentage of words used in the news stories related to that particular moral foundation.

Results

CNN.com (*N* = 211) published far more stories about immigrants and refugees than did FoxNews.com (*N* = 123) in the time periods considered. Additionally, there was a significant difference in the length of the stories published by these two outlets. A regression model showed that FoxNews.com's stories contained significantly fewer words than those published by CNN.com, $\beta = -.30$, $t(332) = -5.62$, $p < .001$. Thus, both in

terms of the number of stories about immigrants and refugees and the number of words within those stories, CNN.com far out-published FoxNews.com. That is, simply discussing these groups of people more often is not the reason that Fox News has a unique relationship with its consumers' policy preferences.

The next step was to test whether the content of the news stories may shape news consumers' policy preferences. Before running these analyses, the dependent variables (i.e., each of the moral foundations) were transformed to achieve normal distribution by taking the square root of each variable. They were then run in a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) model, with the network (CNN = 0, Fox News = 1) as the independent variable and the five moral foundations as the dependent variables. The omnibus test in this model was statistically significant, Wilks' Λ = .94, F(5, 328) = 4.46, p = .001, η_p^2 = .06. The between-subjects effects showed that two of the moral foundations were used differently between the two networks. CNN.com was significantly more likely to discuss immigrants and refugees in terms of care/harm than was FoxNews.com, F(1, 332) = 4.50, p = .04, η_p^2 = .01. To illustrate the content of these stories, some of the words within the care/harm moral foundation include *safe*, *compassion*, *suffering*, and *empathy*. Conversely, FoxNews.com was significantly more likely to write its stories using language related to authority/subversion than was CNN.com, F(1, 332) = 16.28, p < .001, η_p^2 = .05. Some of the words that are identified within this moral foundation—and Fox News's stories—are *illegal*, *dissident*, *comply*, and *control*.

To consider these variables at a more granular level, they were also analyzed as individual components (e.g., care). Examining each of the moral foundation components in a MANOVA, the omnibus test of the model was statistically significant, Wilks' Λ = .86, F(10, 323) = 5.16, p < .001, η_p^2 = .14. Both the authority, F(1, 332) = 4.10, p = .04, η_p^2 = .01, and subversion, F(1, 332) = 36.20, p < .001, η_p^2 = .10, components of the authority/subversion moral foundation were significantly different between CNN.com and FoxNews.com, where Fox News was more likely to use words related to those moral foundation components. Additionally, the difference in the networks' use of the care component of the care/harm moral foundation approached traditional levels of statistical significance, F(1, 332) = 3.63, p = .06, η_p^2 = .01, with CNN.com using more words related to care. The difference in use of the harm component of this moral foundation was not statistically significant.

These results show that FoxNews.com relied on language related to both authority and subversion in its coverage, while limiting the use of language related to care. In this way, when compared with CNN.com, FoxNews.com emphasized a disregard for authority while simultaneously downplaying the hardships experienced by immigrants and refugees. This illustrates FoxNews.com's focus on binding language and CNN.com's use of individualizing language in their coverage of immigrants and refugees, which supports the partisan nature of their coverage and the predictions made in H2.

Discussion

Considering the ongoing shift toward political polarization in the United States and the associated media content that aligns itself in a partisan manner, this study analyzed how individuals form and/or reinforce their preferences for U.S. public policy. In particular, it examined preferences for policy aimed at refugees and immigrants entering the United States to determine any relationships with cable news use. To engage in this discussion, this research included three studies. The first two studies were surveys of Americans, asking about

their news consumption, political ideology, and preferences for policy directed at immigrants and refugees. The third study was a content analysis of cable news coverage of immigrants and refugees.

The two surveys—one using a convenience sample and the other using a nationally representative one—produced remarkably similar results. Unsurprisingly, respondents' political ideology was consistently related to their preferences for these policies. This result is consistent with Hoewe's (2018) findings, where Americans did not distinguish between immigrants and refugees in terms of their policy preferences, but their political ideology significantly predicted the valence of those preferences. To then consider the potential impact of cable news use, the models in both Study 1 and Study 2 included key demographic variables and political ideology as controls while also accounting for other forms of news consumption, including traditional media sources and social media. Even with each of these variables accounted for, use of Fox News was significantly related to more negative policy views, where fewer immigrants and refugees would be allowed to enter the United States. No other news variables—including use of CNN and MSNBC—were related to these policy preferences. That is, even after controlling for political ideology and other news use, Fox News still had a unique relationship with policy preferences. Recognizing that media diets among the public largely rely on overlapping mainstream outlets (Flaxman et al., 2016) and that partisan selectivity does not preclude exposure to attitude inconsistent media (Garrett, 2009a), these findings become all the more compelling.

Given that Fox News consumers exhibited policy-based preferences different from those of MSNBC (Study 1) and CNN (Study 1 and Study 2) consumers, an explanation of selective exposure alone is insufficient. If individuals opt to consume media that agrees with their political views, then those preferences should be reinforced through viewing that media. However, if this were the case, consumption of both MSNBC and CNN ought to have exhibited similar relationships with policy preferences; instead, it seems that the content itself is working to shape or reinforce viewers' preferences. While they may begin consuming partisan media that aligns with their political orientations, news consumers might then form subsequent preferences that correspond with that media company's agenda.

To test the possibility that the content of these cable news networks plays a part in shaping policy preferences, a content analysis of stories published on CNN.com and FoxNews.com that focused on refugees or immigrants was conducted. Given that CNN.com far out-published FoxNews.com in terms of the number and length of stories about immigrants and refugees, an explanation of simple attention falls short. If the amount of coverage was signaling to consumers that immigrants and/or refugees were important to consider in policy creation, then use of CNN should have been related to policy preferences in Study 1 and Study 2.

Subsequently, the content itself—not merely the quantity—was considered as a potential contributor to the relationship with consumers' policy preferences. Supporting this idea, the moral language used in news stories about immigrants and refugees was different between FoxNews.com and CNN.com. FoxNews.com was much more focused on aspects of authority and subversion, and CNN.com was more concerned with the care being afforded to immigrants and refugees. These moral foundations have been linked to political motivations in past research (e.g., Graham et al., 2009, 2013), illustrating that conservatives tend to emphasize binding components, which include authority and subversion. In this way, FoxNews.com emphasized those aspects linked with conservative values (i.e., authority and subversion) and deemphasized those connected with liberal values (i.e., care). As a result, this linkage of moral language to coverage of immigrants and refugees may

work by emphasizing the considerations that news consumers should use in forming their own opinions and attitudes.

These results show that consuming information from Fox News was related to migration-related policy preferences, while other cable news outlets were not related to those preferences. Moreover, the content of FoxNews.com's coverage was demonstrably different from that of CNN.com. Though these studies cannot determine if consuming Fox News is the causal mechanism behind these relationships, this study's results suggest that either (1) Fox News's content is markedly different than the content of MSNBC and CNN, (2) Fox News viewers are markedly different than viewers of MSNBC and CNN, or (3) both. Supporting the suppositions of the RSM, it is most likely that these forces work in tandem to both shape and reinforce policy preferences. Considering the implications of threat as well as group-based identities and decision making that are detailed in the RSM (Slater, 2015), it seems likely that the content of Fox News and the viewpoints of those individuals who select into Fox News content are working together to facilitate a spiraling effect that can both create and reinforce such policy preferences. This process results in a unique relationship between Fox News and its consumers, where their policy preferences are more strongly related to Fox News content, and those preferences drive their decision to view that content.

Limitations and Future Research

These studies do have limitations, which allow for several potential avenues of future research. First, Study 1 incorporated measures to determine audiences' use of cable news in terms of reading, watching, and listening to the content, whereas Study 2 and Study 3 examined only online news use and content. Future research should do more to iron out the similarities and differences between online and TV cable news content. Second, the use of the cross-sectional designs in Study 1 and Study 2 is limited to suggesting relationships between cable news use and policy preferences. Based on the findings presented here, future research can assess causality by employing time-series data or experimental designs. Third, the somewhat low sample size in Study 1 may limit degrees of freedom and statistical power. However, this should make it more difficult to find statistically significant results, and the results are largely replicated in Study 2's much larger data set. Therefore, while the Study 1 models may be oversaturated, the key results should not be an artifact of overfitting. Regardless, future research should continue investigating these relationships. Fourth, Study 2 used single-item measures for the dependent variables. Given that these items may contain greater levels of measurement error than indexes, future research should incorporate larger scales (similar to those used in Study 1). Finally, this research addressed two specific areas of policy preferences—those aimed at immigrants and refugees. A consideration of other policy issues would be beneficial to the expansion of the theories considered here.

Conclusions

Prior research has found that individuals may select into the types of news media that match their political stances (e.g., Garrett, 2009b; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Stroud, 2008). Other work has shown that the way these news media outlets describe political issues can influence the way their news consumers perceive those issues (e.g., Golan & Wanta, 2001). Branching from those areas of research and their implications for the RSM, this study examined the relationship between cable news use and U.S. policy

preferences, particularly regarding immigrants and refugees. Through two surveys and a content analysis, this research identified that Fox News users were more likely to support policies aimed at restricting immigrants and refugees. Importantly, these results controlled for the influences of political ideology and other news use. On the other hand, use of MSNBC and CNN was not related to policy preferences. A content analysis then revealed that FoxNews.com used different moral language than CNN.com in its descriptions of immigrants and refugees. In this way, Fox News has a distinctive relationship with Americans' policy preferences and appears influential in shaping and reinforcing its consumers' policy preferences, particularly those directed at immigrants and refugees.

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