Analyzing Open-mindedness within Online Political Debates

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Abstract

This paper lays out a research proposal for investigating open-mindedness in online political settings, through an in-depth analysis of how people disagree with one another in discussion forums attached to online news articles. The goal of the proposed research is to investigate the political behavior of open-mindedness towards other viewpoints in a way that has not been directly studied before. Previous literature has investigated the relationship between a number of factors such as openness to experience and conscientiousness related to political behaviors and identification. However, the research proposed here offers a method of examining how individual traits correlate with one's own tendency to be open-minded toward others, as well as the tendency of others to be open-minded toward them.

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Few, if any, political virtues appear to be as widely appreciated as open-mindedness. When roughly 600 students of American government at Oklahoma State University were asked which single characteristic of a political discussion/debate companion "would cause [them] to have the greatest level of appreciation for this other person," the results were as follows[2]:

Characteristic	Percent
Intelligence/education	17.6
Wit/humor	12.2
Open-mindedness	*34.4*
Confidence	4.5
Real-life experience	16.1
Austerity/seriousness	0.8
Passion/sincerity	12.1
Unsure/no response	2.2

The results show that these students, who we have no reason to doubt are representative of the average citizen on this question[3], value open-mindedness far more than other characteristics that might cause a person to respect a fellow political discussant. Thus, the relative dearth of research on political open-mindedness appears out of line with how important the public considers this characteristic to be.

The purpose of the research project proposed here is to supplement our understanding of political behavior with an analysis of characteristics that most closely correlate with openness to others' ideas. Specifically, we propose a novel method of measuring open-mindedness in political debates – an observational analysis of comments posted in response to a sample of online political news articles. We also propose to evaluate the characteristics of comment writers – especially, but not limited to, ideological leanings – that appear to correlate with a willingness to remain open to political opponents' ideas.

This paper will be organized as follows: The first section offers a theoretical discussion, with reference to various existing pieces of literature, of the possible relationship between ideological leaning and open-mindedness. Next, we outline the core components of a research project designed to measure open-mindedness – and some of its determinants – in online political discussions. Third, we offer a few general expectations about what we might expect to find in an analysis of open-mindedness in internet comments. Finally, we conclude with a brief summary of extensions that could follow the core project summarized here.

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[2] The options are shown in the table in the same order as they were presented in the informal poll given to students.

[3] In fact, if pressed, we might assume that these students are somewhat *less* likely to appreciate open-mindedness than older individuals, who have more experience contending with the stubbornness of political opponents.

Theoretical Considerations: The Study of Open-Mindedness and the Possible Role of Ideology

Open Minds on the Internet

        Open-mindedness is often discussed as a political virtue; people strive to be more open-minded towards others. However, open-mindedness needs further exploration as to what it entails and who is open-minded in political discussions. An open-minded person would be willing and able to release their default positions on issues so that they can seriously evaluate the viewpoints of another (Baehr). The internet is an increasingly common method used to engage in political discussions and debate, often through comment sections of news articles. However, little has been done to understand if individuals on the internet are able to be open-minded or to understand the characteristics of these open-minded individuals. An interesting dynamic is added to the open-mindedness of individuals using the internet to engage in political debates and discussions because of the often anonymous nature of the internet. An understanding of open-mindedness could allow individuals to purposefully interact with groups that would be the most susceptible to considering their stances on issues. Open-mindedness research in relation to the internet allows for an additional realm of possibilities where social and identity barriers are dropped for all parties, unless the individual states or implies their personal characteristics. This could allow for the removal of effects damaging an individual's message on the basis of race, gender, life experience and possibly ideological leaning. Ideology will be a major emphasis in analyzing the characteristics of open-minded comments for several reasons. First, previous literature is split with several possible hypotheses that could explain why both conservatives and liberals could be open-minded. Second, while the internet could allow for the removal of some effects that could damage open-mindedness, such as stereotypes, it could also limit the possibility to test for other variables that would be available, such as education level, if another method was used. Third, the internet allows for a variety of individuals along the ideological spectrum to post at the venue of their choosing without restriction.

The Role of Ideology

        We are especially interested in patterns that might emerge concerning particular ideological orientations and open-mindedness. This would help further our understanding of the fundamentals the liberal and conservative ideologies, which would be beneficial, as they are such central organizing principles of political behavior. Additionally, ideological leanings are more readily perceptible in political commentary than are many other characteristics, which might be at least as interesting theoretically yet virtually impossible to measure observationally – thus excluded from our consideration in this research.

        Before proceeding to discuss the possible relationship between open-mindedness and liberal/conservative ideology, let us add that we have no intention of assigning judgment to any open- or closed-minded tendencies that might be associated with a particular ideology; and, in fact, we have only very tentative expectations about which patterns might emerge in the first place. Overall, as will be discussed in a later section, we expect that ideologues of different stripes will tend to be closed-minded *differently* from one another – yet no more or less closed-minded overall.

        When looking at ideologies, previous literature offers several different paths for the role ideology may play in open-mindedness. While there is little previous literature on openness in

our sense of the subject, openness to conflicting ideas or beliefs, much has been done on openness to experience. Conservatism has been shown to be negatively correlated with openness to experience (Hiel). It could be that those that are less open to experience are also less open to viewpoints that are different than their own. Additionally, it has been shown that openness to experience is correlated with an increased likelihood to use the internet as a source of news (Gerber). It could be that those that use the internet as a source of news have the highest levels of openness to experience within their ideological group. Conservatives using the internet as their news source may more open to experience than conservatives that do not use the internet as a source of news. It is even possible that the internet is an equalizer and conservatives and liberals who use the internet for their news do not vary significantly in their openness to experience. It is unclear if there is a relationship between openness to experience and open-mindedness but a connection would make some logical sense. Openness to experience allows individuals to be exposed to experiences that they may otherwise reject. For a person to be open to accepting a new experience they must be able to release their default position and evaluate the possibility of the experience. It could follow that these same people will, by their nature, be open-minded to viewpoints other than their own in order to consider new experiences.

However, it could also be that open-mindedness online has more to do with politeness and conflict avoidance than it does with true openness. Politeness has been shown to correlate with conservatism (Hirsh). If open-mindedness correlates with conservatism, it could be because conservatism correlates with politeness. It may be hard to determine the sincerity of openness expressed in an online comment. Openness because of politeness could be just to avoid conflict with others; a person could simply put on a front of openness because they wished to avoid any conflict. Additionally, a polite person could avoid posting in order to avoid conflict and maintain politeness.

Both the attributes of commenter and the respondent may interact in a way that influence the outcome of an open or closed minded comment. It could be that that two people that have similar displayed attributes are more likely to be open-minded towards each other. For instance, someone posting comments on the internet from the ideology of a conservative, ether explicitly stated or implied through their stances, might find that fellow conservatives are more open-minded towards their comments. This is opposed to posters coming from ideologies that are different than that of population of the site they choose to post on, in which we might find that people are likely to be more closed-minded to their stances.

Empathy may be an important factor in influencing the comments that an individual posts. Empathy would be the ability for an individual to relate to the feelings that another has in building their stances on issues. An empathetic person would understand the feelings and emotions that a person has behind their opinions. It could be that those that post from an empathetic standpoint, especially when their opinions are stated in an empathetic frame, are more likely to have their empathy returned with empathy and possibly open-mindedness. Logically, empathy could be an important step in respondents posting open-minded comments; a more empathetic person should be more understanding to the reasoning behind opinions that are different from their own. A person that understands the reasoning and emotions behind a person's stance, that is empathetic to another's views, could be more open-minded to the opinions held by others because they understand these nuances.

However, when comments are posted that have no clear ideological leaning it is unclear how their comments will be received. It could be that without ideological leanings present there is a greater chance that respondents will not take ideological leaning into account in their

analysis of the commenter or will assume that the commenter's ideological leaning is the same as their own. Respondents are unlikely to extend empathy to those that differ from them ideologically (O'Brien). As a result, by not explicitly or implicitly offering ideological leaning, it may be that the chances for respondents to display empathy to the commenter increases.

Finally, it could be that open-mindedness of comments is somehow related to the thoughtfulness put into the comment. Simple comments may be the most closed-minded types of comments while comments that are more complex and thoughtful could be more open-minded. Comments that are based in thoughtfulness may decrease the judgment or prejudice of the commenter or respondent. If judgment, stereotyping or bias is decreased through thoughtfulness of responses, it is possible that there will be more open-mindedness within the comments.

Closed-Minded Tendencies

It is clear that both liberals and conservatives display tendencies of closed-mindedness by limiting their sources of news or their exposure to opinions of those that disagree with them. Recent Pew surveys found that both liberals and conservatives insulate themselves from the views that conflict with their own. In the study, 47% of conservatives cited Fox News as their primary news source (Mitchell). With 47% of conservatives listing Fox News as their primary news source, it is possible that the respondents are receiving a very limited view of news stories. This is different from the media habits of liberals who tend to rely on a greater range of media sources than conservatives (Mitchell). This does not mean they rely on both liberals and conservative source, just that they rely on a greater range of sources. However, liberals also are the most likely to defriend someone on social media that differs from their ideology (Mitchell). So while liberals may be more exposed to various media sources, they are also the most likely to be insulated from the views of others by defriending those that disagree with them.

Even if liberals on social media show tendencies towards closed-mindedness, it is possible that the internet, as a whole, can still be viewed as an area that promotes interactions between those that disagree politically. Some believe that the internet allows for the exchange of ideas and beliefs because there is a better possibility for more direct exchange of beliefs (Papacharissi). However, some have looked into political discussions across online group types and found that people isolate themselves, no matter the group, with those that agree with them (Wojcieszak). News sites were not looked at however, and it might be that news sites are different in some way. It could be that these news sites, because of their nature, allow people to be exposed to ideas that are different than their immediate interactions offline (McKenna). If the internet is a place that encourages active debate and discussion, it might actually encourage some people to seek it out as a source of news. While open-minded individuals may be more likely to use the internet as a source of news, others may seek out the internet out despite the levels of disagreement involved. (Huckfeldt). It is unclear if these individuals, those that are attracted despite political conflict, are open-minded.

Given the nature of political disagreement, political open-mindedness may require individuals to be empathetic, that is able to understand the reasoning behind another's viewpoint and the emotions surrounding these viewpoints, with those that disagree with them politically. Empathy has been show to take place in some online settings, such as medical discussion forums but it is unclear if this will extend comments posted in news site sections (Preece). It is also unclear if empathy in a news comment section is required for an individual to be open-minded. If online discussions are mostly partisan, it could be very difficult for empathy to play a role. Empathy may not cross party lines, at least in offline settings (O'Brien). However, it could be

that in an internet setting empathy does cross party lines. It is possible that a lack of clear party distinction on the internet, a person's party identification is not explicitly available unless the individual states their identification, may allow for individual to have some empathy for others. Without party identification clearly stated, there may still be room for individuals to be empathetic. Similarly, with factors such as gender and race removed, because of the anonymous nature of the comments, there may be a possibility that empathy could be expressed because of the removal of prejudices and stereotypes. It could even be that comments posted that clearly state the posters ideological leaning or party will receive the less open-mindedness both because empathy may not cross party lines and other posters will build prejudices and stereotypes of the person's ideology.

 It is possible that an individual could be open-minded even when they do not already have a stance on the argument. A person can be both open-minded to hear another side of the issue and open-minded to hear both sides of the issue (Baehr). Conflict may not need to take place at all for an individual to be open-minded. It could be possible that open-mindedness is needed to grasp a new or confusing subject; an open-mindedness to learn (Baehr). In this sense a person could ask questions to display open-mindedness, in an effort to understand a new or confusing subject. In comments, questions asking to seek clarity may signal this type of open-mindedness.

Multiple Ideological Paths

Previous research suggests that ideology may play some role in political open-mindedness. Several possible theories emerge from the previous literature. First, it could be that liberals are more open-minded than are conservatives which could have some relation to openness to new experience linking with openness to new political ideas. However, it could be that conservatives are more open-minded than liberal which could have something to do with keeping polite political dialogue. It should be expected that both ideologies will show some political open-mindedness and closed-mindedness. The findings should reveal that both sides have the ability to be open-minded, possibly through different ways, as well as closed-minded, possibly in different ways.

However, it is also possible that those that are open-minded may be unlikely to post responses to comments at all. An open-mined individual could consider a stance of another person and be open-minded towards the opinion without posting a response. While some may ask questions to clarify a point, others could have little to ask of the other side, after they have given their open-minded consideration, and simply move on. If the open-minded individual has little reason to confront the person with an opposing view or clarify a point they have made, they may have little reason to post at all.

It is possible a lack of open-minded individuals joining in on an online political debate will not be an issue if the topic of the political discussion is a more controversial issue. At the very least, in highly contentious political topics, people should be more likely to seek points of clarity on issues and stances because the stakes are believed to be higher. Since people will be more attracted to being closed-minded towards those they disagree with on highly charged issues that split the camps along ideological lines, there is less of a chance that individuals will be open-minded and simply sit the fight out. For example, discussions on abortion or gun rights are highly unlikely to result in a high amount of open-mindedness from either political ideology. As a result those people that are open-minded could seize these issues as a chance to join in the debate in a way that differs from the majority of closed-mindedness that is part of the debate.

However, it may be beneficial to focus on more broad displays of political stances in order to strike a balance between highly charged issues that have little chance of open-mindedness such as abortion or gun laws and issues that open-minded individuals may have already passed on. For example, the State of the Union address presented yearly by the president provides a range of issues for all ideologies to evaluate the president's agenda without being too specific on the issues to the point that it becomes so highly charged that only closed-mindedness is present. General comments regarding the address and its points may allow for a more open-minded discussion than would other political debates.

Analyzing Open-Mindedness in Internet Comments

Our approach to analyzing open-mindedness relies on an in-depth analysis of comments posted to a sample of online political news stories. This section begins by describing the details of the sample of comments we have assembled for analysis. We then describe the exact procedures to be used in analyzing these comments.

Sampling of Comments

Our sampling procedure has three components: first, we sampled *news outlets*; next, we sampled *issues* and selected every news story pertaining to each issue that was published during the first ten weeks of 2015 in any of the selected news outlets[4]; finally, we gathered the entire population of comments for each of the selected news articles.

The objective of our sampling of news outlets was to find an assortment of outlets that would contain posts from an assortment of political types. Just as ideology can be viewed along a range from liberal and conservative, so can internet news sites. It is assumed that the online version of news sources has the same ideological leaning as their offline counterpart, such that it would be very problematic to draw comments only from, say, Fox News or *The New York Times.* Both sources – and a wide variety of others – would contain an idiosyncratic assortment of comments that would bias our results by systematically excluding particular political types. So the goal was to select a sample that would be balanced along important dimensions. First, we sampled sources with and without paywalls, on the assumption that we would find relatively more sophisticated comment on the paywall sites. The paywall sites we chose are, also along these lines, regarded as a couple of the most elite newspapers in the country. Additionally, we chose sites generally regarded as having more conservative readership and sites generally regarded as having more liberal readership.

Overall, this gave us a more-elite and more-liberal site (*New York Times*), a more-elite and more-conservative site (*Wall Street Journal*), a more-mainstream and more-liberal site (MSNBC), and a more-mainstream and more-conservative site (Fox News). Finally, we selected a fifth site, relatively mainstream with no perceptible partisan leaning (ABC). Though initially guided by assumptions, our identification of these sites as more liberal or more conservative are born out by a survey on media use conducted by the Pew Center for the People and the Press (Mitchell).

Our sample of issues was guided by a similar logic – we wanted to look at issues that were likely to generate strong comment from conservatives and other issues that were likely to

[4] We chose the first ten weeks of 2015 because all of the issues we sampled were on the national agenda during this time. Furthermore, this is a manageable time frame ending at approximately the time we began the work of collecting comments for analysis.

generate strong comment from liberals, as well as issues in which there were no such expectations. We chose four issues, the partisan natures of which are fairly well-distributed:

- Keystone pipeline: A variety of articles in early 2015 focused on President Obama's veto of Congress's authorization of the Keystone XL pipeline. Keystone is primarily a Republican agenda item, and we expect a heavy concentration of conservative viewpoints in comments on these articles.
- Affordable Care Act: The Supreme Court heard a case concerning the federal ACA subsidies early in 2015. The ACA is primarily a Democratic agenda item, and we expect a heavy concentration of liberal viewpoints in comments on these articles.
- Measles: Early in 2015, localized measles outbreaks fueled controversy over the government mandating that children be vaccinated against measles and other illnesses. This issue is relatively neutral territory, with Democrats and Republicans often agreeing and with neither party "owning" the issue.
- 2015 State of the Union address: With the annual SOTU containing a wide variety of agenda items, analyzing comments posted after the speech will allow us to look at opinions on a variety of comments that should be neither predominately conservative nor predominately liberal.

Finally, we chose one non-political issue with a great deal of controversy as a type of control: controversy surrounding the color of "the dress." Early in 2015, photos of a dress went viral on the internet and social media. The dress appeared alternatively, depending in part on the observer, as white and gold or blue and black. Such categorical disagreement, which is in no way political, offers a good view of what disagreement looks like in a relatively pure form. Analyzing this disagreement will enable us to gain a sense of perspective for our findings concerning political disagreement.

The number of comments collected varies from issue to issue and from site to site. On the high end, 15,832 comments were collected from a single Fox News article on the Obama veto of Keystone. Fox News also had the highest average number of comments across four of the five issues. For each site the comments were pulled from the comment board that was part of article. The comments from each of the articles were combined with comments from other articles on the topic from that news site. By doing this, the number of comments that could be reviewed is extensive. Each issue created documents of comments that ranged from 84 pages to several hundred pages.

Content Analysis Procedures

Open-mindedness in online political comments will be analyzed through an in-depth content analysis of the sample of comments described above. First, let us look at the specific items that will be recorded in order to measure the key variables of the study.

The reader is asked to review the coding instrument appended to the end of this thesis, in order to gain a sense of how exactly the key variables will be measured. In short, the open-mindedness of a comment is evaluated by asking each coder to indicate their responses (always on a four-point scale) to six questions about the open-mindedness of the comment (Variables 13-18):

- How would you describe the intensity of disagreement/antagonism directed at the person(s) with whom the commenter disagrees?
- How would you describe the level of insult directed at the person(s) with whom the commenter disagrees?

- How would you describe the level of sarcasm and/or condescension directed at the person(s) with whom the commenter disagrees?
- How would you describe the extent to which the commenter acknowledges the validity of the viewpoint(s) with which s/he disagrees?
- How would you describe the extent to which the commenter concedes points to the person(s) with whom s/he disagrees?
- How would you describe the extent to which the commenter is curious about the opposing viewpoint?

The first three questions point to closed-mindedness, and the last three questions point to open-mindedness; however, we regard open-mindedness and closed-mindedness as opposite ends of the same spectrum, so the values can all be combined into a single open-mindedness variable.

Along with the above – as well as a variety of items pertaining to basic information about the comment and a few questions permitting us to filter the comments so that we are analyzing only those that are relevant – we record information concerning the following variables:

- Ideological orientation
- Political party identification
- Religiosity
- Gender
- Level of political sophistication[5]

The main limitation of attempting to determine the factors most closely associated with open-mindedness is that not all comments will contain information about the variables most worth considering. However, the above variables are the ones of most interest and the ones most likely able to be estimated based on information available in comments.

The variables in the attached coding sheet will be recorded, for each comment, by three members of the content analysis team ("coders"). Their responses on each of the subjective items will be summed, in order to provide a measure of the interpretation of the entire set of coders doing the analysis of that comment.[6] This approach differs from the typical approach to completing content analysis with multiple coders, which involves having only one coder analyze each text but attempting to ensure (through a mutual coding of a subset of texts) that one coder's analysis is a reliable representation of what the other coders would have said if they had coded the same text.

Because this approach differs from the typical method described above, it is important to discuss the significance (or, more precisely, the insignificance) for this project of a piece of information that is typically of vital importance. Measures of intercoder reliability, which show how frequently different coders agree when evaluating the same text, are typically used in order to assess the reliability of the coding procedures and categories. If different coders do not agree frequently enough about how to code a particular variable for a particular text, it is an indication that one person's coding of a text cannot reliably substitute for another, such that any analysis

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[5] As estimated by: reference to empirical evidence, writing quality, and posting forum (more elite website vs. more mainstream website).

[6] In the likely event that more then three individuals end up completing this analysis, the comments will be distributed among them, with each possible grouping of three people being assigned texts in sequence. For example, if there were four coders – A, B, C, and D – then one comment would be coded by A, B, and C; the next by A, B, and D; the next by A, C, and D; the next by B, C, and D; and so on throughout the comments. In this example, each coder analyzes 75% of the comments, distributed in a manner that approaches randomness.

completed by only one of these people could be systematically biased. In the coding scheme used here, there is need to confirm the validity of any data generated by *just one person*, because every text is evaluated by more than one person. Thus, individual coders' decisions are never meant to represent what other coders would have decided; every coder's decisions represent his/her own perception of the matter. Of course, because this leaves us no way to confirm that each overall measurement is not simply an assortment of several idiosyncratic perceptions – thus not carrying much real meaning – it will be essential that all coders are rigorously trained so as to ensure that everyone perceives each question in the same way.[7]

There are two major benefits to the approach being used here. First, it is more informative: instead of a particular comment being rated on a scale of, for example, 0 to 3 on a particular variable, the comment will now receive a score ranging from 0 to 12. This provides greater variability in how each comment rates on each variable. Second, it is more authentic, because it records real differences in how different people perceive the subjective nature of what we are analyzing. Achieving an acceptable level of intercoder reliability can come at too high a cost in terms of the validity of the constructs. While much will be done in the training of coders to make the variables they are recording as objective as possible, they still *are* subjective constructs. It would be exceedingly difficult to make the coding categories so objective that they permit a sufficient level of intercoder agreement while remaining meaningfully representative of the variety with which different people communicate in online political forums (or anywhere else).

Summary of Expectations

Ideology

We have no expectations concerning the average level of open- or closed-mindedness of adherents to different ideologies. However, we have a tentative expectation that liberals and conservatives will exhibit closed-mindedness differently from one another:

> *Expectation: Liberal comments will contain, on average, greater levels of sarcasm and/or condescension than conservative comments.*

> *Expectation: Conservative comments will contain, on average, greater levels of outrage – as measured by intensity of disagreement/antagonism – than liberal comments.*

> *Expectation: Liberal comments and conservative comments will be similar in terms of the level of insult they contain.*

We generally expect that sites with clear political leanings will exhibit less open-mindedness than sites that have less of a leaning. Conservatives and liberals both show tendencies towards closed-mindedness – communities with more consistent political leanings could reinforce these tendencies. Individuals who comment on sites where there are a variety of opinions and challenges to their own opinion may be more open-minded than those who have negative tendencies reinforced by liberal- or conservative-leaning sites.

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[7] Even if they might have their own interpretations of how the question ought to be answered for any particular text.

Expectation: The differences in levels of open-mindedness to beliefs that oppose their own between conservative communities on conservative leaning sites and liberal communities on liberal leaning sites will be small.

Expectation: The difference between the levels of open-mindedness between political leaning communities and communities without a clear ideological leaning will be higher.

Expectation: Individuals will be more open-minded to ideas that differ from their own when they come from an individual that shares their ideology.

Gender

Except for issues that are more salient to men than women, or vice versa[8], we tentatively expect men to be less open-minded than women in their online comments. We expect that each gender would be more open-minded towards the same gender because they would find their life experience more relatable. It may or may not be possible to test these expectations, depending on how many commenters divulge their gender in their comments.[9]

Expectation: Comments posted by men will be, on average, more closed-minded than comments posted by women.

Expectation: Responses to one of the same gender will be, on average, more open-minded than responses to someone of a different gender.

Political Sophistication

Greater political sophistication could lead either to greater open-mindedness (as a sophisticate is more likely to recognize, for example, that political issues are nuanced and that reasonable people sometime disagree) or to greater closed-mindedness (as a sophisticate is more likely to feel superior and, consequently, to act condescending). In truth, both tendencies surely exist. However, when thinking about the overall relationship between political sophistication and open-mindedness, we expect greater levels of open-mindedness is more elite communities and greater levels of open-mindedness in comments (on any site) that contain evidence of political sophistication (i.e., reference to empirical evidence and greater writing quality).

Expectation: Comments posted on sites with paywalls will be, on average, more open-minded than comments posted on mainstream sites.

Expectation: Comments that contain greater evidence of political sophistication will be on average, more open-minded than comments that contain less evidence of sophistication.

We have no specific expectations to propose concerning the possible role of the other two independent variables we are prepared to measure in comments – religiosity and partisanship. We use partisanship mainly as a secondary way to measure one's political leaning; thus, we have no expectations that distinguish self-identified Democrats from those we evaluate as liberal, and

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[8] Of which we do not have any obvious candidates among the issues in our study.

[9] Testing these expectations would also require that there is no systematic difference in the tone of comments that do contain references to gender, compared to those that do not.

self-identified Republicans from those we evaluate as conservative. We expect that the frequency of people who self-identify as religious, or who use religious appeals while discussing the issues we include in our sample, will be very low. We include religiosity primarily as an exploratory variable – in order to see whether there is a reason to consider religion as a cleavage to activate in a possible second phase of this project, as briefly discussed in the concluding section that follows.

Possible Extension

An observational analysis of comments posted to online news websites will be inherently limited by the fact that there is no way to control the nature of the comments posted there. For instance, it is impossible to control for important variables because the observer is at the nature of what happens to have been posted and by whom. Thus, a logical extension to the project proposed here would be to post our own comments and measure the responses to them. This would permit us to do two important things: 1) measure the attributes and behaviors of comment writers that are associated with *others* being open-minded toward the writer and 2) control for the content to which one is responding when we evaluate a comment writer as more or less open-minded.

This extension of the project would involve posting our own carefully designed comments that seek to activate particular variables in order to see what effect they elicit from other commenters. For example, the ideology of our comments could be varied by repeating talking points from prominent Republican or Democratic political leaders. The comments that we construct could come from self-identifying Republicans vs. Democrats, men vs. women, faithful vs. atheistic, and so on. This would permit us to see how other commenters respond to the cues we provide in our own messages. Many details of the project, especially the content analysis procedures and the coding instrument used for the content analysis, could carry over from the first phase of the project to this second phase. In the meantime, the project proposed here promises to be a worthwhile first investigation into how open-mindedness works in online political discussion.

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Internet Comment Coding Instrument

Analyzing Open-Mindedness in Online Political Debates
VERSION 1
4/29/15

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General Instructions to Coders

- Examine the text as requested in the instructions and type the appropriate information or code in the coding spreadsheet (in the column indicated next to the variable name in the instructions).
- Review the full instructions before *each* of your first several coding session. After you are familiar with the instructions, quickly skimming them periodically is fine, but it is very important that you carefully review the footnotes on a regular basis. These are the areas in which mistakes are most likely to occur. In addition, it is vital that everyone remains very familiar with all of these nuances in order to avoid inconsistent coding across group members.
- No binge coding! Do not code for more than about four hours in one sitting (i.e., without an extensive break) or when you are especially tired. Otherwise, fatigue may cause you to make coding decisions you otherwise would not make – thus jeopardizing the validity and reliability of the study results. It is also advisable to take a short break every hour.
- For each row of codes that you enter into your coding spreadsheet, be sure that column A contains your first initial.
- Enter a period (".") when the instructions indicate that you should leave a field blank, in order to indicate that you are purposefully leaving it blank.

- **Variable 1: Issue**
  - Instructions: Enter the code corresponding to the issue that is the focus of the article for which the comments are posted.
  - Codes:
    - 1 = HCR
    - 2 = Keystone
    - 3 = Measles outbreak/vaccinations
    - 4 = State of the Union
   - 5 = Dress color

- **Variable 2: Source**
  - Instructions: Enter the code corresponding to the website on which the comments you are analyzing appear.
  - Codes:
    - 1 = ABC News
    - 2 = Fox News
    - 3 = MSNBC
    - 4 = New York Times
    - 5 = Wall Street Journal

- **Variable 3: Title of Article**
  - Instructions: Type the title of the article, up to and including the first six words of the article. Type these in all caps, just as they appear on the webpage.
  - Format: TITLE OF ARTICLE

- **Variable 4: Date of Article**
  - Instructions: Type the date of the article as shown on the spreadsheet containing citation information for all articles. Begin with the year, then the month, then the day, without any punctuation. For a one-digit month or day, be sure to type a zero before the digit. So, for instance, February 13, 2015 would be 150213 and December 4, 2014 would be 141204. **See footnote[1]**
  - Format: YYMMDD

- **Variable 5: PDF Page Number**
  - Instructions: Enter the page number (*of your PDF file*) on which the text begins.

- **Variable 6: Comment Number**
  - Instructions: Indicate the position of the comment on the PDF page, not including deleted comments. The first *full*

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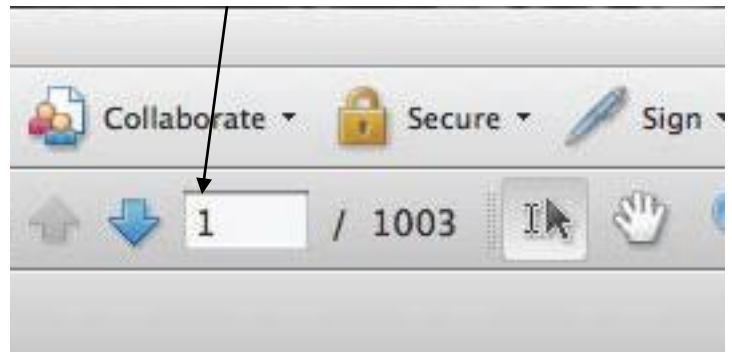
[1] Remember to begin with the two digits for the *year*, not month.

comment is number one, and so on. **See footnote[2]**

- **Variable 7: Writer's handle**
  - o Instructions: Write the user name by which the commenter is identified. Write the name *exactly* as it appears on the page – case sensitive, including any spaces that are shown, etc.

- **Variable 8: Comment length**
  - o Instructions: Determine the length of the comment as measured by how long it would take the read the comment – at a deliberate, but still conversational, tempo. **See footnote[3]**
  - o Codes:
    - § 1 = Short: It would take fewer than 5 seconds to read the comment.
    - § 2 = Medium: It would take between 5 seconds and 15 seconds to read.
    - § 3 = Long: It would take longer than 15 seconds to read.

- **Variable 9: Are you able to make any sense of the comment?**
  - o Instructions: Review the comment carefully and attempt to determine what the writer is trying to say, without making *assumptions* about what the writer must be saying. If it is not evident what the writer is trying to say, then indicate that the comment is incomprehensible. **See footnote[4]**
  - o Codes:
    - § 0 = The comment is utterly incomprehensible. SKIP ALL SUBSEQUENT QUESTIONS FOR THIS COMMENT.
    - § 1 = The comment is comprehensible, in whole or in part. **See footnote[5]**

- **Variable 10: On which side of the political divide would you place the writer? **See footnote[6]****
  - o Codes for comments concerning the State of the Union:

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[2] Remember to begin counting with *first full comment*.

[3] As very general guidelines: a short comment will be one sentence, two short sentences, or just an assortment of words not assembled into a sentence; a medium comment will be as long as about five simple sentences; and a long comment will be anything longer than this. Because sentence length and the length of lines on the page (due to indentations) will differ, measure a comment's length only by the approximate time needed to read the comment. After actually timing this for several dozen comments, feel free to estimate the length of subsequent comments.

[4] Do not view this through the lens of what you consider *logical*. The question is whether you recognize the words as having any kind of meaning, not whether these words communicate anything you consider logical or persuasive.

[5] For subsequent questions, evaluate only the portions of the comment that are comprehensible to you.

[6] When coding this item, keep in mind that the writer's political leaning is the predominant concern. So, for example, if the writer appears to be liberal yet is critical of the president, or is taking the conservative position on a particular issue, code this as a 2; if the writer appears to be conservative but is supportive of the president or is taking a liberal position on an issue, code this as 1. Later items will be used to record the writer's openness to the other side of the political divide.

- 0 = The writer's political leaning is neither liberal nor conservative; or the writer's leaning is unclear.
- 1 = The writer appears to be conservative and/or critical of the president.
- 2 = The writer appears to be liberal and/or supportive of the president.

- **Variable 11: How would you rate the overall tone of this comment?**
  - Instructions: Review the comment and evaluate its overall tone, on a scale of very positive to very negative. If the comment contains positive and negative aspects, then evaluate how positive the comment is *on balance*. If it is evenly balanced between positive or negative, then indicate that it is neither positive nor negative.
  - Codes:
    - 1 = The comment is very positive.
    - 2 = The comment is, on balance, positive.
    - 3 = The comment is neither positive nor negative.
    - 4 = The comment is, on balance, negative.
    - 5 = The comment is very negative.

- **Variable 12: Does the comment contain any indication of disagreement – implicit or explicit – with any other person or group of people? **See footnote[7]****
  - Instructions: Begin by determining whether the writer is addressing any other person(s). If not, code this as 0 and skip all subsequent questions for this comment. If the comment *is* directed at others, either implicitly or explicitly, then evaluate the extent to which it conveys disagreement with the person(s) to whom the comment appears to be directed. If there is no disagreement, code this as 0 and skip all subsequent questions for this comment. If there is disagreement, indicate the level of disagreement from among the options given. **See footnote[8]**
  - Codes:
    - 0 = The comment contains no disagreement. SKIP ALL SUBSEQUENT QUESTIONS FOR THIS COMMENT. **See footnote[9]**
    - 1 = The comment contains disagreement (either implicit or explicit) with others.
    - 2 = The comment contains disagreement (either implicit or explicit) with another commenter.

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[7] Here are a few examples: The following comment is not directed toward anyone, so there is no disagreement – "The Keystone pipeline would create jobs." The following comment contains disagreement that is *implicitly* directed toward others (Democrats) – "Republicans are in favor of Keystone, because they think creating jobs is important." The following comment contains disagreement that is *explicitly* directed toward others – "I disagree with those who say the Keystone pipeline will create jobs."

[8] If there are multiple types of disagreement within a single comment, indicate the highest-numbered option.

[9] If you are on the fence about whether or not a comment contains disagreement – or if a comment appears to contain *insincere* disagreement for the purpose of mocking someone on the other side of the issue – err on the side of coding this item as 0 and skipping all subsequent variables for this comment.

** Careful: We are now evaluating only comments that contain expressions of disagreement. If the comment in question does not contain any expression of disagreement (implicit or explicit) – or if it was filtered out earlier because it was incomprehensible – then all remaining variables should be left blank. In this case, remember to type a "." in your spreadsheet for these variables. **

- **Variable 13: How would you describe the intensity of disagreement/antagonism directed at the person(s) with whom the commenter disagrees? **See footnote[10]****
  - Codes:
    - 0 = The comment is not antagonistic in any way.
    - 1 = The intensity of disagreement/antagonism is minimal.
    - 2 = The intensity of disagreement/antagonism is moderate.
    - 3 = The comment is downright hostile. **See footnote[11]**

- **Variable 14: How would you describe the level of insult directed at the person(s) with whom the commenter disagrees? **See footnote[12]****
  - Codes:
    - 0 = The comment is not insulting in any way.
    - 1 = The comment is only minimally insulting.
    - 2 = The comment is moderately insulting.
    - 3 = The comment is extremely insulting.

- **Variable 15: How would you describe the level of sarcasm and/or condescension directed at the person(s) with whom the commenter disagrees?**
  - Codes:
    - 0 = The comment is not sarcastic or condescending in any way.
    - 1 = The comment is only minimally sarcastic/condescending.
    - 2 = The comment is moderately sarcastic/condescending.
    - 3 = The comment is extremely sarcastic/condescending.

- **Variable 16: How would you describe the extent to which the commenter acknowledges the validity of the viewpoint(s) with which s/he disagrees?**
  - Codes:
    - 0 = The commenter does not acknowledge the validity of the other viewpoint(s) whatsoever.
    - 1 = The commenter acknowledges the validity of the other viewpoint(s) minimally.

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[10] View this question – and all other questions from this point forward – according to the standards of online political debate and not, say, a dinner party.

[11] Do not conflate with insulting, which is a separate matter to be recorded in the next variable. Though there could be considerable overlap, an antagonistic or hostile comment needs not be insulting. For example, the following hypothetical would be coded as hostile but not at all insulting: "I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU WOULD SAY THAT!! HOW DARE YOU!!"

[12] Insulting comments must be antagonistic (and this should be reflected in your response to the previous question, if you indicate any level of insult in the current question); however, antagonistic comments need not be insulting.

- - 2 = The commenter is moderately acknowledging of the validity of the other viewpoint(s).
  - 3 = The commenter is extremely acknowledging of the validity of the other viewpoint(s).

- **Variable 17: How would you describe the extent to which the commenter concedes points to the person(s) with whom s/he disagrees?**
  - Codes:
    - 0 = The commenter does not concede any point at any time.
    - 1 = The commenter concedes very minimally.
    - 2 = The commenter is somewhat conciliatory.
    - 3 = The commenter is extremely conciliatory. **See footnote[13]**

- **Variable 18: How would you describe the extent to which the commenter is curious about the opposing viewpoint? **See footnote[14]****
  - Codes:
    - 0 = The commenter does not appear at all curious.
    - 1 = The commenter appears minimally curious.
    - 2 = The commenter appears moderately curious.
    - 3 = The commenter appears extremely curious.

- **Variable 19: Does the writer make reference to any empirical evidence in his/her comment? **See footnote[15]****
  - Codes:
    - 0 = No
    - 1 = Yes

- **Variable 20: How would you describe the writing quality of the comment?**
  - Codes:
    - 0 = The writing is downright sloppy.
    - 1 = The comment is somewhat rough.
    - 2 = The comment is generally well written.
    - 3 = The comment is pristine. **See footnote[16]**

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[13] Here is an example of what an extremely conciliatory (again, by the standards of online political disagreement, not everyday courtesy) comment might look like: "I suppose I see your point about _____. While it wasn't my intention to offend, I will stop using the term ____ to describe _____."

[14] Measure this primarily through the presence of questions. However, do not include questions that are asked by way of *interrogation*. Furthermore, try to avoid confusing genuine curiosity with *bafflement* – include the former but not the latter.

[15] View empirical evidence as any manner of reference to *systematic* observation of anything relating to the matter being discussed (especially, but not limited to, reports or research findings).

[16] This means: proper capitalization and punctuation; no typos or spelling errors; nothing ungrammatical (as far as you can tell); and no sentence fragments.

- **Variable 21: To what extent does the writer use CAPITAL LETTERS for emphasis?**
  - o Codes:
    - ▪ 0 = Not at all
    - ▪ 1 = Minimally
    - ▪ 2 = To a moderate extent
    - ▪ 3 = Extensively

- **Variable 22: Does the writer *explicitly* indicate that s/he is a Republican, conservative, Tea Partier, etc.? **See footnote[17]****
  - o Codes:
    - ▪ 0 = No
    - ▪ 1 = Implicitly
    - ▪ 2 = Explicitly

- **Variable 23: Does the writer *explicitly* indicate that s/he is a Democrat, liberal, progressive, etc.? **See footnote[18]****
  - o Codes:
    - ▪ 0 = No
    - ▪ 1 = Implicitly
    - ▪ 2 = Explicitly

- **Variable 24: To what extent does the writer characterize himself/herself as religious? **See footnote[19]****
  - o Codes:
    - ▪ 0 = Not at all
    - ▪ 1 = Minimally
    - ▪ 2 = To a moderate extent
    - ▪ 3 = Extensively

- **Variable 25: Does the writer indicate his/her gender? **See footnote[20]****
  - o Codes:
    - ▪ 0 = No
    - ▪ 1 = Yes – the writer is male.
    - ▪ 2 = Yes – the writer is female.
    - ▪ 3 = Yes – the writer is transgender.

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[17] Do not assume a person's partisanship or ideology based on issue positions that are expressed within the comment. Use only direct statements about the writer's ideological or partisan leanings.

[18] See previous footnote.

[19] As above, do not assume religiosity based on comments that are not related to religion.

[20] Count only explicit statements concerning one's gender. Make no assumptions based on other things that are stated. For instance, do not assume that one is female based on a statement such as: "I am glad someone is finally recognizing that women are continually discriminated against at the workplace." However, do indicate female in response to a statement such as: "As a working mother, I think…" Furthermore, do not assume one's gender on the basis of the writer's handle.