

A 'Safe Space' for Disagreement?: An Experiment on the Effect of Social Media Cross-Cutting Exposure on Internal Political Efficacy

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Abstract: We investigate whether cross-cutting and mixed exposure to political information on social media is associated with users' internal political efficacy using an online survey experiment. Existing research has demonstrated several benefits of cross-cutting exposure, but it has also shown its dark side. Mutz (2006) found that political ambivalence is significantly associated with cross-cutting talk as disagreement makes people more uncertain about their political views. However, it has not been investigated if cross-cutting exposure makes people more uncertain about their own political capacities to understand politics and meaningfully participate within it. Our research question is whether this detrimental effect on internal political efficacy can be detected in the social media context. The findings show that participants' internal political efficacy is not significantly shaped by the type of exposure. Consequently, cross-cutting exposure on social media can be seen as a 'safe space' for political disagreement where the 'dark side' of cross-cutting exposure cannot prevail.

Keywords: cross-cutting exposure; internal political efficacy; social media; experimental research; health care system

INTRODUCTION

People have natural tendencies to avoid cognitive dissonance and intentionally seek attitude-consistent information to reinforce that their political views are right and valid (Festinger, 1957). They usually socialize with people who are like themselves (McPherson et al., 2001) and consume media content that echoes their pre-existing views (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). This is reasonable as studies showed that cross-cutting exposure has the potential to make people more uncertain about their own opinions (Mutz, 2006), and ambivalence can lead to the feeling of psychological discomfort (van Harreveld et al. 2009). The emergence of social media as a political information resource, however, has resulted in a rather diverse information environment. Research demonstrated that people are frequently exposed to cross-cutting political content on these platforms (Barnidge, 2017; Beam et al, 2018), which fact may induce a feeling of political uncertainty.

While existing studies focused on uncertainty about specific political attitudes (political ambivalence), we generalize this theory and test the proposition that cross-cutting exposure can make people uncertain in their own political capacities to comprehend and act meaningfully in the political sphere, a feeling that is commonly conceptualized as internal political efficacy (Niemi et al., 1991). This is a truly important question since internal political efficacy is a key antecedent variable of political behavior (Pollock III, 1983): if the heightened cross-cutting exposure experienced in social media results in less efficacious people, it would have wider detrimental consequences on political participation. Although existing research showed that cross-cutting exposure can increase political ambivalence by making people more uncertain about specific political objects such as political actors and issues (Huckfeldt et al., 2004; Mutz, 2006), and they also demonstrated that political ambivalence and internal political efficacy are closely related concepts as people who are more uncertain about their political views are usually less confident in their own political capabilities (Chen & Lin, 2021; Hmielowski et al., 2018), no research tested if cross-cutting exposure is able to affect people's political self-conception. In line with these findings, we expect that people's level of internal political efficacy will be lowered when they are exposed to cross-cutting content as this will make them more uncertain about their capabilities to comprehend politics and act within it in a meaningful way.

We tested this hypothesis with an experimental method in which participants (N = 365) divided into three groups were exposed to a Facebook discussion consisting of four comments about the state of the health care system in Hungary which is a highly important and controversial topic in this specific context. Our manipulation tests the effects of two different forms of cross-cutting exposure compared to full like-minded exposure: we differentiated between 'full cross-cutting' and 'mixed cross-cutting' exposure. In the case of the former, only disagreeable

comments are shown, while in the latter both like-minded and conflicting opinions are listed. Based on the results, our hypothesis is rejected: participants' internal political efficacy is not affected by the type of Facebook discussion they are exposed to. They do not become more skeptical about their own political capacities when their views are challenged, and similarly, the like-minded opinions do not make them more confident either. These findings imply that, from this aspect, social media may be a 'safe space' for disagreement as the uncertainty-inducing effect of cross-cutting exposure does not prevail on these platforms.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

INTERNAL POLITICAL EFFICACY IN A MEDIATIZED INFORMATION CONTEXT

The concept of political efficacy is a construct to capture voters' subjective attitudes towards their role within the overall political system (Campbell, 1954). It is usually broken into two components where external political efficacy is related to perceptions about the responsiveness of the political system, while internal political efficacy is more about political self-conceptions and refers to "beliefs about one's own competence to understand, and to participate effectively in politics" (Niemi et al., 1991: 1407). Since the development of the concept, numerous research have demonstrated that internal political efficacy is a key variable in political behavior, and the way people think of their own personal political capacities can shape their willingness to participate in political activities. Lower political self-confidence is a barrier to voting (Pollock III, 1983), protest (Christensen, 2016) and political discussion activity (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017).

Although political efficacy is traditionally treated as a static and enduring political attitude that is deeply ingrained in individuals' personality and social-economic status (SES) (see Campbell, 1954; Easton & Dennis, 1967), subsequent research demonstrated that mediatized experiences also shape its level. In his classic study, Robinson (1976) found that television-based news consumption decreased the level of political efficacy, but later studies mostly found positive effects (Ardèvol-Abreu, 2019; Moeller et al., 2014; Newhagen, 1994). Internet use is also demonstrated to have a beneficial impact on internal political efficacy (Lee, 2006; Boulianne et al., 2023), and there is evidence that political activities on social network sites can also increase political self-confidence (Chan et al., 2017; Halpern et al., 2017). While these relationships are not always direct (Ardèvol-Abreu, 2019, Chan et al., 2017) and uniform across media (Moeller et al., 2014) and news type (Lee, 2006; Kenski & Stroud, 2006), these findings suggest that the mediatized information people are exposed to can shape their political self-conception.

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A SPACE OF CROSS-CUTTING EXPOSURE

Social media platforms are now key information resources for many voters (Newman et al., 2021). However, the nature of political information exposure on these platforms is different from what is dominant in the case of news media. While media consumption in the high-choice media environment is largely driven by selective exposure (see, Iyengar & Hahn, 2009), it is demonstrated that social media platforms, especially Facebook, are actually more heterogeneous environments than other political information contexts: people are frequently exposed to political content which are against their political preferences (e.g., Barnidge, 2017; Beam et al, 2018; Cardenal et al, 2019). Studies showed that accidental exposure is a common experience on social media platforms as people frequently see political content without wanting to be exposed to it (Goyanes & Demeter, 2020; Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016). The inadvertent nature of this exposure, however, does not mean that accidentally seeing political content would be ineffective. Research demonstrated that people still often pay attention to this content (de Zúñiga et al, 2021; Karnowski et al, 2017, Nanz et al., 2025), and they are also able to shape recipients' political behavior and views (Kim et al, 2013; Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016).

Nonetheless, the heterogeneous political environment of social media sites seems to be counter-intuitive as both algorithms and affordances support the idea of an information-context which is in line with users' true preferences. Carefully-crafted algorithms curate the News Feeds, i.e., the central interface where people are exposed to content, to adjust the supply of posts to the users' true interests and needs as much as possible based on their continuously monitored activities. Also, social media platforms offer several affordances for users to customize and personalize their News Feed: they can freely add and delete content-providers (friends and pages) and make different filtration actions in relation to specific content to indicate if they do not prefer them.

Regarding the content-filtering algorithms, it seems that they give larger weight to personal ties and interactions, and it shows content posted or shared by friends even if it is confronted with the particular users' preferences and interests (Bucher, 2012; DeVito, 2017). Also, studies found that peer-cues in the form of social endorsement or personal mediation can overwrite political and interest-based selectivity in news selection, and people click on cross-cutting items if they are highly recommended by peers or shared by personal friends (Anspach, 2017; Messing & Westwood, 2014). For these reasons, people may often read or click cross-cutting content that restricts the ability of the algorithms to find out the users' true preferences. Indeed, studies showed that on Facebook – whose platform applies the strongest algorithmic filtering (Bossetta, 2018) – the algorithm's contribution to the politically more homogenous information environment was marginal (Bakshy, 2015; Guess et al., 2023).

The relative heterogeneity of social media platforms can be also attributed to the underutilization of the affordances offered by these sites to personally curate the News Feed. People intensively and proactively create connections based on their social needs and interests, but the ease of connection building entails the proliferation of weak ties (Kim & Chen, 2015; Raine & Wellman, 2012) which is a major driver of heterogeneity (Granovetter, 1973). At the same time, studies showed that it is rather uncommon to use the connection-breaking or content-filtering affordances for political reasons, and it is only the politically active and partisan people who occasionally apply them to homogenize their own information environment (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Zhu et al, 2017). Overall, for these reasons, it seems that cross-cutting exposure is an everyday experience on social media platforms as they create a rather diverse information environment for people.

THE EFFECT OF CROSS-CUTTING EXPOSURE ON INTERNAL POLITICAL EFFICACY

Heightened cross-cutting exposure experienced in the social media context, however, may have implications for individuals' political self-conception. While democracy theory has long argued for the importance and democratic benefits of cross-cutting exposure (Fishkin, 1995; Gutmann & Thompson, 1998), Diana Mutz (2006) in her seminal study raised attention to its 'dark side', too. She argued that cross-cutting exposure can negatively affect people's willingness to participate in politics because it may make them more uncertain about their own political views. She demonstrated that people who are more frequently exposed to cross-cutting political information are more ambivalent about their political attitudes because conflicting views can increase the inner uncertainty about specific political issues or actors. While the dilemma of 'deliberative versus participatory democracy' raised in her book has been mitigated or even refuted by several subsequent research showing a null (Eveland & Hively, 2009; Nir, 2011, Matthes et al., 2019) or even positive effect (Huckfeldt et al., 2004; Kwak et al., 2005; Scheufele et al., 2006) of cross-cutting exposure on political participation, the related ambivalence-argument remained largely unchallenged (see, Matthes et al., 2019). In fact, the small number of studies investigating the links between cross-cutting exposure and political ambivalence reinforced Mutz's findings (Huckfeldt et al., 2004; Lee, 2012, Chen & Lin, 2021).

Internal political efficacy is strongly related to political ambivalence both conceptually and empirically. While political ambivalence refers to the level of subjective uncertainty about specific political objects (actors or issue), internal political efficacy is also related to subjective political uncertainty but in a more general sense, as it is the (un)certainty about one's own political capabilities of meaningful political activities. It is unsurprising, therefore, that research

found strong association between the two constructs: people who are more ambivalent about specific political objects have generally lower internal political efficacy as well (Chen & Lin, 2021; Hmielowski et al., 2018; McGraw & Bartels, 2005; Lee & Chan, 2009).

For these reasons, we may expect that cross-cutting exposure affects internal political efficacy in a manner similar to political ambivalence. We argue that contrasting views make people more uncertain not only about specific subjects, but also about their own capacities to comprehend and orient themselves in politics. Interestingly, to our knowledge no research has investigated the effect of cross-cutting exposure on internal political efficacy. A closely related finding (Zhang & Chang, 2014) tested how perceived disagreement in everyday talk situations affects internal political efficacy in Singapore, but everyday talk is different from pure exposure to cross-cutting content. Further, another study focused on the effect of political context heterogeneity on efficacy among the minority population in Finland, but context was measured by macro-level factors such as the strength of the minority party in the municipal council and the proportion of the minority population in the municipality (Karv et al., 2021). Anyway, these two studies yield conflicting findings: while the former study found no effect, the latter showed that the level of internal political efficacy is lower for people who live in a more heterogenous context. Nonetheless, the distinct effect of cross-cutting exposure remained unexplored. This is a surprising gap given the fact that Robinson in his early study has already raised the possibility that the negative effect of television viewing on political efficacy can be the product of exposure to information that opposes existing beliefs which leads to people 'questioning their own ability to cope with or comprehend politics' (Robinson, 1976: 417). While this idea was ignored by subsequent research, since cross-cutting exposure is now an everyday experience for people on social media, it is reasonable to revive it. Therefore, in this research we test the following hypothesis:

- *H1. Cross-cutting exposure will decrease individuals' internal political efficacy*

We differentiate between two forms of cross-cutting exposure. First, the ideal type of cross-cutting exposure is when people are exposed only to information that oppose to their views. This can be labelled as 'full cross-cutting exposure'. However, given the heterogeneity of the Facebook information environment, it is more realistic that people are exposed to both like-minded and cross-cutting content at the same time. While in line with our theoretical reasoning, we expect that both type of cross-cutting exposure will decrease internal political efficacy by making people more insecure in their own political capacities, it is reasonable to test the effect of the two conditions separately.

DATA AND METHOD

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

We tested our hypothesis in an online survey experiment conducted in Hungary with 423 respondents; of these, $N = 365$ completed all items in the political efficacy battery used for the main analysis. The experiment was conducted by the Kutatócentrum polling company in 2018, approximately one month after the last national elections (between 25 May and 22 June). Participants were recruited using quotas to represent the Hungarian population with internet access in terms of gender, education, region, and type of settlement. The final sample, however, was somewhat more educated (53% had at least upper-secondary education) and included slightly more women (56%) than the general population. Our experimental condition focused on the topic of the state of the healthcare system; respondents were exposed to different opinions on this issue. At the time, this topic was perceived as the most important national issue in Hungary (Eurobarometer, 2018), and was regularly discussed in both mass and social media in the months preceding the experiment (Bene, 2021; Dobos et al., 2021). Research shows that pro-government and opposition voters were highly polarized in their views on the healthcare system: pro-government voters were generally satisfied with its functioning, while opposition voters were more likely to express dissatisfaction (Political Capital, 2017).

Respondents first completed a short pre-test survey, and then read a Facebook thread consisting of four comments expressing opinions on the state of the healthcare system in Hungary. In order to enhance the ecological validity (i.e., generalizability to real-life settings) of the experiment (see Osborne-Crowley, 2020), the posts used as experimental stimuli were taken from real online discussions. This approach not only authentically reflects the language of online discourse, but also presents the different positions within their actual discursive context, including the discursive markers associated with each stance. This makes it easier for participants to situate their own views in relation to the comments. The manipulation check (see below) confirmed that this approach was successful. Afterward, they answered a post-test survey that included questions about political efficacy, political news consumption habits, and other political attitudes. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three groups, each receiving a different treatment in the form of a Facebook thread. These threads were artificially constructed by the research team to reflect the tone and language of real online debates on the topic (see Appendix for the original texts and their English translations). To avoid potential confounding effects related to gender, age, or attractiveness, all names, profile photos, and comment dates

were blurred. The arguments presented in the threads varied by treatment group, as described below.

- *ProGov Group*: Four comments praised the government’s handling of the healthcare system, including some criticism of the performance of previous administrations.
- *AntiGov Group*: Four comments criticized the state of the healthcare system and the performance of the current government in managing it.
- *Mixed Group*: A mix of four comments: two comments from the Pro-Gov group and two from the Anti-Gov group.

We conducted one-way ANOVAs to assess whether randomization produced balanced groups across key pre-treatment variables. No significant differences were found for age, $F(3, 438) = 0.49, p = .692$; education level, $F(3, 439) = 0.85, p = .465$; or left-right self-placement, $F(2, 336) = 0.52, p = .597$. These results suggest that the randomization procedure successfully created comparable groups across key demographic and political variables.

To assess the effectiveness of our manipulation, we asked respondents to describe their overall feelings in an open-ended question and to indicate their level of agreement with the content on a 0 to 10 scale. Both opposition and government partisans responded in line with expectations. Opposition partisans reported a high mean level of agreement with the negative stimuli ($M = 8.41$) and a low level of agreement with the positive stimuli ($M = 2.53$). Conversely, government partisans showed stronger agreement with the positive stimuli ($M = 6.16$) and lower agreement with the negative stimuli ($M = 4.84$). As anticipated, the mixed treatment elicited relatively balanced agreement from both groups (opposition: $M = 5.76$; government: $M = 5.53$), suggesting it have been perceived as representing opinions from both sides.

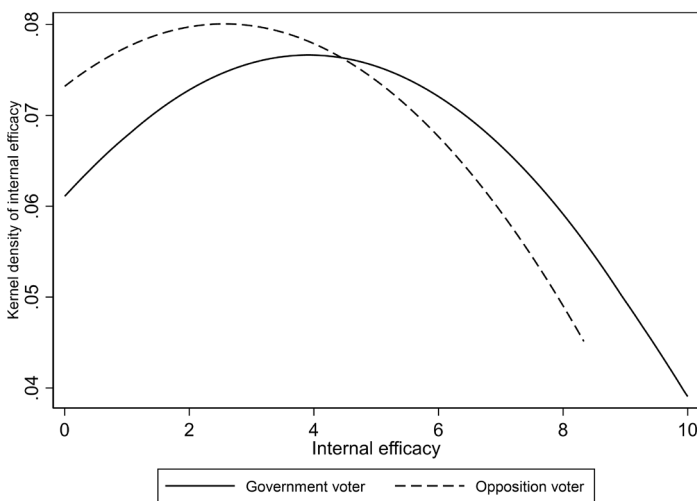
Therefore, we believe the stimuli were sufficiently strong, particularly given the intensity of emotional and cognitive engagement expressed in participants’ open-ended responses. Many respondents reacted strongly—both positively and negatively—indicating that the content was not only noticed but also subjectively impactful. Given their personal involvement and prior experiences with the healthcare system, as well as the emotionally charged nature of the comments included in the stimuli, the vast majority of participants reported strong negative feelings. Most commonly, those exposed to the negative stimuli expressed sadness and anger, often stating that the comments resonated with them because they were “true.” Among those who received the mixed stimuli, 23% explicitly noted that the information or their emotional reactions were mixed. These responses included expressions of ambivalence and conflicted feelings, references to specific comments they agreed with versus those they

rejected, or identification of the political affiliations behind different statements. In contrast, only 1.05% of respondents in the groups exposed to uniformly negative or positive content reported mixed feelings.

Dependent variable

Our dependent variable is composed from three items that are used for measuring internal political efficacy in the 7th round of the European Social Survey (ESS): “How able do you think you are to take an active role in a group involved with political issues?; How confident are you in your own ability to participate in politics?; How easy do you personally find it to take part in politics?”. Responses ranged from 0 to 10 on an 11-point scale. The three items were merged into an index using their mean value. We assessed the internal consistency of the political efficacy scale using Cronbach’s alpha. The scale, which included five items, demonstrated acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .792$), indicating that the items measured a coherent construct. The descriptive statistics of the variable show that most people were not very confident about their political efficacy (Mean=2.96; St. D.=2.23; N=365). However, in line with the literature (Bene, 2020), perceptions about internal efficacy were strongly influenced by respondents’ government-opposition voter status. Figure 1 shows the density of internal efficacy scores for government and opposition voters, separately. While the internal efficacy of opposition voters is mostly low, government voters’ internal efficacy is much closer to a normal distribution.

Figure 1. The density of internal political efficacy scores by voters’ government-opposition preference



INDEPENDENT AND CONTROL VARIABLES

We constructed our main independent variable from respondents’ vote choice and the three treatment groups (ProGov, AntiGov, and Mixed). Respondents were asked who they voted for in the last election. The short time period which passed after the last elections ensures that respondents’ vote choice mirrored their actual party preferences. Their answers were recoded into a dummy variable (government voters – 1; opposition voters – 0), while we excluded non-voters from the most part of the analysis.

We constructed our independent variable about the *type of exposure* combining vote choice and treatment group. *Type of exposure* is a nominal variable, with the following values: 0 – *like-minded exposure* (government voters who were exposed to ProGov arguments about health-care policy and opposition voters who were exposed to AntiGov arguments), 1 – *full cross-cutting exposure* (opposition voters who were exposed to ProGov arguments about health-care policy and government voters who were exposed to AntiGov arguments), 2 – *mixed cross-cutting exposure* (both opposition and government voters who were exposed to two AntiGov and two ProGov arguments).

In some of the regressions we controlled for important sociodemographic variables and variables related to political news consumption, such as gender (reference category is men), age (from 19 to 85), education (0 if at most secondary, 1 if at least upper-secondary), political interest (ranging from 1 to 4 with higher values indicating higher interest), the importance of Facebook as a political information source for the respondent (0 to 10 with higher values indicating more importance), and left-right ideological position (0 to 10 with higher values indicating a more rightist position). Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of all variables.

Table 1. The descriptive statistics of the variables analyzed

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Internal efficacy	365	2.96	2.24	0	10
Age	423	46.90	15.10	19	85
Gender	423	0.56	0.50	0	1
Government voter	306	0.36	0.48	0	1
Education level	423	0.53	0.50	0	1
Interest in politics	423	2.72	0.85	1	4
Role of Facebook in gaining political information	421	3.92	3.32	0	10
Ideological position	339	5.27	2.59	0	10

FINDINGS

First, we assessed the effect of different types of exposure on internal efficacy with OLS regressions. As reported in Table 2, the type of exposure does not significantly affect the internal efficacy of respondents: the level of internal political efficacy does not lower for those respondents who were exposed to either full cross-cutting (Mean=3.11; St. D.=2.17) or mixed cross-cutting information (Mean=2.94; St. D.=2.43) compared to those who could read like-minded information (Mean=3.09; St. D.=2.3).

Model 2 shows that the difference between the groups remains insignificant when controlling for a range of important sociodemographic variables, relevant political attitudes, and the relevance of Facebook as a source of political information for the respondent.

Table 2. OLS regressions estimating the effect of the type of exposure on internal political efficacy

	Model 1		Model 2	
	B	St. Err.	B	St. Err.
Cross-cutting exposure (Ref: Likeminded)	.021	(.333)	-.048	(.314)
Mixed exposure (Ref: Likeminded)	-.156	(.345)	-.319	(.33)
Government voter (Ref: Opposition)			1.154***	(.339)
Age			.002	(.009)
Gender			-.482*	(.273)
Education level			.218	(.273)
Interest in politics			.535***	(.187)
Role of Facebook in gaining political information			.124***	(.042)
Ideological position (Left to right)			.104*	(.061)
Constant	3.092***	(.237)	.724	(.936)
Observations		275		253
R-squared		.001		.197

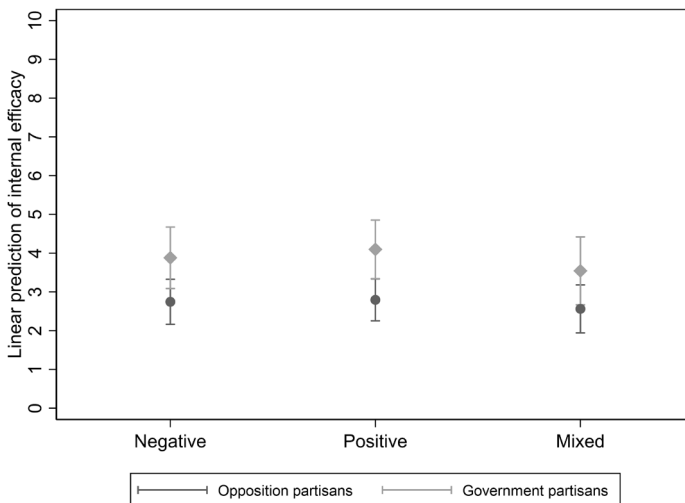
Entries are regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses
 *** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .1$

To further explore the question, we examined whether partisan affiliation moderates the effect of the treatments, investigating if the three types of threads—Pro-Government, Anti-Government, and Mixed—have differential effects on the internal political efficacy of government and opposition voters. This analysis builds on our earlier finding that internal efficacy is strongly influenced by respondents' partisan alignment (see Model 2 in Table 2). Regardless

of whether we consider raw differences or those adjusted for relevant control variables, the results indicate no statistically significant variation in efficacy levels among individuals exposed to likeminded, fully cross-cutting, or mixed content (see Figure 2). In all models, men, government voters, those holding a more rightist ideological position, those who considered Facebook as a more important information source for themselves and those more interested in politics proved to be more efficacious, while the type of information they received left their internal political efficacy intact.

To explore potential moderation effects, we interacted all control variables with the type of exposure respondents received, aiming to identify whether socio-economic or political characteristics moderated the impact of exposure type. The analysis revealed no substantial or statistically significant moderation effects¹. Therefore, we conclude that no meaningful moderator variables were identified. The results imply that there is no significant relationship between the type of exposure and one’s internal political efficacy.

Figure 2. The marginal effects of the interaction of partisan group affiliation and the experimental treatment on internal political efficacy, with 95% confidence intervals.



¹ The only notable finding was among respondents who reported no interest in politics and were exposed to cross-cutting content; this group exhibited significantly higher internal political efficacy compared to the other two exposure groups. However, this subgroup consisted of only six individuals, making it impossible to draw reliable generalizations.

CONCLUSION

In our contemporary social media-dominated political communication environment cross-cutting exposure to political information, which has been rather marginal due to network homophily (Mutz, 2006) and selective media-consumption patterns (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009) in the past, is an everyday experience for many citizens. While it is usually the benefits of cross-cutting exposure that is emphasized by political science literature, its 'dark side' is also demonstrated: research showed that people became more uncertain in their own views when they are exposed to political information that challenge their pre-existing beliefs (Mutz, 2006; Huckfeldt et al., 2004; Lee, 2012). Existing studies, however, focused on uncertainty only about specific political attitudes related to political actors or particular issues, namely political ambivalence. In this study, we argued that uncertainty due to exposure to conflicting views can spill over from specific political objects to the self: uncertain people will be less confident in their own political capacities to understand politics and act meaningfully in the political sphere, in other words, the level of their internal political efficacy will be lower. This thesis is also supported by the fact that studies found a strong relationship between political ambivalence and internal political efficacy (Chen & Lin, 2021; Hmielowski et al., 2018).

However, our experimental research could not confirm this hypothesis: in this specific experimental setting people's political self-conception is not changed by the type of information they are exposed to on social media. This is good news from a democratic viewpoint: social media seems to be a 'safe space' for political disagreement, the predicted detrimental effect does not occur on this platform in this specific context. Nonetheless, it is important to emphasize that we obtained this result in a single context and on a single topic, so our observation is far from conclusive. At the same time, this finding may spark interest in the topic, and future studies can investigate whether this observation can be confirmed in other contexts and on other issues as well.

Nonetheless, this tentative conclusion is in sharp contrast with findings about the ambivalence-inducing effect of cross-cutting exposure. It seems that even if cross-cutting exposure makes people more uncertain about specific political subjects, their political self-confidence remains intact on social media context. However, as our research focused only on the links between internal political efficacy and cross-cutting exposure on social media, we can only speculate if the lack of relationship is due to the differentiated effect of cross-cutting exposure on ambivalence and internal efficacy or it is because of the specific social media context. The former explanation would be that even if ambivalence and internal political efficacy are related concepts, ambivalence may be more situational and thereby more affected by the immediate information context, while internal

political efficacy is a more static attitude and formed by long-term influences rather than prompt impressions. Future research should investigate how cross-cutting exposure affects both political ambivalence and internal political efficacy to test this explanation. Another possible reason behind the contradicting findings can be related to the specific communication context. People may process cross-cutting content on social media differently than in offline context. Since exposure to conflicting views is an everyday experience here, they may be more accustomed to it, and develop a sort of immunity against it. Further, people may relate to cross-cutting exposure differently when the sources of this content are not strong ties as is the common case in offline context, but unfamiliar users as in our experimental condition. In these contexts, the well-known political psychological mechanisms of motivated reasoning (Nir, 2011) and confirmation bias (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2020) may work more effectively and defend users from being uncertain about their own points. These facts can make social media a 'safe space' for political disagreement, where its dark side cannot prevail. However, to confirm this thesis, future studies should investigate the effects of cross-cutting exposure on internal political efficacy in different communication context. Nonetheless, the calming lesson from our research, how the heightened level of cross-cutting exposure experienced in the social media context may not result in less efficacious people, at least one-off exposure does not make people more uncertain in their own political capacities.

Naturally, our study has several limitations beyond the aforementioned constraint of having been conducted in only one context and on a single topic. In designing the experiment, we prioritized ecological validity by selecting real-life comments as stimuli. However, this may have weakened the internal validity of the stimuli, as the differences between them are not strictly minimal. Balancing between ecological and internal validity is a common trade-off in experimental research, and in our case, it seemed justified to prioritize ecological validity in order to help respondents interpret the stimuli in relation to their own views. Nevertheless, future research would benefit from testing the same question using designs that place greater emphasis on internal validity. At the same time, it is worth noting that had the stimuli been even more similar to one another, this might actually have reduced the size of any potential effect. Yet, since we did not find a significant effect even with stimuli that may have somewhat overestimated the potential effect, this is unlikely to pose a practical problem. On the contrary, if we had found a null effect with very similar stimuli, one could argue that more realistic, real-life-like stimuli might have produced stronger effects—which is a scenario we can now rule out.

Additionally, we must also mention a general limitation of cross-sectional experimental designs: in real life, exposure is continuous—voters encounter cross-cutting content repeatedly over time—whereas in our study, we were

only able to test the immediate effect of a single exposure. It is possible that an effect does exist, but only manifests over a longer period through repeated exposure. This question could be explored using a longitudinal experimental design or self-reported survey data.

Lastly, the null findings in our study contribute to an ongoing and necessary conversation about the role of non-significant results in experimental research. Such outcomes are crucial for mitigating publication bias and building a more accurate and comprehensive scientific record. As positive findings are disproportionately published, reporting null effects helps prevent overestimation of intervention efficacy and supports the development of more robust theoretical frameworks and research designs. In the context of this experiment, the null result does not necessarily indicate that cross-cutting content is ineffective, but rather that a one-time exposure, however strong the stimuli is, may be insufficient to alter entrenched beliefs. By reporting these findings transparently, we aim to encourage a more nuanced understanding of experimental outcomes and to support future research in refining both theoretical models and methodological approaches.

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APPENDIX

ProGov thread (see English translation below)



The image shows a vertical scroll of four Facebook posts. Each post includes a profile picture, a name, and a text-based message. The posts are separated by thin horizontal lines. The text in the posts discusses government spending on healthcare, the impact of the Gyurcsány government, and the quality of care provided by different political parties.

Post 1:
Hazugság, hogy pusztul az egészségügy! 1200 milliárd került az egészségügybe fejlesztésekre, bérekre! És további 700 milliárd megy Pest megyébe és Budapestre! Soha ilyen fejlődés nem volt! Ha az ellenzéki médiának volna ideje a rémhírterjesztés, a lepukkant budik vadászása és a dezinformációk gyártása helyett, akkor talán mindenki tudhatná, hogy mi minden fejlesztés történt az ország minden pontján.
Like · Comment · Share

Post 2:
Gyurcsány Ferenc kormányzása alatt sok milliárd forintot vont ki az egészségügyből, több ezer egészségügyi dolgozót üldözött el a pályáról és több száz települést hagyott házi orvos nélkül. A polgári kormány 2010 óta pótolja az egészségügytől elvett pénzeket, országszerte újíttja fel a kórházakat, rendelőköt és bérémeleést biztosít az egészségügyi dolgozóknak, házi orvosoknak.
Like · Comment · Share

Post 3:
Az elmúlt évek egészségügyi intézkedései közül kiemelhetjük a bérémeleéseket, a rezidens-, a praxis- és a házi orvosi letelepedési programot. A minél jobb színvonalú ellátásra az egészségügyben bért emelő Fidesz-KDNP a garancia a "vizitdíjas" MSZP-vel vagy az "orvosexportáló" Jobbikkal szemben.
Like · Comment · Share

Post 4:
A 2002 és 2010 közötti MSZP-SZDSZ rablőhadjárat idején kórházakat szüntettek meg, zártak be vagy adtak magántulajdonba felújítás és bővítés helyett. 2010 óta ennek az ellenkezője történik, rengeteg pénzt költött az egészségügyre a kormány és az eredmények meg is látszanak.
Like · Comment · Share

AntiGov thread (see English translation below)



The *Mixed thread* combined the following comments, AntiGov (1), ProGov (1), AntiGov (4) and ProGov (2).

ProGov thread (English translation)

- 1) It is a lie that the health service is dying! 1200 billion has been spent on health care on developments and on wages. And another 700 billion to Pest County and Budapest. There has never been such progress! If the opposition media had the time to do its job instead of spreading scare stories, hunting down shabby toilets and producing disinformation, then maybe everyone would know what developments have been made all over the country.

- 2) Under Ferenc Gyurcsány's government, he has withdrawn billions of forints from the health sector, he has chased thousands of health workers out of the profession and left hundreds of municipalities without a family doctor. The civic [Fidesz] government has been replacing the money taken from the health sector since 2010. It is renovating hospitals and clinics across the country and giving health workers and GPs a pay rise.
- 3) Among the health measures of recent years are the pay rises and the resettlement programs for residents, and general practitioners. The Fidesz-KDNP, which raises wages in the health sector, is the guarantee for better quality in healthcare, as opposed to the MSZP, which charges a visit fee, or the Jobbik, which is exporting doctors.
- 4) During the MSZP-SZDSZ thievery between 2002 and 2010, hospitals were closed down or privatized instead of being renovated and expanded. Since 2010, the opposite has been happening: the government has spent a lot of money on health care and the results are visible.

AntiGov thread (English translation)

- 1) The government, which is doing so well with hundreds of people freezing to death in winter and tens of thousands in the health system because they can't get care, does not give a shit to bring home professionals and keep them home. While Orbán's obsessions with stadiums, railways and theft have been well funded in recent years, the health service is dying, there is a constant shortage of resources and some of the professionals prefer to go abroad.
- 2) In the light of recent events, I think we have every right to be angry! There is no money for basic hygiene in hospitals, for the care of patients. But billions of taxpayers' money can be wasted on unnecessary stadiums – the passion of a lunatic mind!!!!
- 3) In Hungary today, people go to hospitals not to get better, but to die. I do not really cry for Gyurcsány's people, but even then we were not that far behind European standards! Of course, according to the government-controlled media, everything is fine and dandy. Go Hungary!
- 4) Zero health care in Hungary, fleas, bedbugs and who knows what other extra residents there are.... Patients left on their own, waiting 6 hours in the waiting room, doctors abroad... but Hungary is doing better, huh???