

Study links US polarization to TV news deregulation

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Increasing American political polarization is linked to television news deregulation following the federal Telecommunications Act of 1996, according to a Washington State University study.

"After 1996, we see changes in [polarization](#) based on how much television people are using," said researcher Jay Hmielowski, assistant professor in WSU's Edward R. Murrow College of Communication. He conducted the study with Murrow colleague Myiah Hutchens and former colleague Michael Beam, now at Kent State University.

Their work was recently published online in the [*International Journal of Public Opinion Research*](#).

The telecommunications act sought to open markets to competition, but the result was consolidation. This included large companies like FOX and NBC buying smaller, independent TV stations and cable news channels.

Scholars and pundits have voiced concern that the U.S. government has become increasingly inept at solving important problems. Many point to political polarization as the culprit, with evidence of increasing attitude divergence among party elites, interest groups and activists.

The Murrow researchers found that U.S. citizens have become increasingly polarized since 1996. And they found that greater use of TV news is associated with higher levels of polarization.

"Our study is unique," they wrote, "in that it focuses on a specific moment (1996) that perpetuated changes to the media system."

Earlier studies have put forward various explanations for how these changes may have contributed to polarization, they explained. For example, having more TV news choices means programmers can target particular consumers and consumers can pick news they prefer. Also, corporate consolidation of TV [news](#) resulted in drastic cuts to newsroom budgets, reducing coverage and variety.

"We thought it was important to look at polarization in the United States given that we have increasing polarization in Congress and some evidence that people in general are polarizing with their attitudes and their likes or dislikes for the out party," said Hmielowski.

Provided by Washington State University

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