Virtual chat rooms can increase negative political biases of debate viewers

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The campaign for the 2020 U.S. presidential election was historic in many ways due to the COVID-19 pandemic, including the use of digital watch parties to view the presidential and vice-presidential debates. This viewing method allowed people to continue interacting socially while

watching the debates and remaining socially distanced in their homes.

Inspired by these virtual watch parties, researchers at the University of Missouri studied the use of group chat rooms during virtual debate watch parties and found that online chat rooms can increase the negative political biases of debate viewers, particularly when chatting with like-minded individuals, said Ben Warner, associate professor of communication and co-author of the study.

"Imagine watching a political debate by yourself, and you already know who you're going to vote for, but all of a sudden the other political candidate makes a good point," said Warner, who also serves as the director of the Political Communication Institute. "You might think to yourself, 'that was smart, or 'I hadn't thought about it that way.' But if you are watching the same debate with a group of like-minded people, we found that you're more likely to notice the negative things or to construe something being said as negative, when likely that wouldn't have happened if someone wasn't there to conveniently supply that information."

Warner, whose research interests include studying the effects of partisan media, presidential debates, campaign ads and political humor, has helped conduct numerous debate-watching studies at MU involving hundreds of college students. From 2000 until 2020, all of these studies involved in-person watch parties, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the researchers had to move their studies of the 2020 campaign online.

Therefore, researchers recruited more than 500 study participants from a total of 12 higher education institutions to view one of the two 2020 presidential campaign debates or vice-presidential debate in real time using digital watch parties via video conferencing and the use of digital chat rooms. The participants were split into three different groups—with all supporters of the same political party, with a mix of supporters from

both political parties, or no chat at all, said Go-Eun Grace Kim, a doctoral student in the Department of Communication and corresponding author on the study.

"We devised an innovative design for this study, and it was surprising to me that we could recruit a lot of students to participate," Kim said. "We also allowed participants to turn off their video cameras and change their names so they could remain anonymous when sharing their responses with us and one another."

Warner said the researchers "experimentally manipulated" the social conditions of these watch parties in order to study the amount of bias processing that was occurring in each watch party.

"When we talk about bias processing and debates, it means that Democrats believe their candidate did an awesome job and the Republican candidate was terrible—and vice versa," Warner said. "We found that it wasn't the agreements that made people more positive toward a particular candidate, rather it seems like these chats helped create a 'piling-on' effect of negative comments directed against the opposition party's candidate."

Warner equates this feeling to watching a sporting event while surrounded by and socializing with fans of the same team. He added that this study can contribute to the knowledge base surrounding a popular topic of discussion in today's society—the impact of people mostly surrounding themselves with like-minded individuals.

"When we think of the types of information environments that we surround ourselves in—we all have a choice of whether or not to hang out with people we disagree with—what kind of perspectives are we volunteering to expose ourselves to?" Warner said. "For instance, if I'm watching a football game and I purposely don't watch the game with fans

of the opposing team that I root for, then I am recreating the sort of ideologically homogeneous environment of attending a political debate watch party with like-minded people."

"Social watching the 2020 presidential and vice-presidential debates: the effect of ideological homogeneity and partisan identity strength," was published in *Argumentation and Advocacy*.

Provided by University of Missouri

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