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The Influence of Influencers: The Impact of Online Political Influencer Content on Political Affiliation

Pearl M. B. Meredith[1], Misha Turychenko and Tamara Dodds

Abstract

Political content on the Internet has increased dramatically over the last decade and has a demonstrated effect on the habits and beliefs of voters. We examined whether and to what extent content created by Online Political Influencers (OPIs) is effective at influencing the political affiliation of online audiences and whether this depends on the political affiliation or rhetorical mode (debate or video essay) characterizing their content. Participants (N = 302) were recruited from a variety of online platforms. We found that most participants had experienced a small change in political affiliation since watching OPI content and found evidence for an interaction between rhetorical mode and the size and direction of political affiliation change. People who experienced a significant change to the right were more likely to report watching debate only or mostly debate content.

[1] pearl.meredith@student.kpu.ca; Written for Applied Research I (PSYC 3400). The authors have no known conflicts of interest to disclose. We would like to thank Dr. Liudmila (Lucy) Jdanova for her thoughtful guidance on this project.

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The internet has heralded a new era in politics. Illustrating the novel power of the internet in people's political lives, figures such as former U.S. president Donald Trump have used social media platforms to effectively influence mainstream media reporting and the opinions of voters (Pérez-Curiel & Naharro, 2019). It is not just politicians who have the power to change people's minds through social media—online content creators who focus on political issues also draw large followings on social media platforms. High-profile conservative content creator Ben Shapiro boasts over five million followers on Twitter at the time of this writing (Shapiro, n.d.), and the well-known left-wing YouTube creator Natalie Wynn has received over 6.4 million views on some of her videos (ContraPoints, n.d.). Content creators such as these, who focus primarily on political issues, have been dubbed *online political influencers* (Riedl et al., 2021). Importantly, online political influencers are proliferating at break-neck speed. In the mid-2010's, researchers were reporting on the very beginnings of what would become the online political influencer phenomenon (Cunningham, 2015). By 2022, that phenomenon had grown so large so as to rival the political influence of professional journalism (Fischer et al., 2022). Indeed, political activism is becoming increasingly common within the online influencer space (Schwemmer et al., 2021). This wave of new political voices is present across the political spectrum, including the extremes (see O'Connor, 2021; Wurst, 2022).

Some pioneering research has investigated important differences in the delivery method of videographic online political influencer content, with Fischer et al. (2022) finding evidence for two distinct content characteristics: *partisan mockery* or *engaging education*. This echoes a distinction made within online political influencer communities between debate-style content and video essay content (e.g., Zena & Poppy, 2022). Similar to Fischer et al.'s (2022) *partisan mockery*, content referred to as *debate* within online political influencer communities features impromptu or planned debates between content creators with differing political views, frequently becoming contemptuous and mocking in tone (e.g., Destiny, 2022). Likewise, content referred to as *video essay* provides structured overviews of political topics from one political perspective (e.g., Actual Justice Warrior, n.d.), similar to Fischer et al.'s (2022) *engaging education*. The consistent use of the categorical terms *debate* and *video essay* within online political influencer communities suggests that this dichotomy may carve content at an important, natural joint, with differential

influence on either side. These two categories reflect phenomenologically different rhetorical styles, which may or may not be adopted consciously by political content creators to aid them in gaining influence and followers.

We investigated the phenomenon of online political influencer content because the scientific and political community does not yet know the full significance of its real-world effects. Preliminary research has demonstrated that this phenomenon is growing, and has consequences in the offline world (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022; Fischer et al., 2022). We wanted to investigate how this new form of political content might influence the direction and strength of change in political affiliation in those who consume it, and whether this depends on the rhetorical mode used in its delivery. We aimed to clarify the potential impact of online political influencers on political affiliation, and to shed light on a potentially important distinction in the rhetorical style of their content through a quantitative, correlational study.

Online Political Influencers (OPIs)

The online political influencer (OPI) phenomenon refers to the proliferation of content creators who amass large audiences by producing political content, such as live-streamed or edited videos, spanning a range of topics, including LGBTQ+ rights, immigration policy, and environmental issues (Riedl et al., 2021). While some online political influencers engage their audience through image-based platforms like Instagram (Riedl et al., 2021), this study is specifically focused on OPIs whose content is primarily delivered through video. This is driven by the frequent citing of video-based platforms such as YouTube as potential radicalization pathways (Manoel et al., 2021). We define *online political influencers* as individuals who comment on current issues, engage with the popular media, and draw large audiences on online platforms, whose content centers around political issues (Riedl et al., 2021). We define *online political influencer content* as online content (such as a video or live stream) put out by OPIs that focuses on political issues for the purpose of entertainment, information sharing, or changing people's minds (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022).

Multiple platforms have emerged as lively spaces for political content producers and their consumers to converge. YouTube and Twitch.tv are two popular platforms for online political influencers to live stream and upload their video content, although other platforms such as Facebook (e.g., Cooper, 2022) and DLive host this content as well (Munger & Phillips, 2022; O'Connor 2021; Wurst, 2022). The political views espoused by OPIs span the entire political

spectrum from far-right to far-left, and political communities have grown up around OPIs that are unique to the online space (e.g., the left-wing "Dirtbag Left" and right-wing "Reactionary Video Tube"; Wurst, 2022). Far-right OPIs may avoid being banned from regulated platforms by espousing extreme and conspiratorial views without directly calling for violence (O'Connor, 2021). Left-wing and right-wing OPIs and their communities frequently interact with each other online to both generate entertaining content and persuade the opposing OPI's audience (e.g., Modern-Day Debate, n.d.).

The Debate and Video Essay Dichotomy

Multiple schemas exist for classifying political content on platforms such as YouTube. When exploring radicalization pathways on YouTube, Manoel et al. (2021) generated the categories of *Media*, *the Alt-Lite*, *the Intellectual Dark Web*, and *Alt-Right*. When examining the same phenomenon, Ledwich and Zaitsev (2019) grouped content broadly into *Left*, *Center*, and *Right*, and further subdivided these categories into *Socialist*, *Anti-Social Justice Warrior*, *Religious Conservative*, *White Identitarian*, and *Conspiracy*. Hosseinmardi et al. (2021) used the labels *Far Left*, *Left*, *Center*, *Anti-Woke*, *Right*, and *Far Right*.

While these categories effectively assess the political affiliation of a given channel or video, to our knowledge only Fischer et al. (2022) have conducted categorical analyses on the *rhetorical mode* used by online political influencers. By the term *rhetorical mode,* we refer to the method by which OPI content is delivered for the purposes of influencing consumers' opinions. As noted previously, Fischer et al.'s (2022) investigation generated the rhetorical categories of *partisan mockery* and *engaging education*. In the interest of examining a natural distinction made within OPI communities, we are departing from Fischer et al.'s (2022) dichotomy to examine two distinct rhetorical mode categories applied by community members to OPI content: *debate content* and *video essay content*. For the purposes of this paper, we have defined debate content as videographic OPI content which is characterized primarily by dialectic argumentation. We have defined video essay content as videographic OPI content which is characterized by the rhetorical devices of narration, description, and exposition, but which does not make use of dialectic argumentation. Popular media has outlined some key characteristics of debate and video essay content (e.g., debate; Gonzales, 2022; video essay; Williams, 2020), but these definitions appear restrictive when compared to how these terms are applied within OPI communities. We have chosen to generate our own definitions because definitions in popular media have not been tested

empirically, and because they may be too restrictive. Our definitions are based on an examination of their use within OPI communities, ensuring that the definitions used in this study are broad enough to capture how these terms are commonly used by consumers. This is intended to enhance the external generalizability of our results.

As stated above, our categorization of OPI content into debate and video essay styles is founded in the colloquial distinction made by consumers and producers of OPI content alike, between debate and video essay content (e.g., frenchtoastkid, 2022; Rose Wrist, 2022). This distinction is frequently used when making a claim about the relative persuasive efficacy of either rhetorical mode (e.g., Samsen, 2022). Despite what appears to be broad consensus on the relevance of these terms, consumers and creators alike criticize the dichotomy between debate and video essay content (e.g., Zena & Poppy: Wholesome Degenerates, 2022), and the utility of evaluating OPIs on their choice of rhetorical modes alone (e.g., Beard, 2022). Within left-wing OPI circles, there is strong disagreement about what style of content—debate or video essay—effectively deradicalizes far right audiences (e.g., Samsen, 2022). Right-wing communities appear to have a more neutral relationship with content style, potentially due to fewer right-wing OPIs choosing to engage in video essay style content (e.g., glahoiten, 2021). Despite this, their desire to effectively move people over to the political right appears to be just as vigorous (see an op-ed by right-wing debater Charlie Kirk; Kirk, 2022).

The Gateway Hypothesis

The Gateway Hypothesis, conceptualized in the context of illicit drug use, predicts that seemingly innocuous behaviors can lead one towards engaging in more radical behaviors in the same realm (Yamaguchi & Kandel, 1984). Support exists for this hypothesis in the realm of political engagement as well (De Moor & Verhaegen, 2020). Indeed, the influence of OPIs does not only have effects in the online sphere; engagement with OPI content translates into both online and offline participation in politics, suggesting an important role for OPIs in shaping political behaviors in the real world (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022). The gateway hypothesis suggests that OPI content may have both intended and unintended consequences for consumers. Intended consequences may include a gradual shift towards a socially desirable (i.e., non-violent) political affiliation, while unintended consequences may include the continued shifting of political affiliation towards the extremes.

The influence of online political media extends across borders, with the phenomenon dubbed the “Trump Effect” (Costello, 2016) resulting in increased hate crimes and an estimated doubling of far-right extremist membership in Canada (Perry & Scrivens, 2019). While right-wing extremism has historically been defined in a U.S. context, it is also alive and well in Canada both online and in formal groups such as The Heritage Front, Final Solution Skinheads, and the Aryan Guard (Perry & Scrivens, 2016). Underpinning the danger suggested by the gateway hypothesis, the internet has made it easier for right-wing extremists to connect and recruit new members (Perry & Scrivens, 2016), and various social media sites have become objects of scrutiny for their black box algorithms that may act as radicalization pathways to the far right (Manoel et al., 2021).

While less commonly discussed, left-wing radicalization is also cause for concern. People who describe themselves as belonging to the ‘radical left’ are more distrustful of institutional systems, such as the democratic voting system (Talshir, 2005). In industrialized democracies such as Canada, lack of political trust has been shown to negatively predict voting (Elections Canada, 2020). Thus, left-wing radicalization may result in lower voter turnout, weakening the democratic process. While people belonging to the far-right show similar patterns of institutional distrust, they tend to advocate for political change through more streamlined and hierarchical grassroots activism, while the far-left tends towards decentralized and diffuse grassroots activism (Talshir, 2005). This means that the disengagement of the far-left in institutional democracy in favour of grassroots activism may allow for excess influence from the far-right, which would otherwise be counterbalanced by the far-left through the democratic process.

The Persistence Hypothesis

Stable personality characteristics such as extraversion and agreeableness have been implicated as important predictors of party identification. This suggests that innate factors play a significant role in political affiliation, explaining relative stability of political attitudes over time (Gerber et al., 2012). The persistence hypothesis encompasses these findings and predicts that political predispositions are relatively stable over the lifespan, with most variations of the hypothesis stating that political predispositions remain stable once crystallized. Classic studies testing the persistence hypothesis have focused mainly on party identification (Sears & Funk, 1999). While there is a difference between party identification and political affiliation, they have a very close relationship.

Sears and Funk (1999) examined party identification as one aspect of a two-dimensional model of political attitudes, with the other factor being ideology. They operationalized *party identification* as a single-item self-report measure that simply asked "what are your political leanings," and operationalized *ideology* as a single-item self-report measure with five response options ranging from *extremely radical* to *very conservative*. Their investigation of longitudinal data revealed that political identification and ideology, operationalized in this manner, were encompassed by the persistence hypothesis (i.e., they remained stable over time). To ensure that our construct is encompassed by the persistence hypothesis, we have operationalized our concept of political affiliation in line with Sears and Funk's (1999) party identification and ideology, and conceptualized political affiliation broadly as a general sense of belonging to a particular ideological group (Lutz & Lauener, 2020). These terms and definitions were selected to capture the broadest sense of political identity possible—aiming to capture both party identification and ideology—while still framing it in a way that is recognizable and usable empirically.

Contrary to the persistence hypothesis, proponents of debate and video essay content, especially on the left, frequently espouse the power of these rhetorical modes to change minds (e.g., pro-debate argument; Vaush, 2022; pro-video essay argument; Shanspeare, 2022). If these effects are generalizable, they would point to a mechanism operating in opposition to the persistence hypothesis, as that hypothesis would predict that exposure to OPI content should not meaningfully affect one's political affiliation. Rather, the persistence hypothesis would predict that people engage mainly with content that caters to and supports their political predispositions.

Social Judgment Theory

Literature on party identification (closely related, as we've described, to political affiliation) suggests that identification remains relatively stable over the lifetime, with most changes being moderate in nature and clustering around the center (Sears & Funk, 1999). Social judgment theory provides a framework for the moderate nature of most of these changes, positing that new information which contradicts a currently held attitude is reacted to differently depending on a variety of personal factors (Sherif, 1973). The further away a new piece of information is perceived to be from one's currently held beliefs, the theory suggests, the more likely it is to be rejected. Similarly, the more ego-involvement one has in one's currently held beliefs—that is, the more one identifies as someone who has these beliefs—the less likely one is to change these beliefs (Sherif, 1973). Despite these findings, major shifts in political affiliation as a result of consuming

OPI content are recognized by creators and consumers alike (e.g., creators; Professor Flowers, 2021; consumers; CBC Radio, 2019). If these effects are generalizable, they would point to a mechanism operating outside the domain of social judgment theory, as that theory would predict that exposure to OPI content far from one's own affiliation on the political spectrum would not result in affiliation change.

Hypotheses

The effect of online political engagement seems to be inherently borderless, and social media platforms are implicated in the radicalization of our populace. The emergence of OPI content may be a contributor to this potentially harmful phenomenon. Some phenomenological differences exist in the rhetorical mode of OPI content which have not been thoroughly explored. These may contribute to the persuasive power of OPI content. Thus, we sought to determine whether the consumption of OPI content is related to different directions and distances of political affiliation change or no change at all and whether this depends on the rhetorical mode of the content consumed.

H1

Based on longstanding research on the stability of political affiliation over time (e.g., Cohen, 2003; Gerber et al., 2012; Sears & Funk, 1999) which supports the persistence hypothesis, and on the predictions of social judgment theory, we hypothesized the following: The proportion of participants who report no change in political affiliation will be higher than those who do report change in political affiliation.

H2a

Drawing on the predictions of social judgment theory, we hypothesized the following: Among participants who report a change in political affiliation, the proportion of participants who report minor changes will be higher than those who report major changes on an objective measure.

H2b

From the same basis we hypothesized the following: Among participants who report a change in political affiliation, the proportion of participants who report minor changes will be higher than those who report major changes on a subjective measure.

H3a

Supported by evidence for a right-wing extremist radicalization pathway on video hosting platforms (Hosseinmardi et al., 2021; Manoel et al., 2021) and the absence of a similar left-wing

radicalization pathway, despite an apparent algorithmic preference for centrist and left-leaning content (Ledwich & Zaitsev, 2019), we hypothesized the following: On an objective measure, proportionally more participants who report being moderate-right or centrist before consuming OPI content will report being far-right after consuming OPI content. This is in comparison to people who report being moderate-left or centrist before consuming OPI content and report being far-left after consuming OPI content.

H3b

For the same reason, we hypothesized the following: On a subjective measure, proportionally more participants who report being moderate-right or centrist before consuming OPI content will report being far-right after consuming OPI content. This is in comparison to people who report being moderate-left or centrist before consuming OPI content and report being far-left after consuming OPI content.

H4

Based on observations of the correlation between OPI content consumption and online and offline political behavior (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022), as well as the implications of the gateway hypothesis, we hypothesized the following: Of participants who report a change in political affiliations, the proportion who attribute any OPI content to their change in political affiliation will be higher than the proportion who do not attribute their change to OPI content.

H5

We also sought to investigate the following exploratory hypothesis: The number of participants reporting no change, a small change, or a large change to the left or right, will differ depending on the rhetorical mode of the OPI content they most often consume.

Method

Participants

Anyone 19 years of age or older was allowed to participate. Participants were recruited from a wide range of platforms including: KPU Sona System, Reddit, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Twitch, Truth Social, Discord, and other social media platforms. Our primary goal in using multiple platforms was to gather a representative sample of participants from political affiliation categories spanning the political spectrum, whose viewing habits represent both OPI debate and video essay style content.

After data cleaning 302 participants remained. Participants ranged in age from 19-61 (M = 26.98, SD = 7.82). A large portion of the sample, 41.7% (n = 126), resided within the U.S., with 25.5% (n = 77) residing in Canada and 32.8% (n = 99) indicating a third country. The most represented group in the sample (50.7%, n = 153) were men. Women made up the second largest group (32.8%, n = 99), with a sizable minority reporting a gender outside of the binary, placing them in the *Other* category (16.5%, n = 50). As our gender measure was a blank entry form, participants were manually sorted into the above three gender categories. Anyone reporting a gender other than an easily recognized binary gender (e.g., male, man, M, cis-male, female, woman, F, W) was placed into the *other* category. Non-binary genders were quite varied, e.g., demimasc, intersex, and nonbinary trans femme. The majority of our sample identified their political affiliation as far left (53.3%, n = 161), followed by moderate left (28.1%, n = 85), center (10.3%, n = 31), and moderate right (3.6%, n = 11), with the smallest group identifying as far right (0.7%, n = 2). 4.0% (n = 12) of participants did not respond to this question. The largest group in our sample indicated that, in general, they consume mostly video essay (33.1%, n = 100), followed by about equal debate and video essay (26.2%, n = 79), mostly debate (18.2%, n = 55), video essay only (17.9%, n = 54), and debate only (0.7%, n = 2). 4.0% (n = 12) of participants did not respond to this question.

Procedure

Upon clicking the link, participants were redirected to the study, hosted on the platform Qualtrics, where they were presented with an informed consent form. After consenting to participate in the study, participants were presented with demographic questions on a separate page. On the page following that one, participants were presented with a short description of online political influencers, debate content, and video essay content (see Table 2). They were also presented with exemplars of each rhetorical mode from both sides of the political spectrum (Debate exemplars: Vaush, Nick Fuentes, Xanderhal, Fabian Liberty, Destiny, Charlie Kirk; Video essay exemplars: Prager U., ContraPoints, Aydin Paladin, Noah Samsen, 1791, Anactualjoke). On the same page, they were then asked two screening questions: whether they were familiar with the debate and video essay OPI content, and whether they had consumed such content. Participants who answered no to both questions (n = 42) were redirected to the debriefing form and no further information was collected from them.

Participants were provided with definitions of all five political affiliation categories (see Table 2) and were then asked to indicate their current political affiliation. They were then asked questions about their political affiliation before consuming OPI content, the political affiliation of the OPI content they most often consume, and the rhetorical mode of the OPI content they most often consume. Participants were then asked to indicate if they believe they have experienced a shift in political affiliation since they began watching OPI debate and video essay content. Only those who indicated they experienced a political shift responded to a subjective measure of political affiliation (see Table 1). Participants were then asked to indicate which rhetorical mode of OPI content they attribute with this change (if any) by selecting from a multiple-choice option. If participants selected *I do not believe it played a role*, no further questions were asked. If they selected any of the other five response options, they indicated the political affiliation of the OPI content they attribute with this change (if any) by again selecting from a multiple-choice option.

Measures

We collected demographic data on participants' age, gender, and country of residence (see Demographic Questions) and included screening questions in the survey so that we were able to remove participants who did not meet our requirements. The survey included a series of questions generated by the authors that pertained to our seven variables (see Table 1). Variables that were not used to measure hypotheses were used to analyze data in an exploratory manner. All questions were created by us for the purposes of this study. When constructing our questions, we drew on the work of Lutz and Lauener (2020) to inform our choice of wording. Borrowing the phrasing suggested by Lutz and Lauener (2020), questions about political affiliation and content consumption were phrased in a way which clearly indicated that we were asking participants to assess global trends in their attitudes and behavior, as opposed to short term, mutable trends in their attitudes and behavior (e.g., "Generally speaking, do you currently think of yourself as far left, moderate left, center, moderate right, or far right?"). To ensure participants understood the meaning of all terms used in the survey, definitions were presented throughout the survey before relevant questions (see Table 2). The definitions in Table 2 represent our conceptualization of each term for the purposes of this study, as well as the definition that we provided to participants throughout the study to clarify key terms.

Demographic Questions

Participants were presented with three demographic questions assessing their age, gender, and nationality. Age was indicated by participants moving a slider. Gender responses were recorded in a blank entry form to increase inclusivity and to avoid activating response bias (e.g., dissent bias) in participants with strong political views about gender. Nationality was selected through a drop-down menu containing three response options, *Canada*, *United States*, and *Other*.

Screening Questions

Participants were asked "Before starting this survey, were you familiar with both kinds of content put out by online political influencers?" and "How often do you watch debate or video essay content put out by online political influencers?" If participants responded *no* to the first question and/or *I have never watched this kind of content* to the latter, they were redirected to the debriefing form and no further data was collected from them.

Variable A: Occurrence of Change

We measured the construct of political affiliation change through a single-item self-report measure that asked participants if they believe they have experienced a change in political affiliation since they began watching either debate or video essay online political influencer content. This variable had two levels: *yes* and *no*.

Variable B: Subjective Distance and Direction of Change

The construct of distance and direction of political affiliation change was measured subjectively by a single-item self-report measure that asked participants to select an option from a drop-down menu that best represents their political affiliation before watching debate and/or video essay content and their political affiliation currently. There were 20 response options in total, representing all possible directions and distances of political affiliation change between the five political affiliation categories we provided. For example, the response option *Far Left to Moderate Right* represents a large change in a rightward direction that is not clustered around the center of the political spectrum. The response option *Moderate Right to Center* represents a small change in a leftward direction that is clustered around the center of the political spectrum.

Variable C: Objective Distance and Direction of Change

The construct of distance and direction of political affiliation change was measured objectively by two single-item self-report measures. The first measure, containing five levels, asked participants to indicate what their political affiliation was prior to consuming debate and/or

video essay style content from a multiple-choice option presenting all five political affiliation categories as options. The five options were *far left*, *moderate left*, *center*, *moderate right*, and *far right*. The second measure, also containing five levels, asked participants to think back to before they began consuming debate and/or video essay style content and to indicate what their political affiliation was from a multiple-choice option presenting the same five political affiliation categories as options.

Variable D: Rhetorical Mode of Content Participants Most Often Consume

The construct of rhetorical mode of content most often consumed by participants was measured through a single item self-report measure with five levels: *debate only*, *mostly debate*, *about equal debate and video essay*, *mostly video essay*, and *video essay only*. Participants indicated the rhetorical mode of the OPI content they most often consume by selecting from a multiple-choice option presenting all five categories of rhetorical mode.

Variable E: Political Affiliation of OPI Content Consumed

The construct of political affiliation of OPI content was measured through a single item self-report measure with the same five levels as Variable C. Participants were asked to indicate the political affiliation of the OPI content they most often consume by selecting from a multiple-choice option presenting all five categories of political affiliation.

Variable F: Frequency of Content Consumption

The construct of frequency of content consumption was measured by a single item self-report measure with nine levels (see Table 1). Response options ranged from *daily* to *I haven't watched in the past year*. A screening question was embedded in this measure through the response option *I have never watched this content*.

Variable G: Mode of Content Participants Attribute to Political Affiliation Change

The construct of rhetorical mode participants attribute to their political affiliation change was assessed by a single item self-report measure with six levels. Participants were asked to report the mode of OPI content, if any, that they attribute to their change in political affiliation by selecting between six multiple choice response options. The first five levels ranged from *debate only* to *video essay only*. The last level was the response option *I don't believe it played a role*.

Variable H: Political Affiliation of Content Participants Attribute to Political Affiliation Change

The construct of political affiliation of OPI content participants attributed to their political affiliation change was assessed by a single item self-report measure with five levels. Participants

were asked to report the mode of OPI content, if any, that they attribute to their change in political affiliation by selecting between five multiple choice response options. They ranged from *far left* to *far right*.

Results

Analyses

We used chi-square (χ^2) goodness of fit to analyze H1, H2a, H2b, and H4, and we used χ^2 test of independence to analyze H5. We failed to meet assumptions of at least five participants expected per cell for H3a and H3b, and thus could not conduct our analysis for these hypotheses. To meet this assumption for H5, we manually collapsed the 20 levels of Variable B (i.e., Subjective Distance and Direction of Change; see Table 1) to *small left*, *large left*, *small right*, and *large right*. This was necessary due to us acquiring too few participants who reported experiencing a change to *far right* (see Limitations section). We categorized small changes as a change between adjacent categories (e.g. *far left* to *moderate left*, or *moderate right* to *center*). We categorized large changes as any change between non-adjacent categories (e.g., *far left* to *center*, *moderate right* to *far left*). In addition, we collapsed our rhetorical mode categories from five down to three, generating *debate only or mostly debate*, *about equal debate and video essay*, and *video essay only or mostly video essay*. This was necessary due to acquiring too few participants who reported watching *debate only* (see Limitations section). All other variables were analyzed in an exploratory manner.

H1

A chi-square test of goodness-of-fit was performed to determine whether experiencing a change or not experiencing a change was equally likely. We found that likelihood of change was not equally distributed in the population, $\chi2$ (1, N = 288) = 22.22, p < .001. Contrary to our hypothesis, a majority of participants (63.9%, n = 184) reported experiencing a change in political affiliation, while a minority (36.1%, n = 104) reported no change (see Figure 1). 4.6% (n = 14) of participants did not respond to this measure.

H2a

A chi-square test of goodness-of-fit was performed to determine whether experiencing a small or large change was equally likely on an objective measure (i.e., Variable C: Objective Distance and Direction of Change; see Table 1). As predicted by our hypothesis, we found that the likelihood of small or large change was not equally distributed in the population, $\chi2$ (1, N = 164) = 28.20, p < .001. More participants (70.7%, n = 116) reported a small change in political

affiliation, while fewer participants (29.3%, $n = 48$) reported a large change (see Figure 2). 10.8% ($n = 20$) of participants who indicated on other measures that they had experienced a change did not respond to one or both objective change measures.

H2b

A chi-square test of goodness-of-fit was performed to determine whether experiencing a small or large change was equally likely on a subjective measure (i.e., Variable B: Subjective Distance and Direction of Change; see Table 1). As predicted by our hypothesis, we found that the likelihood of small or large change was not equally distributed in the population, $\chi 2$ (1, $N = 177$) = 31.78, $p < .001$. More participants (71.2%, $n = 126$) reported a small change in political affiliation, while fewer (28.8%, $n = 51$) reported a large change (see Figure 2). 3.8% ($n = 7$) of participants who indicated on other measures that they had experienced a change did not respond to this measure.

H4

A chi-square test of goodness-of-fit was performed to determine whether attributing or not attributing political affiliation change to OPI content was equally likely. As predicted by our hypothesis, we found that the likelihood of attributing change to OPI content was not equally distributed in the population, $\chi 2$ (1, $N = 182$) = 87.23, $p < .001$. Most (84.6%, $n = 154$) participants who experienced a change attributed this change to their consumption of OPI content, while few (15.4%, $n = 28$) did not (see Figure 3). 1.1% ($n = 2$) of participants who had reported experiencing a change in other measures did not respond to this measure.

H5

To meet assumptions, the categories of *debate only* and *mostly debate* were collapsed into one category, as were *video essay only* and *mostly video essay*. *About equal debate and video essay* was unaffected. A Chi-square test of independence indicated that there was a significant association between the rhetorical mode of the OPI content participants most often consumed and the size and direction of change they experienced, $\chi 2(8) = 16.79$, $p = .032$, with a small effect size (Cramer's $V = .17$). All six assumptions outlined by McHugh (2013) were met, with 86.7% of cells containing an *N expected* of five or more, and no cells containing an *N expected* of less than one. 5.2% ($n = 16$) of our data was missing from this analysis.

Bonferroni post-hoc tests of the row x column differences indicated statistically significant differences between rhetorical mode categories (see Table 3). Participants who watched *debate*

only or mostly debate y were more likely than participants who reported watching *about equal debate and video essay* or *video essay only or video essay mostly* to report a large right change, with 50% (n = 5) of all participants who reported a large right change being within *debate only or mostly debate*, p = .003 (for percentages by category see Figure 4). Overall, participants who reported watching *debate only or mostly debate* were still most likely to report a small change in political affiliation towards the left (36.8%, n = 21). Participants who reported no change or a small left, large left, or small right change in political affiliation had an equal likelihood of being in either other category (*about equal debate and video essay* and *video essay only or mostly video essay*).

Discussion

Our study examined whether and to what extent content created by OPIs is effective at influencing the political affiliation of online audiences, and whether this depends on the political affiliation or rhetorical mode characterizing their content. Contrary to our first hypothesis, the majority of our sample reported experiencing a change in political affiliation since consuming OPI content. This was a surprising finding given the predictions of the persistence hypothesis. This result leads us to consider a few potential explanations. Our study may reflect a response bias towards those who have experienced a change since watching OPI content. As this is a frequently discussed issue within some OPI communities, people wishing to lend support to the efficacy of OPI content may have been particularly drawn to participate. Another explanation involves the gateway hypothesis. Reported changes in political affiliation may reflect an incremental shifting of political affiliation towards the extremes. However, we observed changes in all directions and distances, for example from the far left to the center and from the far right to the moderate right.

A final explanation suggests that the particular kind of OPI content we investigated may utilize some mechanisms of persuasion that are particularly influential. This explanation is attractive because, regardless of rhetorical mode, OPI content does appear to capitalize on multiple persuasion techniques simultaneously, such as deductive logic, narrative, compelling images, authority, and aesthetics (Soules, 2015). OPI content can also be conceptualized through the *elaboration likelihood model* (ELM) as content that provides high-quality peripheral and central route persuasion factors simultaneously. The elaboration likelihood model posits that peripheral persuasion factors, such as the attractiveness of an OPI, or central persuasion factors, such as the logical soundness of their argument, will be attended to preferentially depending on the cognitive

motivation and resources available to the consumer (Hedhli & Zourrig, 2022). In a study on a related phenomenon, Gao et al. (2021) found that consumers of live streamed product reviews were influenced in favor of the product by both peripheral and central route factors, and that the presence of online community members enhanced this persuasive power. Gao et al. (2021) note also that the streamers themselves (corollaries to our case, OPIs) exert a powerful persuasive effect if they embody peripheral route cues. This suggests that the potential power of OPI content to produce changes in political affiliation may rest in its inherently dynamic nature, as this provides OPIs with the ability to offer multiple peripheral and central route persuasion factors at once.

As expected, of those who did report a change in political affiliation since viewing OPI content, most reported a small change on both an objective and subjective measure. This is in line with the predictions of social judgment theory. Despite this, a large minority of participants did report experiencing a large change in political affiliation. This again may provide evidence for the gateway hypothesis, or it could point to the unique ability of some OPI content to produce large changes in political affiliation, operating outside the domain of social judgment theory.

As per our predictions, most participants attributed their reported change in political affiliation since watching OPI content to that content. Again, this may reflect a response bias from those who feel passionately about the OPI content they consume, or the communities they are part of. However, because such a large majority of respondents reported this, it is also likely that OPI content does play a significant role in the political lives of those who consume it. Combined with our results showing a majority of participants reported experiencing a change since consuming OPI content, this warrants further investigation into the impact that OPI content is having on political affiliation.

Our interaction hypothesis returned some interesting results. Participants who reported experiencing a large change to the right were most likely to report regularly consuming debate only or mostly debate content. There are two explanations for this result that we find likely. First, this discrepancy may simply be an artifact of the difference in preference between right-wing and left-wing OPIs to engage in debate or video essay content. If there are relatively fewer right-wing OPIs who create video essay content, this would explain why more people experiencing a large change to the right would report watching debate only or mostly debate. Alternatively, it may be the case that right-wing political content is more persuasive when delivered in a debate format. As a purely speculative hypothesis, it may be that debate allows right-wing creators to focus on

individual issues with which they are able to wrestle adeptly. In contrast, the format of video essays calls for the development of an overarching narrative that rings true to a large audience. Some social commentators have described the modern right as being mired in an internal debate about the future and foundation of their ideology (Mitchell, 2019), and this may make it more difficult for right-wing OPIs to create video essay content that is coherent and consistent with other right-wing creators. Further research is necessary to determine whether this is the case.

Finally, we proposed two hypotheses intended to investigate the presence of what has been dubbed a right-wing radicalization pathway on video hosting platforms (Hosseinmardi et al., 2021; Manoel et al., 2021). We were unable to analyze these hypotheses as we received a dearth of participants who reported experiencing changes to the far right. We believe this is mostly due to limitations in our sampling, which we will discuss in the next section of the paper.

Limitations

First and foremost, we used non-experimental survey research, and this precludes us from assessing any causal relationships that may underlie the trends in our data. Participants self-reported affiliation change related to the consumption of OPI content. The data is thus contingent on the accuracy of the participants' memory of their own political evolution over time. Any causal relationship between change of affiliation and consumption of OPI content that does exist may work in the direction opposite to our expectations; participants may watch OPI content that reflects their political evolution offline, rather than OPI content changing their affiliation.

Only 0.7% (n = 2) of our sample identified themselves as far right, whereas 53.3% (n = 161) identified themselves as far left. This is a large discrepancy that represents self-selection bias in our sample. Despite our efforts to avoid sampling bias, we encountered difficulty in accessing and promoting our study in right and far-right-leaning spaces. Many communities on the platform Reddit have specific rules about the kind of posts that may or may not be made in their communities. To avoid having our account banned, we reached out to the moderators of each Reddit community we wanted to post in to gain approval before posting. Many of the Reddit communities that allowed us to post a link to our study were explicitly left-leaning, with the remaining communities being politically centrist or non-political spaces. The explicitly right and far-right wing Reddit communities we contacted either failed to respond, had rules against data collection, or simply told us that they could not accept our request to post on their subreddit at this time. Our efforts to promote the study on platforms that cater to right-wing users (e.g. Truth Social;

Parler) were thwarted, with one of our accounts being banned. We attempted to access more right and far right participants by posting our study link in explicitly right-wing YouTube comments sections, but this did not result in as much engagement as our Reddit posts received. Posts on Instagram, Facebook, and other social media platforms appeared to generate marginal engagement. These difficulties strongly suggest to us that a non-response bias may be at play. Thus, future studies on OPI content should place an emphasis on designing their participant sampling techniques in such a way that right and far-right potential participants will be more likely to see and participate in this research.

Another limitation follows from allowing participants to self-identify their current and past political affiliation, as well as the affiliation of OPI content they consume. While we provided consistent definitions of affiliation categories, the self-concept of individuals in regard to political affiliation can be hard to accurately measure. In particular, those at either political extreme may not accurately identify themselves as extreme (Lutz & Lauener, 2020). On the other hand, one unexpected benefit of promoting our study through Reddit posts was the ability for participants to comment on the post publicly without being prompted. Multiple commenters suggested that we should have allowed people to self-describe their political affiliation, indicating that at least some members of our sample have very specific and well-defined political affiliations that are not well captured by our predetermined categories. Some commenters noted that it was difficult to answer questions pertaining to the type of content that influenced their change in political affiliation, with one commenter stating “Contra and Knowing Better [left wing OPIs known for video essays] pushed me more to the left, while Destiny [left wing OPI known for debate] pulled me more to the moderate left” (Maestro_Titarenko, 2023).

Finally, the dichotomy of *debate* and *video essay* may not adequately capture the nuances of the OPI space. The categories of “streamer” and “video essayist” may be terms with more utility and validity, as these categories capture an even broader subset of OPI content. Debate content is often put out by streamers, who can be found hosting live streams wherein no debate is taking place. This ‘downtime’ may be influential as well, and is not captured by the category of *debate*.

Future Directions

Given that participants in our study reported changes of all sizes and directions, the promise of an effective tool of deradicalization warrants further exploration of these phenomenally different tools (debate and video essay) of online political discourse. Future studies should aim to

generate more inferential results, either through a causal or predictive study design. Experimental studies can establish a causal link between OPI content and political affiliation change, and longitudinal studies can capture these changes as they evolve over time. Other ways of operationalizing OPI content should be explored, for example using the more inclusive terms *streamer* and *video essayist*. These should be validated for use in both left- and right-wing spaces. The apparent difference in the likelihood of left-wing and right-wing OPIs to produce debate and video essay style content should also be investigated further.

Future research may also avoid potential misidentification by participants of the rhetorical mode or political affiliation of OPI content they consume by collecting specific information about the OPIs that participants watch, allowing researchers to systematically group cases within clear parameters. The potential for participants to misidentify their own political affiliation, in part by assuming one's self to be less radical than one is, should also be managed. Some existing measures targeting this problem include questions about previous and future voting habits, and these measures could be added to future studies to more accurately and consistently determine political affiliation (Lutz & Lauener, 2020).

Finally, influences outside the political affiliation or rhetorical mode of OPI content may be contributing to the changes in political affiliation we observed. There is ample evidence that group influence holds great sway over political beliefs (Cohen, 2003). Some evidence suggests that the policy of the party one identifies with significantly determines one's political attitudes, with this influence being largely unconscious (Cohen, 2003). This group influence may push an individual towards certain OPI content based on the shifting policies adopted by the political party they identify with. Thus, further research should examine the influence of party policy within the OPI space.

Tables

Table 1
Variables with their Levels and Measurement

Variables	Levels		Measurement
A: Occurrence of Change	**La1**: No **La2**: Yes		**Qa1**: "Since watching debate and/or video essay content, do you feel you have experienced a shift in your political affiliation?"
B: Subjective Distance and Direction of Change	**Lb1**: FL to ML **Lb2**: FL to C **Lb3**: FL to MR **Lb4**: FL to FR **Lb5**: ML to C **Lb6**: ML to MR **Lb7**: ML to FR **Lb8**: C to MR **Lb9**: C to FR **Lb10**: MR to FR	**Lb11**: FR to MR **Lb12**: FR to C **Lb13**: FR to ML **Lb14**: FR to FL **Lb15**: MR to C **Lb16**: MR to ML **Lb17**: MR to FL **Lb18**: C to ML **Lb19**: C to FL **Lb20**: ML to FL	**Qb1**: "Thinking about your shift in your political affiliation, select the option from the drop down menu that best represents your political affiliation before and after watching political debate and/or video essay content:"
C: Objective Distance and Direction of Change	**Lc1**: FL to ML **Lc2**: FL to C **Lc3**: FL to MR **Lc4**: FL to FR **Lc5**: ML to C **Lc6**: ML to MR **Lc7**: ML to FR **Lc8**: C to MR **Lc9**: C to FR **Lc10**: MR to FR	**Lc11**: FR to MR **Lc12**: FR to C **Lc13**: FR to ML **Lc14**: FR to FL **Lc15**: MR to C **Lc16**: MR to ML **Lc17**: MR to FL **Lc18**: C to ML **Lc19**: C to FL **Lc20**: ML to FL	*Discrepancy in responses to two questions.* **Qc2**: "Generally speaking, do you currently think of yourself as:" **Qc3**: "Think back to before you began watching online political influencer content – either debates or video essays. Did you currently think of yourself as:"

D: Rhetorical Mode of Content Participants Most Often Consume	**Ld1**: Debate Only **Ld2**: Mostly Debate **Ld3**: About Equal Debate and Video Essay Content	**Ld4**: Mostly Video Essay **Ld5**: Video Essay Only	**Qd1**: "We know that online political influencers often engage in both debate and video essay style content, but think about the kind of content that the content creators you watch most often engage in. Generally speaking, do you watch political influencer content that is:"
E: Political Affiliation of OPI Content Consumed	**Le1**: Far Left **Le2**: Moderate Left **Le3**: Center	**Le4**: Moderate Right **Le5**: Far Right	**Qe1**: "Generally speaking, do you watch political influencer content that is:"
F: Frequency of Content Consumption	**Lf1**: Daily **Lf2**: Multiple times a week **Lf3**: Weekly **Lf4**: Multiple times a month **Lf5**: Monthly	**Lf6**: Multiple times a year **Lf7**: Once a year **Lf8**: I haven't watched in the past year **Lf9**: I have never watched this content	**Qf1**: "How often do you watch debate or video essay content put out by online political influencers?"
G: Mode of Content Participants Attribute to Political Affiliation Change	**Lg1**: I don't believe it played a role **Lg2**: Debate Only **Lg3**: Mostly Debate	**Lg4**: About Equal Debate and Video Essay **Lg5**: Mostly Video Essay **Lg6**: Video Essay Only	**Qg1**: "If you believe debate and/or video essay content played a role in your shift in political affiliation, what was/is the style of that content?"
H: Political Affiliation of Content Participants Attribute to Political Affiliation Change	**Lh1**: I don't believe it played a role **Lh2**: FL **Lh3**: ML **Lh4**: C	**Lh5**: MR **Lh6**: FR	**Qh1**: "If you believe that debate and/or video essay content played a role in your shift in political affiliation, what was/is the political affiliation of that content?"

Note: FL = Far Left; ML = Moderate Left; C = Center; MR = Moderate Right; FR = Far Right

Table 2
Definitions That Will be Provided to Participants Throughout the Survey

Term	Definition	Rationale for Definition
Political Affiliation	A general sense of belonging to a particular ideological group	Lutz & Lauener (2020)
Online Political Influencer	Individuals who comment on current issues, engage with the popular media, and draw large audiences on online platforms. Their content centers around political issues	Riedl et al. (2021)
Political Influencer Content	Online content (such as a video or live stream) that focuses on political issues for the purpose of entertainment, information sharing, or changing people's minds. Generally put out by individuals or small organizations that are not affiliated with a large, mainstream institution	Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022
Debate Content*	Video or live stream content put out by an online political influencer that primarily features political debates between the content creator and other people.	See Introduction
Video Essay Content*	Video or live stream content put out by an online political influencer that primarily features documentary-style overviews of political subjects.	See Introduction
Far Left	Found at the extreme left of center. Often involves a radical rejection of capitalism, usually advocating for a more socialist society. Increased economic and social equality reforms are considered necessary	Moss & O'Connor (2020)
Moderate Left	Often referred to as left of center. A liberal leaning position without the extreme views of the far left. Typically supports greater economic equality to address the rich-poor gap, but is not as staunchly anti-capitalist as the far left	Joshi (2021); Moss & O'Connor (2020)

Center	Often called moderate. The midline of the political spectrum. Supports social equality but does not support any significant shift either right or left. Seeks common ground between left and right. An emphasis on realistic and pragmatic political solutions	Joshi (2021); Moss & O'Connor (2020)
Moderate Right	Also referred to as center right, there is strong support for capitalist ideals and civil liberties	Joshi (2021); Moss & O'Connor (2020)
Far Right	Found at the extreme right of center. Favor maximally conservative and nationalist policies	Moss & O'Connor (2020)

Note: These definitions also reflect the operationalization of these terms for the purposes of this study.
* The definitions for debate content and video essay content are derived from our previous operationalization of the terms (see Introduction). They have been adapted for use with participants to ensure all participants can grasp the concepts quickly and easily.

Table 3
Chi-square Test of Independence Contingency Table for H5 Analysis

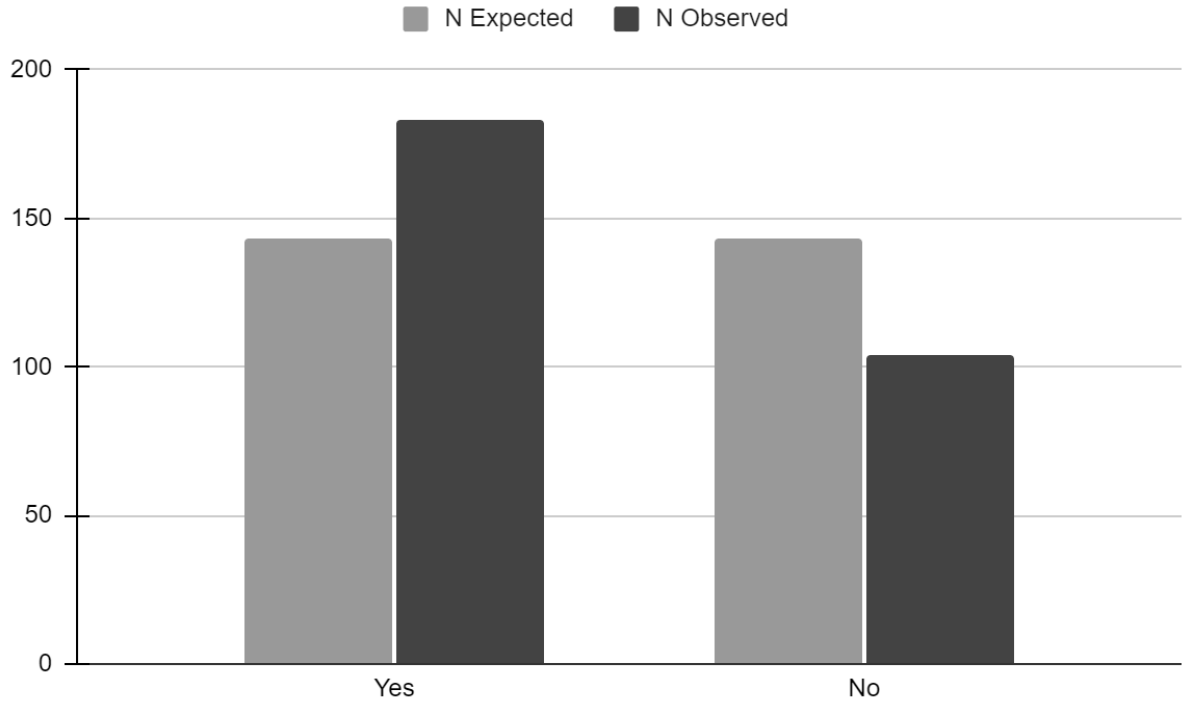
Rhetorical Mode	No Change	Small Left	Large Left	Small Right	Large Right	Row Totals
Debate Only/Mostly Debate	**21.3, 15$_a$**	**19.1, 21$_{a,b}$**	**8.2, 11$_{a.b}$**	**6.4, 5$_{a,b}$**	**2,** *5*$_b$	57
About Equal Debate and Video Essay	**28.8, 28$_a$**	**25.8, 25$_a$**	**11, 7$_a$**	**8.6, 14$_a$**	**2.7, 3$_a$**	77
Video Essay Only/Mostly Video Essay	**56.9, 64$_a$**	**51, 50$_a$**	**21.8, 23$_a$**	**17, 13$_a$**	**5.3, 2$_a$**	152
Column Totals	107	96	41	32	10	*N* = 286

Note. Boldface indicates *N expected*, roman type indicates *N observed*. Differing subscripts indicate significant differences. This analysis contained 5.3% (*n* = 16) missing data, resulting in an *N* of 286 out of a total *N* of 302. Cell totals confirm what the p-value from H5 indicates - there is an interaction between change categories and rhetorical mode categories. In particular, 50% of all participants reporting a large right change also reported watching debate only or mostly debate.

Figures

Figure 1

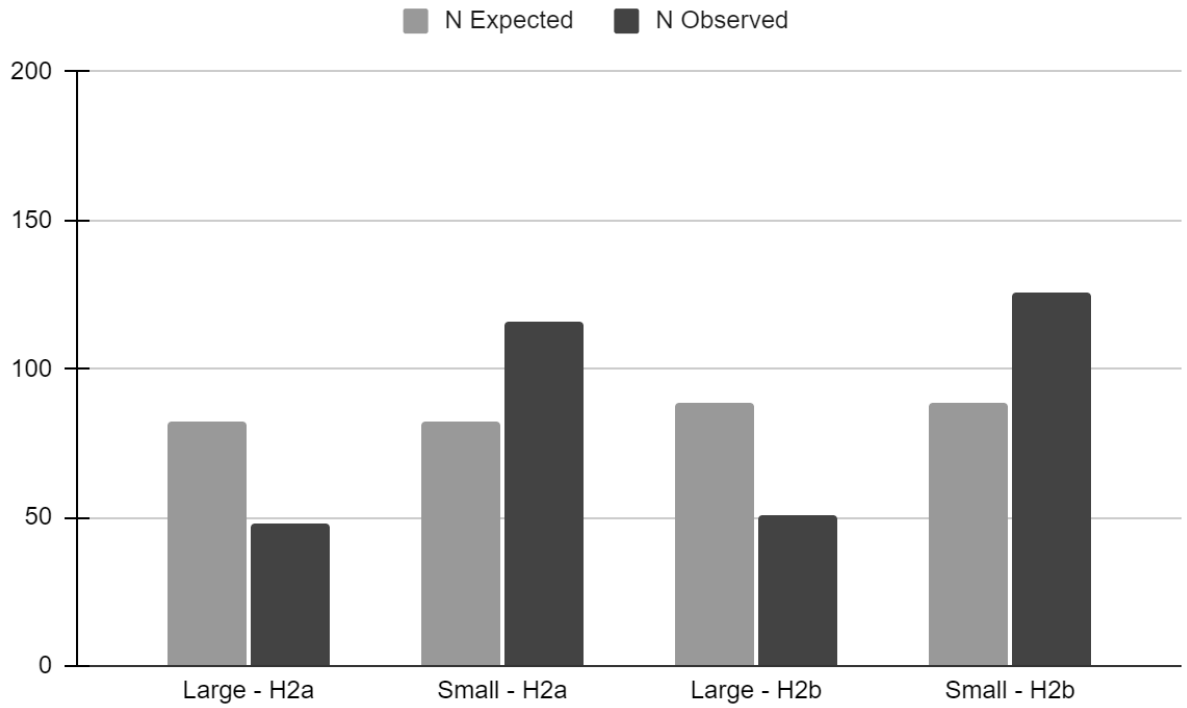
H1 Chart of Observed and Expected Values, Change vs. No Change



Note. This bar chart indicates that the observed values are very dissimilar to the expected values for each category, thus visually confirming what the p-value derived for H1 indicated - the observed values significantly differ from the expected values for participants who both reported a change or no change in political affiliation.

Figure 2

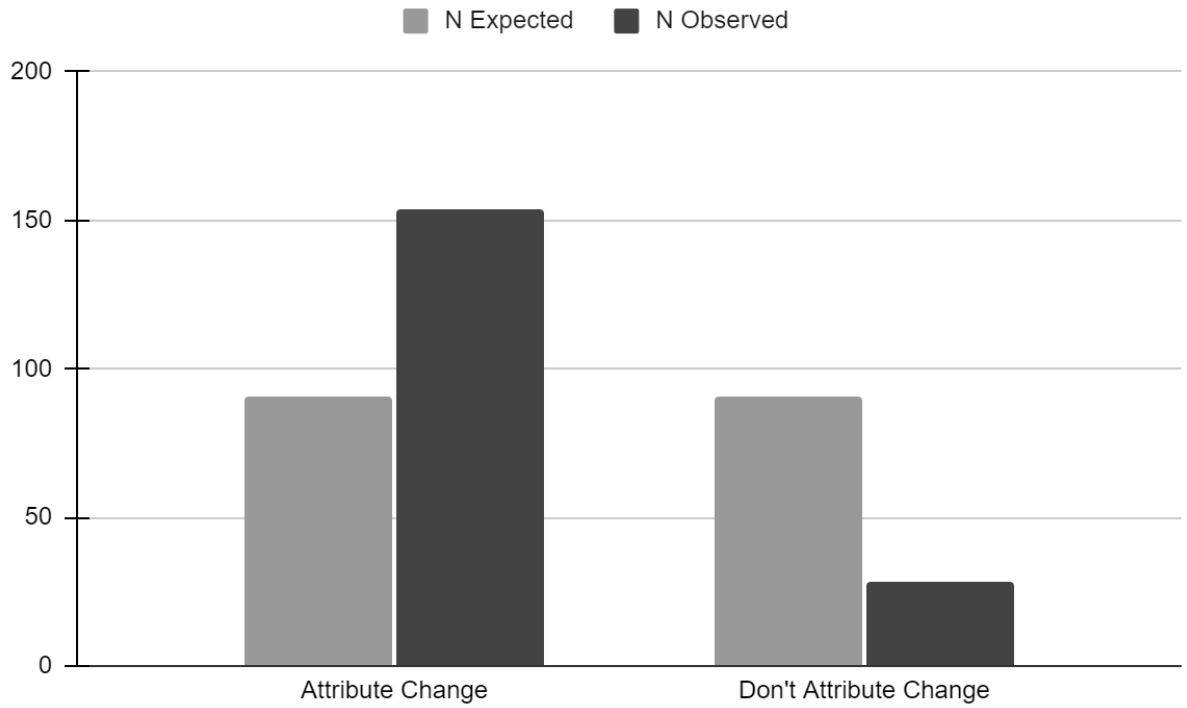
H2a and H2b Chart of Observed and Expected Values, Small Change vs. Large Change



Note. This bar chart indicates that the observed values are very dissimilar to the expected values for each category of H2a and H2b, thus visually confirming what the p-values derived for H2a and H2b indicate - the observed values significantly differ from the expected values for participants who reported a small or large change on both an objective and subjective measure.

Figure 3

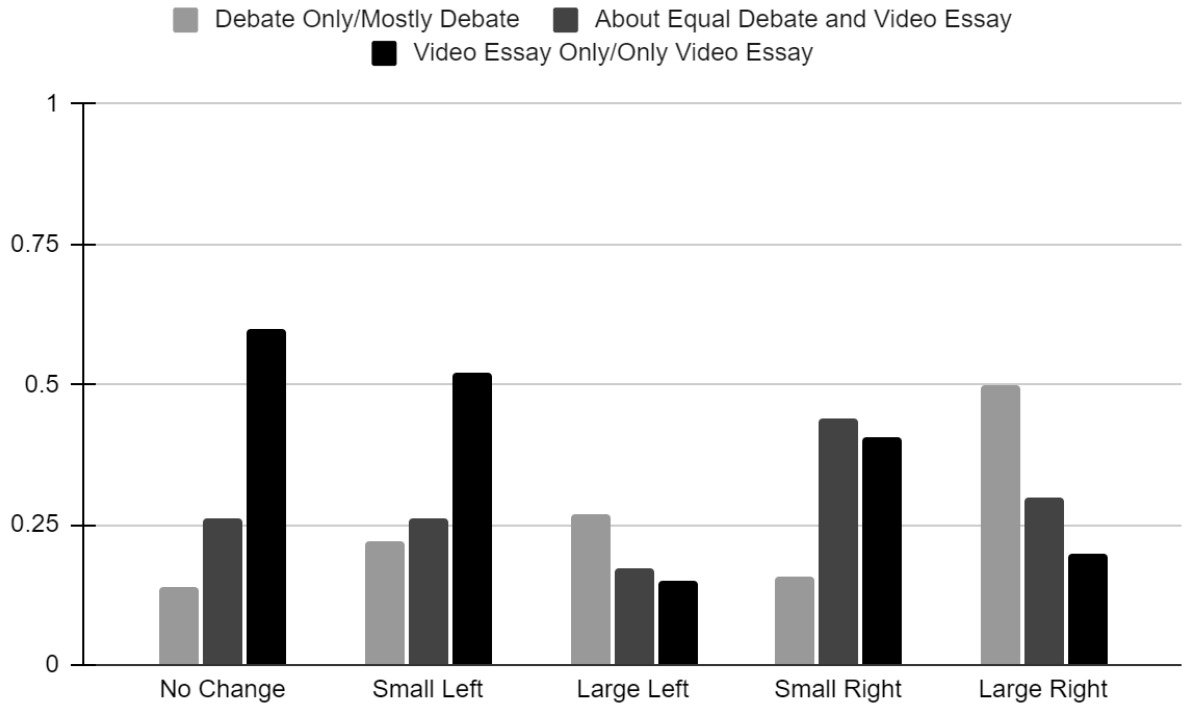
H4 Chart of Observed and Expected Values, Change Attributed vs. Not Attributed to Content



Note. This bar chart indicates that the observed values are very dissimilar to the expected values for each category, thus visually confirming what the p-value derived for H4 indicates - the observed values significantly differ from the expected values for participants who attribute or do not attribute their change in political affiliation to their consumption of OPI content.

Figure 4

Chi-square Test of Independence Bar Graph for H5 Indicating Percent of Rhetorical Mode Responses Within Change Categories



Note. This bar chart visually displays the percent of respondents within each change category who reported watching *debate only or mostly debate*, *about equal debate and video essay*, or *video essay only or mostly video essay*. While percentages within no change, small left, and small right visually suggest a significant difference, only differences in the large right category reflect a statistically significant interaction effect ($p = .003$). This is made clear by the fact that the minority of participants reported consuming *debate only or mostly debate*.

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