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Partisanship as Social Identity; Implications for the Study of Party Polarization

Abstract: Partisanship continues to divide Americans. Using data from the American National Election Study, as well as implicit attitude tests, we argue that Americans' partisan identity has become highly salient. Partisans have become more negative towards the opposing party on both explicit and implicit measures, and these biases spill over into their everyday decisions. Partisanship has become one of Americans' most salient social identities.

Introduction

The concept of group identity plays a vital role in explaining individuals' party choices (Greene 1999; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002; Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe 2015). It is well established, based on a vast literature in social psychology, that any form of group affiliation, even one based on the most trivial of shared characteristics, triggers both positive feelings for the in group, and negative evaluations of the out group (Tajfel et al. 1971; Billig and Tajfel 1973). The sense of group identity is tantamount to group polarization. In the case of societies with deep cleavages, and where the cleavages are reinforcing (rather than cross-cutting), this sense of "us against them" can have destabilizing consequences (see Lijphart 1969). Dissatisfaction with government performance frequently leads group members to demand political redress and autonomy, in some cases using violent forms of protest (Gubler and Selway 2012). Recent manifestations of this pattern include the unrest in the Russian speaking regions of Ukraine, the sectarian political conflict in Northern Ireland, and independence movements in the Basque and Catalonian regions of Spain as well as the Tamil districts of Sri Lanka.

Since group-based affect appears to be an ingrained human response, and individuals typically categorize themselves into multiple groups, an important question concerns the hierarchy of group affiliations. Which affiliations provide

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the most meaningful cues? Social identity theorists posited identity salience as the basis from which to predict the extent of inter-group polarization (see Haslam et al. 1999; Transue 2007): the more salient the affiliation, the more divergent the individual's beliefs about group members. Salience itself can depend on either dispositional factors, such as the strength of the individual's loyalty to the group, or characteristics of the information environment, such as the number of times the individual is reminded of her group ties. In the case of party affiliation, as we argue below, there are good reasons to expect identity salience since individuals acquire their group affiliation at an early stage in the life cycle and because political campaigns – the formal occasions for expressing one's partisan identity – are frequent and lengthy occurrences, at least in the American case.

We argue that partisan affect has become especially salient in American politics. Partisans' negative feelings towards members of the opposing party on a variety of measures have continued to rise throughout the 2000s. As we describe below, the heightened animus influences a wide variety of everyday behaviors, from dating, to employment decisions, to vaccinating a child. Today, partisanship may be one of Americans' most salient group affiliations.

Alternative Definitions of Party Polarization

To the extent partisanship represents a meaningful social identity, partisans should express not only positive sentiments for their own group, but also negative sentiments toward those affiliated with opposing groups (Tajfel and Turner 1979). This divergence in partisan affect (or affective polarization as it has come to be known in political science) is sufficiently strong to inculcate a sense of social distance from political opponents, thus motivating partisans to seek out and associate with like-minded others. Party affiliation becomes a litmus test for character and compatibility.

A different definition of party polarization, long favored by political scientists, is based on ideological rather than affective divergence. In this framework, since party identification is motivated by policy agendas and positions, the appropriate metric for calibrating polarization is the distance between partisans in the policy space. While there is a consensus that American party elites are polarized by this standard (Stonecash, Brewer, and Mariani 2003; Layman, Carsey, and Horowitz 2006; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2016), the extent to which the electorate has followed suit remains unclear. Some scholars argue that the mass public has polarized on the issues, citing a decline in the number of ideological moderates (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Campbell 2008; Jacobson and Carson 2015), a near doubling of the average distance between the ideological self-placement

of non-activist Democrats and Republicans between 1972 and 2004 (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008), and the strengthened consistency of voters' preferences across issues (Abramowitz 2010). Others, however, contest this description of the masses, maintaining that the median citizen remains a centrist rather than an extremist on most issues (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2008; Fiorina 2017).

The instrumental account of party affiliation is an appealing theory, especially to scholars who study representation. It provides a clear mechanism for electoral accountability; representatives whose policy decisions stray from the preferences of their constituents will be penalized at the next election (Page and Jones 1979; Fiorina 2017). But in the US, empirical evidence for the "reward-punishment" theory has always been scant (Achen and Bartels 2017). One of the earliest challenges came from the scholars who developed the concept of party identification (Campbell et al. 1960). They discovered that relatively few people reasoned about politics in ideological terms, and concluded that partisan identity was primarily affective. Parallel work, based on more unstructured, depth interviews revealed that ordinary citizens had considerable difficulty "connecting the dots" when thinking about their interests in relation to the actions of government (Lane 1962).

Citizens' political naiveté is one reason for doubting the utility of the instrumental theory of partisanship. Another is the body of work on the origins and underpinnings of partisan identity over the course of the life cycle (Converse 1969; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002; Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers 2009). Political socialization researchers discovered that children acquired a sense of party identification surprisingly early in life (e.g. Tedin 1974; Alford et al. 2011), without any "flickering awareness" (Jennings and Niemi 1974, p. 265) of party differences on the issues. Moreover, as people moved through the life cycle, with corresponding changes in economic circumstances and interests, their sense of partisanship proved relatively stable despite considerable change in their stances on the issues (Sears 1971; Niemi and Jennings 1991; Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers 2009).

Finally, the strength of the affective relative to ideological bond between voters and parties is further substantiated by research showing that affect-based or motivated reasoning trumps reasoning based on hard evidence. Despite extensive documentation to the contrary, a significant proportion of Republicans (over 40 percent) continue to believe that former President Obama is a Muslim (New York Times). More recently, large majorities of Republicans ignore the consensus judgment within the intelligence community – widely reported by the news media – and deny that the Russians interfered in the 2016 election. Partisans' tendency to discount or reject uncongenial information is well-established (Lord, Ross, and Lepper 1979; Kunda 1987). Seminal work by Lodge and others has documented the pervasive use of confirmatory bias and motivated skepticism in information processing; both heuristics allow partisans to protect their sense of

identity from short-term threats (Taber and Lodge 2006; Lodge and Taber 2013). Increased access to partisan news sources has only furthered partisans' ability to take refuge in supportive "echo chambers" (Sunstein 2017).

In short, as summarized above, there is ample evidence indicating that the psychological underpinnings of party identification in the US are more affective than ideological in nature. The more meaningful definition of party polarization, therefore, is the degree to which partisans consider their opponents a stigmatized out group. In this paper, using national survey data, we provide evidence on the extent of affective polarization in the US. We then discuss the new role of party affiliation as a meaningful cue for non-political attitudes and behaviors. In closing, we speculate over the factors that have given rise to heightened affective polarization.

Partisan Negativity Continues to Rise

The 2016 election maintained the trend of rising partisan negativity in the American electorate. From the 1980s onward, partisans have grown increasingly more hostile toward the opposing party. Figure 1 shows partisans' mean ANES feeling thermometer ratings for both their own and the opposing party between 1978 and 2016.[1] In this analysis we limit our attention to respondents in the personal interview survey mode. While both Democrats and Republicans have maintained strong and generally stable positive feelings for their preferred party (with average feeling thermometer ratings hovering around 70 for the entire period), both sets of partisans have grown dramatically more negative toward each
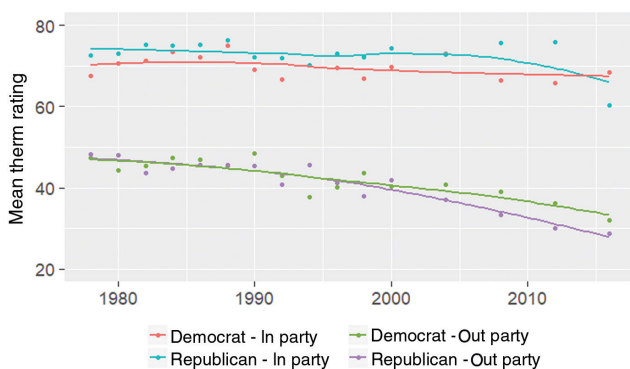

Figure 1: In Party and Out Party Feeling Thermometers.

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1 Independent leaners are treated as partisans in all analyses.

other. The out party feeling thermometer ratings in 2016 (30.5) and 2012 (31.9) are noticeably lower than those recorded in 1988 (45.54). Interestingly, the 2016 campaign – arguably the most divisive in recent history – resulted not only in increased hostility for the out party, but at least in the case of the Republicans, also in less enthusiasm for the in party. The mean Republican party thermometer rating among Republicans fell to the lowest level in the entire series.

Despite the drop in Republicans' ratings of their party, the in-group evaluations remained relatively stable between 2012 and 2016, at least in comparison to evaluations of the out group. Partisans became considerably more hostile toward the opposing party in 2012 and 2016 than even in 2008. Figure 2 shows the distribution of out party thermometer ratings between 2004 and 2016. In both 2004 and 2008 (as well as all prior years), the thermometer rating had a mode of 50, indicating that many partisans felt indifference rather than animus toward their opponents. In 2012, however, the most frequent rating of the out party was zero. This trend persisted into 2016, when the most common responses were 30, 15, and zero.

Stronger hostility for the out party is a recent, but rapidly escalating trend that began at the turn of the century. Figure 3 shows that while the percentage of partisans who rated the out party between 1 and 49 on the thermometer has increased steadily since the 1980s, the share of partisans expressing intense negativity for the out party (ratings of 0) remained quite small until 2000. Post-2000, the size of this group has increased dramatically – from 8 percent in 2000 to 17 percent in 2016. Thus, the first two decades of the 21st Century represent an acute era of polarization, in which partisans' mild dislike for their opponents has been transformed into a deeper form of animus.

The trend of intensified polarization is not limited to any single indicator of partisan affect. When we look at trait ratings of the presidential candidates (see
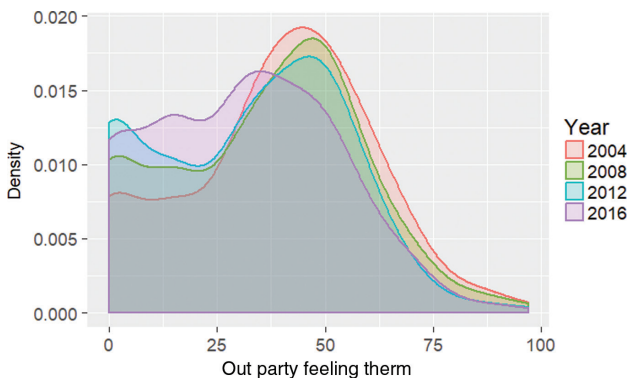

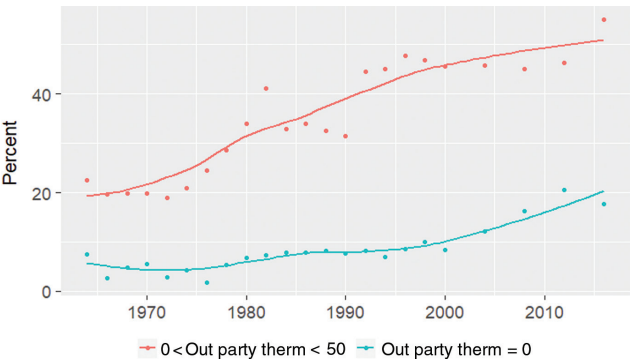**Figure 2:** Out Party Feeling Thermometers, 2004–2016.

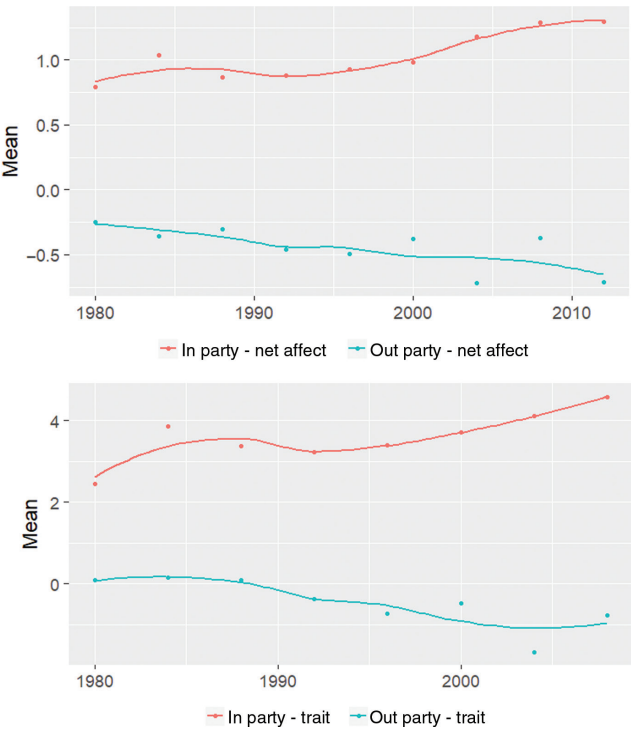**Figure 3:** Changes in Out Party Thermometers.

Figure 4: Candidate Traits and Affects Over Time.

Figure 4), there is a steady decline in the applicability of positive traits to the opposing candidate since 1988 and a corresponding increase in positivity toward the in-party candidate. The same pattern applies to the affect battery (also shown

in Figure 4). Since 1980, increasing numbers of partisans experience more negative than positive emotions when thinking about the opposing candidate, a trend that accelerates following 2000. Conversely, the in-party candidate increasingly elicits more positive than negative emotions. Thus, unlike the case of the feeling thermometers, heightened polarization over time in these trait and affect measures reflects both increased in-group favoritism and out-group hostility.

As a robustness test, we consider the extent to which financial incentives temper the expression of partisan affect. Some scholars have argued that negative evaluations of the out party may represent "top of the head" cheer leading for the home team, an expressive response that is not thoughtful or well considered (Bullock et al. 2015). In the particular case of answers to political knowledge questions that reflect well or poorly on the performance of the respondent's preferred party (e.g. the state of unemployment, or the size of the federal deficit), there is evidence that partisans' engage in wishful thinking, i.e. they underestimate the unemployment rate when their party is in power (see Bartels 2002; Gerber and Huber 2010; Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen 2012). However, when survey respondents are given a token financial incentive to answer correctly, partisans become less likely to provide misinformed responses (that favor their party) by a factor of more than fifty percent (Bullock et al. 2015; for similar evidence, see Prior and Lupia 2008; Prior, Sood, and Khanna 2015). As Bullock and his co-authors summarize their results (2015, p. 559): "Survey respondents may not think seriously about correct answers under ordinary survey conditions, but incentives may reduce partisan gaps by causing respondents to think more carefully about correct answers.... In either case, the takeaway is the same: conventional survey measures overstate partisan differences."

Do ANES survey respondents become less expressive and less prone to provide polarized evaluations when given a larger financial incentive to participate in the survey? For evidence bearing on this question, we return to the 2016 ANES which includes an experiment that assigned respondents into $10 and $20 prepaid incentive conditions. Since treatment is randomized, we can estimate the causal effects of the amount received on the standard indicators of affective polarization. Table 1 shows the results.

Table 1: ANES 2016 Payment Effects.

	Mean Polarization 10$ Payment	Mean Polarization 20$ Payment	p-Value of Difference
Feel Therm	43.76	43.09	ns
Affect	9.10	8.71	ns
Trait	9.50	9.25	ns

The results given in Table 1 show no noticeable moderation of attitudes in the $20 condition. The differences between the in and out party evaluations are reduced when the incentive to take the survey is increased, but the magnitude of the "cash effect" is trivial.[2] This pattern suggests that partisans' negative evaluations of the opposition are not merely symptoms of instinctive partisan cheer leading, but represent respondents' genuine beliefs. It is also worth noting that while the distinction between cheer leading and sincerity may be of interest to survey researchers, it is likely of no consequence to elected officials who interpret their supporters' harsh evaluations of the opposition as a signal to go on the attack when running for reelection.

The ANES data establish not only that partisans increasingly dislike their opponents, but also that the party cleavage is the most affect-laden in contemporary American society. Expressions of negative affect toward the out group are not nearly as pronounced when groups are defined on the basis of ethnicity, gender, religion, or other salient cleavages (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Muste 2014). In the ANES, feeling thermometer ratings of Muslims, atheists, gays and other marginalized groups are not nearly as negative as ratings of the opposing party (see Figure 5 for illustrative data from the 2016 ANES). The historical trend of increased negativity directed at partisan opponents may therefore be a product of the gradual diffusion of norms that temper evaluations of social
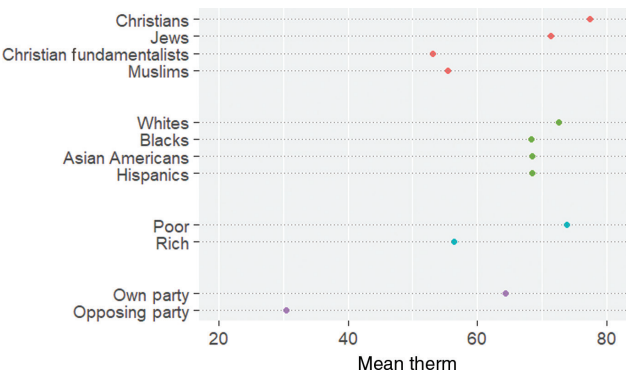

Figure 5: Feeling Thermometer Ratings of Different Groups (2016 ANES).

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2 Since the ANES experiment targeted households (addresses) rather than individual household members, there is the possibility that the effects of the treatment have been diluted in Table 1 since the respondent may not have received the cash. We attempted to more precisely specify the recipient of the payment by limiting the analysis to respondents from households with two or fewer members. The results of this analysis did not alter the pattern reported in Table 1.

groups, but that are non-applicable to groups defined on the basis of political ideology. Racism has become taboo, but it is perfectly acceptable to impute undesirable traits and behaviors to political opponents. By this account, survey data will inevitably highlight the party divide relative to other social cleavages.

Implicit Partisan Polarization

Since political party affiliation is an "unprotected" identity in the sense that it is considered appropriate to view one's opponents unfavorably, a more stringent test of affective polarization is to define affect at the level of an implicit or sub-conscious attitude. Experiments on the most fundamental aspects of the human mind, such as the ability to perceive (e.g. vision) and remember (memory) have shown not only that the human brain can operate outside conscious awareness, but also that such unintended thought and feeling may even be the dominant mode of operation (Bargh 1999). Evidence from behavior and direct measures of the brain suggest it may be useful to think about two separate systems that have evolved to support the unconscious and conscious aspects of thought. Greenwald and Banaji (1995), among others, have argued that the analysis of group attitudes and stereotypes could gain from an analysis of relatively more automatic versus reflective forms of thought and labeled the new system of interest as one that tapped implicit social cognition as distinct from explicit social cognition. Psychologists now believe that the mind's architecture precludes introspective access for the most part and have developed measures of implicit preferences and beliefs (see Banaji and Heiphetz 2010, for a review) that exist independently of consciousness. The assumption is that although explicit attitudes do in fact reflect genuine conscious preferences (which, in the case of race, have changed profoundly over the course of the past 60 years), they shed no light on less con-scious and therefore inaccessible preferences that may nevertheless influence behavior. In the area of race, there is now an extensive literature on implicit attitudes, their relationship to explicit attitudes, and their prediction of behaviors (see Wittenbrink, Judd, and Park 1997; McConnell and Leibold 2001).

Interest in implicit attitudes has led to the development of measurement methods that bypass the standard posing of questions altogether and that instead rely on the speed of responses that associate concepts (such as Democrat and Republican) and valenced attributes (such as good and bad). Based on the idea that groups automatically associated with these attributes will be responded to faster and with fewer errors, these measures focus on the error rates and time taken to respond to associations of, for instance, In Group+Good and Out

Group + Bad and the opposite concept + attribute pairs such as Out Group + Good and In Group + Bad. There are several such methods for observing implicit group prejudice, the most well-known of which is the Implicit Association Test or IAT (Greenwald, McGhee, and Schwartz 1998). Since these implicit measures are not subject to cognitive processing, they provide a more spontaneous measure of feelings toward out groups, feelings that are not masked by the intrusion of social norms. Unobtrusive measures of group prejudice such as the IAT are much harder to manipulate than explicit self-reports, producing more valid results (Asendorpf, Banse, and Mücke 2002; Boysen, Vogel, and Madon 2006).

Political scientists have recently incorporated implicit measures of partisan affect to assess the extent of party polarization (Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Theodoridis 2017). Iyengar and Westwood adapted the IAT procedure to associations of "Democrats" and "Republicans" with the standard set of positively valenced (Wonderful, Best, Superb, Excellent) and negatively valenced (Terrible, Awful, Worst, Horrible) attributes. Following Greenwald, Nosek, and Banaji (2003), Iyengar and Westwood used the "D-score" to interpret the BIAT results. The score, which can range from –2 to 2, is calculated by subtracting the mean response times for the round pairing Democrats with positive attributes from the mean response times for the round pairing Republicans with the same positive terms (for full details on the computation of the D-score, see Greenwald, Nosek, and Banaji 2003). This difference in response latency is then divided by the pooled standard deviation over both rounds of the procedure. Positive scores indicate that participants respond faster to Republican-good than to Democrat good pairings. Since people respond faster to group attribute pairs for which they have acquired ingrained or automatic associations, this pattern would indicate greater positive affect for Republicans, whereas the inverse pattern would reflect greater positive affect for Democrats. The obtained D-scores in this study broken out by Democratic, Republican, and non-partisan identifiers are presented in Figure 6.

As expected, Democrats' and Republicans' scores diverged significantly, indicating that they more rapidly associated their party than the opposing party with positive attributes. A more fine-grained analysis of the differences between weak and strong partisans (for details, see Iyengar and Westwood 2015), showed a mix of expected and unexpected results. While strong Republicans exhibited the most bias in favor of their side, it was the weak Democrats who showed the greatest in-party favoritism. Overall, the results from this study show that the survey measures of party affect summarized earlier should not be dismissed as mere "cheap talk." When cognitive processing is suppressed, as in the IAT procedure, the divergence in sentiment for the in and out party persists. Moreover, as Iyengar and Westwood go on to demonstrate, the level of implicit group polarization based on
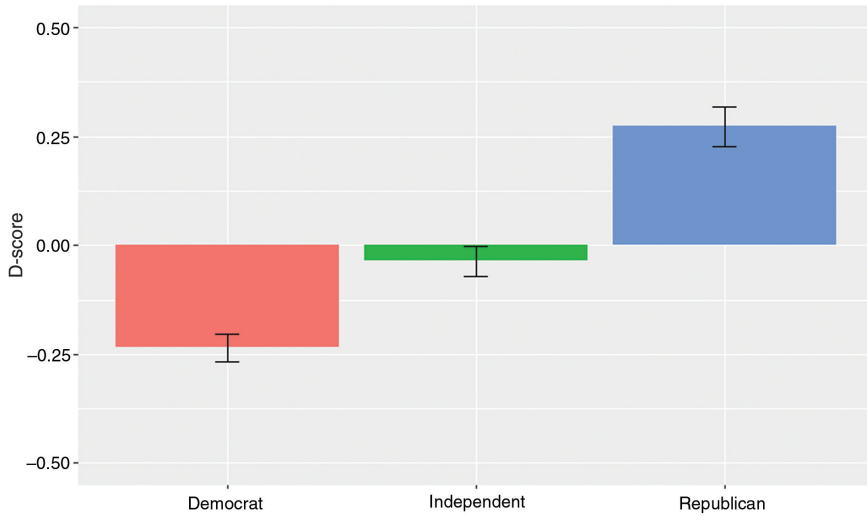
Figure 6: D-Score by Party.

party affiliation exceeds implicit polarization based on the most salient of social cleavages, namely, race. "From our perspective, the difference in the magnitude of the partisan and racial divides in implicit affect is especially telling. Racial identity is acquired at birth, and racial attitudes are deeply ingrained (see Baron and Banaji 2006). For partisanship to approach (and surpass) race, the underlying animosity must be more substantial than previously thought. The data show that negative associations of opposing partisans are faster (more automatic) than negative associations of African Americans." (p. 696).

Strikingly, the pattern of stronger polarization based on partisanship vis-a-vis salient social cleavages applies to divided and unified societies alike. In a cross-national study that included the cases of the Basque region of Spain and Belgium – both deeply fractured societies – the researchers found that the impact of party affiliation on inter-personal trust exceeded the effects of linguistic or ethnic identity (see Westwood et al. 2015). "Partyism" dominates other forms of out group prejudice.

In summary, there is a wealth of evidence at the level of attitudes – both explicit and implicit – demonstrating that Americans have become polarized on the basis of their partisan identity and associated feelings for their compatriots and opponents. The ANES time series suggests that the electorate has been highly polarized post-2000 and the evidence from implicit tests of partisan bias demonstrate that the survey data reflect genuine divergence of sentiment rather than impression management or other forms of insincere survey response.

Behavioral Evidence of Affective Polarization

The pattern of results based on attitudinal data is unequivocal, partisans increasingly harbor hostility toward their opponents and the divergence in affect is not symptomatic of superficial thinking on the part of survey respondents. Nonetheless, it is fair to raise questions over the meaningfulness of survey data given the notorious weak connections between attitudes and behaviors. In this next section, we summarize the evidence on affective polarization as manifested in real-world behavior. Attitudes and behaviors both point to heightened polarization.

The most startling evidence of affective polarization comes from research that documents the applicability of party cues to entirely nonpolitical settings. To the extent their out-group animus is genuine, partisans should take individuals' political affiliation into account when considering their trustworthiness. They should also be unwilling to enter into friendships or other meaningful relationships with political opponents. In effect, affective polarization implies that partisan identity has strengthened to the point where partisanship should act not only as a marker of political views, but also as an indicator of character and personal worth.

Using available sources of "big data" including national voter files, researchers have documented that the party cue does in fact influence the decision to enter into inter-personal relations. The level of spousal partisan agreement has increased significantly over the period marked by heightened polarization. In a longitudinal analysis spanning 1965–2015, Iyengar, Konitzer, and Tedin (2018a) find that spousal agreement moved from 73 to 82 percent, while disagreement fell from 13 to 6 percent. Since the 1965 sample of spouses had been married for decades, the baseline level of agreement is likely inflated by post-marriage convergence, i.e. one spouse moving in the direction of the other. When the researchers limit the focus to younger couples, they find a more impressive shift; among recently married couples in 1973, spousal partisan agreement registered at 54.3%. For the comparable group of recently married couples in the 2014 national voter file, spousal partisan agreement reached 73.9%. This is an increase of 36 percent in partisan agreement among couples who have had little opportunity to persuade each other. Increased spousal partisan homogeneity among couples who have been together for a relatively short period suggests a substantial strengthening of the selection mechanism underlying spousal agreement. To the extent individuals take politics into account when selecting a mate, there should be only small differences in spousal political agreement between couples who have been together for 5 or 50 years. In fact, in the analysis reported by Iyengar, Konitzer, and Tedin (2018a), the difference in partisan agreement between couples married for less than 6 years and couples married for more than two decades is only 10 percentage

points (72 vs. 82 percent). Further corroborating the selection explanation, these authors also show only weak effects of age on spousal agreement.

As we have indicated above, spousal agreement post-marriage is attributable to any number of explanations, only one of which is the use of politics as a selection criteria. On inferential grounds, therefore, evidence that derives from married couples is not the most compelling. A more fertile source of data concerns the pre-marital dating phase when individuals can reveal their interpersonal preferences. Huber and Malhotra (2017) leverage data from an online dating website where they have access to both the daters' personal profiles as well as their messaging behavior. They find that partisan matching increases the likelihood of a dyad exchanging messages by 10 percent. To put that difference in perspective, the comparable difference for couples matched on socio-economic status (using education as the indicator) is 11 percent. Thus, partisanship appears to be just as relevant as social standing in the process of selecting a romantic partner. The authors replicate this result in the context of a survey experiment where they demonstrate that after exposure to a dating profile that includes the target individual's political ideology, ideological agreement significantly enhances the participant's interest in dating the target individual.

If partisanship has become a relevant factor for entering into meaningful personal relationships, does it also enter into less emotion-laden exchanges such as casual friendships? A recent national survey by the Pew Research Center suggests that Americans are not prone to associate with opposing partisans. Almost two-thirds of Democrats (64 percent) and a clear majority of Republicans (55 percent) report that they have "just a few" or zero close friends who identify with the opposing party. Similar results appear in the experiment on dating choices (Huber and Malhotra 2017); the researchers find that ideological disagreement not only reduces interest in pursuing a romantic relationship, but also in initiating friendship with the target individual.

Another personally salient arena into which the partisan cue has intruded is decision making on matters of health care. Krupenkin (2018) shows that partisans are less likely to vaccinate their children when the opposing party holds the presidency, suggesting that partisanship influences Americans' trust in government agencies. In 2003, when George W. Bush was president, Democrats were more wary of the smallpox vaccine's safety than Republicans. However, in 2009 and 2015, during the Obama administration, Republicans were less convinced that the H1N1 and MMR vaccines were safe. These partisan differences in vaccination were significantly mediated by respondents' levels of government trust, suggesting that partisan vaccination gaps are the result of mistrust of government agencies among individuals identifying with the party out of power. Krupenkin

further demonstrates that actual rates of vaccination reflect partisan differences; between 2001 and 2008, the granting of personal belief exemptions to childhood vaccinations grew most quickly in Democratic school districts, while after 2008, the growth was concentrated in more Republican school districts.

Partisan biases also appear in the behavior of medical practitioners. Hersh and Goldenberg (2016) find that Republican and Democratic physicians advise patients differently on health issues with clear political ramifications (e.g. abortion), but behave uniformly on apolitical health topics. Finally, on the question of willingness to enroll in subsidized health insurance, Lerman, Sadin, and Trachtman (2017) shows that Republicans were substantially less willing than Democrats to enroll in health insurance exchanges set up by the Affordable Care Act.

Party Cues and Economic Behavior

Thus far, we have summarized evidence showing that partisanship spills over into social interactions and health-related choices. But can partisanship also impact consumer choice such as the decision to purchase a product? There are at least two possible mechanisms by which party cues influence consumer behavior. The first, directly tied to polarization, leads consumers to boycott or avoid products and brands they associate with the opposition party. In the aftermath of the high school massacre in Florida, many companies announced that they were ending long-standing benefits provided to members of the National Rifle Association. These companies assumed that tacit endorsements of controversial political groups can lead to consumer backlash. As outlined below, there is some evidence to suggest that in the current era, consumers do favor companies, products or brands they associate with their own party.

The second possibility is that partisanship impacts consumer behavior through economic expectations and consumer confidence. In the aftermath of an election, supporters of the victorious party may feel euphoric about the state of the economy, now that their party controls government, and this sense of generalized optimism may motivate purchasing behavior. McConnell et al. (2018) conducted a field experiment in which they offered individuals the opportunity to buy a heavily discounted gift card. They assigned some prospective buyers to conditions featuring a subtle partisan signal to the effect that the seller is either a co-partisan or opposing partisan. Although they detected no evidence of discrimination against the out-party seller, buyers offered nearly twice the price for the card from the co-partisan seller. Panagopoulos et al. (2016), on the other hand, found that approximately 20 percent of individuals were unwilling to accept a

gift card from a company described as having made financial contributions to the opposing party.

In addition to product markets, partisanship may distort labor markets. Using an audit study, Gift and Gift (2015) conducted a field experiment where they mailed resumes providing information about a job candidate's partisanship in a heavily Democratic and heavily Republican area. In the predominantly Democratic county, applicants with a Democratic affiliation were 2.4 percentage points more likely to receive a callback than applicants with a Republican connection. The corresponding bias in favor of co-partisans was 5.6 percentage points in the Republican area. On the other side of the labor market, McConnell et al. (2018) examine how partisan cues impact employee behavior. The researchers hired workers to complete an online editing task and subtly conveyed the partisan leanings of the employer. Unlike Gift and Gift (2015), they find that partisan bias takes the form of in-group favoritism rather than out-group prejudice. The only significant results obtained in comparisons between the co-partisan condition and the no information control group. People accepted lower wages (by a factor of 6 percent) from a co-partisan employer.

Partisans also evaluate economic conditions differently depending on the party of the president. When the president is an out-partisan, partisans are more likely to say that the economy is doing poorly, while the opposite is true when the president is a co-partisan. As we have already noted, some scholars (Bullock et al. 2015; Prior, Sood, and Khanna 2015) have suggested that such misperceptions are cheap talk. However, Krupenkin, Hill, and Rothschild (2018) find that partisans do modify their purchasing behavior when party control of the presidency switches. While partisans may engage in wishful thinking when answering survey questions, their purchasing behavior is more likely to represent firm beliefs. If partisans genuinely believe that economic conditions are faltering under an out-party president, they should avoid making risky financial decisions, such as buying a car, house, or investing in the stock market. Using Bing searches[3] referencing automobile, house, and stock purchases as indicators of consumer interest, the authors find that Democrats were significantly less likely to utilize these search terms after Trump was elected, while Republicans showed no change. The authors replicated the browsing behavior results through an analysis of DMV registration data, which showed that car registration rates increased among residents of predominantly Republican zip codes after Trump was elected.

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3 Search data is a good predictor of purchasing behavior across a wide variety of both durable and consumer goods (Kholodilin, Podstawski, and Siliverstovs 2010; Choi and Varian 2012; Wu and Brynjolfsson 2015).

These results suggest that partisan bias in perceptions of the economy carry over into the realm of consumer activity, especially for supporters of the losing party.

The work on marriage, dating, health-related and consumer behavior is representative of a broader literature documenting the applicability of partisan cues to non-political settings (for a review of this literature, see Iyengar et al. 2018b). Other instances of partisan bias include evaluations of high school students' academic credentials (Iyengar and Westwood 2015) and assessments of physical attractiveness (Nicholson et al. 2016), Overall, it appears that the party cue is now all-encompassing and just as likely to influence nonpolitical as political choices.

Conclusion

The intensification of partisan sentiment over the past three decades cries out for explanation. Polarization is likely the consequence of a wide variety of factors, including changes in the media environment, increased social homophily, and partisan sorting. In addition to independently inducing negative sentiment, each of these factors reinforce the others, further contributing to the rise of affective polarization.

While the period in question encompasses multiple societal changes in the US – greater ethnic and religious diversity, a declining manufacturing sector, and heightened income inequality, for example – it was also a time of seismic changes in the media environment. Twenty four hour cable news channels emerged as competitors to network news. The availability of cable television in the 1970s provided partisans their first real opportunity to obtain news from like-minded sources (Fox News first for Republicans, and MSNBC later for Democrats). The development of the Internet provided a much wider range of media choices, which greatly facilitated partisans' ability to obtain political information and commentary consistent with their leanings. In a break with the dominant paradigm of non-partisan journalism, a growing number of outlets, motivated in part by the commercial success of the Fox News network, offered reporting in varying guises of partisan commentary. The political blogosphere, with hundreds of players providing news and analysis – often vitriolic – developed rapidly as a partisan platform, with very little cross-party exposure (Adamic and Glance 2005; Lawrence, Sides, and Farrell 2010). The creation of vast online social networks permitted extensive recirculation of news reports, even to those not particularly motivated to seek out news.

While there are good reasons to believe that the new media environment has contributed to the growth in partisan animus, by facilitating access to partisan

news and commentary, it is possible that enhanced consumer choice also sets in motion processes that weaken polarization. As media platforms have multiplied, consumers gain access not only to more news providers, but also entertainment providers. The availability of entertainment programming on demand enables some to drop out of the political arena entirely (Prior 2007). Thus, the net impact of the increased empowerment of consumers is unclear.

In fact, despite the myriad changes in the media environment, the evidence to date demonstrating that news consumption exacerbates polarization is less than unequivocal. While experimental studies of online browsing behavior confirm the tendency of partisans to self-select into distinct audiences (see Iyengar and Hahn 2009), more generalizable real-world studies find few traces of audience segregation. In their pioneering analysis of Americans' web browsing behavior (conducted in 2008), Gentzkow and Shapiro (2011) found that online audiences were only slightly more segregated than audiences for network or cable news. They concluded that "Internet news consumers with homogeneous news diets are rare. These findings may mitigate concerns…. that the Internet will increase ideological polarization and threaten democracy" (p. 1831). More recent work, however, also using large-scale tracking of online browsing behavior, suggests that news audiences are becoming more segregated. A 2013 study showed that although most people relied on ideologically diverse online sources such as web aggregators (Flaxman, Goel, and Rao 2016), audience segregation tended to increase among individuals who used search engines to locate news stories and among social media users who encountered links in their news feed. Both these pathways to news exposure feature personalized algorithms, making it more likely that individuals encounter information consistent with their political loyalties. In the case of Facebook, now a major source of news, most individuals are embedded in politically homogeneous networks, increasing the likelihood of exposure to polarizing messages.

To the extent partisans do gravitate to like-minded news providers, the diffusion of high-speed Internet has facilitated this behavior. In those parts of the country where broadband is more available, traffic to partisan news sites is greater (Lelkes, Sood, and Iyengar 2017). Moreover, Lelkes et al. go on to show that broadband diffusion has strengthened partisan affect. Moving from a county with the fewest number of broadband providers to a county with the highest number increased affective polarization by roughly 0.07 (an effect roughly half as large as the effect of partisans' political interest).

A different potential cause of strengthened polarization is social homophily. We have described studies documenting strengthened processes of socialization by which families come to agree on their partisan loyalties. Family agreement creates an inter-personal echo chamber that facilitates polarization.

When family members identify with the same party, they also express more extreme positions on the issues and harbor hostile views toward their opponents. In the case of a 2015 national survey of married couples, respondents evaluated the presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump (using the ANES 100 point feeling thermometer). Among spouses who agreed on their party identification, the average difference between the in-party and out-party candidate evaluation was 59 points (70 vs. 11 degrees on the thermometer). Among the few pairs consisting of spouses with divergent loyalties (Democrat-Republican pairings), this margin of difference fell by more than 30 degrees. Partisan agreement within the family strengthens polarization (see Iyengar, Konitzer, and Tedin 2018a).

Given the importance of family socialization to the development of partisan attitudes, it appears that the rate at which any given society will undergo polarization is conditional on the extent to which partisans grow up in homogeneous environments. Recent simulations by Klofstad, McDermott, and Hatemi (2013) suggest that spousal agreement rapidly induces ideological polarization, reaching a stable equilibrium by the 11th generation, but with most of the increased polarization occurring as early as the fifth generation (Klofstad, McDermott, and Hatemi 2013, pp. 530–531). We would similarly expect generations to move increasingly apart on their feelings toward the opposing party to the extent family members share these sentiments.

Yet another explanation for the increased level of inter-party animus in the American context, one favored by scholars of ideological polarization, is the phenomenon of "sorting" or the increased confluence of voters' partisan, ideological, and policy preferences (see Levendusky 2010; Mason 2015; Fiorina 2017). Over the same period marked by heightened partisan affect, a number of social and economic cleavages including ethnicity, urban-rural residence, gender, and religion have all come into alignment with the party divide. This process is thought to have contributed to polarization by reinforcing individuals' partisan identities. However, in one of the few efforts to estimate the impact of sorting on partisan affect, Lelkes (2018) finds that changes over time in affective polarization have occurred at the same rate among voters who are more or less ideologically sorted.

In closing, affective polarization has any number of consequences, most deleterious, on the body politic. Partisans' disdain for their opponents sends a clear signal to elected officials that compromise and realpolitik will not be respected. Gridlock and inaction have become normal legislative occurrences. Policies are enacted only when one party imposes its will on the other, with the result that minority parties view enacted policies as illegitimate. It is no accident that Republicans have made repeal of the Affordable Care Act their overriding political priority.

At the level of electoral politics, heightened polarization has made it almost impossible for partisans to abandon their party's candidates, no matter their limitations. In contrast, the Access Hollywood tape would surely have ended the candidacy of any presidential candidate in any election cycle from the 1980s or 1990s. Yet in Alabama, in 2017, evidence of inappropriate relations with under-age women hardly caused concern among Republican voters, a mere seven percent of whom defected. In the present era, one has to wonder how severe the shortfall from conventional norms must be before electoral support evaporates. Partisans have become so committed to their candidates that the standard finding of public opinion research in the pre-polarization era – voter ignorance of current events – has had to be updated. Today, we observe a more insidious form of ignorance in the form of partisans' willingness to believe in misleading appeals and "alternative facts." At some point, this breakdown in common knowledge can only lead to a political crisis.

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