

## The Strengthening of Partisan Affect

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*Partisanship continues to divide Americans. Using data from the American National Election Studies (ANES), we find that partisans not only feel more negatively about the opposing party, but also that this negativity has become more consistent and has a greater impact on their political participation. We find that while partisan animus began to rise in the 1980s, it has grown dramatically over the past two decades. As partisan affect has intensified, it is also more structured; ingroup favoritism is increasingly associated with outgroup animus. Finally, hostility toward the opposing party has eclipsed positive affect for ones' own party as a motive for political participation.*

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America is a deeply divided society. Elected leaders of the two major parties have gradually moved to the ideological extremes. Ideologically polarized elites have intentionally engineered legislative gridlock; laws are enacted only when one party imposes its will on the other. At the level of the electorate, signs of ideological polarization are more nuanced. While partisans have become more ideologically “sorted,” that is, their partisan and ideological leanings are now consistent (Levendusky, 2009), their positions on the issues remain generally centrist (Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope, 2008; for an alternative view, see Abramowitz, 2010) indicating that mass polarization has not kept pace with elite polarization (Sood & Iyengar, 2014).

Ideology is one standard for assessing party polarization. Another is the extent to which partisans treat each other as a stigmatized outgroup (Tajfel, 1970; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). By this standard, there is compelling evidence that voters have become more polarized. Beginning in the mid-1980s, Democrats and Republicans increasingly dislike candidates of the out-party and also hold negative stereotypes of opposing partisans (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012). Affective polarization among ordinary citizens has reached the point where party affiliation is now a litmus test for interpersonal relations. People distance themselves from and are less trusting of partisan opponents. Today, outgroup prejudice based on party identity exceeds the comparable bias based on race, religion, and other significant social cleavages (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015).

The intensification in partisan sentiment over the past three decades has been attributed to a variety of factors. The period in question (1980–today) coincides with three major changes in American society and politics. First, the two major political parties differ not only in their issue platforms, but also on the basis of the constituencies they represent. Democrats are increasingly the party of women,

non-Whites, professionals, and residents of urban areas, while Republican voters are disproportionately older White men, evangelical Christians, and residents of rural areas. The result is that today, differences in-party affiliation go hand in glove with differences in world view and individuals' sense of social and cultural identity (Mason, 2015).

Second, as a direct consequence of party sorting, family and social networks have become more politically homogeneous. People prefer to associate with like-minded others while distancing themselves from and distrusting partisan opponents (Huber & Malhotra, 2017; Westwood et al., 2017). Finally, the revolution in information technology has empowered consumers to encounter news on their own terms. The migration of news organizations to the Internet, the growth of the political blogosphere, and the creation of vast online social networks have greatly facilitated access to information and commentary that fan the flames of partisan discord. Several scholars thus single out the technologically enhanced media environment and partisans' ability to encounter "friendly" information providers as an especially influential agent of polarization (see, for instance, Sunstein, 2017).

While a number of scholars have begun to investigate the question of causation, there has been little attention given to the attitudinal and behavioral consequences of heightened partisan affect. That is our objective. We begin by demonstrating that in the aftermath of the divisive presidential election of 2016, partisans' ill will toward their opponents shows no sign of weakening. If anything, the partisan divide is stronger today than ever before. Second, we turn to an analysis of partisan affect as a constrained belief system. Using longitudinal data from the American National Election Studies (ANES), we show that partisans are not only hostile to each other, but they also seek to maintain psychological balance in their evaluations of ingroup and outgroup targets. To dislike your opponent implies liking for your fellow partisans. This increased consistency or constraint across the in- and outgroup evaluations is a recent outcome, one that we attribute to the heightened salience of partisan identity and party cues in the aftermath of polarization.

Finally, again using the ANES time series, we show that polarization has altered the motivational underpinnings of political behavior in the United States. Prior to the era of polarization, ingroup favoritism, that is, partisans' enthusiasm for their party or candidate, was the driving force behind political participation. More recently, however, it is hostility toward the out-party that makes people more inclined to participate. In closing, we discuss the implications of affective polarization for the study of identity-based politics.

## Research Design and Methods

We track ANES national survey data over the past 30 years to document trends in partisan affect. The ANES represents the longest-running representative sample survey of Americans' political attitudes with a vast battery of questions tapping party identification and partisan attitudes. In recent years, the ANES has relied on a dual mode design, with both face-to-face interviews and self-administered online questionnaires. In 2016, the total sample included 4,271 individuals, 1,181 of whom were interviewed. As is typical with ANES surveys, the 2016 respondents completed a preelection survey in the weeks leading up to Election Day, as well as a postelection survey administered between November 9, 2016 and January 9, 2017. The response rate (AAPOR RR1) was 50% for the face-to-face mode and 44% for the Internet mode.

We focus on three related indicators of partisan affect—feeling thermometers targeting the two major parties and their presidential candidates, trait ratings of the presidential candidates, and the degree to which each of the candidates elicited positive and negative emotional responses. These indicators date back to the 1970s (in the case of the feeling thermometers) and the early 1980s in the case of the affect and trait batteries. Using the 2016 study for purposes of illustration, respondents were presented with a "feeling thermometer" to indicate how favorably or unfavorably they felt toward the Democratic Party, the Republican Party, Donald Trump, and Hillary Clinton. They also indicated how

well (on a scale ranging from “extremely well” to “not well at all”) the terms “provides strong leadership,” “really cares about people like you,” “knowledgeable,” “speaks his/her mind,” and “even tempered” described Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. We rescaled each rating to range from  $-2$  (not well at all) to 2 (extremely well) and computed the average trait rating for each candidate.

As our third indicator of partisan affect, we utilize a battery of questions asking respondents to report on their emotional responses to the presidential candidates. Respondents indicated (yes/no) whether they experienced anger, pride, hope, and disgust when thinking about the candidates in question. We scored responses of “no” as 0 and “yes” as 1, then subtracted the negative affect ratings from the positive ratings to measure the average “net” affect elicited by each candidate.<sup>1</sup>

Our analysis of affective polarization is based on the standard ANES 7-point measure of party identification. Following conventional practice, we classify independent “leaners” as partisans. In all the ensuing analyses, we exclude independents and those identifying with minor parties. For each indicator of partisan affect, we present the in-party evaluations (Democrats’ evaluation of the Democratic party/candidate and Republicans’ evaluation of the Republican party/candidate) and the corresponding out-party evaluation (e.g., Republicans’ evaluation of Democrats).

### Affective Polarization: The Evidence

The 2016 election failed to stem the rising tide of 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 1988 and 2016.

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 other. The out-party feeling-thermometer ratings in 2016 (25.99) and 2012 (27.31) 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 Democrats, also in less enthusiasm for the in-party. The mean Democratic party thermometer rating among Democrats fell to the lowest level in the entire series

Despite the drop in Democrats’ ratings of their party, the ingroup evaluations remained relatively stable between 2012 and 2016, at least in comparison to evaluations of the outgroup. 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. Since 2012, however, the most frequent rating of the out-party is the minimum score possible (i.e., zero), indicating a dramatic shift in the overall distribution of responses. This trend persisted into 2016, when even more partisans rated the out-party at 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% in 2000 to 21% in 2016. Thus, the first two decades of the twenty-first century represent an acute era of polarization, in which partisans’ mild dislike for their opponents has been transformed into a deeper form of animus.

<sup>1</sup> ANES changed the format of the affect items in 2016 to a 5-point scale; respondents were asked to indicate how frequently a candidate made them feel a particular emotion ranging from “never” to “always.” To preserve the comparability of the time series, we exclude the 2016 data from our analysis of the affect items.

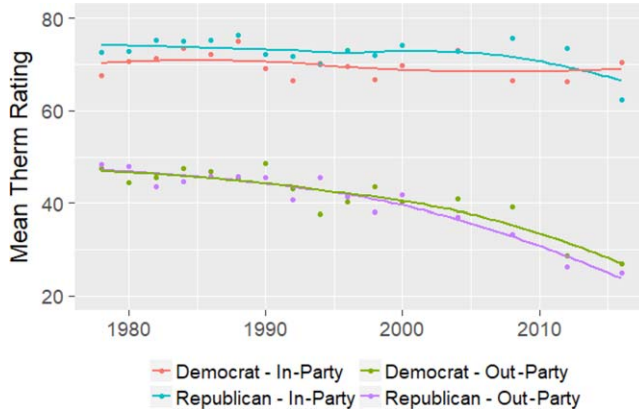


Figure 1. In-party and out-party feeling thermometers. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

The pattern of increased negativity reappears in respondents' feelings toward presidential candidates. Until about 2000, partisans reported only a mild dislike of the opposing party's nominee (feeling-thermometer scores of around 40). However, beginning in 2004, partisans expressed noticeably colder feelings toward the out-party candidate, with thermometer scores dropping to around 15 in 2016. As in the case of the party thermometers, there was little change in partisans' feelings toward their own party nominee. However, as noted above, the nomination of two especially controversial and polarizing candidates in 2016 resulted in a slight drop in in-party sentiment in 2016; the mean in-party thermometer rating in 2016 dropped to its lowest level for the entire series. Overall, however, the candidate thermometers provide further evidence of increased affective polarization.

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 5), 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

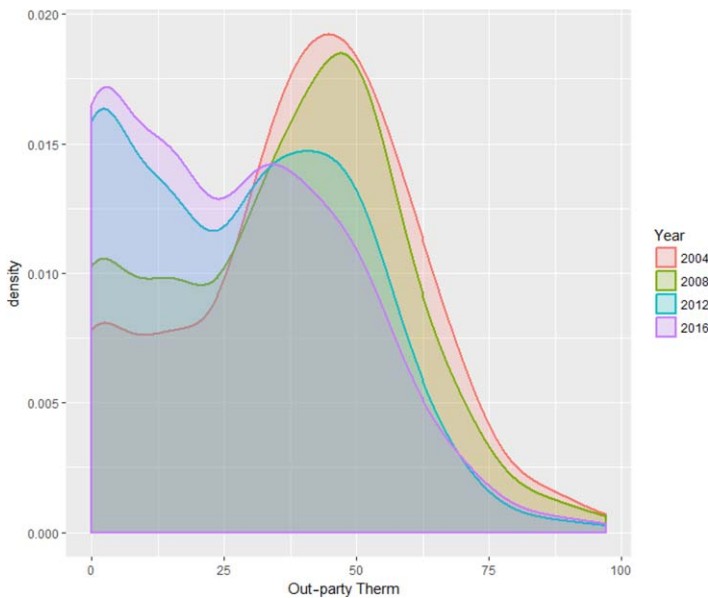


Figure 2. Out-party feeling thermometers, 2004–16. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

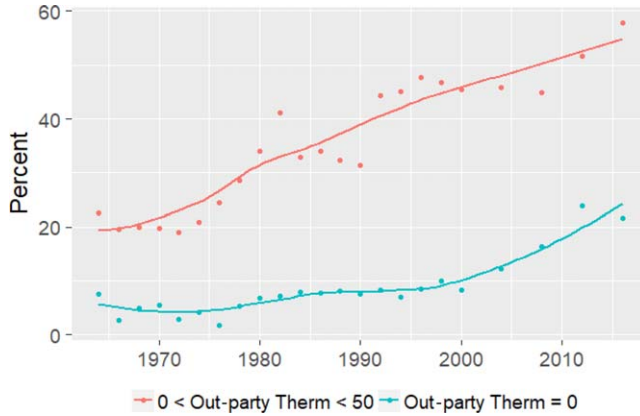


Figure 3. Changes in out-party thermometers. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Figure 5). 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 the trait and affect measures is due to both increased ingroup favoritism and outgroup hostility.

Taken together, the party and candidate thermometers and the trait and affect ratings all point to increased affective polarization. The thermometer results show that polarization has intensified primarily because of increased hostility toward the out-party, while the trait and affect measures suggest a more symmetric process involving increases in both in- and outgroup bias. The changes appear substantial for the thermometers, more modest in the trait and affect ratings. At least in the case of the affect questions, there are good reasons for expecting less one-sided evaluations. As pointed out by the scholars who developed the affect battery (Abelson, Kinder, Peters, & Fiske, 1982), respondents are asked to consider any actions by the target candidates over an undefined time span. Since most presidential candidates have been in the spotlight for decades, it is not difficult for partisans to recall an instance in which their favored candidate did or said something they disliked. The affect battery is, therefore, a particularly stringent indicator of affective polarization.

In addition to examining multiple indicators of affect, we consider the stability of the observed pattern across modes of survey administration. It is well documented that survey mode can alter the

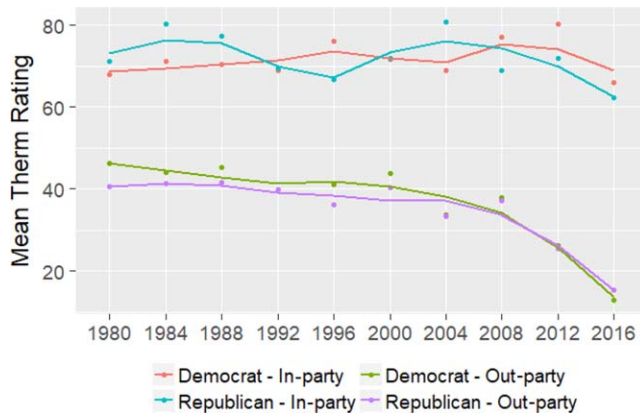


Figure 4. Candidate feeling thermometers. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

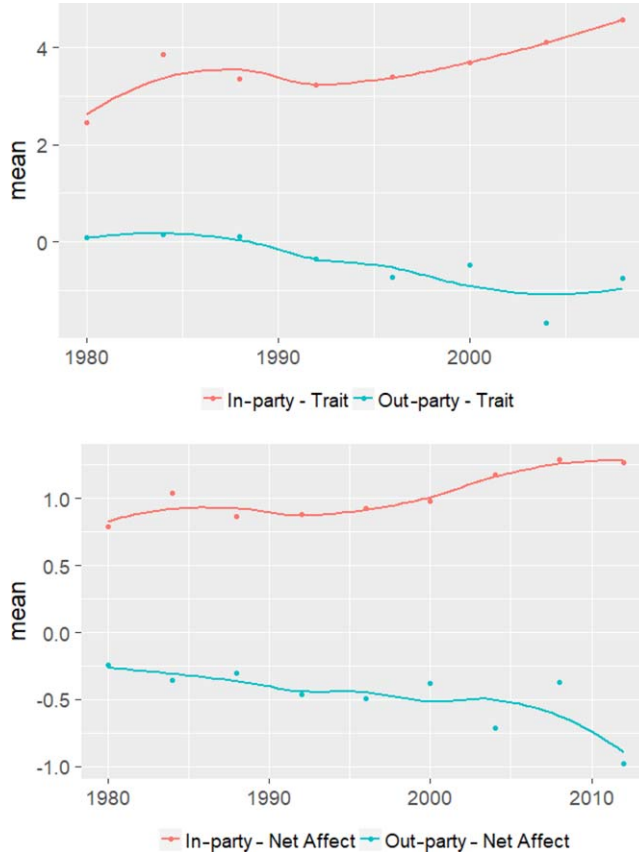


Figure 5. Candidate traits and affects over time. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

distribution of responses (Kreuter, Presser, & Tourangeau, 2008; Revilla & Saris, 2013; Villar & Fitzgerald, 2017). In the context of the two modes employed by ANES—face-to-face interviews and self-completed online questionnaires—respondents may be less inclined to offer harsh evaluations of individuals or groups in the presence of an interviewer, but less constrained by social and cultural norms that temper the expression of extreme views in the anonymous setting of an online survey. We compare the extent of affective polarization in the 2016 ANES across the two survey modes using the net thermometer, trait and affect scores, that is, in each case, the in-party rating minus the out-party rating. As shown in Table 1, there is significantly heightened polarization in the more anonymous setting of the online survey. The thermometer ratings, on average, diverge by an additional 10 points in the online condition. The tendency for in-person interviews to elicit less hostile evaluations of the opposing party holds for all three indicators, but the mode effect is most pronounced in the case of the feeling thermometers. The mode effects are significant, but the underlying phenomenon is by no means a survey artifact; the extent of affective polarization remains considerable in the face-to-face interviews.

Table 1. ANES 2016 Interview Mode Effects

	Mean Polarization (face to face)	Mean Polarization (online)	<i>p</i> -value of Difference
Feel Therm	33.90	43.27	<0.001
Affect	2.22	2.55	<0.001
Trait	7.77	8.96	<0.001

Overall, the ANES data show quite clearly that the increased level of affective polarization among partisans is consistent across multiple survey indicators of partisan affect. The trend appears in both face-to-face and online interviews, although it is strengthened in the latter mode.

### **Partisan Affect as a Constrained Belief System**

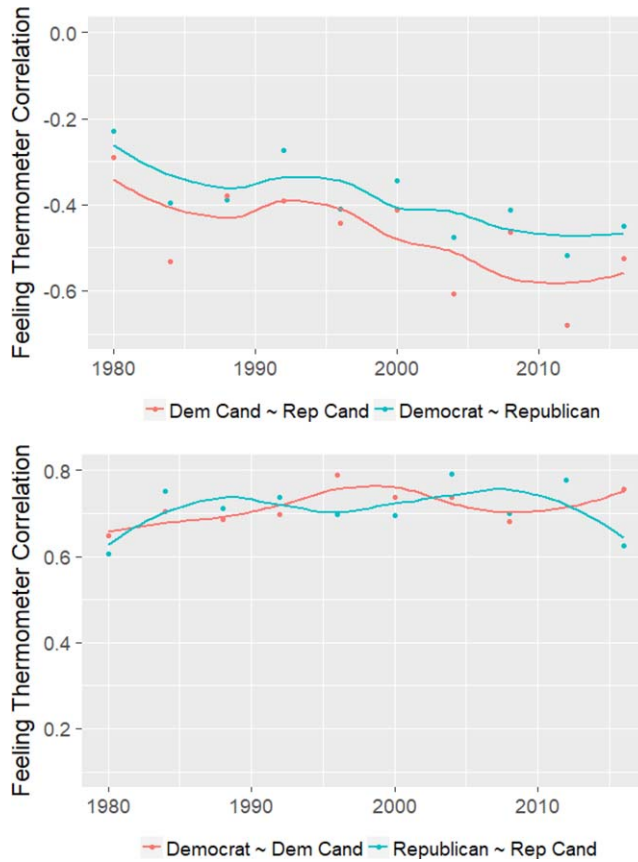
Having documented that partisans direct hostile sentiment at their opponents, we turn to consider the extent to which the different indicators of partisan affect form a structured or integrated “belief system.” One of the defining features of American public opinion is the lack of consistency or constraint across subject matter or topical domains (Converse, 1964). Multiple studies document that Americans display remarkable inconsistency across political issues when asked to position themselves along a liberal-conservative scale (Converse, 1964; Judd & Milburn, 1980; Kinder, 1998; Moskowitz & Jenkins, 2004). Contrary to the stipulations of dissonance and balance theory (Abelson et al., 1968; Festinger, 1962), individuals are content to express inconsistent preferences on crime, national defense, immigration, and social welfare issues. This result, coupled with longitudinal data showing that individuals changed positions on the issues haphazardly over time, led to the introduction of the term “nonattitudes” into the lexicon of public opinion research (Converse, 1970). Converse’s insight was that Americans’ views about politics were superficial and not rooted in ideological principles or a set of values.

Does this same “top of the head” (Zaller & Feldman, 1992), unconstrained characterization apply to polarized evaluations of the parties and candidates? In an affective sense, the term “constraint” implies divergence across evaluations of the in- and outgroup. Social identity theory (Hogg & Hardie, 1992; Tajfel, 1970; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) holds that group members should display ingroup favoritism coupled with outgroup animosity. Yet, as we have already noted, partisans’ feelings toward the out-party in the 1980s and 1990s were not especially negative suggesting only modest divergence between in- and outgroup evaluations during this period.

In one of the first tests of consistency in partisan affect, Abelson and his colleagues (1982)—using data collected in 1979—discovered significant inconsistencies in candidate evaluations. As already noted, these researchers were the first to investigate the pattern of correlations between self-reported feelings of positive and negative emotions toward politicians. Their results showed an absence of consistency in that feelings toward politicians typically included a mix of positive and negative emotions. People surveyed in 1979 indicated, for instance, that Senator Ted Kennedy made them feel both happy and angry. After subjecting the emotion items to a factor analysis and extracting two factors (with oblique rotation) that corresponded to positive and negative emotions, the researchers obtained a median correlation of  $-.26$  between the two factors. As expected, the consistency in the candidate evaluations strengthened among strong partisans, with the median correlation rising to  $-.36$ .

The authors carried out a parallel analysis of trait ratings, applied to the same set of candidates. In general, respondents who attributed positive traits to particular candidates also believed that negative traits did not apply, indicating greater attitude consistency in this domain. The median correlation between the positive and negative trait attributions was  $-.50$ , nearly twice the same correlation for the emotion items. The authors attributed the divergence to the more cognitive or perceptual nature of the trait measures and that they were directed at the candidate (rather than the self) as the attitude object, both of which tend to encourage belief and attitude consistency. On the basis of their evidence, Abelson et al. (1982) concluded that “For the most part, feeling good things about a political leader does not imply the absence of bad feelings. Somehow there is a weakness of consistency pressures to bring these two polarities into natural opposition with each other” (p. 623).

Using the Abelson et al. (1982) analysis as our template, we assess the extent of partisan divergence in positive and negative ratings of both the parties and the candidates. Our general expectation is that strengthened polarization is associated with greater coherence in the party and candidate evaluations. We anticipate increasingly strong negative correlations between evaluations of the two parties and candidates.



**Figure 6.** Feeling-thermometer correlations. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

Simultaneously, we also expect stronger positive correlations between the different measures of intra-party support. Given the greater extremity of the out-party evaluations in recent years, we also assess the degree to which there is differential constraint across ratings of the ingroup and outgroup.

To test these expectations, we examine the level of consistency over time both within and between the three indicators of partisan affect introduced earlier—feeling thermometers, candidate traits, and candidate affects. We begin by considering the feeling thermometers.

As shown in Figure 6, both the candidate and party feeling thermometers have grown more consistent over the past three decades. In 1980, the opposing party thermometers correlated at only about  $-0.22$ , while by 2016 the correlation had more than doubled to  $-0.58$ . The correlation between the opposing candidate thermometers followed the identical trajectory, increasing from  $-0.30$  in 1980 to  $-0.51$  in 2016. While the intraparty correlations between the party and candidate thermometers (shown in the bottom panel of Figure 6) also increased during this time period, the change was more modest, moving from about 0.6 to 0.75 in the case of the Democrats, and from 0.6 to 0.65 for Republicans.

Next, we look at consistency in the net affect ratings directed at the candidates. Once again, we observe a substantial increase in affective consistency. The negative correlation between net Democrat and Republican candidate affects stood at about  $-0.3$  in 1980 and more than doubled to  $-0.7$  in 2012 (Figure 7). At the same time, the consistency in the valence of the net ratings for each candidate also strengthened over this time period, moving from about  $-0.3$  to about  $-0.5$  (Figure 8). Respondents who reported that one of the candidates made them feel hopeful or proud became less likely to say



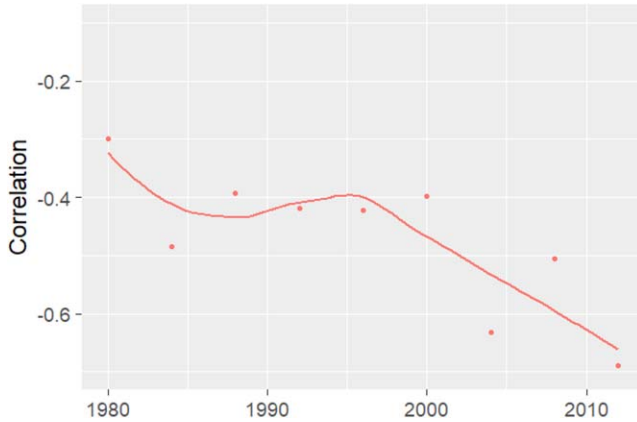


Figure 7. Correlation between net Democratic and Republican candidate affects. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

that the same candidate also made them feel angry or afraid, and vice versa. The increase in affective constraint thus parallels the increase in affective polarization over the course of the past few decades.

Finally, the ratings of the candidates' traits also show greater coherence, especially after 2000. The correlation between the Democrat and Republican candidate's trait ratings strengthened substantially as shown in Figure 9. In the 1980s, the in-party and out-party trait scores correlated only weakly at about  $-0.2$ , but by 2016 the correlation was  $-0.6$ . In 1980, the mean within-candidate trait correlation was about 0.4, while in 2016 it had doubled to 0.8 (see Figure 10). Partisans who rated their candidate as moral, also judged him to be knowledgeable, a strong leader, and caring, more so in 2016 than in 1980. Conversely, they became consistently less prone to attribute positive traits to the opposition candidate.

While there were significant increases in consistency over time within the thermometer, affect, and trait ratings, the consistency between these indicators of affect did not change. Figure 11 shows that the correlations among the three indicators of partisan affect were already robust as early as the 1980s, averaging around 0.6 both for the in-party and out-party evaluations. Increased polarization has not resulted in strengthened convergence across different measures of candidate evaluation.

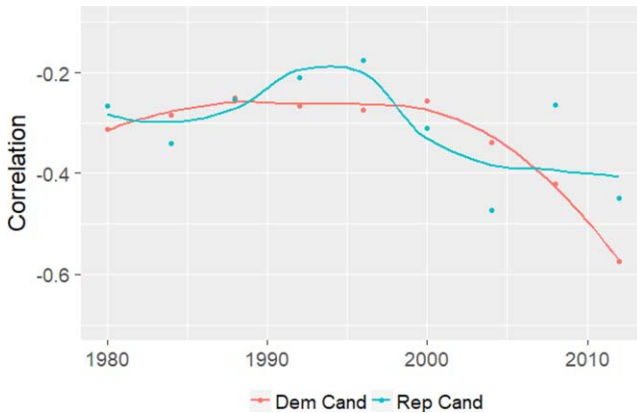
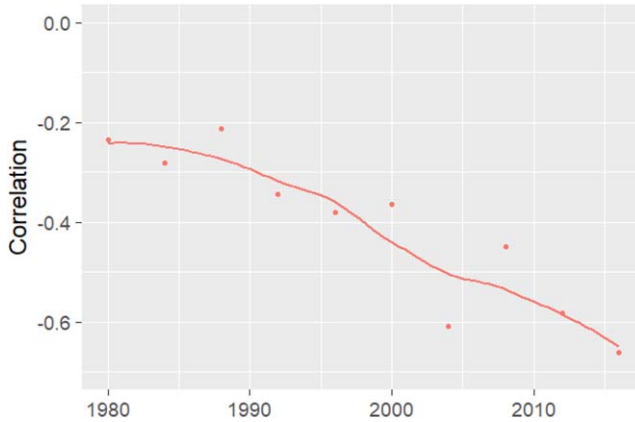


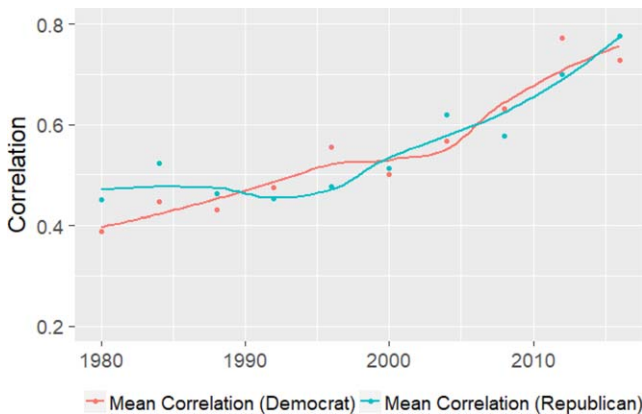
Figure 8. Correlations between negative and positive affect items within candidate. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



**Figure 9.** Correlation between Democrat and Republican candidate traits. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

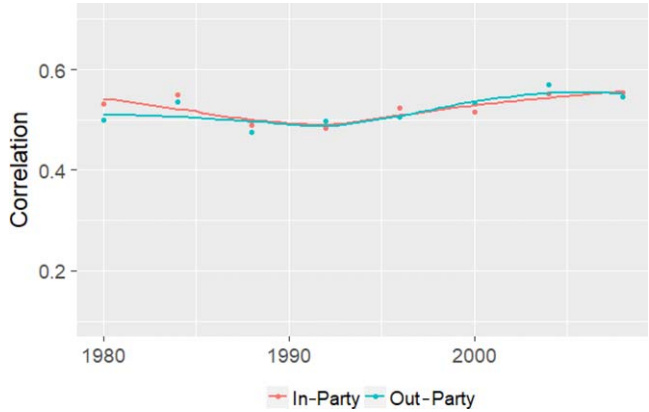
Finally, we consider the strength of the relationship between party identification and partisan affect (see Figure 12). Increasing divergence between evaluations of the in- and out-party implies that the party cue is exerting stronger effects on partisans’ evaluations of candidates, as they become more motivated by the distinction between in- and out-parties.<sup>2</sup> Averaging across the three indicators of partisan affect, the mean correlation with party affiliation strengthened from around 0.6 in 1980 to 0.8 in 2012. Partisanship has, in fact, become a stronger evaluative cue.

In summary, indicators of partisan affect have become significantly more constrained since the 1980s. Most of the increased consistency has occurred through a stronger contrast between affect for the in- and out-party. Post-2000, positive ratings of the in-party invariably coincide with negative ratings of the out-party. Despite the stronger trend toward increased out-party animus, the level of constraint is no different for evaluations of the in- and out-party. Finally, the strength of the relationship



**Figure 10.** Mean candidate trait correlations (moral, knowledgeable, good leadership, cares). [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

<sup>2</sup> We scored party identification on a metric ranging from 1 for Strong Democrats to 4 for Strong Republicans.



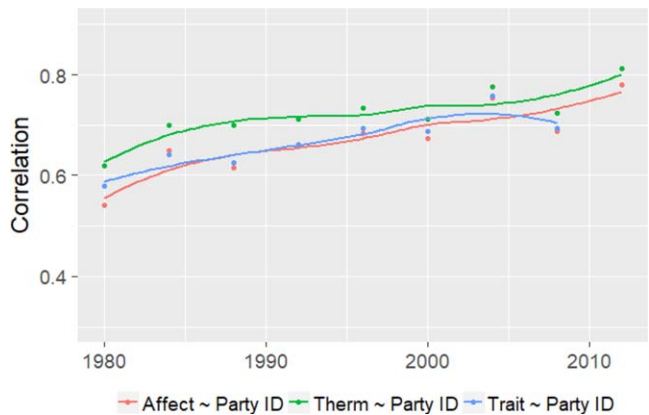
**Figure 11.** Mean correlation between the affects, traits, party, and candidate thermometers. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

between the three indicators of affect has not increased over time primarily because respondents with high candidate-thermometer scores also rated the candidates positively on the trait and affect measures before the onset of polarization.

### Partisan Affect and Political Participation

In this final section, we consider the implications of affective polarization for political participation. We find that as animosity toward the opposing party has intensified, it has taken on a new role as the prime motivator in partisans’ political lives. As documented below, the impact of feelings toward the out-party on both vote choice and the decision to participate has increased since 2000; today it is outgroup animus rather than ingroup favoritism that drives political behavior.

Citizens have many reasons or motives to become involved in politics. For some, it is the sense of civic duty. For others, it may be dedication to a political cause or the anticipated satisfaction from helping their party win. For still others, the impetus to participate may derive from a desire to contribute to the defeat of a disliked candidate or party. The relative weights assigned to these motivations have important consequences; they determine which groups and politicians attract volunteers,



**Figure 12.** Correlations between party identification and indicators of partisan affect. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

donations, and ultimately, votes. The mix of voter motivations also affects the behavior of candidates by encouraging them to emphasize different aspects of their platform—or to avoid emphasizing their platform at all.

We focus on the relative importance of positive and negative motivations. Human judgment is characterized by a well-known negativity bias: Negative information carries more weight in decision-making than positive information. Previous studies, for instance, have documented that person perception is more sensitive to negative rather than positive traits (Fiske, 1980; Hamilton & Zanna, 1972; Hodges, 1974). Negative information is also more likely to draw and hold attention, thereby becoming more memorable than positive information (Fiske, 1980; Ohira, Winton, & Oyama, 1998). This negativity bias applies to voters' evaluations of government performance (Soroka, 2014), while Klein (1991) showed that ratings of the presidential candidates on “bad” traits contributed more to candidate preference than ratings on positively valued traits.

We test whether political participation and vote choice are subject to a uniform negativity bias over time, before and after the era of affective polarization. Do negative feelings toward the out-party have the same impact on the decision to participate in 2012 and 2016 as they did in 1980, when partisans were more amenable to their opponents? Or alternatively, has the onset of affective polarization strengthened the motivation of partisans to participate as a way to dominate their opponents?

The affective basis of voter participation also matters to questions of representation and democratic accountability. When citizens are motivated to support a candidate or party because of some admired attribute of the candidate, their continued support is predicated on the candidate's (or party's) ability to deliver on the attribute in question, be it the implementation of some policy agenda or the delivery of psychological rents. The logic of positive motivations holds candidates accountable—if they fail to deliver, citizens will no longer support them. However, when citizens' support for a candidate stems primarily from their strong dislike for the opposing candidate, they are less subject to the logic of accountability. Their psychic satisfaction comes more from defeating and humiliating the outgroup, and less from any performance or policy benefits that might accrue from the victory of the in-party. For this group of voters, candidates have every incentive to inflame partisan negativity, further entrenching affective polarization.

We compare the effects of outgroup negativity and ingroup positivity on multiple indicators of electoral participation between 1980 and 2016. Our results reveal a striking trend; initially, positive feelings for the preferred party were the dominant motive for participation. In 1980, partisans who felt negatively toward the out-party were actually *less* likely to turn out than those who felt otherwise. More recently, however, the pattern has reversed. In the current era, it is negativity toward the opposition that is the stronger electoral motive.

To isolate the effects of ingroup positivity and outgroup negativity from other covariates that may affect participation, we regressed indicators of self-reported political participation on the in-party feeling thermometer, the out-party feeling thermometer, and a number of other relevant covariates including partisanship and socioeconomic background.<sup>3</sup> To test whether the effects of out-party negativity or in-party positivity have changed over time, we interacted respondents' feeling thermometers with year of the survey. Since political participation is typically reported as a binary variable, we used a binomial logit regression.<sup>4</sup>

We examined both voting turnout and alternative modes of participation. The nonvoting behaviors examined were: attending a rally, donating money, mobilizing others to vote, wearing a sticker/button in support of a candidate, and working for a party. We took the sum of all of these five measures to determine a respondent's overall level of nonvoting political participation.

<sup>3</sup> The full set of covariates includes age, gender, partisanship, race, year of survey, and education.

<sup>4</sup> To measure effect sizes, we calculated predicted probabilities for each form of political participation by year, using the mean age, and modal value of all of the other covariates. When calculating the predicted probabilities of participation for different values of the out-party thermometer, the in-party thermometer was kept constant at 50, and vice versa.

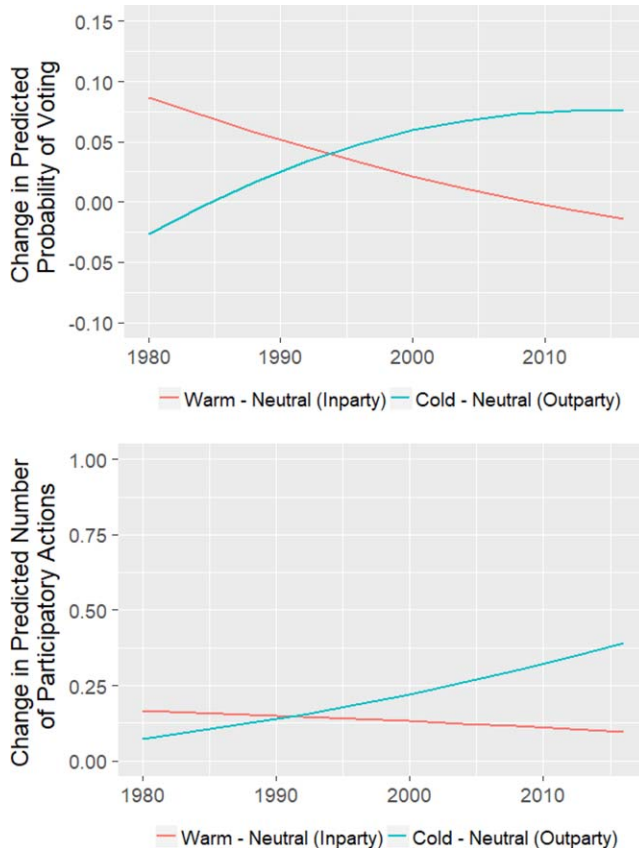


Figure 13. Effects of positive and negative motivations on political participation. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

As we have noted, dislike for the opposing party is a potentially powerful negative motivator of participation. Hating a candidate or party can prompt people to engage in a variety of actions, including donating money, volunteering with a campaign, or voting. Figure 13 shows the effect of the party feeling-thermometer scores on ANES respondents' self-reported political participation. The blue lines represent the difference between the predicted probability of participation for respondents who feel extreme negativity toward the out-party (with feeling-thermometer scores of zero) and those that feel ambivalent or neutral (with thermometer scores of 50). The red lines represent the difference between the predicted probability of participation for respondents who feel extreme positivity toward the in-party (with party thermometer scores of 100) and those that respond at the neutral midpoint of 50.

In 1980, positive feelings for the in-party exerted greater effects than negative feelings toward the out-party both on voting and nonvoting forms of participation. However, by 2016 negativity had replaced positivity as the main driver of political participation. In 1980, feeling extremely warm rather than neutral toward the in-party made the respondent about 8% more likely to vote, while feeling highly negative toward the opposing party was associated with a 3% drop in the likelihood of voting. Thus, moving from the lowest rating of the out-party to the warmest rating of the in-party produced an increase of 11% in the likelihood of voting. However, by 2016, moving from 50 to 100 on the in-party thermometer had no effect on turnout, while moving from 50 to 0 on the out-party thermometer increased the probability of voting by 8%.

Out-party animus also exerted stronger effects on nonvoting forms of participation. These behaviors are relatively rare—the average number of nonvoting actions that respondents reported was less

**Table 2.** Partisan Affect and Political Participation

	<i>Dependent Variable</i>	
	Voting	Nonvoting Participation
	(1)	(2)
Year	0.070*** (0.006)	0.029*** (0.003)
In-party Therm	0.577*** (0.143)	0.239*** (0.077)
In-party Therm x Year	-0.0003*** (0.0001)	-0.0001*** (0.00004)
Out-party Therm	0.920*** (0.122)	0.447*** (0.064)
Out-party Therm x Year	-0.0005*** (0.0001)	-0.0002*** (0.00003)
Strong Democrat	-	-
Weak Democrat	-0.645*** (0.050)	-0.566*** (0.027)
Independent - Democrat	-0.778*** (0.055)	-0.383*** (0.029)
Independent - Republican	-0.548*** (0.060)	-0.382*** (0.031)
Weak Republican	-0.566*** (0.057)	-0.470*** (0.030)
Strong Republican	0.221*** (0.064)	0.017 (0.025)
Demographics	X	X
Constant	-139.274*** (11.802)	-59.363*** (6.555)
Observations	26,607	26,460
Log Likelihood	-13,090.090	-30,921.410
Akaike Inf. Crit.	26,226.170	61,888.810

Note. \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

than 1 for each year surveyed. However, in 1980, moving from neutrality to extreme negativity on the out-party thermometer brought about a 0.1 increase in the average number of nonvoting forms of participation reported, an effect that was statistically significant at 0.01.

By 2016, that same effect had increased fourfold to 0.4. Conversely, over the same time period, the influence of warm feelings for the in-party declined substantially. In 1980, in comparison to partisans rating the in-party at the mid-point, those giving the in-party thermometer scores of 100 reported 0.08 more participatory acts. In 2016, the same effect was  $-0.01$ .

The increased role of negative partisan affect is confirmed by Table 2, which shows the results of the regressions previously described. The coefficient on the interactions between year and the out-party thermometer score is negative and highly significant, indicating that negativity toward the out-party elicited a greater level of participation in later years. Similarly, the coefficient on the interactions between year and the in-party thermometer is also negative and significant, suggesting that the role of warm feelings toward the in-party as an impetus for participation has declined since the 1980s.

Partisans' feelings toward the opposing party have become energized over time, so much so that today they significantly influence partisans' decisions to participate. More than ever, it is partisans' dislike and distrust of the opposing party that leads them to participate in political life. The implications of this negativity bias for political accountability are cause for concern. If partisans care less about their own party's performance and instead focus on their distrust of the opposition party, elected officials no longer need campaign on their own merits; instead, they have good reason to try even harder to denigrate the opposition.

## Conclusion

Affective polarization in the United States has developed primarily because of increased hostility toward the out-party. It is striking that more than one in five partisans rate the opposing party at the lowest possible score on the feeling thermometer. This result is no artifact of survey research; as

we noted at the outset, behavioral measures of interpersonal trust and implicit bias confirm that it is the party cleavage that elicits the strongest level of group discord.

The strengthening of partisan identity and affect has altered the psychological rewards that prompt partisans to become politically active. The primal sense of “us against them” makes partisans fixate on the goal of defeating and even humiliating the opposition at all costs. This negativity bias in voting behavior undermines traditional theories of electoral accountability that rest on incumbents’ ability to deliver policy and performance benefits. When negative affect for the opposing candidate becomes the primary motive underlying vote choice, candidates seeking their party’s nomination are less likely to be sanctioned for demonstrating incompetence, dishonesty, and unethical behavior. A candidate accused of molesting teenage children is able to attract 80% of the vote from his copartisans. In the words of Donald Trump, “I could stand in the middle of 5th Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn’t lose voters.”

The rising importance of partisan affect at the level of the electorate sends clear signals to elites. Not only are they to avoid cooperating with the opposition (seen as appeasement), they must also take every opportunity to reinforce their supporters’ fears and prejudices. The dominance of negative advertising in political campaigns (Geer, 2008, 2010), and the proclivity of incumbent congresspersons to “taunt” the out-party in their press releases (Grimmer & King, 2011) provide stark testimony to the affective responsiveness of leaders to their electoral base. More recently, the tactic of demeaning critics has become central to the Trump Administration’s daily messaging via social media. Obviously, this spiral of mass-elite negativity can only lead to gridlock and policy dysfunction (Ornstein & Mann, 2000).

In closing, we note that the current state of affective polarization raises any number of important research questions. Perhaps most fundamental, can we isolate the role of partisan identity—separate from other aspects of an individuals’ social identity—as the triggering mechanism for out-party hostility? As we pointed out at the outset, the American parties have become well “sorted” over the past three decades (Green, 2005; Mangum, 2013; Mason, 2016). Not only is partisanship more in alignment with liberal-conservative ideology, but the party constituencies are also better differentiated by visible social and demographic groupings. The Democrats are the party of non-Whites, women, city dwellers, the young, and “highbrow” culture. The Republican electorate consists disproportionately of older White males, evangelicals, southerners, and people more interested in Nascar than the NBA.

In effect, the sorting of the parties in America refers to a pattern of reinforcing rather than cross-cutting social cleavages. Research in comparative politics has long demonstrated that when social cleavages overlap or reinforce each other (as in the case of race and partisanship in the United States or language and region in Catalonia), the resulting convergence of multiple identities creates an especially strong sense of group identity (Dahl, 1982; Lijphart, 1968; Verba, 1965). Under these conditions, dissatisfaction with political outcomes frequently results in mass movements to demand group autonomy, in some cases using violent forms of protest (Gubler & Selway, 2012; Selway, 2011). Recent instances of such separatist activity have occurred in the Russian-speaking regions of Ukraine, Northern Ireland, and the Basque and Catalanian regions of Spain as well as the Flanders region of Belgium.

Since partisan identity is increasingly correlated with gender, race, age, and religious and cultural identity, the daunting challenge facing researchers is to design measures of identity that allow individuals to prioritize their multiple social affiliations. A plausible hypothesis is that group differentiation and affect depends on identity strength; the stronger the sense of identity with party vis-à-vis other affiliations, the greater the hostility toward the out-party. Alternatively, to the extent people actively identify with the constituent groups of each party, the more they emphasize the in- and out-party distinction. By this logic, Democrats who also identify as African American, as female, or as a Californian will harbor more ill will toward Republicans than their counterparts who identify as White, or male, or Texan. Teasing out the particular contributions of individuals’ multiple social

identities to their partisan affect will require both new measures of identity and imaginative experimental designs that pit competing identities against each other.

It is worth noting that one factor that almost certainly contributes to the level of party polarization is that unlike other social groupings, political party affiliation does not invoke norms that regulate conflict. In the case of race, gender, and other social divides, the expression of intergroup hostility is considered taboo and off limits (Himmelfarb & Lickteig, 1982; Maccoby & Maccoby, 1954; Sigall & Page, 1971). These same norms do not apply to supporters of political parties. In fact, partisans consider it perfectly acceptable to treat opponents with disdain. In this sense, individuals have greater freedom to resent the out-party and its supporters.

Finally, we raise the overarching question of historical context. American politics has witnessed significant periods of polarization (including the Civil War and the early twentieth century) as well as periods of partisan harmony (typically during international crises and in the aftermath of major wars). However, to the extent partisan negativity is self-reinforcing, that is, political elites are motivated to stoke negativity to boost their chances of reelection, what set of circumstances will create movement away from the current state of polarization, sorting, and gridlock, toward a period of greater civility and partisan collegiality?

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