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# The Illusion of Affective Polarization

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## ABSTRACT

Deep levels of affective polarization—the tendency of ordinary partisans to dislike and distrust those from the other party—is a defining feature of contemporary American politics. Or is it? The researchers argue that it may in fact be more of an illusion, both in the minds of citizens and scholars. Specifically, canonical measures of affective polarization dramatically overstate its extent. When asked to rate their feelings toward "Democrats" or "Republicans," respondents draw on stereotypes and media exemplars that suggest citizens are ideologically extreme and politically engaged. Using data from an experiment where the researchers randomly vary the ideological extremity and political engagement of out-partisans, they show that partisan animus falls sharply when respondents evaluate those who are less engaged or ideologically moderate—that is, those who actually comprise most of the electorate. The authors show that prior results stem from citizens' vast misperceptions of out-partisans. The authors' results accentuate the importance of careful measurement and, more significantly, the reality that partisans do not hold deep animus for most members of the other party. These findings, however, also complicate conceptions of "good citizenship" that often call for ideological constraint and engagement.



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Hyper-partisan polarization defines 21st century American politics. In particular, Democrats and Republicans dislike one another at remarkably high rates, a phenomenon known as affective polarization (Iyengar et al. 2019). Scholars, journalists, and citizens often presume such animus is real (Badger and Chokshi 2017, Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012) and, subsequently, focus on assessing its causes and consequences (Iyengar et al. 2019; Mason 2018). We argue that, while affective polarization is certainly real as measured, it also is *much* less extreme than assumed; indeed, it is as much an illusion as it is a reality.

How is this possible given the vast evidence accumulated? The answer lies in a measurement problem. When measures ask people to evaluate "Democrats" and "Republicans," people draw on stereotypes and media exemplars that suggest citizens are ideologically extreme and politically engaged. These are precisely the types of out-partisans whom people dislike but, contrary to what people believe, they constitute a small minority of either party. We show that when respondents assess moderate members of the other party who are less politically engaged—that is, the exact type of people who actually identify with both parties—affective polarization declines dramatically. Put another way, affective polarization is an illusion on two levels: Americans misperceive the extremity and engagement of the opposing party (i.e., a perceptual illusion) and, as a result, the standard measures in the literature perpetuate the misperception by overstating the extent to which partisans dislike one another (i.e., a measurement illusion).

Our findings accentuate the importance of careful measurement in the study of polarization. Our data also reveal a relatively simple antidote to ostensibly high levels of polarization: informing individuals about their misperceptions (Ahler and Sood 2018). This does lead to a normative quandary, however: the "ideal" citizen—one who is ideologically

constrained and deeply politically engaged—drives both ideological and affective polarization, a point to which we return in the conclusion.

**Measuring Affective Polarization**

Affective polarization refers to the tendency of partisans to like members of their own party and dislike those from the opposition (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012). Scholars employ various measures to study affective polarization: feeling thermometer ratings towards the parties (i.e., ratings on a 0 to 100 scale where 0 indicates very cold feelings and 100 indicates very warm feelings), whether respondents trust the parties, and trait ratings (e.g., patriotism, hypocrisy) of partisans (Druckman and Levendusky 2019). Alternatively, some use social distance measures that ask people their degree of comfort with having close friends or neighbors from the other party, or having their children marry someone from the other party. All of these measures invariably show extraordinarily high levels of out-party dislike; indeed, it is this reported out-party animus that drives high affective polarization (Lau et al. 2017: 233) and that is used by media and scholars alike to portray a divided nation.

But the scales used to measure affective polarization consistently ask respondents to rate abstract partisan groups: for example, "Democrats" and "Republicans" or the "Democratic Party" and the "Republican Party." The vagueness of these measures is consequential (e.g., Druckman and Levendusky 2019). We argue that people's affective evaluations depend on the political engagement and ideology of the out-party target being evaluated.

The target's political engagement shapes how they are affectively evaluated because many Americans are averse to political discussion. Klar and Krupnikov (2016: 63) report that 40% of individuals express "discontent at the thought of working with [a] politically inclined colleague—even though the hypothetical colleague *agrees* with them!" (italics in original; also

see Klar, Krupnikov and Ryan 2018). This aversion will be particularly acute when it comes to talking with people with whom one disagrees: people do not even want to discuss *apolitical* topics with those from the other party (Settle and Carlson 2019; also see Chen and Rohla 2018).

Similarly, ideological disagreement will affect affective polarization (Bougher 2017). When an out-partisan is more ideologically extreme, we expect individuals to exhibit more negativity—for example, Republicans will rate liberal Democrats more harshly than moderate Democrats. This follows straightforwardly from work on attitudes showing that those who are more similar are more liked (e.g., O'Keefe 2016: 201**)**, and is implied by proximity theories of voting where people prefer those who are ideologically closer (e.g., Lacy and Paolino 2010).

*Hypothesis 1:* Out-party animus will be higher when the out-party targets are more politically active, relative to when they are politically inactive, all else constant.

*Hypothesis 2:* Out-party animus will be higher when the out-party targets are ideologically extreme, relative to when they are ideologically moderate, all else constant.

These hypotheses have normative implications: sorted partisans (i.e., liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans) facilitate representation by allowing parties to reflect ideological divisions in the public (Levendusky 2009: 9). Also, political engagement has long been a defining feature of the "good citizen" (Schudson 1998).

Further, when individuals answer questions about the out-party, they envision extreme (sorted), engaged partisans. The rise of partisan media means that, unlike a quarter century ago, people encounter partisan content with much greater frequency and thus believe partisans are more extreme (e.g., Levendusky and Malhotra 2016, Peterson and Kagalwala 2019). Similarly, individuals most likely to post politically on social media tend to be more ideologically extreme, thereby contributing to the perception of an extreme electorate (Cohn and Quealy 2019). An

analogous logic applies to engagement: the availability of partisan media leads to consistent partisan chatter, and media often rely on vocal social media partisans to portray public opinion (McGregor 2019). This can lead to the perception that partisans frequently engage. All of this suggests that when people imagine out-partisans, they think of engaged ideologues.

*Hypothesis 3:* When out-party targets are undefined in terms of ideology and activism (i.e., the common measures), out-party animus will:

- be significantly higher than when out-party targets are ideologically moderate and inactive, all else constant.
- not be significantly different from when out-party targets are ideologically extreme and active, all else constant.

Our final hypothesis is that the perception that the typical out-partisan is engaged and extreme is incorrect (hence, the illusion). In reality, most citizens are moderate and not particularly politically engaged (Lewis-Beck et al. 2008). Yet, due to partisan stereotypes (Ahler and Sood 2018), and the aforementioned media coverage, people will believe that the modal partisan is ideologically extreme and politically engaged. Hence, they will overestimate the number of these individuals in the population.

*Hypothesis 4:* When asked to assess the ideology and activism of out-party partisans, individuals will significantly over-estimate the percentage of ideologically extremists and activists, all else constant.

In sum, we posit, via our pre-registered hypotheses (see Supplemental Information (SI) section 1), that citizens appear affectively polarized because they misperceive the ideology and activism of those from the other party. Once that is corrected, out-party animus substantially drops, implying that affective polarization is, at least in part, based more on misperception than

on reality. Further, if correct, our hypotheses suggest that scholars need to take care when measuring partisan attitudes, since respondents are likely to imagine a target that is different from what scholars likely intend (Dafoe, Zheng, and Caughey 2018).

**Experiment**

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a three-wave online survey experiment with Bovitz, Inc. in the summer of 2019 (details are in SI2). In total, 4,073 adult American participants completed each wave of the study. In the first wave, participants answered a series of questions about their political predispositions, including their partisan identities, political knowledge, and demographic characteristics. The second wave included our experimental manipulation, which we will describe in detail below. The main items in this second wave asked participants versions of the affective polarization items: (1) the feeling thermometer scales, (2) trait ratings, (3) a trust measure, and (4) social distance measures. Each measure asked about both parties, with the out-party always coming first. In every condition, we specifically described the target as an "ordinary voter" because our ultimate interest lies in levels of affective polarization among voters rather than between voters and elites (c.f., Druckman and Levendusky 2019). In the third wave, we asked respondents to classify themselves in terms of ideology and activism; this provides the actual distribution of these characteristics among our sample and allows us to compare people's perceptions of partisans to the actual distribution.

In each experimental condition in wave 2, we varied two factors in describing the partisans being rated: (1) their ideological profiles, and (2) their political engagement levels. Along the ideological factor, we randomly assigned participants to one of three groups: the first group received no information about the partisans' ideology, the second group were told that the partisans are moderate, and the third group were told the partisans are ideological (with

Democratic partisans being described as liberal, and Republican partisans being described as conservative). On the political engagement factor, we assigned participants to one of four groups: they received no information about the partisans' level of discussion, or they learned that the partisans discuss politics rarely, occasionally, or frequently.[1] We used "discussion" to operationalize activism, given that it is an easily understood measure of political activism for ordinary voters.

**[Insert Table 1 About Here]**

This led to 12 randomly assigned conditions, as displayed in Table 1. For example, those in Condition 1 who receive no information about ideology and no information about discussion frequency, were asked to rate just "Republicans" and "Democrats," making this item akin to the conventional items from the literature. The other conditions introduce variation; for example, in condition 12, respondents were asked about "Conservative Republicans who frequently talk about politics" and "Liberal Democrats who frequently talk about politics," and so forth (see SI3 for more on this measure). We test hypotheses 1 and 2 by exploring how between-condition variations in ideological extremity and activism changed the level of affective polarization. Hypothesis 3 suggests that affective polarization in condition 1 (the conventional formulation used in the literature) should be significantly greater than in condition 6 (moderate partisans who rarely talk about politics) and not significantly different from condition 12 (ideologically extreme partisans who frequently talk about politics).

[1] In a pre-test (see SI3), we verified that subjects perceived "rarely," "occasionally," and "frequently" to correspond to significantly different frequencies of political discussion.

Finally, we included a 13th randomly assigned condition in which respondents did not complete any affective polarization measures but rather reported their perceptions of the way partisans behave. For example, we asked participants in this condition to categorize the ideology and frequency of political discussion of the "typical" Republican and Democrat. To test Hypothesis 4 (regarding misperceptions of the out-party), we can compare the frequencies reported in this condition to the actual distributions from wave 3. The full wording of all items is included in SI3.

**Results**

Given our focus on perceptions of out-party members, we restrict our analysis to partisans and independent leaners. In SI4, we provide details on a manipulation check that shows respondents were thinking of voters (rather than elites) as we intended. We also show that the level of affective polarization found in condition 1—where we use the conventional versions of the items from the previous literature—replicate those found in earlier studies.

To consider whether information about ideology and engagement affects individuals' ratings of out-partisans, we scale and aggregate the four different rating types (thermometer, trait ratings, trust ratings, and social distance measures) into one measure of out-party affect ($\alpha$=0.88).[2] While this aggregate approach is consistent with previous studies on partisan animosity (e.g., Boxell, Gentzkow and Shapiro 2017), we present the results for each of our

[2] As intimated, some scholars measure affective polarization by taking the difference between out-party and in-party ratings (Lelkes and Westwood 2017). Our results are robust to using this approach except the frequently condition also lowers affective polarization compared to the no discussion information control (see SI6).

measures individually in SI5; these measure-specific results are substantively the same as the results we present below. This combined aggregate measure is scaled 0 to 1, with higher values indicating *more positive affect* for the out-party and lower values indicating greater animosity toward the out-party. To test hypothesis 1 and 2, we regress the aggregate measure of out-party affect on the discussion and ideology treatments. We present the results in Table 2.

**[Insert Table 2 About Here]**

Consistent with hypothesis 1, we find a large and significant effect on affect towards the out-party from the frequency of discussion. Relative to receiving no information about a partisan's discussion preferences, participants rate the out-party significantly more positively when they are told that the out-partisan "rarely" or "occasionally" talks about politics (put another way, greater frequency leads to lower scores which means more animus, as predicted). This effect is especially large in the "rarely" condition—this is the single largest affective shift in our data, representing a 25% decrease in animosity relative to the baseline category.[3] Those who "frequently" discuss politics are rated more negatively, though this effect is quite modest, representing only about a 5% relative increase in animosity.[4] This suggests that subjects assume—in the absence of additional information—that those described by the baseline questions talk about politics quite frequently, consistent with hypothesis 3.

[3] To make this more concrete, for the feeling thermometer item, we find the rarely label increases ratings by 19 degrees, relative to no label—an extremely large shift.

[4] We show that the same pattern of effects holds for in-party ratings as well (see SI7). This suggests that—consistent with Klar et al. (2018)—many people simply dislike *anyone* who discusses politics.

Consistent with hypothesis 2, we see similar, albeit smaller, effects of ideological extremity; ratings for moderate out-partisans are higher than for liberal/conservative out-partisans (by 3% of our scale). While describing an out-partisan as ideologically extreme/sorted—a liberal Democrat or a conservative Republicans—increases animosity, the effect is not statistically significant, again, suggesting that this condition is seen as the default when no other information is provided (see SI10 for more on condition-by-condition comparisons). Consistent with hypotheses 1 and 2, then, animosity toward the out-party is not simply a function of partisan identity: partisans who engage in little political discussion, or are ideologically moderate, are rated much more positively than others, and the difference is very large.

Our third hypothesis suggests that prior work over-states affective polarization because respondents presume they are rating ideological and engaged partisans when they receive the conventional unlabeled items. Our results above offer initial evidence of this, but here we offer a direct test by comparing the key three conditions: the conventional non-descriptor condition (1) against the moderate, rarely discuss condition (6) and the extreme, frequently discuss condition (12). We present the results of our comparison in Figure 1.

**[Insert Figure 1 About Here]**

As predicted, ratings in Condition 6, towards moderate out-partisans who rarely talk about politics, are significantly higher (i.e., less animus) than in Condition 1, where no additional descriptors are provided ($p<0.001$). Clearly, when asked the conventional question, people are not imaging moderates who rarely talk about politics.[5] While Condition 1 and Condition 12—the

[5] Condition 6 is also significantly higher than Condition 12 ($p<0.001$).

extremist frequently discuss condition—significantly differ ($p<.01$), the difference is minimal, amounting to just .04 units on the 0 to 1 scale. Thus, while not strictly statistically confirming that aspect of hypothesis 3, the small substantive different suggests that the conventional measures of affective polarization do measure attitudes toward rather extreme and engaged out-partisans. To assume it measures attitudes toward the modal out-partisan would be both incorrect and illusory.

Our final hypothesis suggests that individuals systematically exaggerate the extremity and political engagement of the modal partisan. Our finding above that conditions 1 and 12 look very similar provides evidence of this, but we formally test this with condition 13, where participants reported what they thought were the ideological extremity and frequency of political discussion for the "typical" member of the out-party. We compare these perceptions to our third wave data, which measured the reality among all respondents. We report the results in Figure 2.[6]

**[Insert Figure 2 About Here]**

We find that people vastly *overestimate* the extent to which out-partisans discuss politics. While 64.18% of participants believe that out-partisans frequently discuss politics, the reality is that that only 27.2% of partisans actually discuss politics frequently. We find similar misperceptions about partisans' political positions. While 69.36% of participants perceive that most out-partisans are extreme (i.e., liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans), the actual distribution of positions shows that slightly more than half of partisans are moderate (51.32%). When the categories are combined, we see that 49.25% of respondents perceive that out-

[6] In Figure 2, we present all partisans, even though our discussion focuses on out-party perceptions. In SI12, we show that this same relationships holds separately for each party.

partisans are both extreme and frequently discuss politics; this is in sharp contrast to the actual distribution, which shows that 14.04% of partisans behave that way.

These wildly extreme misperceptions cohere with other work that explores perceptions of the demographics of the other party (Ahler and Sood 2018) and the nature of partisan media (Peterson and Kagalwala 2019). Yet, in our case, it may be even more consequential, as it leads to a marked misunderstanding of the degree of affective polarization in the mass public. Nearly half the respondents believe out-partisans are extreme and frequently discuss politics, and when evaluating such individuals, they rate them at a chilly 32 degrees on the feeling thermometer scale. But in reality, the modal partisan is a sorted partisan who only occasionally discusses politics. When rating these individuals, the average feeling thermometer rating is 47 degrees—nearly 50% higher! When it comes to moderates who rarely discuss politics, the average thermometer is 56 degrees, veering towards likability. When assessing the modal out-party member, rather than partisan stereotypes, these attitudes look more like indifference than animus. Researchers need to take much more care in specifying their measures and understanding those implications so as to avoid arriving at illusory conclusions (Dafoe et al. 2018) and to avoid promoting the misperception that affective polarization is rampant.

We do not mean to fully indict past researchers insofar as they are measuring what people really think, but what people think is in fact illusionary. It suggests that if researchers can correct these illusions, then the appearance of affective polarization will lessen. Further, we suspect that in reality, individuals who interact with those from the other party come to have more accurate perceptions about those individuals and thus, outside of research studies, partisan interactions are likely much less likely to involve animus. The key is for people to generalize from their own personal interactions, rather than from the elites or media caricatures.

## Conclusion

Our results suggest that reported affective polarization depends on how out-partisans are described. Of particular importance is the frequency of political discussion: people have much less animosity toward an out-party member who rarely discusses politics than one who frequently discusses politics. Similarly, people have distinctly less animosity toward moderate, rather than extreme, out-partisans. The effects of ideology are smaller than those of discussion, however, which may reflect the frequency of discussion being easier to visualize, or discussion tendencies being more bothersome. We might find stronger effects had we asked respondents about particular issue positions, rather than general ideology (e.g. Orr and Huber 2019), though we leave this for future work.

High levels of out-party animosity are an artifact of vague measures. When offered little additional information, people imagine out-partisans to be both extreme and frequent political discussants. This image leads people to report animosity toward this imagined out-party member when, in fact, it poorly describes most partisans who actually talk occasionally or rarely about politics and who hold more moderate views on many issues. Partisans simply do not harbor unconditional animosity toward the other side; instead, they hold deep and consequential misperceptions of how the other side behaves.

The irony here is that people's dislike of the other side is largely directed at the type of person many political scientists have traditionally identified as the ideal voter: the highly engaged and ideologically constrained citizen. Our results suggest that such "ideal voters," in fact, provoke animosity toward the other side and, in turn, lead to hugely exaggerated levels of affective polarization. This underscores a point Almond and Verba (1965) made over 50 years ago: democracy requires a mix of different types of citizens, and an excess of engaged and informed voters is just as bad as too many apathetic ones. Indeed, as our results highlight,

reminding citizens that most of their peers are not the "idealized" ideological and engaged citizen would help improve our democracy by lowering levels of expressed partisan animus.

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**Table 1: Experimental Conditions**

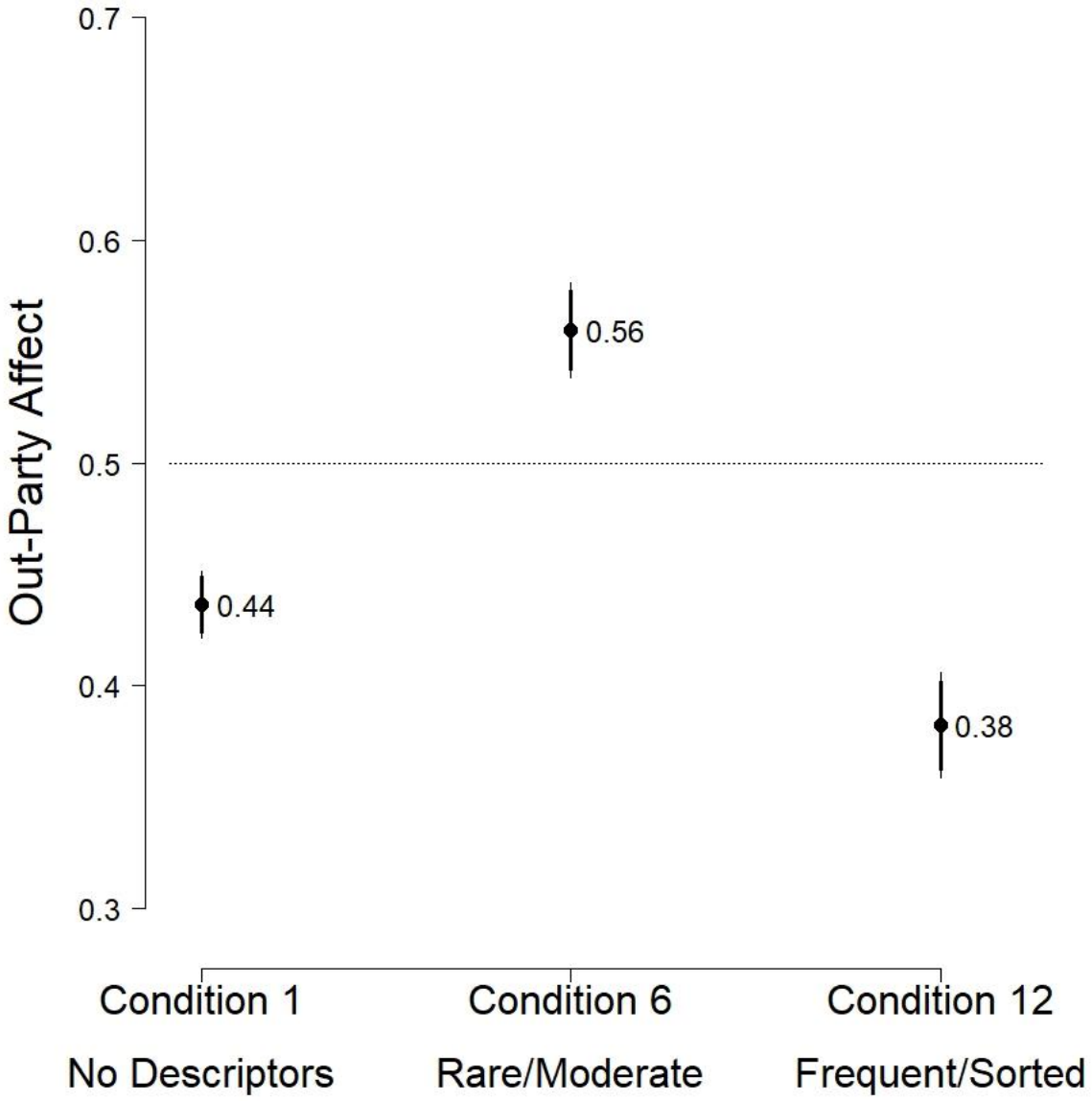
| | No Discussion Descriptor | Rare Discussion | Occasional Discussion | Frequent Discussion |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| No Ideology Descriptor | Condition 1 (N=538) | Condition 2 (N=272) | Condition 3 (N=269) | Condition 4 (N=272) |
| Moderate Ideology | Condition 5 (N=271) | Condition 6 (N=273) | Condition 7 (N=276) | Condition 8 (N=273) |
| Extreme Ideology (Conservative/Liberal) | Condition 9 (N=272) | Condition 10 (N=270) | Condition 11 (N=276) | Condition 12 (N=261) |

**Table 2: Effect of Treatments on Out-Party Affect**

| | Coef. | Std. Err. |
|---|---|---|
| *Discussion Conditions* | | |
| Rarely | 0.101 | 0.009 |
| Occasionally | 0.020 | 0.009 |
| Frequently | -0.024 | 0.009 |
| *Ideology Conditions* | | |
| Moderate | 0.030 | 0.008 |
| Extreme | -0.012 | 0.008 |
| Constant | 0.416 | 0.007 |
| N | 2,888 | |
| $R_2$ | 0.072 | |

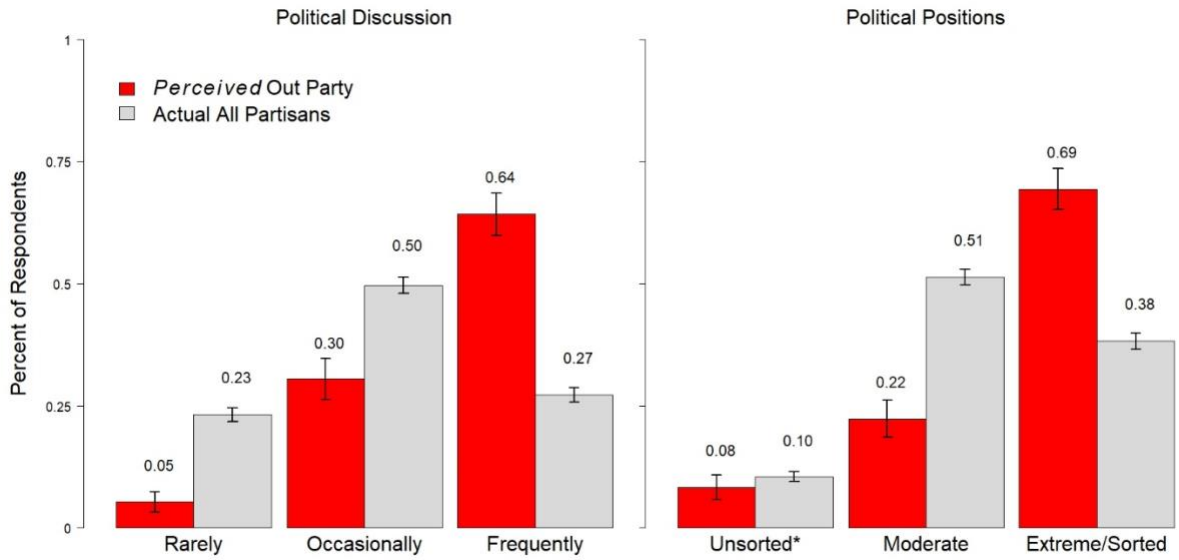
*O.L.S. regression; dependent variable is scaled 0 to 1, with higher values indicating more positive affect. The analysis excludes pure independents (see SI8 for patterns among pure independents). The excluded category for each of our factors is the "No Additional Descriptor." A model with controls is shown in SI9.*

**Figure 1: Comparison Across Three Conditions**




*Y-axis represents out-party aggregate measure ranging from 0 (entirely negative affect, e.g. animosity) to 1 (entirely positive affect). Results based on OLS model that considers each condition separately (see SI11).*

**Figure 2. Perceptions of Out-Party Compared to Actual Partisans**




**Unsorted refers to liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats.*

*Perceptions are from condition 13 participants only while actual partisan values are estimated using all wave 3 participants.*

**Supplementary Information for "The Illusion of Affective Polarization"**

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**Supplementary Information 1: Pre-Registered Hypotheses**

**The following are the answers to the pre-registration questions** https://aspredicted.org available at http://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=2yj7y2.

*1) Have any data been collected for this study already?*
It's complicated. We have already collected some data but explain in Question 8 why readers may consider this a valid pre-registration nevertheless.

*2) What's the main question being asked or hypothesis being tested in this study?*
Is affective polarization higher when the targets involved are more extreme ideologues and/or activists (as defined by frequency of political discussion)? What do people envision as the targets of affective polarization measures when ideology and/or activism is left undefined? What do people project when it comes to ideology and activism when thinking of "typical" partisans?
We predict:

1. Affective polarization will be higher when the targets are more ideologically extreme and/or more active.
2. When the targets are undefined, levels of affective polarization will be closer to extreme/activists ratings than moderate/disengaged ratings.
3. People misperceive the ideological extremeness and political activity of the typical partisan. They believe they are more extreme and active then the actual population is.

*3) Describe the key dependent variable(s) specifying how they will be measured.*

We include four main affective polarization measures: feeling thermometers, trait measures, partisan trust, and social distance measures. We also ask in one condition people to project the ideology and frequency of talk among partisans (that is the DV for our misperception prediction).

To be clear, by affective polarization, for us, we focus on negative partisanship – evaluations of the out party. We do that because we have clear theoretical expectations for why our treatment will polarize those ratings Even so, we will also examine the difference between in-party and out-party ratings. Klar, Krupnikov, and Ryan (2018) find differences between strong and weak partisans using this measure, so we will replicate all analyses using this DV as a secondary analysis as well.

*4) How many and which conditions will participants be assigned to?*

There are 13 conditions. Conditions 1-12 vary the ideological portrait and/or frequency with which the partisans discuss politics. The 13th condition asks people to rate what they perceive to be the typical ideology and speech frequency of partisans. Conditions 1-12 appear below.

| | None | Rare | Occasionally | Frequent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| None | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Moderate | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 |
| Sorted | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 |

Subjects will randomly be assigned to condition with a larger number being assigned to 1 and 13.

*5) Specify exactly which analyses you will conduct to examine the main question/hypothesis.*

We will primarily analyze difference of means calculations (largely via regression). We expect the lowest level of affective polarization (negative partisanship) in condition 6 and the highest level in condition 12. We do not have strong a priori predictions of whether ideology or frequency of talk will increase polarization at a higher rate. If they have an approximately equal impact we would then predict a rough condition ordering of 12 > 11 = 8 > 10 = 7 > 6. (If they do not have an equal impact than 11 and 8 may not be equal and 10 and 7 may not be equal.)

We do not know where the other conditions will fall within that set but do expect 4 > 3 > 2 and 9 > 5. We also expect condition 1 > 6 and possibly approaching condition 12, as we hypothesize that in the absence of any modifiers, most people will call to mind a relatively extreme and politically interested exemplar of the out-party, since these are the most commonly depicted figures in the media (Levendusky and Malhotra 2016b).

We include condition 13 to allow us to explicitly test respondents' perceptions of ideological extremity and political interest in the out-party. Our assumption is that respondents will say that most out-party partisans are ideologically extreme and very politically interested, given patterns of media coverage documented in earlier studies. These raw perceptions are interesting in and of themselves. But we can also calculate false polarization and false engagement using the methods outlined in Levendusky and Malhotra (2016a).

*6) Describe exactly how outliers will be defined and handled, and your precise rule(s) for excluding observations.*

We will exclude pure independents from the analyses, consistent with earlier studies in this vein (Levendusky and Druckman 2019). We will analyze pure Independents separately in the appendix and report out the findings, though we do not have specific expectations about these findings, and view them more as a preliminary analysis.

*7) How many observations will be collected or what will determine sample size?*
*No need to justify decision, but be precise about <u>exactly</u> how the number will be determined.*

Our goal, based on a power analysis, is to have a sample of roughly 3,800 for our main experimental condition analyses.

*8) Anything else you would like to pre-register?*
*(e.g., secondary analyses, variables collected for exploratory purposes, unusual analyses planned?)*

Our answer to the data collection question is "it's complicated" because we were waiting to submit the pre-registration until we confirmed with a power analysis what N we would need. Once we confirmed that N, we launched and frankly neglected to actually submit the pre-registration (it had already been written in a word document that had been created prior to data collection). We are submitting on this date which is after the experimental treatment data wave is complete but before we have downloaded those data (and prior to the completion of our collection of the data on individuals' actual ideological placement and frequency of discussion

which we will use to test the perceptions from condition 13 – those data are collected in a distinct survey wave).

Also, we measured (in an earlier survey wave) and will examine heterogeneous treatment effects based on partisan social identity, issue position extremity, and democratic norm endorsement. We view these as suggestive analyses, however, as our power calculations were geared to detect our main effects and we are under-powered for these interactive hypotheses.

**Supplementary Information 2: Details of Three Wave Survey**

The survey was conducted using Bovitz Inc. (http://bovitzinc.com/index.php). They provide an online panel of approximately one million respondents recruited through random digit dialing and empanelment of those with internet access. As with most internet survey samples, respondents participate in multiple surveys over time and receive compensation for their participation.

The survey took place over three waves. All participants who completed the first wave were invited to participate in the other two waves (i.e., they could participate in the third wave even if they skipped the second wave). In the first wave (N=5,191), we asked participants about their demographics, political positions, and political engagement. The second wave (N=4,076) contains our experiment as we asked participants the measures in our main analyses. The third wave (N=4,048) contains our questions about our perceptions.

The tables below present demographics based on their wave 1 answers.

| Age | |
|---|---|
| 18-24 | 9.72% |
| 25-34 | 19.79% |
| 35-50 | 33.74% |
| 51-65 | 25.02% |
| Over 65 | 11.74% |

| Gender | |
|---|---|
| Woman | 50.16% |
| Man | 48.88% |
| Transgender | 0.67% |
| None of the categories offered | 0.29% |

| Primary Racial Group | |
|---|---|
| African-American | 14.55% |
| Asian-American | 4.01% |
| Hispanic or Latino | 9.20% |
| Native American | 0.88% |
| White | 69.30% |
| Other | 2.06% |

| Annual Family Income before Taxes | |
|---|---|
| <$30,000 | 29.57% |
| $30,000-$69,999 | 37.39% |
| $70,000-$99,999 | 16.58% |
| $100,000-$200,000 | 14.36% |
| >$200,000 | 2.10% |

| Education Level | |
|---|---|
| Less than high school | 2.98% |
| High school graduate | 21.73% |
| Associated Degree | 27.47% |
| Some College | 24.35% |
| 4-year college degree | 8.87% |
| Advanced degree | 14.60% |

**Supplementary Information 3: Full question wordings for measures**

Participants read the following introduction prior to answering the affective polarization questions. "We are next going to ask you a set of questions about ordinary people (e.g., voters) who are *[Republicans and Democrats / Democrats and Republicans]*. Please take your time, and do your best to answer the questions about these people."

The participants were then asked the following questions. Where the word "[CONDITION]" currently is placed, the participants saw one of the following options depending on which treatment group they were placed in.

1. [Republicans/Democrats]
2. [Republicans/Democrats] who rarely talk about politics.
3. [Republicans/Democrats] who occasionally talk about politics.
4. [Republicans/Democrats] who frequently talk about politics.
5. Moderate [Republicans/Democrats]
6. Moderate [Republicans/Democrats] who rarely talk about politics.
7. Moderate [Republicans/Democrats] who occasionally talk about politics.
8. Moderate [Republicans/Democrats] who occasionally talk about politics.
9. [Conservative Republicans/Liberal Democrats]
10. [Conservative Republicans/Liberal Democrats] who rarely talk about politics.
11. [Conservative Republicans/Liberal Democrats] who occasionally talk about politics.
12. [Conservative Republicans/Liberal Democrats] who frequently talk about politics.

*Feeling Thermometer*

We'd like you to rate how you feel towards [CONDITION] on a scale of 0 to 100, which we call a "feeling thermometer." On this feeling thermometer scale, ratings between 0 and 49 degrees mean that you feel unfavorable and cold (with 0 being the most unfavorable/coldest). Ratings between 51 and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorable and warm (with 100 being the most favorable/warmest). A rating of 50 means you have no feelings one way or the other. How would you rate your feeling toward these groups? Remember we are asking you to rate ordinary people (e.g., voters) and *not* elected officials or candidates.

*Trait Questions*

We'd like to know more about what you think about [CONDITION]. Below, we've given a list of words that some people might use to describe them. For each item, please indicate how well you think it applies to [CONDITION]: not at all well; not too well; somewhat well; very well; or extremely well.

Terms: Patriotic, Intelligent, Honest, Open-minded, Generous, Hypocritical Selfish Mean
Response Options: Not at all well, Not too well, Somewhat well, Very well, Extremely well

*Trust*

How much of the time do you think you can trust [CONDITION] to do what is right for the country?

Response Options: Almost never, Once in a while, About half the time, Most of the time, Almost always

*Social Distance*

How comfortable are you having close personal friends who are [CONDITION]?

Response Options: Not at all comfortable, not too comfortable, somewhat comfortable, extremely comfortable.

How comfortable are you having neighbors on your street who are [CONDITION]?

Response Options: Not at all comfortable, not too comfortable, somewhat comfortable, extremely comfortable.

Suppose a son or daughter of yours was getting married. How would you feel if he or she married someone who is a [CONDITION]?

Response Options: Not all all upset, Not too upset, Somewhat upset, Extremely upset

*Pre-Test*

We pre-tested the words in our treatments to ensure that the participants viewed the words as we hoped they would. The pre-test was conducted on Amazon's Mechanical Turk (N=660).

Pre-test participants were first asked about the frequency words – participants were randomly assigned to one word.

"Imagine that you were going to have dinner with someone who [rarely/occasionally/some times/frequently] talks about politics. In a 2-hour dinner, what percentage of the time do you think this person would spend talking about politics?"

The percent of time spent discussing politics looked like this:

Means: Rarely: 18%, Occasionally: 32%, Sometimes: 33%, Frequently 52%

Medians: Rarely: 5%, Occasionally: 20%, Sometimes: 22%, Frequently 52%

The less frequent discussion means are skewed by a few people stating they would talk about politics the entire time possibly because they would want to talk about politics.

They were then asked about the ideology measures – participants were randomly assigned to one type of person.

"Imagine now that you are having dinner with a different person, and this person describes him/herself as a [Democrat who is moderate/Republican who is moderate/ Democrat who is liberal/Republican who is conservative]. Where on the scale below would you think he/she falls in terms of overall ideology?"

Response Options: (1) Very liberal, (2) Mostly liberal, (3) Somewhat liberal, (4) Moderate, (5) Somewhat conservative, (6) Mostly conservative, (7) Very conservative

The table presents the means for all respondents and then by the party of the respondent.

| | Liberal Democrat | Moderate Democrat | Moderate Republican | Conservative Republican |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| All respondents | 2.6 | 3.4 | 5.0 | 5.8 |
| Democrats | 2.6 | 3.3 | 5.0 | 5.9 |
| Independents | 2.2 | 3.3 | 5.1 | 6.0 |
| Republicans | 2.9 | 3.8 | 4.9 | 5.6 |

*Perceptions of Out-Partisans*

To measure the perceptions of out-party members, the following questions were asked.

Which point on the scale below, best politically describes the typical [Republican/Democrat]

Response Options: Liberal, Moderate, Conservative

How often do you think [Republicans/Democrats] talk about politics?

Response Options: Rarely, Occasionally, Frequently

**Supplementary Information 4: Manipulation Check and Benchmarking**

We conducted two checks to ensure the validity of our data. The first is a manipulation check to ensure that our participants heeded our instructions to focus on ordinary voters—rather than elites—when rating partisans. Relying on a post-treatment measure that asks participants who they were thinking about when they rated partisans, we see strong evidence that participants were focusing on ordinary voters, suggesting that our results can speak directly to patterns of affective polarization in the electorate. Specifically, pooling conditions 1 and 12, we find that 88% of participants report that they thought of voters when rating the out-group and 89% report that they thought of voters when rating the in-group. The correlation between in-group and out-group categorizations is .82, suggesting most participants were keeping the same categories in mind as they rated them. Given that condition 13 is somewhat different from the other conditions, we consider it independently and again find that clearly respondents were thinking of voters rather than elites: 86% report that they were thinking of voters when rating the out-group and 85% report the same for the in-group; the correlation is again high, at .76. We also conducted a multinomial logit to consider whether categorizations differed significantly by condition; we find no evidence that individuals in a particular condition were no more or less likely to categorize the targets differently.

Our second check focuses on benchmarking. Since our goal is to offer a re-interpretation of extant data collections, it is important that the patterns in condition 1—the condition that reflects traditional measurement practices—are similar to existing data. We compare the condition 1 ratings to Druckman and Levendusky (2019), which include similar measures. Our data reflect comparable levels of ratings (and also matches other work on particular measures which cohered with Druckman and Levendusky's ratings). Specifically, Druckman and Levendusky (2019) report the following means for out-party *voter* conditions: thermometer: 28.79, traits: 2.33, trust: 1.89, and social distance: 3.22. The means in our condition 1 are thermometer: 30.29 (SD = 24.04; N=456), traits: 2.49 (SD = 0.81; N=452), trust: 1.94 (SD = 0.89; N=454), and social distance: 2.99 (SD = 0.76; N=454). They are thus similar albeit it a bit higher for the thermometer, traits, and trust.

**Supplementary Information 5: Results for each type of affective polarization measure**

| | Feeling Thermometers | | Traits | | Trust | | Social Distance | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Coef. | Std. Err. | Coef. | Std. Err. | Coef. | Std. Err. | Coef. | Std. Err. |
| *Talk Conditions* | | | | | | | | |
| Rarely | 0.186 | 0.012 | 0.108 | 0.010 | 0.122 | 0.012 | 0.043 | 0.013 |
| Occasionally | 0.095 | 0.012 | 0.034 | 0.010 | 0.030 | 0.012 | -0.047 | 0.013 |
| Frequently | 0.019 | 0.012 | -0.004 | 0.010 | -0.017 | 0.012 | -0.098 | 0.013 |
| *Ideology Conditions* | | | | | | | | |
| Moderate | 0.067 | 0.011 | 0.037 | 0.009 | 0.048 | 0.011 | -0.004 | 0.011 |
| Extreme | -0.019 | 0.011 | -0.006 | 0.009 | -0.006 | 0.011 | -0.028 | 0.011 |
| Constant | 0.316 | 0.009 | 0.370 | 0.008 | 0.238 | 0.009 | 0.631 | 0.010 |
| N | 2,955 | | 2908 | | 2929 | | 2926 | |
| $R_2$ | 0.102 | | 0.058 | | 0.056 | | 0.042 | |

*All variables are coded 0-1. Terms and social distance are means of the answers to all questions of that type. In all cases, larger values indicate less out-group animus. All models are O.L.S. Models.*

**Supplementary Information 6: Differences in In-Party and Out-Party Ratings**

| | Coef. | Std. Err. |
|---|---|---|
| *Talk Conditions* | | |
| Rarely | -0.128 | 0.012 |
| Occasionally | -0.048 | 0.012 |
| Frequently | -0.023 | 0.012 |
| *Ideology Conditions* | | |
| Moderate | -0.028 | 0.011 |
| Extreme | 0.011 | 0.011 |
| | | |
| Constant | 0.285 | 0.009 |
| N | 2,872 | |
| $R_2$ | 0.044 | |

*OLS Model. Dependent variable is mean the difference between in-party and out-party ratings for all of the affective polarization questions. The variable can range from -1 to 1 with positive values indicating greater in-group preference.*

**Supplementary Information 7: In-Party Ratings**

| | Coef. | Std. Err. |
|---|---|---|
| *Talk Conditions* | | |
| Rarely | -0.025 | 0.007 |
| Occasionally | -0.028 | 0.007 |
| Frequently | -0.047 | 0.007 |
| *Ideology Conditions* | | |
| Moderate | 0.003 | 0.006 |
| Extreme | -0.001 | 0.006 |
| Constant | 0.700 | 0.005 |
| N | 2,897 | |
| $R_2$ | 0.015 | |

*OLS Model. Dependent variable is the mean in-party rating for all affective polarization measure. The variable ranges from 0 to 1 with larger values indicating greater positive views of the in-party.*

**Supplementary Information 8: Pure Independents**

| | Coef. | Std. Err. |
|---|---|---|
| *Talk Conditions* | | |
| Rarely | 0.051 | 0.018 |
| Occasionally | -0.023 | 0.018 |
| Frequently | -0.034 | 0.018 |
| *Ideology Conditions* | | |
| Moderate | 0.016 | 0.017 |
| Extreme | -0.004 | 0.015 |
| Constant | 0.502 | 0.013 |
| N | 953 | |
| $R_2$ | 0.036 | |

*OLS Model. Pure independents rated both parties and the level of analysis is the participant-party – that is, there are 2 cases for each participant. Standard errors are adjusted for 478 participants. Dependent variable is the mean rating for all affective polarization measure for each party. The variable ranges from 0 to 1 with larger values indicating greater positive views of the party's paritsans.*

**Supplementary Information 9: Reanalyzing Table 2's model with control variables.**

| | Coef. | Std. Err. |
|---|---|---|
| *Talk Conditions* | | |
| Rarely | 0.102 | 0.009 |
| Occasionally | 0.021 | 0.009 |
| Frequently | -0.025 | 0.009 |
| *Ideology Conditions* | | |
| Moderate | 0.030 | 0.008 |
| Extreme | -0.010 | 0.008 |
| *Control Variables* | | |
| Age | -0.017 | 0.012 |
| Woman | -0.003 | 0.007 |
| White | 0.025 | 0.014 |
| Black | -0.008 | 0.016 |
| Hispanic | 0.017 | 0.017 |
| Education | -0.019 | 0.014 |
| Income | 0.055 | 0.012 |
| Partisan Strength | -0.063 | 0.008 |
| Constant | 0.440 | 0.018 |
| N | 2,852 | |
| $R_2$ | 0.109 | |

*OLS model. All variables are coded from 0 to 1.*

**Supplementary Information 10: Condition-by-condition comparisons**

The following table provides the results of difference-of-means (t) tests for each pair of treatment conditions. This looks at the full out-party scale of affective polarization measures. In each cell, the top number reports the difference of means with positive values indicating that the column treatment's mean was greater than the row treatment's mean. The p-values are two-tailed p-values.

| Discussion Ideology | 1 None None | 2 Rare None | 3 Occ. None | 4 Freq. None | 5 None Mod. | 6 Rare Mod. | 7 Occ. Mod. | 8 Freq. Mod. | 9 None Sorted | 10 Rare Sorted | 11 Occ. Sorted | 12 Freq. Sorted |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | XXXX | -0.08 p=0.00 | 0.00 p=1.00 | 0.04 p=0.00 | 0.00 p=0.87 | -0.12 p=0.00 | -0.04 p=0.01 | 0.00 p=.80 | 0.02 p=0.11 | -0.07 p=0.00 | 0.01 p=0.70 | 0.05 p=0.00 |
| 2 | | XXXX | 0.08 p=0.00 | 0.13 p=0.00 | 0.09 p=0.00 | -0.04 p=0.01 | 0.05 p=0.00 | 0.09 p=0.00 | 0.11 p=0.00 | 0.02 p=0.28 | 0.09 p=0.00 | 0.13 p=0.00 |
| 3 | | | XXXX | 0.04 p=0.00 | 0.00 p=0.89 | -0.12 p=0.00 | -0.04 p=0.02 | 0.00 p=.83 | 0.02 p=0.16 | -0.07 p=0.00 | 0.01 p=0.74 | 0.05 p=0.00 |
| 4 | | | | XXXX | -0.04 p=0.01 | -0.17 p=0.00 | -0.08 p=0.00 | -0.04 p=0.01 | -0.02 p=0.11 | -0.11 p=0.00 | -0.04 p=0.01 | 0.00 p=0.95 |
| 5 | | | | | XXXX | -0.13 p=0.00 | -0.04 p=0.02 | 0.00 p=0.95 | 0.02 p=0.24 | -0.07 p=0.00 | 0.00 p=0.87 | 0.04 p=0.01 |
| 6 | | | | | | XXXX | 0.09 p=0.00 | 0.13 p=0.00 | 0.14 p=0.00 | 0.05 p=0.00 | 0.13 p=0.00 | 0.17 p=0.00 |
| 7 | | | | | | | XXXX | 0.04 p=0.01 | 0.06 p=0.00 | -0.03 p=0.04 | 0.04 p=0.00 | 0.08 p=0.00 |
| 8 | | | | | | | | XXXX | 0.02 p=0.23 | -0.07 p=0.00 | 0.00 p=0.91 | 0.04 p=0.01 |
| 9 | | | | | | | | | XXXX | -0.09 p=0.00 | -0.02 p=0.27 | 0.02 p=0.12 |
| 10 | | | | | | | | | | XXXX | 0.07 p=0.00 | 0.11 p=0.00 |
| 11 | | | | | | | | | | | XXXX | 0.04 p=0.01 |
| 12 | | | | | | | | | | | | XXXX |

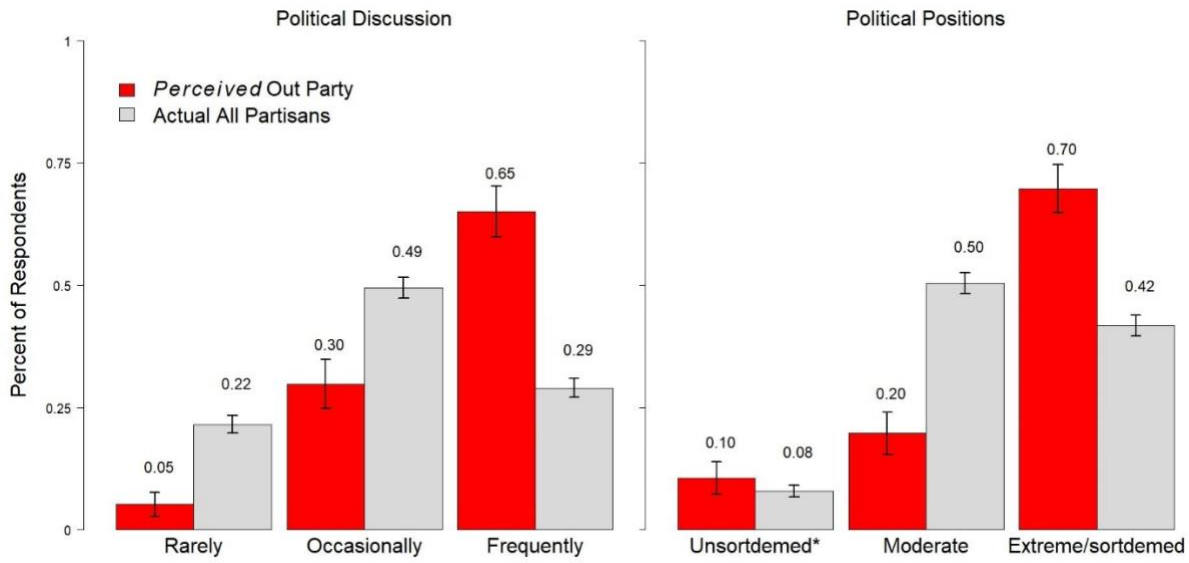
**Supplementary Information 11: OLS model for figure 1**

| | Coef. | Std. Err. |
|---|---|---|
| Condtion 6 (Rare/Moderate) | 0.123 | 0.013 |
| Condition 12 (Frequently/Sorted) | -0.054 | 0.014 |
| Constant | 0.437 | 0.008 |
| N | 993 | |
| $R_2$ | 0.12 | |

*OLS model of full out-party scale of affective polarization measures. Condition 1 (no discussion or ideology information given) is the reference category.*

**Supplementary Information 12: Perceptions and actual levels for Democrats and Republicans**

## A. Democrats (as perceived by Republicans and actual Democratic levels)




## B. Republicans (as perceived by Democrats and actual Republican levels)