

Affective Polarization in the American Public

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Abstract

Affective polarization in the United States – the gap between individuals' positive feelings toward their own political party and negative feelings toward the opposing party – has increased markedly in the past two decades. The authors review recent work on affective polarization, focusing on causes, consequences, and antidotes. In the last few years, there has been new work in all of these areas, and particularly when it comes to political consequences (as opposed to social consequences) and antidotes. Recent work shows a link between affective polarization and some concerning behaviors such as deleterious reactions to COVID-19; however, connections between affective polarization and dire outcomes regarding violence and democratic backsliding remain unclear. While possible antidotes to affective polarization focus on correcting stereotypes or priming common identities, more work is needed to determine which causes and antidotes apply most directly to *political* consequences.

A functioning political system needs competition between alternative visions of the public good, and thus, some level of ideological polarization. For much of the 20th century, scholars of American politics worried about weak parties and insufficient polarization (Fiorina 1980). This changed in the 21st century with scholars recognizing the resilience and increasing strength of partisanship at the elite level (Hetherington 2001).

Although many scholars remain skeptical about mass ideological polarization (Fiorina and Abrams 2008), it has become a point of consensus that *something* concerning is going on. Scholars have called polarization in the U.S. public an “acrimonious matter” (Finkel et al. 2020), and the general public certainly believes that polarization has increased (Lelkes 2016). What exactly is going on? It is now rather indisputable (Webster and Abramowitz 2017) that there has been an increase in affective polarization in the public – “ordinary Americans increasingly dislike and distrust those from the other party” (Iyengar et al. 2019), to the point where outgroup hate now exceeds ingroup love (Iyengar and Krupenkin 2018). Evidence suggests that this partisan animosity is frequently *not* tied to substantive beliefs (Mason 2018a, Dias and Lelkes n.d.). Scholars worry that affective polarization precludes opportunities for compromise and mutually beneficial policies (Whitt et al. 2020), weakens support for democratic norms (Graham and Svobik 2020), and undermines trust in government (Hetherington and Rudolph 2015) – all of which raise concerns about democratic backsliding (e.g., Kingzette et al. n.d.). Indeed, levels of partisan animosity parallel those found between religious groups in post-conflict societies (Carlin and Love 2016). In this chapter, we review recent research on affective polarization, its causes, consequences, and potential solutions, with a focus on the mass public in the U.S. We point out that the connection between affective polarization and most dire anti-democratic political consequences is unclear, at best, and thus, scholars need to think carefully about what they intend to target (e.g., affective polarization, support for democratic norms) when devising interventions.

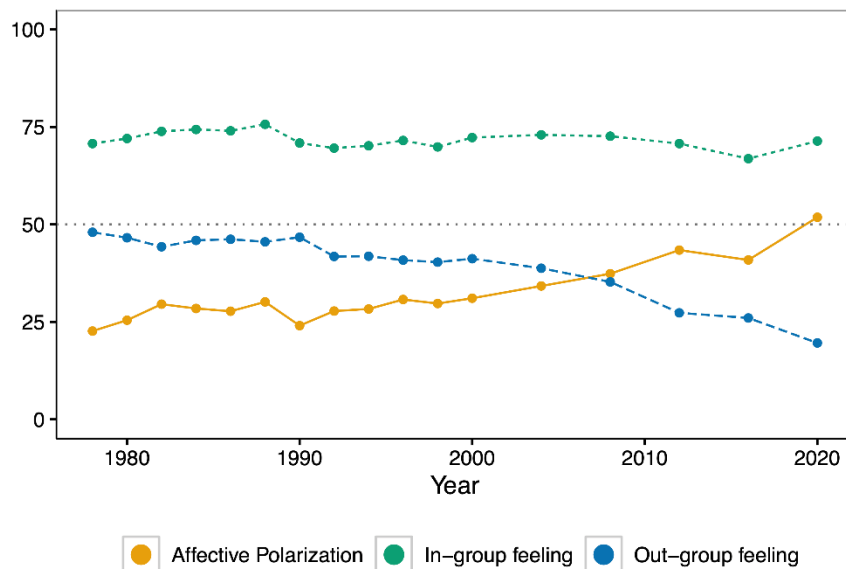
1. Defining Affective Polarization and Trends.

Historically, work on polarization concerned the *ideological polarization* of issue positions or attitudes. In the U.S. Congress, trends measured with DW-NOMINATE scores – a measure of a legislator’s ideological position, typically on a single left-right dimension based on the cumulative total of their votes – are clear. The two parties have become more internally homogenous and further apart from each other, and this trend has been driven by a rightward shift among Republicans (McCarty 2019). Trends in the mass public have been subject to more debate (Lelkes 2016). Some argue that the public as a whole is largely moderate, indicating little *ideological divergence* (separation) over time (Fiorina and Abrams 2008). Others argue that *ideological consistency* (i.e., ideological attitude constraint where attitudes across issues correlate with one another) of Democrats and Republicans has increased over time (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008). Lelkes (2016) provides recent data. He finds that ideological divergence (i.e., separation) and ideological consistency in the mass public have not increased over time, although both have increased among strong partisans. He also finds perceptions within the public that the public is polarized. Baldassarri and Park (2020) offer an alternative viewpoint that the entire electorate has become more liberal over time on social issues, but this change occurs more quickly among self-identified liberals compared with self-identified conservatives, leading to temporary gaps.

There is much more agreement that affective polarization – the gap between individuals’ positive feelings toward their own political party and negative feelings toward the opposing party – is occurring. This has generated an enormous literature on affective polarization and related

constructs such as partisanship as a social identity, partisan ambivalence, pernicious polarization, moral polarization, tribalism, and political sectarianism. There are several common survey measures used to assess levels of affective polarization: 1) feeling thermometers that asks respondents to rate how cold or warm they feel towards the parties on a 0 (very cold) to 100 (very warm) scale; 2) trait measures that asks respondents to rate partisans when it comes to being hypocritical, selfish, honest, or generous, among other traits; 3) trust measures about how much one can trust the parties; and 4) social distance measures that ask about individuals' comfort in having their child marry someone from another party or having a friend from the other party. Druckman and Levendusky (2019) find that the feeling thermometers, trait assessment, and trust measures correlate highly, while the social distance measures correlate less strongly with the former three. This is noteworthy for indicating that affective attitudes about the parties do not always correspond with (intended) behaviors.

Figure 1: Affective Polarization Over-Time



By just about any measure, affective polarization (i.e., in-party score – out-party score) has clearly increased in US public, with evidence indicating it is mostly driven by out-group animosity. Average feeling thermometer scores toward out partisans have dropped from 48° in the 1970’s to 20° today (Finkel et al. 2020). The feeling thermometer differential (in-party love – out-party hate) averaged about 20° in the 1970s and 1980s, and is now roughly -10°, indicating the strength of negative feelings toward the other party (Finkel et al. 2020). As shown in Figure 1, negative out-party affect continued to increase in the 2020 American National Election Studies (ANES) survey.¹

While research on Congress tends to focus on ideological polarization (McCarty 2019), or increases in partisan gamesmanship (e.g., F. Lee 2009), it is plausible too that negative affect has increased at the elite level. Partisan rhetoric among elites has increased sharply since the 1990s (Gentzkow et al. 2019) and campaign rhetoric has likely become more negative (Lau et al. 2017) (although what Gentzkow et al. 2019 consider partisan rhetoric may also constitute moral rhetoric, which is also an area of study, see Wang and Inbar, 2020). Scholars have further

¹ This graph was created by Sean Westwood and shared with us on February 16, 2021. The data all come from the ANES.

documented affective mass polarization in countries other than the U.S. Westwood et al. (2018) show that in four countries, levels of partisan discrimination exceed comparable levels between other relevant social groups (see also Gridron et al. 2020). That said, affective polarization is not always increasing for all countries (Boxell et al. 2020).

2. Causes of affective polarization

The most prominent theory of affective polarization posits that partisanship as a social identity underlies affective polarization, with changes to the media environment and social sorting serving as major drivers (Iyengar et al. 2019; Finkel et al. 2020). But the relationship between causes and consequences can be more dynamic and lead to possible feedback effects (Pierson and Schickler 2020). We organize the causes into external causes (media, ideological and social sorting, elite influence, and political institutions), and internal causes (social identity, stereotypes, motivated reasoning, traits).

External Causes

The effect of the changing media environment represents one of the most-studied external causes of affective polarization. Much work on media in recent decades concerns the echo chambers hypothesis, that partisans are now surrounded by favorable political information environments. The most recent work has tended to study the Internet (as opposed to, for instance, cable news), and focus on, or at least incorporate, measures of affective polarization (as opposed to other measures such as ideological polarization or vote choice). A variety of mechanisms (e.g., selective news exposure, politically homogenous online social networks, or online algorithms) plausibly explain how the Internet can contribute to affective polarization. Individuals' exposure to favorable content can prime their partisan identities and increase their negative evaluations of the opposing party (Iyengar et al. 2019). Overall, there is reasonably strong causal evidence to suggest that widespread use of the Internet contributed to the rise in affective polarization and will continue to provoke division in the public. There is, in our view, plenty of cause for concern in this regard (see Finkel et al. 2020), although our understanding of the magnitude and mechanisms of any effects is far from definitive.

Three recent studies illustrate what we know and do not know about the Internet's effect on affective polarization. Lelkes et al. (2017) use state right-of-way laws – which affect the costs of building Internet infrastructure – as an instrument for broadband Internet access by county. Using large-scale surveys in 2004 and 2008, they find that greater Internet access in a county increased polarized feelings toward the Presidential candidates. On the other hand, Boxell et al. (2017) assess ANES data from 1972-2016 by age cohorts according to their likelihood of using the Internet and social media. They find that the largest increases in a polarization index over time – which included a measure for affective polarization – occurred among the oldest cohort that was the least likely to use the Internet. Their predictive models find a small effect of Internet use on polarization. Regarding the effects of social media specifically, Alcott et al. (2020) conduct a large-scale experiment in which individuals – all of whom indicated they were willing to deactivate their Facebook accounts for the four weeks prior to the 2018 midterms – were randomly assigned to receive or not receive a \$102 incentive to deactivate. The authors find that Facebook deactivation reduces polarization, measured as an index. The effect on affective polarization was negative – deactivation reduces affective polarization – but not significantly, suggesting social media may have some effect. Taken together, the studies document that there is

an effect of the Internet on affective polarization, although the authors appear to agree it is small (Iyengar et al. 2019; Boxell et al. 2017).

It is difficult to draw conclusions about the mechanism between the Internet and affective polarization. Many studies investigate online social networks and the extent to which individuals encounter political information that is favorable to their political party or ideology (see Zhuravskaya et al. 2020). This is a widely-proposed mechanism of political polarization, although these studies do not always focus on affective polarization specifically. Bakshy et al. (2015) use a dataset of URLs shared on Facebook, and find that individuals do see more congruent information than cross-cutting information, both due to the homogeneity of news shared in individuals' networks and due to features of the Facebook Newsfeed. However, individuals may actually be exposed to a higher proportion of cross-cutting information in online networks than in their interpersonal interactions (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2011). Still, a higher proportion of homogenous information online compared to offline is not necessarily a precondition for the Internet to increase affective polarization. Lelkes et al. (2017) argue that the Internet increases individuals' total amount of news consumption, often through inadvertent exposure, such that existing imbalances in information exposure can have large effects on affective attitudes. Furthermore, the political content shared on social media is accompanied by signals about users' partisan identities, which are more visible than in offline interactions (Settle 2018).

Other experimental work provides more direct tests of the mechanisms by which encountering political information online may increase affective polarization. Shmargad and Klar (2020) expose respondents to a list of news articles ranked as most popular by either an in-party online network or an out-party online network. This treatment thus incorporates both the network homogeneity and algorithmic mechanisms, but the authors do not find a statistically significant effect on affective polarization. A number of studies look at the effects of exposure to cross-cutting information – if exposure to congenial information increases affective polarization, it should hold that exposure to cross-cutting information decreases it. Levy (2021) finds evidence of this – he randomly assigns individuals to an offer to subscribe to a news outlet that is either liberal or conservative, and finds that exposure to cross-cutting news decreases affective polarization. Under the right conditions, though, the opposite may be true. Bail et al. (2018) randomly incentivized individuals to follow a Twitter bot providing opposing political content for a month, and find that individuals became more ideological in the direction of their existing attitudes. This ideological polarization can contribute to out-party animus (see Bail 2021). The effect in this experiment may be due to the sample makeup of identified partisans who already visit Twitter at least three times a week, and the treatment dosage of exposing individuals to two dozen opposing Tweets a day. To sum up the whole discussion, the (small) effects of the Internet on affective polarization have been documented by a reasonable amount of evidence, but there are many conflicting theories and findings about the underlying mechanisms.

Social processes, particularly sorting in the electorate, also serve as a major driver of affective polarization. Beginning with a party alignment often attributed to the Civil Rights era in the 1960s, partisans have become more ideologically sorted (i.e., liberals are Democrats and conservatives are Republicans). Democrats and Republicans in the electorate could more clearly perceive party cues to endorse a particular ideology, and became likely to switch their ideological identification accordingly (Levendusky 2009) – conservative Democrats became liberal and liberal Republicans became conservative. In this sense, ANES data indicate that the

proportion of the public whose party identification and ideological identification were sorted increased substantially from 39 percent in 1972 to 57 percent in 2012 (Lelkes 2016).

Research also reveals increased public sorting on other characteristics. Racial, religious, and geographic identities too have become more aligned with partisanship. While partisan and demographic sorting can beneficially provide clearer political information to voters (Levendusky 2009), Mason (2018) robustly substantiates the argument that it does more bad than good. Social sorting turns partisanship into a “mega-identity,” whereby fewer and fewer individuals in the mass public experience the social cross-pressures that are thought to allow the political system to adjust to changing dynamics on the ground. As such, individuals become more involved in “real and invented conflicts” (13), affecting party evaluations, anger, and activism “independent of a person’s policy opinions” (15). Mason (2016) provides experimental evidence that such social sorting produces anger more consistently than policy attitudes or partisan identity primes alone. Put another way, the parties have become more socially distinctive and homogenous, leading people to harbor more animus towards the other party that looks less and less like them.

Sorting in the electorate may now be so complete that partisanship and race are enmeshed in the public mind. In three experiments, Westwood and Peterson (2020) provide evidence that priming one such identity will also trigger positive-or-negative affect toward the other. This is an important finding because it essentially raises questions about the extent to which negative partisan affect can be treated as separate from negative racial attitudes (see also Abrajano and Hajnal 2015; Bartels 2020). It also adds to the case that sorting is a major driver of affective polarization. Further indicating a highly sorted electorate, an emerging literature investigates how individuals use all kinds of previously non-political information – from baby names to beer preferences – to identify others’ likely partisanship (Carlson and Settle, n.d.). Separate from sorting, another relevant social process is conformity. Connors (2021) finds that levels of negative partisan affect may also be inflated due to social pressure. This could mean that reported levels of affective polarization are not as dire as they seem (as people over-report due to social pressure), or alternatively, the inflated levels of negative affect can create feedback that fuels true negative affect.

The interplay between elites and the mass public serves as another external driver of affective polarization. Gentzkow et al. (2019) analyze congressional speeches, showing that since the 1990s, differences in the speaker’s rhetoric can be increasingly predicted by partisanship. This reveals deep partisan distinctions in how party elites communicate. We mentioned how polarized elite cues can drive sorting; they also can influence affective polarization directly. Rogowski and Sutherland (2016) implement an experiment finding that individuals’ affective candidate evaluations are directly responsive to elite ideological polarization. Webster and Abramowitz (2017) similarly use ANES data to show that the public’s welfare attitudes are strongly related to affective evaluations of elites and the parties. Affective attitudes in the public may also be directly impacted by the tone of political elites (à la Gentzkow et al). Lau et al. (2017), for instance, use a dynamic process tracing experiment to indicate that diverse media environments with negative campaign rhetoric lead to greater affective polarization.

In addition to elite-public interactions, a variety of meso-level institutions contribute to intensifying affective polarization. Pierson and Schickler (2020) provide a framework by which meso-level institutions either “self-correct” against partisan division or become self-reinforcing “engines of polarization.” Whereas separation of powers, checks and balances, and federalism traditionally frustrate attempts at consolidating power, modern institutional arrangements

intensify division. The alignment of the parties, the alignment of interest groups with particular parties, and the weakening of state parties may all be expected, then, to intensify affective polarization. Others have similarly shown a relationship between negative affect in the public and the nationalization of U.S. elections and media (Abramowitz and Webster 2016, Moskowtiz 2020, Pierson and Schickler 2020). Gidron et al. (2020) provide a comparative perspective on institutions. Their analysis suggests that economic conditions – like unemployment and inequality – and majoritarian institutions – like single-member voting districts – are more strongly related to mass affective polarization, while elite ideological polarization is less strongly related.

Internal (Individual-Level) Causes

The main psychological factor theorized to underly affective polarization is partisanship as a social identity. Individuals develop lasting attachments to their party identification, which tend to endure through life even in the face of major political events like wars, recessions, or electoral landslides (Green et al. 2002). These theories highlight that many aspects of partisan behavior are expressive rather than instrumental, as partisans are likened to cheering sports fans (Green et al., 2002, pg. 221) or “two teams fighting over a trophy” (Mason, 2018, pg. 4). These partisan social identities can induce negative perceptual biases toward the outparty (Mason 2018, although see Green et al. 2002) such as stereotyping (Iyengar et al. 2012) that reinforces negative affect. Huddy et al. (2015) produce a well-known experimental result that electoral victories produce stronger emotional reactions from partisans than policy victories, indicating a likely triumph of expressive goals.

An emerging literature draws from the notions that negative partisan affect stems from stereotyping. This literature assesses the various dimensions of partisans’ attitudes toward one another. Ahler and Sood (2018) ask respondents to estimate the proportion of Democrats or Republicans that meet certain demographic characteristics and find that respondents overestimate the prevalence of “prototypical” characteristics by large margins. For instance, respondents estimate that 31.7% of Democrats are lesbian, gay, or bisexual, when the true figure in the sample was 6.3%. Individuals also overestimated the proportion of Republicans who were evangelicals by 20 percentage points. The authors further show that these misperceptions predict in-party loyalty and feelings of social distance from the out-party. Other studies investigate the content of party stereotypes (Rothschild et al., 2018) or other types of misperceptions. Partisans tend to view the other party as more ideologically extreme and engaged (Levendusky and Malhotra, 2016; Druckman et al., n.d.), more prejudiced (Moore-Berg et al., 2020), and more obstructionist (Lees and Cikara, 2020) than they actually are.

Notably, most accounts of affective polarization highlight the extent to which negative affective attitudes are *disconnected* from instrumental beliefs such as ideological or values-based beliefs about policy. American politics research has largely found the public to be innocent of ideology. One recent piece of evidence in this regard (Barber and Pope 2018) finds that self-described conservatives are likely to follow a “Trump cue” even when Donald Trump embraces policies that contradict conservative principles. Still, as many studies highlight partisans’ expressive behaviors as dominating instrumental ones, it would be a mistake to conclude that affective polarization has no connection to substantive beliefs. Indeed, studies cited above suggest that public-and-elite policy attitudes are intertwined with public affective attitudes (Webster and Abramowitz 2017; Rogowski and Sutherland 2015). For instance, personality traits – and thus one’s ideological profile – have been linked to pro-group attitudes (Zmigrod et al.

2021). And while trends in sorting and ideological polarization indicate the electorate has not become more extreme, a non-trivial amount of sorted partisans can still have meaningful beliefs. Taking these insights together, it is plausible that the misperceptions and negative affective found in Ahler and Sood (2018) and related studies are intertwined with individuals' instrumental beliefs. More work can likely address the interaction of partisan social identity and instrumental beliefs (see also Mummolo, Peterson, and Westwood 2019, Dias and Lelkes, n.d.,).

Partisan motivated reasoning, the process by which partisans reach pre-determined conclusions to uphold partisan attitudes or their existing attitudes, is another psychological process relevant to discussions about polarization. Motivated reasoning is often theorized to lead to ideological polarization, if individuals are more likely to believe pro-attitudinal policy arguments and counterargue counter-attitudinal arguments (Taber and Lodge 2006). Motivated reasoning, though, plausibly influences affective polarization through selective media exposure and social identity processes. In the process-tracing experiment mentioned earlier, Lau et al. (2017) argue that motivated reasoning drives selective exposure of campaign information. They then find that negative ads in high-choice media environments increase affective polarization. Regarding social identity, Mason (2018a) argues motivated reasoning underlies partisans' engagement in "imagined conflict." Motivated reasoning, then, could plausibly contribute to negative stereotype use, interpretations of partisan conflict, or even negative affective evaluations directly. That said, there is no work to our knowledge that empirically links motivated processing to affective polarization.

Finally, some scholars show how psychological traits influence affective polarization. For instance, Simas et al. (2020) investigate empathy. While empathy is often assumed as a potential balm for polarization, the authors argue it can exacerbate affective polarization if individuals with empathetic temperaments primarily direct their empathy toward their party ingroup. They will often avoid empathizing with the out-party, which can be costly. Furthermore, while empathetic individuals may be more likely to interact with members of the opposite party, this can backfire if out-party members engage in behavior that is viewed as harmful to the ingroup, triggering anger. The authors find that affective polarization is higher among individuals with empathetic dispositions, controlling for other factors. Another relevant trait is authoritarian disposition. Luttig (2017) argues that authoritarianism should facilitate affective polarization because it is associated with need for belonging and ingroup favoritism. While much work on authoritarianism focuses on political conservatives, the author finds evidence across multiple waves of ANES data that authoritarian disposition in either party is associated with higher polarization on party feeling thermometer ratings.

In this section, we have reviewed what is known about the causes of affective polarization. As noted throughout, there is room for further work clarifying the mechanisms that may or may not underly effects of the Internet; the interaction between trends in the mass public with those occurring in other institutions; whether motivated reasoning is tied to affective polarization; and the extent to which expressive, identity-based beliefs outweigh ideological or instrumental motivations in driving affective polarization.

Consequences of Affective Polarization

When it comes to the consequences of affective polarization, extant work focuses on non-political or social effects and political impacts. We discuss each in turn, highlighting extant gaps in the literature.

Non-Political Consequences

The rise of affective polarization led many to explore whether partisanship spills over into non-political domains. In what follows, we discuss three types of evidence: 1) measurement studies about what one thinks about those from the other party, 2) studies revealing the impact on social relationships including living arrangements and social gatherings, and 3) studies about economic discrimination based on partisanship (Iyengar et al. 2019).

A common approach to assess what one thinks of the other party is to use behavioral games. For example, Carlin and Love (2016) use a partisan trust game where one player is given a sum of money and can decide to share none, some, or all of it with the other player. The amount that is shared triples before going to the other player who, in turn, can decide whether to return none, some, or all the money. The amount of money the initial player passes along captures trust since that player is entrusting the other to return at least as much back. The authors varied the identity of the receiving player such that sometimes he or she was said to be from the other party. They find people exhibit much less trust of those from the other party – they do not share as much money. In fact, the partisan trust gap outsizes those based on race. Iyengar and Westwood (2015) offer similar results with behavior games. They also show that implicit partisan bias (e.g., subconscious antipathy towards the out-party) exceeds implicit racial bias and that partisans prefer their co-partisans for academic scholarships, regardless of academic qualifications and again dwarfing racial bias. Whitt et al. (2020) show that partisan biases in behavioral games has increased over time. At the extreme, partisans dehumanize one another, comparing out-partisans to sub-humans (e.g., rating how evolved partisans are on a scale from an ape like picture to a fully human picture) (Cassese 2019). Martherus et al. (2019) study the relationship between affective polarization (thermometers) and dehumanization and find a strong relationship. That said, the two concepts are not linearly interchangeable: dehumanization increases sharply at the very top of the affective polarization scale.

Putting the engagement issue aside, other work suggests that feelings of animus toward the other side affect social relationships including with whom one wants to live, date, and marry. For instance, Shafranek (2019b) studies roommate choice among college students, presenting them the prospective roommates' partisanship as well as their cleanliness, preferred bedtime, musical tastes, hobbies, values, race/ethnicity, religion, etc. He finds that respondents strongly prefer co-partisan roommates even in the presence of the other individuating information. Partisans avoid living with a member of the other party at roughly the same level as they avoiding someone described as “not at all clean and tidy.” That said, the effect of avoiding those from the other party is particularly acute when they also are interested in politics. This echoes work by Klar et al. (2018) and Druckman et al. (n.d.) who show that affective polarization depends on whether those from the other party are politically engaged in politics: polarization is much lower when the other partisans are less engaged. Moreover, in many cases, partisans overestimate the engagement of the other side (a la our prior discussion).

Partisanship also influences partner and family dynamics: Huber and Malhotra (2017) use data from online dating websites to show that partisan matching increases the likelihood of an exchange of messages by 9.5% (c.f., Klofstad et al. 2013). Further, married couple and parent-to-offspring partisan agreement has increased over time, with spousal selection occurring on political bases (Iyengar et al. 2018). Chen and Rohla (2018) use smartphone tracking data to analyze Thanksgiving dinners following the 2016 election. Using the partisan bent of individuals' home locations and assessing the likelihood that they shared Thanksgiving dinner with people with distinct partisan leanings, they find that that divided family dinners were

shortened by 20-30 minutes relative to 2015. Whether partisanship drives geographic choices remains debated (c.f. Cho et al. 2013, Mummolo and Nall 2017); however, it is clear that for one reason or another partisans live in areas where they have virtually no exposure to those from the other party (Brown and Enos 2021). Similarly, Lee and Bearman (2020) show that, over time, personal networks have become smaller and more homogeneous in terms of partisanship stemming partially from more topics being seen as political.

A third non-political area where affective polarization matters is the economy. McConnell et al. (2018) show that Mechanical Turk workers would charge 6.5% less to a co-partisan (relative to a non-partisan) for doing a copyediting job. They also find that partisans are more likely to purchase a discounted gift card from events involving their own party (versus the other party), and are more likely to forgo an economic bonus if it involves making a nominal contribution to the other party. Gift and Gift (2015) conduct an audit experiment where they sent ostensibly real job applications in a liberal and conservative county. They varied the presence of a partisan signal (e.g., having worked for a partisan campaign and been a member of the College Republicans/Democrats), finding that job seekers with minority (majority) partisan affiliations were substantially less (more) likely to obtain a callback (relative to candidates with no partisan affiliation).

Does Affective Polarization Affect Non-Political Relations?

We just presented what appears to be clear evidence that affective polarization influences 1) what partisans think of out-partisans, 2) social relationships, and 3) economic behaviors. Yet, in so doing, we have been purposefully vague about the measurement of “affective polarization.” With the exception of Martherus et al. (2019), none of the studies we reviewed explicitly connect measures of affective polarization (thermometers, traits, social distance items) with social biases. They thus do not reveal a direct relationship between such affective polarization measures and the outcome being studied (e.g., social relations). Instead, the studies implicitly or explicitly assume that the non-political biases reflect a form of affective polarization (e.g., Whitt et al. 2020: 3). This could be premature, however. It is plausible that partisan discrimination is not new to the era of affective polarization, and studies seeking to tie discrimination effects to affective polarization should employ feeling thermometers or other measures of affective polarization (when possible) to ensure that the individuals discriminating are indeed those who are affectively polarized (see Lelkes and Westwood, 2017).

Another unanswered question concerns the mechanism: it is not clear whether behaviors reflect dislike of the opposing party, broadly speaking, or whether individuals infer other information (such as issue positions or values) from party labels. The Shafranek (2019b) roommate study suggests group-based factors play a substantial role, beyond values. In contrast, Orr and Huber (2020) present evidence that policy congruence with another individual (e.g., shared issue positions) dwarf the impact of partisanship in evaluations of others (c.f., Bougher 2017, Rothschild et al. 2018, Lelkes 2021). This is notably the case when people take counter-stereotypic issue positions (e.g., a Republican endorses gun control). These ostensibly conflicting results suggest a conditionality to how partisanship works. It could be then that partisan discrimination depends on whether one fits the “stereotype” of those from the other party. Indeed, Dias and Lelkes (n.d.) find that while both partisan identity and policy congruence affect interpersonal affect, the former plays a greater role. Policy preferences matter largely when they signal partisanship on party-branded issues, although policy disagreement does partially drive negative affect on issues orthogonal to partisan reputations.

Political Consequences

Research on the political ramifications of affective polarization ironically lagged work on the non-political consequences (e.g., Iyengar et al. 2019). Yet, the last few years have seen a substantial number of inquiries regarding 1) participation, including electoral activities and social media behaviors; 2) policy attitudes and voting preferences; and 3) support for democratic principles. With regard to participation, Iyengar and Krupenkin (2018) show that as affective polarization has risen so has its impact on political participation. Specifically, over time, out-party animus has become a substantial driver of both voting and non-voting forms of participation (e.g., attending a rally, donating money). While most view participation as a normative good, the authors point to a troubling implication: 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 to campaign on their own merits; instead, they have good reason to try even harder to denigrate the opposition” (214). Affective polarization also seems to motivate forms of deleterious action on social media. Osmundsen et al. (2021) offer evidence that out-party dislike correlates with sharing fake news stories that denigrate the other side (c.f., Pennycook et al. 2021). Rathje et al. (n.d.) show members of the public more frequently like or retweet (with angry reactions) posts from the news media or members of Congress when they reference the other party.

Turning to policy attitudes and voting preferences, Druckman et al. (2020a) argue that the more a partisan dislikes the other party, the more he or she will be motivated to do the opposite of what the other party endorses (to differentiate him/herself). The authors test this in the context of COVID-19 (in the spring of 2020), showing a strong relationship between pre-pandemic measures of out-party animus and subsequent responses to the pandemic (also see Druckman et al. 2020b). For example, Republicans (Democrats) with high levels of out-party animus exhibit less (more) support for policies to combat COVID-19 (e.g., disagreement or agreement with closing non-essential businesses, stay-at-home orders). That said, the authors also find that the impact of out-party animus disappears in areas with a high prevalence of COVID-19 cases, as individuals prioritize their own well-being and accurate information. Abramowitz and Webster (2016) tie out-party animus to voting, showing that it correlates with the rise of straight-ticket voting: voters are much less likely to split their tickets and vote for the other party (also see Smidt 2017).

Closely related to policy attitudes, affective polarization could plausibly impact partisan motivated reasoning regarding factual information. This would be consistent with widespread concern for the effects of partisan reasoning on factual misperceptions (Flynn et al. 2017) or partisan discrepancies in factual beliefs (e.g., Peterson and Iyengar 2020). To our knowledge, only Garrett et al. (2019) have directly studied the possible effect of affective polarization on factual misperceptions, suggesting there is room for more work on how affective polarization might impact reasoning processes.

A third area of inquiry concerns democratic norms – that is, “the ‘fundamental values’ or ‘rules of the game’ considered essential for constitutional government” (McClosky 1964, 362). If these norms erode, then there is a serious risk of democratic backsliding or even failure (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Graham and Svobik (2020) find that partisans prefer candidates from their own party even if they violate norms such as electoral fairness, checks and balances, and/or civil liberties. They find this is particularly true for those who are extreme in their partisanship or policy view; however, they do not directly measure affective polarization. Kingzette et al. (n.d.)

do directly measure affective polarization and find a strong correlation such that polarized partisans oppose constitutional protections (e.g., limits on executive power) when their party is in power but support protections when their party is not in power.

In addition to the public's endorsement or not of democratic norms, affective polarization can also impact institutional functioning, which can be a problem for democratic governance. Hetherington and Rudolph (2015) show that affective polarization has politicized trust such that partisans only trust government when it is run by their party. This, in turn, leads to gridlock since representatives have little incentive to compromise. The authors (2017) explain that "partisans do not want their members of Congress to compromise with the devil." This could eventually have implications for how democracies function. Levendusky (n.d.) similarly points out that affective polarization contributes to perceptions of greater ideological difference between the parties (Levendusky and Malhotra 2016) that reduces support for compromise (also see Armaly and Enders 2020).

Does Affective Polarization Affect Political Relations?

As is the case with non-political consequences, there remains uncertainty about the severity of political consequences. For instance, some studies report more limited connections between affective polarization and support for democratic norms. Westwood et al. (2019) report that affectively polarized partisans are more apt to want to investigate the other party for corruption, but no more likely to endorse using tear gas on a group of protesters from the other side. This suggests some effects, but also limits to the impact of affective polarization on anti-democratic activities (also see Lelkes and Westwood 2017). Bartels (2020) finds that Republicans in January 2020 are more likely to hold anti-democratic attitudes (affirming that strong leaders sometimes bend the rules) when they have high levels of ethnic antagonism (e.g., fears that power and resources are going to immigrants and minorities) – party affect does not have a notable effect in his data. Finally, Kalmoe and Mason (2020) oddly find a small, inverse relationship between individuals' outparty evaluations and their support for partisan violence.

Taking all the studies together, it remains unclear whether affective polarization impacts support for democratic norms. Part of the inconsistency may stem from the use of distinct measures of norms, ranging from abstracted to concrete operationalization, and studies in varying contexts. Regardless, more studies on affective polarization and democratic norms are needed. Interestingly, too, Costa (2020) shows that people do *not* prefer representatives who promote negative partisanship (e.g., accusing the other party of being corrupt or immoral); rather, they attend much more to whether representatives share their policy views. In fact, legislators gain no advantage when they prioritize doing "everything it takes" to make sure the other party loses. This suggests citizens want legislators who make policy rather than ones who generate polarizing rhetoric.²

More generally, Broockman et al. (2020) point out that much of the work on the political consequences of affective polarization suffers from causal identification challenges since polarization is not exogenously manipulated. These authors have study participants take part in a partisan trust game where someone from the other party either acts in an untrustworthy or trustworthy fashion, which in turn leads to notable changes in affective polarization (using thermometer measures). Participants subsequently engage in various experiments on accountability (e.g., learning about issue positions of their representatives), adopting a party's

² Also, Shafranek (2019a) finds that when partisans observe their own party discriminate against the other party, they have negative reactions (i.e., their partisan identification declines, and they become depolarized).

position (cue taking), supporting bi-partisanship, endorsing democratic norms (e.g., have state legislators decide election results), and perceptions of objective conditions (e.g., unemployment rate under Trump). They find no impact of affective polarization on any of these outcomes. They conclude that “affective polarization is best understood as a social phenomenon that regulates individual and group decision-making and not attitudes toward representatives and democratic norms” (36).

What is one to conclude? It seems unwise to either conclude that dire effects have been proven or that there are no political effects. Citizens seem to prefer substantive representation, and there is insufficient evidence on the most extreme outcomes concerning democratic norms and violence. On the other hand, evidence on various forms of participation and conditional effects of policy cue-taking suggest affective polarization can matter. Furthermore, when affective polarization does matter, the consequences can be substantial. In the case of Druckman et al.’s (2020a) study which used an exogenous measure of out-party animus, affective polarization contributed to the flouting of public health guidelines and likely lead to the loss of life (e.g., Gollwitzer et al. 2020). Overall, the mix of evidence suggests that the political impact of affective polarization may be contextual; it likely depends on the nature of elite communications and social networks, the extent to which the topic is conflictual, salient and politicized, among other factors.

Throughout, we have drawn attention to a lack of consistency in the way different studies operationalize affective polarization and its relationship to constructs of interests. These challenges prove quite important in the study of political outcomes, which are likely the outcomes scholars are most concerned about. Broockman et al. (2020) argue that affective polarization is so confounded with other dynamics (e.g., partisan media, social sorting) that causal claims involving feeling thermometers often lack credibility. Yet, it is exactly that reason – that so many social forces shape affective polarization – that one must also be cautious in interpreting attempts to experimentally induce affective polarization, given it reflects over-time socialization forces. In some sense, the authors’ argument raises a larger issue of whether scholarly interest really concerns the acute consequences of partisan affect, or the consequences of the social processes underlying affective polarization. As another example, while Kalmoe and Mason (2020) do not find the expected relationship between respondents’ feeling thermometer ratings and endorsement of violence, the authors in other work (2018) do find that partisan identity strength predicts support (or at least lack of condemnation) for violence toward the outparty in some situations. Again, it is not clear that negative partisan affect has to be the direct cause of the political outcome for scholars to be concerned about polarization. Finally, few have considered the relationship between the social and political consequences of affective polarization. If affective polarization leads to social discrimination, it can alter the contexts in which people live (e.g., Brown and Enos 2021) and that, in turn, can shape political attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Sinclair 2012). The social consequences may be important *because* they feedback into political consequences, but few have studied this possibility.

Antidotes to Affective Polarization

A virtual cottage industry has arisen aimed at vitiating polarization. This includes a sizeable number of practitioner bridging organizations – such as Unify America, Braver Angels, and the One America Movement – that work with communities to connect those from different parties and ideologies. Scholars also have proposed various antidotes aimed directly at affective polarization (e.g., Finkel et al. 2020). These can be classified into psychological, social, and

institutional approaches. An underlying theme is to induce partisans to avoid stereotypes and recognize commonalities between those from the other parties.

Levendusky (2018) offers a widely discussed antidote building on the common group identity model from social psychology. He shows that when individuals are primed to recognize their American identity (e.g., reading an article about the strength of America and writing about what they like best about America), they exhibit much less animosity towards the opposing party. They come to view the out-party as part of a liked national in-group, rather than seeing them as a disliked partisan out-group. He finds this effect even for strong partisans, and replicates it in the field, showing that out-party animosity shrinks during times that prime national identity (e.g., July 4th, the Olympics) (also see Carlin and Love 2016).

An alternative approach is to accentuate intellectual humility, which is people's ability to recognize the fallibility of their knowledge. Krumrei-Mancuso and Newman (2021) show that those with higher levels of intellectual humility – measured with a scale that captures independence between intellect and ego, openness to revising views, respect for diverse viewpoints, and lack of overconfidence in one's knowledge – are more politically tolerant of those who disagree with them (c.f., Colombo et al. 2020). These findings lend themselves to potential interventions. Fernbach et al. (2013) show that instilling intellectual humility by asking people to mechanistically explain their preferences worked to moderate perspectives (although they do not directly look at affective polarization).

Another promising psychological approach involves corrections to misperceptions about the other party. Partisans tend to view those from the other party as more socially distant, ideologically extreme, politically engaged, contemptuous, and uncooperative than is actually the case. Correcting these incorrect misperceptions can reduce animosity. For example, Druckman et al. (n.d.) find that partisans vastly over-estimate the ideological extremity and engagement of a typical out-party member. Thinking of such an extremist generates animus, but that animosity shrinks when partisans instead rate the actual typical out-party member (i.e., ones who are relatively moderate). Lees and Cikara (2020) show that partisans perceive the other side as much more likely to be opposed to their party's activities than they actually are, and consequently perceive that party to be purposefully obstructive (a negative trait attribution similar to affective polarization trait measures). They find that providing participants with actual opposition beliefs of the other party substantially reduces negative perceptions, particularly among those with the most inaccurate perceptions (also see Ahler and Sood 2018, Moore-Berg et al. 2020). Ruggeri et al. (2021) replicate these results in 26 countries. That said, overcoming misperceptions on a mass scales faces challenges as misperceptions reflect institutional factors. As Wilson et al. (2020: 223) explain, “institutional polarization processes (elites, media and social media) contribute to people's misperceptions of division among the electorate, which in turn can contribute to a self-perpetuating cycle fueling animosity (affective polarization)” (also see Peterson and Kagalwala 2021).

A second antidote approach involves cross-party social contacts and relationships. Levendusky and Stecula (n.d.) show that having Democrats and Republicans come together and have political discussions substantially reduces affective polarization. The effect, which lasts at least a week, stems from the discussions leading partisans to realize they have more in common with those from the other party, have a better understanding their perspectives, and to have increased feelings of being respected. On the other hand, Carlson and Settle (n.d.) study the social dynamics of real-world political discussion, and are skeptical that real-world discussion is structured enough to engender the types of perspective-sharing effects found in controlled lab

environments. Still, other forms of contact can also be effective. Kalla and Brookman (2021) show that campaign activists who worked to persuade voters with opposing views became less affectively polarized thanks to those cross-party interactions. The mechanism at work is one of perspective-getting that humanizes and individuates out partisans (also see Warner et al. 2020). Levendusky (n.d.) goes further to see if contact can be emulated by asking people to think about friends, families, and co-workers they have from the other party – this intervention also reduces affective polarization. With regards to perceptions of elites, Huddy and Yair (2020) show that observing warm political interactions between opposing party leaders also reduces affective polarization, whereas learning about policy compromises between them does not. Wojcieszak and Warner (2020) similarly find an effect of vicarious contact, but in contrast to Levendusky (n.d.), they find just imagining a positive interaction with another partisan has indirect effects at best.

A final approach to reducing affective polarization involves institutional changes. One of the more direct tests of this comes from Zoizner et al. (2020). They argue that when the media covers politics as strategic it leads partisans to see the other side as similar in terms of having strategic electoral incentives while also minimizing ideological differences. They present evidence that, indeed, increased use of a political strategy media frame decreases affective polarization. Structural institutional reforms also could matter – perhaps most notably those aimed at reducing economic inequality and unemployment given the cross-national link with affective polarization (Gidron et al. 2020). Electoral reform could help as countries with majoritarian electoral institutions exhibit higher levels of affective polarization (Gidron et al. 2020).

In sum, the last few years has seen notable progress in identifying antidotes to affective polarization. The key seems to be to find ways that lead partisans to avoid stereotypes, and instead individuate those from the other party and recognize commonalities. This is a common formula for reducing hostility between any two groups. One challenge moving forward will be to translate these approaches into scalable interventions. Perhaps even more important is to study antidotes with an eye on the political consequences of affective polarization. For example, given the ambiguous relationship between affective polarization measures and democratic norms, those concerned about the latter may be better off devising distinct interventions that are not focused on polarization. Scholars should not assume, without evidence, that interventions relevant to one outcome will impact another.

Conclusion

Affective polarization is a key element of the current U.S. political environment, and there has been lots of new research in recent years illuminating the subject. While the direst predicted consequences of affective polarization have not been empirically demonstrated, we do think there is more than enough cause for scholarly and public concern. A fairly strong amount of evidence has allowed us to document the causes of affective polarization – such as the partisan social identities in conjunction the new media environment and social sorting, as well as other social, psychological, and institutional processes – the widespread social consequences like partisan discrimination in dating and family choice, and possible antidotes such as priming common identities or correcting misperceptions.

We can say with confidence that there are lots of open questions about affective polarization that the field can continue to understand better. As we have noted throughout, certain constructs that are distinct tend to get treated interchangeably across studies, and different

authors may operate from different overarching models of what causes what. For instance, we have a lot to uncover regarding the mechanisms underlying any media effects on affective polarization. Furthermore, while there is strong evidence for social identity and social sorting serving as a major driver, the possible role of instrumental or ideological beliefs can still be further clarified. When it comes to the social consequences of affective polarization, many studies assume that discrimination results from affective polarization or do not employ common measures of affective polarization. Even for the common measures, there is inconsistency in whether scholars use measures of in-party like, out-party animus or a combination (c.f., Iyengar and Westwood 2015, Druckman et al. 2020a,b). In some cases, people act to affirm their affinity for their own party while in others they are driven to differentiate themselves from the hated other party. More work is needed to figure out which matters and when.

Ultimately, all of the measurement challenges complicate our ability to understand political consequences. While direct study of the political consequences of affective polarization has increased markedly, there can be much more clarity on which causes – media, social sorting, social discrimination, or negative affect itself – most impact possible political consequences. Similarly, while work on interventions has also increased, we do not simply want to reduce negative affect without also reducing negative political consequences. From the evidence reviewed here, affective polarization has been shown to alter voting turnout and vote-choice (and likely, the corresponding incentives for campaigns), and the functioning of political institutions. The worst effects for democratic backsliding or violence may not be definitive from the research, but still represent a real possibility.

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