

Political Identify and Party Polarization in the American Electorate

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Bryce Summary

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"I want everyone treated fairly in this country. We have never gone wrong when we've extended rights and responsibilities to everybody."

– Barack Obama, May 14, 2012¹

"This president is moving us away from our founders' vision. Instead of limited government, he is leading us toward limited freedom and limited opportunity."

– Mitt Romney, April 12, 2012²

Evidence of ideological polarization among party elites has fueled a debate about the degree of polarization among the American public. Much of the debate has focused on an ideological or policy-based definition of polarization. For example, there is clear evidence of “sorting,” an increasing correspondence between a voter’s party identification and ideological position on a left-right spectrum (Levendusky 2009). In addition, there is evidence showing that the policy preferences of average Democrats and Republicans have moved farther apart on several key issues, particularly among the most engaged segment of the electorate (Abramowitz 2010; Layman et al. 2010).

However, more attention should be given to psychological components of polarization that emphasize political identity. Increased partisan disagreement among politicians and activists has fostered a more attentive public and a stronger sense of political identity among mass partisans (Hetherington 2011). One consequence is increased party loyalty on Election Day (Bartels 2000). But heightened elite partisanship also encourages the public to view politics in zero-sum “us versus them” terms. Increased party conflict at the elite level invites mass followers to internalize the broad outlines of those conflicts and denigrate their political opponents more than in the past. For example, Alan Abramowitz writes that growing political polarization may “contribute to a tendency to demonize the opposing party and its supporters” (Abramowitz 2013, xv).

We test these arguments with survey data from the American National Election Studies. As party elites have become more ideologically polarized, mass partisans have become more polarized in their basic evaluations of the two major political parties. In particular, followers of both parties express increasing levels of fear and contempt toward the opposite party and its presidential candidates, with the 2012 election cycle producing record levels of out-party demonization. Polarized ratings of the two major parties have many roots, including party identity, ideology, core values, group-based attitudes, individual predispositions, and the growth in partisan media.

¹ Killough 2012.

² Metzler 2012.

Part of our analysis includes public attitudes toward the Tea Party, the latest front in the partisan wars and a good example of the psychological basis of mass polarization. The strongest predictor of Tea Party support is the degree to which voters like the Republican Party and dislike the Democrats. Partisanship also structures how voters define the burgeoning Tea Party movement. Red meat rhetoric that demonizes the opposition is a staple of political campaigns and it sustains opposition parties when they are not governing. Since President Obama has occupied the White House, evaluations of the nation's direction are closely associated with contempt for the Democratic Party and its president. There is a deepening reservoir of fear and loathing of the opposing party that can be tapped by political leaders eager to mobilize the base for the next political battle, but contempt for the political opposition inhibits negotiation and efforts to find common ground in American politics.

Party Polarization

There is clear evidence of party polarization at the elite level of American politics. Polarization is typically defined in terms of a growing ideological gap between the two major political parties and increased ideological homogeneity within parties. For example, studies of Congress find that the center of the Democratic Party has moved to the left while Republican legislators have moved more sharply to the right, particularly during the past two decades (Bonica et al. 2013; Theriault 2013). In addition, studies of party activists find growing differences between Democrats and Republicans on economic, racial and cultural issues (Layman et al. 2010). Finally, recent examination finds a considerable degree of party polarization in American state legislatures (Shor and McCarty 2011).

There is some debate about the extent of ideological polarization among the mass public. Some, such as Fiorina and colleagues (2011) argue that most voters have centrist policy preferences that have not changed much in the aggregate in response to elite polarization. However, several other studies observe growing differences between Republicans and Democrats on a range of issues (e.g., Abramowitz 2010; Layman et al. 2010). Increased elite polarization means that elected officials more frequently divide along party lines on important issues of the day. The increasing frequency and intensity of these policy disagreements make the public more aware of policy differences between the major political parties (Hetherington 2011). Being aware of the major policy differences between the parties makes it easier for citizens to choose sides in the partisan political wars.

Furthermore, elite polarization heightens partisan identity and loyalty among the mass public. For example, Druckman and colleagues (2013) find that exposure to elite polarization increases the impact of party cues on public opinion, reduces the influence of

substantive information, and boosts confidence in one's opinions. Regardless of the substance of the disputes, mass partisans have a rooting interest in seeing their party win political battles. When elite partisan disagreements increase in frequency and intensity, mass partisans will feel a stronger sense of identity with their own political party and a greater inclination to define the opposite party in negative terms. Thus, some explain party polarization in terms of group identity, separate from ideological preferences.

Social identity theory argues that people derive their own sense of self from their membership in groups. The motivation to identify with an in-group (to which the person belongs) that is distinct from a perceived out-group is powerful (Tajfel 1978, 1982). As a result, people naturally tend to see the world in terms of in-groups and out-groups. More importantly, the theory predicts biased perceptions that exaggerate inter-group differences and generate positive feelings toward one's own group and negative feelings about opposing groups. Party identification is a central concept in the study of American voting behavior, and was originally conceived to resemble other social group identities, like religion (Campbell et al. 1960). Thus, social identity theory may help us understand partisanship and party polarization.

Several studies examine partisanship from the perspective of social identity theory. Most importantly, as elite party polarization is conveyed to the public, citizens become more certain about their own party identity (Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen 2012; Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013). Similarly, Greene (1999) finds that strong partisans stand out from other partisans in terms of their robust social identity with a political party. Furthermore, social identity predicts voter loyalty, activism, and ideological extremism even when controlling for strength of partisanship (Greene 2004). More recently, Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes (2012) apply social identity theory to document increasing affective polarization in the mass public in the United States and Britain. For instance, they observe rising levels of opposition to inter-party marriage and increased party polarization in trait ratings of party supporters.

[Figure 1 about here]

There is additional evidence of increasing denigration of the opposite party, particularly in the last decade. Figure 1 shows the percentage of partisans who report feeling angry or afraid about the opposite party's presidential candidate. The data are from surveys conducted by the American National Election Studies, and questions that ask if the presidential candidate of a particular party ever made the respondent feel angry, or afraid.³

³ The 2012 wave of the ANES surveys is unusual in that it included two interview modes. One sample of respondents was interviewed face-to-face, the traditional mode for ANES surveys, and the other sample completed the survey on the Internet. Several indicators show the Internet sample to be more polarized than the face-to-face sample. For any depiction of chronological trends, as in Figure 1, we only use the face-to-face sample of the 2012 survey.

While opposite party presidential candidates tend to inspire more anger than fear, both indicators increase over time. Compared to previous decades, both indicators also reach new highs in 2012, with almost half of partisans professing fear and almost two-thirds of partisans expressing anger in reaction to the presidential candidate from the opposite party.

[Figure 2 about here]

The most compelling evidence from Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes (2012) depicts growing mass polarization in the feeling thermometer ratings of the two major parties over the past thirty years. The thermometer questions ask respondents to rate groups or political figures on a scale from 0 to 100, with higher values indicating warmer feelings and lower scores indicating more animosity toward the object. We update their evidence to include the 2012 wave of the ANES surveys (see Figures 2 and 3). As the figures indicate, during the past thirty years Republicans and Democrats have consistently rated their own party positively, at approximately 70 degrees. On average, Democrats tend to rate their own party a couple points higher than Republicans rate the GOP.

[Figure 3 about here]

However, the figures show that ratings of the opposite party have declined over time, with a relatively steep drop occurring during the last ten years. Mean ratings of the opposite party were close to 50 degrees in 1980 but have dropped almost to 30 degrees in 2012. On average, Democrats tend to rate the GOP a point or two lower than Republicans rate the Democratic Party. Once again, the 2012 cycle produced record low thermometer ratings of the opposite party, for both Republicans and Democrats. To summarize the two trends, the gap in affection for one's own party and the opposite party, termed affective partisanship or "net partisan affect" (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012), has increased from roughly 25 degrees in 1980 to almost 37 degrees in 2012.

Why is this polarization in affective ratings of the two major parties happening? There is some debate about this question as well. Abramowitz (2013) argues that ideology is at the root of mass polarization. Ideological disagreements between the two parties have come define a growing portion of the policy agenda, and Democrats and Republicans have moved farther apart on the ideological spectrum. Thus, affective polarization may be a by-product of ideological polarization. As it happens, the rather dramatic increase in net partisan affect among the mass public over the past decade coincides with sharper ideological polarization in Congress during the same period.

Iyengar and colleagues (2012) argue that exposure to political campaigns, and negative ads in particular, explains mass polarization. Political campaigns tend to focus heavily on inter-party differences, which, according to social identity theory, should

strengthen partisan identity among voters. In addition, negative campaign advertising is devoted to demonizing the opposing party and its candidates, which should encourage partisans to view their opponents in a harsher light. Furthermore, negative campaigning in presidential elections has increased over time (West 2013), which also corresponds with the growing polarization in ratings of the two parties.

We believe that neither of these perspectives fully explains polarized attitudes toward the political parties. In addition to ideology, there are other political attitudes associated with party polarization in the United States. In addition to negative campaigns, there are other sources of partisan rhetoric that contribute to affective polarization in American politics. There are pluralistic roots of political attitudes in the United States (Kinder 1983; Clawson and Oxley 2013), and party polarization is no different. Core values that are common reference points in political debates, group-related symbols and attitudes, the growth of partisan media, and individual predispositions help explain polarized ratings of the two political parties. In the next section we explain these how these concepts relate to party polarization and then in the following section we provide some evidence from the 2012 ANES survey to support our hypotheses.

Source of Mass Polarization

As shown by Abramowitz (2010, 2013), the strengthened link between partisan and ideological identification is an important source of polarization in the United States. However, even though many political debates in American politics can be boiled down to ideology, elite discourse does not frame politics entirely in terms of liberal-conservative conflicts. In fact, political parties and candidates frequently avoid using terms such as “liberal” or “conservative” in their campaign rhetoric. This makes sense because few Americans use ideological terms to discuss politics, and many do not understand politics in terms of left-right ideological concepts (Converse 1964; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008; Goren 2013). A significant portion of Americans are unable to place themselves, or the major parties, on the ideological spectrum. Those that do tend to assume, sometimes incorrectly, that their favored candidates have the same policy and ideological positions as themselves. The tendency to project one’s own attitudes onto favored political figures is most pronounced among people with strong party attachments (Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen 2012). Thus, there are some limits on the ability of ideology to explain partisan conflict and polarization. Core values, group-based attitudes, individual predispositions, and the rise of partisan media also account for the state of party polarization in the United States today.

Core Values

To appeal to as many voters as possible, political campaigns frequently frame policy disputes in terms of core values or principles that can be applied to issues in a particular policy domain. Core values are general beliefs about how the world should work, and values guide a person's understanding of right and wrong. To the extent that partisan political debates are framed in terms of clashing values, then partisans are encouraged to view those conflicts in terms of right versus wrong and good versus evil. If different parties represent competing values, or different poles on the same value dimension, then core values may structure affective polarization in the United States.

Core values are widely held and used by voters. Virtually all citizens, regardless of their level of education or involvement in politics, adhere to a limited number of core values and are able to base their own voting decisions and policy preferences on those values (Feldman 1988; Goren 2013). Since firmly held values may conflict with one another on significant public policy debates, values are likely to structure partisan conflict. As a result, value conflict may be an important source of attitude polarization in American politics. We examine three core values that have become common sources of partisan conflict in American politics: egalitarianism, limited government, and moral traditionalism.⁴

Egalitarianism emphasizes equal opportunity and fair treatment for everyone, regardless of their individual attributes. High adherence to egalitarianism is associated with more liberal views in several policy domains, particularly social welfare issues. Low adherence to egalitarianism is associated with more conservative policy positions (Feldman 1988). Thus, egalitarianism correlates with Democratic partisanship. Limited government deals with the degree to which the national government should intervene to provide an economic safety net for its citizens. Those who believe that people are largely responsible for their own well-being favor limited government. High adherence to limited government is associated with more conservative views on economic policies and correlates with Republican partisanship and voting behavior (Goren 2013). Overall, egalitarianism and limited government help structure a persistent party cleavage in the United States since the New Deal.

Moral traditionalism focuses on "the degree to which conservative or orthodox moral standards should guide the public and private life of the nation" (Goren 2013, 5). Moral traditionalists oppose changing norms regarding family structure and believe that government should promote traditional family values. In contrast, moral progressives are

⁴ These are not meant to be an exhaustive list of core values in American politics. Additional values are covered by Goren (2013) and Clawson and Oxley (2013). Rather, egalitarianism, limited government, and moral traditionalism have structured party conflict in the United States for an extended period.

more tolerant of different lifestyles and resist government efforts to enforce traditional notions of morality (Hunter 1991). Moral traditionalism undergirds several policy debates in the United States, including abortion and gay rights, and moral traditionalism has been a source of partisan conflict since the 1960s (Goren 2013; Clawson and Oxley 2013).

Core values are distinct from left-right ideology as sources of partisan conflict. While each of the values described above can be mapped onto the liberal-conservative spectrum, none of them are perfectly correlated with ideology. More importantly, people who may not comprehend the liberal-conservative framework of ideological conflict can apply core values to voting and policy decisions. And since core values form the basis for beliefs about right and wrong, values are crucial for nurturing negative views of the political opposition. It is no surprise that partisan rhetoric frequently taps into core values. The quotations from President Obama and Governor Romney at the beginning of this paper offer two examples of value references during the 2012 presidential campaign. Obama's statement, made in connection with his announced support for legalizing gay marriage, contains egalitarian themes. Romney's statement, made at the annual convention for the National Rifle Association, emphasizes limited government. In sum, value conflict should help explain polarized ratings of the two parties. Those with more extreme beliefs on each value dimension should produce more polarized ratings of the two major parties.

Group attitudes

We also believe that attitudes toward social groups contribute to polarized ratings of the two political parties. Attitudes toward groups are an important source of policy preferences in the United States. Partisan rhetoric is frequently framed in terms designed to appeal to public stereotypes of prominent groups in society. In addition, some theories of partisanship are rooted in public perceptions of social groups commonly associated with each political party (Jacoby 1988; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002). As is the case with core values, people who do not follow politics very closely can still form beliefs about groups in society and rely on those beliefs to evaluate the political parties. We focus on attitudes toward two groups that reflect important partisan differences in modern politics: African Americans and women.

While many scholars have observed a decline in overt racism in the United States, Donald Kinder and Lynn Sanders (1996) argue that a new type of racial prejudice, termed "racial resentment", has emerged in the wake of the civil rights movement. Racial resentment centers on a belief that a lack of work ethic accounts for inequality between black and white Americans. Since African Americans identify heavily with the Democratic Party, racial attitudes have likely partisan consequences. Racial resentment has not diminished over the last two decades and it is associated with policy preferences on issues

such as affirmative action and the death penalty (Kinder and Sanders 1996; Clawson and Oxley 2013). In addition, racial resentment is associated with Republican partisanship and voting behavior (Valentino and Sears 2005). Finally, the partisan impact of racial resentment may be stronger now that the first African American president in the nation's history occupies the White House (Tesler and Sears 2010; Kinder and Dale-Riddle 2012). Elite political rhetoric and media coverage of politics can arouse racial resentment in subtle ways. For example, when Newt Gingrich referred to Barack Obama as "the food stamp president" during the 2012 presidential campaign (Weiner 2012), the remark may have tapped into racial resentment. Since there are substantial differences between black and white voters in their support for the two major parties, we expect racial resentment to be associated with polarized ratings of the parties.

We also examine attitudes involving the status of women in American society. Modern sexism revolves around reactions to changing gender roles and beliefs about the degree that discrimination against women still persists (Glick and Fiske 2011). There is a consistent gender gap in voting and party identification, with women more supportive of the Democratic Party and men favoring the Republican Party (Clawson and Oxley 2013). Furthermore, there is persistent partisan conflict over issues specific to women, such as abortion, contraception, equal pay, and workplace rights. For example, the Democratic Party recently campaigned on an alleged GOP "war on women," highlighting some of these issues. The "war on women" rhetoric likely stirs beliefs about modern sexism when voters evaluate the two parties. Thus, attitudes about the role of women are likely to be a source of polarized ratings of the two major parties.

Partisan Media

Thus far we have discussed attitudes that are expected to be primed by partisan rhetoric. It is also important to consider the sources of partisan rhetoric in elite discourse. In addition to negative campaigns, the recent growth of partisan media on cable television, talk radio, and the Internet is another likely source of polarization in American politics. Partisan media programs and websites tend to feature hyperbolic language and fear mongering that highlights the latest outrage perpetrated by the political opposition (Berry and Sobieraj 2013). Thus, partisan media seems to be an effective mechanism for nurturing negative attitudes toward the opposite party.

There is evidence that consumers of partisan media become more polarized by the experience. In a series of controlled experiments, Levendusky (2013a) finds that exposure to like-minded media produces moves citizens to adopt more extreme policy positions. In addition, exposure to partisan media is associated with more negative ratings of the opposite party and reduced support for bipartisanship (Levendusky 2013b). Mutz (2007)

argues that two features of televised political discourse, incivility and close-up camera shots of speakers, cause viewers to treat opposing points of view as less legitimate. In two experiments, she finds that exposure to televised debates caused viewers to rate opposing candidates less favorably, producing more polarized ratings of their preferred and opposing candidates. Incivility and close-up camera angles are more common features of partisan television media than mainstream television networks. Thus, we expect that consumers of partisan media will exhibit more polarized ratings of the two major political parties.

Predispositions

Finally, we hypothesize that some individuals have predispositions that foster more negative views of the political opposition. One such trait is the “need to evaluate,” which reflects a person’s capacity for being judgmental. In other words, the need to evaluate indicates the degree and frequency with which someone rates objects as good or bad. Those who are high in the need to evaluate tend to hold more intense opinions (Jarvis and Petty 1996). When it comes to partisan politics, we expect that the need to evaluate is associated with more negative opinions of the opposition and more polarized ratings of the two major parties.

A second predisposition relevant to partisan polarization is authoritarianism, a worldview “concerned with the appropriate balance between group authority and uniformity, on the one hand, and individual autonomy and diversity, on the other” (Stenner 2005, 14). Authoritarians value conformity and order and tend to view with world in black and white terms. At the other extreme, libertarians value diversity and appreciate nuance. Authoritarianism is associated with public preferences on issues such as gay rights, military intervention abroad, and the balance between civil liberties and the need to prevent terrorist attacks (Hetherington and Weiler 2009).

Given the association between political attitudes and authoritarianism, it would appear that authoritarianism is related to party identification. We have a somewhat different point of view. Hetherington and Weiler (2009) argue that authoritarianism structures partisanship, with those high on the authoritarianism spectrum gravitating toward the Republican Party and voters low in authoritarianism favoring the Democratic Party. While they find evidence to support the link between authoritarianism and partisanship, that is not the entire story. Hetherington and Weiler (2009) also find an asymmetry when examining authoritarianism and feeling thermometer ratings of the two parties. In addition, they find a considerable variation on the authoritarianism dimension within both parties. In examining partisan polarization, it is important to keep in mind that authoritarians make stronger distinctions between in-groups and out-groups (Stenner

2005). Thus, we hypothesize that authoritarians, regardless of the party with which they identify, hold more negative opinions of their political opponents and more polarized ratings of the two major parties. To summarize, we believe that there are several roots of partisan polarization in the mass public. In the next section we test our hypotheses with public opinion data from the 2012 election.

Predictors of Net Partisan Affect

We examine the predictors of polarized party evaluations using data from the American National Election Studies 2012 Time Series survey (ANES 201). The sample includes 2,054 face-to-face interviewees and 3,860 who completed the survey on the Internet. Our measure of polarized partisan attitudes is the thermometer rating for one's own party minus the thermometer rating for the opposition party, dubbed "net partisan affect" by Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes (2012).

Before getting to measures of our concepts described above, we include several control variables to account for alternative explanations of polarization. First, we control for strength of party identification. As Figure 4 indicates, strong partisans produce significantly more polarized ratings of the two parties than others, and the difference between strong partisans versus weak and leaning partisans has grown by about five degrees over the past 30 years.⁵ The differences between weak and leaning partisans are not nearly as pronounced. For strong partisans, the difference in party thermometer ratings increased from roughly 39 degrees in 1978 to over 56 degrees in 2012. Net partisan affect has risen for other partisans as well, but not quite as steeply as for strong partisans. In any case, we control for strength of partisanship by including separate dummy variables for strong and weak partisans in the analyses below.

[Figure 4 about here]

Ideology is another common predictor of party polarization, as more extreme ideological positions are associated with more polarized ratings of the parties. We control for ideology by using the item that asks respondents to place themselves on a seven-point scale from extremely liberal at one end to extremely conservative at the other end. A follow-up question asked moderates and those who could not place themselves on the scale to choose one side of the ideological spectrum or the other. We used the follow-up item to place many of those uncertain ideologues as slightly liberal or slightly conservative,

⁵ For all analyses in this paper we treat Independents who lean toward a party as partisans.

minimizing the amount of missing data. Higher values on the scale indicate more conservative respondents.

It is not clear why the Internet sample is more polarized than the face-to-face sample in the 2012 ANES data. Perhaps the lower response rate for the Internet mode produces a more politically extreme sample of respondents. Perhaps the Internet mode of the survey fosters the expression of more extreme attitudes. We include a dummy variable for the Internet mode of survey response as another control variable. Net partisan affect is approximately six degrees larger, on average, for the Internet respondents than for the face-to-face respondents. We also control for residents of battleground states, to test the hypothesis that exposure to the presidential campaign produces more polarization. On average, net partisan affect was just one to two degrees higher in battleground states in 2012.

Finally, we treat the two predispositions, need to evaluate and authoritarianism, as control variables before estimating the impact of core values, group-based attitudes and exposure to partisan media. We measure need to evaluate by averaging responses to two questions about how frequently they form opinions about things.⁶ Higher values indicate a stronger need to evaluate. We measure authoritarianism based on four forced-choice questions that ask about preferred traits in children (independence vs. respect for elders; curiosity vs. good manners; obedience vs. self-reliance; and being considerate vs. well-behaved). Responses to the four questions are averaged together to create the authoritarianism scale.⁷ Higher values indicate a more authoritarian worldview.

The associations between the control variables and net partisan affect are presented in Table 1 separately for Democrats and Republicans. We use ordinary least squares regression to estimate the impact of each variable on net partisan affect. For each variable we use the model estimates to calculate how much the gap in party thermometer ratings changes, on average, when moving from the 10th percentile to the 90th percentile on each independent variable. We use this approach because some independent variables have highly skewed distributions. Not surprisingly, strength of partisanship is a potent predictor of net partisan affect. Holding the other control variables constant, strong partisans rate the two parties roughly 25 degrees farther apart than do leaning partisans. Weak partisans produce party thermometer ratings only a few degrees more polarized than leaning partisans. Ideology also influences net partisan affect in the expected direction. Moving from low to high conservatism among Republicans increases the gap between party feeling thermometer ratings by almost 12 degrees. Moving in a more conservative direction among Democrats reduces the gap in party ratings by a similar amount.

⁶ The questions asked whether the respondent has opinions about many things and if the respondent has more opinions than the average person. The reliability coefficient (Cronbach's α) for these items is .66.

⁷ The reliability coefficient (Cronbach's α) for the items in the authoritarianism scale is .60.

[Table 1 about here]

We also find fairly consistent associations between the two predispositions and net partisan affect. Moving from low to high values on the need to evaluate scale increases the gap between party ratings by roughly 5 degrees, for members of both parties. Similarly, moving from low to high values on authoritarianism polarizes party thermometer ratings by roughly 8 degrees. Since both measures yield similar estimated effects for Republicans and Democrats, this suggests that the predispositions contribute to party polarization in fairly uniform ways.

Turning to our other hypothesized predictors of party polarization, the ANES data also provide batteries of questions that we use to measure adherence to core values. We measure egalitarianism using six items that ask respondents the degree to which they agree or disagree with statements about equal rights, equal opportunity, fair treatment, and related topics. We averaged responses to the six questions to create the egalitarianism scale.⁸ Higher values indicate a stronger belief in equality. The ANES survey contains four questions to measure beliefs about limited government. The items ask about preferences for free markets, preferences for more or less government, why government has gotten bigger, and the amount of preferred regulation of business. We averaged responses to the four questions to create the limited government scale.⁹ Higher values indicate a stronger preference for limited government. Finally, we measure moral traditionalism using four questions that ask respondents the degree to which they agree or disagree with statements about newer lifestyles, changing moral behavior, traditional family values, and tolerance for different moral standards. Responses were averaged together to create a moral traditionalism scale.¹⁰ Higher values indicate a stronger preference for traditional moral values.

We measure group-based attitudes in a similar manner. Racial resentment is measured based on four questions that ask respondents the degree to which they agree or disagree with statements about the status of blacks in society (Clawson and Oxley 2013, 196). Responses to these four items are averaged together to create the scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = .80$). Higher values indicate higher levels of racial resentment. The ANES survey contains six questions to measure beliefs about modern sexism. The items ask about how serious sex discrimination is, media coverage of sex discrimination, whether women demanding equality seek special favors, discrimination in hiring and promotion, whether complaining about sex discrimination creates more problems, and whether women have as many

⁸ The egalitarian items form a reliable scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = .78$).

⁹ The limited government items form a reliable scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = .77$).

¹⁰ The reliability coefficient (Cronbach's α) for the items in the moral traditionalism scale is .77.

opportunities as men. We averaged responses to the six questions to create a modern sexism scale.¹¹ Higher values indicate greater concern about the persistence of modern sexism.

Finally, we measure exposure to both flavors of partisan media as well as a general measure of mainstream news media exposure. The ANES survey included a long series of questions asking which TV and radio programs they regularly consume and which web sites they regularly visit. We selected nineteen sources, from Rush Limbaugh to Hannity to the Drudge Report, as examples of conservative media. We averaged together responses indicating the number of those media sources that people frequented regularly.¹² Higher values indicate greater exposure to conservative media. We apply the same measurement method to nineteen liberal media sources, including Huffington Post, MSNBC, National Public Radio, and the *New York Times*.¹³ Higher values indicate greater exposure to liberal media. Partisan media exposure is confined to a fairly small slice of the American electorate. Based on these measures, the median respondent is not a regular consumer of any liberal media or any conservative media. We also constructed a scale of general attention to mainstream news based on how many days a week respondents follow the news on TV, radio, the Internet, and in newspapers.¹⁴ Higher values indicate more frequent general news exposure. The median respondent follows the news three days a week through those sources.

[Table 2 about here]

In Table 2 we report the bivariate associations between net partisan affect and the remaining predictors, while controlling for the variables depicted in Table 1. We use the same method used in Table 1 and report associations separately for Democrats and Republicans. All three core values polarize evaluations of the political parties in the expected direction. Moving from low to high values on egalitarianism among Democrats increases the expected gap in party ratings by almost 16 degrees. Among Republicans, strong belief in limited government and moral traditionalism (to a lesser degree) generate more polarized evaluations of the two major parties. Core values can also help us explain the growth in party polarization during the last few decades. The correlation between moral traditionalism and the seven-point party identification scale has grown from .09 in 1986 to .37 in 2012. Similarly, the correlation between egalitarianism and partisanship has grown stronger (from -.33 in 1984 to -.45 in 2012). The results also reveal the moderating impact of cross-pressured party identifiers. Party members who adhere to values that conflict with the base position of their party (egalitarianism for Republicans, limited

¹¹ The reliability coefficient (Cronbach's α) for the items in the modern sexism scale is .66.

¹² The conservative media items form a reliable scale (Cronbach's α = .86).

¹³ The liberal media items form a reliable scale (Cronbach's α = .77).

¹⁴ The reliability coefficient (Cronbach's α) for the items in the general news exposure scale is .43.

government and moral traditionalism in the case of Democrats) are less polarized in their ratings of the two parties.

We also find evidence of our hypothesized effects of group-based attitudes on party polarization. Moving from low to high values in racial resentment among Republicans increases the gap in party thermometer ratings by 10 degrees. For Democrats, higher levels of racial resentment mutes affective party polarization. Racial resentment also helps account for the growth in affective polarization since the 1980s, as the correlation between party identification and racial resentment has increased from .15 in 1986 to .38 in 2012. Turning to gender attitudes, increasing concern about modern sexism among Democrats produces more polarized ratings of the two major parties, but has a more muted impact on Republicans.

Compared to the attitudes and predispositions examined here, the overall impact of media exposure on party polarization is rather weak. This is due in part to the fact that exposure to partisan media, as we have defined it, is very narrow. For example, the median Republican is not a regular consumer of any of the 19 conservative news sources we examined. Similarly, the median Democrat does not frequent any liberal sources either. Nevertheless, we do find that Republican exposure to conservative media is associated with an 8 degree increase in the gap between party thermometer ratings. Exposure to liberal media has a weaker impact on party polarization. There is more widespread public exposure to general sources of news in the United States, but attention to general news sources does not appear to do much in the way of affective polarization. Overall, while the partisan media have grown substantially over the past several years, they may not contribute much to mass polarization because of the electorate's limited exposure to partisan media.

Thus far, we have provided some evidence of the pluralistic roots of party polarization in the United States. Party identity, ideology, core values, group attitudes, predispositions, and, to a lesser degree, media exposure, all appear to contribute to polarized evaluations of the major parties. This begs the question of whether polarized views of the parties matters in American politics. We think increased denigration of the opposite party has several important consequences. In the next sections, we examine two areas where net partisan affect contributes to our understanding of public opinion: attitudes toward the Tea Party, and evaluations of the country's direction.

The Tea Party and Out-Party Denigration

In a relatively short period of time the Tea Party has become an important force in American politics, putting its stamp on debates about government spending and the

national debt and influencing Republican primary elections around the country. The Tea Party has also emerged as a major source of opposition to President Obama and the Democratic Party agenda in national government (Skocpol and Williamson 2013). We examine public support for the Tea Party using data from the first wave of the ANES Evaluations of Government and Society Survey (EGSS1), conducted via Internet in October of 2010. This was one of the earliest national surveys to include questions about the Tea Party.

We estimate a simple statistical model of support for the Tea Party, which is measured on a scale from 1 (oppose a great deal) to 7 (support a great deal). Previous research finds that support for the Tea Party is largely confined to whites (Skocpol and Williamson 2013), so we limit our analysis to non-Hispanic white respondents to the survey. Some argue that Tea Party support is motivated by ideological opposition to the policies of the Democratic Party under President Obama (Abramowitz 2013; Summary 2013). We try to mimic these studies in creating a policy conservatism scale based on several binary choice questions that ask about opposition to prominent legislative items early in the Obama presidency. We created a scale from seven of these legislative items, including the stimulus bill, the children's health insurance program (CHIP), cap and trade legislation, the Affordable Care Act, regulation of the financial industry, ending the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy, and federal funding of stem cell research. Our measure indicates the proportion of those legislative items that the respondent opposed.¹⁵ Higher values indicate more conservative policy preferences, so the policy measure should be positively associated with support for the Tea Party.

Some studies find that support for the Tea Party is motivated by racial resentment and a reaction to the election of the first African American president in the nation's history (Parker and Barreto 2013; Abramowitz 2013; Summary 2013). We create a racial resentment scale using the same four survey questions described above (Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$). Higher values indicate higher levels of racial resentment, so racial resentment should be positive correlated with support for the Tea Party.

We hypothesize that support for the Tea Party in 2010 also represents a strong partisan reaction to the first instance of unified Democratic Party control of Congress and the White House since 1994. The Tea Party is an outlet for GOP anger and unhappiness at finding themselves in the loyal opposition. Thus, net partisan affect (the degree to which one likes the GOP and dislikes the Democrats) should be a good predictor of support for the Tea Party. The EGSS1 survey did not include party feeling thermometer questions to allow us to measure net partisan affect in the same way as with the 2012 ANES data. However, there is an acceptable substitute: four questions that ask how much respondents liked or

¹⁵ The policy conservatism items form a reliable scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = .80$).

disliked the Democratic Party, Barack Obama, the Republican Party, and Sarah Palin on a scale from 1 (like a great deal) to 7 (dislike a great deal). We reverse the scale for the Republican and Palin items and average the four responses to create a net partisan affect scale.¹⁶ Higher values indicate greater positive affect for the GOP, so the scale should be positively associated with Tea Party support.

[Table 3 about here]

We find that when controlling for policy preferences and racial resentment, support for the Tea Party is still strongly associated with the degree to which one dislikes Democrats and likes Republicans (see Table 3). Moving from the 10th percentile to the 90th percentile on net party affect increases expected support for the Tea Party by 2.7 points, almost half of the range on the support scale. By comparison, policy conservatism and racial resentment have smaller effects on Tea Party support (.9 points and .6 points, respectively). Overall, these results suggest that the Tea Party can be understood as a vehicle for those who dislike the Democratic Party the most. It is likely that increasing party polarization helped make the Tea Party possible. A deepening reservoir of hostility to the Democratic Party among Republicans provides fertile ground for Tea Party appeals. With growing contempt for the GOP evident among Democrats, perhaps a similar movement on the Left is not far behind.

To further examine attitudes toward the Tea Party we coded responses to an open-ended question asking what the Tea Party stands for, also from the first wave of the EGSS survey.¹⁷ The data file included the full text of the response provided by each person. We coded responses into eight different categories, based on concepts developed by Brewer (2009) and the American National Election Studies coding for questions about what people like and dislike about the two major political parties. These categories included Economic Policy, Non-economic Policy, Philosophy, Government Management, General Image, People, Foreign Policy, and None (or Don't Know). Each respondent was coded into at least one of these eight categories. With the exception of the None category, the categories are not mutually exclusive. Thus, a substantive response could be coded into multiple categories.¹⁸ The criterion for the placement of the responses into each category is as follows.

The Economic Policy category included responses that referenced the economy. For instance, references to taxes, spending, as well as fiscal and monetary policy.¹⁹ Non-Economic Policy responses consisted of those that were non-economic in nature, or that

¹⁶ The reliability coefficient (Cronbach's α) for the net partisan affect scale is .86.

¹⁷ The question asks "What does the Tea Party stand for?"

¹⁸ For instance, consider the following response: "Reduction of Taxes. Social Conservatives." This response was coded as both Philosophy for its reference to social conservatism and as Economic for the reference to taxes.

¹⁹ For instance, the open-ended response "lower taxes" was coded as an Economic Policy response.

referenced domestic policies specifically, such as welfare, education, and gun control.²⁰ The Philosophy category included ideological phrases, such as “conservative,” as well as associated values including less government, traditional values, and states’ rights.²¹ The Government Management category included responses that referenced how the government was run or how it operated. This included responses pertaining to wasteful government spending, government incompetence, and corruption.²² The General Image category included negative or positive responses without ideological or issue content, such as whether respondents liked or disliked the Tea Party as well as specific references to party labels. For instance, affective responses such as the Tea Party stands for “craziness” or “They stand for the people” were coded as General Image. The People category included responses that referenced a particular individual. For example, these include responses mentioning Sarah Palin or other politicians associated with the Tea Party.²³ The Foreign Policy category covered specific responses related to foreign affairs such as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan or more general responses such as those referring to isolationism.²⁴ The None (or Don’t Know) category pertained to responses that were left blank or where responses stated that they did not know the answer to the question.

The first set of results aggregates all responses by category and illustrates the frequency with which respondents identified the Tea Party as being associated with each of the eight categories described above. The highest percentage of respondents (44%) identified the Tea Party using a general image, while 29% described the Tea Party in terms of general philosophy, and 23% mentioned an economic policy. Far fewer respondents identified the Tea Party with a non-economic policy (3%), government management (2%), a person or people (1%), or foreign policy (0.2%). More than one-in-three respondents (35%) either did not know what the Tea Party stands for or did not answer the question. These results are interesting in that, roughly one year into the Tea Party’s existence, respondents used a general image to define the Tea Party more frequently than they referred to philosophy as a defining feature. Further, respondents used a general image to define the Tea Party roughly twice as often as they used an economic policy to do the same.

The second set of results divides the highest-frequency response categories of general image, philosophy, and economic policy by party identification and orientation toward the Tea Party. The height of each bar in Figure 5 indicates what percent mentioned

²⁰ For instance, the open-ended response “anti-public education” was coded as Non-economic Policy response.

²¹ For instance, the open-ended response “reducing government power” was coded into the Philosophy category.

²² For instance, the open-ended response “they are against wasteful spending” was coded into the Government Management category.

²³ For instance, the open-ended response “It stands for Sarah Palin” was coded into the People category.

²⁴ For instance, the open-ended response “Strong military” was coded into the Foreign Policy category.

phrases from that category in describing the Tea Party. The color of the bar indicates what share of those responses came from Tea Party supporters versus non-supporters. For example, the bar at the left edge of the figure indicates that 43% of Democrats described the Tea Party in general image terms, but only 7% of those Democratic respondents professed support for the Tea Party. Thus, the vast majority of general image responses from Democrats described the Tea Party in negative terms. The most immediate conclusion that can be drawn from these results is that few Democrats and Independents identified themselves as Tea Party supporters. When Democrats and Independents offered a description of the Tea Party, most often they referred to the general image of the Tea Party and usually in negative terms. By comparison, roughly half of GOP identifiers support the Tea Party, and Republicans tend to describe the Tea Party in more substantive terms.

[Figure 5 about here]

It is also noteworthy that Independents were least likely to offer any description of the Tea Party while Republicans were most likely to offer a substantive response. Perhaps the most intriguing finding comes from the different ways in which Republicans, Democrats, and Independents define the Tea Party, regardless of whether they support or oppose it. Republicans are more likely than Democrats and Independents to refer to economic policies or government philosophy themes in describing the Tea Party. While party identification is only a moderate predictor of whether or not a respondent will use a general image to define the Tea Party, party identification is much more highly correlated with responses invoking economic or philosophical concepts as perceived defining features. Specifically, approximately 50% of Republicans used a general image to define the Tea Party, while approximately 43% of Democrats and 30% of Independents did the same. However, Republicans were more likely to define the Tea Party in economic terms (32%) than were Democrats (20%) or Independents (14%). Republicans were even more likely to define the Tea Party in philosophical terms (41%) than were Democrats (24%) or Independents (14%). In addition, most of the economic or philosophy mentions on the Republican side came from Tea Party supporters. Overall, just a year into the Tea Party's existence we find opinions of the Tea Party are heavily bifurcated by partisanship.

Net Party Affect and the Politics of Negative Emotions

Finally, we believe that party polarization also sharpens the emotional nature of political conflict. Heightened contempt for the opposite party creates greater fear and loathing when reckoning with occasions when the opposite party controls the legislative and executive branches of the government. We explore this idea by examining some questions from the 2010 EGSS1 survey that asked about the direction of the country. For

example, one iteration of the question asked “Generally speaking, how do you feel about the way things are going in the country these days? How angry?” Respondents answered on a scale from 1 (extremely) to 5 (not at all). The same root was used to query four negative emotions: angry, afraid, worried, and outraged. There is a lot of variation on all four items, with slightly more respondents placing themselves on the negative side of the scale rather than the positive side. We reversed the direction of the scale so that higher scores indicate more negative emotions, and we averaged responses to all four items to create a negative emotions index ($\alpha = .89$). We then estimate a regression model to explain variation in emotions about the nation’s direction.

With the nation still emerging from a recession in 2010, we expect that economic needs and concerns help structure feelings about the way things are going in the country. The national unemployment rate in October 2010 was still high (9.5 percent). Thus, our regression model includes one independent variable indicating whether the respondent is unemployed. We expect that negative emotions should be more pronounced for those who are unemployed. The survey also includes two questions about ongoing economic anxieties. The items ask how worried the respondent is about (1) one’s financial situation and (2) paying for health care during the next 12 months. Respondents answered on a scale from 1 (extremely worried) to 5 (not at all worried). We reversed the direction of the scale so that higher scores indicate higher anxiety levels, and we averaged responses to both items to create an economic peril index ($\alpha = .75$). There is a lot variation in economic peril, with more reported anxiety about one’s overall financial situation than about paying for health care. We expect more economic anxiety to be associated with more negative emotions about the direction of the country.

We also expect that negative emotions about the country reflect political attitudes. Those with more conservative policy preferences may have been upset in 2010 about the content of the main legislative initiatives pursued in the first two years of the Obama administration. Thus, we expect a positive relationship between the policy conservatism index described above and negative emotions. We also examine whether passions among American voters reflect racial divisions in society in response to the election of President Obama and ongoing changes in the nation’s demographics embodied by that election. Thus, whites may express more negative emotions than non-white respondents, and people with higher levels of racial resentment may express more negative emotions.

Finally, party polarization may contribute to negative feelings about the direction of the country. Given that Democrats held the White House and majorities in the House and Senate in 2010, Democratic partisans likely had more positive feelings about the nation’s direction than Republicans. More specifically, we expect that those who disliked the Democrats the most testified to the most negative emotions about the direction of the

country. We measure contempt for Democrats by averaging responses to the two questions that assess how much respondents dislike the Democratic Party and President Obama.

The model estimates are reported in Table 4. We find that when controlling for policy preferences, financial pressures, and racial divisions, negative emotions about the nation's direction are strongly associated with the degree to which one dislikes the Democratic Party. Moving from the 10th percentile to the 90th percentile in contempt for Democrats is associated with a one point increase in negative feelings about the direction of the country (the full range of the emotions index is four points). Anger and concern about what is going on in the country is shaped by how much one dislikes the governing party. Growing disdain for one's political opponents means that politicians and activists now have a deeper well of fear and loathing among fellow party supporters to tap when they find themselves in the loyal opposition.

[Table 4 about here]

Other political attitudes are associated with feelings about the course of the nation. Increased opposition to the main legislative agenda of 2009-2010 tends to produce more negative emotions. Furthermore, we find some evidence of racial divisions in feelings about the direction of the country. White respondents and those with higher levels of racial resentment report more negative feelings, although those effects are more modest. Finally, while unemployment does not seem to produce more negative feelings, there is a strong association between concerns about economic perils and negative emotions. Fear and loathing about the way things are going in the nation reflects economic, partisan, policy and racial attitudes. However, party polarization and contempt for the opposite party are an important source of those negative feelings.

Conclusion

There are growing differences in feelings toward the two major political parties in the United States. Contempt for the opposite party has increased substantially, particularly during the past ten years. The increase in negative feelings for the opposition party is partly a response to elite polarization. Elite polarization strengthens party identity among the public, fuels biased political reasoning and distrust of the political opposition. Polarized ratings of the parties have many other sources, including ideology, core values, group-based attitudes, individual predispositions, and exposure to partisan media. Thus, in crafting rhetoric that encourages revulsion for the opposite party both political parties can appeal to a diverse palette of public attitudes.

Party polarization and increasingly negative assessments of one's political opponents have important consequences for American politics. Party polarization has helped created emotional space for the Tea Party to emerge. Support for the Tea Party is strongly related to how much one likes the Republican Party and dislikes the Democratic Party. Twenty years ago, when there was considerably less contempt for Democrats among GOP supporters, there may not have been much of a market for the Tea Party. If that contempt continues to grow, then the Tea Party should continue to thrive. Since we observe similar levels of contempt for the GOP among Democrats, there seems to be an opportunity for a more coordinated movement like the Tea Party to form on the Left.

Increased negativity toward political opponents among the mass public is a promising development for those eager to mobilize the base of either party. Appeals that emphasize threats and fear are more effective at motivating mass political activity than a positive agenda (Miller 2013). Politicians can appeal to feelings of contempt, anger and fear to draw more citizens into the political arena. However, having repeatedly stoked those negative feelings among party supporters, it can be difficult for politicians to ride that tiger when governing requires negotiation and compromise. If partisans do not view the other side as legitimate, then they are less likely to support compromise with the opposition. This dynamic seems to have contributed to the government shutdown in October of 2013. A majority of each party's supporters found it unacceptable for their party leaders to make concessions to the other side (Motel 2013). On the Republican side, Tea Party supporters (those who tend to dislike Democrats the most) were more likely to want their political leaders to stand firm and not compromise (Summary 2013). It appears that many national politicians responded to those desires, prolonging the shutdown crisis. Given the increasing disdain for political opponents, another similar crisis may occur again soon.

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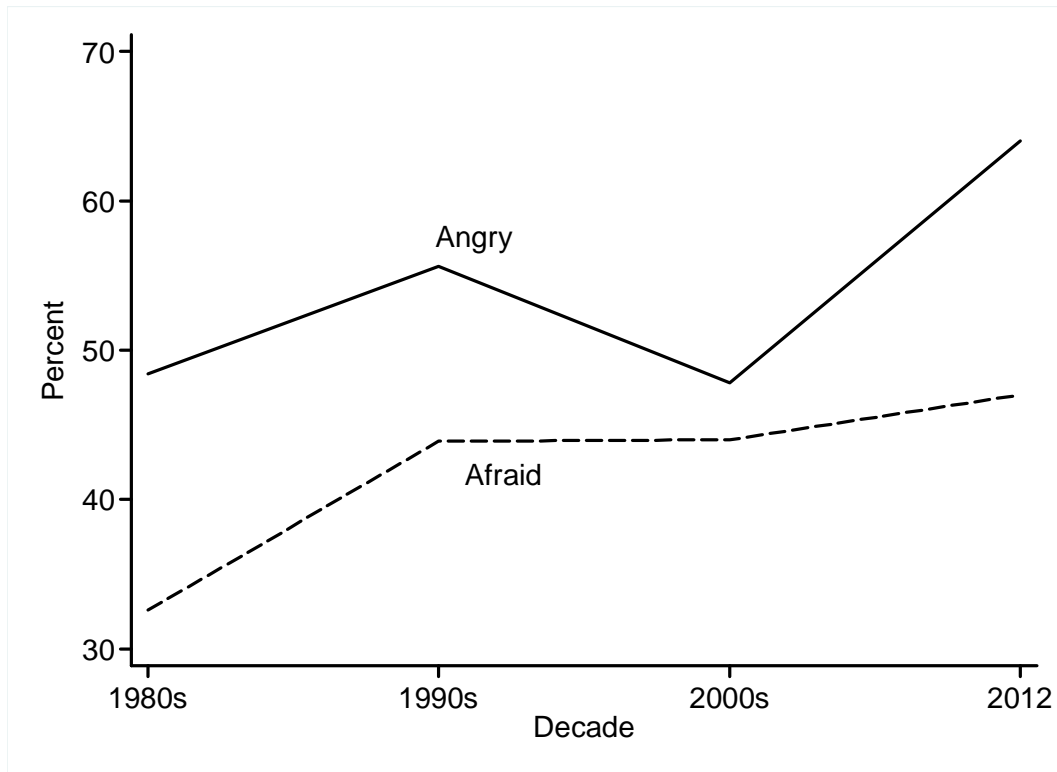
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Figure 1
Emotions toward Other Party's Presidential Candidates by Decade



Source: ANES 2010, 2013

Figure 2
Mean Party Ratings by Democrats, 1978-2012

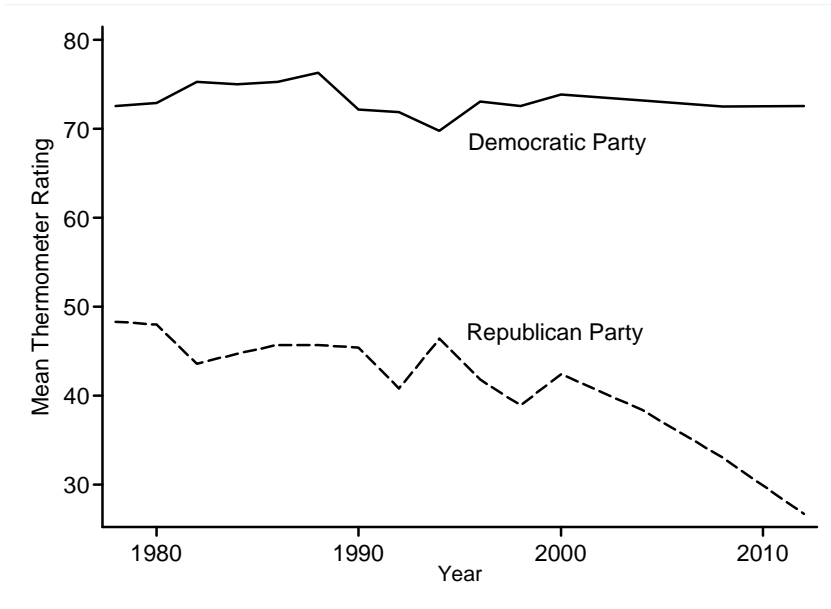
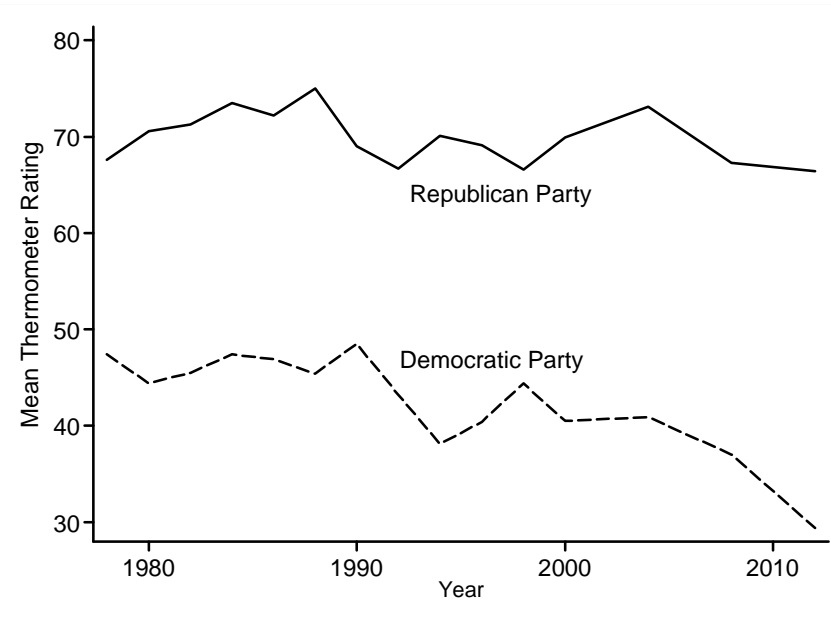
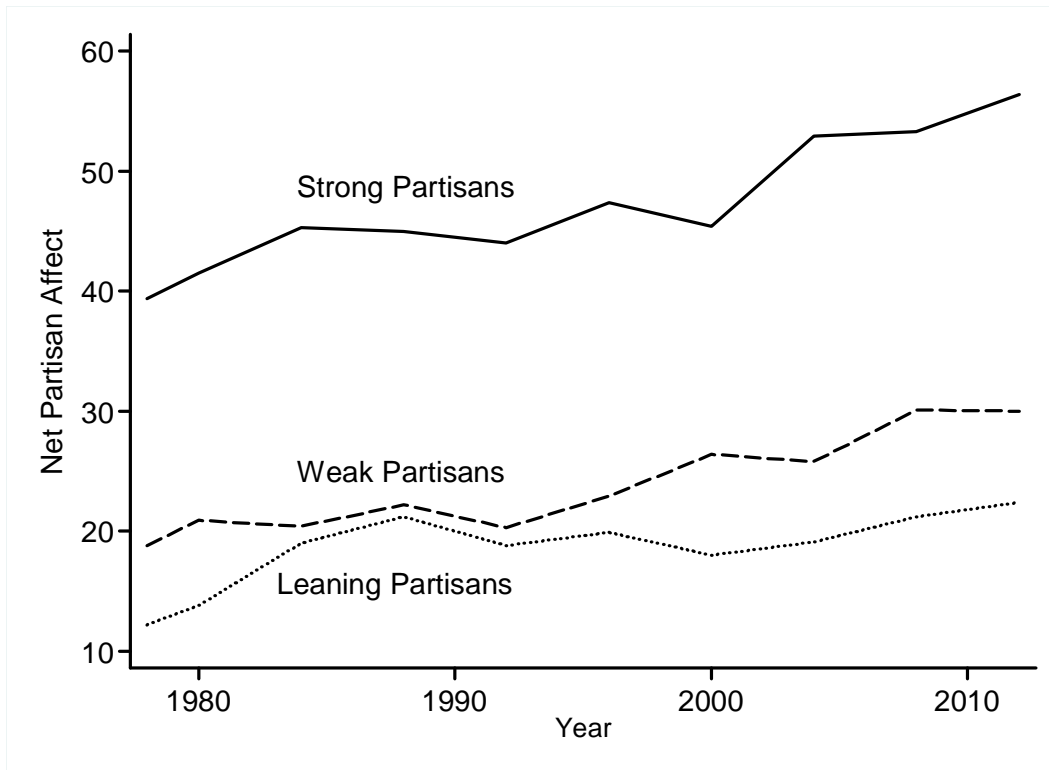


Figure 3
Mean Party Ratings by Republicans, 1978-2012



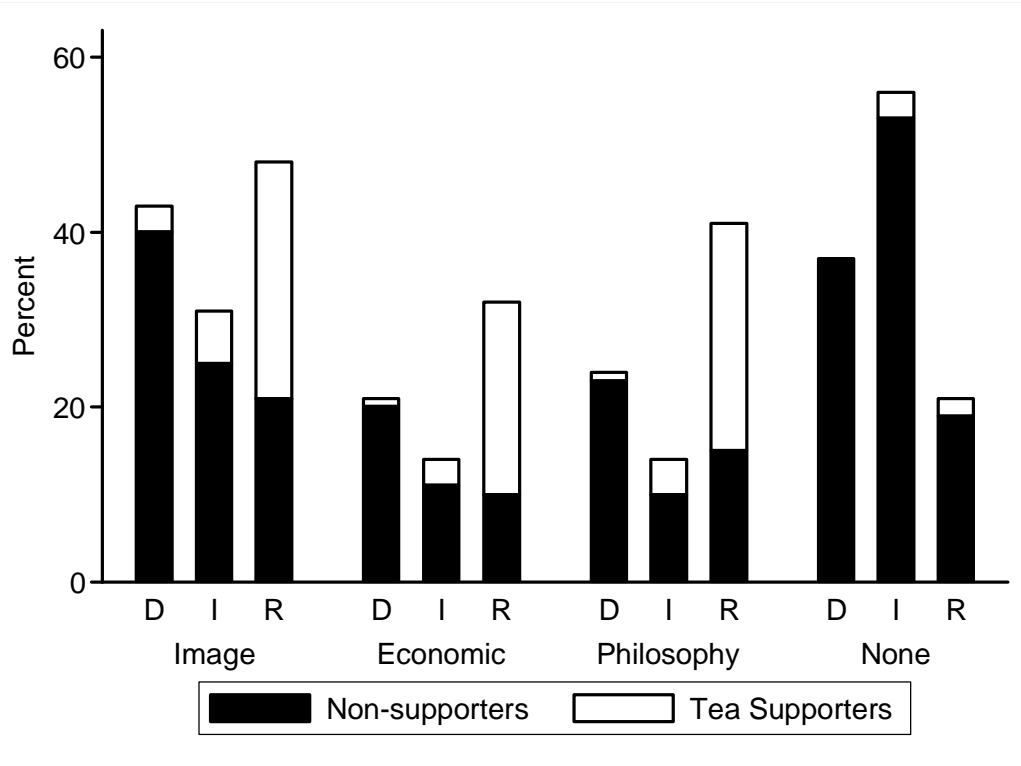
Source: ANES 2010, 2013

Figure 4
Net Partisan Affect by Strength of Partisanship, 1978-2012



Source: ANES 2010; ANES 2013

Figure 5
What the Tea Party Stands for, by Party Identification and Tea Party Support



Source: ANES EGSS1

Table 1
Associations between Control Variables and Net Partisan Affect, 2012

Independent Variable	Republicans	Democrats
Strong partisan	24.6 [21.7, 27.5]	26.6 [24.0, 29.3]
Weak partisan	2.2 [-0.7, 5.1]	3.7 [0.9, 6.4]
Ideology	11.7 [9.3, 14.1]	-11.7 [-14.2, -9.2]
Need to evaluate	4.5 [1.4, 7.7]	5.9 [3.1, 8.8]
Authoritarianism	8.3 [5.2, 11.4]	7.5 [4.1, 10.9]
N	1840	2813

Estimates are created using ordinary least squares regression. Cell entries indicate the expected change in net partisan affect when moving from the 10th percentile to the 90th percentile on the independent variable. 95% confidence intervals are in parentheses. Additional control variables, survey mode and battleground states, are not shown. Data are weighted by the post-stratified weight for the full sample.

Source: ANES 2013

Table 2
Associations between Predictors and Net Partisan Affect, 2012

Independent Variable	Republicans	Democrats
Egalitarianism	-7.4 [-10.5, -4.3]	15.7 [12.9, 18.4]
Limited government	10.2 [7.1, 13.2]	-11.8 [-14.1, -9.5]
Moral traditionalism	4.7 [1.6, 7.7]	-11.7 [-14.4, -9.0]
Racial resentment	10.0 [7.1, 12.9]	-7.9 [-11.0, -4.9]
Modern sexism	-3.0 [-6.0, -0.2]	9.4 [6.7, 12.1]
Conservative media	8.1 [5.4, 10.9]	-2.4 [-3.6, -1.2]
Liberal media	-4.4 [-6.4, -2.3]	1.6 [-0.6, 3.8]
General news	2.4 [-0.6, 5.4]	-3.5 [-6.4, -0.6]
N (min)	1840	2813

Estimates are created using ordinary least squares regression. Cell entries indicate the expected change in net partisan affect when moving from the 10th percentile to the 90th percentile on the independent variable. 95% confidence intervals are in parentheses. Additional control variables, strength of partisanship, ideology, need to evaluate, authoritarianism, survey mode and battleground states, are not shown. Data are weighted by the post-stratified weight for the full sample.

Source: ANES 2013

Table 3
Predicting Support for the Tea Party among Non-Hispanic Whites, 2010

Independent Variable	Impact [95% CI]
Net Partisan Affect	2.7 [2.4, 3.0]
Policy Conservatism	0.9 [0.6, 1.2]
Racial Resentment	0.6 [0.3, 0.8]
N	904
R ²	.55

The dependent variable is support for the Tea Party on a scale from 1 (oppose a great deal) to 7 (support a great deal). Estimates are created using ordinary least squares regression. Cell entries indicate the expected change in support for the Tea Party when moving from the 10th percentile to the 90th percentile on the independent variable. 95% confidence intervals are in brackets. Data are weighted by the post-stratification weight.

Source: ANES 2010-2012 Evaluations of Government and Society Study, October 2010 Survey

Table 4
Predicting Fear and Loathing about the Direction of the Country, 2010

Independent Variable	Impact [95% CI]
Dislike for Democrats	1.0 [0.8, 1.2]
Economic Peril	0.9 [0.7, 1.0]
Unemployed	0.02 [-0.1, 0.1]
Policy Conservatism	0.2 [0.03, 0.4]
Racial Resentment	0.2 [0.05, 0.35]
Non-Hispanic White	0.2 [0.04, 0.3]
N	1161
R ²	.32

The dependent variable is a scale measuring negative emotions about the way things are going in the country from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). Estimates are created using ordinary least squares regression. Cell entries indicate the expected change in negative emotions when moving from the 10th percentile to the 90th percentile on the independent variable. 95% confidence intervals are in brackets. Data are weighted by the post-stratification weight.

Source: ANES 2010-2012 Evaluations of Government and Society Study, October 2010 Survey