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Affective Polarization and Ideological Sorting: A Reciprocal, Albeit Weak, Relationship

Abstract: American partisans are far more hostile towards out-party members than they were 40 years ago. While this phenomenon, often called affective polarization, is well-documented, political scientists disagree on its cause. One group of scholars believes that affective polarization is driven by processes related to social identity theory. In particular, cross-cutting identities have declined in America, and toxic political communication continuously primes partisan identities and resentment. Recently, several scholars have pointed to another phenomenon as the root cause of affective polarization: partisan sorting, i.e. the alignment of partisan identities with ideologically consistent issue positions. I review evidence in favor of each claim, and provide additional evidence that affective polarization has increased about as much among those who are not sorted as among those who are sorted. Furthermore, while sorting is only related to affective polarization among the most politically knowledgeable, affective polarization has increased across all levels of political knowledge. Finally, affective polarization may also increase sorting, further complicating any clear cut causal relationship.

Introduction

Mass politics in America in the past 40 or so years has been marked by two major trends. First, the public has become more politically sorted. That is, Democrats are increasingly likely to hold liberal issue positions, and Republicans are increasingly likely to hold conservative issue positions (Levendusky 2009; Abramowitz 2010). Second, partisans increasingly dislike each other (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Abramowitz and Webster 2016). For instance, Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes (2012) show that, since the early 1970s, Americans are increasingly likely to hold negative feelings towards the out-party. Partisans are increasingly likely to see members of their own party as intelligent, honest, patriotic, generous and open-minded, while members of the other

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party are increasingly likely to be seen as close-minded, hypocritical, selfish and mean. They are also more likely to be unhappy if their child married someone from the other party (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012).

Although we know that affective polarization and sorting have increased substantially, there is some disagreement as to whether there is a causal relationship between the two phenomenon. While a number of studies claim that political identity drives affective polarization (Iyengar and Westwood 2015; e.g. Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Mason 2015, 2016), other work claims that increasing ideological sorting and elite polarization in the mass public is to blame (Rogowski and Sutherland 2016; Bougher 2017; Webster and Abramowitz 2017). The current work discusses the extant research and provides additional evidence that (1) sorting is only weakly related to affective polarization and (2) the relationship is reciprocal: affective polarization also drives the adoption of issue positions.

The evidence suggests that affective polarization, for all but the most politically engaged, is not rooted in substantive ideology. For the most part, the parallel increase in partisan sorting, vis-à-vis substantive ideology, and affective polarization are epiphenomenal. This implies that other forces that have emerged in the past 40 or so years – the decline of cross-cutting identities and the rise of rancorous rhetoric for instance – have driven partisans to dislike one another.

Affective Polarization: Identity or Ideology?

Much of the work on affective polarization argues that it is rooted in social identity. According to this perspective, partisanship is an affective or "psychological" attachment to the Republican or Democratic parties (Campbell et al. 1960; Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe 2015). In order to maintain the group's "positive distinctiveness" (Abrams and Hogg 1988), identifiers discriminate in favor of their ingroup in order to "achieve, maintain, or enhance a positive social identity" (Rubin and Hewstone 1998, p. 41).[1]

As partisanship is believed to be rooted in social identity, a number of scholars have also pointed towards social identity theory to explain the rise of affective polarization. For instance, Mason (2016) and Mason and Wronski (2018) argue that since few political and social identities cut across both parties, partisans no longer see themselves as having much in common with the other side. That

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1 The perspective that partisanship is a political identity is not without its critics, however. These critics tend to view partisanship through the lens of rational choice theory. In order to maximize their utility, people, for instance, support the party that supports the same policies that they do (Downs 1957) or based on a "running tally" of performance evaluations (Fiorina 1981).

is, the Republican party is now predominantly the party of white conservative identifiers, while the Democratic party is a more diverse coalition of liberal identifiers (see also Abramowitz and Webster 2018). Mason and Wronski (2018) construct a measure of social sorting that indicates the degree to which a person's demographics align with their party identification. Moving from the lowest to the highest level of that measure increases in-party warmth by almost 40 percent. When social identities no longer cut across partisan identities, the odds of encountering people from the other party decreases. People increasingly view members of the other party as an other and rely on stereotypes, which exacerbates affective polarization (Ahler and Sood 2018).

These strengthened identities make people more attune to information from ingroup members (Malka and Lelkes 2010), and changes in the political information environment compound the effects of strengthened identities. As the parties became more politically polarized and elections become more competitive (Lee 2016), campaigns became increasingly vitriolic. Geer (2012), for instance, reports that in the 1960s roughly 10 percent of advertisements were negative. That number stands above 90 percent today. The media has also increasingly covered campaign negativity. As such, partisans become affectively polarized throughout political campaigns (Sood and Iyengar 2016, although see, Ridout et al. 2018).

Additionally, in the 1980s, an "outrage industry" arose through talk radio and, later, cable news that aggravated partisan animosity (Sobieraj and Berry 2011) through "insults, name-calling, misrepresentation, character assassination, and false, abusive, incendiary, hysterical tones" (Gitlin 2016). Relatedly, increases in media fragmentation allow citizens to more easily tune into potentially polarizing content, although the estimated size of these effects range from small or nonexistent when it comes to the online environment (Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro 2017; Lelkes, Sood, and Iyengar 2017) to quite large when it comes to the roll-out of cable news (Martin and Yurukoglu 2017).

Recent papers have argued that rather than identity, "ideological disagreement between supporters of the two major parties is the primary cause of increasing affective polarization in the contemporary American electorate" (Webster and Abramowitz 2017, p. 623). Rogowski and Sutherland (2016) argue that people develop more polarized affective evaluations of politicians when competing politicians support divergent ideologically extreme policy positions. In their study, survey respondents were randomized into conditions that varied in the level of information provided about a pair candidates, who they were asked to evaluate. Ideological extremity of the candidates was indicated by placing candidates on an 11-point scale, marked on one with the label "Extremely Liberal" and the other with the label "Extremely Conservative." Rogowski and Sutherland (2016) find that candidates that were at more extreme ends of the scale were more negatively evaluated.

One concern with the design of the experiment is that it may conflate ideological identity with ideological policies. Ideology, like party, often functions as a symbolic identity (Ellis and Stimson 2009; Malka and Lelkes 2010), and Americans do not necessarily understand the policy positions of liberals and conservatives (Kinder and Kalmoe 2017). Hence, it's not clear that telling respondents that a candidate is extremely liberal or conservative denotes any substantive policy information. Rogowski and Sutherland (2016) also show that a larger difference in feeling thermometer scores towards senators is a result of senators being more extreme. However, we cannot rule out other explanations that could explain affective polarization and ideological divergent senators. For instance, more extreme senators may also adopt more vitriolic and partisan language, which may increase affective polarization.

Webster and Abramowitz (2017) and Bougher (2017) bring a host of evidence to support their hypothesis that ideology, and ideological consistency in particular, drives affective polarization. First, Webster and Abramowitz (2017) find that survey respondents that placed parties farther from themselves were more affectively polarized. Additionally, Webster and Abramowitz (2017) and Bougher (2017) show that citizens who hold policy positions that are consistent with that of their political party are more affectively polarized than those who do not hold policy positions that are consistent with that of their political party. Finally, Webster and Abramowitz (2017) conduct an experiment wherein survey respondents were either given only biographical information about a member of their opposing party (who was explicitly identified as a Republican or Democrat) or biographical information plus the candidate's policy positions, which were either extreme or moderate. They find that more ideologically extreme candidates were rated negatively compared to the control, while ideologically moderate candidates were rated more positively than the control.

One criticism of Webster and Abramowitz's (2017) first finding is that perceived distance may be endogenous to affect (Sood and Iyengar 2017). That is, people may infer policy positions of a party from how much they like they party (Brady and Sniderman 1985). Hence, while it may be true that, "prejudice is based on the assumption of dissimilarity in beliefs between oneself and members of outgroups rather than on socially derived value connotations which are directly associated with intergroup categorizations," (Tajfel 1982, p. 21), the assumption of dissimilarity in beliefs may be caused by negative affect rather than causing negative affect.

Similarly, policy positions (and consistency) may also be endogenous to party identification and affect. When people identify as members of group, they adopt the attitudes and beliefs of the prototypical ingroup member as their own (Turner 1981). Partisans may do this to obtain the approval of other group members, or they conform because they believe that other group members are trustworthy or knowledgeable (Deutsch and Gerard 1955). In line with this theory, a number of

studies have shown that partisans adopt the policy positions (Lenz 2009) and even religiosity (Margolis 2018) of their party. Similarly, recent work shows that partisans with the strongest affective attachments to their party are the most likely to adopt the positions of their party, especially if they are particularly adept at motivated reasoning (Bakker, Lelkes, and Malka 2018).

In addition, although Webster and Abramowitz (2017) experiment clearly shows that the policy positions of a candidate does have an effect on affective polarization, and does not conflate ideological identity with substantive ideology, it does not compare the effect of identity versus substantive ideology. Respondents in all conditions were primed with the partisan identity of the candidate in the vignette. In this design, we cannot judge whether party identity cues or substantive ideological information is the prime mover.

A final reason to be skeptical of the claim that ideology drives affective polarization is that it conflicts with a central finding in the study of American politics: Americans know little about politics (Carpini, Keeter, and Delli Carpini 1997) and tend to not think about politics in terms of ideology (Converse 1964). For instance, Converse (1964) found that less than 15 percent of Americans could be defined as ideologues or near-ideologues. That is, very few Americans had a consistent world view that structured their policy positions. Kinder and Kalmoe (2017) find that ideological understanding has not shifted much between 1964 and 2000. If most people are not ideological, than ideology is unlikely to be the main driver of affective polarization except among the most politically knowledgeable Americans.

Is Issue Consistency the Primary Driver of Affective Polarization?

If issue consistency is the main cause of affective polarization, we would expect that affective polarization has only increased among those who hold consistent issue attitudes. We should not see rising affective polarization among Democrats and Republicans who hold a mix of liberal and conservative policy attitudes.

To test this claim, I use data from the American National Election Study (1984–2016),[2] and, using the coding scheme from Abramowitz and Saunders (2008), categorize responses to a number of items (aid to blacks, ideology, defense spending, guaranteed jobs, privatized health insurance, abortion, government services) into

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2 The data begin in 1984 as it's the first year when all items of the issue consistency scale were available

conservative, liberal, and moderate responses. I then compute the number of times respondents gave ideologically consistent responses. That is, those who gave only liberal or only conservative responses would be coded as 7, while those who gave an equal number of conservative and liberal responses or only moderate responses would be coded as 0. Affective polarization was measured as the difference in 101-point feeling thermometer scores towards a person's in-party and their out-party.

In Figure 1, I split respondents by ideological consistency tertile and plot the mean level of affective polarization by ideological consistency score over time. I also superimpose the coefficients from a OLS model regressing affective polarization on year among those within the ideological consistency tertile displayed in each facet of the graph. While affective polarization is higher among the more consistent than the less consistent, the rate of increase is stable across levels of consistency. Affective polarization has increased among those who are at the bottom of third of the ideological consistency distribution at a rate of 0.43 points per year (left panel). It has increased at a similar rate among those with the most consistent attitudes (right panel; $b = 0.44$). Furthermore, the r-squared from these models are all less than 0.05.

Figure 1: Affective Polarization Score by Ideological Consistency Score, ANES Cumulative Data File 1984–2016).

These results are inconsistent with the claim that sorting is the primary driver affective polarization.

The assumption that affective polarization is caused by ideological consistency assumes that the latter temporally precedes the former. While Bougher (2017) finds evidence that changes in affective polarization are associated with changes in ideological consistency, she does not test the possibility that affective polarization in earlier time points predicts ideological consistency in later time points.

To test this assumption, I use data from the 2008–2009 ANES panel, which consists of two waves (Waves 1 and 10) of policy measures related to same-sex marriage, taxation, prescription drugs, government insurance, terrorism, wiretapping, and immigration. I use Bougher's (2017) data and measures of ideological consistency (a tally of the number of times a person gave ideological consistent responses to these policy measures). The affective polarization measure is the difference in 7-point measures of how much a respondent likes or dislikes their in-party and how much he or she likes or dislikes their out-party.[3]

I conduct a cross-lagged panel model (Finkel 1995), wherein wave 10 ideological consistency and affective polarization scores are regressed on wave 1 ideological consistency and affective polarization scores. The results from this model appear in Table 1.

Ideological consistency and affective polarization have a reciprocal relationship. The coefficients from the regression of ideological consistency in Wave 10 on affective polarization in Wave 1 (b = 0.11, se = 0.03, β = 0.13) is indistinguishable from the regression of affective polarization in Wave 10 on ideological consistency in Wave 1 (b = 0.14, se = 0.05, β = 0.11). The data imply that affective polarization and ideological consistency create a cycle wherein the affectively polarized become more ideologically consistent, while the ideologically consistent become more affectively polarized. Affective polarization is as much of a driver of ideological consistency as ideological consistency is a driver of affective polarization.

The relationship is also not particularly strong, as indicated by the standardized regression terms. Similarly, regressing Wave 10 ideological consistency on Wave 1 affective polarization yields an r-squared of 0.06, and regressing Wave 10 affective polarization on Wave 1 ideological polarization yields an r-squared of 0.05.

Furthermore, lagged ideological consistency only predicts affective polarization among the most politically sophisticated. Replicating Table 1 among respondents in different tertiles of political knowledge[4] reveals that lagged

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3 These results replicate in the 1992–1994–1996 ANES Panel.

4 Political knowledge was based on a tally of correct answers to six questions about the US political process, e.g. how many times can the president be elected, which were asked in wave 2.

Table 1: Cross-Lagged Panel Model Estimating Relationship Between Affective Polarization and Ideological Consistency, 2008–2009 ANES Panel Study.

	Regression slopes
	Ideological consistency (Wave 2)
Affective polarization (Wave 1)	0.11 (0.03)***
Ideological consistency (Wave 1)	0.61 (0.04)***
	Affective polarization (Wave 2)
Affective polarization (Wave 1)	0.53 (0.03)***
Ideological consistency (Wave 1)	0.14 (0.05)**
	Residual covariances
Affective polarization (Wave 1) w/Ideological consistency (Wave 1)	0.02 (0.00)***
Ideological consistency (Wave 2) w/Affective polarization (Wave 2)	0.01 (0.00)***
	Fit indices
RMSEA	0.00
	N
	583

**p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001. Standard errors in parentheses.

ideological consistency only predicts higher levels of affective polarization in among the most politically knowledgeable respondents. Lagged affective polarization predicts higher levels of ideological consistency among those with high and low political knowledge (although not middling levels; Table 2).

If ideological consistency is the primary driver of affective polarization, we would expect to find that affective polarization has increased only among the most politically knowledge citizens, since the relationship between lagged ideological consistency and affective polarization only appears in this subgroup. To test this claim, I again use the 1984–2016 ANES data, divide respondents by political knowledge tertile, as indicated by the survey interviewer's rating of respondent political knowledge (Bartels 1996; Gilens 2001; Lelkes and Sniderman 2016), and examine changes in affective polarization.

While affective polarization increased at a faster rate among the most politically knowledge, it also increased substantially among the least politically knowledgeable (Figure 2). It should be noted that in 2016, affective polarization plunged back to 1980 levels among the least politically knowledgeable, which was mostly driven by lower levels of in-party affect (potentially due to the 2016 presidential candidates). Between 1980 and 2012, affective polarization increased by 11 points among the least knowledgeable and 16 points among the most knowledgeable.

Table 2: Cross-Lagged Panel Model Estimating Relationship Between Affective Polarization and Ideological Consistency by Political Knowledge Tertile, 2008–2009 ANES Panel Study.

	Political knowledge		
	Bottom third	**Middle third**	**Top third**
			Regression slopes
Ideological consistency (Wave 2)			
Affective polarization (Wave 1)	0.13 (0.05)**	0.06 (0.04)	0.15 (0.07)*
Ideological consistency (Wave 1)	0.49 (0.07)***	0.60 (0.05)***	0.63 (0.08)***
Affective polarization (Wave 2)			
Affective polarization (Wave 1)	0.57 (0.06)***	0.51 (0.05)***	0.56 (0.08)***
Ideological consistency (Wave 1)	0.03 (0.10)	0.09 (0.07)	0.30 (0.09)**
			Residual covariances
Affective polarization (Wave 1) w/ Ideological consistency (Wave 1)	0.01 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)**	0.03 (0.01)**
Ideological consistency (Wave 2) w/Affective polarization (Wave 2)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.00)	0.01 (0.01)
			Fit indices
RMSEA	0.00	0.00	0.00
			N
	180	245	105

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$. Standard errors in parentheses.

While increasing ideological consistency may have led to larger increases in affective polarization among the most politically knowledgeable, these respondents are also more likely to encounter elite rhetoric which may prime their partisan identity.

Conclusions

While Democrats and Republicans certainly dislike each other more today than in the past, partisan sorting is likely not the primary cause: Affective polarization has also increased among those who do not hold ideological consistent attitudes, and changes in ideological consistency is only weakly related to changes in affective polarization. This (weak) relationship between lagged affective polarization and ideological consistency is driven entirely by those
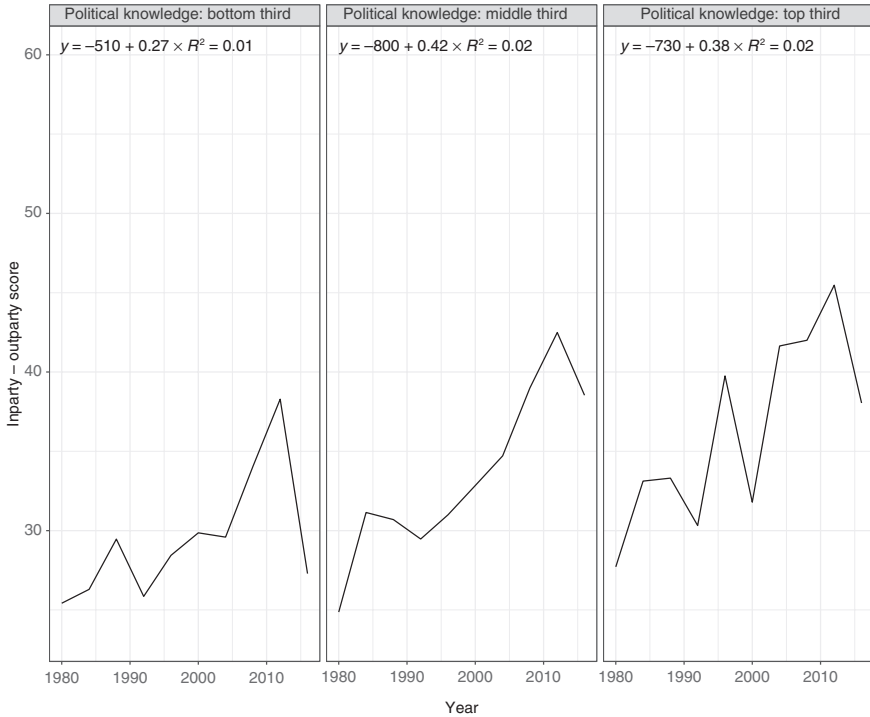
Figure 2: Affective Polarization Score by Political Knowledge, ANES Cumulative Data File (1984–2016).

with high levels of political knowledge. Affective polarization has increased across levels of political knowledge and ideological consistency, however.

Complicating any claim that ideological polarization is the primary driver of affective polarization is the causal effect of affective polarization on ideological consistency. In addition to the lagged relationship reported here, experimental work indicates that those who have the strongest affective attachment to their party (an analog of affective polarization), are the most likely to adopt the issue positions of their party (Bakker, Lelkes, and Malka 2018). Affective polarization is likely as much of a driver of ideological consistency as vice versa.

Increased ideological consistency and extremity does drive affective polarization to a certain extent. This is especially true among the most politically engaged, who think about politics in ideological terms. However, ideological sorting does not explain 95 percent of the variance in affective polarization. The main driver, evidence suggests, is (1) the decline of cross-cutting identities, which decrease the likelihood that a partisan will hear ideas that challenge their own

preconceptions, and (2) vitriol emanating from partisan elites and talking heads, which affects interparty animosity without necessarily changing ideological beliefs (Mason 2018).

This work echoes past research that the importance of substantive ideology in the American public should not be overstated (Kinder and Kalmoe 2017). While a subset of Americans certainly are passionate ideologues who dislike the other party because they do not share their ideology, this work demonstrates that affective polarization occurs even in the absence of a consistent ideology. That is, partisans may dislike one another even if they do not disagree with one another.

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