Fear and Loathing in American Politics: The Trump Candidacies and Affective Polarization

Joseph Gershtenson[1]

[1]University of North Georgia
[*]joseph.gershtenson@ung.edu

ABSTRACT

Much evidence suggests increased partisan polarization in American politics in recent decades. Partisanship appears to have become a stronger and more salient social identity and this has been associated with copartisan favoritism and hostility toward political figures and citizens associated with the opposing party. It is against this backdrop that Donald Trump, who many observers regard as a divisive figure engendering strong positive and negative feelings, came to the fore. I use a variety of indicators from the ANES cumulative file to trace polarization from 1968 to 2020 in terms of sentiments toward presidential candidates and toward the major political parties. The findings point to increased polarization with identifiers of both parties exhibiting growing divergence in their sentiments toward their own party and its candidates and the opposition, with polarization generally reaching its apex in 2020. Increased polarization has been asymmetric, with negative attitudes toward the out-party increasing more quickly than positive attitudes toward the in-party. Underlying general patterns, however, are variations that indicate the relevance of individual candidates, even in the context of enhanced importance of party affiliation.

It is far from a secret that contemporary American politics are combative and divisive. While there are many fault lines along which struggles occur, the most obvious is political party. Democrats and Republicans have become more distinctive from one another in recent decades while simultaneously becoming more unified within their own ranks. Party votes in Congress have become more common, party unity for both Democrats and Republicans has increased, and the ideological gap between party delegations has widened. Many media outlets have pronounced biases toward one or the other major political parties. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, the electorate reflects these other developments. Partisan sorting has meant fewer liberal Republicans and fewer conservative Democrats can be found. In addition, identifiers of both parties have become at least somewhat more consistent and extreme in their views on political issues. Perhaps even more notable than ideological and issue polarization is greater affective polarization. Partisanship appears to have become a stronger and more salient social identity and this has been associated with copartisan favoritism, and even more notably, hostility toward political figures and citizens associated with the opposing party. Not only do many party identifiers dislike members of the other party, they are willing to discriminate against them in non-political settings, they do not wish to see their children marrying across party lines, and they are more prone to attribute negative stereotypes to opponents.

Scholars of American politics have documented many of these developments and explored both their causes and consequences. However, because polarization is a concept that necessarily involves a time dimension, polarization is a process while polarized is a condition at a given point in time, it is important to continually evaluate and reevaluate developments and trends. That is what I do in this study. Specifically, I focus on recent patterns in affective polarization.

This is particularly critical in the context of Donald Trump, arguably one of the most divisive figures in American politics, having burst onto the political scene when he announced his candidacy for president in New York's Trump Tower in June 2015.

Using data from the American National Election Studies cumulative file from 1968 to 2020, I find that identifiers of both major political parties have generally become more polarized in their sentiments toward presidential candidates, and that this polarization is greatest by most measures in the most recent election. This polarization has been uneven, however, as increased warmth toward the in-party has been significantly outpaced by greater negativity toward the out-party. In addition, within the broad trend of growing polarization, there are variations in affect that underscore the continued relevance of individual candidates, even in the context of enhanced importance of party affiliation.

Polarization in American Politics

By most accounts, the polarization of American politics first appeared among the ranks of the elite. Numerous scholars have specifically traced increasing divergence in the voting patterns of members of the two parties in Congress dating to the late 1960s and early 1970s (Coleman, 1997; Fleisher and Bond, 2000; Poole and Rosenthal, 1997; Rohde, 1991; Stonecash et al., 2003; Theriault, 2006). In addition to each of the two parties becoming more ideologically cohesive internally while becoming

more distinctive from one another, politics in the capital appears to have become more nasty and personal. For example, former member of Congress and Republican National Committee chair William Brock (2004: B7) wrote that "the evidence is compelling that we are today seeing a serious deterioration in political civility" exhibited by increasingly polarized members of Congress. One of the lows point for civility among elected officials was the 2009 outburst by Representative Joe Wilson (R-SC) who interrupted President Obama's address to a joint session of Congress by yelling "You lie!" as Obama defended his proposed healthcare legislation.

The public has noted this growth of elite-level incivility. In 2016 (KRC Research, 2016) about three-fourths of respondents reported a decline in civility, a marked increase from just a few years earlier (Page, 2010). In a related vein, more than 90% of U.S. respondents indicated that political discussions are angry and bad tempered (Harris Poll, 2016). It is also the case that a sizeable portion of the public view polarization as undesirable. In a 2022 survey by FiveThirtyEight, 28% of respondents indicated political extremism was among the most important issues facing the country, a percentage only exceeded by inflation and crime or gun violence (Skelly and Fuong, 2022).

At the same time that many Americans appear to bemoan the polarization of politics, there is evidence that the electorate has itself become more polarized. Earlier work on polarization generally conceptualized it as being associated with ideological and/or policy differences between the parties. To be certain, there are scholars who question the extent of polarization, arguing that it has been muted among the public (Fiorina and Abrams, 2008; Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope, 2005, 2008). However, a larger camp suggests that Democrats and Republicans in the electorate have adopted increasingly divergent ideological and issue positions (Abramowitz, 2010; Abramowitz and Saunders, 1998, 2008; Bafumi and Shapiro, 2009; Brewer, 2005; Hetherington 2001; Jacobson 2007; Layman and Carsey 2002; Levendusky 2009; Pew Research Center, 2014).

Affective Polarization

Polarized attitudes on political issues and in ideological orientations is important to recognize and can have significant implications for the nature of political debate, the functioning of government, citizen faith in government, and more. Nevertheless, issue-based polarization can still offer the opportunity for meaning dialogue and compromise. What makes this less likely is a corresponding rise in affective polarization.

As opposed to divergent positions on an ideological or issue scale, affective polarization is about sentiment and differential feelings toward one's own party and its leaders and the opposing party. Scholars have used various labels for this, including social polarization (Mason 2015), behavioral polarization (Mason 2013), and partisan prejudice (Lelkes and Westwood 2017). Regardless of the terminology, there is widespread agreement that affective polarization has been on the rise in recent decades (Haidt and Hetherington 2012; Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Mason 2013). Heightened affective polarization can promote political involvement (Mason 2015; Pew Research Center, 2014). However, it can also lead individuals to be more dismissive of, or to avoid altogether, members of the opposing party, to extend preferential treatment to members of their own party, and to employ confrontational rhetoric (Lelkes and Westwood 2017; Mason 2015). It is these tendencies that can be troubling as indicated by Senator John McCain's widow, Cindy McCain (2019), in noting that "the anger some Americans feel for people with opposing views seems to have become more vitriolic and intense" and encouraging the U.S. public to "take a pledge of civility by committing to causes larger than ourselves and joining together across the aisle or whatever divides us to make the world a better place."

The hostility toward individuals on the other side of the aisle goes beyond political rhetoric to the very identity of many Americans and their societal interactions. So, partisans seem increasingly willing to assign negative personality attributes to those of the other party and to illustrate support for discriminating against them (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes, 2012; Miller and Conover 2015; Pew Research Center 2014, 2022). It even extends to attitudes about marrying across party lines, where opposition now exceeds that to racial intermarriage (Vavrek, 2017).

Scholars point to various causes for increased affective polarization. Partisan sorting, the process of conservatives finding their "natural" home in the Republican Party while liberals do likewise with the Democratic Party, and more generally, greater ideological and partisan consistency and stronger party ties, appear associated with polarization (Levendusky, 2009; Mason, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2016; Rogowski and Sutherland, 2016). Others indicate that polarization can be self-reinforcing as individuals receive negative information about the opposing party through campaigns and media coverage (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Lelkes, Sood, and Iyengar 2017; Levendusky 2013; Miller and Conover 2015).

In a related vein, scholars have also devoted some attention to which individuals are likely to exhibit greater polarization. For example, Garrett and Bankert (2020) noted the role that moralized attitudes can have in contributing to affective polarization. Drawing from moral psychology, they suggest that propensity to moralize exacerbates affective polarization, having an effect beyond that of partisan strength. In particular, they find that individuals who are more likely to think about political issues in moral terms, based in fundamental beliefs about right and wrong, display more polarized attitudes toward presidential candidates and greater hostility toward opposing partisans (as assessed by measures of anger, incivility, and antagonism toward the out-party). Bolsen and Thornton (2021) emphasize the significance of political sophistication. They argue that individuals

who have greater interest in, involvement in, and information about politics should display greater biases toward presidential candidates of both political parties, largely because these individuals are the most likely to engage in partisan motivated reasoning. They find that more sophisticated individuals display a more pronounced person-positivity bias toward candidates of their own party and person-negativity bias toward candidates of the opposing party (rating the candidates more warmly/cooly using feeling thermometers respectively than do their less sophisticated counterparts).

The Trump Phenomenon

Literature pointing to elite polarization and elite behavior, and the nature of media coverage and exposure as factors promoting affective polarization in the electorate underscore the importance of considering specific political personalities and political context. Even prior to becoming the Republican presidential nominee in 2016, Donald Trump was quick to attack others, often in an uncivil manner. For example, referring to Carly Fiorina, Trump said, "Look at that face! Would anyone vote for that?" The general election campaign offered more examples of incivility, personal attacks, and questioning various characteristics of the candidates and their supporters. Fox News anchor Megyn Kelly reminded potential voters that Trump had a history of making sexist remarks, referring to women he disliked as "fat pigs, dogs, slobs, and disgusting animals." Trump's response suggested that Kelly must have been menstruating to ask such a "ridiculous" question. In the general election, Trump stayed true to form, calling Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton a "nasty woman" during the third presidential debate. Clinton returned fire on the campaign trail saying of Trump supporters, "They're racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic," and referring to half of them as a "basket of deplorables" (Reilly, 2016).

Following his election, Trump continued to used pointed language and personal attacks. He called MSNBC's Joe Scarborough "Psycho Joe" and said that Congresswoman Maxine Waters "an extraordinarily low IQ person." Trump's behavior and his personality led to counterattacks as well. After Trump indicated Democratic Florida congresswoman Frederica Wilson was "wacky" for criticizing his phone call to the family of a fallen U.S. soldier, she called him a "jerk" and a "liar." Waters urged her supporters to harass members of the Trump administration when they see them around town. And Democratic Virginia Lieutenant Governor Ralph Northam said that Trump was a "narcissistic maniac."

Given this, it is unsurprising that a 2018 poll revealed that 74% of respondents viewed the overall tone and civility in Washington, D.C. to have deteriorated since Trump's elections (Santhanam 2018). It is with general patterns in polarization combined the nature of the 2016 campaign (and subsequently the 2020 campaign) and what is widely perceived to be Trump's divisive presidency and personality, his willingness to denigrate political opponents and describe unfavorable media outlets as the enemy, and the reactions of Democratic officials and Democratic-leaning media to push back, that I derive empirical expectations about polarization.

- Hypothesis 1a: Affective polarization toward presidential candidates will be greater in 2016 and 2020 than in previous election cycles.

- Hypothesis 1b: Affective polarization toward political parties will be greater in 2016 and 2020 than in previous election cycles.

- Hypothesis 2a: Positive attitudes toward in-party presidential candidates will be greater in 2016 and 2020 than in previous election cycles.

- Hypothesis 2b: Negative attitudes toward out-party presidential candidates will be greater in 2016 and 2020 than in previous election cycles.

- Hypothesis 3: The increase in negative attitudes toward out-party presidential candidates will be greater than the increase in positive attitudes toward in-party presidential candidates.

- Hypothesis 4: The correlation between affective assessments of presidential candidates' and political parties' will be greater for both in-party and out-party in 2016 and 2020 than in previous election cycles.

  While Donald Trump was obviously the Republicans' standard bearer in 2016, he had not necessarily captured the party to the extent that he would by 2020. In the 2020 election, the Republican National Committee did not even adopt a new platform and its resolution asserted continued support for the America First agenda espoused by Trump. Similarly, several states canceled their Republican primaries and caucuses in 2020, eschewing any possibility of challenges to the incumbent president. This leads to one additional expectation.

- Hypothesis 5: The correlation between affective assessments of Donald Trump and the Republican Party will be greater in 2020 than in 2016.

Data and Measures

Examining developments in polarization requires time series data. The American National Election Studies (ANES) is one of the few sources meeting this need. Consequently, I use the ANES) Time Series Cumulative Data File (1948-2020). The ANES has its roots in the Survey Research Center (SRC) at the University of Michigan, which conducted the first survey in the series in 1948 using a national probability sample. The University of Michigan continued to conduct national surveys every two years, primarily with new cross-sectional samples, through 1976. In 1977, the National Science Foundation provided support to create the American National Election Studies, and the ANES has since continued to conduct politically-related surveys with national probability samples during presidential election years.[1]

As the name implies, ANES surveys focus on politics, particularly electoral politics, including things such as individuals' views on specific policy issues (e.g., government spending on national defense), individuals' general political orientations (e.g., party identification and ideology), and individuals' political behavior (e.g., contribute to political campaigns, vote in elections). In addition, the ANES regularly collects data for a number of sociodemographic variables such as education, income, and age. Not all survey administrations have included exactly the same battery of questions. However, there are a number of items that have appeared in many years, including some of those central to tracking affective polarization.

Measures of Polarization

I employ several measures of affect toward both presidential candidates and toward political parties, most of which have been used previously by other scholars. Beginning with candidates, the first measure of affect relies on thermometer ratings. These items ask respondents to rate various political figures and groups on a scale from 0 to 100. The survey instructs respondents that ratings from 50 degrees to 100 degrees mean that they "feel favorably and warm toward the group," while ratings from 0 degrees to 50 degrees mean that they "don't feel favorably towards the group." The thermometer ratings for candidates have been included in the 14 presidential election year ANES surveys from 1968 to 2020. The second indicator of affect toward candidates asks respondents to indicate if candidates have ever engendered certain emotions. For 2016 and 2020, the questions followed this lead: "Now we would like to know something about the feelings you have toward the candidates for President. I am going to name a candidate, and I want you to tell me whether something about that person or something he or she has done has made you have certain feelings like anger or pride. Think about [PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE]. How often would you say you've felt [AFFECT] because of the kind of person [PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE] is or because of something HE/SHE has done?" The specific sentiments (affect) I examine are "angry," "afraid," "hopeful," and "proud." I also note that prior to 2016, the question only allowed respondents to indicate whether or not they had each of the affective reactions, not how much/how often they felt a certain way. Consequently, I use a dichotomous variable for all four sentiments with data available to construct the measures for 1980-2016, where 1 indicates feeling the relevant emotion and 0 not feeling it.

I also have two measures of affect toward political parties. The first is thermometer ratings for each of the parties that mirror those described above for presidential candidates. The second similarly asks respondents their feelings toward political parties. In this case, the question reads as follows: "I'd like to know what you think about each of our political parties. After I read the name of a political party, please rate it on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means you strongly dislike that party and 10 means that you strongly like that party." Respondents were provided with the names of parties and placements, which resulted in an 11-point scale for each.

My final analysis in this study seeks to provide some understanding of determinants of affective polarization using ordinary least squares regression for the years 1972 to 2020. The dependent variable measures affect toward presidential candidates from thermometer ratings, and is constructed by subtracting the rating of the out-party candidate from the in-party candidate. My main independent variables of interest in this analysis are the strength of partisanship and ideological strength. To measure partisanship, I begin with a 7-point party identification variable in the data set that is constructed by asking respondents, "Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?" Follow-up questions ask Democrats and Republicans, "Would you call yourself a strong (Democrat/Republican) or a not very strong (Democrat/Republican)?" Respondents originally identifying as Independents were probed by asking, "Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican or Democratic party?" The strength of partisanship is on a 4-point scale from "pure independent" (0) to strong Democrat/Republican (3). I also note that in tracing affective polarization over time, I show patterns separately for Democrats and Republicans. In those analyses, I define partisans to include strong, weak, and "leaning" individuals. The ideological strength measure parallels that of partisanship strength, ranging from moderate (0) to extremely liberal/conservative (3) based on responses to the following item: "We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. Here is a 7-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?"

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[1]Neither the Center for Political Studies at the University of Michigan nor the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research bears any responsibility for the analysis and conclusions present here.

In addition to the partisanship and ideology variables, the regression analyses include a host of political and sociodemographic control variables. Specifically, I measure the following:

1. Political interest: "Some people don't pay much attention to political campaigns. How about you, would you say that you have been/were very much interested, somewhat interested, or not much interested in the political campaigns (so far) this year?" Variable ranges from 1 to 3, with 3 indicating greater interest.

2. Political participation, vote: "In talking to people about the election, we often find that a lot of people weren't able to vote because they weren't registered, they were sick, or they just didn't have time. How about you, did you vote in the elections this November?" Variable coded as 1 for voted, 0 otherwise.

3. Age: Variable uses 7 age categories, coded 1 to 7 in ascending order of age category where categories are 17-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, 65-74, and 75 and older.

4. Gender: Coded as 1 for male, 2 for female

5. Race: Coded as 1 for white, non-Hispanic, 0 otherwise.

6. Region, south: Coded as 1 for 13 states of the Confederacy, 0 otherwise

7. Education: Variable uses 4 categories, coded 1 to 4, grade school or less (1), high school (2), some college (3), college or advanced degree (4).

8. Income: Respondents were asked to indicate their household family income from all sources (with question-wording varying by year). Respondents were then placed into the following five categories in the cumulative data file: 0 to 16 percentile (1), 17 to 33 percentile (2), 34 to 67 percentile (3), 68 to 95 percentile (4), and 96 to 100 percentile (5).

Results

The initial examinations of affective polarization use feelings toward the presidential candidates of the two major political parties from thermometer ratings. I begin with extreme ratings of the candidates, namely the percentages of Democrats and Republicans rating the in-party candidate at the maximum and the out-party candidate at the minimum. Figure 1 displays the results. In the figure, the solid lines show the percentages of partisans with maximum ratings of their own candidates. Variability for both Democrats and Republicans here speak to the importance of individual candidates. For example, the relative weakness of both George McGovern in 1972 and Jimmy Carter in 1976 among Democrats is apparent while Republicans were seemingly less thrilled with their nominees of Bob Dole and John McCain in 1996 and 2008 respectively. In contrast, and consistent with expectations (Hypothesis 2a), more Republicans (34.2%) gave Donald Trump in 2020 the highest thermometer rating possible than they had any candidate prior to that point. Trump's effect is also evident when considering Democrats' ratings of him. Democrats went from 28.2% minimum ratings (0) of Mitt Romney in 2012 to 53.4% providing this rating of Trump in 2016 and a whopping 73.5% in 2020, a pattern consistent with Hypothesis 2b. While not as pronounced for Republicans, they also saw higher percentages of their identifiers rating the Democratic candidates (Clinton and Biden) at zero in 2016 and 2020 than at any point prior to that, a finding again consistent with Hypothesis 2b. Given these sentiments toward each of the candidates, it is also the case that the proportions of Democratic and Republican identifiers having the maximum possible difference in ratings of candidates (maximum value for their own candidate combined with minimum value for the opponent) was greater in 2016 and 2020 than in preceding elections. In other words, there is evidence of greater polarization in 2016 and 2020 consistent with Hypothesis 1a.[2]

Figure 2 continues the story by displaying mean thermometer ratings of presidential candidates. The patterns here offer further evidence of increasing polarization, consistent with Hypothesis 1a. For Democrats, the mean difference in feeling thermometer scores between their party's candidate and the opposition candidate increased from 31.37 in the 1968-2012 elections to 61.68 for the 2016 and 2020 elections. This difference is statistically significant (t-test for difference in independent samples) at the .001 level as is the difference in the means of Republicans from 37.00 in the 1968-2012 elections to 52.28 in the two most recent elections.[3] Figure 2 also illustrates the nature of polarization in terms of warmth toward each of the candidates. Specifically, mean ratings of in-party candidates do not follow a monotonic trend for identifiers of either party.

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[2]Z tests for equal proportions of independent samples, the samples being 2016/2020 and 1968-2012, are significant at the .001 level for all proportions except the proportions of Democrats rating in-party candidates at the minimum, 0. In that instance, the proportion of Democrats was not significantly lower in 2016/2020 than it was earlier. This appears to be a function of higher numbers of Democrats rating Hillary Clinton at 0.

[3]While the hypotheses in this study are about changes in polarization over time, it is worth noting that for both Democratic and Republican identifiers, the differences between their feeling thermometer ratings of in-party and out-party candidates are statistically significant (paired samples t-tests) at the .001 level for every year in this series.

For Democrats, the difference in mean thermometer ratings of Democratic candidates is virtually identical for the two sets of elections (72.51 for 1968-2012 and 72.17 for 2016/2020) and is not statistically significant. Mean thermometer ratings of their own candidate (Trump) for Republicans were actually lower in 2019/2020, 71.45, than in the preceding elections, 74.04. These findings run counter to the expectation of increasingly positive attitudes toward in-party candidates from Hypothesis 2a. In contrast, the evidence fully supports increasingly negative attitudes toward out-party candidates from Hypothesis 2b. For both Democrats and Republicans, mean ratings of opposing candidates were significantly lower in 2016/2020 than in 1968-2012. These findings with regard to feelings toward in-party and out-party candidates also generally support Hypothesis 3 that points to greater changes in attitudes toward opposing candidates (i.e. that increasing polarization is driven more by hostility toward the out-party). Finally, it is important to note here that the effect of Trump's presence on the national political scene is less straightforward than might be expected. It appears that significant changes began following the 2008 elections and then continued with Trump's two campaigns.

Next, I turn to specific emotions that candidates engender in respondents. Specifically, I examine two "negative" emotions, anger and fear, and two "positive" emotions, hope and pride. To the extent that affective polarization has been on the rise, we should expect to see both negative reactions to the out-party candidate and positive reactions to the in-party candidate increasing over time. Figures 3 and 4 display results for Democratic and Republican identifiers respectively. Specifically, each figure shows the mean ratings of in-party and out-party candidates constructed so positive values indicate greater favorability toward in-party candidates. For example, for Democrats, for anger and fear, the measure subtracts their own candidate's response from the opposing party's (Republican) candidate. Thus, if a Democrat said that the Republican candidate made them angry while their own candidate did not, it would yield a score of 1 (it would be 0 if neither or both candidates produced anger, and -1 if just the Democratic candidate did). Figure 3 generally suggests increasing affective polarization from 1980 to 2016 (as mentioned earlier, the items did not appear on the 2020 survey). For each of the four emotions, positive sentiment toward the Democratic candidate relative to that toward the Republican candidate was higher (statistically significant at the .001 in independent samples t-tests) in 2016 than in the 1980-2012 period. As was the case with feeling thermometer ratings of candidates, emotional assessments also support greater polarization as forwarded by Hypothesis 1a. [4]

Figure 1. Thermometer Ratings of Democratic and Republican Candidates by Party Identification
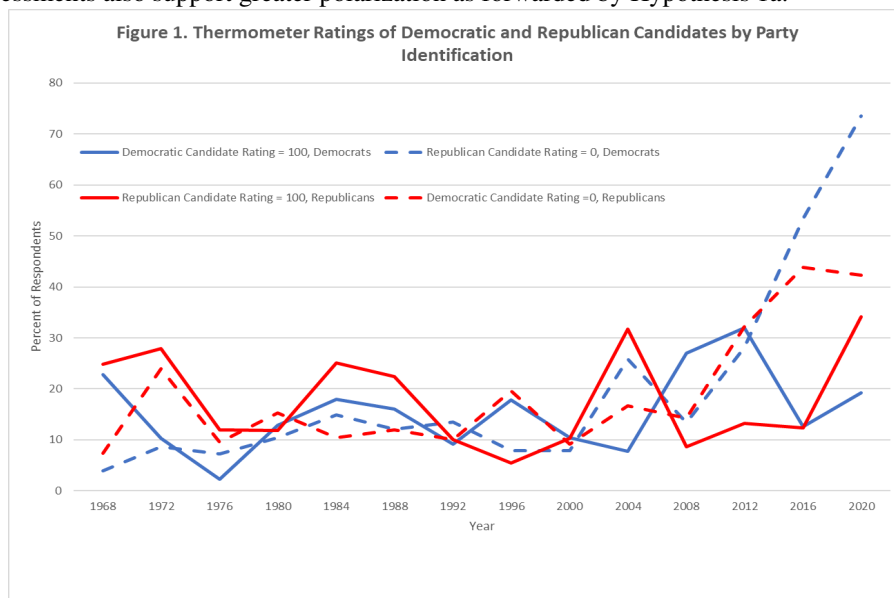
Within the general trend of the measures moving in the expected, becoming greater, direction, there are some variations. For example, Democrats expressed low levels of relative pride in Bill Clinton compared to George H.W. Bush in 1992. Also, while 2016 showed an uptick in differential ratings of the two candidates, Clinton and Trump, on negative sentiments (anger and fear), it didn't on positive assessments (hopefulness and pride). Of course, these relative ratings can mask assessments of each candidate and do not directly address hypotheses about separate changes in sentiments toward in-party and out-party. Hypothesis 2a posits that positive attitudes toward in-party candidates will be highest in the most recent elections. This is supported for the Democrats. In 2016, 88.3% of Democrats indicated feeling proud of Clinton and 85.6% felt hopeful compared to significantly lower percentages of 78.1% and 63.3% in the elections from 1980 to 2012.[5] In a similar vein, Democrats'

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[4]As with feeling thermometer ratings, paired samples t-tests show that relative emotions evoked by in-party and out-party candidates are consistently significant. Specifically, with the exceptions of relative anger among Democrats in 1980 and relative pride among Republicans in 1992, identifiers of both parties exhibited more positive relative emotions toward their own candidates than toward opposing candidates.

[5]The proportions of identifiers exhibiting each of the four sentiments is not shown in the figures, but these statistics are available on request.

negative sentiments toward Trump exceeded those toward preceding candidates, thus supporting Hypothesis 2b. While 43.4% of Democrats felt afraid of Republican candidates and 53.8% felt anger during the 1980-2012 elections, those numbers jumped significantly in 2016 to 90.0% and 93.1%. These patterns also support expectations regarding asymmetry in changing attitudes from Hypothesis 3. Namely, while positive assessments of in-party candidates increased by 10.2 percentage points for feeling proud and 22.3 percentage points for feeling hopeful, these were dwarfed by growth in negative feelings toward out-party candidates which were 46.6 points in fear and 39.3 points in anger.

Figure 4 displays relative sentiments toward the candidates for Republican identifiers. Unlike Democrats, Republicans do not exhibit uniformly greater relative in-party positivity in 2016 compared to the earlier elections. While relative hopefulness and pride were higher (significant at the .001 level) in 2016 as expected with Hypothesis 1a, relative fear was essentially the same in the two periods and relative anger was actually significantly lower in 2016 than in the preceding elections. As with Democrats, the figure reveals some real variations across elections rather than a simple monotonic trend. This again points to the importance of the specific candidates in a race. Republicans' difference in positive sentiments toward the candidates peaked in the two elections in which they had an incumbent candidate win reelection, Ronald Reagan in 1984 and George W. Bush in 2004. On the other hand, negative feelings were more distinctive in the elections featuring a Democratic incumbent being reelected, Bill Clinton in 1996 and Obama in 2012.

Also, as is the case with Democrats, comparative feelings toward the candidates can obscure patterns in separate feelings toward candidates. Here, like Democrats, Republicans feelings of anger and fear toward Democratic candidates has a more observable downward trend over the 36-year period and reach their highest levels in 2016. And, like Democrats and consistent with Hypothesis 2b, the proportions of Republicans with negative feelings toward the out-party candidate were higher in 2016 at 86.7% and 92.5% for fear and anger respectively than they were for 1980-2012 when they stood at 46.4% and 59.2%. Republicans also provide support for Hypothesis 2a, with positive feelings toward Trump in 2016 exceeding those toward candidates in the 1980-2012 period. The proportions of feeling hopeful and proud toward in-party candidates rose from 75.6% and 66.0%, respectively, in the earlier period to 85.2% and 78.3% in 2016. Finally, these patterns are again with Hypothesis 3. Changing attitudes toward in-party and out-party candidates are not symmetrical with the increases in negative attitudes toward out-party candidates greatly outstripping those of increases in positive attitudes toward in-party candidates.


Figure 2. Mean Thermometer Ratings of Democratic and Republican Candidates by Party Identification
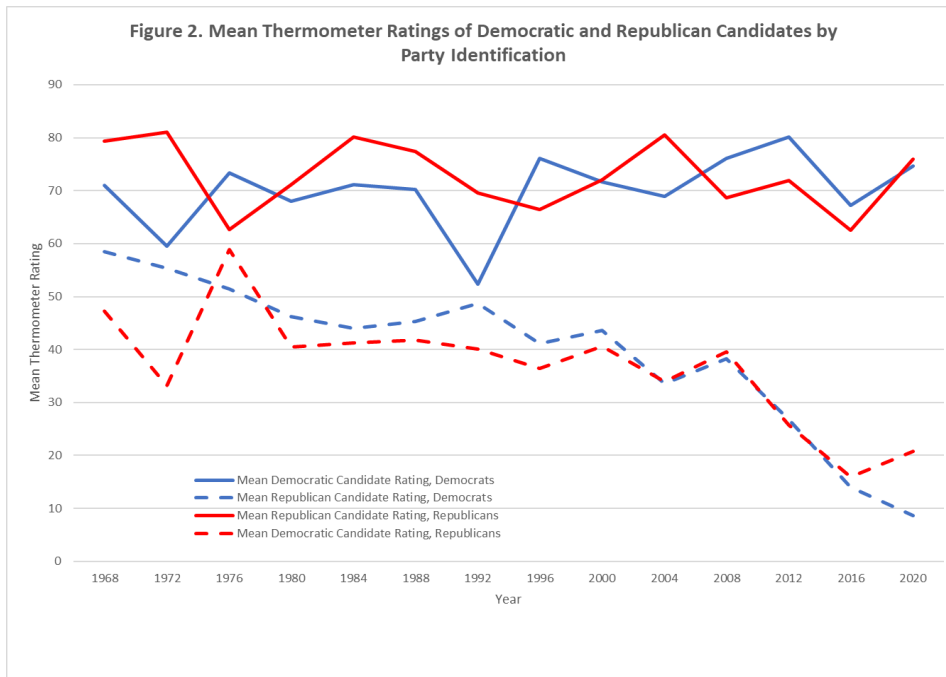
Conceptually, affective partisanship should apply to political parties themselves, not just the parties' presidential candidates, though perhaps polarization toward parties may be less pronounced than toward candidates (see, e.g., Bolsen and Thornton, 2021). Figure 5 displays mean differences in ratings of in-party v. out-party thermometer ratings with the solid lines. The patterns here are similar to those for thermometer ratings of candidates. Namely, affective polarization has increased substantially, with the mean differences between parties more than doubling for both Democrats and Republicans from 1980 to 2020. Furthermore, most of the increase has occurred since 2004 with identifiers of both parties reaching their highest polarization levels in 2020. Statistical tests for differences of means between the 2016/2020 elections and the earlier elections

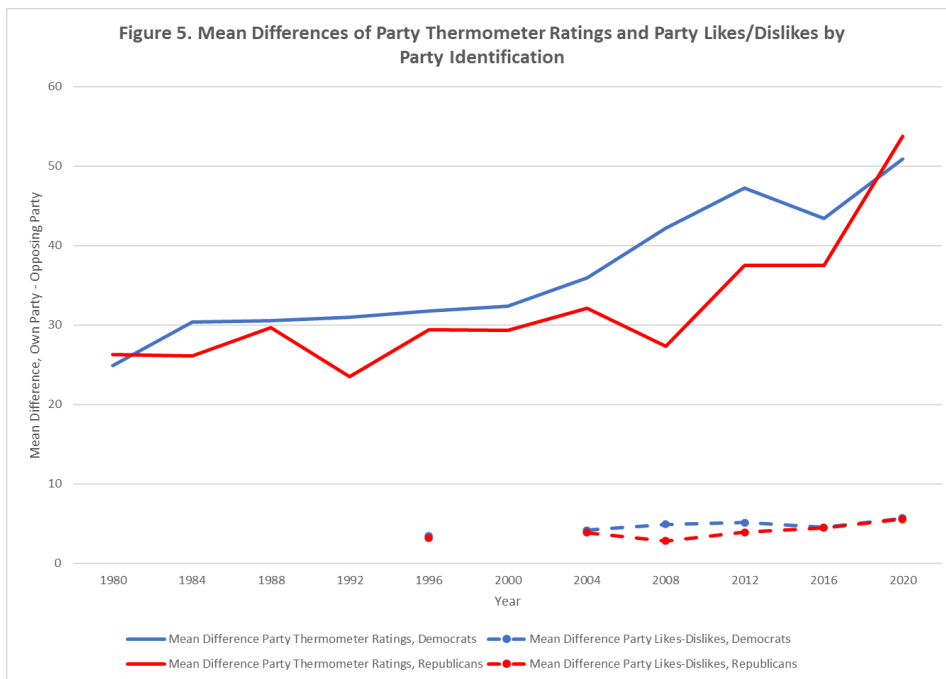are significant at the .001 level for both Democrats and Republicans, providing support for Hypothesis 1b.

More difficult to see are patterns in polarization as measured by the mean difference in ratings of the two parties on the 11-point like/dislike scale. Here, the ANES item was asked in 1996 and then again from 2004 to 2020. For identifiers of both parties, polarization generally trended up over the observations, and, for both, they reached their highest levels in 2020. Among both Democrats and Republicans, mean differences were significantly higher (at the .001 level) in 2016/2020 than in earlier years, again consistent with Hypothesis 1b.

Figure 3. Mean Difference Ratings of Candidate Traits, Democrats
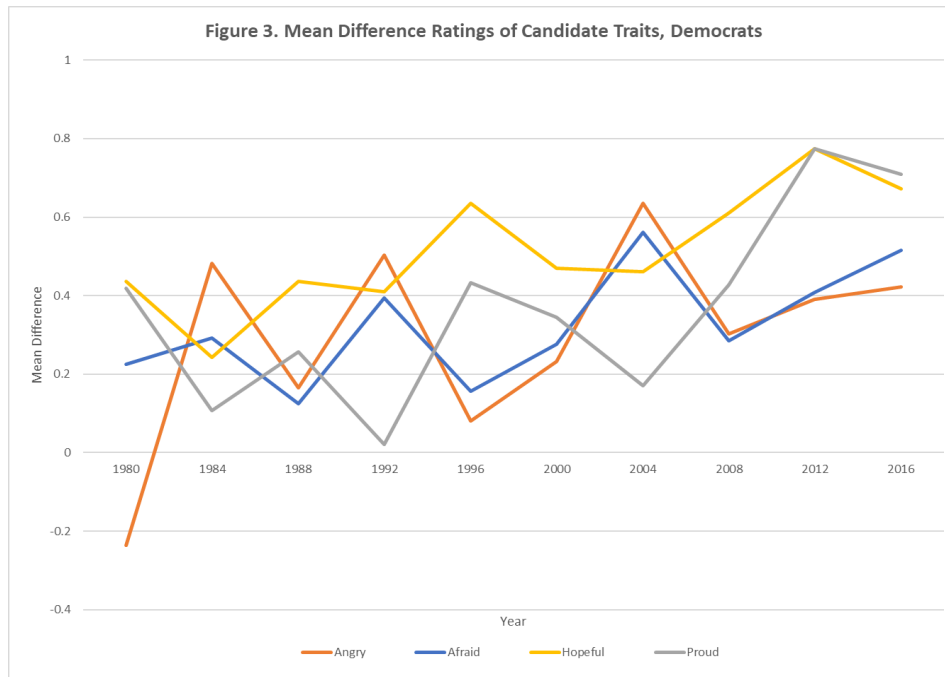
The final hypotheses (4 and 5) concern linkages between feelings toward political parties and their candidates. The primary examination of this uses correlations between party and candidate thermometer ratings with Figure 6 displaying the correlations for both in-party and out-party for identifiers of each party. For both Democrats and Republicans, correlations between parties and candidates end the time series higher than they began. However, none of the correlations move monotonically upward over the entire period. Furthermore, it is only for Republicans that 2020 represents the strongest correlations between feelings toward parties and candidates. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, statistical tests (z tests following Fisher's transformation of the correlation coefficients) provide mixed support for Hypothesis 4 that posited higher correlations in 2016 and 2020 than in the earlier elections. For both Democrats and Republicans, correlations between in-party candidates and the in party itself were higher in the most recent elections than in preceding contests (.604 v. .535 for Democrats and .613 v. .659 for Republicans). However, for Republicans, the correlations between Democratic candidates and the Democratic Party were virtually identical in the two periods (.641 and .638), and the correlations of the Republican Party and Donald Trump were actually weaker (.539) for Democrats than they were for candidates and the Party prior to 2016 (.656). The figure does offer an interesting story related to Trump. Moving from 2012 to 2016, the connection between party and candidate affect with regard to Republicans declined for identifiers of both parties. That is to say, feelings toward Trump and the Republican Party were more distinctive for both Democrats and Republicans than they had been prior to that time (reaching a low for the entire period for Democrats). This likely reflects Trump representing a departure, at least in part, from existing conceptions of Republicans. However, as president, with his hold over the Republican Party increasing, the link in feelings toward Trump and the Party rebounded considerably. For Democrats, the correlation between the Republican Party and its candidate rose from .48 in 2016 to .566 in 2020 while for Republicans the change was even more dramatitc, from .475 to .825. For identifiers of both parties, the differences in the correlations between the two years are statistically significant at the .001 level, thus providing support for Hypothesis 5. With an apparent rematch of the 2020 election in store for 2024, the link between assessments of political parties and their nominees in presidential elections is likely to tick upward, but that remains to be seen.

Figure 4. Mean Difference Ratings of Candidate Traits, Republicans
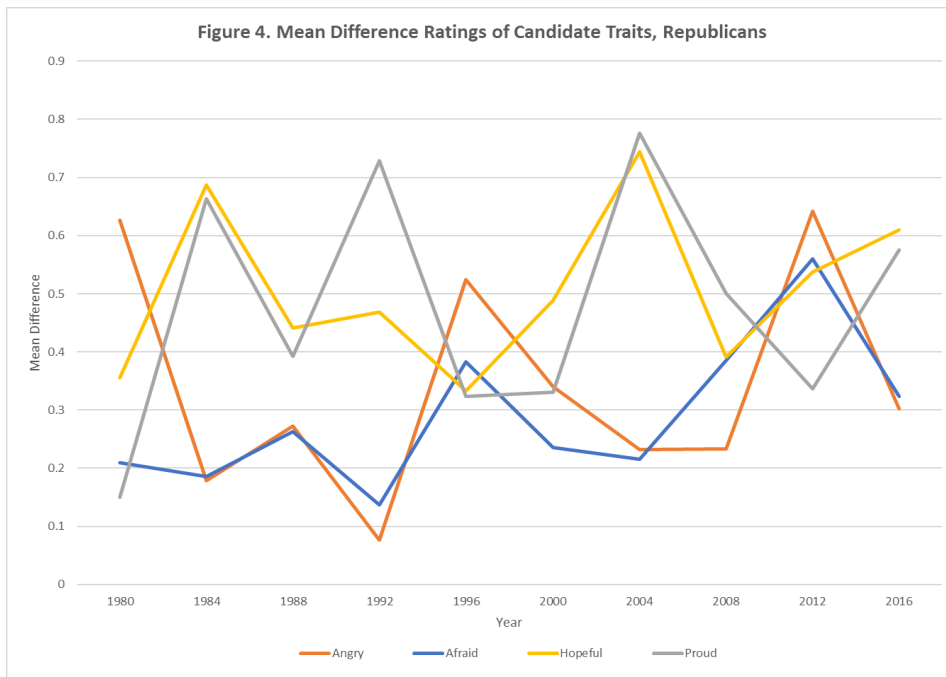
This likely reflects Trump's representing a departure, at least in part, from the existing conceptions of Republicans. However, as President, with his hold over the Republican Party increasing, the link in feelings toward Trump and the Party rebounded considerably. In fact, for Democrats, the correlation between the Republican Party and its candidate reached its highest point. In sum, the evidence for the strengthening of assessments of political parties and their nominees in presidential elections is only partially supported. With an apparent rematch of the 2020 election in store for 2024, the link is likely to tick upward, but that remains to be seen.

Figure 5. Mean Differences of Party Thermometer Ratings and Party Likes/Dislikes by Party Identification

The other analysis designed to help illuminate connections between partisanship, ideology, and affect estimates regression models with the difference between thermometer ratings of in-party and out-party candidates as the dependent variable. The construction means that higher scores indicate greater relative warmth toward the in-party candidate, i.e., greater affective polarization. Table 1 presents the results for the years 1972-2020. As shown there, both the strength of party identification

and ideological extremity are consistently important (the most important in the model) predictors of polarization, with each being statistically significant at the .01 level every year. If party identification has become more directly connected to affective evaluations, we would expect the magnitude of the partisanship strength effect to increase over time. And, while it is generally higher in more recent elections than those earlier in the series, it does not increase monotonically. In a similar vein, estimates of ideological extremity's effects does not move consistently in one direction across elections. It is worth noting, though, that they were considerably higher in 2016 and 2020 than they had been since 1984. Of the remaining, control, variables, the only one that is also significant every year is interest in the election. Higher levels of interested are consistently associated with greater affective polarization, a finding consistent with Bolsen and Thornton (2021). In a related vein, in most years, individuals who report voting also exhibit higher polarization than their counterparts who abstain. None of the other variables emerge as reliable determinants of polarization, though it is interesting that race has been significant in the last three elections, with whites exhibiting less polarization than others, all else being equal.
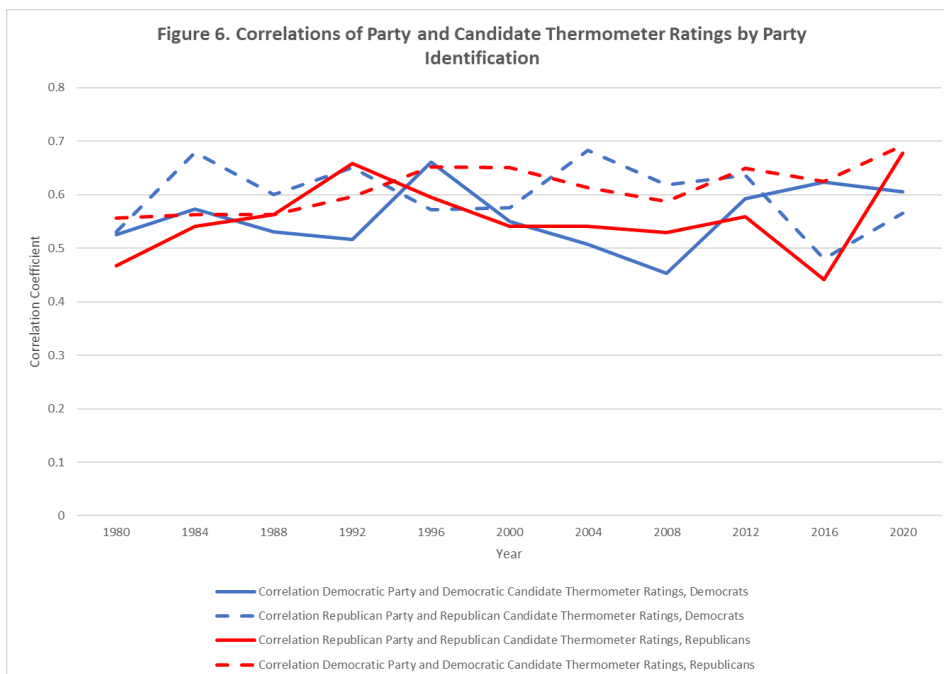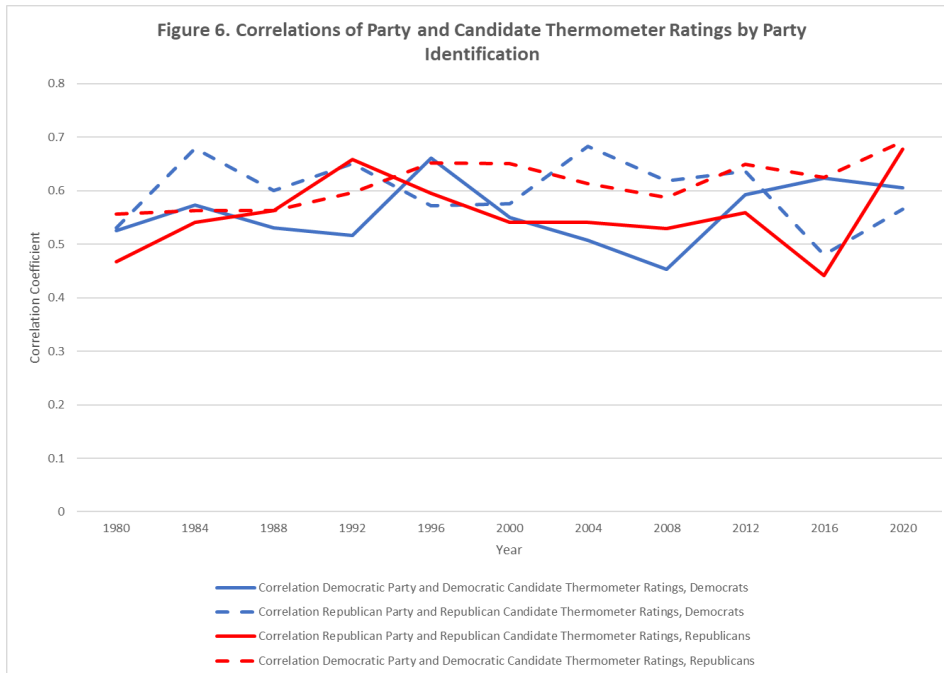

Figure 6. Correlations of Party and Candidate Thermometer Ratings by Party Identification

Figure 6. Correlations of Party and Candidate Thermometer Ratings by Party Identification

Table 1. OLS Regression of Affective Polarization Toward Presidential Candidates

Year	Adj. R^2	Party	Ideology	Interest	Vote	Age	Gender	Race	South	Edu.	Inc.
1972	.118	7.332**	6.385**	8.422**	3.202	.591 (.771)	-.385	-14.269**	-23.779**	4.882**	-.912
1976	.071	7.459**	4.782**	4.572**	-3.800	.084 (.629)	1.433	-9.517**	-1.456	1.230	-.068
1980	.109	8.543**	7.464**	4.609*	9.113**	-1.754* (.765)	4.303	-.758	-4.620	-.526	-.509
1984	.138	6.273**	9.854**	7.302**	8.104**	.629 (.652)	1.867	-2.292	-3.378	.139	-.519
1988	.109	9.207**	4.254**	5.707**	6.061*	-.840 (.636)	-3.371	.371	.419	2.055	-2.109*
1992	.153	9.909**	5.534**	8.949**	5.042*	-.322 (.519)	1.497	2.825	-2.901	.758	-1.738*
1996	.148	9.947**	4.770**	7.748**	2.055	-.647 (.587)	5.903**	-.138	-2.952	-1.231	-.127
2000	.160	8.979**	6.061**	10.611**	-2.438	-.090 (.966)	-.643	1.579	6.749*	-2.892	2.792
2004	.254	11.669**	5.104**	13.789**	8.744*	.493 (.743)	4.377	-.167	4.081	.486	1.859
2008	.175	10.550**	4.889**	10.049**	6.378	-1.821* (.792)	.229	-.720	-3.196	2.506	.196
2012	.158	10.386**	5.048**	9.354**	7.326**	-.227 (.329)	.918	-2.762*	-.095	-.446	-.316
2016	.186	10.582**	9.802**	8.586**	7.940**	.965* (.436)	.961	-3.493*	-.478	-1.240	-.719
2020	.190	9.835**	8.211**	9.828**	10.118**	.815** (.301)	2.826**	-2.392*	.847	-1.217	-.449

Conclusion

The partisan polarization of American politics is widely recognized and discussed. Political pundits, media outlets, public officials, and citizens alike tend to understand that politics has become more divisive and contentious in recent decades. Political scientists also recognize this polarization and have devoted considerable scholarly attention to it. Patterns in the voting behavior and rhetoric of members of Congress, and diverging ideological and issue stances among the electorate, illustrate polarization. More recently, scholars have also examined affective assessments, noting that feelings toward the two major political parties and people associated with them have exhibited polarization as well. The current study continues this line of inquiry, tracing developments in citizens' feelings using several indicators from the 1970s through the 2020 presidential contest. The findings reinforce the general line of thinking that affective polarization has been on the rise, and that the polarization exhibits some asymmetry, with negative feelings toward the out-party increasing more than positive feelings toward the in-party. Importantly, by extending the examination to 2020, I reveal an apparent acceleration of polarization when Donald Trump entered the national political scene. By virtually all measures, polarization is higher now than at any time for which we have data to make comparisons. These findings underscore the continued relevance of partisanship as a linchpin of identity in American politics.

While party is clearly critical, variation in affect across the elections examined here support Bolsen and Thornton's (2021, p. 6) claim that "the individual candidate or political context matters." A number of scholars have explored determinants of polarized sentiment, but understanding how the relative importance of determinants ebb and flow as a function of context is an avenue for future research. In a similar vein, examinations of individual-level change are scarce. So, we know much more about aggregate patterns in polarization than we do about individuals' themselves experiencing increasingly divergent feelings toward the parties and those affiliated with them. Panel studies would allow for increased attention to such processes, but panel data are unfortunately not abundant. Understanding those processes would also potentially address some questions with the regression models I estimate. In the models here, I do not account for the possibility of reciprocal relationships between affective polarization and party identification and between feelings toward parties and candidates and political interest and turnout. Finally, at the individual level, future work could also more directly examine party identification as an element of identity. For example, in what ways is party identification similar to, and different from, more traditional characteristics of identity such as race, religion, or gender.

Continuing affective polarization may be a cause for concern. Disagreement on policy objectives and the means to achieve them is inevitable. However, when those whom disagree with you are portrayed as the enemy and regarded as somehow less human, there can be real danger of political differences escalating to political violence and other problematic behavior (see, for example, Kalmoe, 2014). Yet, the fact that many knowledgeable observers and many average Americans regard polarization as problematic offers hope for some efforts to combat the current situation and begin a process of de-escalation.

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