

## ARE THERE STILL LIMITS ON PARTISAN PREJUDICE?

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**Abstract** Partisan affective polarization is believed, by some, to stem from vitriolic elite political discourse. We explore this account by replicating several 2014 studies that examine partisan prejudice. Despite claims of elevated partisan affective polarization from pundits, this extensive replication offers no evidence of an increase in the public's partisan prejudice between 2014 and 2017. Divides in feeling thermometer ratings of the two political parties remained stable, and there was no overall increase in measures of partisan prejudice between periods. This is consistent with results from the 2012 and 2016 ANES. Moreover, the most affectively polarized members of the public became no more likely to hold prejudicial attitudes toward the other party. Despite an intervening campaign with elevated elite hostility and rampant postelection discord, the limits on partisan prejudice identified in prior research remain in place. This stability is important for understanding the nature and malleability of partisan affect.

Several accounts assert that elite rhetoric causes partisan affective polarization (e.g., [Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012](#)). If true, the combination of one of the most acrimonious presidential elections in modern history ([Fowler, Ridout, and Franz 2016](#); [Pew Research Center 2016](#)) and a contentious postelection period should increase affective polarization. We replicate a prior study on the boundaries of affective polarization and show, in contrast to this expectation,

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that elevated partisan rancor among political elites has not increased affective polarization among the public. This represents critical evidence that the public's feelings toward the other party have not paralleled increases in elite and policy polarization. The stability we find is important for understanding the nature and malleability of partisan affect.

The 2016 election was marked by appeals to “fear and anger” (Bhat et al. 2016). Ninety percent of Hillary Clinton's ads attacked Donald Trump's character (Fowler, Ridout, and Franz 2016), and Trump regularly called for Clinton's jailing. Campaign media coverage in 2016 was, outside of 2000, the most negative in recent history, and focused heavily on the legal and moral wrongdoing of the candidates (Patterson 2016). Ultimately, the 2016 race left pundits unable to “think of a campaign that's been this personal and this negative” (PBS 2016) and led 92 percent of voters to assess the election's tone as more negative than previous campaigns (Pew Research Center 2016). This rancor continued after the election, as those on the left vocally questioned whether Trump would end American democracy (Mounk 2018) and the president often declined to enforce norms of governance. But do perceptions of increasing partisan hostility among the pundit class correspond to actual movement in the public's affective polarization? Is movement even possible, or do ceiling effects tamper further polarization?

This note details a replication effort examining whether affective polarization tracks this uptick in elite hostility in the post-2016 era. We employ a widely used framework for measuring prejudice (Allport 1954). Its prior application in 2014 revealed clear limits on the scope of partisan prejudice (Lelkes and Westwood 2017). While affectively polarized partisans in this work were more likely to avoid members of the other party and support preferential treatment for copartisan politicians, they failed to endorse direct harm to their political opponents. Have these bounds on partisan prejudice since eroded?

Examination of evidence from 2014 on partisan prejudice and a 2017 replication study<sup>1</sup> enables an over-time comparison in which neither survey is uniquely inflated by its position in the campaign timeline. Moreover, it captures baseline, noncampaign levels of partisan prejudice. We find no evidence of a general increase in partisan prejudice over this time period: The most affectively polarized members of the public became no more likely to display attitudes placing them in the highest level that Allport's framework of prejudice tested. Complementing this off-cycle comparison with evidence collected during political campaigns, data from the 2012 and 2016 ANES show no increase in affective polarization during this time period.

1. Unlike 2017, the year 2014 was a midterm election year, and past work shows that affect toward partisans moves in response to elections (Michelitch and Utych 2018). Our 2014 data were collected six to seven months before the midterm elections.

Overall, despite an intervening campaign with substantial elite conflict, previously identified limits on partisan prejudice remain in place. This implies that either (1) elite rhetoric is less successful at elevating affective polarization than previously supposed; or (2) affective polarization has reached a ceiling at which elites are unable to generate additional outparty animus.

## **From Elite Hostility to Affective Polarization**

Partisan hostility is a prominent element of elite political discourse. In Congress, legislators regularly taunt their partisan opponents (Grimmer and King 2011). On the campaign trail, candidates use negative advertising to critique their challengers (Fowler, Ridout, and Franz 2016). This extends to news coverage, where partisan media outlets produce a steady flow of coverage insulting the other party (Berry and Sobieraj 2014). Prior scholarship offers several paths for how this elite hostility can produce affective polarization among the public.

One path relates to the media's role in generating affective polarization through the combination of a high-choice media environment and a proliferation of partisan news outlets (e.g., Sunstein 2017). For those exposed to it, partisan news teaches that being a member of their party involves hostility toward the opposition. This point is made by pejorative comparisons of outpartisans to Nazis (Berry and Sobieraj 2014) and a focus on the opposing party's flaws, such as involvement in scandals (Budak, Goel, and Rao 2016). Evidence from survey and experimental studies links partisan news exposure to affective polarization (Levendusky 2013; Kelly Garrett et al. 2014).

A second focus is the role of negative political campaigning in bringing elite hostility to the public. Like partisan news, campaigns increase the salience of an individual's partisan identity (Michelitch and Utych 2018) and, in an era of negative campaigning, portray the other party as an existential threat (Bhat et al. 2016; Fowler, Ridout, and Franz 2016). Unlike partisan news, campaigns use advertisements and outreach to create persistent exposure to this negativity among individuals who might otherwise avoid it. Indicative of this, residents of battleground states are more affectively polarized than those with less campaign exposure (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012). Additionally, people are far more polarized at the end of political campaigns than at the beginning (Sood and Iyengar 2016), especially those exposed to negative campaign ads. However, in contrast to these findings, Ridout et al. (2018) find that affective polarization in 2014 was negatively correlated with the level of advertising in a media market.

As indicated by both public assessments of campaign tone (Pew Research Center 2016) and scholarly analyses of campaign content (Bhat et al. 2016; Fowler, Ridout, and Franz 2016; Patterson 2016; Faris et al. 2017), these potential sources of affective polarization were elevated in 2016. As a result,

the last two years offer a possible breakpoint for examining the consequences of elite animus for affective polarization. If accounts of the relationship between elite discourse and affective polarization are true, affective polarization among the American public should have increased over the last several years.

## Stable Affective Partisan Polarization

We begin by comparing affective polarization over time in two contexts: outside of political campaigns and during the peak presidential campaign environment. First, to compare affective polarization outside of campaigns, we use surveys conducted on respondents from the Research Now/SSI panel (collected via Qualtrics).<sup>2</sup> The 2017 data ( $n = 1,377$ ) were collected in June, and the 2014 data ( $n = 2,045$ ) were collected in several surveys conducted over the first half of the year. Both studies were quota sampled to benchmarks from the American Community Survey. Leaners were coded as partisans, and pure independents were excluded. Second, to compare affective polarization at the height of political campaigns—where it may be elevated in a cyclical fashion (Michelitch and Utych 2018)—we use the 2012 and 2016 American National Election Studies, both collected in the final months of each presidential campaign.

Both comparisons measure affective polarization as the difference in feeling thermometer ratings of the party an individual identifies with and their rating of the other party (e.g., Hetherington and Weiler 2009; Haidt and Hetherington 2012; Mason 2015). This difference is rescaled between zero and one. Higher numbers indicate greater affective polarization. If elite hostility spilled into the public, we would anticipate more affective polarization in the later surveys.

Figure 1 indicates this is not the case. The top panel (A) shows the average level of affective polarization in the two nonelection surveys is nearly identical (mean difference =  $-0.002$ , 95 percent confidence interval [ $-0.014, 0.010$ ]). The distribution remains similar, with no movement toward the upper end of the scale. If anything, the public appears less polarized in 2017 relative to 2014, a shift driven by a drop in inparty warmth. The bottom panel (B) shows this pattern is mirrored in the ANES surveys conducted at the peak of recent political campaigns. Here too affective polarization did not increase between 2012 and 2016. Both comparisons offer no indication that the 2016 election and subsequent period of Trump governance meaningfully changed partisan affect, and provides evidence against the perspective that the 2016 election provided a breakpoint in partisan affect.

2. Although purchased through Qualtrics, the sample originated from the same panel as 2014—Research Now/SSI.

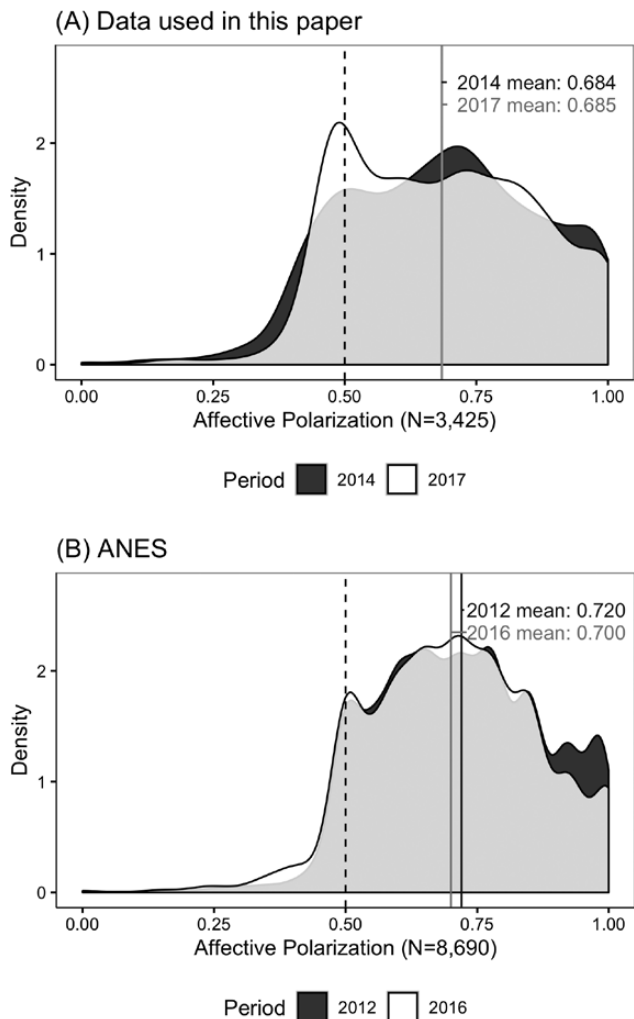


Figure 1. Changes in affective partisan polarization.

## Methods

To probe for potential consequences of elite hostility beyond this baseline measure of partisan affect, we follow research using survey and behavioral measures to capture manifestations of affective polarization (e.g., [Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012](#); [Mason 2015](#); [McConnell et al. 2018](#)). Here we replicate four studies from [Lelkes and Westwood \(2017\)](#) that measure a spectrum of increasingly severe forms of partisan prejudice using a framework from [Allport \(1954\)](#).

## STUDY 1: ANTILOCUTION

Study 1 captures the lowest level of prejudice in Allport's (1954) framework, in which individuals speak poorly of their opponents and oppose speech critical of their party, and aligns with conceptions of prejudice as the promotion of "unmitigated, derogatory stereotypes" (Jackman 2005, p. 96).

This study assesses a general taste for partisan bias and documents the degree to which affective polarization moderates the willingness to spread vitriolic political speech. In this experiment, participants ostensibly helped a news organization decide what information it should feature on its website. Participants were given the opportunity to promote or suppress negative news content in a realistic setting.

Participants were randomly assigned to read one of two news opinion articles: a column from Fox News blaming congressional gridlock on Democrats or an MSNBC column blaming Republicans for the gridlock. The two stories were identical, with only the source and the name of the party altered. The text of the manipulations appears in [online appendix table A1](#). After reading the article, participants reported whether they endorsed the article for inclusion on the news organization's website.

The sample ( $n = 265$ ) for our 2017 replication was almost evenly split between Democrats (52.83 percent) and Republicans (47.17 percent). It was 69.06 percent white and 30.94 percent nonwhite. There were roughly the same number of men and women (50.94 percent versus 49.06 percent, respectively). A majority of respondents had at least a college degree (55.85 percent), 26.04 percent had some college, and 18.11 percent had a high school degree or less.

## STUDY 2: AVOIDANCE

Study 2 measures a second, more severe tier of prejudice—avoidance. Intentional avoidance of members of the other political party is a growing concern given increasing social distance between the parties (e.g., [Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012](#); [Huber and Malhotra 2017](#)).

In this experiment, avoidance was tested using a team formation task. Participants chose between ostensibly real participants that varied on a variety of attributes. Participants were told that they would complete in teams a series of puzzles (simplified word-completion tasks based on crossword puzzle clues), none of which had anything to do with politics. Participants were asked to complete three rounds of the word-completion task in order to increase the validity of the design, to increase comprehension of what the group would do, and to demonstrate the importance of intelligence and education in the tasks. To enhance the believability of the task, each participant was placed in a "waiting room" and told that it would take a moment for a sufficiently large group of other people completing the survey to gather.

After a short amount of time, participants were told that they were randomly selected by our software to continue as one of two team leaders. To incentivize the task, participants were told that their success/score would hinge on both their abilities and the abilities of their team. Participants were explicitly told that the person not picked as a team member would be excluded from participating in the remainder of the study and therefore would not get any bonuses associated with the task. The player profiles were constructed so that the least academically qualified player was an Independent, and so that two partisans (one Democrat and one Republican) were essentially the same (both having college educations). An additional Independent had qualifications that were lower than those of the partisans, but higher than the high school–educated Independent (see [online appendix table A3](#)). Participants could therefore select the three players with the highest level of education (tolerating a member of the political outparty) or make a selection that excluded the political outparty in favor of the less academically qualified Independent. The order of each player was randomized, participants only completed one round of team selection, and all other traits were fixed.

The 2017 replication sample ( $n = 351$ ) leaned Democratic (56.98 percent). It was 71.51 percent white and 28.49 percent nonwhite. There were more women than men (55.84 percent versus 44.16 percent, respectively). A majority of respondents (59.85 percent) had at least a college degree, 25.36 percent had some college, and 15.10 percent had a high school degree or less.

#### STUDIES 3.1 AND 3.2: DISCRIMINATION

Study 3.1 and 3.2 evaluate [Allport's \(1954\)](#) third level of prejudice: discrimination. Discrimination can manifest itself in many ways, from allocating different punishments for different groups to withholding rights or benefits from them. Importantly, this level requires intentional actions designed to harm the opposing group. Our two experiments are designed to detect discriminatory preferences in contexts where discrimination would violate core democratic norms.

*Study 3.1: discrimination: endorse use of tear gas:* To test for how partisan biases affect responses to the suppression of political demonstrations—an example of where discriminatory behavior would be particularly troubling for the health of American democracy—participants read a newspaper story titled “Police Use Tear Gas on Peaceful Young [Democrat/Republican] Protest.” The story described a situation where police officers broke up a peaceful student protest. Participants reported whether they “agree or disagree with the decision to use tear gas on the protesters.” Next they were told, “The cost of the police response is unknown at this point, but the city can fine the protesters any amount up to \$10,000. What amount, if any, do you think the city should

fine the group of protesters?” Participants answered using a slider widget (see [online appendix table A7](#) for the full treatment).

The sample ( $n = 372$ ) in this replication was slightly more Democratic (52.69 percent) than Republican (47.31 percent), and nearly three-quarters (73.92 percent) of the sample was white. Slightly more men (52.15 percent) than women (47.84 percent) were in the sample. A majority of respondents (62.37 percent) had at least a college degree, 23.39 percent had some college, and 14.25 percent had a high school degree or less.

*Study 3.2: discrimination: endorse investigating political corruption:* This experiment focused on a situation where actual wrongdoing had occurred. In our scenario a political elite has violated fund-raising laws to advance his political party. Participants read a faux newspaper article entitled “Donations from Millionaire Businessman to [Republican/Democratic] Super PACs in Question.” The article reported that investigators were looking into possibly illegal donations that may have swayed an election (see [online appendix table A10](#) for the full treatment). Participants were asked if they supported or opposed an investigation on a seven-point bipolar scale ranging from “strongly oppose” to “strongly support,” which was recoded to range between 0 and 1.

The replication sample ( $n = 402$ ) was slightly more Democratic (54.98 percent) than Republican (47.31 percent). The sample included more white respondents (70.90 percent) than nonwhite respondents (20.10 percent) and slightly fewer men (48.01 percent) than women (51.99 percent). A majority of respondents (59.95 percent) had at least a college degree, 18.66 percent had some college, and 21.39 percent had a high school degree or less.

## Results

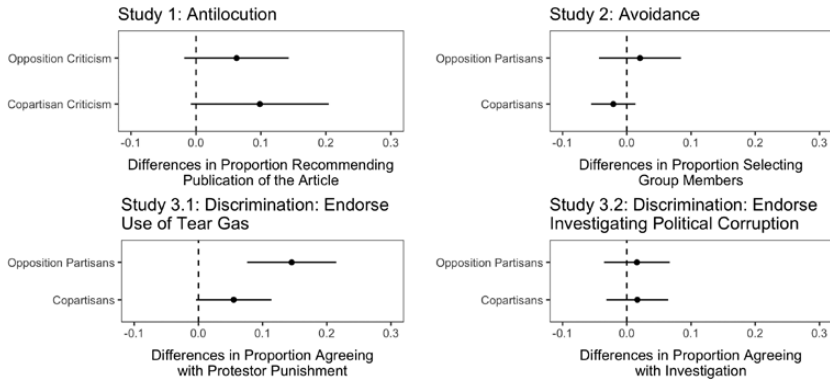
We compare results in these replication studies to results from 2014. If elite hostility elevated partisan prejudice among the public (and if those effects persisted beyond an election period), the more recent data should reveal higher average levels of outparty prejudice and inparty favoritism. For all following analysis, affective polarization was recoded to range between 0 and 1. [Figure 2](#) displays the mean difference of these outcomes between 2017 and 2014, along with a confidence interval.<sup>3</sup>

No evidence for a general increase in partisan prejudice exists across these measures.<sup>4</sup> Study 1 shows more support for publishing stories that are critical

3. Results in tabular form appear in the online appendix. Additional results replicating study 2.2 from [Lelkes and Westwood \(2017\)](#) and additional results from study 3.1 are included as the online appendix ([tables A4](#) and [A9](#) and [figure A1](#)).

4. There is no general evidence of heterogeneity by party in the 2014 or 2017 data, although subsetting to partisan groups produces smaller samples.





**Figure 2.** Differences in proportion in measures of partisan prejudice (2014 to 2017).

of the ingroup or the outgroup, with individuals endorsing publication of stories critical of both the other party (mean difference = 0.060, 95 percent CI [-0.020, 0.139]) and their copartisans (mean difference = 0.104, 95 percent CI [-0.000, 0.207]) at slightly higher rates than 2014, although in each case these between-year differences are not statistically significant. Controlling for year, participants are more likely to support publication of content critical of the opposition relative to content critical of copartisans ( $\beta = 0.373$ ,  $t = 11.943$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

For study 2, respondents were no more likely to exclude as a team member political opponents (mean difference = 0.021, 95 percent CI [-0.043, 0.084]) or include copartisans (mean difference = -0.021, 95 percent CI [-0.056, 0.013]) in 2017 relative to 2014.

Study 3.1 offers the lone instance of an increase in partisan prejudice between the two waves of the study. Compared to 2014, in 2017 individuals are more willing to support punishing protesters from an opposing partisan group (mean difference = 0.145, 95 percent CI [0.076, 0.215]). As indicated by the positive (though not significant) difference for punishment of a copartisan protester (mean difference = 0.055, 95 percent CI [-0.004, 0.114]), this is part of a general elevated willingness to punish protesters. Controlling for year, participants are more likely to agree with punishing opposing partisans relative to punishing copartisans ( $\beta = 0.104$ ,  $t = 4.538$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Finally, study 3.2 offers no evidence of increased partisan prejudice in political corruption investigations. We observe similar levels of willingness to investigate copartisan (mean difference = 0.016, 95 percent CI [-0.032, 0.064]) and outpartisan politicians (mean difference = 0.015, 95 percent CI [-0.035, 0.067]) in 2017 and 2014. Controlling for year, participants are more willing to investigate opposing partisans relative to copartisans ( $\beta = 0.126$ ,  $t = 7.030$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

In sum, we find no evidence of a general increase in partisan prejudice between 2014 and 2017. When a difference between the time periods did occur, attitudes toward both the copartisans and the other party move in the same direction. Some of the samples are not extremely large, but we are powered in 2017 to detect effects smaller than those observed in 2014. Furthermore, the differences between 2014 and 2017 are substantively very small.

NO INCREASE IN PREJUDICE AMONG THE AFFECTIVELY POLARIZED

The previous sections demonstrate that affective polarization and partisan prejudice among the public have remained stable in periods studied. However, this focus on the overall population may cloud any effects of increased elite hostility among those with high levels of affective polarization. Do the affectively polarized now hold attitudes placing them further up the hierarchy of partisan prejudice than in the past?

To consider this possibility, we examine how these measures of prejudice vary based on the affective polarization of the respondent. Specifically, we regress the outcome variable in each study on a respondent's level of affective polarization using a LOESS regression. Figure 3 displays the results from both the original studies conducted in 2014 and the replication studies from 2017. Changes among those with high levels of affective polarization

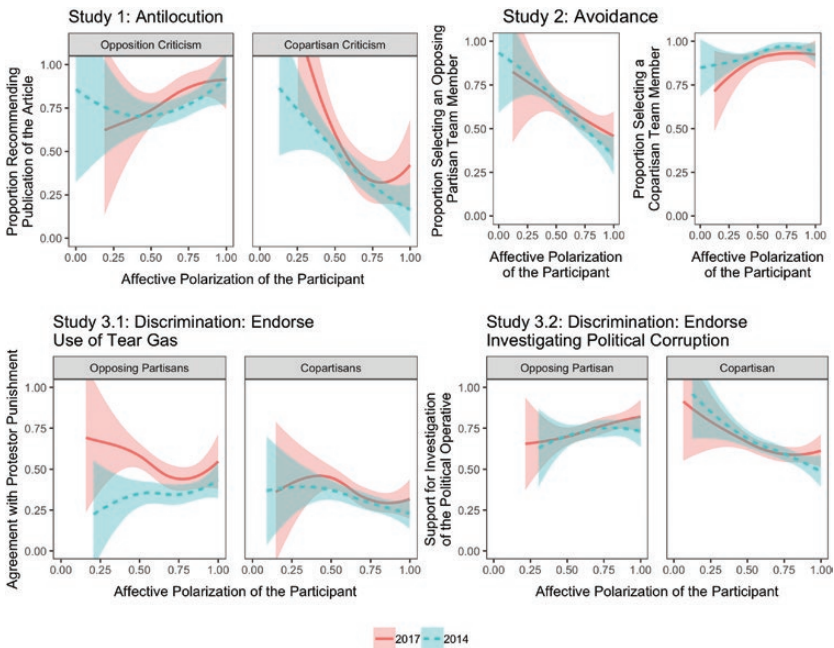


Figure 3. Measures of partisan prejudice by affective polarization.

would manifest as gaps between the two lines at the upper end of the affective polarization scale.

Overlaying the results from the two periods shows highly similar patterns. To more clearly contextualize the relationship between affective polarization and our outcome measures, we augment the LOESS visualization with results from OLS regressions. In study 1, those with high levels of affective polarization suppress criticism of copartisans ( $\beta = 0.747, t = -5.823, p < 0.001$ ), and support criticism of opposing partisans ( $\beta = 0.332, t = 2.923, p < 0.01$ ). Next, in study 2, the polarized avoid members of the other party ( $\beta = -0.564, t = -7.100, p < 0.001$ ) and selected copartisans ( $\beta = 0.104, t = 2.513, p < 0.05$ ). Study 3.1 shows that the highly polarized are no more likely to agree with punishing opposing partisans ( $\beta = -0.066, t = -0.650, p > 0.05$ ) and less likely to agree with punishing copartisans ( $\beta = -0.302, t = -3.620, p < 0.001$ ). The highly polarized are less likely to support corruption investigations of copartisan politicians ( $\beta = -0.302, t = -4.347, p < 0.001$ ) and more likely to support corruption investigations of opposing partisans ( $\beta = 0.167, t = 2.141, p < 0.05$ ).

In all cases, which controlled for study year, year is significant only in study 3.1, where people were more willing to punish protesters from opposing partisans at lower rates in 2014 than in 2017 ( $\beta = -0.141, t = -3.980, p < 0.001$ ).

Across these different studies, the relationship between affective polarization and these measures of partisan prejudice is not statistically or substantively different between 2017 and 2014 (with the exception of opposing partisans in study 3.1—one of eight comparisons). Overall, similar constraints continue to exist on partisan prejudice even among those with high levels of affective polarization.

## Conclusion

Based on an elite-driven model of partisan affect, affective polarization should have increased in the Trump era. We find one piece of evidence consistent with this claim. In 2017, partisans were more supportive of punishing outparty protesters than they were three years prior. This change is alarming, but it does not appear to be part of a broader trend. Across the other outcomes examined in our extensive replication study, there is no evidence of an increase in outparty animus over this time period.

This finding has two interpretations relevant to elite-driven models of affective polarization: either (1) elite rhetoric is less successful at elevating affective polarization than previously supposed; or (2) polarization has reached a ceiling at which elites are unable to generate additional outparty animus. Given that the one instance of elevated outparty hostility occurred for protester punishment, an outcome with relatively low levels of support in 2014 and hence far from any potential upper bound, the lack of change found on the other outcomes is consistent with the latter perspective in which already high

levels of outparty animus are difficult to elevate further. While adjudicating between these alternatives requires additional study, this replication has important implications for understanding the boundaries of affective polarization.

The purpose of this study is not to identify causal mechanisms for the lack of change in partisan animosity, but rather to document results that are counter to the prevailing account of ever-increasing partisan animosity (e.g., [Patterson 2016](#); [Bhat et al. 2016](#); [Fowler, Ridout, and Franz 2016](#)). These results stand as an important descriptive contribution to our understanding of partisan affective biases and possible ceiling effects.

It is also important to note that our research design does not isolate variation in elite rhetoric from other changes that occurred between the two time periods. While we fail to observe expected changes in affect predicted by models tying elite hostility to affective polarization, we do not assess the causal contribution of elite rhetoric. Nevertheless, previously identified limits on partisan prejudice are robust to a contentious election, a pattern consistent with recent field experiments that identify minimal campaign effects in general election campaigns ([Kalla and Brockman 2018](#)).

## Appendix

### Question Wording

*Race.* What is your race? (White/Caucasian; African American; Hispanic; Asian; Native American; Pacific Island; Other)

*Gender.* What is your gender? (Male; Female)

*Education.* What is the highest level of education you have completed? Less than High School; High School/GED; Some College; 2-Year College Degree; 4-Year College Degree; Master's Degree; Doctoral Degree; Professional Degree (JD, MD)

*Party ID.* Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or some other party? (Democrat, Republican, Independent, Other)

(If Independent or Other selected) Do you consider yourself to be closer to the Democratic Party or Republican Party? (Democratic Party, Republican Party, Neither)

(If Democrat) Would you say that you are a... Strong Democrat, Not a Strong Democrat

(If Republican) Would you say that you are a... Strong Republican, Not a Strong Republican

*Feeling Thermometers.* On a scale from 0 (coldest) to 100 (warmest), how do you feel about the following people and groups? (Republicans, Democrats)

*Study 1 Dependent Variable.* A large website that posts stories from many different news sources is considering sharing the article you just read. Do you think they should post this article? (Yes, No)

*Study 3.1 Dependent Variable 1.* Do you agree or disagree with the decision to use tear gas on the protesters? (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree)

*Study 3.1 Dependent Variable 2.* The cost of the police response is unknown at this point, but the city can fine the protesters any amount up to \$10,000. What amount, if any, do you think the city should fine the group of protesters?)

*Study 3.2 Dependent Variable.* Do you support or oppose the investigation of Alan Gregory? (Strongly Support, Support, Somewhat Support, Neither Support nor Oppose, Somewhat Oppose, Oppose, Strongly Oppose)

## Supplementary Data

Supplementary data are freely available at *Public Opinion Quarterly* online.

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