Are There Still Limits on Partisan Prejudice?

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Abstract

Partisan affective polarization is believed, by some, to stem from hostility in 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 towards the other party. Despite an intervening campaign with elevated elite hostility and rampant post-election 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.

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Several accounts assert that elite rhetoric causes partisan affective polarization (see e.g., Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes, 2012; Haidt and Hetherington, 2012; Rogowski and Sutherland, 2016). If true, the combination of one of the most acrimonious presidential elections in modern history (PBS, 2016; Pew, 2016; Fowler, Ridout, and Franz, 2016) and a contentious post-election period should increase affective polarization. We replicate a prior study on the boundaries of affective polarization and show, in contrast to this expectation, 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 change 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% of voters to assess the election’s tone as more negative than previous campaigns (Pew, 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 the extent to which affective polarization has failed to track the 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 co-partisan politicians, they failed to endorse direct harm to their political opponents. Have these bounds on partisan prejudice since eroded?

We find no evidence of increased affective polarization or partisan prejudice between the collection of the original data in 2014 and our replication in 2017. This enables an over-time comparison of partisan prejudice in which neither survey is uniquely inflated by its position in the campaign timeline and instead captures baseline, non-campaign levels of partisan prejudice. We augment this comparison in off-cycle periods with data from the 2012 and 2016 ANES. The similarity between ANES results in 2012 and 2016 suggest that the stability of partisan affect is not an artifact of the 2014 and 2017 sampling periods used to gather data for this paper. Our results show that there was no general increase in partisan prejudice. The most affectively polarized members of the public became no more likely to display attitudes placing them in the highest level Allport’s framework of prejudice that we test. Despite an intervening campaign with substantial elite conflict, previously identified limits on partisan prejudice remain.

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 out-party 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

1 Although we recognize that unlike 2017, 2014 was a midterm election year and past work shows that partisan affect cycles with elections Michelitch and Utych (2018), our 2014 data were collected 6-7 months before the midterm.
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 towards the opposition. This point is made by pejorative comparisons of out-partisans 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 (e.g., 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 the beginning (Sood and Iyengar, 2016), especially those exposed to negative campaign ads. However, in contrast to these findings, Ridout et al. (2018) find affective polarization in 2014 was negatively correlated with both the level of advertising in a media market.

As indicated by both public assessments of campaign tone (Pew, 2016) and scholarly analyses of campaign content (Faris et al., 2017; Fowler, Ridout, and Franz, 2016; Patterson, 2016; Bhat et al., 2016), these potential sources of affective polarization were elevated in 2016. As a result, the last two years offer a possible break-point for examining the consequences of elite animus for affective polarization. If accounts of the relationship between elite discourse
and affective polarization are true, we should expect these pathways to have substantively increased affective polarization in the American public 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)\(^2\) in 2017 (n=1,377) and the SSI panel in 2014 (N=2,045).\(^3\) The 2017 data were collected in June and the 2014 data were collected in the first half of the year. 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 re-scaled 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 left panel shows the average level of affective polarization in the two non-election surveys is nearly identical (mean difference = -0.002, \(^2\)Although purchased through Qualtrics, the sample originated from the same panel as 2014—Research Now/SSI

\(^3\)Both studies were quota sampled to benchmarks from the American Community Survey.
95% 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 in-party warmth. The right panel 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. This provides evidence against the perspective that the 2016 election provided a break-point in partisan affect.

Measuring Partisan Prejudice

To probe for potential consequences of elite hostility beyond this baseline measure of partisan affect, we follow previous 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) which measure a spectrum of increasingly severe forms of partisan prejudice using a framework from Allport (1954).

Study 1 measures antilocution—a respondent’s willingness to share a news article randomly assigned to be critical of either their party or the other party. This captures the lowest level of prejudice in the Allport 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).

Study 2 measures a second, more severe tier of prejudice—avoidance—by asking respondents to select a team for completing a set of puzzles. Before making a selection, they learned characteristics of potential teammates, including their partisanship. The profiles were designed so that respondents prioritizing team quality would need to select an out-party teammate. This measures intentional avoidance of members of the other political party, a concern given increasing social distance between the parties (e.g., Huber and Malhotra, 2017; Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes, 2012).

Finally, the third form of prejudice—discrimination—was measured in two studies. Study 3.1 probed respondents’ willingness to endorse the use of tear gas by police to suppress political action by a group with a randomly assigned party label. Study 3.2 examined their support for investigating charges of political corruption made against a public official, again with the official’s partisanship randomly assigned. This represents an upper tier of partisan prejudice in Allport’s framework in which individuals intentionally harm the opposing party, in this case by violating core democratic norms of equal justice (McCloskey and Zaller, 1984).

No Increase in Overall Partisan Prejudice

We compare results in these replication studies back to results from 2014. If elite hostility elevated partisan prejudice among the public (and if those effects persisted beyond an election period), we would anticipate observing higher average levels of out-party prejudice and in-party favoritism in the replications. Figure 2 displays the mean difference of these outcomes between 2017 and 2014 along with a confidence interval.4

There is no evidence for a general increase in partisan prejudice across these measures. In Study 1 there is greater interest in stories that are critical of both the in-group or the out-

4Additional studies replicating other aspects of Lelkes and Westwood (2017) produce similar results and are described in the appendix.
Mean differences in proportions between 2014 and 2017 with 95% confidence intervals. With individuals endorsing publication of stories critical of both the other party (mean difference = 0.060, 95% CI [−0.020, 0.139]) and their co-partisans (mean difference = 0.104, 95% 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 co-partisans ($\beta = 0.373$, $T = 11.943$, $P < .001$).

For Study 2, respondents were no more likely to exclude political opponents (mean difference = 0.021, 95% CI [−0.043, 0.084]) or include co-partisans (mean difference = −0.021, 95% 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. In 2017 individuals are more willing to support punishing protesters from an opposing partisan group than in 2014 (mean difference = 0.145, 95% CI [0.076, 0.215]. However, as indicated by the positive (though not significant) difference for punishment of a co-partisan protester (mean difference = 0.055, 95% CI [−0.004, 0.114]), this is part of general elevated willingness to punish protesters. Controlling for year, participants are more likely to agree with punishing opposing partisans relative to punishing co-partisans.
Finally, Study 3.2 offers no evidence of increased partisan prejudice in political corruption investigations. We observe similar levels of willingness to investigate co-partisan (mean difference = 0.016, 95% CI [–0.032, 0.064]) and out-partisan politicians (mean difference = 0.015, 95% CI [–0.035, 0.067]) in 2017 and 2014. Controlling for year, participants are more willing to investigate opposing partisans relative to co-partisans ($\beta = 0.126, T = 7.030, P < .001$).

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 towards both the co-partisans and the other party move in the same direction. We do note that 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 would manifest as gaps between the two lines at the upper end of the affective polarization scale.

Overlaying the results from the two periods show 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 their co-partisans in ($\beta = 0.747$, $T = -5.823$, $P < .001$), and support criticism of opposing partisans ($\beta = 0.332$, $T = 2.923$, $P < .01$). Next, in study 2, the polarized avoid members of the other party ($\beta = -0.564$, $T = -7.100$, $P < .001$) and selected co-partisans ($\beta = 0.104$, $T = 2.513$, $P < .05$). Study 3.1 shows that the highly polarized are no more likely to agree with punishing opposing partisans ($\beta = -0.066$, $T = -0.650$, $P > .05$) and less likely to agree with punishing co-partisans ($\beta = -0.302$, $T = -3.620$, $P < .001$). The highly polarized are less likely support corruption investigations of co-partisan politicians ($\beta = -0.302$, $T = -4.347$, $P < .001$) and more likely to support corruption investigations of opposing partisans ($\beta = .167$, $T = 2.141$, $P < .05$).

In all cases we control for the year of the study. We only find that year is significant in study 3.1, where people were more willing to punish protesters from opposing partisans at
lower rates in 2014 than in 2017 ($\beta = -0.141, T = -3.980, P < .001$).

Across these different studies, the relationship between affective polarization and these measures of partisan prejudice is not statistically or substantively different between 2017 to 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 no evidence of such shifts in our extensive replication study. This has two interpretations relevant to elite-driven models of affective polarization: either 1) elite rhetoric is less successful at elevating affective polarization that previously supposed, or 2) polarization has reached a ceiling at which elites are unable to generate additional out-party animus. While adjudicating between these alternatives requires additional study, this replication has important implications for understanding the boundaries of affective polarization.

The purpose of this manuscript is not to identify causal mechanisms for the lack of change in partisan animosity, but rather it is 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 we do not employ a research design that isolates 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, we show that 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 Broockman, 2018)
References


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