Measuring Affective Polarization: Matching Concepts to Measures*

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*We thank Dot Sawler and Katie Young for superb research assistance and advice, as well as the editors and the reviewer for excellent suggestions. Replication data are available at: https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/JORZGF.

Abstract

Affective polarization is the extent to which partisans like their own party relative to their dislike of opposing parties. High levels of affective polarization in the United States and many other countries have prompted widespread scholarly interest and practical concern. Yet, despite nearly fifteen years of scholarship, significant uncertainty remains about how best to measure affective polarization. We offer a comprehensive review focused on the measurement of affective polarization, underscoring how seemingly innocuous choices can yield substantially different results. These include the target of evaluation (e.g., engaged ideologues, ordinary voters), the dimensions of evaluation (e.g., liking/disliking, moralization), the measurement context (e.g., whether respondents are interviewed by an interviewer or complete surveys independently), and the political context (e.g., the power relationship between parties). We conclude that the next generation of inquiry will need to more carefully align measures of affective polarization with specific research questions.

1. Introduction

Polarization has become a defining political concept in the 21st century. While there are multiple types of polarization (Jost et al., 2022), affective polarization has attracted the greatest concern. The concept entered scholarly discourse in 2012, with the publication of Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes' seminal article. They defined affective polarization as "the extent to which partisans view each other as a disliked out-group… not only positive sentiment for one's own group, but also negative sentiment toward those identifying with opposing groups" (406).[1] A voluminous, interdisciplinary literature has followed, with more than 4,000 papers discussing affective polarization in 2025 alone.[2] Scholars have focused on the origins of affective polarization (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012), its consequences for both political and apolitical behaviors (Druckman et al., 2024), its application in political systems around the world (Reiljan et al., 2024), and ways to mitigate its deleterious effects (Levendusky, 2023).

Given the size and breadth of this literature, no single paper can do it justice. Rather than trying to provide a comprehensive review (e.g., Iyengar et al., 2019), this essay focuses on a fundamental question that has surprisingly received limited attention: how should affective polarization be measured (also see Carlin & Love, 2025)? We review commonly used measures, most notably the party feeling thermometers from the American National Election Studies (ANES). We explain how this and other measures of affective polarization, as with any measure, reflect a set of crucial decisions about the underlying construct. These decisions, in turn, affect the conclusions scholars reach. Rather than advocating for any particular measurement approach,

[1] While the modern literature begins with Iyengar et al. (2012), the intellectual roots date back to earlier mid-20th century debates about conflict in democracies (Schedler, 2023). While affective polarization is often positioned as an alternative to ideological polarization, it can, of course, partially stem from principled disagreement (c.f., Dias & Lelkes, 2022, Orr, Fowler, & Huber, 2023).

[2] This count comes from a Google Scholar search in January 2026, searching for articles that have the term "affective polarization" anywhere in the article. If we limit the search to articles with "affective polarization" in the title, the number in 2025 drops to 221. The more than 4,000 is surely an overcount and the 221 is surely an undercount.

our goal is to demonstrate that different, seemingly innocuous, measurement choices can lead to different answers. Any given measure of affective polarization should, therefore, be carefully designed to match the researcher's underlying theoretical concept of interest.

2. Conceptualizing Affective Polarization

Iyengar et al. (2012) grounded affective polarization in Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory: partisanship is a social, not simply a political, identity. As such, identifying with a party not only produces positive attachment to one's own in-group (their own party), but can also generate negative sentiment toward the out-group (the other party or parties). At first glance, this theoretical grounding appears simple: how much individuals like their own side relative to how much they dislike the opposing side(s). A deeper examination, however, reveals that conceptualizing affective polarization means considering at least five interrelated core components:

1. **Group-centrism**: individuals identify with a political party, and equally importantly, do not identify with the other party(ies), establishing the in-group and the out-group(s).
2. **Defining Parties**: A party is a multi-faceted group (Key, 1964), including elected officials, party organization leaders, political activists, and voters. Which one people are evaluating matters (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Druckman et al., 2022).
3. **Affective Measures**: The relevant evaluations of the groups (the parties) are rooted in affect, and as such, could be party likes and dislikes, feeling thermometer ratings, trait evaluations, aversion ratings, moralization ratings, and so forth.
4. **Difference Measure**: In an inter-group setting, such as politics, "polarization" refers to the difference between two or more groups (Jost et al., 2022, p. 2). Here, the groups are

the political parties – the difference in evaluations between one's own party and the opposing party(ies).

5. **Macro-, Micro-Level Dimensions**: Affective polarization manifests at the macro- and micro- levels. One can characterize the average size of the affective gaps between how partisans feel about their own party and the other party or parties (a macro-level manifestation, such as the national average level of affective polarization in a given year being 51.64 on a 100-point scale). Alternatively, one can consider the affective feelings of an individual voter who may or may not act on their feelings (a micro-level version, such as a voter at a given point in time having an affective polarization score of 60 on a 100-point scale).

These distinctions are not meant to be pedantic. Instead, we aim to demonstrate that even a seemingly straightforward concept comes with subtleties and nuance once it is unpacked. Measures of affective polarization reflect this complexity, even if that reality has not been widely appreciated. In what follows, we explore the intricacies of measuring affective polarization. While we focus primarily on the United States, we also explicitly discuss the cross-national challenges toward the end of the manuscript.

We begin in section 3 by analyzing the major measures employed, showing that what one finds depends on the target being evaluated (e.g., engaged ideologues or ordinary voters), and the evaluative dimension employed (e.g., like/dislike or aversion). In section 4, we discuss the design and deployment of surveys, by far the modal data collection method. The impact of survey design choices on affective polarization varies: the political nature of surveys that measure affective polarization does not seem to matter very much, declining response rates in probability surveys have uncertain consequences, and the mode of data collection clearly affects

the measures. In particular, people answer differently when in the presence of others. Live-interviewer surveys record markedly different (lower) levels of affective polarization than self-administered ones, underscoring that there is a social dimension to affective polarization.

We follow this discussion in section 5 with an exploration into whether there are partisan asymmetries; that is, do Democrats and Republicans exhibit psychological differences in affective polarization? We find little evidence of consistent psychological differences between the two groups. That said, in section 6, we show that differences can emerge as a function of political context. In particular, out-party animosity (and therefore affective polarization) tends to increase when individuals perceive the opposing party as relatively powerful, such as when it controls government offices. In section 7, we discuss applications beyond the United States, particularly in multi-party contexts. We highlight how variation in political and cultural contexts shapes both how scholars measure affective polarization and the empirical patterns they observe. Finally, we return to the aforementioned core components and draw on the lessons learned from our review to offer a framework for measuring affective polarization.

3. Measuring Affective Polarization

Affective polarization is a group-based affective measure. Beginning with Iyengar et al. (2012), scholars have often used two measures that were included in surveys long before theories of affective polarization emerged: party feeling thermometers and social distance items. This proved vital for tracking the macro-level changes over time in affective polarization. It also means that, in some ways, affective polarization is a concept that emerged from available measures – rather than from measures derived from a clearly specified theoretical construct.

The most frequently used measure is the *feeling thermometer* items included in the ANES: a scale ranging from 0 (coldest) to 100 (warmest), which respondents use to state how

they feel toward a given political group (here, their own and the other political party or parties; see Tyler & Iyengar, 2024). Since 1978, the ANES has asked respondents to rate the Democratic Party and the Republican Party on this 0-100 scale, giving researchers the ability to track affective polarization over almost 50 years. The most common approach is to take the difference between the respondent's rating of their own party (e.g., the Democratic Party for Democrats) and their rating of the other party (e.g., the Republican Party for Democrats), although some focus strictly on the other party rating. Pure independents are typically excluded, a point we discuss further below.

In Figure 1A, we present the affective polarization scores over time, which show a substantial increase.[3] The difference between the in-party and out-party rating in 1978 was 20.38 degrees. In 2024, it had risen to 51.64 degrees, a 153.34 percent increase.[4] In Figure 1B, we plot the in-party and out-party thermometers separately; this shows that most of the growth reflects surges in out-party animosity. In 1978, the out-party thermometer registered an average score of 52.61, which dropped to 19.35 in 2024.

[3] All figures that use ANES data use sample weights as advised by the relevant codebooks.
[4] Figure 1 merges across survey modes. We later discuss mode effects.

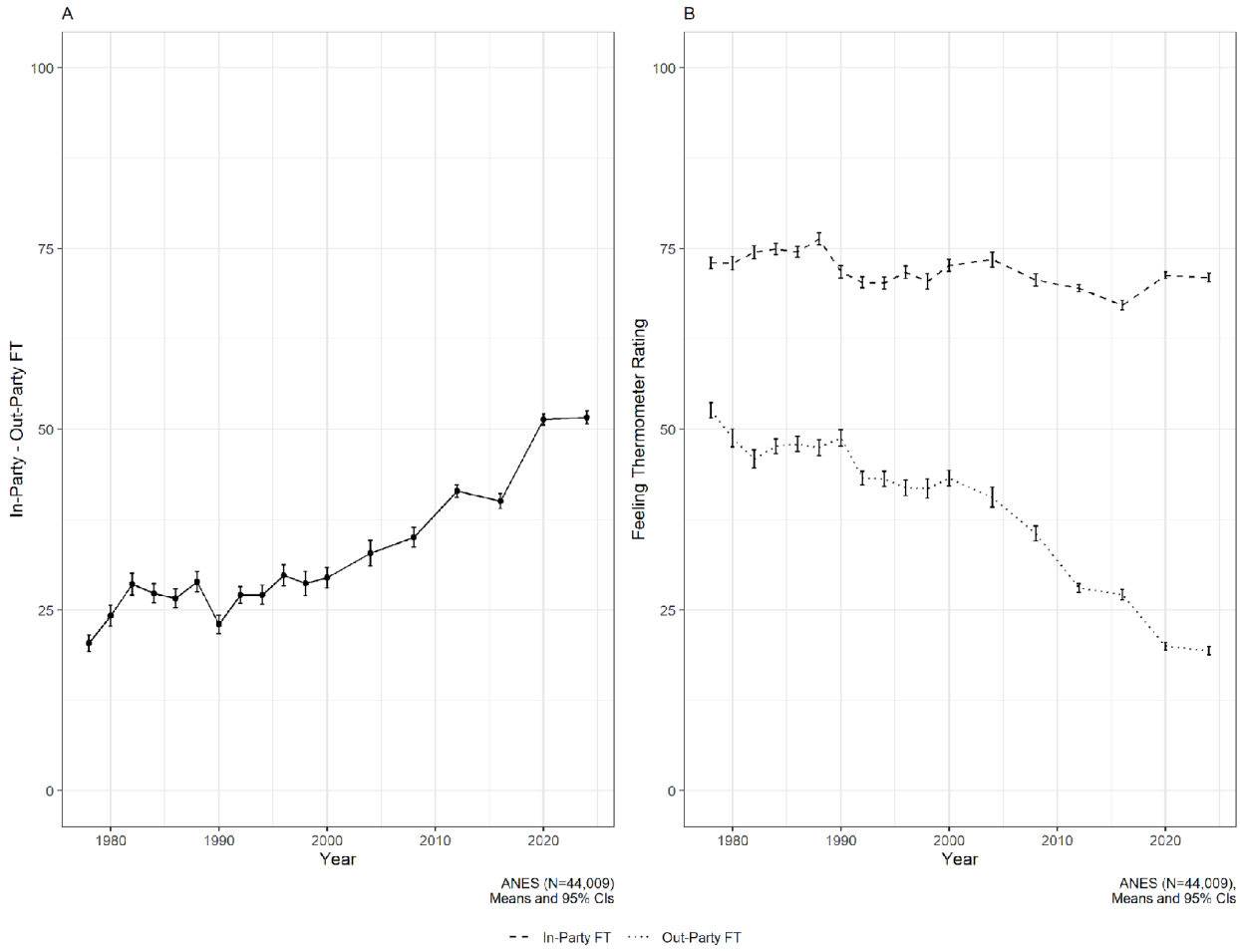

Figure 1: Affective Polarization and Thermometer Scores from the ANES Over Time

A distinct measure that has provided less consistent, though still meaningful, coverage over time is the *social distance scale*. Originally developed to measure differences between racial and ethnic groups (Bogardus, 1926), these measures were adapted to a partisan context by Almond and Verba (1963). The items track the extent to which people would be happy or comfortable introducing someone from the other party into their social circles. Measures include asking participants about an in-law or close relative from the opposing party (e.g., Iyengar et al., 2012; Klar et al., 2018; Wojcieszak & Warner, 2020), having friends from the other party, and having neighbors from the opposing party (e.g,. Simas et al., 2020). An example item is: “How

would you feel if you had a child who married a [Republican/Democrat] supporter?", with Democratic respondents answering about a Republican, and Republican respondents answering about a Democrat. The answer options could be: "Not at all upset, somewhat upset, very upset" (Iyengar et al., 2012). As with the thermometers analyses of social distance items also show substantial increases in affective polarization over time.

Two additional items that do not have the same historic lineage, but have become part of standard batteries, are traits and trust measures. The former asks survey respondents to consider how well in- and out-partisans are described by positive traits like patriotic, intelligent, honest, open-minded, and generous, versus negative traits like hypocritical, selfish, and mean (e.g., Garrett et al., 2014; Wojcieszak & Warner, 2020). The latter queries how often the parties can be trusted to do what is right for the country (Levendusky, 2013; Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Druckman et al., 2024).

3.1. Who Is the Target?

When asked to rate "the Republican Party" and "the Democratic Party" on feeling thermometers,[5] respondents need to conjure an image of the typical member of the group they are rating (Dafoe, Zhang, & Caughey, 2018). Druckman and Levendusky (2019) suggest that when asked this question, respondents tend to think more about party elites than of typical voters, although the differences in ratings of the two groups (voters vs. elites) are not large.[6]

The social distance items suffer from an analogous ambiguity problem. When asked how happy or unhappy they would be if their child married someone from the opposing political

[5] From 1964 to 1982, the ANES asked thermometers about "Democrats" and "Republicans." They asked these items as well as the party focused items in 1980 and 1982. Iyengar et al. (2012) show that when it comes to one's own party, the different targets are treated the same. When it comes to the other party, respondents rate the "party" version a bit lower (about 5 percentage points), although the items are highly correlated.

[6] Our review focuses on affective polarization toward individuals who identify with a given party (e.g., elites, voters, ideologues). We do not address work that looks at evaluations of single individuals who have a specific party identification (e.g., Orr, Fowler, & Huber, 2023).

party, few people likely imagine their child will marry an elected official from the other party, but many may envision their child marrying a political activist or an engaged partisan. After all, if the only thing that respondents are told about their child's hypothetical mate is their partisan affiliation, then this is likely a central part of that person's identity. In this case, the respondent may be upset not because of the party affiliation of their future family member, but rather the possibility the person will incessantly discuss politics (Klar et al. 2018): they do not want to be around amateur activists who, for example, may center every family dinner conversation around Donald Trump's latest activities (Ahn et al., 2014; Connors et al., 2023; Krupnikov & Ryan, 2022).

The question – who are people imagining as the target? – is an issue at the heart of any measure that asks people to evaluate partisans. Are they envisioning moderates or ideologues? Are they thinking of highly engaged partisans or those who pay scant attention to politics? In prior work, we addressed these questions with an experiment (Druckman et al., 2022). Specifically, we included a control condition that asked standard affective polarization items, including thermometers, trait items, trust items, and social distance measures. These questions all asked about "Republicans" and "Democrats."[7] Those not assigned to the control condition were assigned to one of eleven treatment conditions that asked the same set of affective polarization questions but were offered information about the target's ideology and/or frequency of discussing politics (i.e., engagement): the experimental thus varied ideology (not stated, moderate, conservative /liberal ideologue)[8] and discussion frequency (not stated, rarely, occasionally, frequently). The control condition was when neither were stated.

[7] We focused on evaluations of voters (explicitly telling respondents that was the case). This is why we used "Republicans" and "Democrats" instead of "the Republican Party" and "the Democratic Party,"
[8] We used liberal for Democrats and conservative for Republicans.

For example, some were asked the affective polarization questions (e.g., the thermometers, trait questions, etc.) about "Conservative Republicans who frequently talk about politics" and "Liberal Democrats who frequently talk about politics," (in the ideologue, frequently condition) or with regard to "Moderate Republicans who rarely talk about politics" and "Moderate Democrats who rarely talk about politics," (in the moderate rarely condition), and so forth.

We focus here just on ratings of the out-party (rather than the difference measure), consistent with the original paper.[9] We regress evaluations of the other party, where higher scores indicate more positive affect (so less polarized), on dummy variables for the target's ideology and discussion frequency – all relative to the control condition. If, for example, the variable for frequently talking about politics is not significant, it would indicate that individuals are thinking of those who frequently talk about politics when it comes to the basic questions about Democrats and Republicans (i.e., since qualifying them as frequently discussing politics does not significantly change the ratings). If, instead, frequently talking about politics is significant and negative (more polarized), it would suggest people are imagining someone who talks less than frequently (i.e., since qualifying them as frequently discussing politics leads to more negative evaluations).

We present the results in Table 1 (also see Druckman et al. 2022, Table 2). Focus on the first column that uses an average of all the measures scaled from 0 to 1. For ideology, we find that *Moderate* condition generates more positive affect toward the other party, while the *Ideologue* condition is not significantly different from the control, suggesting that people envision "Republicans" and "Democrats" as ideologues. We see that the *Rarely Discuss Politics*

[9] The results are largely unchanged if we use the full affective polarization measure (difference between in-party and out-party).

and *Occasionally Discuss Politics* treatments lead people to feel more positively. In contrast, when the target *Frequently Discuss Politics,* respondents are less sanguine about them. This means that when asked to evaluate other partisans generally ("Republicans" or "Democrats"), they like this person less than they like one who talks about politics rarely or occasionally, but more than someone who talks about politics frequently. So, they are imagining someone who talks about politics somewhere between occasionally and frequently.

	Full Index (1)	Feeling Thermometer (2)	Trait Ratings (3)	Trust (4)	Social Distance (5)
Constant	0.416***	0.316***	0.370***	0.238***	0.631***
	(0.007)	(0.009)	(0.008)	(0.009)	(0.010)
Moderate	0.030***	0.067***	0.037***	0.048***	−0.003
	(0.008)	(0.011)	(0.009)	(0.011)	(0.011)
Ideologue	−0.012	−0.019+	−0.006	−0.006	−0.028*
	(0.008)	(0.011)	(0.009)	(0.011)	(0.011)
Rarely Discuss Politics	0.101***	0.186***	0.108***	0.122***	0.043***
	(0.009)	(0.012)	(0.010)	(0.012)	(0.013)
Occasionally Discuss Politics	0.020*	0.094***	0.034***	0.030*	−0.047***
	(0.009)	(0.012)	(0.010)	(0.012)	(0.013)
Frequently Discuss Politics	−0.024**	0.019	−0.004	−0.017	−0.098***
	(0.009)	(0.012)	(0.010)	(0.012)	(0.013)
N	2887	2954	2907	2928	2925
R2	0.072	0.102	0.058	0.056	0.042

Table 1: Reanalysis of the Druckman et al. (2022) Experiment
Note: Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients with associated standard errors underneath.
+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

In this same study, we identified who "typical (modal) partisans" are: moderates who occasionally discuss politics (Druckman et al., 2022). Consequently, when asked the standard affective polarization items, voters appear to think about ideologues who talk to them about politics (more than occasionally) and not typical partisans. This makes sense, as ideologues who discuss politics are more visible on social media, etc. (Bail, 2021; Wilson et al., 2020). It also means that, in a sense, the affective polarization measures overstate polarization, at least relative to how people actually feel about typical partitions.

In Table 1, we also present the results for each affective polarization measure separately. These results reveal important distinctions between the various measures, with the social distance items being unique in several ways (see also Druckman & Levendusky, 2019). Relative to the other measures, people seem to be imagining someone who talks about politics less (e.g., rarely to occasionally) and who is not as extreme.[10] This may be because the social distance items bring clearer examples to mind from everyday social life, another reminder that question wording influences what we find.

3.2. Dimensional Measures of Affective Polarization (Political Sectarianism)

There have been recent efforts to develop new measures based on the related, more fleshed-out theoretical construct of political sectarianism (Finkel et al., 2020). Political sectarianism includes three specific elements: (1) othering, (2) aversion, and (3) moralization. Othering captures the feeling that members of each party are fundamentally different from each other. Aversion refers to the desire to avoid interacting with out-party members. Moralization

[10] These results reflect the negative, significant coefficients on "occasionally" and "ideologue" for the social distance items only.

reflects the extent to which support for a particular party reflects fundamental values. All three elements capture what could be considered relatively severe evaluations. The existing measures discussed above do not clearly depict other partisans as being fundamentally different or having distinct morals. For instance, aversion is stronger than social distance measures, as the former implies complete avoidance, while the latter simply implies discomfort with a social interaction.

Thus far, there are two approaches to capturing the dimensionality inherent in political sectarianism. Finkel et al. (2023) developed a set of items tapping all three dimensions but found that their items load onto one dimension. Campos and Federico (2025) derived their own sectarianism measures but analyzed the three elements of sectarianism separately. Both these papers engaged in extensive measurement validation, part of which involved looking at predictive validity. In theory, high levels of affective polarization might mean the desire to "win" should dominate following democratic procedures (Mason, 2018). Yet, work with the existing measures has been inconclusive about the relationship between affective polarization and support for partisan-based anti-democratic attitudes (e.g., ignoring checks and balances if one's party is in power) (cf. Lelkes & Westwood, 2017; Tappin & McKay, 2019; Westwood, Peterson, Lelkes, 2019; Kingzette et al., 2021; Broockman et al., 2023; Voelkel et al., 2023; Druckman, Green, & Iyengar, 2023; Druckman et al., 2024).

In three studies, Finkel et al. (2023) demonstrate that their measure correlates better with anti-democratic attitudes than the traditional measures of affective polarization. And, Campos and Federico (2025) similarly found a correlation between sectarianism and anti-democratic attitudes, with aversion being the element of sectarianism driving the relationship. Surprisingly, moralization was in some cases associated with stronger support for democratic principles. Campos and Federico (2025) argue that this distinction is critical because it demonstrates that

hyper-partisanship is not always universally bad (or universally good). Aversion, they argue, demonstrates rejection of existing norms of the current establishment. Moralization, on the other hand, requires embracing at least one of the current established institutions (i.e., one's own party). Hence, aversion has implications for dismantling democracy in ways that other aspects of political sectarianism do not.

Political sectarianism and affective polarization thus appear to be highly related but distinct constructs (also see Bankert, 2024 on negative partisanship). The former does a better job enveloping strong feelings that lead partisans to sacrifice democratic norms such as checks and balances or obeying unfavorable court rulings.[11] The latter captures milder forms of affect that influence social relationships, such as willingness to work with members of the other party (e.g., Lelkes & Westwood, 2017; Broockman et al., 2023) and cue-taking in terms of following the advice of in-party elites when it comes to policy or behaviors (e.g., actions during COVID-19) (Druckman et al., 2024).[12]

3.3. What about Pure Independents?

All measures considered thus far are used to compare how people perceive two groups: the in-party and the out-party. While the United States has essentially been a two-party system since its founding (aside from the brief "Era of Good Feelings" in the early 19th century) characterized by limited partisanship, there have always been voters who do not have strong affective attachments to either party. In some cases, the claim of independence is often for show (Klar & Krupnikov, 2016), but there are also those individuals who do not identify themselves with either party, often due to minimal political interest (Klar, 2014). Nearly all work on

[11] That said, Voelkel et al. (2024) show standard affective polarization items, experimentally induced, influence evaluations of candidates who violate democratic norms. This makes sense insofar as the measure shapes inter-personal evaluations but not normative violations.

[12] Our prior critique about the target applies to sectarianism measures that have only used general target labels.

affective polarization excludes pure independents (including our own work, see Druckman et al., 2024). While most independents do lean toward a party (and hence are included in measures of animosity), excluding pure independents does mean excluding roughly 7 percent of the public (based on the 2024 ANES sample).

The easiest way to incorporate pure independents is to take the absolute difference between ratings of one party and the other (Ahn & Mutz, 2023; Krupnikov & Ryan, 2022). This method avoids the need to label one party "in" and the other one "out," as well as the possibility that a respondent will rate the other party higher than their own (i.e., have a negative affective polarization score). This is unusual, but does it occur possibly due to inattention to the survey or to long-standing party attachments that have outlived their actual feelings toward the parties and their supporters (Green & Palmquist, 1990; Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2004). With the absolute difference measure, the person who still calls themselves a member of one party despite liking it less than the other party is no longer in the "wrong" party. The macro-level consequences of including pure independents with the absolute difference measure or using the absolute difference measure for all respondents (including pure independents) are fairly minor. For instance, in the 2024 ANES data, the partisan-only "typical" affective polarization score is 51.64, while the other two respective scores are 48.82 and 50.44. Generally, adding pure independents slightly lowers affective polarization, as they tend not to feel strongly toward either party. In the appendix, we provide figures for all three approaches, revealing that the trends strongly match one another. We also, in the appendix, re-evaluate the experiment we described earlier, but we include pure independents, using the absolute difference measure. We find the treatment effects are mostly the same, although stronger partisans are again more polarized than independents.

Of course, one could easily imagine some objecting to the inclusion of pure independents, arguing that affective polarization is meant to measure group differences, and pure independents are not one of the relevant groups. At some level, we do not disagree. But this also underscores the extent to which choices about measurement are also choices about conceptualization.

3.4. A Limitation of Self-Reports? Measures of Partisan Discrimination

A complementary approach to studying affective polarization is to look at partisan discrimination. Instead of measuring affect, scholars evaluate social discrimination – treating people differently based on their partisanship. This is useful since someone with high affective polarization, when faced with a person in day-to-day life, may or may not treat them with fairness and kindness.

Iyengar and Westwood (2015) use trust and dictator games to show people discriminate against those from other parties more than they do toward people of different races (also see Carlin & Love, 2013, 2018; Whitt et al., 2024). In other behavioral approaches, scholars have demonstrated discrimination on dating websites (Huber and Malhotra, 2017), family dinners (Chen and Rohla, 2018), roommate selection (Shafranek, 2021), spousal selection (Iyengar et al., 2018), job hiring (Gift & Gift, 2015), and pay for work (McConnell et al., 2018). Just how much partisan discrimination occurs generally is difficult to estimate, especially given that people will often put politics aside to maintain their social relationships (Carlson & Settle, 2022; Cowan & Baldassarri, 2018). While potentially promising, it is important that scholars conceptualize when and how these measures operate – measures where people show in-group favoritism or out-group aversion toward those whom they know little are quite different from changing relationships with close colleagues, friends, or family.

3.5. Summary of Measuring Affective Polarization

Developments in the measurement of affective polarization have offered some important insights. First, the characterization of the group – and what people imagine of the group – matters. Second, the evaluative dimension shapes the consequences of the evaluations. A measure that captures dislike (canonical affective polarization) will not have the same impact as a measure that captures the rejection of social norms of interaction (political sectarianism). The former tends to have predictable social consequences, while the latter seems to affect beliefs about established political principles.

We recognize the discussion thus far may generate confusion, as one might wonder about the exact relationships between "affective polarization," political sectarianism, partisan discrimination, etc. How we label these various metrics, though, is much less important – and we caution researchers against introducing more terminology – than being thoughtful and transparent when choosing which measure to use.

4. Do Aspects of Survey Design Impact Measures of Affective Polarization?

Our discussion thus far has focused on question-wording, which speaks to the validity of the measure (i.e., whether the items capture the construct of interest). Another set of concerns revolves around measurement bias in surveys. For instance, it could be that the public's true level of affective polarization (using whichever measure one prefers) is x, but because of the structure of the survey, the sample selection procedures, and so forth, the level of affective polarization as measured by the study is $x \pm c$, where c is a non-random constant. In this section, we examine the impact of survey methods (political priming, survey mode, response rates), with a focus on the workhorse feeling thermometer measure.

4.1. Political Priming in Surveys

An obvious concern is that political surveys, such as the ANES, prime people with highly partisan content, which then biases how they think about the other party (Zaller, 1992). For instance, Bailey (2021) randomly assigned UK subjects to take either a political or an apolitical survey and then asked them about their perceptions of the economy. Those who backed the ruling Conservative Party gave more positive assessments of the economy in the political survey – the political survey cued them that they should view the economy through a partisan lens. The same logic may apply to questions of affective polarization: perhaps spending considerable time answering questions about politics puts ANES respondents into a more political frame of mind than if they were just to answer the affective polarization items by themselves. In particular, they may be primed to think about all the ways they differ or disagree with the other party.

The 2020 collaboration between the ANES and the General Social Survey (GSS) affords us the possibility to test this hypothesis. The GSS is a high-quality social science study that is largely apolitical. In 2020, the ANES and GSS collaborated so that a portion of each sample took part of the other's survey. Relying on the GSS respondents who completed the ANES items, Tyler and Iyengar (2024) show no support for the political priming hypothesis. The GSS respondents, who answered very few political questions before answering the affective polarization battery, were no less polarized than the ANES respondents who had responded to numerous questions about politics.[13] Likewise, Tyler and Iyengar (2024) show that while the ANES overestimates the share of strong partisans relative to the GSS (likely because strong partisans are more interested in taking an hour-long political survey), that too has little effect on the level of affective polarization reported in the ANES. It may be that measures of affective

[13] They used thermometers of the presidential candidates since the party thermometers were not asked of GSS respondents; however, the candidate thermometers strongly correlate with the party thermometers and others have used them interchangeably (Lelkes et al., 2017, Boxell et al., 2022).

polarization are themselves so inherently partisan that asking them in a political versus an apolitical survey has minimal effect.

4.2. Survey Mode

The mode of survey response also might influence the reported level of affective polarization. Beginning in 2012, the ANES administered its questionnaire to two separate samples: one in the traditional face-to-face format used by the ANES since its inception in 1948, and a second one via a self-administered questionnaire over the Internet. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, for the first time, there was no face-to-face sample. There are now two ANES time series: a face-to-face one spanning 1948 – 2016 as well as 2024, and an online one from 2012 – 2024. Both of them are drawn using high-quality random selection methods, and as such, they should agree on the level of affective polarization in the American public. We plot the trends of these two modes in Figure 2 to assess their patterns of affective polarization, building on the trends that merged across modes in Figure 1.[14]

[14] We wrote this review in the spring-summer of 2025, and we used the April 2025 preliminary release of the data (unweighted), so these figures may change once the final version of the data is released. Additionally, the 2012 data were different than subsequent online collections: it was not a fresh probability draw (but rather came from a probability-based internet panel) and thus it is difficult to interpret the impact of mode versus sample (see Valentino, Zhirkov, Hillygus, & Guay, 2020). Indeed, the ANES itself does not include the 2012 affective polarization scores in its Guide to Public Opinion and Electoral Behavior (see the sources & notes section of: https://electionstudies.org/data-tools/anes-guide/anes-guide.html?chart=affective_polarization_parties).

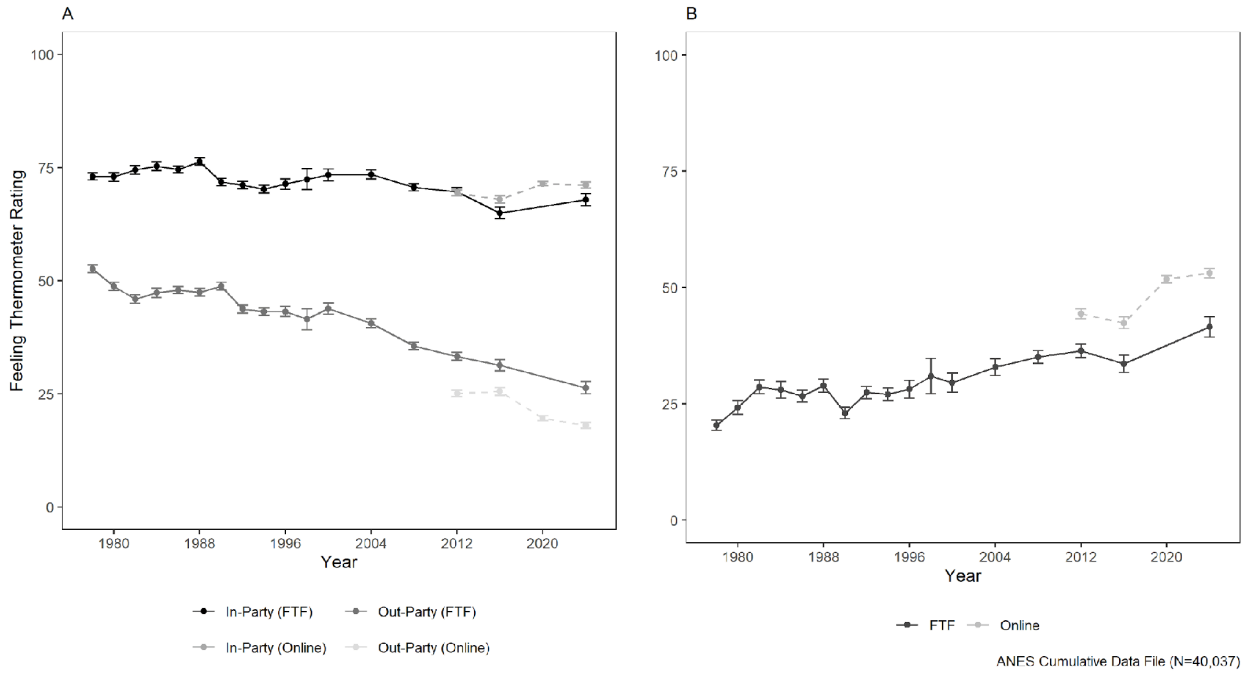

Figure 2: Thermometer Scores and Affective Polarization, by Mode

Figure 2A clearly indicates that there are important mode effects. Those in the online sample feel warmer toward their own party, and colder toward the opposing party (also see Thornton, 2025).[15] The size of this gap is notable, with the same-party differences being rather modest and the out-party effect being notably large. Those who complete the ANES online seem to especially dislike the other party.

This greater in-party warmth and out-party animosity translates into a larger difference between the two ratings (i.e., affective polarization) as shown in Figure 2B. The size of this difference is striking; in the 2024 ANES data, for example, the difference in feeling thermometer ratings in the face-to-face sample is 41.55 degrees, but in the online sample, it is 53.06 degrees, or 11.51 degrees more, a 27.73 percent increase. This sort of gap cannot simply be attributed to random measurement error, as it is both too large and too consistent across years. This has

[15] The one exception to this is that in 2012, online respondents rated their own party less positively than did face-to-face respondents. The exact reason why is not clear, though it could be a consequence of the aforementioned sampling difference in 2012.

implications for those using the trends to describe the state of the country. Consider that in 2004, the affective polarization score was 32.86. In 2024, the score was 51.64 when merged across modes. Yet, in 2004, it was only face-to-face. Thus, part of that increase twenty years later is from the value growing because many of the respondents were online (which leads to higher scores). The 2024 face-to-face only score was 41.55 – significantly below the merged score.[16] Clearly, there was still a large increase in affective polarization over time, but an accurate portrait requires keeping the mode constant.[17]

A reason why the online sample might have lower out-party ratings and higher in-party ratings is a tendency toward extremity. Self-administered questionnaires (delivered via the web or through the mail) tend to offer more extremely positive and extremely negative answers than live interviewer questionnaires, such as face-to-face ones. This reflects social desirability biases where respondents provide more moderate answers in the presence of interviewers since extremity is normatively undesirable (e.g., Endres et al., 2023; Homola, Jackson, & Gill, 2016; Atkeson, Adams, & Alvarez, 2014). Figure 3 plots the distribution of responses to both in-party and out-party feeling thermometer ratings for both samples, using the 2024 ANES data.

[16] The merged score is much closer to the on-line score because the on-line sample is substantially larger than the face-to-face sample.

[17] It does not seem as if the mode effect has changed over time. In both 2016 and 2024, the mode differences in affective polarization scores were 9 points. They were smaller in 2012 (4), which could reflect that the 2012 online sample differed from the subsequent ones (see prior footnote).

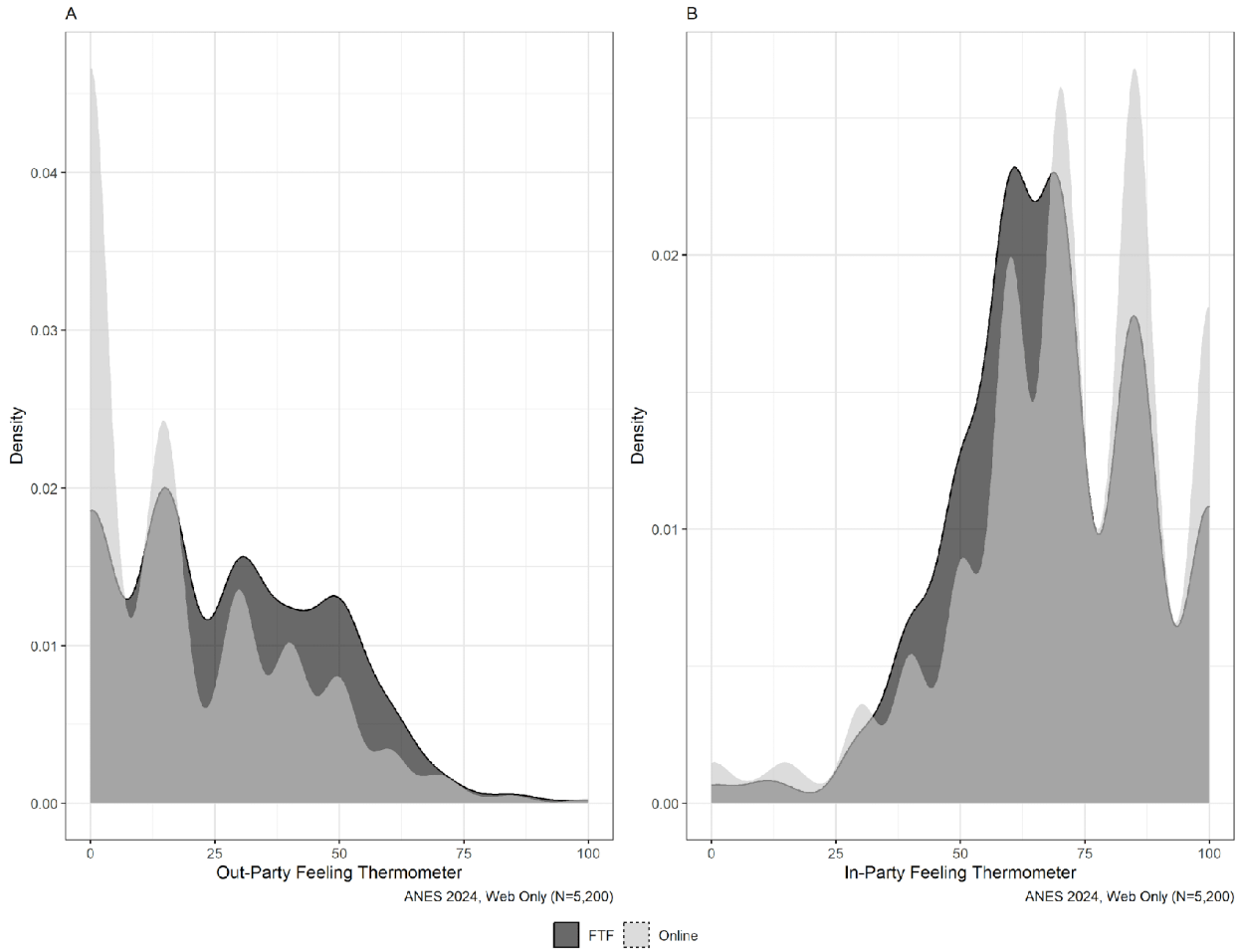

Figure 3: Distribution of In-Party and Out-Party Feeling Thermometers in ANES 2024, Online vs. Face-to-Face Samples

We see that indeed those interviewed in the face-to-face mode tend to offer more moderate responses, while those interviewed online offer more extreme ones. This is especially true for the most extreme ratings: rating the other party at 0 degrees and rating one's own party at 100 degrees. While this tendency exists for both in-party and out-party ratings, it is particularly notable in out-party assessments. In the face-to-face sample, 25 percent of respondents give the other party the coldest rating, but that jumps to 38 percent in the online sample. Likewise, while nearly half of face-to-face respondents rate the other party at 25 degrees or warmer, that falls to only one-third in the online sample. Online respondents are more extreme generally, but are especially hostile toward the other party.

To see if we can explain why these differences exist, we model both affective polarization (the difference in feeling thermometer ratings) and rating the other party at 0 degrees as a function of the demographic and attitudinal factors that influence these differences: age, education, gender, partisan and ideological strength, and political interest. Do any of these factors explain away the difference in reported levels of affective polarization between online and face-to-face respondents? Table 2 presents the results.

	Affective Polarization (1)	**Affective Polarization (2)**	**Out-Party at 0 (3)**	**Out-Party at 0 (4)**
Constant	41.555***	15.762***	0.220***	−0.008
	(1.115)	(2.334)	(0.020)	(0.056)
Web Respondent	11.505***	5.826***	0.166***	0.106***
	(1.231)	(1.162)	(0.023)	(0.025)
Age		0.055*		−0.001*
		(0.027)		(0.001)
College Graduate		−3.808***		−0.058**
		(0.959)		(0.020)
Male		−3.516***		−0.024
		(0.906)		(0.021)
White		3.137**		0.055*
		(0.984)		(0.023)
Strong Partisan		28.892***		0.221***
		(0.931)		(0.021)

Ideological Strength		−0.006		0.000
		(0.015)		(0.000)
Political Interest		2.372***		0.020+
		(0.497)		(0.012)
Democrat		0.175		−0.035+
		(0.942)		(0.021)
Internal Efficacy		2.213***		0.056***
		(0.520)		(0.013)
N .	4799	4061	4802	4063
R2	0.018	0.266	0.018	0.105

Table 2: Mode Differences in Affective Polarization
Note: cell entries are OLS regression estimates with associated standard errors in parentheses; models for rating the other party at 0 degrees use robust standard errors. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

In column (1), we see that affective polarization is 12 (specifically, 11.51) degrees higher in the online sample relative to the face-to-face sample (as mentioned). In column (2), we explore whether we can model away that difference. The answer is no – even controlling for a number of demographic and political variables, much of it remains. The same is true of the likelihood of rating the other party at 0 degrees. The raw difference between the two samples is 17 percentage points. Controlling for various political and demographic variables reduces that gap to 11 percentage points, still a large difference. Simply put, while this is not definitive (as it would require random assignment to mode), the evidence suggests that it is difficult to explain away the mode gap.

What should scholars make of these mode differences between the two samples? They likely reflect the aforementioned social desirability biases, where those in interviewer-based modes (face-to-face) adjust their answers to be more socially appropriate. It highlights the importance of being clear in stating which samples are being used.

One should not, however, mistake the socially desirable result (in the face-to-face) as the "false result." This is the case because many expressions of affective polarization – such as partisan discrimination – have a social component (Connors, 2023). This sometimes means expressing *more* affective polarization in contexts with fellow-partisans and even acting in a partisan fashion to "morph" into such settings (Connors, 2023).[18] Put another way, one may be tempted to conclude that the online mode provides the more authentic measures. The reality, however, is that many manifestations of affective polarization are inherently social. In a face-to-face interview, the social pressure may mean reporting less out-party animus, but in a group of fellow partisans, it would do the opposite and could include acting in a more partisan manner as well.

4.3. Do Declining Response Rates Increase Measures of Affective Polarization?

There has been a dramatic decline in survey response rates over time that has led even historically gold-standard survey organizations like the Bureau of Labor Statistics to change their techniques (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). While lower response rates are not necessarily problematic for data quality (Keeter et al., 2000; Dutwin & Buskirk, 2017), they can pose a challenge in particular cases. Specifically, low response rates become a problem in probability samples like the ANES if the non-responders systematically differ from the responders in ways that correlate with the variable of interest (even accounting for weights). This nonignorable unit

[18] Connors (2023, p. 911) explains "social desirability – which can be shifted by contexts – can alter how affectively polarized people act."

non-response. For instance, if weak partisans who are less affectively polarized (Abramowitz, 2010; Druckman et al., 2024) systematically did not respond to surveys, then the survey would overstate levels of affective polarization: it would be missing a part of the less polarized population (unless it could be addressed with weighting).[19] One concern, then, is whether increased affective polarization over time stems, at least in part, from increased non-response from individuals who are less affectively polarized. In what follows, we explore this possibility with two data sources. We then offer a broader, cautionary discussion.

One way to explore the nature of non-response is to use the ANES non-response study (ANES 2021). The ANES selected 8,000 addresses that were part of the sample for its 2020 study: 4,000 addresses where a household member completed the study, and 4,000 addresses where they did not (i.e., non-respondents). They then sent each of these households a short follow-up survey measuring a set of demographic and attitudinal variables to help better understand non-response bias. To illustrate the challenge of contacting non-respondents, the overall response rate for the survey was 56.6 percent, with an 83.3 percent response rate among ANES respondents versus only a 33.5 percent response rate among the ANES initial non-respondents.

In Table 3, we examine whether non-responders differ from responders. Because the non-response survey needs to be quite short, there are not an especially large number of variables in it that might influence measures of affective polarization, but there are some. In particular, we can ask whether those who participated in the ANES are more politically attentive, more likely to be registered to vote, more likely to turn out, more likely to identify with one of the two major

[19] For a discussion of non-response and ideological polarization, see Cavari & Freedman (2018, 2023) and Mellon & Prosser, 2021, Forthcoming).

political parties, or more likely to have a bachelor's degree (all of which tend to increase affective polarization).

Variable	ANES Participant	Non-Respondent, Eligible Household	Non-Respondent, Unknown Eligibility[20]
Pays attention to government and politics at least "most of the time"	63	57	58
Registered to Vote	92	89	86
Voted in the 2020 Election	85	76	80
Identify as a Democrat or Republican	67	65	62
Have a bachelor's degree	46	39	35

Table 3: Difference between NES Respondents and Non-Respondents, 2020 Non-Response Follow-Up Study
Note: Cell entries are percentages, with post-stratification weights applied

There are clear differences between those who responded to the ANES and those who did not. As one might expect, those who agreed to take part in the full ANES study are more political: they pay closer attention to government and politics, they are more likely to be registered and then actually turn out to vote, and they are more likely to have graduated from college. But these differences are minor or moderate, not massive, and hence the downstream effect of these sources of non-response on measures of affective polarization is likely not sizeable. It does not seem like response rates explain much of the macro affective polarization trend in the U.S.

The non-response study is indirect insofar as it does not actually measure affective polarization among non-responders. Fortunately, there exists another dataset that allows for a more direct test. Moniz et al. (2024a) worked with Time Sharing Experiments for the Social

[20] To determine whether a sampled address is eligible to participate in the ANES, someone from the household must fill out a screening questionnaire to ensure that an adult U.S. citizen lives there. Households with unknown eligibility did not complete that questionnaire, so it is unknown whether someone living at the address could actually participate in the ANES. Most addresses are likely to house at least one eligible respondent, but absent completing the screener, ANES staff cannot be sure, hence there are two populations of non-respondent households (M. DeBell email communication, June 27, 2025).

Sciences (TESS) and NORC, the survey provider used by TESS, to obtain data for 50 different TESS studies. NORC maintains a nationally representative panel of Americans (drawn using address-based sampling and other methods) and then samples from this panel to field each TESS study. But some people are much more willing to join NORC's panel than others – they join based on NORC's initial outreach effort, whereas others take multiple appeals, and increasing amounts of money, to become panelists. For each of these 50 TESS studies, NORC provided Moniz et al. with the data on whether each subject had agreed to participate from the original recruitment effort (an "eager" participant), or whether it took follow-up visits and larger incentives to get them to take part (a "reluctant" participant). This allows for a more direct test of the impact of non-response. It is likely that these reluctant respondents resemble the respondents who are dropping out of academic studies – they are the people who do not want to take part and require large financial incentives and considerable time and effort to recruit. The more eager respondents do indeed tend to be more politically engaged which, as explained, could contribute to affective polarization, at least in theory (Bilgen et al., 2018). So, if studies are now increasingly relying on eager participants, does it lead to an over-estimation of the public's level of affective polarization?

Moniz et al. (2024a) is a large meta-analysis of different sorts of studies, many of them not related to politics. However, among their 50 studies are two that include measures of affective polarization: Bougher (2017) and Busby et al. (2018). We can re-analyze the data from these studies to investigate the level of affective polarization among eager versus reluctant participants (Moniz et al., 2024b).

Take Bougher (2017) first. Her data, in many ways, is a near-ideal test because they included the party feeling thermometers as a pre-treatment covariate, so we do not have to worry

about interactions between the treatment and eager/reluctant participants (i.e., heterogeneous treatment effects). Here, among eager participants, the average in-party feeling thermometer rating is 65.5 degrees, versus 64.7 degrees for the reluctant participation group; this difference is not statistically significant ($p = 0.54$). Likewise, the out-party feeling thermometer rating among eager participants is 22.5 degrees, versus 23.7 degrees among reluctant participants, and again, the difference cannot be differentiated from 0 ($p = .35$). These differences – less than 2 degrees on a 100-point feeling thermometer – are neither statistically nor substantively different, evidence once again against the idea that response rates impact affective polarization.

Busby et al. (2018) investigate how different party stereotypes influence the level of polarization. These stereotypes include traits stereotypes (how we describe the parties, e.g., Democrats are generous, Republicans are selfish, etc.), issue stereotypes (what the parties stand for), or group stereotypes (who the parties are) – influences the level of polarization. They found that these treatments do have some effects on affective polarization (for the details, see Busby et al., 2021). For our purposes, the treatments are less interesting than whether the reluctant versus eager participants have different levels of affective polarization. Their study includes two measures of affective polarization: same- and out-party feeling thermometers, as well as a social distance measure, whether respondents would be happy if a family member dated someone from the other party. Once again, we find no significant differences based on recruitment in feeling thermometer ratings for either the in-party or the out-party ($p = 0.74$ and $p = 0.34$, respectively). We do find a statistically significant difference for the social distance measure. In the eager sample, 29 percent disagree that they would be happy if a family member dated someone from the other party, versus 23 percent for the reluctant sample. It is true more people in the eager sample would be upset, but the substantive difference is not especially large, only 6 percentage

points.[21] The data, again, suggest that declining response rates are not a major driver of heightened levels of affective polarization.[22]

Overall, the evidence suggests that declining response rates have not been a primary driver of increased affective polarization. It may have played some role, but the differences suggested in the data we analyzed (e.g., differences from the non-response study, in the Busby et al. data) seem too small to explain the large change in affective polarization. Yet, we also recognize that these studies are limited since they look at individuals who are more reluctant to respond rather than those who do not respond at all.

As a general matter, it is clear that nonignorable unit non-response has impacted some conclusions from political surveys (e.g., Dyck et al., 2018; Clinton et al., 2022). Tyler et al. (n.d.) show that recent ANES data have nonignorable unit non-response such that Trump supporters were less likely to respond (and complete) the survey than non-Trump supporters, and post-stratification sample weights are insufficient to address the bias. This explains why the ANES (and potentially many other surveys) have understated the Trump vote. The implications for affective polarization are not entirely clear, given that non-response implications are variable-specific. However, if anything, it suggests the possibility that recent surveys may understate affective polarization since it could be strong, affectively polarized Trump supporters who opt out. We are left with uncertainty about exactly how survey non-response influences affective polarization measures – even whether it deflates or inflates them.

4.4. Summary of Survey Design Effects

[21] Because Busby et al.'s (2018) measures are included in the post-treatment portion of the study, readers might be concerned about heterogeneous treatment effects. However, we find little evidence of heterogenous treatment effects (based on respondent type). We do note that these data were collected in 2018, and it is possible that larger differences would exist in more recent years.

[22] The Moniz et al. (2024b) data also include how much each participant was paid to join NORC's panel. Panelists were initially offered $20, but they could be paid up to $50 if needed to convince them to join. Re-analyses of the data by the amount paid shows similar null effects.

Our review of survey design effects leaves us with three scenarios. First, the political nature of surveys via priming does not seem to affect standard measures of affective polarization. Second, declining response rates have an ambivalent impact: while it does not seem that they impact the main over time conclusion, they may (or may not) influence affective polarization levels in one way or another. Third, survey mode has an impact such that self-administered online surveys generate higher levels of affective polarization than face-to-face interviews. As explained, this speaks to the social nature of the measure – there are "appropriate" and "inappropriate" responses that presumably depend on the audience. As such, the type of sample used influences the conclusions one draws, including about precise over time changes.

5. Are There Partisan Differences in Affective Polarization?

In our analyses thus far, we have pooled Democrats and Republicans, assuming that the psychological mechanisms underlying affective polarization are parallel across party lines. But this is an assumption. While there has not been much discussion of this particular point in the affective polarization literature, there is a large debate about whether partisans or those on the left and the right more generally have distinct psychological tendencies and/or behaviors (c.f. Zmigrod, 2022; Jost 2021, 2024; Kteily & Brandt, 2025; Nair et al., 2025). This disagreement suggests a need to investigate whether Democrats and Republicans differ across affective polarization measures.

The existing evidence on party differences is, at best, mixed. Some studies show those on the political right (e.g., Republicans) exhibit more dislike toward those on the left (e.g., Democrats) than vice versa (Ganzach & Schul, 2021), others show those on the left hold more animus toward those from the other party (Druckman et al., 2024, p. 41-42; Nair et al., 2025), and yet others find no differences (Crawford & Brandt, 2020; Hartman et al., 2022; Brandt &

Vallabha, 2023). Kteily and Brandt (2025, p. 518) explain that "the preponderance of the evidence fails to point to clear and systematic ideological differences in the expression of [partisan/ideological] prejudice," suggesting that there are not likely to be important differences. But of course, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, so we investigate this with actual data.

5.1. Are there Partisan Differences in Thermometer Measures?

We look at the ANES trends over time by party. We start by plotting the ANES affective polarization trends and in-group/out-group feeling thermometers by party.[23] Panel A in Figure 4 shows that early in the time series, the parties exhibited very similar patterns. Partisan differences largely emerged around 2008, concurrent with Obama's election and then the rise of the Tea Party, with Democrats exhibiting higher levels of affective polarization than Republicans. The difference, though, eroded to the point that by 2024, the parties' scores were nearly identical (50.96 for Democrats and 52.35 for Republicans). In panel B, we look at the individual thermometer ratings. They suggest that the overall affective polarization divide around 2008 came mainly from Democrats having more in-party like than Republicans did, although that difference evaporated by 2020. Out-party animosity displays scant inter-party difference over time. These findings are consistent with the data from the Polarization Research Lab (PRL). Since 2022, PRL has tracked affective polarization weekly and found no definitive partisan differences overall or when examining the in-party and out-party thermometers separately (see https://americaspoliticalpulse.com/citizens/ for more details). This suggests that, at least in the contemporary period, Democrats and Republicans both have similar levels of affective polarization.

[23] These figures use weighted data across modes. The results are mostly unchanged if we instead look at mode specific results.

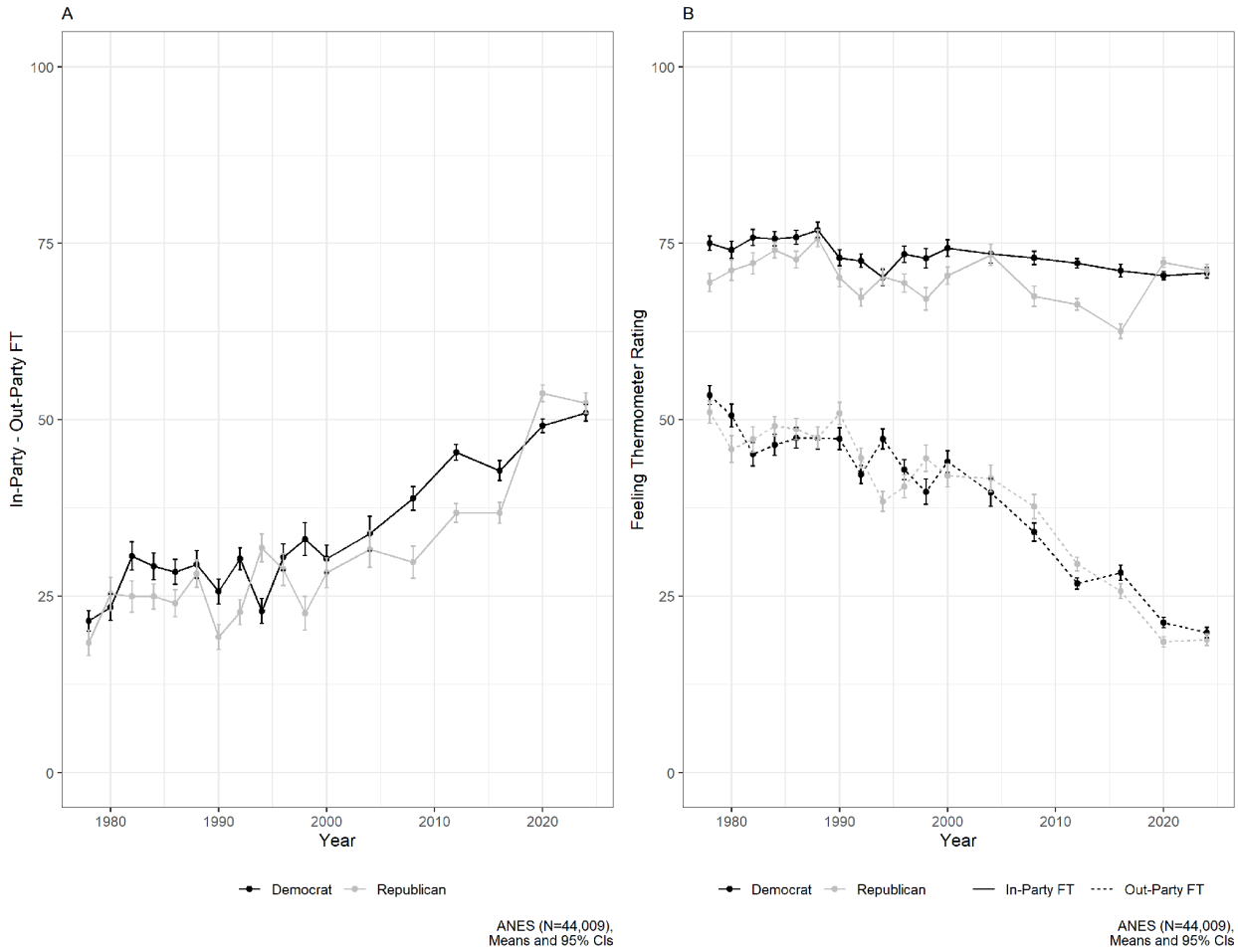

Figure 4: Affective Polarization and Thermometer Scores, By Party

5.2. Are There Partisan Differences in Perceptions of Affective Polarization?

While not directly a measure of affective polarization, there has been increasing interest in partisans' perceptions of what the other side believes. In many domains, partisans have greatly exaggerated perceptions of what the other side thinks, such as accepting the other side is more dehumanizing (Moore-Berg et al. 2020), violent (Mernyk et al., 2022), or anti-democratic (Braley et al. 2023) than they actually are (also see Ahler & Sood, 2018). In Figure 5, we plot perceptions of partisan animosity, using data from the 2022 ANES Social Media Study. For example, the panel "Belief About Democrats Ratings Republicans" shows what all respondents, Democrats, and Republicans believe about Democrats' thermometer rating of Republicans (on

average). The open circle shows the actual average Democratic rating of Republicans on the feeling thermometer scale – approximately 20 degrees. The other symbols reveal the perceptions. They show that members of both parties are remarkably accurate in their perceptions of how Democrats rate Republicans, and there is no difference in those beliefs between Democrats and Republicans. Looking across panels, this holds for all ratings. For our purposes, the most pertinent point is that there are no ostensible partisan asymmetries in perceptions of affective polarization. More generally, the accuracy is striking given the exaggerations in other domains (although average scores can mask notable heterogeneity in perceptions; see Lees et al., 2024).[24]

[24] We find similar results from the 2020 ANES Social Media Study. The accuracy results contrast with Moore-Berg (2020: Figure S1) and Overgaard (2024) who report some exaggeration of how much partisans think members of the other party dislike them, although no sizable or consistent partisan asymmetries in perceptions. This is not to say there are not asymmetries in other partisan perceptions (e.g., Van Boven et al., 2018; Schulman et al., 2025).

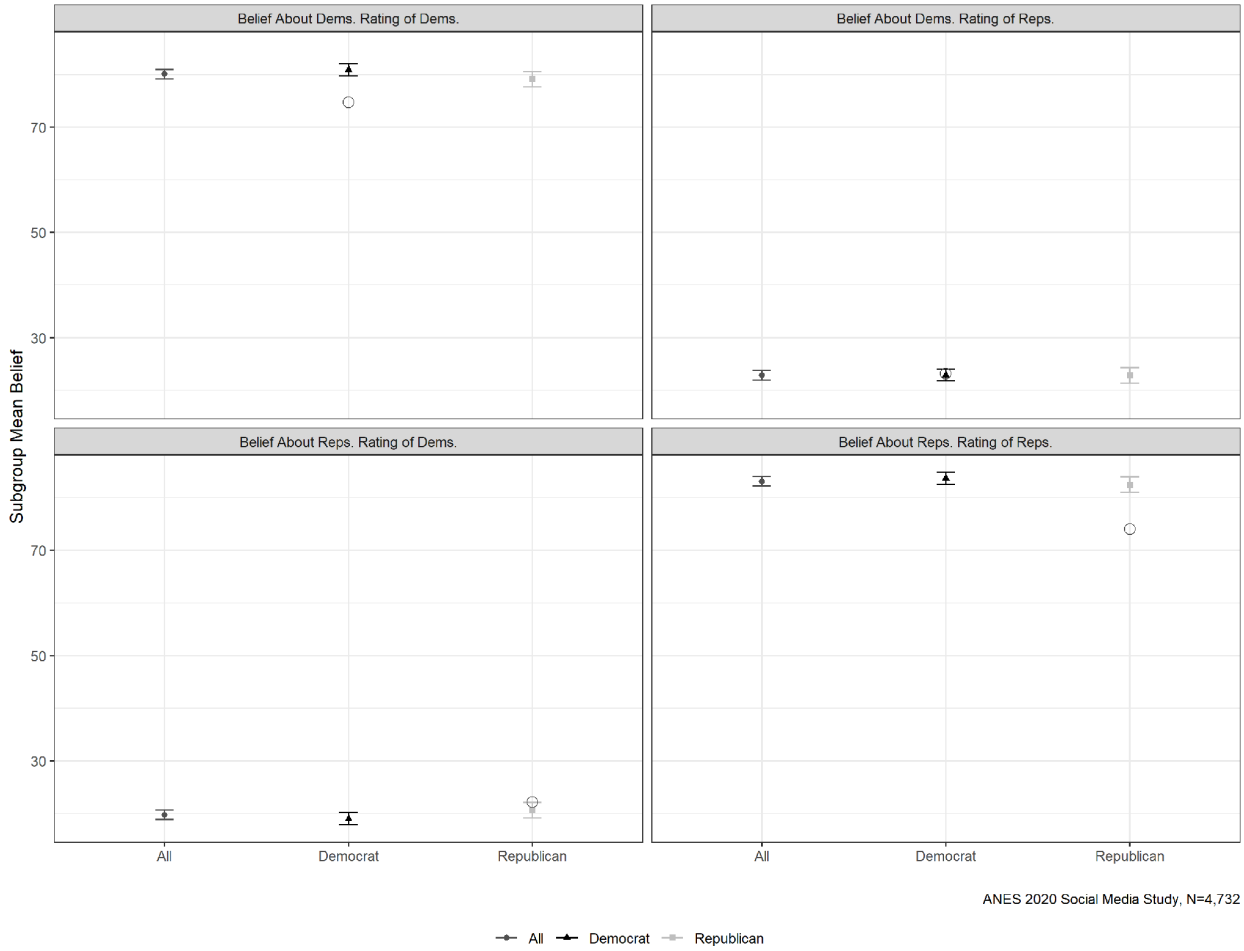

Figure 5: Perceptions of Party Thermometer Ratings By Party
Note: open circles show the actual feeling thermometer ratings of each group.

5.3. Are There Partisan Differences in Social Distance Measures?

The thermometers are just one measure of affective polarization. In our own data from Druckman et al. (2024), we gauged out-party animosity with a thermometer, trait measures, a trust measure, and social distance items. We find that, in 2019, Democrats exhibited significantly more animosity across the four measures, with the largest difference on the social distance items. We found the same result, except that there was no partisan difference in trust, two years later, in 2021.[25] The social distance result aligns with Nair et al. (2025). They find, using data from 2022

[25] All items were scaled 0 to 1. In 2019, the partisan difference on the social distance measure was .08 whereas the differences on the other measures were .02 to .04. In 2021, the partisan difference on the social distance measure was .08 whereas the differences on the other measures were .01 to .04. Data from Druckman and Levendusky (2019) reveal similar partisan differences from 2017. And, similarly in Busby et al.'s (2018) aforementioned study, with

-2023, that Democrats exhibit greater dislike toward Republicans than the other way around, as evidenced in both social media behavior (e.g., blocking an account, breaking social ties) and survey responses (e.g., likability ratings, hiring preferences). They argue that the asymmetry stems from Democrats holding strongly moralized beliefs that Republicans pose harm to disadvantaged groups (e.g., racial/ethnic minorities). Greater Democratic social distance is also evident in some fairly recent survey data showing that Democrats (more than Republicans) would not want to date someone who supports a Republican candidate (Brown, 2020) and that they have fewer bipartisan friendships (Cox, 2021). Connors (2023) shows that, compared to Republicans, Democrats seem more sensitive to social pressure in their expression of affective polarization, possibly suggesting acute asymmetries in the social domain. Finally, in the Campos and Federico (2025) data, there are (small) partisan differences such that Democrats score higher on their aversion scale, which asked about friendship/liking (and no or very slight differences on their othering and moralization scales).

Before concluding enduring partisan asymmetry in social manifestations of affective polarization (i.e., social partisan discrimination), consider that Iyengar et al. (2012) collected a social distance measure (discomfort with the prospect their child marrying a member of the other party) in 2010; they find "The difference in social distance between the parties was highly significant ($p < .01$)… Republicans maintain greater social distance from Democrats" (418). This is the complete opposite of the more recent data. One possible explanation is the rise of identity politics, where: "[s]ince 2010, the political systems of the United States and other advanced democracies have undergone a momentous change… conflict over cultural issues such as immigration, race, and abortion has strengthened" (Bonomi et al., 2021, p. 2371). That shift

data 2018, reports that Democrats expressed significantly greater social distance than Republicans – although there were no partisan differences based on the sample source discussed above (i.e., eager versus reluctant samples).

heightened the salience of the historic power of social groups sorted into the Republican party – white, men, Christians – and partisan social groups' impact on affective polarization (Robison & Moskowitz, 2019). And, as we will later discuss, perceptions of power may affect levels of affective polarization.

5.4. Summary of Partisan Differences in Affective Polarization

The bottom line is that there is no consistent pattern of partisan asymmetry in affective polarization. The existing studies present mixed evidence, over time trends are inconsistent, and further examination of the data is necessary. Related data also show a few signs of partisan variation. For instance, in their mega-study of interventions to reduce affective polarization, Voelkel et al. (2024) find scant evidence that partisans differ (see their supplementary materials, S.8.1), and Campos and Federico (2025: 16) do not find systematic partisan variation in the connection between political sectarianism and support for elite anti-democratic actions or political violence. In short, there does not seem to be an invariant partisan difference.

We offer five caveats. First, despite our inconclusive findings, it is worth noting that many of the studies discussed are not statistically powered to document heterogeneous effects and doing so requires more power than is often appreciated (e.g., Rauf et al., 2025). Second, as explained, there is evidence that Trump voters are less likely to take or complete surveys. If these non-respondent Trump voters have more (or less) affective polarization than their Republican respondent counterparts, there may be recent asymmetries (with greater Republican polarization) hidden by non-response; More work is needed to explore this possibility. Third, we have considered non-response only in the context of American probability surveys and have not addressed response rates in other countries or bias in widely used non-probability samples (where response rates are typically not meaningful metrics).

Fourth, the lack of asymmetries in levels of affective polarization (if that is the case) does not mean there are none in the *consequences* of affective polarization. For instance, Osmundsen et al. (2021) show that affective polarization (animosity) contributes to sharing fake news from one's partisan side. They also find that Republicans share more fake news than Democrats. This could reflect distinct psychological manifestations of affective polarization by party (also see Chang et al., 2025), or it could reflect contextual informational environments that vary across parties (e.g., there is a greater supply of fake news for Republicans). The authors lean toward the latter explanation, suggesting that the consequences of affective polarization depend on context. Finally, returning to the question of when partisan differences in affective polarization manifest, the evidence suggests it is less a psychological than a political question (Schmidt et al., 2025).[26] This is sensible insofar as parties at their core are about people seeking power (Downs, 1957), and thus to understand feelings about the parties, one needs to consider the contextual power dynamics.

6. Considering the Context: Power Imbalances and Affective Polarization

Affective polarization is ultimately the study of intergroup relations between political parties. Discussions of affective polarization, though, make rare mention of how those parties compare in terms of power, status, and control. This is perhaps a deeper lacuna in the measurement of affective polarization, as almost no studies – including our own – address this limitation. While there is some work on how electoral outcomes impact affective polarization (e.g., Andrews & Huang, 2025; Gidron & Sheffer, 2024; Hamrak, 2025; Phillips & Warner, 2026), it does not explicitly or fully interrogate the role of power.

[26] It additionally likely as a social component as levels of affective polarization reflect social surroundings as well (Smiley & Kaiser, 2025).

In the field of intergroup conflict, scholars often assume equal status between groups. Seminal studies on intergroup rivalry, most notably the Robbers Cave experiment (Sherif, 1954), noted that hostility between groups can arise based on minimal group distinctions, but shared goals can unite those groups and reduce intergroup animus. Decades later, Gaertner et al. (1993) argued that shared identities could have a similar impact by motivating rival groups to broaden their concept of an ingroup to include one another. More recent attempts to reduce intergroup hostility – and, in particular, affective polarization – include correcting myths and misperceptions about a rival group (Druckman et al., 2022).

These conceptions of intergroup hostility are based, at least implicitly, on the assumption that the groups are of roughly equal status. In the case of the Common Ingroup Identity Model, the assumption is, in fact, quite explicit: it requires "equal status, opportunities for personal interaction, co-operative interdependence, and supportive norms" (Gaertner et al., 1993, p. 2). Similarly, the related contact hypothesis assumes that "the status of the participants from the two social groups must be equal in the situation in which the contact occurs" (Cook, 1985, p. 453).

Within the study of affective polarization, there is scant discussion of status imbalances between the two parties. It is indeed the case that Democrats and Republicans in the mass public are roughly equal in number, and the electorate has become increasingly evenly divided over time. According to the Pew Research Center, Democrats and Republicans are now almost evenly split (Pew Research Center, 2024). Yet mere numerical equality among voters does not necessitate equal status or power between the two parties. While some work on reducing polarization with shared goals and common identities shows promising effects (e.g., Levendusky, 2018a; Huddy & Yair, 2021), other recent work is unable to find common ground between parties to reduce affective polarization (e.g., Myrick, 2021; Klar, 2018; Wojcieszak & Warner,

2020; Levendusky, 2018b). One consideration is the degree to which the parties view one another as equals. When competing groups are not on equal footing, this might asymmetrically influence intergroup evaluations.

We (implicitly) pointed to this in our earlier discussion of social distancing: Democrats might exhibit higher levels of social distance (e.g., have fewer friends from the other party) because they perceive many Republicans come from historically higher status groups (e.g., white men) that threaten historically disadvantaged groups (e.g., minorities) (Nair et al., 2025). Of course, status is tricky to gauge, given that it varies across domains. For instance, one could argue that Democrats, rather than Republicans, are of higher status, given the ostensibly larger liberal presence in cultural and knowledge-based institutions. We simplify definitional conundrums by focusing on a relatively explicit (formal) operationalization, looking at political power (i.e., holding office) and perceptions of political power — those in power or perceived to have power enjoy a higher political status.

6.1. Data on Power and Affective Polarization

To explore the role of status imbalance in affective polarization, we administered an original survey to a national sample of American adults. The survey was conducted from May 21 to May 24, 2025, among an online sample of 1,000 US adults, by TrueDot.ai, a survey research platform. Respondents were sourced from opt-in online panels.

We first asked thermometer scales measuring affect toward each party: “How coldly or warmly do you feel toward the Republican Party [the Democratic Party] on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means ‘very cold’ and 10 means ‘very warm’?” (thus, using a shorter scale than with the ANES 0 to 100 scale). We use the typical difference between the in-party rating and the out-party rating as an effective polarization measure. We also asked respondents: “In your opinion, which

party holds more power in this country: the Democrats or the Republicans?" with a 7-point scale as a response (ranging from "Democrats hold all the power" to "Republicans hold all the power"). We then asked these same questions, but at the specific state-level: "How coldly or warmly do you feel toward the Republican Party [Democratic Party] in your state?" and "In your opinion, which party holds more power in your state: the Democrats or the Republicans?"

We begin by examining the national level, using the first set of questions. As one would expect, we find that Americans largely do not view the parties as holding equal power. At the time of this survey, the Republicans controlled every branch of the federal government, and this was plainly apparent to most survey respondents: 58% of Democrats, 42% of independents, and 78% of Republicans felt that the balance of power tips toward Republicans. Democrats were most likely to say the Democratic Party holds power in the country, but only 27% expressed this view; more than twice as many said Republicans are in control. Figure 6 presents the distribution of responses for Democrats, Republicans, and Independents.

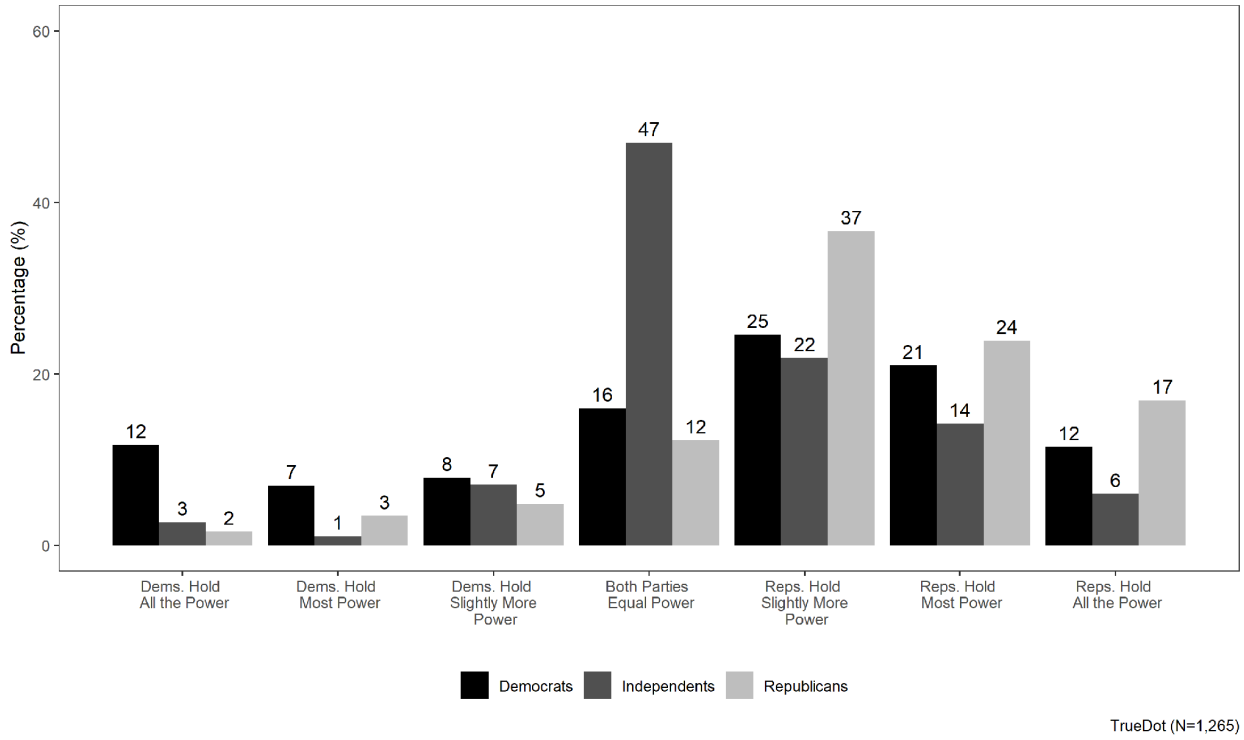

Figure 6: Perceptions of National Political Power, by Party

There are significant differences between the parties' perceived power: they are not perceived to be on equal footing. The literature on intergroup conflict suggests that this should have important implications for how the two groups evaluate one another. We next investigate the relationship between perceived power differential and party thermometers. It is most illustrative to show in-party affect (i.e., thermometer ratings toward one's own preferred party) and out-party affect (thermometer ratings toward the out-party). We do so in Table 5.

	In-Party Affect (1)	**Out-Party Affect (2)**
Constant	4.147***	7.461***

	In-Party Affect (1)	**Out-Party Affect (2)**
	(0.578)	(0.619)
Perception of Out-Party Power	−0.093	−0.250***
	(0.063)	(0.068)
Importance of Party ID	0.984***	−0.489***
	(0.097)	(0.104)
Ideological Strength	0.305*	−0.361*
	(0.136)	(0.146)
Age	−0.003	−0.027***
	(0.006)	(0.007)
College Graduate	−0.560**	0.505*
	(0.211)	(0.226)
Male	−0.346+	1.164***
	(0.202)	(0.216)

	In-Party Affect (1)	**Out-Party Affect (2)**
Voted in 2024	0.217	0.315
	(0.297)	(0.318)
Democrat	0.040	0.137
	(0.238)	(0.255)
N	616	616
R2	0.223	0.174

Table 5: Perceptions of National Power and In-Party/Out-Party Affect
Note: Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients with associated standard errors underneath.
+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

We separately regress in-party affect (Column 1) and out-party affect (Column 2) on the perception of the out-party's relative power. Higher values indicate a greater perception of out-party relative to in-party power. For example, a higher value on the out-party measure indicates that a Republican sees the Democratic party as having greater power relative to Republicans, and that a Democrat sees the Republican party as having greater power relative to Democrats. We control for the importance of party identification ("How important is being a Democrat/Republican to you?"), ideological extremity (ranging from moderate to very conservative/very liberal), voting in 2024 (1=yes; 0=no), age (4-point categorical), gender

(woman=1; man=0), education (6-point categorical with high values indicating more education), and an indicator for white respondents vs. non-white.

We first see that perceptions of out-party power are unrelated to in-party affect. In other words, the amount of power one thinks the out-party has is not related to feelings about one's own party. Perception of out-party power, however, significantly reduces out-party affect. The more an individual sees the other party as powerful, the lower their out-party affect (or, in other words, the higher their out-party animus). Notably, although not shown, these results are robust across parties and consistent with our findings on partisan symmetry.

It is difficult to determine the causal relationship from these results – the perception of out-party power might not *cause* out-party animosity; indeed, it is certainly plausible that out-party animus might increase the perception of out-party power. Furthermore, we are conducting these analyses in a one-party-dominance setting: at the national level, Republicans control the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, a fact readily apparent to our respondents.

Across states, however, there is greater variation in the balance of power. By carrying out these analyses at the state level, we can see how Republicans and Democrats vary according to which party holds more power – does the balance of power in one's *state* affect their level of animosity toward the out-party, perhaps to an even greater extent?

We classify each respondent as to whether they live in a state controlled by their preferred party. Respondents who live in a state with a Democratic governor and two Democratic senators are categorized as living in a Democratic state; likewise, those with a Republican governor and senators are categorized as living in a Republican state. We exclude those respondents whose state control is split between the two parties. Finally, we create a variable indicating whether a

respondent's party identity matches the party in control of their state. Overall, 470 respondents live in states where their preferred party is in control; 370 respondents do not.

We find that respondents' perceptions of the balance of power within their states are closely aligned with our categorization. In Figure 7, we show the distribution of responses to the question of which party holds more state. We break responses into those from Democratic-controlled states and those from Republican-controlled states. This is an admittedly crude measure, as state legislatures and local officeholders might represent a different party than the governor and senators. But even so, the state's balance of power shapes respondents' level of animosity.

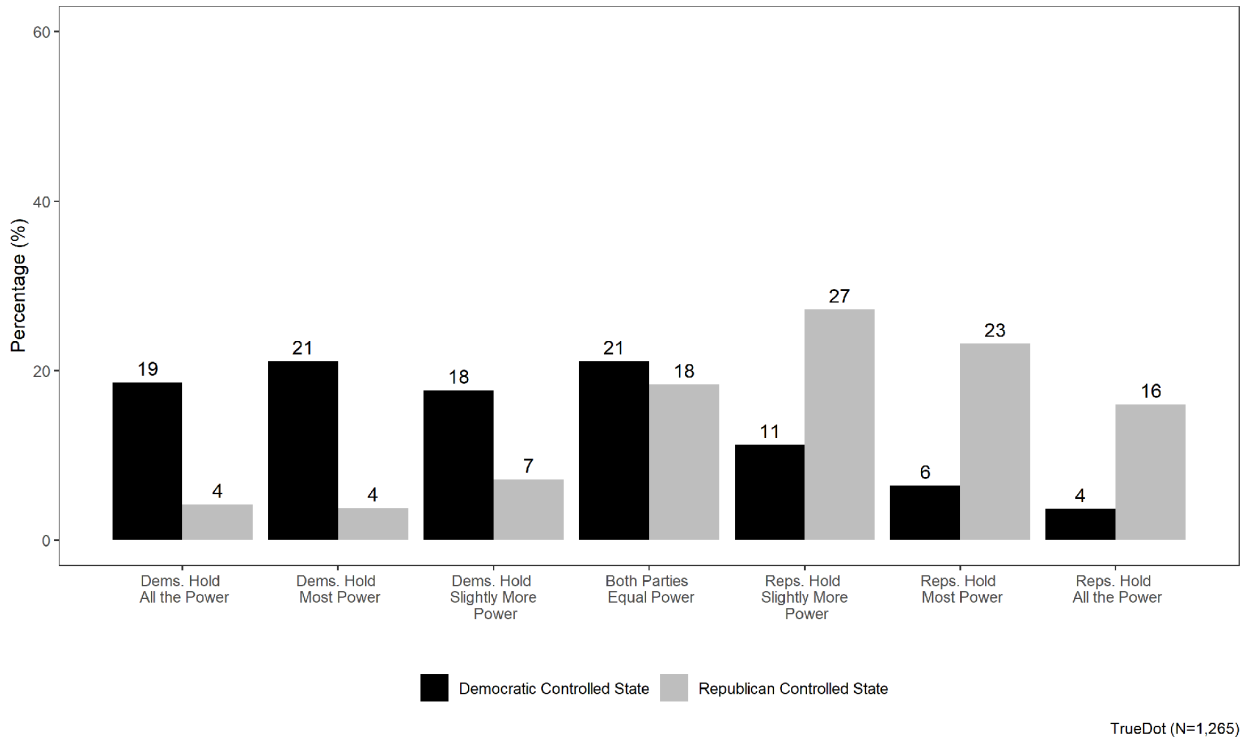

Figure 7: Perceptions of State Political Power, by Control of State Government

These perceptions are remarkably accurate: 58 percent of respondents in Democratic states perceive the Democratic party to hold more power; 21 percent believe they hold equal power, and just 21 percent perceive the Republicans as holding more power. Among those in Republican-controlled states, 66 percent recognize that the Republicans hold more power; 18

percent see the parties as equally powerful, and just 15 percent believe the Democrats hold more power.

We next compare the relationship between party animus and perceived out-party power, interacted by whether the respondent lives in an in-party-controlled state, in Table 6. We first turn to respondents who live in a state controlled by their in-party. When one's own party rules, perception of the out-party gaining power reduces in-party affect (i.e., there is a negative and significant interactive effect). In other words, as the out-party gains power in a like-minded state, respondents feel more negatively toward their *own* party. Out-party power in a like-minded state has no association with out-party affect – the main effect and interactive effect cancel one another out. The former result may reflect partisans' frustration with their party holding formal power, accompanied by the perception that the out-party is powerful. If so, the latter result suggests that people hold their own party more accountable in such situations than the out-party. The result somewhat aligns with Phillips and Warner's (2026) finding that members of the losing party after an election feel less warmth toward their own party.

When the out-party controls one's own state, however, we find the opposite: a growing perception of out-party power reduces *out-party affect* (note the negative main effect). In other words, respondents living under out-party control become more hostile toward the out-party as their perceived power grows, but affect toward one's own party is unrelated to out-party power in an out-party state. Here, they do not like an out-party with formal and perceived power and do not attribute the perceived power situation, per se, to their own party.

	State In-Party Affect (1)	State Out-Party Affect (2)
Constant	3.037***	8.299***
	(0.724)	(0.742)
Perception of Out-Party State Power	0.063	−0.383***
	(0.084)	(0.086)
State Controlled by Respondent's Party	1.566**	−1.551**
	(0.521)	(0.534)
Importance of Party ID	0.861***	−0.518***
	(0.112)	(0.114)
Ideological Strength	0.456**	−0.176
	(0.151)	(0.154)
Age	0.005	−0.020**
	(0.007)	(0.007)
College Graduate	−0.303	0.882***
	(0.235)	(0.241)
Male	−0.312	1.010***

	State In-Party Affect (1)	State Out-Party Affect (2)
	(0.228)	(0.233)
Voted in 2024	−0.049	0.006
	(0.329)	(0.337)
Democrat	−0.115	−0.343
	(0.233)	(0.239)
Out-Party Power*State Controlled by Respondent's Party	−0.458***	0.350*
	(0.138)	(0.141)
N	517	517
R2	0.216	0.192

Table 6: Perceptions of State Power and In-Party/Out-Party Affect
Note: Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients with associated standard errors underneath.
+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

6.2. Summary of Power Imbalances and Affective Polarization

Our data suggest that partisans are in tune with the power imbalance between parties and that those perceptions are related to out-party affect. The study of affective polarization is ultimately a study of intergroup relations, building on decades of social psychological work on intergroup conflict. The context in which the two rival groups – in this case, the two parties – exist is an important consideration in studying their relationship. Beyond measuring polarization

as it currently stands, we encourage scholars to consider how shifting power imbalances shape the trajectory of polarization between Democrats and Republicans.

7. Measures of Affective Polarization in Multi-Party Contexts

Affective polarization is, of course, not limited to the United States. While the concept was developed in the U.S. context, other work has extended it to additional national settings. This research finds that several nations are even more polarized than the U.S. (Gidron, Adams, & Horne, 2020), although the U.S. seems to have had the sharpest recent increase (Boxell et al., 2024; Gidron, Adams, & Horne, 2020). The broader research agenda requires a translation of measurement from the American case to a cross-national perspective – a challenge for affective polarization research.

In the American two-party system, identity with one party signals the other party as a clear out-group. The political process further reinforces this division: elections – as well as most other political debates – center on the partisan divide. In turn, this clarity about the two groups in tension allows for a clean intersection of concept and measurement: "in the USA two-party system, researchers can simply look at the gap between the in-party and the out-party to assess affective polarization" (Wagner, 2024, p. 379). Indeed, Wagner (2021, p. 1) notes that the American case is "arguably the most straightforward case" for group-centered theories and measures of affective polarization.

Measuring affective polarization, however, becomes significantly more complex in multi-party contexts (Harteveld, 2021; Garzia et al., 2023; Reiljan, 2020; Tichelbaecker et al., 2023; Wagner, 2021). Wagner (2024, p. 379) explains:

> Complex party systems mean that Europeans are not faced with two partisan groups of roughly equal size, but with a sometimes dizzying array of unstable and ephemeral parties. In such contexts, affective polarization is best conceived of as either the average dislike of out-party supporters (compared to one's sympathy for the most favored party),

> or as the overall spread of affect across all partisans. The diversity of party systems also means that it may make sense to focus on partisan animosity towards each party separately, so the extent to which their supporters are disliked or not. A related question… is whether other political divisions provide the binary distinctions that party systems fail to provide in Europe. Hence, political identities and affective evaluations can be based on ideological identities, issue preferences, Brexit stances, or preferences for regional independence.

Wagner's thinking provides a context for two important decision points in the development of affective polarization measures for multi-party systems: first, the question wording used to capture affect; second, the way these measures of affect are then used to calculate affective polarization. It is the latter, second decision point that may introduce the most cross-national variation and measurement complexity. We focus on three ideas central to this complexity – the relative size of the parties, the presence of multiple in- and out-parties, and the potential for non-partisan political divides. We consider these ideas as closely match our foci (but see Wagner 2024 for an overview of additional concerns).

7.1. Measuring Affective Polarization Cross-Nationally: Question Wording

Paralleling the U.S. case, a modal measure in cross-national, multi-party contexts is a like/dislike scale, somewhat akin to the feeling thermometer. This measure has been included in large, cross-national surveys such as the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) survey and the Comparative National Election Project (CNEP) (e.g., Gidron, Adams, & Horne 2020; Ferreira da Silva & Garzia, 2024; Wagner, 2021; Ward & Tavits, 2019; Boxell et al., 2024). Parallel to the use of the thermometer scale in American studies, the benefit of the likes/dislikes measure is that it has been included in large surveys, offering both longitudinal (Wagner, 2024) and cross-national data (Röllicke, 2023).

Broadening the measure of affective polarization to consider its social consequences, surveys in multi-party contexts have also relied on social distance measures (e.g., Knudsen,

2021) and trait ratings (Hobolt et al., 2021). Here, measures often employ the same question wording as their American counterparts (e.g., Knudsen, 2021). Given multi-party contexts, all of these measures (likes/dislikes, social distance, traits) can be asked about each party – or relevant political group – in a political system.[27] Until recently, however, data availability has meant that cross-national studies were more likely to rely on the likes/dislikes measure, while social distance and trait measures were more likely to be included in single-country studies (Röllicke, 2023).

As in the American context, the precise wording of the questions depends on the measurement goals. Just as in the American context, measures of likes/dislikes capture different aspects of affective polarization than do measures of social distance and traits (Röllicke, 2023; Wagner, 2024). Moreover, some of the question-wording issues we discuss within the American context also apply in the multi-party context. As Wagner (2024) notes, the most common measures of likes/dislikes in large cross-national surveys (e.g. CSES) focus on affect toward parties (e.g. how strongly a Dutch participant likes/dislikes that country's Christian Democratic Appeal Party) rather than party supporters (e.g. how strongly a participant likes/dislike people who support the Christian Democratic Appeal Party) – though there is research to suggest that there is some correlation between the two (Harteveld, 2021). Refining the measure, more recent studies in multi-party contexts have turned to question wording that specifies affect for *supporters* of a particular party (Harteveld, 2021; Torcal & Thomson, 2023).

Where measurement challenges diverge from the U.S., however, is in what we termed the second decision point: the way these measures of affect are used to construct and calculate the

[27] The like-dislike item reads: "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. If I come to a party you haven't heard of or you feel you do not know enough about, just say so."

level of affective polarization either within a country or in a comparative perspective. This second decision point necessarily must address the specific political context of a given country. We next turn to the relevant issues and highlight how different choices would lead to variable measures.

7.2. The Relative Size of Parties in Measuring Affective Polarization

In the U.S., affective polarization is a gap between the in-group and the out-group; this measure implicitly assumes equal weight (size) for both groups (Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021). In the previous section, we suggested that this idea of equal weight may be more complicated in the U.S. than originally assumed; it is, however, an especially tenuous assumption in multi-party contexts where some parties are dominant, and others are marginal. Consider, for example, the United Kingdom, where multiple parties exist, but two have typically been dominant – the Conservatives and Labour (Down & Han, 2024). A person's affect toward Labour may, in theory, carry more consequences for someone's political behavior than their affect for the Green Party, a party that is unlikely to win control of the government (Down & Han, 2024).

Perhaps even more consequential is that "vast distances between sizable parties signify greater polarization from the perspective of the whole system" (Reiljan, 2020, p. 380). This point becomes particularly important when considering the macro effects of affective polarization: if voters only dislike a few small parties, even intense dislike may have few systematic consequences. If there is strong animosity toward the dominant parties (perhaps especially those in power), there may be more meaningful effects on evaluations of the political system as a whole.

Accounting for relative party size introduces important cross-country variation in the calculation of affective polarization. One approach, for example, could be to focus only on the

dominant parties, which is most applicable when many parties exist but only one or two could reasonably win power. In a study of the 2022 election in South Korea, for example, Lee, Choi, and Ahn (2025, p. 448) capture affective polarization as the thermometer difference between the parties of "the two leading presidential candidates." Not every multi-party system, however, can be considered through two dominant parties. Scholars consequently have suggested weighting each party's measure of affect based on its relative size within the electoral system – for example, by vote share (Garzia et al., 2023; Reiljan, 2020; Reiljan et al., 2024; Wagner, 2021). This approach is also beneficial in cases where researchers want to measure affective polarization in a comparative perspective (e.g. Reiljan et al., 2024).

7.3. Affective Polarization with a Multiplicity of In- and Out-Parties

Another challenge is determining which, if any, of the political parties reflects a given respondent's in-party and out-party. In the U.S. context, the political system is structured so that most people identify with one party or the other, creating a clear in-group and out-group. But in a multi-party context, who, exactly, is the in-party and the out-party? At baseline, a multi-party system means numerous out-parties: any party with which a person does *not* identify could be an out-group. Another layer of complexity may be that people may have numerous *in-parties* (Wagner, 2021), especially given that the meaning of partisan "identification" is notoriously fuzzy in many multi-party democracies (Johnston, 2006). Jointly, the possibility of multiple in- and out-parties creates a series of measurement challenges (Wagner, 2024).

Given the challenges of defining the in- and out-party, one solution is ambivalence. In a study of 20 Western democracies, for example, Gidron et al. (2023) use affective polarization items to create dyads for all possible party combinations within each country (also see Ward & Tavits, 2019). Yet many previously disliked parties are seen more positively when they enter a

coalition government with more positively viewed parties (Horne, Adams, & Gidron, 2023; Wagner & Praprotnik, 2024). This would mean that the out-group is not a party but, rather, those who are not in the governing coalition. The possibility that political in- and out-groups move beyond parties thus leads to a potentially broader measurement challenge.

7.4. Capturing the Relevant Divide in a Multi-Party System

The idea that in some contexts the out-group is not a political party raises an additional nuance in measuring cross-national affective polarization: is affective polarization people's affect toward political parties, or is affective polarization people's affect toward those on either side of some highly salient political divide? Given its origins in the American context, the partisan divide *is* the most salient political divide. This means that measures ask about Democrats and Republicans. But this need not be the case in other political contexts. It is possible that multi-party systems may lead to divisions that are much more salient than those within a single party (Bantel, 2023; Comellas & Torcal, 2023).

Focusing on capturing a dividing line beyond parties, researchers have considered the possibility that "camps" drive affective polarization in multi-party systems (Bantel, 2023). For example, in the Canadian context, Johnston (2023, p. 391) explains, "The system can be conceived in continental European terms as comprising party families or blocks…the Conservatives and any party to its right as the 'right' block and the Liberals and all others as the 'left'" (also see Merkley, 2022). In a study tracking the measurement validity of affective polarization measures in a multi-party system, for example, Kasper, Schumacher, and Bakker (2025) find that asking people to rate selected political parties representing different ranges of the political spectrum does as well as asking survey respondents to rate all parties in a multi-party system.

Considering divides becomes more complicated, since camps need not be formed solely through political parties. Indeed, the source of division can vary across countries. Focal issues – like, for example, Brexit in the UK (e.g., Hobolt, Leeper & Tilley 2021) or vaccination status (Filsinger & Freitag, 2024; Wagner & Eberl, 2024) – can serve as key political dividing lines; so too can politicians – like, for example, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil (Areal, 2022). Even disagreements about the likelihood of external threat could become a salient dividing disagreement within a country (Harel et al., 2025). Key to the idea of camps is that of salience: in some contexts, camps are more salient than parties alone (Oshri, Yair & Huddy, 2022). As a result, the idea of camps as dividing lines, rather than parties alone, brings new dimensions to the study of affective polarization. Dividing lines can emerge and fade, suggesting that the basis of affective polarization can shift over time.

The potential importance of camps not only introduces necessary variation into the measurement of affective polarization cross-nationally, but also underscores the conceptual challenge of understanding what, exactly, an affective polarization measure captures in *any* context. Is affective polarization a means of capturing how people feel about political parties? Or is affective polarization a measure of how people feel about either side of any political divide that happens to be salient at a given moment in a given country?

7.5 Summary of Measurement in a Multi-Party Context

Research has often examined how to fit measures of affective polarization, as implemented in the U.S., into multi-party contexts. Although a direct translation has been challenging, considering measurement in a multi-party context opens new possibilities for advancing research on affective polarization. First, while just as in the American context, question-wording remains pivotal, the multi-party context introduces the complication of

deciding how to construct a level of affective polarization. The variance in measuring affective polarization stems mostly from the method used to estimate an affective polarization score. This is because the method of estimating affective polarization levels depends on the particular political conditions of a given country.

These measurement considerations also highlight the potentially contextual dynamism of affective polarization. New coalitions may form, and new dividing lines may emerge within a country, which leads to changes in political disagreements and discourse, something less likely to be apparent in a rigid two-party context such as the U.S.

Second, the multi-party context also raises theoretical possibilities. Could the overlap between party and salient political divides in the U.S. have led to an overstatement of the role of partisan identity in fueling affective polarization? Focusing on Brazil, for example, Areal (2022) finds that people can hold strong affect for certain political groups even without strong social identities. Elsewhere, Down and Han (2024) show that people who do not identify with either Labour or the Conservatives in the U.K. do, nonetheless, have strong "affectively polarized attitudes" about the two dominant parties. Perhaps the relevant identity connects to sides of a broad cleavage rather than a political party. This idea offers an entry point to reconsider the role of group attachment in theories of affective polarization. At the very least, considering how people understand the divisions within the political world could be a step toward addressing what Baldassarri (2025) terms the "psychological reductionism" of assuming partisanship is the singular dominant identity.

8. Discussion: Measurement as a Tool for Moving Forward

Affective polarization is a rare concept that has had an impact across the social sciences and entered public discourse. It can be used to characterize political systems, capture individuals'

social behaviors, explain partisans' political actions, and capture the effects of changes in campaigns, media, and demography. Iyengar et al.'s (2012) insight was profound. At its base, the idea is straightforward: it is an inter-group evaluation. Yet, when intersected with the realities of its multiple purposes, inherent measurement challenges, and political contexts, many questions arise. Most of the issues we discussed are not new; rather, our goal was to highlight the numerous decisions that need to be made when measuring a seemingly clear concept.

In Table 7**,** we present an overview of the lessons from our overview. Each row describes a consideration for which one needs to account when measuring affective polarization. The first column offers a descriptor, and the second column lists non-exhaustive examples. The framework comes from the intersection of our initial discussion of the (five) core components (Section 2; these are listed in italics in what follows) and the insights we discovered throughout the paper.

Consideration	**Examples of Choices**
Groups to be evaluated	Major parties All parties receiving votes Ideological blocks (camps)
Sample	Partisans All voters
Target	Party overall Public officials Ordinary voters Engaged ideologues Those who hold distinct positions on an issue

Dimension of Evaluation	Like / Dislike (thermometers, traits, trust, social distance) Political sectarianism (othering, aversion, moralizing) Partisan discrimination
Computation	In-party – Out-party Out-party evaluation Absolute value Weight by vote
Measurement Context	Private Observed
Political Context	Relative national party power Relative state party power

Table 7: An Overview of Affective Polarization Measurement Considerations

Recall that, at its base, affective polarization is about *group-centrism*: individuals identify with a group that, in this case, is nearly always a political party. Yet, as our overview of multi-party contexts made clear, this quickly becomes complicated. The focus can be on major parties that receive a certain number of votes, ideological blocks, and/or any party in the system. As we discussed, one could push the concept away from partisanship entirely and define it instead in terms of cleavages (camps). Alternatively, one could consider factions of parties (e.g., Young & de-Wit, 2025).

The second entry in the table – sample – is related insofar as the standard assumption is that those offering affective polarization scores identify with a party; yet one could include independents, which would lead to a distinct characterization of a political system since

independents are typically less affectively polarized. Noticeably absent from the row in this table is consideration of "liberals" or "conservatives." While our evidence on partisan symmetry is surely not the final word, we found scant evidence of enduring differences across parties.

Third, we emphasized the need to *define the parties* or the targets. We offered detailed evidence showing how such definitions yield different portraits of affective polarization. The fourth characteristic, dimensions of evaluation, aligns with our initial discussion of the *affective measures*. This is perhaps the most glaring consequence of relying on pre-existing measures. It so happened that those measures focused on relatively moderate features (e.g., likeability). The related construct of political sectarianism encompasses more severe evaluative dimensions (e.g., aversion), leading to distinct relationships with outcomes such as anti-democratic attitudes.

There are additionally multiple ways to operationalize polarization *(difference measure)* as displayed in the fifth row of the table. Affective polarization typically entails taking the difference between in-group and out-group evaluations. Yet alternatives include looking only at the out-group (which we used in our analyses in section 3), taking the absolute value of the difference, or weighting (e.g., by votes). While less common, even looking just at feelings towards one's own party or positive partnership can be useful as well (Lee et al., 2022).

This leads to our last two considerations, both of which concern how context affects affective polarization. Affective polarization shapes social life – people make social and economic decisions based on how they feel about the parties. Conversely, how they feel about the parties depends on the social environment. This is evident from our findings regarding survey mode: individuals adjust their level of polarization contingent on whether they are being observed. They additionally seem to alter their partisan behaviors depending on whether fellow partisans are present (Connors, 2023). Consequently, it is vital to assess whether the measure is

best gauged in private or public/social settings. In a sense, this highlights how, when gauging micro-level individual affective polarization, it is essential to consider the social context, which acts as a sort of meso-level between the individual and society as a whole. Finally, affective polarization is a political measure and, as such, needs to account for the macro-political context. We detailed how power and perceptions of power condition affective polarization. The results accentuate the need to appreciate the political aspects of a psychological concept. How macro-level affective polarization ebbs and flows depend on the distribution of power within a given political entity (e.g., nation).

There are additional examples beyond those in the table. For instance, the groups to be evaluated could be issue publics (e.g., for and against Brexit) (Hobolt et al., 2021), the sample could be office holders (Lucas & Sheffer, 2025), the dimension of evaluation could be dehumanization (Landry et al., 2024) or emotional reactions (Bakker & Lelkes, 2024) or negative partisan identity (Bankert, 2024), the target could be members of extremist or anti-system parties (Harteveld et al., 2022), the computation could incorporate perceptions of the ideological distributions of partisans (Dias et al., 2025; Sawler, 2025), the measurement context could be within deliberative groups (Setälä & O'Flynn, 2025), and the political context could involve a national emergency (Druckman et al., 2021; Boxell et al., 2022).

Where does that leave us? We offer three final points. First, how one applies any of these considerations is entirely variable. For instance, in the U.S., the typical approach gauges how partisans feel about (like/dislike) the two major parties overall and considers the relative gap between them. Often, there is no explicit consideration of the social or political context. While these are reasonable decisions and altering any of them may not change the time trend, they would alter the precise metric and its relationship with other variables. Second, what decisions to

make depend on one's research goals, for example, whether the focus is to describe macro conditions or make micro-level predictions. In the former case it will matter substantially whether one asks about engaged ideologues or ordinary voters. In the latter case, it matters if one employes classical affective polarization items or the political sectarianism scales, as well as whether the measure is in a social context with fellow partisans or non-partisan observers.

Finally, our goal here is *not* to populate the field with unnecessary jargon. The literature on affective polarization has been remarkably productive and influential. Instead, our hope is that as the field moves into a new generation of work, scholars think carefully about measurement. This will ensure an accurate portrayal of national politics and individual political decisions, as well as an even richer set of theoretical and empirical results.

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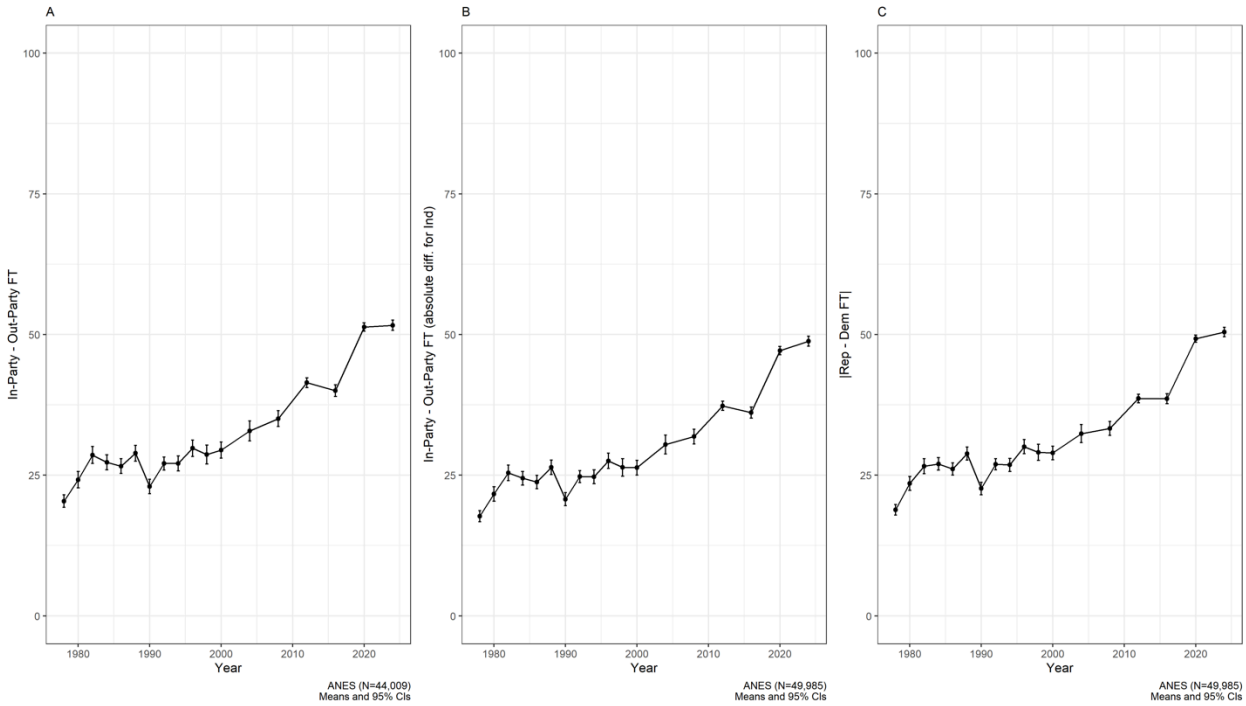
Appendix

Affective Polarization with Pure Independents

Panel A is the same as Figure 1A. Panel B adds pure independents, using the absolute difference measure. Panel C uses the absolute difference measure for all respondents including pure independents.



Re-Analysis of Druckman 2022 with Pure Independents and Absolute Difference Score

We explore how an absolute difference measure affects the Druckman et al. (2022) experiment results. In Table A-1, we reconsider the analysis from Table 1 using an absolute difference measure. For each of the measures, we took the absolute difference of ratings for Democrats and Republicans, then added those differences together, and then divided by twelve resulting in a 0 to 1 affective polarization scale. We then created a 0 to 1 partisan strength measure with 0 for pure independents, 1 for strong partisans, and leaners and weak partisans in

between at equal distance. In the regression model, we interact the treatment variables with the partisan strength measure.

The results show that, by and large, the treatment effects are not conditional on partisan strength. The only conditioning effect is that the *Moderate* treatment lowers affective polarization among strong partisans while having no effect on pure independents. The largest effect remains that affective polarization is lower in the *Discuss Rarely* treatment. There is a result that is noticeably different from the animus measures. With the absolute difference measure, affective polarization is also lower in the *Discuss Frequently* treatment – though this effect is much smaller than the *Discuss Rarely* treatment.

Why does the *Discuss Frequently* treatment lower levels of affective polarization using this measure? The absolute difference between in- and out-party ratings are lower in this treatment because, among partisans, the *Discuss Frequently* treatment lowers evaluations of both out-party supporters and in-party supporters. In fact, the effect of the *Discuss Frequently* treatment is twice as large for in-party supporters. The analysis in Druckman et al. (2022) suggests the reason for this difference between the effects on out- and in-party supporters is that people assume out-partisans talk about politics more frequently than in-partisans. So, the *Discuss Frequently* treatment brings to mind a different type of in-partisan, one the average respondent dislikes.

The largest effect of all in Table A-1 is not any of the treatment variables. The largest effect is partisan strength itself. On the 0 to 1 scale, the estimated polarization score for strong partisans in the *Discuss Rarely* and *Moderate* treatments – i.e., the unconditional polarization scores – are 0.25 for strong partisans and 0.10 for pure independents.

	Coef.	T-Value
Partisan Strength	0.228	12.01

Discussion Conditions		
Rarely	-0.077	-4.14
Occasionally	-0.039	-2.12
Frequently	-0.030	-1.60
Ideology Conditions		
Moderate	-0.002	-0.10
Ideologue	0.017	1.06
Interactions		
Rarely X Strength	-0.031	-1.21
Occasionally X Strength	0.004	0.18
Frequently X Strength	0.017	0.67
Moderate X Strength	-0.046	-2.05
Ideologue X Strength	-0.013	-0.58
Constant	0.177	12.70
N	3345	
R2	0.17	

Table A-1. Using an Absolute Difference Measure of Affective Polarization to Account for Partisan Strength.

Note: Results from OLS regression. Dependent variable is scaled from 0 to 1 with larger values indicating greater affective polarization. The excluded categories are no mention of discussion frequency and no mention of ideology.