

# (Mis)estimating Affective Polarization

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Affective polarization—the tendency of ordinary partisans to dislike and distrust those from the other party—is a defining feature of contemporary American politics. High levels of out-party animus stem, in part, from misperceptions of the other party’s voters. Specifically, individuals misestimate the ideological extremity and political engagement of typical out-partisans. When partisans are asked about “Democrats” or the “Republican Party,” they bring to mind stereotypes of engaged ideologues and, hence, express contempt for the other party. The reality, however, is that such individuals are the exception rather than the norm. We show that when partisans learn that reality, partisan animus falls sharply; partisans do not have much animus toward the typical member of the other party. Our results suggest antidotes for vitiating affective polarization but also complicate understandings of good citizenship.

**H**yperpartisan polarization defines twenty-first-century American politics. Democrats and Republicans dislike and distrust one another, a phenomenon known as affective polarization (Iyengar et al. 2019; Pew Research Center 2019a). Emphasis on this interparty animus in both popular commentary and academic discussions (e.g., Badger and Chokshi 2017; Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012) has motivated scholars to investigate its causes and consequences (Iyengar et al. 2019; Mason 2018). Much of this scholarship—as well as media coverage of it—assumes that Democrats and Republicans automatically dislike one another simply because they belong to different political parties. We argue that this may not be the case. Rather, in many cases, affective polarization is a function of the types of partisans that come to mind when people answer survey questions about the other

party. We show that affective polarization—when it comes to evaluations of other citizens—is significantly more localized than often assumed. Many individuals express indifference, rather than hostility, once they are asked to evaluate the typical member of the other party. The types of partisans who inspire the strongest animus actually constitute only a small minority of both parties.

The standard measures of affective polarization ask respondents to evaluate, for example, “Democrats” or “the Republican Party.” In answering, respondents draw on stereotypes and media exemplars of ideologically extreme and politically engaged partisans (Druckman and Levendusky 2019). These are precisely the types of out-partisans whom both Democrats and Republicans dislike, and, thus, they report high levels of animus. To be clear, this animus is real insofar as people

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Support for this research was provided by Northwestern University, the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of Arizona. This study was conducted in compliance with relevant laws and was approved by the appropriate institutional review boards. Data and supporting materials necessary to reproduce the numerical results in the article are available in the *JOP* Dataverse (<https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/jop>). An online appendix with supplementary material is available at <https://doi.org/10.1086/715603>.

Published online March 1, 2022.

*The Journal of Politics*, volume 84, number 2, April 2022. © 2022 Southern Political Science Association. All rights reserved. Published by The University of Chicago Press for the Southern Political Science Association. <https://doi.org/10.1086/715603>

believe they are evaluating the typical out-partisan. But it is also an illusion, because people assume—incorrectly—that ideologically extreme and politically engaged partisans comprise the majority of the other party.

Even more importantly, we find that when people assess moderate members of the other party who are less politically engaged and who, in fact, resemble the typical member of both parties whom Americans actually encounter in their day-to-day lives, affective polarization declines dramatically. We establish three key findings. First, Americans misestimate the ideological extremity and political engagement of the opposing party's voters. Second, when answering the standard affective polarization measures, partisans rely on these misperceptions, particularly concerning political engagement, leading them to express high levels of animus. Consequently, when scholars, pundits, and journalists use these measures to characterize affective polarization, they inadvertently reinforce an inaccurate image of extreme differences between members of the two parties. Third, and perhaps most importantly, our findings suggest an antidote to high levels of partisan animus: correcting citizens' misperceptions about the other side (also see Ahler and Sood 2018). Such corrections have important implications for how we understand the social consequences of affective polarization, as well as how we assess "good" citizenship.<sup>1</sup>

### WHAT DO AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION MEASURES MEASURE?

Affective polarization refers to the tendency of partisans to like members of their own party and dislike those from the opposition (Iyengar et al. 2012). Scholars employ various measures to study affective polarization: feeling thermometer ratings toward the parties (i.e., a 0–100 scale where 0 indicates very cold feelings and 100 indicates very warm feelings), the degree to which respondents trust out-partisans versus in-partisans, and trait ratings of opposing partisans (i.e., asking how well adjectives like "patriotic," "open-minded," etc., apply

1. Our focus is on affective polarization between citizens, rather than toward elites. These are distinct constructs (e.g., animus toward the other party's voters as opposed to the other party's elected officials), with varying consequences (Druckman and Levendusky 2019). For example, animus toward out-party voters has social consequences such as affecting how much time we spend with our families, where we want to work and shop, and who we want to date (Iyengar et al. 2019). In contrast, animus toward the other party's elites may have political consequences such as nationalizing vote choice (Abramowitz and Webster 2016) and undermining trust in government (Hetherington and Rudolph 2015). Much of the prior work focuses on the social consequences of affective polarization (Iyengar et al. 2019), which motivates our interest. We acknowledge that our findings have less to say about animus toward elites, and we encourage scholars to take up those consequences in future work.

to out-partisans; see Druckman and Levendusky 2019).<sup>2</sup> Alternatively, some use social distance measures that ask people how comfortable they would be to have a friend or neighbor from the other party or how happy they would be if they had a child who married someone from the other party (Klar, Krupnikov, and Ryan 2018). All of these measures invariably show high levels of out-party dislike, which suggests a divided nation.

In employing each of these measures, scholars consistently rely on abstract partisan targets, for example, asking respondents to evaluate "Republicans" or "the Democratic Party." These choices matter because no one can know the Democratic Party in total. Consequently, citizens are apt to substitute the part they know best: the part they see discussed in the media. Because many individuals interact mostly (but not entirely) with those from their own party (Mutz 2006), media stereotypes are the most accessible image they have of the other party.

Yet, media coverage of politics can systematically distort individuals' views of the opposition. Stories about politics skew toward conflict and focus on those who are most passionate about politics—for example, activists who are deeply committed to their cause (Levendusky and Malhotra 2016a). This is true of the mainstream media, and even more so of partisan outlets that play an increasingly important role in the media ecosystem (Levendusky 2013; Peterson and Kagalwala 2021). Social media can also bias partisan perceptions. Most Americans eschew political discussions on social media, but when they do nonetheless encounter them, it is likely to be from the most engaged partisans who produce the most political content on social media (Settle 2018).

There is a similar pattern when it comes to ideology. While some evidence suggests that ideological polarization among the public has increased (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Gramlich 2016; cf. Lelkes 2016), those who receive coverage in the media or post about politics on social media are likely to be much more extreme than the typical partisan (Cohn and Quealy 2019). Indeed, much of the political content on social media is created by people who are both more engaged in politics and more ideological than the average person (Hughes 2019). The result is that when individuals think of those from the other party, what comes to mind, via the availability heuristic, are very engaged ideologues. They remember fervent

2. We focus on self-reported measures of affective polarization. A few scholars have looked at implicit measures of partisan animus to circumvent problems of self-censoring (i.e., Iyengar and Westwood 2015), but such efforts are beyond our scope. This is not a serious limitation, as unlike the case of racial animus, implicit and explicit measures here correlate highly (Iyengar and Westwood 2015).

partisans pleading their cases, rather than their neighbors or colleagues who happen to be from the other party but rarely discuss politics.

In sum, precisely because they know those from the other party less well, citizens assume the pictures they see on mass media and on social media reflect reality, and thus they assume that out-partisans are extremists deeply committed to politics (i.e., the out-group homogeneity effect; see Quattrone and Jones 1980). As Levendusky and Malhotra (2016a) show, for example, media coverage of polarization increases citizens' beliefs that the electorate is polarized. Moreover, journalists often reify this effect by using social media as evidence of what "the public" thinks, despite the fact that it does not represent mass opinion (McGregor 2019). Even politically disengaged individuals cannot escape caricatured images of partisans, thanks to the preponderance of media coverage of political conflict (Robison and Mullinix 2016) and discussions with more politically engaged friends and family members (Druckman, Levendusky, and McLain 2018). The result is an informational context that overrepresents partisan conflict (Klar and Krupnikov 2016). If political reality is just "images in our heads" (Lippmann 1922), then the images of political parties are representations of their most extreme and vocal members.

These expectations about reliance on the stereotypes lead us to our first hypothesis:

**H1.** When asked to assess the ideology and political engagement of out-partisans, individuals will significantly overestimate both quantities, all else constant.<sup>3</sup>

The possibility that people overestimate both the ideological extremity and the level of political engagement of out-partisans has significant implications for the measurement of affective polarization. If survey responses reflect top-of-the-head considerations (Zaller 1992), then when asked to rate Republicans or the Democratic Party, citizens bring to mind stereotypes of the most engaged partisans. Fiorina (2017, 61) captures this logic in noting that when Democrats imagine a Republican, they think of "an evolution-denying homophobe," and likewise Republicans thinking of a Democrat envision "an American-hating atheist," although neither one is accurate.<sup>4</sup> These misestimations can then affect overall measures of affective polarization.

3. All of our hypotheses were preregistered at [aspredicted.org](https://aspredicted.org/7rk7p.pdf): <https://aspredicted.org/7rk7p.pdf>.

4. Certainly, thinking of oneself as a partisan will lead to perceptions that the other side is a distant and disliked other (Hogg 2006). While true, our point is that media attention to the political extremity and engagement of individuals exacerbates these underlying tendencies.

Indeed, other work reveals that distinct misperceptions can influence affective polarization. For example, Ahler and Sood (2018) show that citizens hold skewed assumptions about the parties' demographic makeups. For example, Republicans estimate that 43.5% of Democrats belong to a labor union when in reality it is 10.5%, and Democrats estimate that 44.1% of Republicans earn over \$250,000 per year when it is 2.2% (968). These inaccurate assumptions help to drive partisan animus, and correcting them ameliorates such sentiments (Ahler and Sood 2018). Similarly, Democrats and Republicans both think that the other party dislikes them more than they actually do, and correcting this misinformation reduces interparty discord (Lees and Cikara 2020; Moore-Berg et al. 2020).

This research is telling—and suggests that correcting misperceptions can also vitiate affective polarization—yet an important lacuna remains in that no one has investigated how misperceptions about the parties' ideological makeup and levels of political engagement (à la hypothesis 1) shape affective polarization. While these are not the only relevant dimensions to consider (e.g., Orr and Huber 2020), they hold a special place when it comes to stimulating out-party animus: they signal that the other party holds very different views and is committed to expressing them. These dimensions capture the contours of political competition and difference.

### How perceptions of ideological positions shape affective polarization

Although ideological divides between the two parties may have increased (Webster and Abramowitz 2017), people nevertheless overstate the ideological extremity of the other party (Levendusky and Malhotra 2016b) and, as we hypothesize, will overestimate the extent to which the opposing party members are ideological (hypothesis 1). In turn, these perceptions about the ideological distribution of the opposing party will fuel greater affective polarization (Bougher 2017; Rogowski and Sutherland 2016). But there is a subtler and more pernicious effect of misestimating ideological extremity. This form of misestimation not only increases the perception of irreconcilable differences between the parties (Rogowski and Sutherland 2016), but it also fuels the belief that the other party will have antipathy toward anyone with different political positions (Levendusky and Malhotra 2016a, 2016b).<sup>5</sup>

Thus, if when asked to rate Republicans or Democrats survey respondents think of the most extreme exemplars of the

5. Such perceptions might vary depending on what those positions are; e.g., people might have different (mis)perceptions of what liberal and conservative are (Ellis and Stimson 2012). Nevertheless, these perceptual differences lead to the same place—the belief that someone who is more extreme will be more different and more devoted to a political position.

other side, they will be more likely to report high levels of animosity toward the other party. If, however, people imagine that they are being asked about more ordinary partisans, they would imagine them to be both closer to their own positions as well as less devoted to them and, consequently, would feel more positively toward them (O’Keefe 2016, 201), leading to lower levels of affective polarization.

**H2.** Out-party animus will be higher when out-party targets are ideologically extreme, relative to when they are ideologically moderate, all else constant.

### How perceptions of political engagement shape affective polarization

Much like ideology, the degree to which members of the other party are engaged in politics will shape animus toward them. While political engagement has many manifestations, the most visible—and common—involves political discussion. Fewer than 5% of Americans have volunteered for a campaign, and only 14% have donated money to one, but most people talk about politics at least occasionally (Pew Research Center 2018). Indeed, while many Americans do not know someone who engages in political protests, nearly everyone knows someone who at least occasionally, and possibly frequently, discusses politics, especially in the age of social media.<sup>6</sup> This is why we operationalize engagement in terms of discussion frequency.

We hypothesize that people will overestimate the extent to which out-party members discuss politics (hypothesis 1), which in turn produces affective polarization. Klar and Krupnikov (2016, 63) report that 40% of individuals express “discontent at the thought of working with [a] politically inclined colleague—even though the hypothetical colleague *agrees* with them” (see also Klar et al. 2018). This aversion will be particularly acute when it comes to talking to people with whom one disagrees: people do not even want to discuss apolitical topics with those from the other party (Settle and Carlson 2019), precisely because they think that they have nothing in common with them and the conversation will be unpleasant (Pew Research Center 2019b). Indeed, affective polarization reflects not only animus toward the other party but also a desire to avoid political discussions altogether (Klar et al. 2018). Much like how a misestimation of ideology may inflate affective polarization, so too would a misestimation of political engagement.

6. These various manifestations of political engagement are highly correlated; e.g., in our data described below, political interest correlates with political discussion at .66 ( $p < .01$ ), while political discussion correlates with participation in political activities at .40 ( $p < .01$ ).

**H3.** Out-party animus will be higher when out-party targets are more politically engaged, relative to when they are politically unengaged, all else constant.

### Perceptions of the “other”

Hypotheses 2 and 3 make clear how variations in how Americans perceive out-partisans shape their evaluations. Ideological extremity and political engagement are especially potent stimuli for generating animus. Ideological extremity signals that the other party holds very distant views and potentially different values (Tetlock 2000). Political engagement signals a desire to put them into action (or at least express them), so they represent a threat to the respondent. Taken together, someone from the other party who is both extreme and engaged is especially disliked. These two factors are crucial to amplifying partisan animus in the mass public. Moreover, as explained, we predict people misestimate ideological extremity and political engagement. Thus, when asked the canonical affective polarization measures—with Democrats and Republicans or the Democratic Party and the Republican Party as their target—individuals report relatively high levels of animus since they think of extreme and engaged out-partisans.

**H4.** When out-party targets are undefined in terms of ideology and political engagement (i.e., the common measures), out-party animus will:

- be significantly higher than when out-party targets are ideologically moderate and politically unengaged, all else constant.
- not be significantly different from when out-party targets are ideologically extreme and politically engaged, all else constant.

Taken together, our hypotheses imply an antidote to high levels of out-party animus—specifically, correcting misperceptions about typical ideological extremity and political engagement. As we discuss below, our results suggest correction that could viably be pursued at scale.

### AN EXPERIMENTAL TEST

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a three-wave online survey experiment with Bovitz in the summer of 2019 (details are in app. sec. S11). Bovitz maintains an online panel of approximately 1 million respondents recruited through random digit dialing and empanelment of Americans with internet access. Samples are drawn such that the demographics of the sample match those of the US population. Our sample therefore

Table 1. Experimental Conditions

	No Discussion Descriptor		Rare Discussion		Occasional Discussion		Frequent Discussion	
	Condition	N	Condition	N	Condition	N	Condition	N
No ideology descriptor	1	538	2	271	3	269	4	272
Moderate ideology	5	270	6	273	7	275	8	273
Extreme ideology (conservative/liberal)	9	272	10	270	11	276	12	261

closely tracks census figures for age, race, gender, and so forth (see app. sec. SI1 for more details and comparisons).<sup>7</sup>

In the first-wave participants ( $N = 5,191$ ; all adult Americans) answered a series of questions about their political predispositions, including their partisan identities, political knowledge, and demographic characteristics. The second wave ( $N = 4,076$ ) included our experimental manipulation, which we describe in detail below. The main items in this second wave asked participants versions of the aforementioned affective polarization measures: (1) feeling thermometer scales, (2) trait ratings, (3) trust measures, and (4) social distance measures. Each measure asked about both parties, with the out-party always coming first. In every condition, we specifically told respondents that they were evaluating ordinary people because our interest lies in levels of affective polarization among voters rather than between voters and elites (cf. Druckman and Levendusky 2019; see app. sec. SI2 for question wordings). In the third wave ( $N = 4,048$ ), we asked respondents to classify themselves in terms of ideology and political engagement. This provides the actual distribution of these characteristics among our sample. To avoid spillover, we allowed roughly a week between each wave.

In each experimental condition in wave 2, we varied two factors in describing the partisans being rated: (1) their ideological profiles and (2) their political engagement, which we describe in terms of frequency of political discussion, as explained above. Along the ideological factor, we randomly assigned participants to one of three groups: the first group received no information about the partisans' ideology, the

second group was told that the partisans are moderate, and the third group was told the partisans are ideological (with Democratic partisans being described as liberal and Republican partisans being described as conservative). On the political engagement factor, we assigned participants to one of four groups: they received no information about the partisans' frequency of discussion, or they learned that the partisans discuss politics rarely, occasionally, or frequently.<sup>8</sup>

This led to 12 randomly assigned conditions, which we display in table 1. For example, those in condition 1 received no information about ideology and no information about discussion frequency. They were asked to rate Republicans and Democrats, making this item akin to the conventional affective polarization items used in previous studies. The other conditions introduce variation; for example, in condition 12, respondents were asked about "Conservative Republicans who frequently talk about politics" and "Liberal Democrats who frequently talk about politics," and so forth. We test hypotheses 2 and 3 by exploring how between-condition variations in ideological extremity and political engagement change the level of out-party animus. Hypothesis 4 suggests that out-party animus in condition 1 (the conventional formulation) should be significantly greater than in condition 6 (moderate partisans who rarely talk about politics) and not significantly different from condition 12 (ideologically extreme partisans who frequently talk about politics).

Finally, we included a thirteenth randomly assigned condition in which respondents did not complete any affective polarization measures but rather reported their perceptions of partisans ( $N = 550$ ). We asked participants in this condition to categorize the ideology and frequency of political discussion of the "typical" Republican and Democrat. To test hypothesis 1 regarding misperceptions of the out-party, we can compare the frequencies reported in this condition to the actual distributions from wave 3.

7. Members of the Bovitz panel participate in multiple surveys over time and receive compensation for their participation. This makes our data similar to data from firms such as YouGov or Lucid. Data from Bovitz have been used in numerous published studies in the social sciences (e.g., Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2014; Druckman and Levendusky 2019; Howat 2021). Also, our interest ultimately lies in comparisons across experimental conditions and thus the use of a nonprobability sample is not problematic (Druckman and Kam 2011). That said, samples such as ours tend to include those with more political interest (Malhotra and Krosnick 2007), which may lead to an overstatement of affective polarization. Given our argument, this sample feature works against our expectations, thereby providing a conservative test of our theory.

8. In a pretest (see app. sec. SI2), we verified that subjects perceived "rarely," "occasionally," and "frequently" to correspond to significantly different frequencies of political discussion.

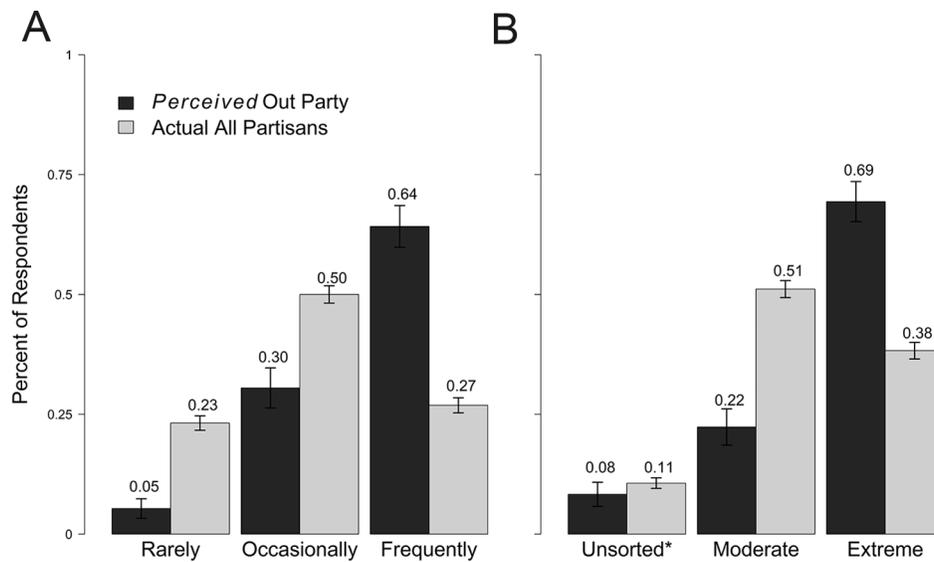


Figure 1. Perceptions of out-party compared to actual partisans. A, Political discussion; B, political positions. “Unsorted” refers to liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats. Perceptions are from condition 13 participants only, while actual partisan values are estimated using all wave 3 participants.

## RESULTS

### Do individuals overestimate the extremity and political engagement of the other party?

Our first hypothesis suggests that individuals systematically misperceive the other party by overestimating the extremity and political engagement of the modal partisan. We formally test hypothesis 1 with condition 13, where participants reported their perceptions of the ideological extremity and frequency of political discussion for the “typical” member of the out-party. We compare these perceptions (from condition 13) to our third-wave data, which measured the actual pattern of these behaviors among respondents. We report the results in figure 1.<sup>9</sup> Given our focus on perceptions of out-party members, we restrict our analysis to partisans (including independent leaners), consistent with other studies of affective polarization (i.e., Druckman and Levendusky 2019).

Even though ideological polarization has substantially increased over time (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Gramlich 2016), individuals still overestimate its extent. Specifically, we find respondents estimated that 69% of partisans are ideologically extreme or sorted (i.e., are liberal Democrats or conservative Republicans), but in reality, only 38% of the respondents in our study were actually sorted; this means, participants overestimate that quantity by 78%. Likewise, participants underestimate the percentage of moderates by 77% (estimating that 22% of partisans are moderates, when in reality it is 51%).

While these results, in some sense, echo prior work on false issue polarization (e.g., Levendusky and Malhotra 2016b), our results concerning political engagement are entirely novel and just as striking.<sup>10</sup> Participants, we show, overestimate the fraction of out-partisans who frequently discuss politics by more than a factor of 2 (they assume that 64% of out-partisans frequently talk about politics, when the reality is closer to 27%), and they underestimate the fraction who rarely talk about politics by a factor of nearly 5 (they assume it is 5%, when it is 23%). When the categories are combined, we see that 49% of respondents perceive that out-partisans are both extreme and frequently discuss politics; this is in sharp contrast to the actual distribution, which shows that 14% of partisans behave that way. Put slightly differently, partisans overestimate the frequency of out-party partisans who are ideologues and frequently discuss politics by a factor of 3.5.

These results are in line with our first hypothesis: people systematically overestimate the ideological extremity and political engagement of opposing partisans. We next turn to the consequences of these misperceptions for affective polarization as well as an exploration of how correction could reduce it.

### Partisan bias and perceptions of the out-party

To examine whether perceptions of out-partisans as ideological and engaged generate animus, we now turn to an analysis of our experimental conditions, in which participants

9. In fig. 1, we present all partisans, even though our discussion focuses on out-party perceptions. In app. sec. SI3, we show that this same relationship holds separately for each party.

10. In addition to research on false issue polarization, there is other work on misperceptions about the demographics and preferences of the opposing party (Ahler and Sood 2018; also see Lees and Cikara 2020; Peterson and Kagalwala 2021).

were randomly assigned to one of 12 different descriptions of partisans (table 1). In appendix section SI4, we provide details on a manipulation check that shows respondents were thinking of voters (rather than elites) as we intended. We also show, in appendix section SI4, that the level of affective polarization found in condition 1—where we use the conventional versions of the items from the previous literature—replicates the results found in earlier studies.<sup>11</sup>

To consider animus toward the out-party, we scale and aggregate the four different rating types (thermometer, trait ratings, trust ratings, and social distance measures) into one measure of out-party affect ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ).<sup>12</sup> While this aggregate approach is consistent with previous studies on partisan animosity (e.g., Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro 2017), we present the results for each of our measures individually in appendix section SI7; these measure-specific results are substantively the same as the results we present below. This combined aggregate measure is scaled 0–1, with higher values indicating more positive affect for the out-party and lower values indicating greater animosity toward the out-party. To test hypotheses 2 and 3, we regress the aggregate measure of out-party affect on the engagement and ideology treatments. This allows us to see whether variations in perceived engagement and ideology of the out-party drive affective polarization. We present the results in table 2.

Consistent with hypothesis 2, we see that the ideological extremity of the target affects out-party affect; ratings for moderate out-partisans are higher than for liberal/conservative out-partisans by 3% of our scale. Further, there is no significant difference between the control (no ideological information) and the ideologically sorted conditions (liberal Democrat/conservative Republican), which suggests that ideological partisans are seen as the default, as suggested by hypothesis 4 (see app. sec. SI9 for more on condition-by-condition comparisons).

Our most striking results come from considering how the target’s level of political engagement affects out-party animus (hypothesis 3). As predicted, we see that relative to receiving no information about a partisan’s level of political engagement, participants rate the out-party significantly more positively when they are told that the out-partisan “rarely” or “occasionally” talks about politics. The effect is especially large in the

Table 2. Effect of Treatments on Out-Party Affect

	Coefficient	SE
Discussion condition:		
Rarely	.101	.009
Occasionally	.020	.009
Frequently	−.024	.009
Ideology condition:		
Moderate	.030	.008
Extreme (Sorted)	−.012	.008
Constant	.416	.007
<i>N</i>		2,887
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>		.072

Note. Ordinary least squares regression; dependent variable is scaled 0–1, with higher values indicating more positive affect. The analysis excludes pure independents (see app. sec. SI5 for patterns among pure independents). The excluded category for each of our factors is “no additional descriptor.” A model with controls is shown in app. sec. SI8.

“rarely” condition—this is the single largest shift in our data, representing a 25% decrease in animosity relative to the baseline category. To make this more concrete, for the feeling thermometer item, we find the “rarely” condition increases ratings by 19 degrees relative to the baseline condition (no information about political discussion)—an extremely large shift. Those who “frequently” discuss politics are rated more negatively, although this effect is more modest, representing only about a 5% relative increase in animosity.<sup>13</sup>

Our results suggest that subjects assume—in the absence of additional information—that those described by the baseline questions talk about politics quite frequently (consistent with hypothesis 4). Overall, then, our findings point to the idea that animosity toward the out-party is not simply a function of partisan identity: partisans who are ideologically moderate or who engage in little political discussion are rated much more positively than others. And the differences, particularly regarding engagement, are large.

Our final hypothesis (hypothesis 4) suggests that prior work overstates affective polarization because respondents presume they are rating ideological and politically engaged partisans when they receive the conventional items. Our results above offer initial evidence of this. Here we offer a direct test by comparing the three key conditions identified by hypothesis 4: the conventional nondescriptor condition (1) against the moderate, rarely discuss condition (6) and the extreme, frequently

11. As mentioned, we exclude pure independents in our analyses. Even so, in app. sec. SI5, we analyze the results for pure independents and find that their results closely mirror those we report below.

12. Some scholars measure affective polarization by taking the difference between out-party and in-party ratings (Lelkes and Westwood 2017). Our results are robust to using this approach except the “frequently” condition also lowers affective polarization compared to the no discussion descriptor condition (see app. sec. SI6). To understand why this is, see n. 13.

13. We show that the same pattern of effects holds for in-party ratings as well (see app. sec. SI10). This suggests that—consistent with Klar et al. (2018)—many people simply dislike anyone who discusses politics.

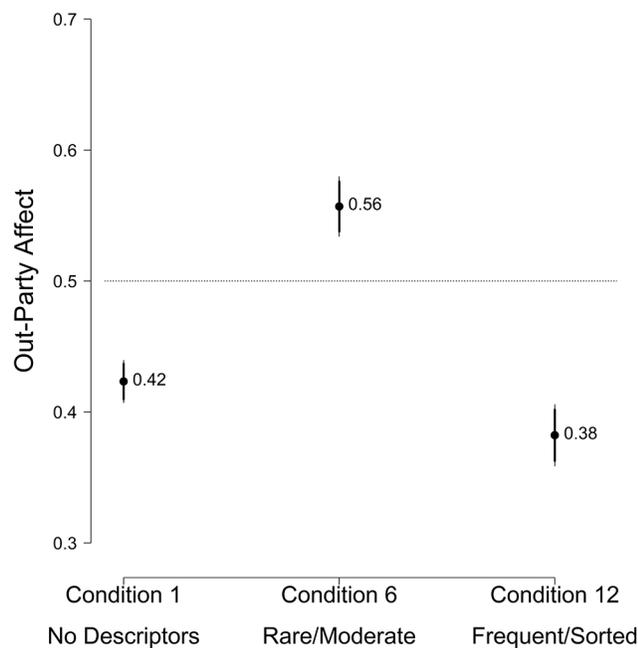


Figure 2. Comparison across three conditions. Y-axis represents out-party aggregate measure ranging from 0 (entirely negative affect, e.g., animosity) to 1 (entirely positive affect). Results based on ordinary least squares model that considers each condition separately (see app. sec. S111).

discuss condition (12). We present the results of our comparison in figure 2 (full coefficient estimates in app. sec. S111).

As predicted, ratings in condition 6 toward moderate out-partisans who rarely talk about politics are significantly higher (i.e., less animus) than in condition 1, where no additional descriptors are provided ( $p < .001$ ). Moving beyond the statistical significance of the effects, in appendix section S112 we compare the effect sizes to preestablished benchmarks, which demonstrate that the changes in measured out-party animosity due to changes in the descriptions of the out-party are also large and substantively important. Clearly, when asked the conventional question, people are not imaging moderates who rarely talk about politics.<sup>14</sup>

While conditions 1 and 12—the extremist frequently discuss condition—significantly differ ( $p < .01$ ), the difference is minimal, amounting to just .04 units on the 0–1 scale. Thus, while not strictly statistically confirming that aspect of hypothesis 4, the small substantive difference (esp. relative to the difference between conditions 1 and 6) suggests that the conventional measures of affective polarization reveal attitudes toward rather extreme and politically engaged out-partisans. To assume they measure attitudes toward the modal out-

partisan would be a mistake—respondents are envisioning a prototype that does not match reality.

To consider how these patterns translate into evaluations of affective polarization even more directly, we focus on thermometer ratings alone. As we show in figure 1, nearly half of our respondents believe out-partisans are extreme and frequently discuss politics. Then, when asked to evaluate these types of out-partisans, our participants place them at just 32 degrees on the feeling thermometer scale. Yet, in reality, the modal partisan is a moderate partisan who only occasionally discusses politics. When our participants rate these types of out-partisans, the average feeling thermometer rating is 47 degrees—nearly 50% higher. When it comes to moderates who rarely discuss politics, the average out-party thermometer rating is now 56 degrees—more positive than negative. When assessing the actual modal out-party member, partisans are more indifferent than hostile—changes in the descriptions of the partisans lead to substantively different conclusions about the state of political animosity in America.

## DISCUSSION

Our results suggest a rather different view of affective polarization in the mass public than we would get from the conventional measures. The conventional measures, we demonstrate, capture people's ratings of the most extreme and the most engaged partisans. Certainly, these ratings are appropriate if the goal is to estimate how people feel about these specific types of partisans, but the ratings are less informative if the goal is to estimate how people feel about the typical partisan. Our results, then, raise two questions. The first is about the implications of misperceptions for interpersonal interactions; the second turns to the possibility of a correction.

### Interpersonal interactions

If people rely on stereotypes of the most extreme and engaged partisans when making evaluations during surveys, could similar misperceptions be guiding their interpersonal interactions as well? Research suggests that is less likely to be the case. First, partisanship is a relatively low salience identity for most Americans (Druckman and Levendusky 2019; see also the discussion in Hersh 2020). Second, interpersonal interactions likely involve much more contextual information than surveys; indeed, political discussions often occur within the confines of nonpolitical discussions (Eveland and Hutchens 2013). When subjects find themselves in research studies where they are asked to evaluate an abstract entity, they draw on media stereotypes. But in interpersonal interactions, people have actual behavioral political information about others—they do not have to assume whether a partisan frequently discusses politics, because they have actual evidence whether that

14. Condition 6 is also significantly higher than condition 12 ( $p < .001$ ).

partisan does or does not (Eveland and Hutchens 2013).<sup>15</sup> While learning someone is from the other party early in a typical interaction may halt the conversation, in most cases, by the time partisanship comes up it is likely dwarfed by other information.

### Possibility of a correction?

In highlighting the role of misperceptions, our results suggest a correction that could potentially address misperceptions. If people dislike extreme partisans who frequently discuss politics, then clarifying the characteristics of the modal partisan is an important step in addressing animus. It is, of course, possible that some people may ignore the correction and instead focus their evaluations on “the worst” partisans (even if those partisans constitute a minority). Yet there is reason to believe that people will be responsive. Partisans, research shows, are responsive to corrections about the demographic makeup of the out-party (Ahler and Sood 2018) and corrections about the extent of the out-party’s disagreement with their positions (Lees and Cikara 2020). Indeed, although some people harbor unconditional animus toward any member of the out-party, most people seem to be able to distinguish between different types of partisans (Kingzette 2021).

There are at least two ways of doing this. First, as we suggest above, we could encourage people to draw more on their actual interpersonal experiences. While social networks tend to be homogeneous with respect to partisanship, most people have friends, family, and neighbors from the other party (Pew Research Center 2017). If encouraged to think about these individuals—who come closer to the modal partisan—then individuals will likely feel less animus toward the opposition.

Second, although our focus is on survey measurement, scholars could also work with journalists to offer more representative or at least more varied portraits of partisan interactions. The idea is to induce individuals to view the reality that the typical out-partisan is not as distinctive as what first comes to mind. Active interventions such as these seem feasible and are important given the obvious persistence of available, but inaccurate, information.<sup>16</sup> An important next step is to assess whether such corrections actually mitigate animus (or is more needed, such as if people overweight the impact of extreme ideologues).

15. It is possible that some people would turn to stereotypes even during interpersonal interactions and assume the worst even of people who do not appear extreme or highly engaged. Extrapolating research on political interactions would suggest that the people who are most likely to do so are themselves highly engaged (Eveland and Hutchens 2013).

16. A related approach would be to work with social media companies to implement nudges about politics when it comes to highly politicized news content that may distort perceptions (e.g., Pennycook et al. 2021).

### CONCLUSION

What is the scope of affective polarization in America? We argue that when people are asked to evaluate the other party, they draw on stereotypes and bring to mind an unrepresentative member of it: an ideologue who is extremely engaged in politics. As a result, they express considerable animus toward the other party. But when asked to evaluate someone who actually looks like the modal member of the other party—someone more moderate, who is largely indifferent to politics—animus falls markedly. Americans dislike the ideologues from the other party who appear on television and those that they see on social media, but they are more indifferent than hateful of the modal member of the other party. Affective polarization is, in part, driven by inaccurate stereotypes individuals hold about those from the other side of the political aisle. More broadly, this measurement issue also highlights questions of overtime comparability in levels of affective polarization. If traditional measures of affective polarization are capturing the images of out-partisans that are at the top of people’s minds, then overtime shifts in partisan animus may be as much a reflection of shifts in media coverage of politics (and the emergence of social media) as changes in the level of animosity toward the other side.

Our results show that the frequency of political discussion holds particular importance for how individuals’ rate those from the other party: people have much less animosity toward an out-party member who rarely discusses politics than one who frequently discusses politics. While people also have less animosity toward moderate, rather than ideologically sorted, out-partisans, these effects of ideology are smaller than those of discussion. This adds a twist to thinking about intergroup relations: although ideological differences do fuel animus, thinking about political discussion may even further exacerbate antipathy toward the out-party.<sup>17</sup> This likely stems from the frequency of discussion being easier to visualize or discussion tendencies being more bothersome. The patterns we observe are consistent with evidence that many Americans want to avoid most political discussions (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2001; Klar et al. 2018).

One could critique our approach on two levels. First, ordinary citizens can do little to correct media stereotypes, and they invariably will fall back to generalizations that come to mind, so perhaps our findings are for naught. We disagree sharply with this sort of assessment. As we noted above, individuals can—and do—interact, at least somewhat, with those

17. An intriguing extension would be to assess whether asking respondents about particular issue positions would have a stronger effect than what we find for ideology (e.g., Orr and Huber 2020).

from the other party (Sinclair 2012). Even in an era of polarization, more than 80% of Americans have at least some friendships that cross party lines (Pew Research Center 2017). Scholarly work should highlight that part of the measured partisan animus comes from the fact that citizens use stereotypes—rather than these interpersonal interactions—to evaluate those from the other party (see also the discussion in Klein 2020).

Second, we recognize our findings do little to change how individuals feel toward political elites (see n. 1) and, as a result, are unlikely to reduce high levels of party-line voting (Abramowitz and Webster 2016). But this underscores an important dimension to debates over affective polarization: attitudes toward elites and voters are related but distinct (Druckman and Levendusky 2019), and arguments about “affective polarization” need to clearly specify their scope conditions. To this end, as we noted above, our findings speak to the apolitical consequences of affective polarization, and we save these political ramifications for future studies.

Although voting is important, the social consequences of affective polarization are also profound. Scholars have documented a number of ways in which affective polarization has changed our personal lives beyond politics: it shapes where we want to live, work, and shop (Iyengar et al. 2019). For example, individuals do not want to talk to those from the other party because they fear that they have nothing in common with them (Pew Research Center 2019b). But this is based, in part, on misperceptions. If people realized that the other party is more similar to them than they believed, they would likely be more willing to interact with them, and in turn, this might ameliorate interparty animus even more. This could also affect their willingness to compromise with those from the other party, which would in turn perhaps even increase elite support for bipartisanship and consensus (Harbridge and Malhotra 2011). While testing these possibilities is beyond the scope of our argument here, our results suggest that correcting these misperceptions would ameliorate the broader sociological consequences of affective polarization.

Even more broadly, our results highlight a theoretical irony. The out-partisans that people dislike—those who are deeply politically engaged and ideological—are the “ideal voters” in many political science theories. Dating back to Converse’s (1964) pioneering work, scholars have searched for ideological consistency because of its crucial role to understanding politics and for holding politicians to account for their decisions. Political interest and engagement are no less important, as it is the key to joining what Prior (2019, 1–2) calls the “self-governing class”: the part of the public who decides how the country is run. Our results suggest that these idealized citizens provoke animosity and hence fuel affective polarization. Not only that,

these citizens often are the ones harboring the most animosity. In the control group, respondents who said they were very or extremely interested in politics (in wave 1) gave lower out-party ratings (in wave 2) than all other respondents.<sup>18</sup>

This underscores a point Almond and Verba (1965) made more than 50 years ago—democracy requires a mix of different types of citizens, and an excess of engaged and informed individuals is just as bad as too many apathetic ones. Indeed, as our results highlight, reminding citizens that most of their peers are not “idealized” citizens would help improve our democracy by lowering levels of partisan animosity.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors thank Talbot Andrews, Jennifer Lin, and Natalie Sands for research assistance and Morris Fiorina, Jacob Rothschild, and Sean Westwood for helpful comments.

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