

FEAR AND LOATHING IN AMERICAN POLITICS: A REVIEW ESSAY¹

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MIEDO Y AVERSIÓN EN LA POLÍTICA ESTADOUNIDENSE: UNA REVISIÓN TEÓRICA

Como citar este artículo / Citation: Iyengar, Shanto (2024). Fear and Loathing in american politics: A review essay. *Revista Internacional de Sociología* 82 (4): e265. <https://doi.org/10.3989/ris.2024.82.4.1303>

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Received: 30/11/2023. Accepted: 16/05/2024.

Published: 04/02/2025

ABSTRACT

President Donald Trump's standing in the polls actually improved in the immediate aftermath of multiple criminal indictments. This development illustrates the phenomenon of affective polarization: intense conflict and ill will across the party divide, and intransigent political preferences that are entirely unresponsive to strong evidence. In this paper, I will provide a brief review of the evidence documenting the intensified state of affective polarization in America, identify possible underlying causes of this phenomenon, and offer some critical commentary on efforts to develop "treatments" that can ameliorate out-party animus.

KEYWORDS

affective polarization; depolarization; emotions; partisan identity; discrimination.

RESUMEN

La posición del presidente Donald Trump en las encuestas mejoró inmediatamente después de sus múltiples acusaciones penales. Esta evolución ilustra el fenómeno de la polarización afectiva: intenso conflicto y animadversión entre los partidos, y preferencias políticas intransigentes que no responden en absoluto a pruebas sólidas. En este artículo se presenta un breve repaso de las pruebas que documentan la intensificación de la polarización afectiva en Estados Unidos, se identificarán las posibles causas subyacentes de este fenómeno y se ofrecerán algunos comentarios críticos sobre los esfuerzos por desarrollar "tratamientos" que puedan mejorar la animadversión hacia el exterior.

PALABRAS CLAVE

polarización afectiva; despolarización; emociones; identidad partidista; discriminación.

INTRODUCTION: DEFINING POLARIZATION

Political scientists have typically conceptualized party polarization in terms of the question of ideological divergence. Are the platforms of the major political parties and the preferences of their followers at opposing ideological extremes? By this standard, there is clear evidence that elected officials in the U.S. leaders have become more extremist over time (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006). Partisan voters, however, have not followed suit; the median partisan has remained centrist on most issues despite the gravitation of party elites to the ideological extremes (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2008)².

Over the past two decades, research on Ideological disagreement has given way to an alternative approach that defines mass polarization as the extent to which partisans view each other as a stigmatized out group. In the U.S., the two-party system means that voters can only affiliate with the “Democrat” group or the “Republican” group (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002; Huddy, Mason, and Aaroe, 2015). Once people adopt a partisan identity, they instinctively categorize the world into a favored in group (their own party), and a disliked out group (the opposing party; see Tajfel and Turner 1979). The more central the political party to the individual’s personal identity, the stronger the degree of out-party animus (Gaertner et al. 1993).

Placed in cross-national context, partisanship is a relatively salient and powerful identify in the U.S. for several reasons. First, it develops at a young age, and rarely changes over the life cycle, notwithstanding significant shifts in personal circumstances (Sears 1975). Second, election campaigns are more frequent and last for many months (or even years). The increased duration of campaigns means that Americans are constantly reminded of their partisan identity. As I describe below, in recent decades the sense of partisan identity has elicited especially harsh evaluations of political opponents (for a review of the now extensive literature on affective polarization, see Iyengar et al. 2019; Druckman, Green, and Iyengar 2023).

Affective Polarization: the U.S. Evidence

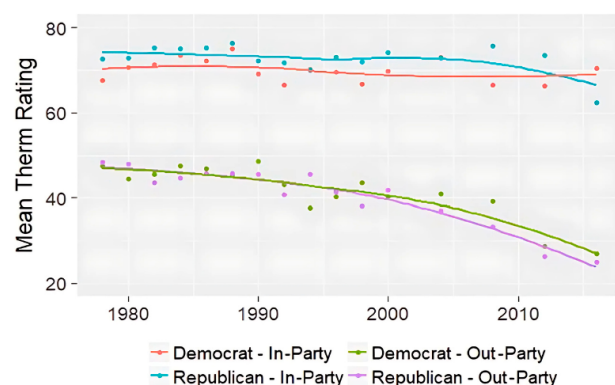
The evidence derives primarily from national surveys, but also encompasses implicit markers of out-party prejudice, indicators of social distancing, and behavioral indicators of discrimination against political opponents.

2 There is ongoing debate over the extent of the ideological disconnect between party leaders and followers. Some scholars argue that the number of ideological moderates has fallen leading to increased divergence in public opinion (see, for instance, Abramowitz and Saunders 2008).

Self-Reported Partisan Affect

Survey data on respondents’ feelings toward the parties and their followers are the most widely used measure of affective polarization. The most widely utilized question is the “feeling thermometer” in which respondents rate the two parties or “Democrats” and “Republicans” on a scale ranging from (0) indicating coldness to (100) indicating warmth. The over time movement in the thermometer scores reveal substantially increased affective polarization. As shown in Figure 1, which plots the in-party and out-party thermometer scores in the ANES time series, the discrepancy between the in and out party thermometer scores steadily increased from around 25 degrees in 1978 to around 45 in 2020. Almost all the increase in affective polarization has occurred because of increased out-party animus. In-group sentiment has remained favorable and stable across the entire period.

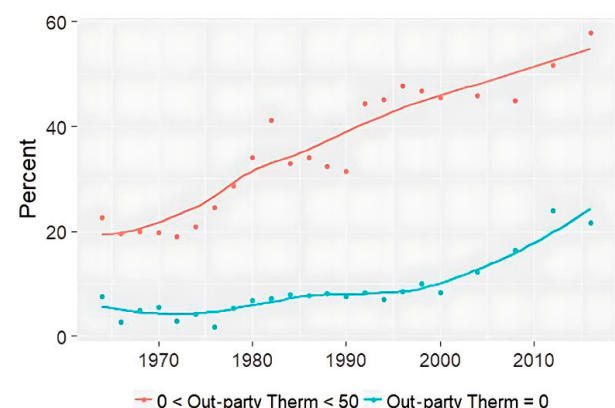
Figure 1.
ANES Party Feeling Thermometers (1976-2020)



Source: ANES Surveys.

Stronger hostility for the out party is a recent, but rapidly escalating trend. Figure 2 shows that the share of partisans expressing intense negativity for the out party (ratings of 0) remained quite small until 2000. Post-2000, the size of this group increased substantially -- from 8 percent in 2000 to 21 percent in 2016.

Figure 2.
Out-Party Animus in Feeling Thermometer Scores



Source: ANES Surveys

The feeling thermometer data show clearly that the party divide elicits affective polarization. But how does partisanship compare with other salient cleavages as a source of out-group animus? Fortunately, feeling thermometer data apply to multiple cleavages in the U.S. making it possible to compare out-group animus based on party with out-group evaluations based on race, religion, region or other relevant groupings. These comparisons reveal that party is easily the most affectively laden group divide in the U.S; religious, racial, and economic out groups all elicit much warmer thermometer scores than the out party (see Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Iyengar and Krupenkin 2018).

Implicit Measures

Psychologists have developed an array of implicit or sub-conscious measures of group prejudice on the grounds that these measures provide a more valid comparison of the bases for prejudice because they are much harder to manipulate than explicit self-reports and less susceptible to impression management or political correctness (Boysen, Vogel, and Madon 2006). Iyengar and Westwood (2015) developed a Party Implicit Association Test to document unconscious partisan bias. Their results showed considerable implicit bias; more than two-thirds of Democrats and Republicans showed bias in favor of their party.

To place the results from their party IAT in appropriate context, Iyengar and Westwood also administered the race IAT to their respondents. Surprisingly, implicit partisan bias exceeded implicit racial bias. The difference in the D-score -- the operational indicator of implicit bias -- amounted to .50 for the party divide, while the corresponding difference in implicit racial bias across the racial divide was only .18 (see also Theodoridis 2017 for an application of implicit measures to the study of partisanship).

Indicators of Social Distance

Another indirect measure of out-group animus is social distance, the extent to which individuals feel comfortable interacting with out-group members in a variety of different settings. The expectation is that if partisans take their political affiliation seriously, they should be averse to entering into close inter-personal relations with opponents. In the early 1960s, the percentage of partisans expressing concern over the prospect of their son or daughter marrying someone from the opposition party was in the single digits, but some forty-five years later, it had risen to more than twenty-five percent (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, 2012). Clearly, the level of out-party animus has exceeded the threshold required to motivate social distancing.

Of course, one may question social distance evidence based on hypothetical social interactions across the party divide. More compelling evidence of social distancing comes from online dating sites

and other available sources of “big data” including national voter files indicating that the party cue does in fact influence the decision to enter into inter-personal relations. In a longitudinal analysis spanning 1965-2015, Iyengar, Konitzer, and Tedin (2018) found that spousal agreement moved from 73 to 82 percent, while disagreement fell from 13 to 6 percent. Since the 1965 sample of spouses had been married for decades, they had many opportunities to persuade their partner, thus inflating the observed level of agreement. When the researchers limited the focus to younger couples, they found a more impressive shift in spousal agreement; among recently married couples in 1973, spousal agreement registered at 54.3%. For the comparable group of recently married couples in the 2014 national voter file, spousal partisan agreement reached 73.9%.

Online dating sites are a rich source of data on the politics underlying inter-personal attraction. Huber and Malhotra (2017) leverage data from a major dating website where they gained access to both the daters’ personal profiles as well as their messaging behavior. They found that partisan agreement increases the likelihood of a dyad exchanging messages by 10 percent. Political leanings proved just as relevant as social status in the process of selecting a romantic partner.

The fact that individuals date and marry co-partisans does not necessarily mean that politics was the basis for their choice. Agreement on partisanship may be a byproduct of spousal selection on some other attribute (perhaps economic status) correlated with partisan identity. While some researchers argue that partisan agreement among couples is in fact “induced” or accidental (see, for instance, Kloststad et al. 2013), others provide evidence in favor of an active selection model in which the political affiliation of the prospective partner is the point of attraction. Huber and Malhotra (2017), for instance, show that ideology and partisanship both predict reciprocal online messaging on dating sites even after controlling for alternative bases of spousal attraction.

Behavioral Markers of Discrimination

Given the inherent limits of survey methodology, scholars have turned to behavioral manifestations of partisan animus. Iyengar, Westwood, and others (Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Broockman, Kalla, and Westwood 2023) have implemented trust and dictator games as a platform for documenting out-group discrimination. In the trust game, the researcher gives Player 1 an initial endowment (\$10) and instructs her that she is free to give all, some, or none to Player 2 (said to be a member of a designated group). Player 1 is further informed that any amount she donates to Player 2 will be tripled by the researcher, and that Player 2 is free (although under no obligation to do so) to transfer an amount back to Player 1. The dictator

game is an abbreviated version of the trust game in which there is no opportunity for Player 2 to return funds to Player 1 and where the researcher does not add to the funds transferred. Since there is no opportunity for Player 1 to observe the strategy of Player 2, variation in the amount Player 1 allocates to the different categories represented by Player 2 in the dictator game is attributable only to group dislike and prejudice.

The trust and dictator games provide a meaningful test of out-group bias, for they assess the extent to which participants are willing to donate money they would otherwise keep to co-partisans while simultaneously withholding money from opposing partisans. For both the trust game and the dictator game, partisan bias emerges as the difference between the amount allocated to co-partisans and opposing partisans. The results generally show the expected pattern; co-partisans consistently receive a bonus while opposing partisans are subject to a financial penalty (Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Broockman, Kalla, and Westwood 2023). As in the case of implicit bias, the effects of party affiliation on donations exceeded the effects of ethnicity.

Other studies use more naturalistic indicators of out-party discrimination. Using an audit design, Gift and Gift (2015) mailed out resumes including information about a job applicant's partisan affiliation in a heavily Democratic area and a heavily Republican area. They found that in the Democratic county, Democratic resumes were 2.4 percentage points more likely to receive a callback than Republican resumes; the corresponding partisan preference for Republican resumes in the Republican county was 5.6 percentage points. In a related study (McConnell et al. 2018), the researchers hired workers to complete an online editing task and subtly signaled the partisan identification of the employer. The results showed evidence of in-group favoritism as opposed to out-group prejudice.

In summary, evidence from self-reported feelings toward the parties, sub-conscious partisan prejudice, increased social distance based on political affiliation, and multiple instances of behavioral discrimination against opposing partisans all converge on the finding of intensified party polarization in the U.S. I turn next to consider the possible explanations for the dramatic increase in affective polarization.

SOCIETAL CONDITIONS THAT PROMOTE POLARIZATION

The period over which mass polarization has intensified (1980-today) coincides with major changes in American society including changes in the media environment that facilitate selective exposure to news, increased social homophily, and partisan sorting or greater differentiation between Democrats and Republicans. In addition to independently inducing

hostility toward opponents, each of these factors reinforces the others, further contributing to the rise of affective polarization.

First, the revolution in information technology has empowered consumers to encounter media sources on their own terms. The availability of twenty-four hour cable news channels provided partisans with their first real opportunity to obtain news from like-minded sources (Fox News first for Republicans, and MSNBC later for Democrats). In a break with the dominant paradigm of non-partisan journalism, a growing number of outlets, motivated in part by the commercial success of Fox News, began to offer biased reporting. Many of these partisan outlets depict the opposing party in harsh terms and focus disproportionately on out-party scandals (real or imagined). The creation of vast online social networks permitted extensive recirculation of news reports, even to those not particularly motivated to seek out news. Several scholars have thus singled out the technologically enhanced media environment and partisans' ability to encounter "friendly" information providers as an especially influential agent of polarization (see, for instance, Sunstein 2017).

While there are good reasons to believe that the new media environment has contributed to the growth in partisan animus, by facilitating access to partisan news and commentary, it is possible that enhanced consumer choice also sets in motion processes that weaken polarization. As media platforms have multiplied, consumers gain access not only to more news providers, but also to entertainment providers. The availability of entertainment programming on demand enables consumers to withdraw from the political arena entirely (Prior 2007). Thus, the net impact of the increased empowerment of consumers is unclear.

In fact, despite the myriad changes in the media environment, the evidence to date demonstrating that news consumption exacerbates polarization is less than unequivocal. Early studies of online browsing behavior confirmed the tendency of partisans to self-select into distinct audiences (see, for instance, Iyengar and Hahn 2009) and that selective exposure contributed to polarization (e.g. Stroud 2010). More recent interventions that manipulate participants' exposure to social media content, however, find only weak to negligible effects of social media usage on out-party animus (see, for instance, Nyhan et al. 2023; Alcott et al. 2020; Levy 2021).

Large-scale observational studies also record mixed findings. In the first large-scale analysis of Americans' web browsing behavior (conducted in 2008), Gentzkow and Shapiro (2011) found that online audiences were only slightly more segregated than audiences for network or cable news. More recent studies, however -- also based on large-scale tracking of online browsing behavior -- suggest that the segregation of news audiences is increasing. A

2013 study showed that although most people relied on ideologically diverse online sources such as web aggregators (Flaxman, Goel, and Rao 2016; also see Peterson, Goel, and Iyengar 2019), audience segregation tended to increase among individuals who used search engines to locate news stories and among social media users who encountered links in their news feed. Importantly, when researchers limit the focus to online sites dedicated to news coverage, they find the expected pattern of audience segregation based on partisanship (Tyler, Grimmer, and Iyengar 2022).

A second societal-level change associated with the growth of out-party animus in the U.S. is the phenomenon of sorting. Over time, the percentage of “sorted” partisans, i.e., partisans who identify with the party most closely reflecting their ideology, has steadily increased (Levendusky 2009). When most Democrats [Republicans] are also liberals [conservatives], they are less likely to encounter conflicting political ideas and identities (Roccas and Brewer 2002) and are more likely to see non-identifiers as socially distant. As partisan and ideological identities have come into alignment, other salient social identities, including race and religion, have also converged with partisanship. Democrats are increasingly the party of women, non-whites, professionals, and residents of urban areas, while Republican voters are disproportionately older white men, evangelical Christians and residents of rural areas. This decline of crosscutting identities is at the root of affective polarization according to Mason (2015, 2018). She has shown that those with consistent partisan and ideological identities became more hostile towards the out party without necessarily changing their ideological positions, and those that have aligned religious, racial, and partisan identities react more emotionally to information that threatens their partisan identities or issue stances. In essence, sorting has made it much easier for partisans to make generalized inferences about the opposing side, even if those inferences are inaccurate.

A third potential cause of strengthened polarization is social homophily. I have already referred to strengthened processes of socialization by which families come to agree on their partisan loyalties. Family agreement creates an inter-personal echo chamber that facilitates polarization. When family members identify with the same party, they also express more extreme positions on the issues and harbor hostile views toward their opponents; partisan agreement within the family strengthens polarization (see Iyengar, Konitzer, and Tedin 2018).

Given the importance of family socialization to the development of partisan attitudes, the rate at which any given society undergoes polarization will be conditional on the extent to which partisans grow up in homogeneous environments. Recent simulations by Klostad, McDermott, and Hatemi (2013) suggest

that spousal agreement rapidly induces ideological polarization, reaching a stable equilibrium by the 11th generation, but with most of the increased polarization occurring as early as the fifth generation (Klostad, McDermott, and Hatemi 2013, pp. 530–531). We would similarly expect generations to move increasingly apart on their feelings toward the opposing party to the extent family members share these sentiments.

CONCLUSION

The literature on affective polarization has grown exponentially over the past decade. The elevated level of out-party animus has set off alarm bells within the academy and at civic organizations. The pressing concern appears to be that partisan animus motivates anti-social behaviors such as denying the results of legitimate elections, the use (or at least approval) of violence as a means of advancing partisan interests, and the strategic spreading of misinformation. The fear is that polarization and such related changes in behavioral norms constitute democratic “backsliding” which now presents an imminent threat to democratic institutions and norms.

Against this backdrop of a “crisis for democracy” (Voelkel et al. 2023), it is not surprising that major foundations with pro-democracy agendas have encouraged and funded (in the millions of dollars) the development of “treatments” for polarization. In the first large-scale assessment of potential treatments, Voelkel et al. (2023) tested the effects of twenty-five interventions designed to reduce out-party animus and anti-democratic predispositions. These interventions all represented brief psychological nudges designed to alter the beliefs and attitudes of partisans such as providing partisans with corrective information concerning the composition of the opposing party, the reasons underlying opposing partisans’ preferences, or highlighting the anti-democratic consequences of polarization. In fact, many of these interventions did “work” as intended -- they significantly reduced out-party animus and willingness to express anti-democratic attitudes -- although the long-term persistence of these effects is unknown.

To this writer, the efforts to develop treatments appear shortsighted and premature. For one thing, there is no compelling evidence that out-party animus contributes to the anti-democratic outcomes of concern (see, for instance, Broockman, Kalla, and Westwood 2023; for a review of the evidence, see Druckman, Green, and Iyengar 2023)). For another, researchers have yet to arrive at a clear understanding of the principal causes of affective polarization. This gives rise to scholars tailoring their treatments to the symptoms rather than the underlying causes of polarization. In short, there is an insufficient theoretical or evidentiary basis for designing appropriate treatments. There are also concerns about the real-world applicability of some of the proposed interventions.

Many represent “counterfactuals” in the sense that the stimuli and experiences encountered in the treatment are rarely found in everyday life. For instance, engaging in “deliberation” with fellow citizens, accompanied by presentations from experts on both sides of a policy debate, is not an everyday opportunity for most Americans. I would also call attention to the significant costs that would be required to scale up some of the more “promising” treatments; in even the most optimistic scenarios, the costs are prohibitive.

All told, the intellectual development of the field of affective polarization remains at the descriptive rather than explanatory stages. In the absence of rigorous evidence of causal effects, the prescription of treatments is unlikely to yield long-term benefits and may even yield unanticipated counterproductive effects as occurred with five of the tested depolarizing interventions in the case of support for undemocratic practices (Voelkel et al., 2023). Organizations seeking to promote the development of harmonious inter-party relations will be better served by investing in basic research into the causal mechanisms at play.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author of this article declares that he has no financial, professional or personal conflicts of interest that could have inappropriately influenced this work.

AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Shanto Iyengar: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review.

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