

# Not Homogeneous: Intra-party affect

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# 1 Introduction

Evidence abounds that regardless of ideological distance between partisan groups, the affective and social distance between Democrats and Republicans has expanded dramatically. American National Election Study (ANES) respondents’ Net Partisan Affect—the difference between their in and out party feeling thermometer has steadily increased since the ANES began asking partisans to rate the Democratic and Republican parties on a scale from 0-100; 0 indicating complete coldness toward the party and 100 indicating total warmth . Partisans, it seems, consistently like their party, and increasingly *dislike* the out-party (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, 2012).

Recent developments give us cause, however, to doubt the consistency of in-party warmth. Using ANES time-series data, Iyengar and Krupenkin (2018) finds that the strength of partisans out-party animus has supplanted in-party warmth as a predictor of voting behavior. The 2016 and 2020 election cycles have been characterized by lengthy and contentious primary elections. There has been no shortage of media accounts describing chaos at party conventions [CITE] and increasingly salient divides between populist and establishment wings of both parties [CITE].

Pundit portrayals of in-party dynamics have been supported by scholarship. Using the 2016 Democratic primary Wronski et al. (2018)

Scholars of affective polarization have largely considered partisans to be warm towards their parties and co-partisans Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes (2012); Iyengar and Krupenkin (2018); Abramowitz (2010). While it is true that *mean* partisan affect—as measured by partisan feeling thermometers—has remained high, the standard deviation of this measure

has increased substantially since 2004. By focusing on mean in-party feeling—rather than the distribution of partisan affect—researchers paint too optimistic a view of partisanship

## 2

### 3 Extension to Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes (2012)

By using the difference between respondents' in and out-party feeling thermometers rather than the each individual scores Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes' measure of Net Partisan Affect, runs the risk of obscuring meaningful changes in both out-party and in-party feeling. An increase in NPA can be observed *either* when in-party feeling increases *or* when out-party feeling decreases (and vice-versa). Similarly, partisans could become more hostile towards their political opponents, while NPA remained constant. These unfortunate characteristics of the NPA measure are becoming more problematic as partisans' feelings towards their own party become less consistent. While the authors' assertion that in-party feeling thermometers have, *on average*, stayed quite warm is correct, the variation around that average has increased substantially.

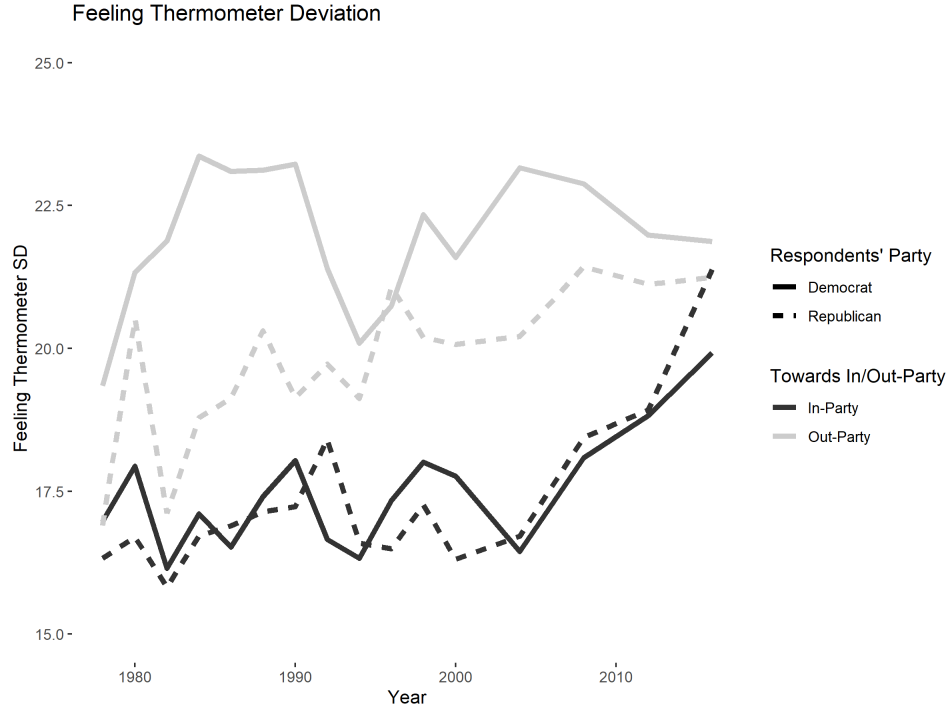


Figure 1: *Standard Deviation of partisans' in party feeling thermometers as reported in the ANES, 1978–2016.* After several decades of minimal change, the variation in in-party feeling thermometer ratings increased substantially between 2004 and 2016. This change is robust to both the Fligner-Killeen and Levene's tests of homogeneity of variance.

Since 2004, partisans' feelings towards their own party have become less cohesive. This trend is less meaningful in regards to out-party feeling thermometers. While the variance of out-party scores is similar in size to that of the in-party, out-party feeling thermometers have historically had high variance, particularly among Democrats.

Factions in both parties have received a great deal of attention in recent years. Groups like the Tea Party and alt-right in the Republican Party and progressives and socialists in the Democratic party have presented substantial challenges to their party's status-quo, often acting in opposition to their party's elites. Recent scholarship too has shown that affective divisions in the parties are both salient and predictive of other traits in partisans (Wronski et al., 2018; Bankert, forthcoming). When the dependent variable in studies of polarization

includes by default feelings towards the in-party, it becomes impossible to study how the effects of in-party feelings themselves have changed over time, or even to determine if they have any effect at all.

I hypothesize that, as partisans have become less consistent in their feelings towards their party there in-party feeling thermometers will be inconsistently related to their feelings towards the out-party. This hypothesis suggests that contemporary conceptions of political polarization, which presuppose that those who feel most warmly toward their co-partisans will on average feel most coldly toward the opposition are subtly incorrect—it is not necessarily that partisans are warm towards their party and cold to the other. They are perfectly capable of being cold towards both groups.

Further, I hypothesize that by controlling for in-party warmth, the modeled effect of cultural and economic attitudes will be more significant. When NPA is used as the dependent variable, the attitudes respondents who feel outside the ideological bounds of their party may cause them to report colder thermometers for both their in-party and out-party, which would not be detected by the NPA measure.

### **3.1 Data & Methodology**

### **3.2 Results**

## **4 Conclusion**

The main lesson of this study to scholars of political polarization should be the importance of clearly conceptualizing what is substantively important about polarization, and

understanding the methodological trade-offs that occur when too much is built in to our dependent-variable models of polarization. The tacit (or explicit) assumption that in-party feelings are necessarily high when out-party feelings are low should be put to rest.

Given that partisans' feelings towards their own party are not necessarily predictive of their feeling toward the opposing party, political scientists should carefully consider what substantive questions they are interested in asking when justifying a choice of dependent variable, recognizing that choice can limit the number of questions which can be asked, and obscure potential insights.

If scholars' interest in affective polarization is truly in the distance between partisans' assessments of themselves and their opponents, a measure like net partisan affective is appropriate. If, however, the researcher's interest is in the absolute political hostility or animus *implied* by that distance, they should simply use partisan's direct feelings towards their enemies. There is no reason for those in the latter camp to run the risk of overcomplicating an analysis or confounding an interesting result by including in their measure a variable unrelated to their interests.

## References

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