

# Distribution of Disdain

*Robert Lytle*

## 1 Introduction

The increasing affective partisan polarization since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century is well documented (Ahler and Sood, 2018; Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, 2012; Iyengar and Krupenkin, 2018; Mason, 2018). In accounts of partisan affect, positive feelings (warmth) towards the in-party are generally assumed to be high (e.g. Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, 2012). In this short article I show that partisans are becoming colder towards their parties (as identified by Klar, Krupnikov and Ryan, 2018), and that this decline is accompanied by an increasingly heterogeneous distribution of in-party affect.

## 2 Data

The data from this study were taken from the American National Election Study Cumulative Data File<sup>1</sup>. All data and replication materials will be made available on GitHub. Following (Klar and Krupnikov, 2016), the data used here *include* partisan leaning independents as members of the party towards which they lean. Versions of these figures which exclude leaners will be made available both in the appendix and on GitHub. Importantly, the topline finding is robust regardless of who is considered a partisan: **An increasing**

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://electionstudies.org/data-center/anes-time-series-cumulative-data-file/>

number of Democrats and Republicans, voters and nonvoters, and partisans and non-partisans are lukewarm or cold—not just towards an out-party but towards both major parties.

### 3 Descriptives

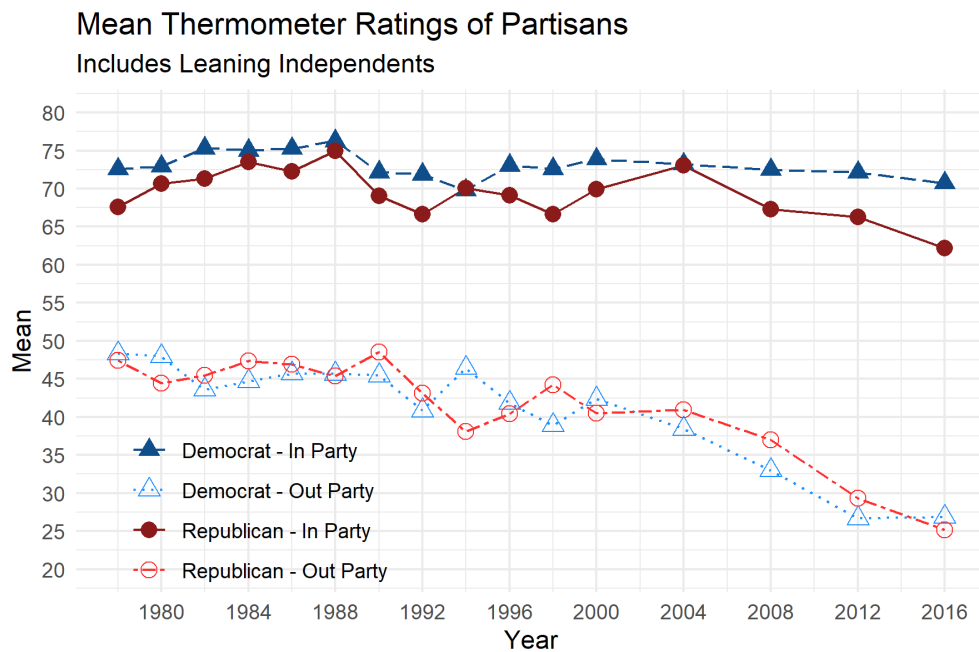


Fig. 1: *Mean of Partisans' in-party and out-party feeling thermometers as reported in the ANES, 1978–2016.*

As shown in Figure 1, mean out party feeling thermometers for Democrats and Republicans have obviously declined. We also see a decline in Republican's in party FTs since 2004, and only a slight decline in those of Democrats. Partisans remain much warmer (on average) towards their party than the opposition this—particularly in the case of Republicans—is in spite of a decline in average in-party FTs.

From 2004–2016 the variance of in-party Feeling thermometers has increased. the SD of Republicans' in-party FTs increased from 14–21 in this period, while Democrats' increased

from 15–19. Alone, these numbers are not all that impressive, but as is made clear by Figure 2, an increase in variation of this magnitude has never before been observed, nor has the trend continued for so many years.

As variance increases, so to has the proportion of partisans who rate their own party below a 50—a substantively meaningful threshold indicating that partisans are more cold than warm toward their own party. When leaning indepen-

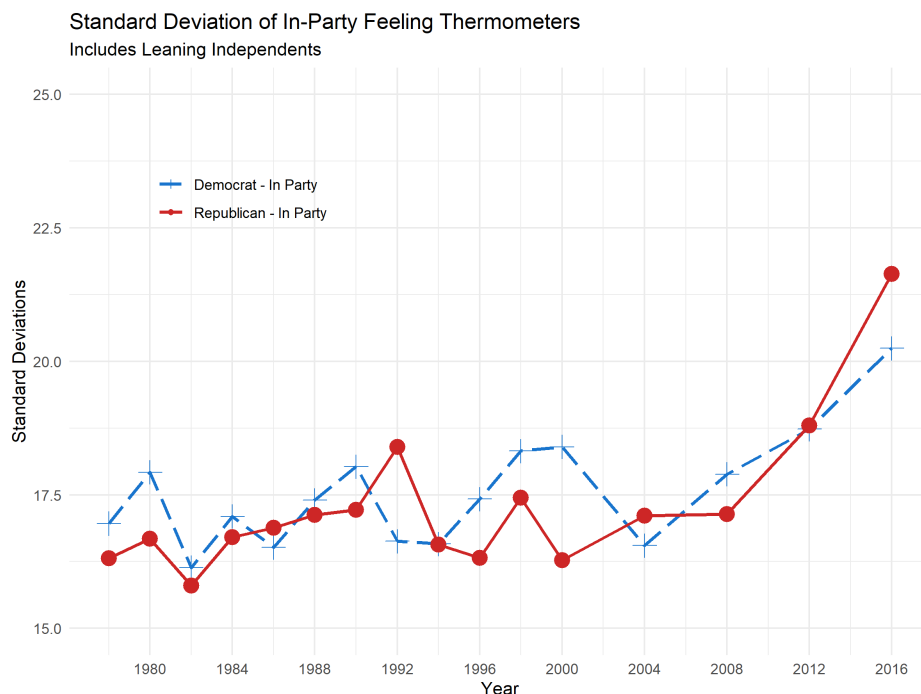


Fig. 2: *Standard Deviation of partisans' in party feeling thermometers as reported in the ANES, 1978–2016.* The

magnitude of this increase is slight—increasing about 5 points from 2000 to 2016—but the parties are each

dents are included (following (Klar and Krupnikov, 2016)), 10% of Democrats and almost 20% of Republicans are found to be cold towards their own party (up from 5% each in 2004), while a sample which excludes leaning independents indicates 13% of Republicans and 8% of Democrats to be cold. Regardless of the cut-off point used to indicate cold affect, or the strength of partisans' identification with their party, the trend is robust—more partisans

were cold to their party than has been observed at any point across the available data.

Negative evaluations of parties are increasingly common. The modal value of independents' average party FT has always been 50; in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the distribution was characterized by a rightward tail. From 2000–2016 that tail has shifted left. Far more independents now have a net-negative disposition towards the two major parties. Similarly, when examining the distributions of in-party feeling thermometers the left skew has become more apparent; more Republicans and Democrats are now cold—below 50—toward their party than at any point in the range of data.

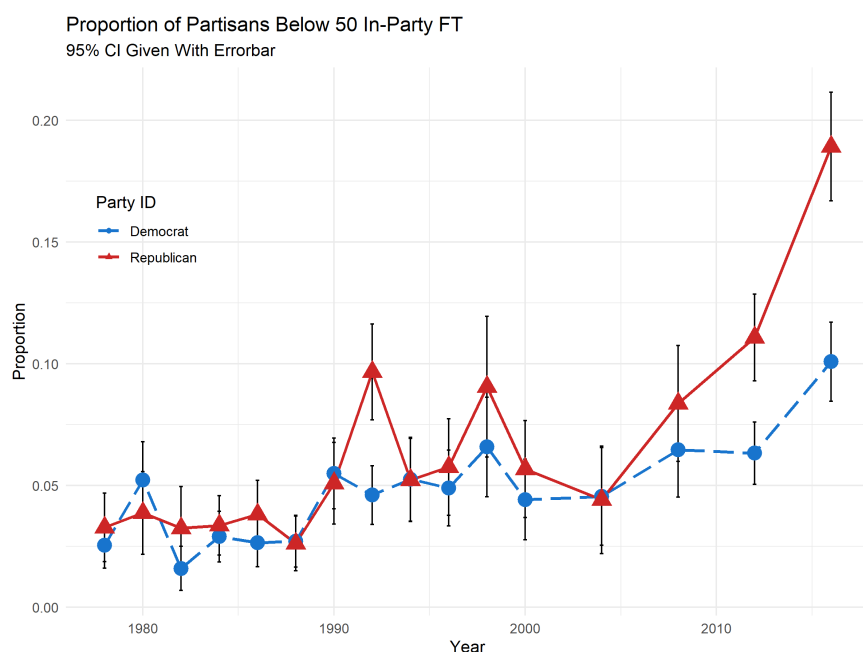


Fig. 3: *The proportion of partisans who whose in-party FT falls below 50.*

The increasing frequency of cold in-party affect is shown in Figure 3. In 2004, less than 5% of Republicans and Democrats were cold toward their party, in 2016 that number increased to 10% of Democrats and almost 20% of Republicans. This trend is robust across all strengths of partisan identification

and regardless of the score we deem to indicate coldness. Additional figures will be made available in the appendix.

Finally, Figure 4 displays changes in the distribution of in-party FTs over time. From 2004–2016, the left tail has grown noticeably longer and more dense. While the majority of partisans remain warmer than 50, these figures are striking.

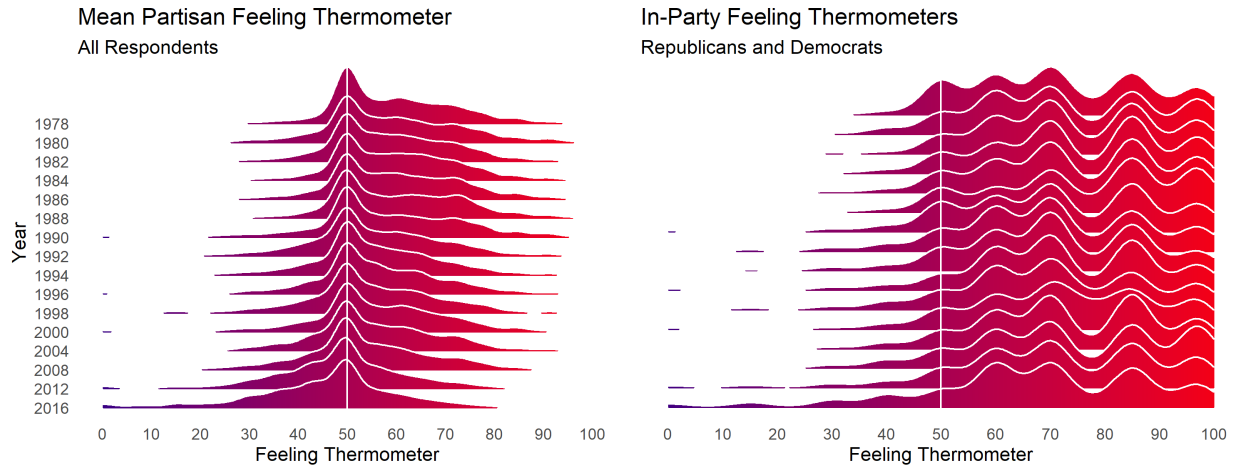


Fig. 4: *Ridgeline plot of partisan feeling thermometers. Partisans' in-party/independents average FT.*

## 4 Behavioral Differences

Do Cold Partisans behave differently from warm partisans?

## 5 Discussion

To avoid unnecessary ambiguity that arises when discussing affect in terms of polarization, I have opted to present

## References

- Ahler, Douglas J and Gaurav Sood. 2018. “The Parties in our Heads: Misperceptions About Party Composition and their Consequences.” *The Journal of Politics* 80(3):964–981.
- Iyengar, Shanto, Gaurav Sood and Yphtach Lelkes. 2012. “Affect, not Ideology: a Social Identity Perspective on Polarization.” *Public opinion quarterly* 76(3):405–431.
- Iyengar, Shanto and Masha Krupenkin. 2018. “The strengthening of partisan affect.” *Political Psychology* 39:201–218.
- Klar, Samara and Yanna Krupnikov. 2016. *Independent Politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Klar, Samara, Yanna Krupnikov and John Barry Ryan. 2018. “Affective polarization or partisan disdain? Untangling a dislike for the opposing party from a dislike of partisanship.” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 82(2):379–390.
- Mason, Lilliana. 2018. “Ideologues Without Issues: The Polarizing Consequences of Ideological Identities.” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 82(S1):866–887.