

Not Homogeneous: Intra-party affect

Robert Lytle

Establishment power in Washington is not always centered around left versus right. Often, it's about up versus down.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

The beauty of the tea party movement is that it is independent and thus a true check and balance of the Republican and Democrat parties. It's not a pawn of the GOP, thus untouchable in criticism of the Democrats—I view it as an unattached conscience of the Republican party.

Dana Loesch

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—a 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. For example, Iyengar and Krupenkin (2018) find 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's strength.

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.

2 Data

The data from this study were taken from the American National Election Study Cumulative Data File ¹. All data and replication materials will be made available on GitHub. The samples used here *exclude* leaning partisans, despite the evidence that partisan leaning independents behave in much the same way as their sorted counterparts (Klar and Krupnikov, 2016). By restricting the sample to avowed partisans, I am likely underestimating the variation present in in-party attitudes, and overestimating the proportion of Democrat and

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

Republican voters who are lukewarm or ambivalent towards their party.

3 Results

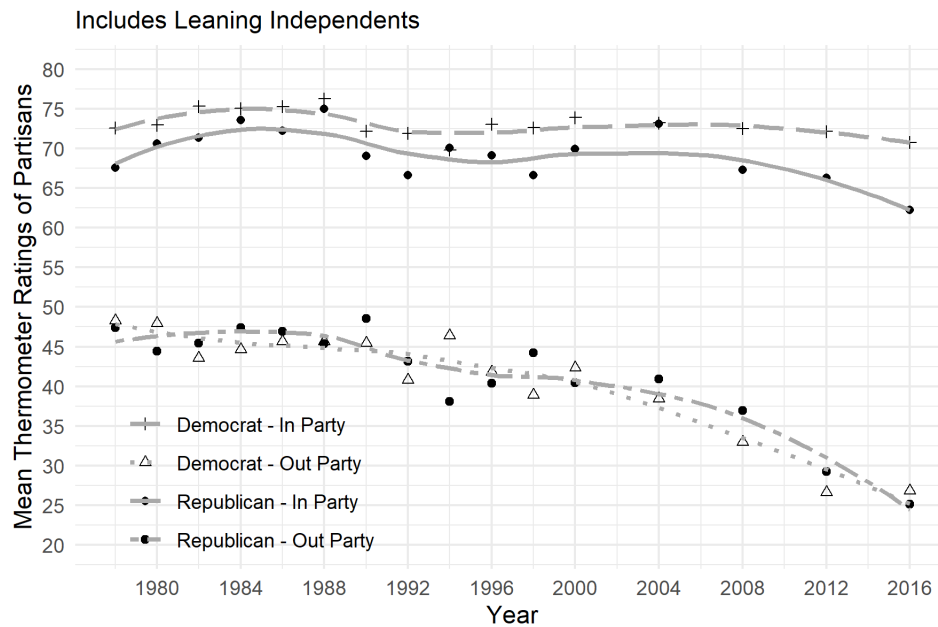


Fig. 1: *Mean of Partisans' in-party and out-party feeling thermometers as reported in the ANES, 1978–2016. Republicans tend to be colder in general.*

Previous studies of affective polarization (e.g. Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes (2012)) have focused on partisans' net partisan affect, this approach is problematic. When using a measure built from both in party and out party evaluations, it is not clear whether a change in NPA is borne of a change in in-party or out-party feeling. For example, the mean out-party affect of Republicans and Democrats in 2016 were each about 25 (Figure 1), but Republicans' NPA was significantly lower than Democrats' (Figure 2). Ostensibly, Republicans were *less* polarized than Democrats, but to say so belies the fact that Republicans are very cold towards Democrats, they are just somewhat colder towards *their own* party as well.

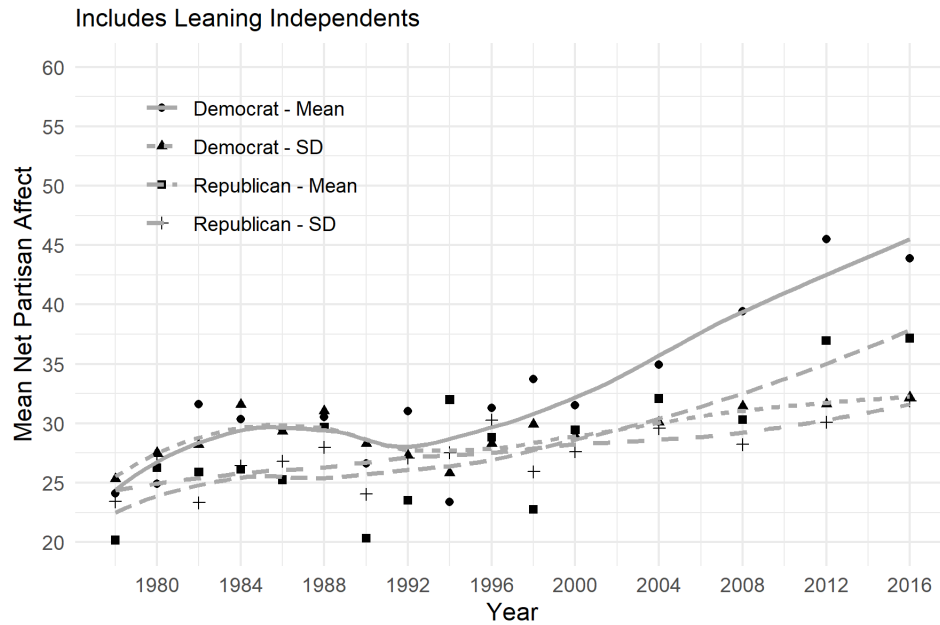


Fig. 2: *Mean of Partisans' in-party and out-party feeling thermometers as reported in the ANES, 1978–2016. Republicans tend to be colder in general.*

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. Indeed, we see increases in NPA (Fig. 2) even as mean in-party affect grows colder (Fig. 1). Polarization implies mean in and out party affect diverging from one another; we observe instead partisans growing to dislike both parties—one at a faster rate than the other.

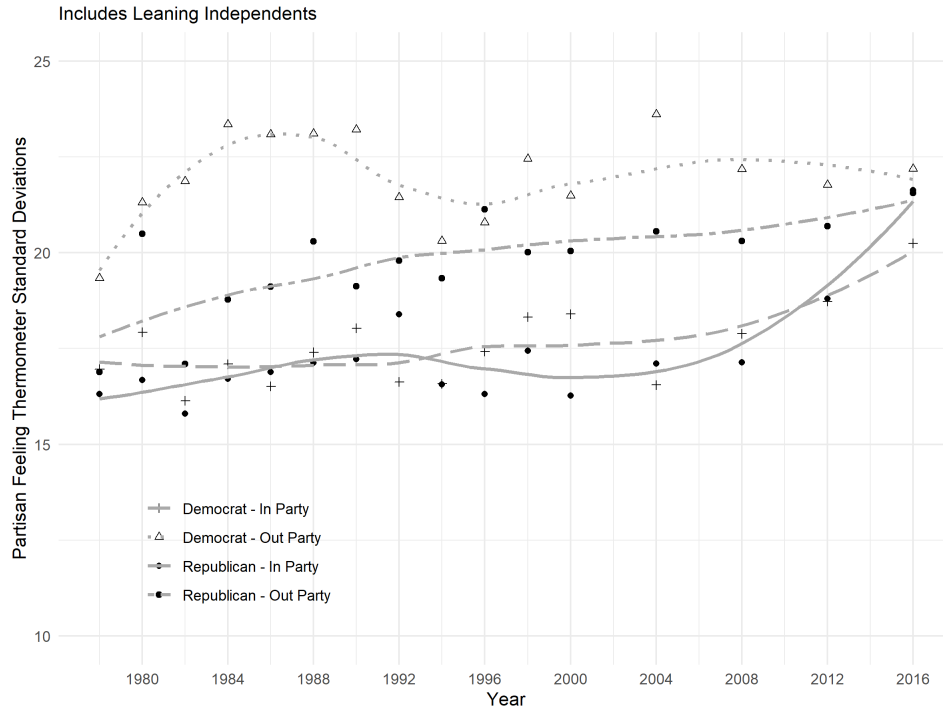


Fig. 3: *Standard Deviation of partisans' in party feeling thermometers as reported in the ANES, 1978–2016.* After several decades of minimal change, the variation in in-party feeling thermometer ratings increased substantially between 2004 and 2016. This change is robust to both the Fligner-Killeen 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.

3.1 How Has the Distribution changed?

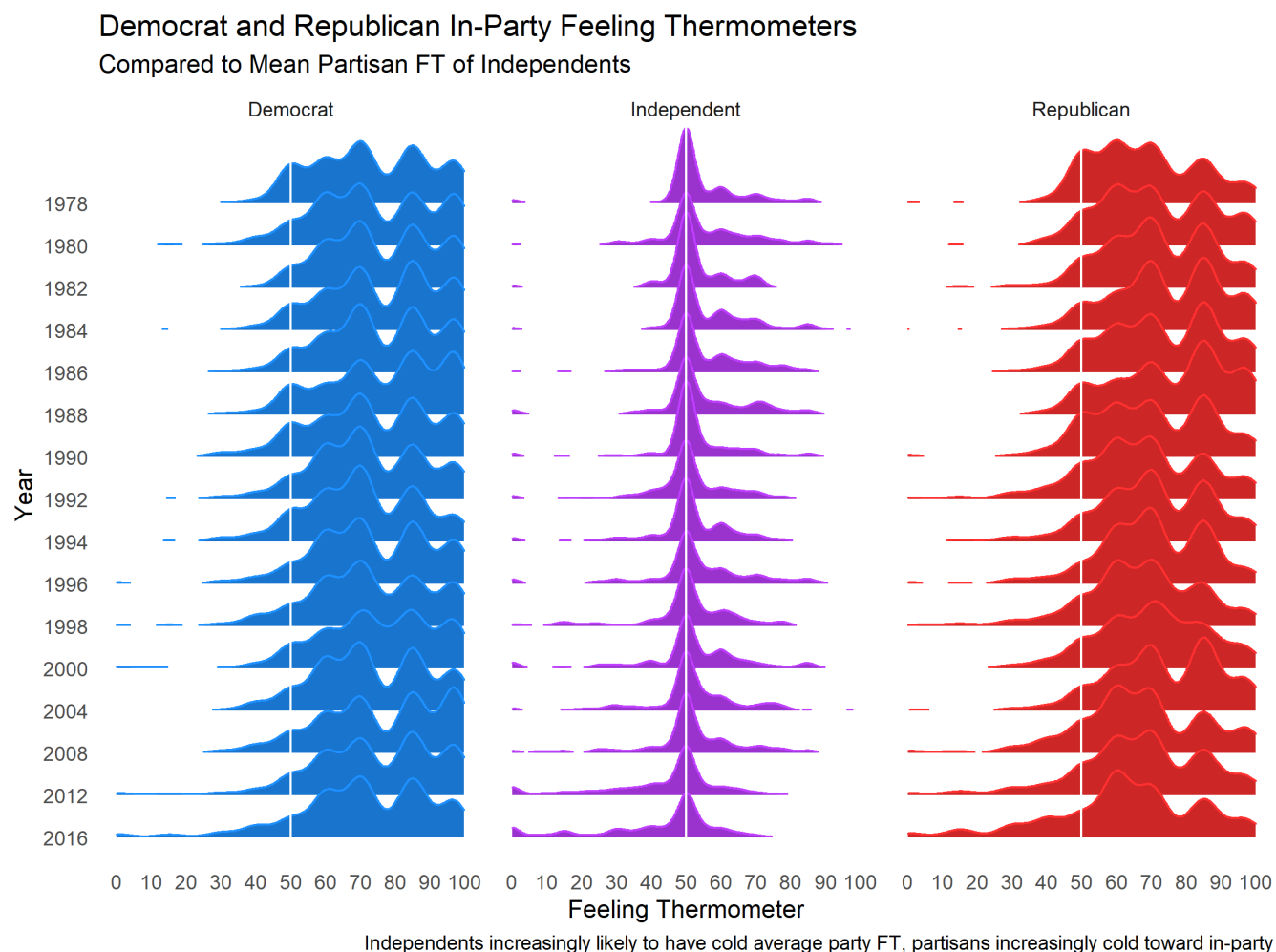


Fig. 4: *Ridgeline plot of partisan feeling thermometers. Partisans' in-party/independents average FT.*

Negative evaluations of parties are increasingly common. The modal value of independents' average party FT has always been 50; in the late 20th 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.

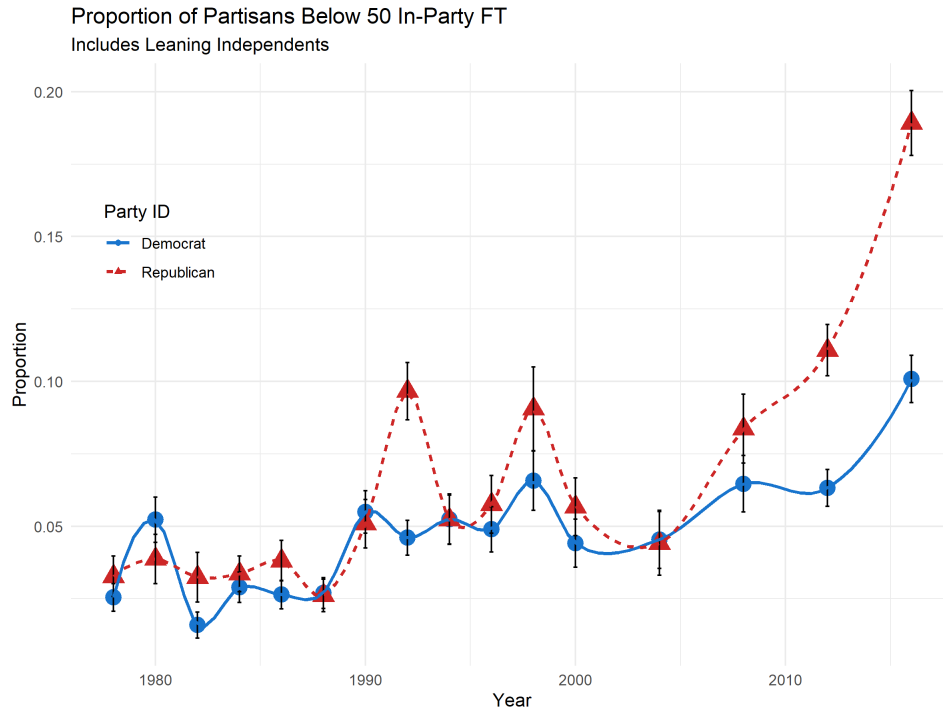


Fig. 5: *The proportion of partisans who whose in-party FT falls below 50. Republicans and Democrats increasingly report feeling colder than the median. This trend is robust to multiple thresholds (further figures included in appendix).*

The increasing frequency of cold in-party affect is shown in Figure 5. 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.

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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