

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.

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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.

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1 Introduction

Affective and social distance between Democrats and Republicans has expanded dramatically. Scholars of affective polarization have largely considered partisans to be warm towards their parties and co-partisans and cold to members of the out party (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, 2012; Iyengar and Krupenkin, 2018). These scholars argue that the “Net Partisan Affect” of Democrats and Republicans—the

Recent developments give us cause, however, to doubt the consistency of in-party warmth; 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 challenges to their party’s status-quo, often acting in opposition to their party’s elites [CITE]. In the midst of these in-party disagreements 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].

Using the 2016 Democratic primary Wronski et al. (2018) demonstrate that Democrats in 2016 primary were divided along authoritarian lines. Primary voters scoring high in authoritarian personality traits were more likely to support Hillary Clinton—those with few authoritarian tendencies were likely to be supporters of Bernie Sanders. 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.

By focusing on mean in-party feeling—rather than the distribution of partisan affect—researchers paint too optimistic a view of partisanship’s strength. My findings bolster those of Klar, Krupnikov and Ryan (2018)—partisan warmth has declined across the board.

2 Data

The data from this study were taken from the American National Election Study Cumulative Data File¹. 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

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

restricting the sample to avowed partisans, I am likely underestimating the variation present in in-party attitudes, and overestimating the proportion of Democrat and Republican voters who are lukewarm or ambivalent towards their party.

3 Results

As shown in Figure 2, out party feeling thermometers for Democrats and Republicans have 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 3, 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 independents 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 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.

The increasing frequency of cold in-party affect is shown in Figure 4. 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.

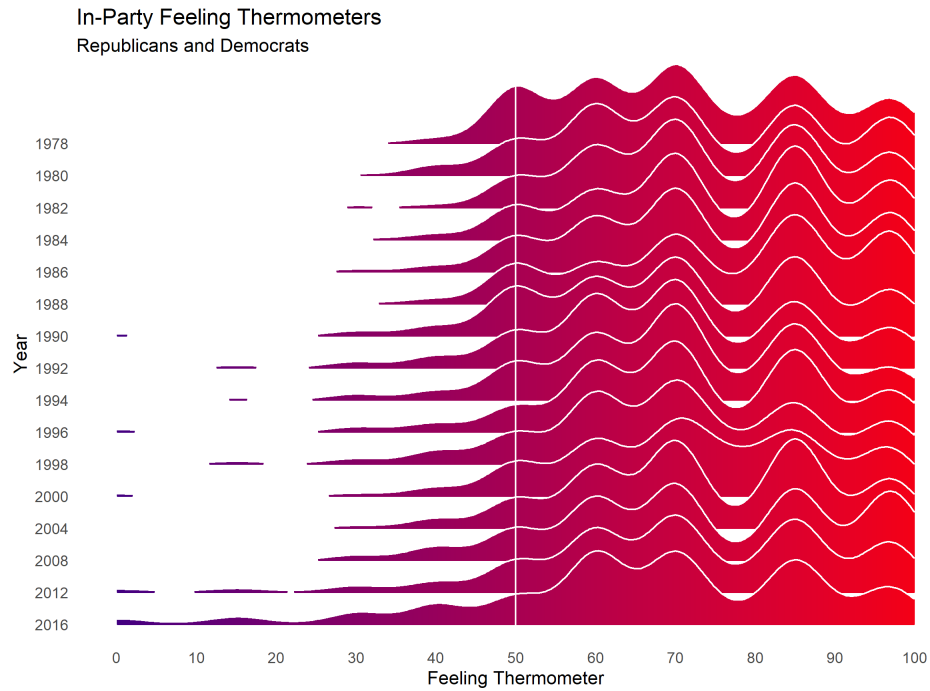


Fig. 1: *Ridgeline plot of partisan feeling thermometers. Partisans' in-party/independents average FT.*

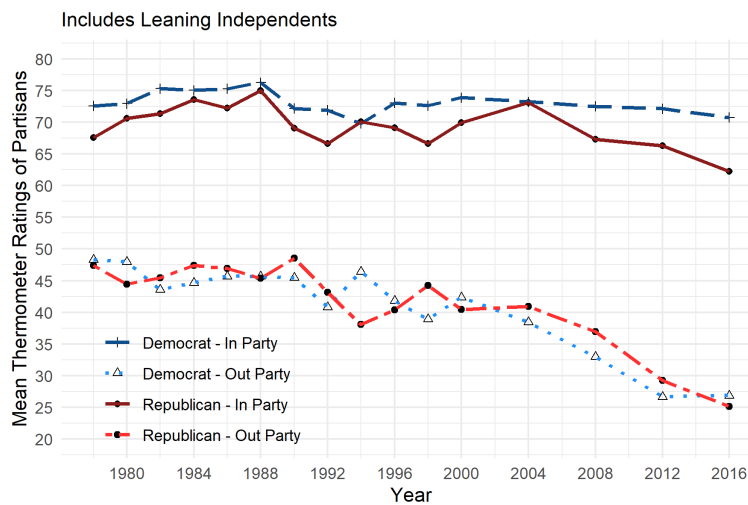


Fig. 2: *Mean of Partisans' in-party and out-party feeling thermometers as reported in the ANES, 1978–2016. Republicans tend to be colder in general.*

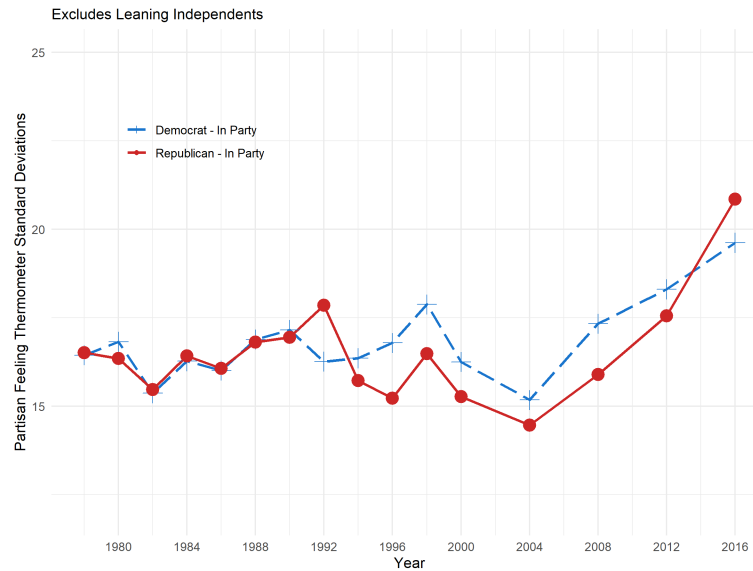


Fig. 3: *Standard Deviation of partisanship in party feeling thermometers as reported in the ANES, 1978–2016.* After several decades of minimal change, the variation in in-party feeling thermometer ratings increased substantially between 2004 and 2016. This change is robust to both the Fligner-Killeen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

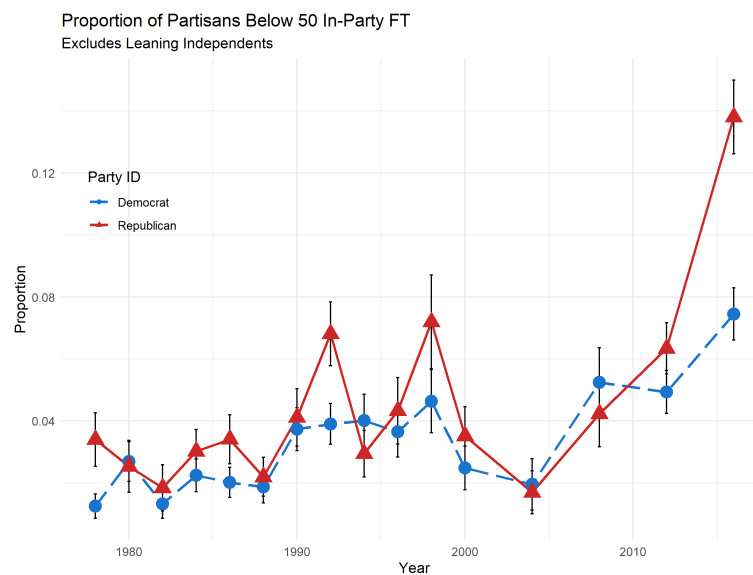


Fig. 4: *The proportion of partisanship who whose in-party FT falls below 50.* Republicans and Democrats increasingly report feeling colder than the median. This trend is robust to multiple thresholds figures included in the appendix show that this trend is robust to choice of “cutoff point” as well as across strengths of party ID.

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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