

Intra-Party Affect

Primary Elections and Declining In-Party Warmth

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Study Information

Title

Intra-Party Affect

Description

In 2008, despite her position as Democratic standard-bearer, supporters of Hillary Clinton’s primary campaign were colder towards their party than any other group of Democratic primary voters on the ANES 100-point Feeling Thermometer. Clinton’s defeat by Barack Obama in June of 2008 spawned the “Party Unity My Ass” movement, which engaged in various forms of protest against the DNC and pledging *en masse* not to support the (relative) party outsider Barack Obama in the general election¹. Clinton supporters’ posture towards their party in 2016 bore little semblance to that of the ’08 race. Bernie Sanders—a former independent and self-identified socialist—leaned into the role of an insurgent, anti-establishment candidate; predicating his campaign on a conflict between the working-class and the elites of both major parties. Sanders supporters, angry with the DNC and reluctant to support Clinton in November led a loosely organized movement of Democratic party discontents to found groups like *Justice Democrats* and expand membership of organizations like the *Democratic Socialists of America* and various state and local progressive caucuses to protest perceived slights by the party establishment and support further left and anti-establishment down-ballot candidates.

This is not particularly surprising on its own. Sanders campaigned against the party establishment—it is not a stretch that he would attract those disillusioned or unhappy with the party. The story is more complicated. Republican supporters of Donald Trump—whose campaign was even more exuberantly hostile towards the Republican party than Sanders’ was toward the Democrats—were *warmer* towards their party than any other candidates’ supporters, despite the mutual hostility between Trump and established Republican elites. As shown in Fig. 1, supporters of winning candidates tend to be warmer towards their own party than are losers—there is little difference in distributions of out-party affect.

Primary elections are substantively significant events, allowing partisans a voice in the presentation and direction of their party. In a political environment in which the presidential nominee becomes the *de facto* leader of the party, the primary process affords non-elite voters a voice in the ideological, political, and stylistic future of the party. The political products offered by primary candidates may reflect (or drive) extant divisions in the party. (Wronski et al. 2018) and (Bankert, n.d.) find that those scoring highly on measures authoritarian personality traits use their primary vote to “protect” their party from factions they see as threatening group cohesion. Just as voters do not toss a coin to decide their general election vote, they do not randomly select their choice in the primary; these

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/06/26/AR2008062604162.html?tid=a_inl_man
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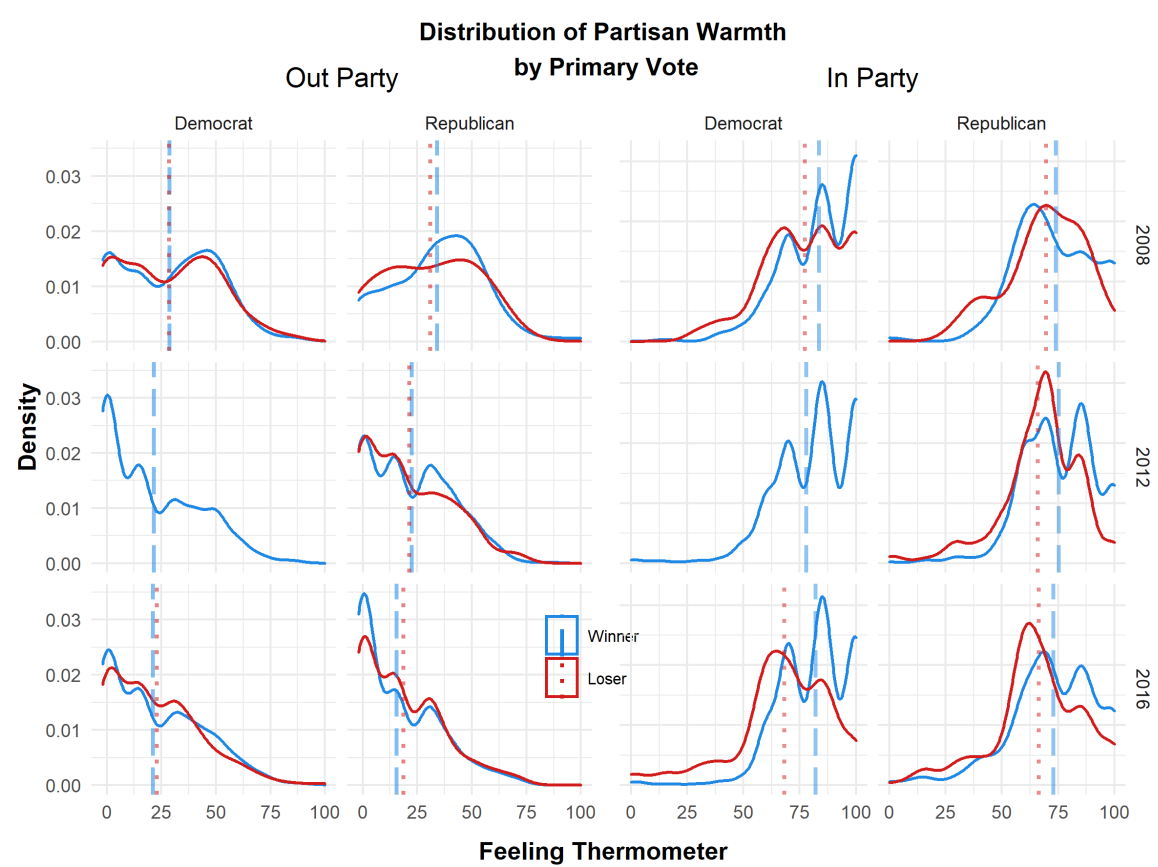


Fig. 1: “Affective Differences between primary winners and losers”

choices are likely to be meaningful—or to become meaningful, if not as matters of issue-ideology but of political identity.

In general elections, candidates' party identification acts as an efficient heuristic under an ideologically sorted elite environment by which voters can base their evaluations of a candidate (Rohde 1991). Of course, in a primary the party ID heuristic is largely meaningless; all candidates in the race (barring an open or jungle primary system) share a party. Candidates must therefore work to differentiate each other from their opponents.

Primary Vote as an Independent Variable

Vote choice—or preference for a candidate more generally—are most often analyzed as the outcome of (potential) voters' preferences and evaluations of candidates' attributes. That primary voters choose their candidate in part to safeguard group cohesion in their party (Wronski et al. 2018; Bankert, n.d.) begs the question: what happens to the group when candidates lose? How do partisans react when the preferences of some in the party are advantaged above their own? Scholars of policy feedback have found citizens who perceive themselves as being cut out of government decision making processes to be more disaffected and less participatory in democratic political activities (???; ???). Not only do individuals assess individual programs and actors on the basis of their (perceived) inclusiveness, assessments of individuals' own roles and place in political society are conditioned in part by signals they receive from political and policy actors (???). I argue that this is likely to hold true in the context of primary elections. Primary voters who perceive their party working against their preferred candidate should become more distrusting of political elites and display less affinity for their own party.

Party elites may not be *government* policymakers or bureaucrats, but they are certainly *political* actors; their sphere of policy influence is simply constrained to the internal workings of one party—not the government writ-large. It is unlikely that the blurry distinction between “government” and “political” matters all that much to the rationally ignorant median voter as they assimilate political information and update their evaluations of elites and themselves. Moreover, government employees and party apparatchiks each wield considerable power shaping possible policy outcomes. Insofar as disaffection stems from being “cut out” of the policy process it is not clear that the legal distinction between government and party *should* be affectively salient to observers, political sophisticates or not. Further, primary elections are programs designed and implemented by a vast bureaucracy of national and state parties, private information systems providers, federal government regulators, and local supervisors of elections; structurally similar to many federated programs, even if the primary bureaucracy only becomes salient to the public every two or four years at best.

In light of these structural similarities, it is worth asking how well insights from the policy feedback literature travel to the context of candidate selection. Theoretically, public perceptions of exclusionary politicking or unfair treatment of candidates by party elites should depress voters' assessment of the nominating process and their affection for the party. Such perceptions signal to the individual both that they hold little power in the nominating process and that those partisan actors who are powerful do not represent the interests of the powerless primary voter in question. In a policy feedback framework, the primary voter perceives a top-heavy, paternalistic party organization and has internalized their own un-belonging within that organization. Concomitant with their declining trust, disaffected partisans have little incentive (whether material or group-motivated) to participate in political activity.

In the presidential context, a primary loss is a rebuke of the preferences of losers supporters and the ascension of the representative of an *outgroup* to the station *de facto* leader of the *in-party*. During the primary season, a primary voter's in-group is not only their fellow Democrats or Republicans, but fellow Sanders, Warren, Buttigieg; Trump, Cruz, and Rubio voters as well. Those supporters of the opposing primary candidates then constitute an out-group *within* the party, the salience of which is endogenous to the affective tenor of the primary and the degree to which the candidates distinguish themselves from the opposition. When the party

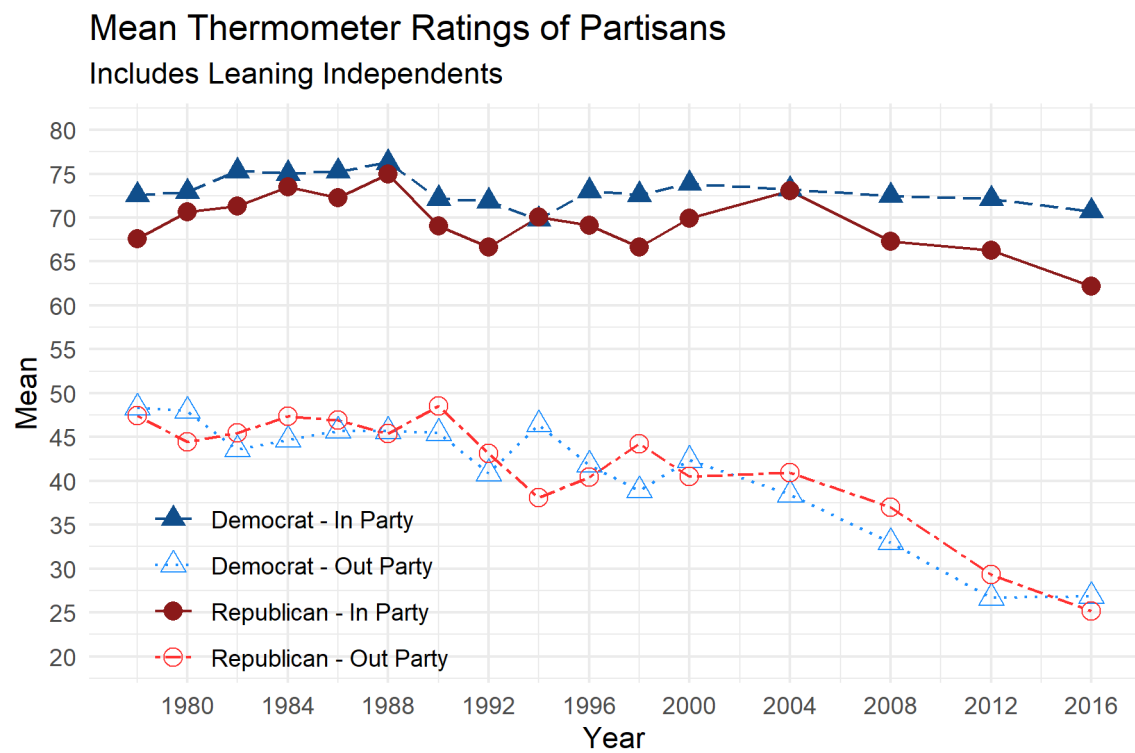
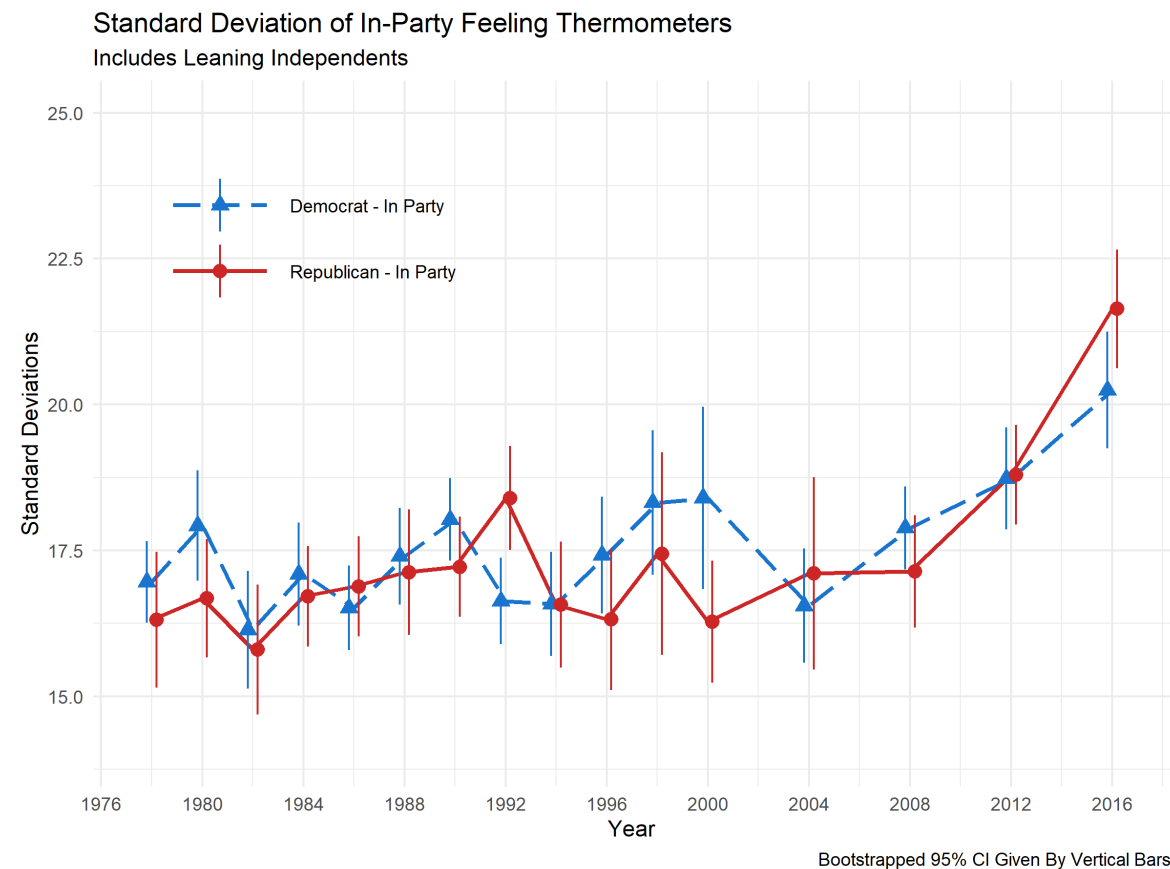


Fig. 2: “Affective Differences between primary winners and losers”

Supporters of winning primary candidates should grow more fond of their party, while losers should become more disdainful, increasing the variance of in-party affective evaluations. Indeed, macro-level trends in partisan affect have shown modest declines in mean in-party affect, concurrent with increasing variance *around* that mean, particularly from 2004–2016, a period during which major-party primary campaign expenditures ballooned from $\approx \$700'000'000$ to more than $\$2'000'000'000$.



In sum, descriptive data at both the macro and individual levels is consistent with our expectations given a causal relationship between primary election outcomes and individuals' partisan affect, but the data here cannot convincingly tell a causal story. To that end, I propose the following experiment.

Hypotheses

If primary election results affect intra-party affect, those who support winning candidates will be warmer towards their party, those who support losers will be colder.

Design Plan

Study type

Experiment

Blinding

Subjects will not be aware of the experimental design, nor of their status in a treatment/control group.

Study design

The experiment is a between-subjects design with a single treatment.

First, participants' sincere party ID is solicited. Following (???), a participant will be defined as a "partisan" if they indicate being registered with a party or *leaning* towards one party or the other. True independents will be excluded from the study.

Next, participants will be shown short vignettes of 10 policy positions of two counterfactual candidates, "Candidate A" and "Candidate B", running against each other in a congressional primary. - The participants will not be informed that the candidates are counterfactual. - The vignettes will be presented side-by-side, policy positions of each candidate will be randomized from a list of 20 neutrally worded positions. - Democratic and Republican positions will be drawn from different lists. - The participant will have one minute to review the vignettes. - To ensure that participants do not attempt to consult outside information about the candidates, no identifying information about the candidates will be presented.

After reviewing the vignettes, the participant is asked which candidate they prefer. After making their choice, subjects in the treatment group are told the candidate lost the election, while subjects in the control group are presented with a brief loading screen.

Finally, each group is asked to rate their preferred party (whichever party the participant indicated a preference for at the beginning of the experiment) on the same 0-100 feeling thermometer scale.

After the second partisan rating, the participant is debriefed that the candidate and election were counterfactual, at which point the session concludes.

Randomization

The candidate policy positions presented to the participants will be randomized.

Sampling Plan

Experimental data will be collected using Amazon Mechanical Turk. A random sample of voting age Americans will be requested.

Existing data

Registration prior to creation of data. As of the date of submission of this research plan for preregistration, the data have not yet been collected, created, or realized.

Explanation of existing data

The only data that have been analyzed prior to registration are time-series data from the American National Election Study and Annenberg Center for Public Policy. No experimental data have been collected and the existing data will not be included in experimental analyses. Please see introduction for further discussion.

Data collection procedures

Participants will be recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk system.

Sample size

I aim to sample as many participants as possible with a budget constraint of \$500. I expect this to be approximately 1000 participants.

Sample size rationale

See above.

Stopping rule

I will stop collecting when the Mturk budget is depleted.

Variables

Manipulated variables

1. Candidate policy positions are randomized. I do not intend to analyze policy effects and no hypotheses are generated regarding policy positions.
2. After recording the participant's candidate preference, I either:
 - a. Inform the participant that their candidate lost the election
 - b. Provide no additional information.

Measured variables

1. Partisanship. final sample will be limited to Democrats (Democrat leaning independents) and Republicans (Republican leaning independents).
2. Initial partisan feeling thermometer. 0 (very cold) 100 (very warm)
3. Preference for one of two congressional candidates in a primary election.
 - Participants will be shown short vignettes of policy details and political attributes of two candidates and asked to choose between them
4. Final partisan feeling thermometer. 0 (very cold) 100 (very warm)

Indices

NA

Analysis Plan

Statistical models

The statistical model to be implemented is a simple t-test of:

$$\mu[i_1(2) - i_1(1)] - \mu[i_0(2) - i_0(1)]$$

or, the difference-in-difference of feeling thermometer ratings between treated and non-treated participants. The hypothesis will be supported when the above quantity is negative, indicating that the partisan warmth of the treated group declined more than their untreated co-participants between measurement.

Transformations

No additional transformations are necessary.

Inference criteria

I will use the standard $p < .05$ criteria to determine if the difference between treatment and control groups is statistically significant.

Data exclusion

I will exclude any participant who does not identify themselves as a partisan or partisan-leaning independent.

Missing data

Participants who do not complete the experiment will be excluded from the analysis.

Exploratory analyses (optional)

Exploratory analysis of descriptive data from the American National Election Study and National Anennenburg Elections Study have been conducted ahead of time (as discussed in the introduction), and suggest a descriptive relationship between primary outcomes and partisan affect. No experimental data analysis has been conducted thus far.

Other

Other (Optional)

Enter your response here.

References

References

- Bankert, Alexa. n.d. "The Authoritarian Divide in the Democratic Party." *Working Paper*.
- Rohde, David W. 1991. *Parties and Leaders in the Postreform House*. University of Chicago Press.
- Wronski, Julie, Alexa Bankert, Karyn Amira, April A Johnson, and Lindsey C Levitan. 2018. "A Tale of Two Democrats: How Authoritarianism Divides the Democratic Party." *The Journal of Politics* 80 (4): 1384–8.