

Not Homogeneous: Intra-party affect

Robert Lytle

This is not the Republicans vs the Democrats—this is the elites of the Republican and Democratic party who have driven this country into the ditch vs Donald J. Trump and the Rest of America.

Roger Stone

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

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

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. Some figures have been built using samples *including* leaning partisans, while others *exclude* leaning partisans, despite the evidence that partisan leaning independents behave in much the same

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

way as their sorted counterparts (Klar and Krupnikov, 2016)². By restricting the sample to avowed partisans, I am likely underestimating the variation/animosity present in in-party attitudes, and overestimating the proportion of Democrat and Republican voters who are lukewarm or ambivalent towards their party. Regardless of the samples used, the topline finding is the same: **An increasing 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 Results

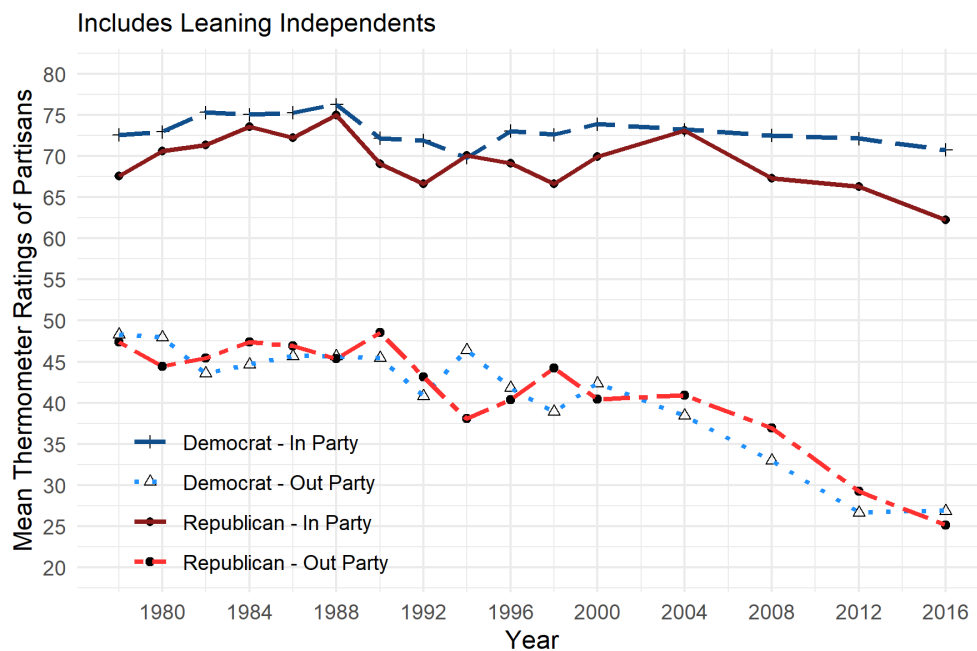


Fig. 1: *Mean of Partisans' in-party and out-party feeling thermometers as reported in the ANES, 1978–2016.*

² The upper left corner of each figure indicates whether leaning independents were included in the sample. This will certainly change before the paper is finished, I've generated figs for both and have been going back and forth

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–

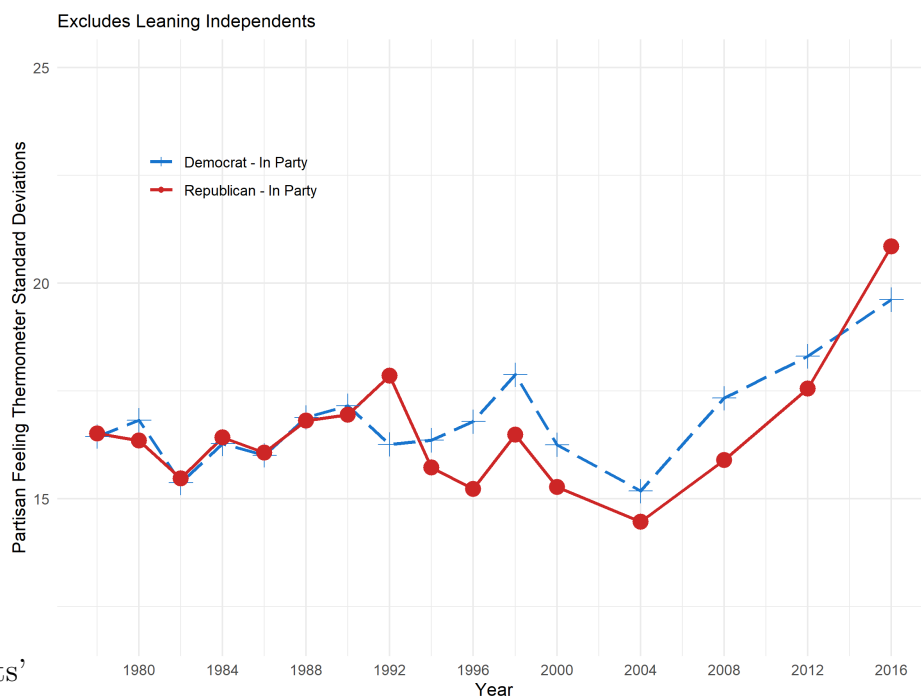


Fig. 2: *Standard Deviation of partisans' in party feeling thermometers as reported in the ANES, 1978–2016.*

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 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 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.

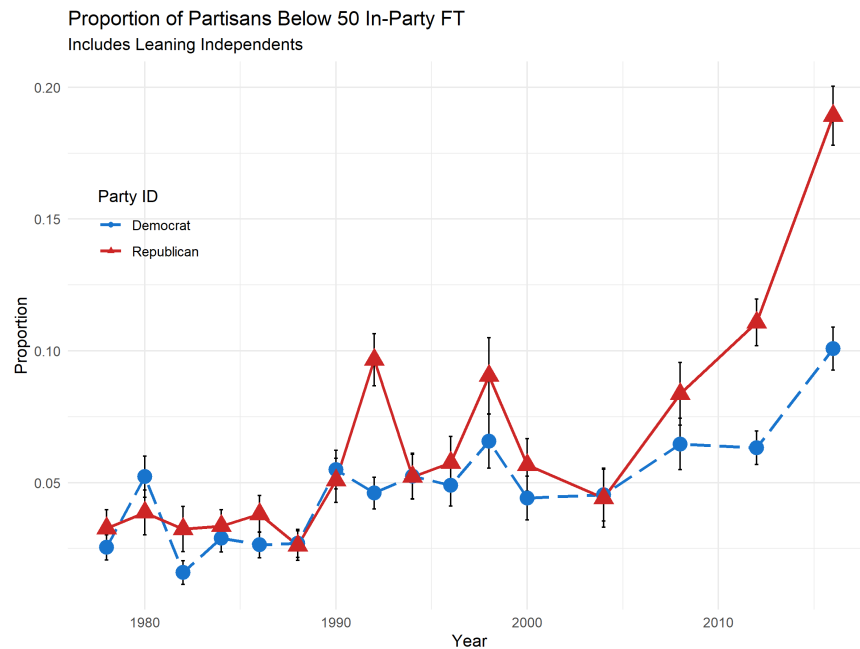


Fig. 3: *The proportion of partisans who whose in-party FT falls below 50.*

3.1 Dissatisfaction

The findings presented here support the view of Klar, Krupnikov and Ryan (2018), that the pattern of affective partisan polarization identified in recent years (e.g. Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes (2012)), is better characterized as increasing frustration with political parties in general—not simple polarization. It is true that antipathy towards the outparty has increased since the 1970s, but so to has the proportion of those who are lukewarm or cold toward their own party.

This raises troubling normative concerns regarding citizens’ faith in democracy. By the ANES’s measure, the proportion of people “Somewhat” or “Very” dissatisfied with democracy has increased from about 18% in 2004 (the first year the question was asked), to 34% in 2012 and 2016.

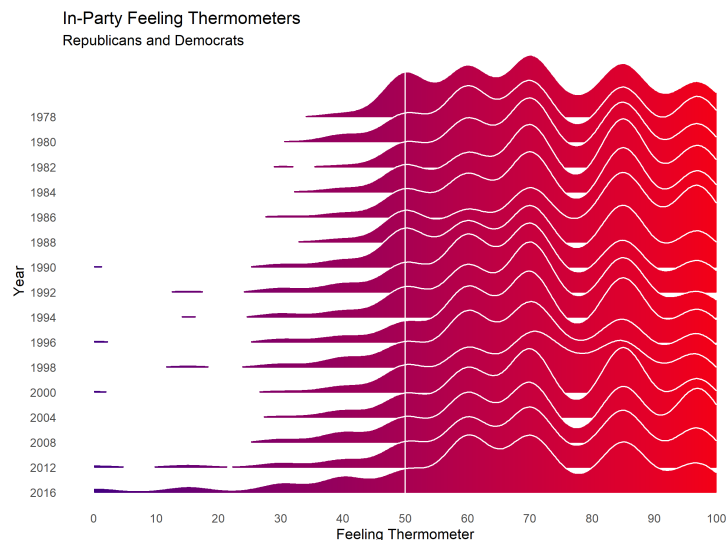


Fig. 4: *Ridgeline plot of partisan feeling thermometers. Partisans' in-party/independents average FT.*

Figure 5 shows all respondents' mean partisan feeling thermometer (the average of their Democrat and Republican thermometers), stratified by whether the respondent is satisfied or dissatisfied with Democracy. Unsurprisingly, the leftward tails are largest among discontents, but all three groups (satisfied, dissatisfied, and those who weren't sure or declined to answer) have become increasingly likely to be, an average, cold towards the parties.

3.2 Primaries

Setting aside issues of causal identification, clearly increasing dissatisfaction with democracy does not fully explain the increase in those who are cold toward their (or both) parties³. I turn now to an examination of the relationship between primary vote choice and in-party affect. I argue that the increase in cold partisan affect can be explained in part by "sore losers"

³ Nor does cold partisan affect explain all increasing dissatisfaction.

in primary elections—as primaries become more salient, so to do the factions represented by supporters of particular candidates. In short, primary elections provide another layer of group-based political identity below the party, forcing partisans to see not just the out-party as adversarial, but members of their own party as well.

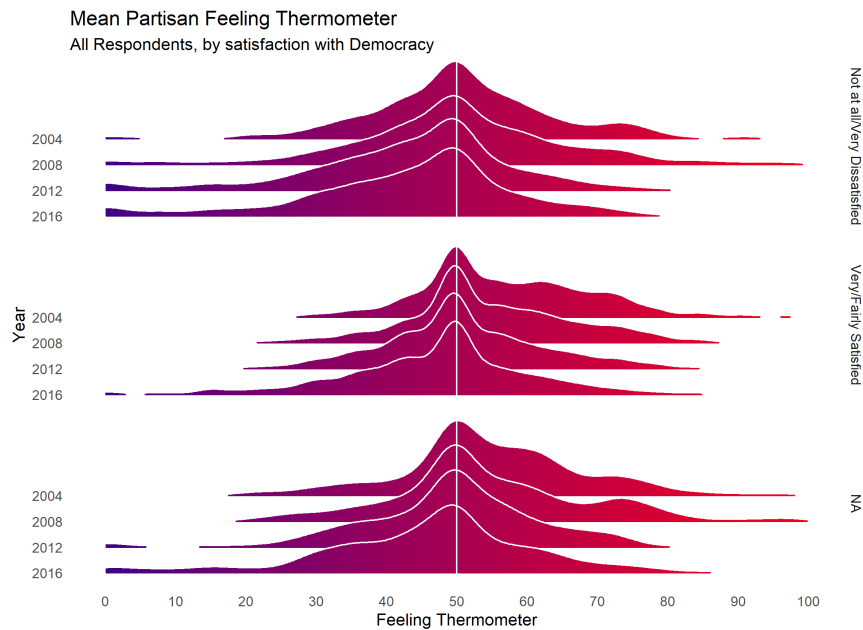


Fig. 5: *Ridgeline plot of mean partisan feeling thermometers by reported satisfaction in democracy.*

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 (forthcoming) 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 choices are likely to be meaningful.

Figure 6 shows density plots of Democrats' in-party feeling thermometers in 2008 and 2016 in each year, in both years, those who supported a losing candidate were more more likely to be cold to their

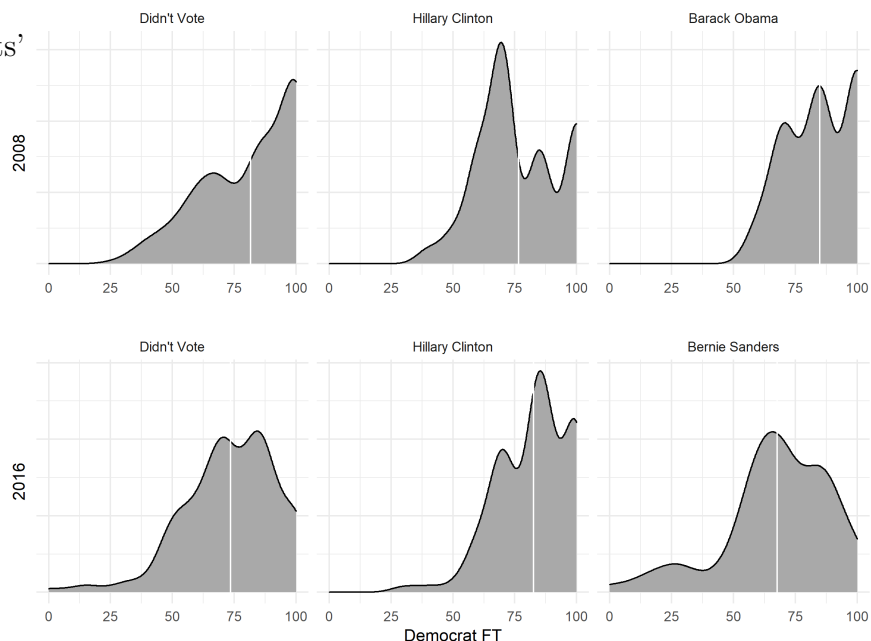


Fig. 6: *Density plots of in-party feeling thermometers by year and primary candidate preference.*

suspect a reverse causal

relationship—that the 2016 data are a product of Sanders supporters' predisposition against their party. While some Sanders supporters were no doubt motivated by an *a priori* disdain for the establishment, note the large number of lukewarm Clinton Democrats relative to both Obama supporters and nonvoters. It would be difficult to imagine a more establishment Democrat than Hillary Clinton running against Obama—then a young senator promising to upset the status-quo.

On the Republican side, the Trump campaign postured itself as openly hostile to the

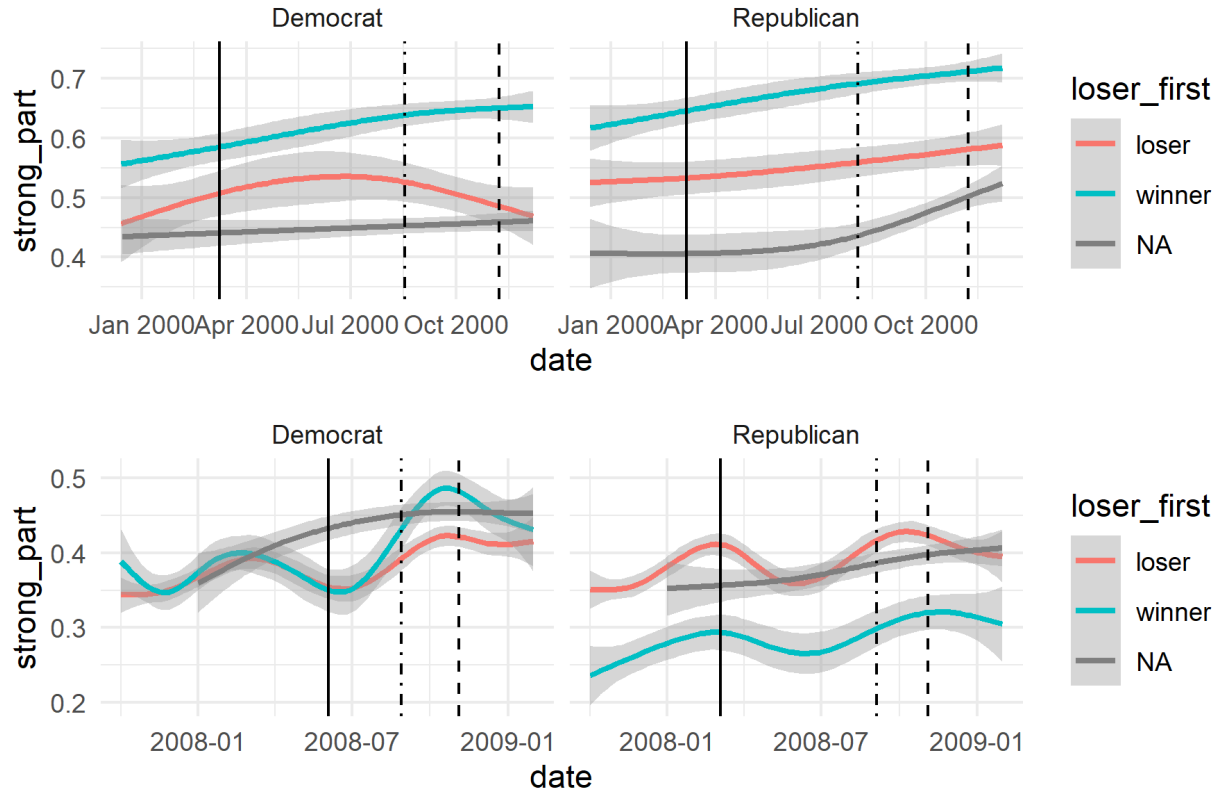


Fig. 7: *LOESS model estimating probability of self-identifying as a strong partisan*

Republican party, perhaps even to a greater degree than did the Sanders campaign against the Democrats. Despite this, Trump supporters were the warmest group of Republican primary voters⁴—bad news for our *a priori* disdain hypothesis—and good news for the sore loser hypothesis.

3.2.1 Panel Data

Based on cross-sectional data alone it is unclear whether vote choice or a cold affect is prior to the other. Using panel data from the 2000 and 2008 presidential elections

⁴ [Figs will be updated to include reps]

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