Non-Political Anger and Affective Polarization in the United States

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Abstract

Increased in-group affinity and outgroup hostility between Democrats and Republicans, or affective polarization, has been highlighted as a major problem in the current political environment. Recent literature suggests that political anger drives increased affective polarization and scholars have even found that political anger may influence social polarization in non-political settings. Our research seeks to build upon this existing literature by proposing that anger elicited from an apolitical source can also lead to increased affective polarization. To test our hypotheses, we conducted two survey experiments that measured the effects of anger elicited from political and apolitical sources and its effects on affective polarization. We found that anger elicited from both political and apolitical settings leads to greater affective polarization. In short, anger prompts greater in-group affinity and outgroup hostility in politics regardless of whether the anger originates in politics. Our findings are important because they suggest that anger is a key contributor to increased affective polarization and that reducing anger in society may slow the rapid rise of affective polarization.

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In recent decades, politics in the United States (and globally) has become increasingly polarized (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2006; Gidron, Adams, and Horne 2020; Lupu 2015; Theriault 2006). This rise in polarization is not solely confined to differences in policy, however, but has been shown to extend to increases in hostility and antipathy towards out-party members and groups (Easton and Holbein 2020; Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe 2015; Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Iyengar and Westwood 2015).[1]

Although rises in affective polarization are largely attributed to the increasing importance of party identification as a social identity (Iyengar et al. 2012; Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Mason 2018) or to increases in partisan policy alignment (Bougher 2017; Orr, Fowler, and Huber 2023), or to perceived threats (Renström, Bäck, and Carroll 2022), recent work has highlighted the impact of political anger, specifically anger directed at the opposing party, on increasing out-group hostility and the social polarization between partisans (Renström, Bäck, and Carroll 2023; Webster 2020; Webster, Connors, and Sinclair 2022). By this account, eliciting anger among partisans towards opposing partisans or the opposing party encourages individuals to take action to "both alleviate their frustration and exact retribution on the source of their anger" (Webster et al. 2022, 1295). In such a way, negative political emotions derived from political stimuli encourage individuals to distance themselves socially from the source of their negative emotion and refusing assistance to out-party partisans.

[1] Beyond its effects on society (Finkel et al. 2020; Iyengar et al. 2019), affective polarization also has downstream political consequences on policy polarization for emerging issues (Druckman et al. 2021). There is also some debate about the consequences of affective polarization and specifically the extent to which affective polarization influences the willingness of individuals to embrace anti-democratic actions and political violence (Broockman, Kalla, and Westwood 2023; Finkel et al. 2020; Kingzette et al. 2021). However, there is a stronger link between anger and other negative emotions (key drivers of affective polarization and our focus here) and a willingness to embrace anti-democratic actions (Berntzen, Kelsall, and Harteveld 2023).

In this paper, however, we argue that such effects from emotional responses are not limited only to such responses stemming from politics but can be triggered by non-political triggers more generally. While previous work has focused on political triggers, we argue that the effects of emotional responses are not compartmentalized. Indeed, previous work suggests that emotional reactions to one component of life often have significant effects spillover effects in other aspects of life. In particular, work unrelated to politics or polarization has shown that emotional responses triggered in one area of life can often affect our reactions, judgements, and decisions in other aspects of life beyond the immediate scope of the cause of the emotional response (Bodenhausen, Sheppard, and Kramer 1994; Dunn and Schweitzer 2005; Forgas and Moylan 1987; Schwarz and Clore 1983). Building on this previous work, we provide clear evidence that increases in non-political anger are also related to increased affective partisan polarization and increased partisan social distance.

To show the effects of non-political negative emotional responses, we conduct a survey experiment where we randomly assign individuals to read a vignette about a football team who acts in a way to support and champion a fellow student with disabilities or about a football team who maltreats and sexually abuses a fellow student with disabilities. Unsurprisingly, we find that the vignette about a football team who abuses the student elicits a greater negative emotional response from respondents. However, more importantly, we also find that this vignette (which triggers a greater negative emotional response) also increases affective polarization both in terms of their relative ratings of in-party and out-party partisans as well as their willingness to engage socially with out-party partisan.

These findings indicate that the effect of negative emotional responses on increased affective polarization and partisan social distance is not limited solely to the negative emotions

surrounding politics. Instead, we find that instances in life that elicit anger or other negative emotions independent of politics have a spillover effect into political judgements. We find that stimuli that increase a negative emotional response, regardless of the origin, are also more likely to increase partisan affective polarization and to increase social distance between partisans.

Emotion Social and Affective Polarization

Americans are much more politically divided than in previous eras. While a certain amount of perceptions of political divisions can be chalked up to greater partisan loyalty (Jacobson 2015) or greater partisan sorting (Levandusky 2009; Noel 2013), perhaps one of the most notable political divisions is the increasing social antagonism between partisans (Iyengar et al. 2019). Perceptions of out-party partisans have become increasingly more negative, and while positive feelings towards co-partisans have declined somewhat (Groendendyk, Sances, and Zhirkov 2020), these effects are dwarfed in magnitude by the sharp decline in feelings towards out-party partisans (Iyengar et al. 2019, 2012).

Furthermore, there is significant evidence that these attitudes are spreading beyond mere perceptions and into actual behaviors, with individuals expressing a greater likelihood of being willing to discriminate against out-party partisans in non-political contexts (Engelhardt and Utych 2020; Iyengar and Westwood 2015) both social (Bishop 2009; Easton and Holbein 2020; Settle and Carlson 2019) and economic (Hassell, Miles, and Morecraft 2023; McConnell et al. 2018).

Because of the rise of social and affective polarization, scholars have spent considerable time trying to understand the causes of this social and political phenomenon. While perhaps not considered the primary driver of affective and social polarization, previous work provides

evidence that negative emotions elicited from politics, and anger specifically, increases social and affective polarization (McLaughlin et al. 2020; Webster 2020; Webster et al. 2022). Moreover, even when considering the effects of what are largely considered the primary drivers of affective polarization (namely intragroup policy differences, social sorting, and diverging social identities) there is considerable evidence that the polarizing effects of these mechanisms are mediated by negative emotional reactions (Gervais 2019; Lu and Lee 2019; Mason 2016; Renström et al. 2023).[2]

All of this work on the relationship between emotional reactions and affective polarization, however, has focused on the emotional reactions to the political world. These are, of course, the logical first places to look for the effects of negative emotions on political outcomes. When emotional responses are triggered we should expect the effects of such responses most likely to be directed at the source of the emotional response. As Webster et al. (2022) reason, "anger at the opposing party should cause individuals to want to take an action or set of actions against the opposing party" (1294). And, as noted above, there is ample evidence indicating that anger and negative emotional responses triggered in response to political stimuli do indeed invoke a political response.

However, emotions are not easily compartmentalized. Previous work outside of political science has provided clear evidence that emotions triggered by stimuli in one area of life often have strong spillover effects in other areas (Bodenhausen et al. 1994; Dunn and Schweitzer 2005; Forgas and Moylan 1987; Pavelchak, Antil, and Munch 1988; Schulz et al. 2004; Schwarz

[2] Along these same lines, previous work has also shown that reducing misperceptions of out-party partisans (and thus reducing the perception of threat and the negative emotions associated with those threats) also reduces affective polarization (Druckman et al. 2022).

and Clore 1983).[3] Simply, although responses to negative emotion generating experiences should logically be targeted toward the emotion generating source, previous work strongly suggests that such emotional responses trigger spillover effects into other areas of life. Thus, we might expect that circumstances that trigger negative emotional responses should increase social and affective polarization, regardless of whether or not the source of the cause of that emotional response was related to politics or partisan group identity.

Experimental Design

Study I

To test whether or not stimuli unrelated to politics that trigger negative emotional responses also have an effect on social and affective polarization, we fielded a survey experiment on a nationally representative sample of 1,200 respondents using YouGov's panel of survey respondents.[4] The survey was fielded in the summer of 2023.

Respondents were randomly assigned to view one of two news stories about the actions of a high school football team towards a mentally disabled teammate. Both stories were drafted from news stories about real local high school football programs. The first article told the story of a high school football team that gave a student with cerebral palsy an opportunity to score a touchdown and highlighted the positive emotions the student expressed as a result of that experience. In stark contrast, the second article told the story of members of a high school football team who verbally and sexually assaulted a disabled teammate. The choice of stories

[3] The one example that we are aware of in political science focuses on stress from daily life and finds a link between that emotional state and political engagement (Hassell and Settle 2017).
[4] Note: The sample is representative. You'll have to trust us on this for right now until we add survey demographic tables to appendix which we haven't had time to do yet.

was based on research by Berkowitz and Harmon-Jones (2004), who suggests that anger is an emotion that must be induced through situations that cause psychological pain or discomfort, physical pain or discomfort, or by some external agent acting improperly or in a disturbing manner.

Table 1: Text of the Experimental Treatment

Treatment	Control
When a teammate held out his arms after football practice in their high school locker room, the student thought he was about to get a hug. Instead, he was viciously assaulted, authorities say. As the teammate restrained the victim, another football player thrust a coat hanger into the victim's rectum, according to a criminal complaint. Then a third teammate kicked the coat hanger several times. The victim, who is mentally disabled, was also verbally abused using offensive epithets. The person responsible for thrusting a coat hanger in the victim's rectum was initially charged with felony forcible sexual penetration by use of a foreign object. The 19-year-old reached a plea bargain that allowed him to plead guilty to a felony count of injury to a child. The deal will allow [NAME REDACTED] to avoid prison time unless he violates his probation.	The athletes on the Bosqueville High School Bulldogs designed an unforgettable moment under those 'Friday night lights' for a student with special needs. Not only did the varsity football team win on Nov. 8, they also set up a play so their biggest fan could help. [NAME REDACTED] has cerebral palsy and has been in a wheelchair his entire life, but his disability hasn't stopped his love of sports and the Bulldogs. The Bulldogs made classmate [NAME REDACTED's] dream come true by letting him come in the game to score a touchdown. "I'm really happy tonight," said the student. "I wanted to score!" he said. "It just felt good." Making the gesture even more special, the players on the team were fully involved and into it from the beginning. It was his big brother's last regular season high school football game, and he got to push his little brother across the goal line while his teammates cheered him on. His dad imagines he will remember the moment for years to come. "We'll be talking about this for a while," he said

Following the story, participants were asked to write a couple of sentences describing their emotional reaction to the football players and the outcome of the story.[5] After writing about

[5] The text of the prompt was "What did you think of the football players and the outcome of the story? Please write a couple of sentences describing your emotional reaction to the football players and the outcome of the story."

their emotional reactions, respondents were asked a series questions aimed to gauge their levels of social polarization and affective polarization. Specifically, to measure affective polarization, respondents were asked first to rate Democrats and Republicans on a feeling thermometer ranging from zero to 100. From this we construct a measure of affective polarization as the feelings towards out-partisans which is alignment with Webster et al.'s (2022) operationalization. Next, respondents were asked to evaluate high school football players generally and the high school football players in the story specifically using the same scale.[6]

To measure social polarization, we asked participants how they would react to certain relationships dealing with opposing partisans. Specifically, we asked participants two questions. The first question we asked was "If you found out a close friend was a [OPPOSING PARTISANS], what would be your response?" Respondents were given four options, with ranging from "I would end the friendship" to "I would change nothing about the friendship." The second question we ask is "Suppose a son or daughter of yours was getting married. How upset would you be if he or she married someone who is a [OPPOSING PARTISAN]?" with respondents being offered five options ranging from "Not at all upset" to "Extremely upset."[7] In both cases, we rescale the variables to values between zero and one with lower values indicating less hostility and higher values denoting greater hostility towards the out-party partisan.

[6] The feeling thermometer questions about partisans were shown first on a separate screen so that evaluations of partisans would not be influenced by anchoring effects.

[7] We should note that Webster et al. (2022) identify these outcomes as "hard" social polarization cases compared to lower cost social polarization like doing a favor for a friend or talking about politics with a friend. Thus, the effects we find are likely the lower bound of effects of negative emotion triggered by non-political stimuli on social political polarization rather than the maximum expected effects.

Effects of Stimuli

Before analyzing whether or not the non-political negative emotional prompting stimuli we provide has an effect on affective polarization and social polarization, we first want to identify whether or not the stimuli prompted different emotional responses from respondents. Keltner, Locke, and Audrain (1993) found that when participants are asked to label their emotions, they tend to discount the relevance of their feelings to subsequent judgments. This is why Lerner and Keltner (2001) measure anger via text analysis of written reactions to the stimulus. We follow this approach and use text-based analysis of the written responses to the experimental stimuli to gauge the effect of treatment on the respondents' emotional state post-treatment.

Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) software draws on decades of research that supports the notion of language as a window into psychological states, It analyzes written text and, based on word choices, offers insights into our emotions (think excited and happy!), thought processes, and even social connections (Boyd et al. 2022). These insights sometimes appear obvious, like happy words suggesting a positive mood, but LIWC goes beyond just basic emotions to uncover deeper psychological patterns (Pennebaker and Chung 2012). The number generated by the software is the number of words in the text that reflect a given emotional state.

Table 2 displays the LIWC results for various emotions by treatment condition. LIWC analysis of the respondents' written responses shows that the experiment elicited significantly different emotional states among the survey participants. Those in the control group used an average of four positive emotion words describing their reaction to the story, while those in the control group reported 0.24 positive emotion words on average. When describing their emotional reaction to the football players and the outcome of the story, participants in the treatment group

used 3.76 negative emotion words on average compared to 0.21 negative emotion words used by those in the control group.

Table 2: Emotional Content of Written Responses by Treatment Condition

Emotion	Control	Treatment	Difference
Positive	4.11	0.24	3.87*
Negative	0.21	3.76	-3.54*
Anxiety	0.03	0.34	-0.31*
Sad	0.09	0.71	-0.61*
Anger	0.01	1.16	-1.15*
N	615	584	

Note: *p <0.01, two tail t-test.

Clearly, the treatment elicited a decidedly negative emotional response. Reactions to the story among treatment group respondents varied, and each negative emotion (sad, anxiety, and anger) was experienced more strongly by those in the treatment group than those in the control group, but anger is the emotion that is most reflected in the written reactions to the story. Treatment group participants used—on average—nearly 3.5 times the number of angry words in their reactions to the story than sad words.

Effects of Stimuli on Attitudes

Having shown that the two stimuli prompted different emotional reactions as expected, we turn to the question of whether stimuli unrelated to politics that elicit negative emotional responses have an effect on political judgements.

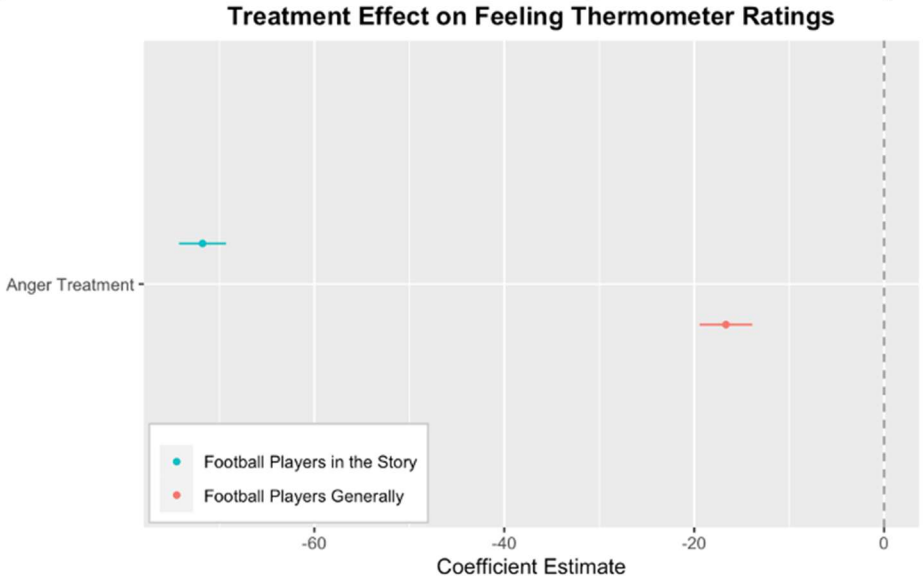
Unsurprisingly, we find that respondents who received the treatment were significantly more likely to hold less favorable views not only towards football players in the story but also towards football players more generally (See Table 3 and Figure 1).

Table 3: Effects of Treatment on Opinion of Football Players Feeling Thermometer - OLS Regression

	Football Players (Story) (1)	Football Players (General) (2)
Negative Emotion Treatment	-71.78***	-16.65***
	(1.256)	(1.42)
N	1,193	1,198
R^2	0.73	0.10
Adjusted R^2	0.73	0.10

Note: *p < .1; **p<.05; ***p < .01

Figure 1: Coefficient Estimates of Effect on Opinion of Football Players



Effects of Stimuli on Social Polarization

We also expected that our treatments unrelated to politics that generated negative emotional reactions would also have an effect on social polarization. To test this, we look at the differences between the treatment and control groups in their response to the questions about

what respondents would do if they found out a family member was marrying someone from the out-party or what they would do if they discovered that a close friend was an out-party member. As we indicated previously, we rescaled both social polarization question responses so that they are in the same direction with lower values indicating less hostility and higher values denoting greater hostility.

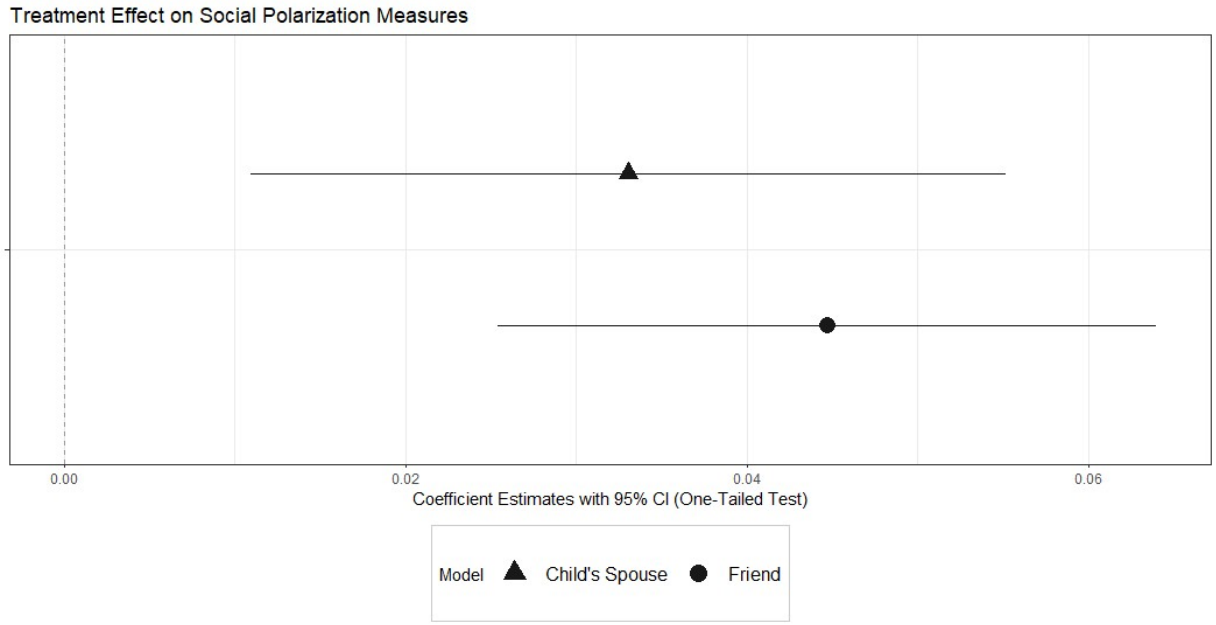
As shown in Table 4 and Figure 3, we found that respondents who received the negative emotional stimuli treatment were more likely to report they were more upset with family members marrying someone from the out-party than those in the control group. Specifically, those in the treatment scored on average .033 points higher on a 5-point scale. Furthermore, we find that respondents in the treatment group were significantly more likely to report that they would change an aspect of the friendship than those in the control group. Those in the treatment group's responses on average were .045 points higher than the control group's responses on a 4-point scale. These results provide consistent evidence that that negative emotions prompted by stimuli unrelated to politics has an effect on social polarization.

Table 4: Effect of Treatment on Social Polarization
Feeling Thermometer - OLS Regression

	Family Members	Close Friends
	(1)	(2)
Negative Emotion Treatment	0.033*	0.045**
	(0.013)	(0.012)
N	1,200	1,200
R^2	0.005	0.012
Adjusted R^2	0.004	0.011

Note: *p < .05; **p < .01

Figure 3: Coefficient Estimates of Effect on Social Polarization



Study II

The first study lacks a true control group and does not isolate anger (relative to other emotions). We designed and pre-registered another experiment that would both isolate anger and have a true control group. Webster et al. (2022) measured the effects of political anger using an experimental design adapted from Lerner and Keltner's (2001) study of anger. We are interested in the effect of non-political anger, so we use the same design as Lerner and Keltner (2001) for our anger treatment, but since we are interested in making comparisons similar to those of Webster et al. (2022) we use the same control as they did in their experiment.

Participants. Lucid recruited a sample of 2,627 people across the United States to participate in a political study conducted between April 19 and 22, 2024. Lucid acts as a hub, connecting researchers with survey participants from a variety of sources. This diverse pool of respondents is popular for academic studies. Lucid gathers basic demographics on all participants, allowing researchers to create samples that mirror the US population according to census data. (Coppock and McClellan 2019). To ensure respondents were engaged with the survey, we included an

attention check question and removed data from participants who missed it. 2,627 began the survey, 1,320 (50.25%) correctly answered the attention question, and, of those, 1,320 (100%) completed the entire survey. We've included a comparison in the appendix demonstrating that our sample reflects the US population on important demographic characteristics.

Procedure

Participants were randomly divided into two groups, each asked to briefly describe three to five things that make them angry (that they ate for breakfast). Then, following Lerner and Keltner's (2001) study of anger, participants in the treatment group were asked to "please describe in more detail the one situation that makes you or has made you the most angry? Please try to write your description so that anyone just reading it might even get mad." Control group participants were asked to describe the breakfast item that was the most healthy and to try to make a reader understand their experience eating that item. In order to specifically study non-political anger, the treatment group received instructions to "describe three to five situations from your personal, social, or professional life that make you the most angry."

Table 3: Text of the Experimental Treatment

Treatment	Control
We are interested in understanding a bit more about you. In the space below, please describe three to five situations from your personal, social, or professional life that make you the most angry. [page break] Now, thinking about your previous response, will you please describe in more detail the one situation that makes you or has made you the most angry? Please try to write your description so that anyone just reading it might even get mad.	We are interested in understanding a bit more about your eating habits. In the space below, please describe three to five things that you ate for breakfast. [page break] Now, thinking about your previous response, will you please describe in more detail the one breakfast item that was the most healthy? Please try to write your description so that anyone just reading it would understand your experience eating that item.

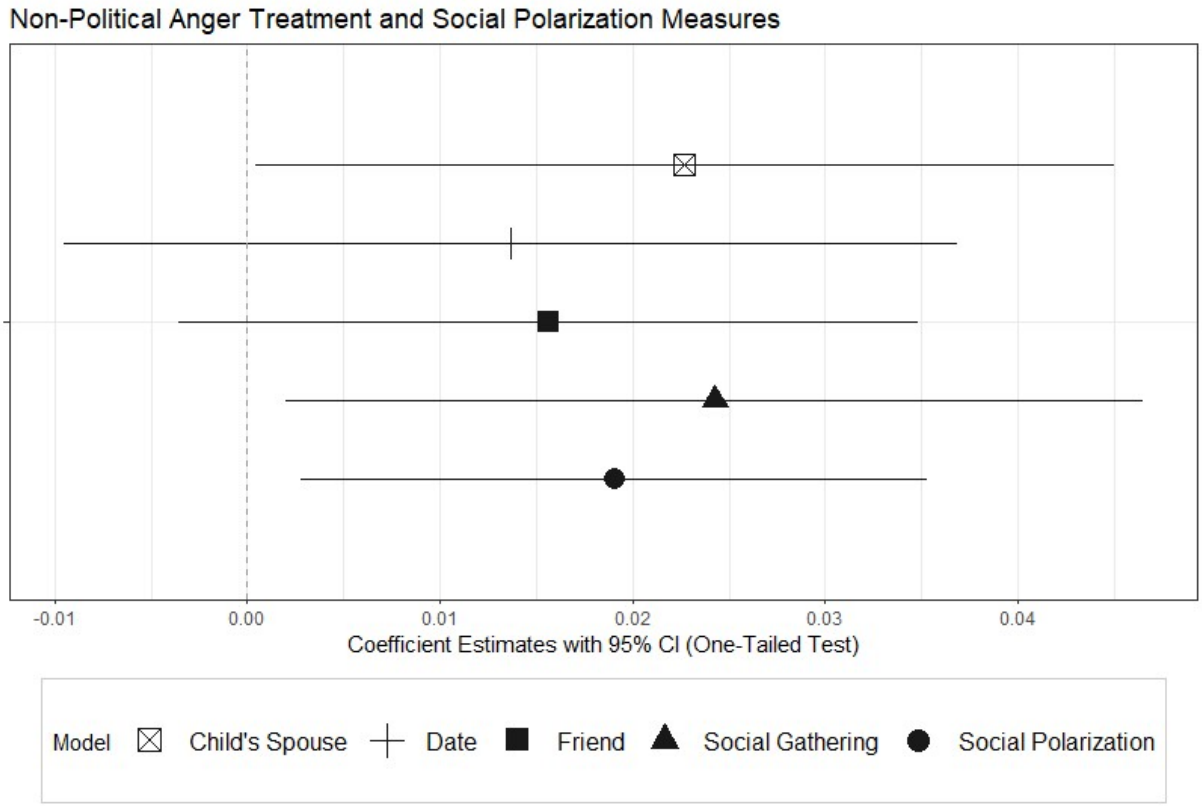
After writing about their experiences with anger (breakfast), respondents were asked a series of questions aimed to gauge their levels of social polarization. We asked participants how they would react to certain relationships dealing with opposing partisans. Specifically, we asked participants four questions. Specifically, we asked, "If you found out a close friend was a [OPPOSING PARTISANS], what would be your response?" Respondents were given four options, with ranging from "I would end the friendship" to "I would change nothing about the friendship." We also asked asked, "Suppose a son or daughter of yours was getting married. How upset would you be if he or she married someone who is a [OPPOSING PARTISAN]?" with respondents being offered five options ranging from "Not at all upset" to "Extremely upset."[8] We further asked, "If there was a social gathering or club that you were invited to and would normally want to go to or join but you found out that there was mostly going to be Republicans there, what would you do?" In this case, respondents were offered five options ranging from "Certainly go" to "Say no, and talk badly about those who are attending to your friends." We also asked, "If a Republican asked you to go on a first date, what would you do?" with response options ranging from "Certainly go" to "Say no, and talk badly about the person to your friends." In all cases, we rescale the variables to values between zero and one with lower values indicating less hostility and higher values denoting greater hostility towards the out-party partisan.

Results

[8] We should note that Webster et al. (2022) identify these outcomes as "hard" social polarization cases compared to lower cost social polarization like doing a favor for a friend or talking about politics with a friend. Thus, the effects we find are likely the lower bound of effects of negative emotion triggered by non-political stimuli on social political polarization rather than the maximum expected effects.

Figure 4 shows the results of the treatment reminding respondents about things that made them angry in their social or professional life. For all of the results, we find consistent positive effects whereby social or professional anger leads to greater social political polarization, all of which have similar effect sizes. For two of the four, we find statistically significant results. After being reminded about things in their professional or social life that make them angry, respondents are more likely to express dismay at the idea of their spouse marrying an individual of the opposite party, they indicate they are less likely to attend a social gathering with opposite party partisans attending.

Figure 4: Coefficient Estimate of Treatment Effect on Social Polarization



Given that each of these questions gets at the same underlying construct of an individual's attitude towards individuals in the out-party, the last coefficient estimate in Figure 4 is the effect on an aggregate measure of social polarization that combines individual responses

from each of the four questions onto a single dimension. We find that there is a statistically significant relationship between being prompted to remember experiences with anger that are unrelated to politics and general social polarization. This finding confirms our argument that the experience of anger is socially polarizing regardless of whether or not that anger is related to politics.

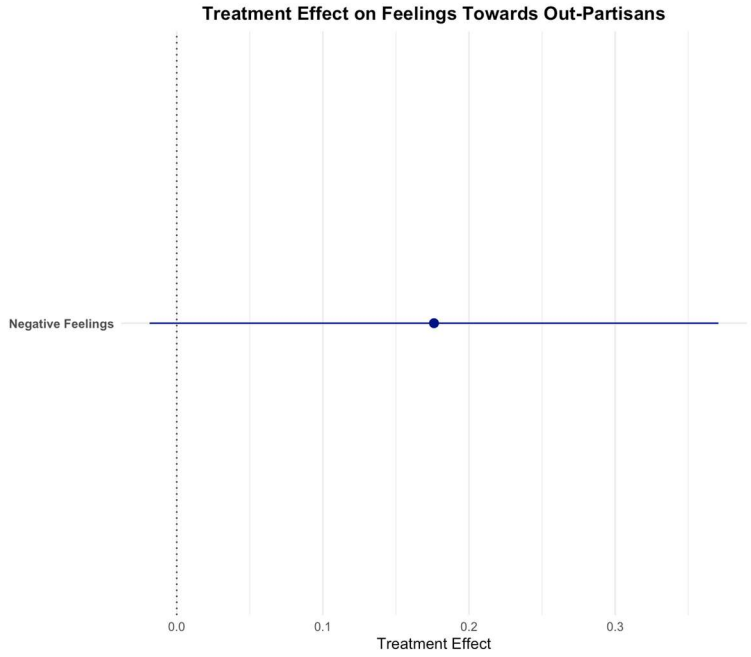
Lastly, we also presented respondents with a scale from 1 to 6 with the lowest value indicating, "My feelings toward the typical Republican [Democrat] aren't negative at all" and the highest value of 6 indicating, "My feelings toward the typical Republican [Democrat] are overwhelmingly negative." We find that those who received the treatment were more likely to report negative attitudes more than respondents who received the control (one sided p-value .038) (See Table 7 and Figure 5). This finding suggests that respondents who received the treatment were more likely to report negative feelings towards out-partisans on average than respondents in the control group. Thus, negative emotions trigged from a non-political source led to more negative feelings towards out-partisans.

Table 7: Effects of Treatment on Feelings Towards Out-Partisans
6-point scale - OLS Regression

	Negative Feelings Towards Out-Partisans
Treatment	0.176*
	(0.099)
N	1,102
R^2	0.003
Adjusted R^2	0.002

Note: *p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

Figure 5: Treatment Effect on Feelings Towards Out-Partisans



Conclusion

While previous work has shown that political anger has a strong effect on affective polarization and social polarization (Webster 2020; Webster et al. 2022), our work provides clear evidence that the causes of anger (or negative emotions more generally) do not have to be focuses on politics to have an impact on these outcomes. Using a survey experiment, we find that individuals who are exposed to stimuli unrelated to politics that are designed to elicit negative emotions are more likely to react negatively not only towards the origins of the stimuli, but also to out-party partisans. We find that individuals who are exposed to the non-political negative emotion stimuli report higher levels of affective polarization and are more likely to a willingness to socially distance themselves from out-party partisans compared to those who receive non-political positive emotion stimuli. Simply, even though the stimulus was unrelated to politics, we find effects of the treatment in political evaluations.

While we might hope that individuals are able to isolate the causes of their negative emotional states and react accordingly, our evidence suggests that the effects of negative emotions in the non-political part of life spillover into political evaluations and considerations. Our evidence suggests that efforts to mitigate anger and other negative emotional reactions in politics may not be sufficient to prevent greater affective polarization if there are not also reductions in similar emotions prompted in other parts of life. Overall our findings paint a picture of greater interactivity between the political and non-political components of our lives and the spillover effects of emotion.

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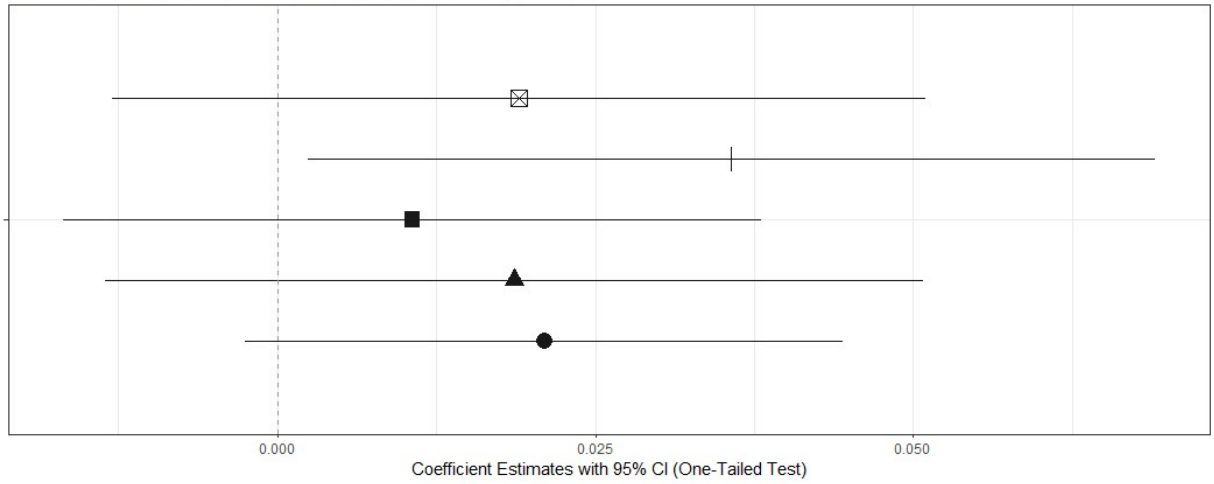
Non-Political Anger Treatment Effect For Identified Republicans



Non-Political Anger Treatment Effect For Identified Democrats