

Pareto Party? Welfare Consequences of Partisanship

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Abstract

The deepest worry about “negative” partisanship is that people will cut their nose to spite their face. Will partisans choose something that isn’t Pareto optimal? When offered a choice between a scheme where co-partisans win X and opposing partisans win $X + 5$ versus where co-partisans win $X - 5$ and opposing partisans win $X - 10$, will they opt for the latter?

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Democrats and Republicans are increasingly sure that they cannot trust the other side. They also increasingly believe that the other side is naive or worse—motivated by bad faith and plausibly even anti-national. Such mistrust poses a grave threat to liberal democracies because it corrodes accountability. Some research suggests that it is indeed true. For instance, data suggest that independents are most responsive to ideological differences and partisans least responsive to ideological differences with co-partisans (Sood and Iyengar 2018). Others cite a more conventional example. Despite any number of missteps by Mr. Trump, well north of 80% of Republicans approve of him.¹

Reduced accountability is one thing. Spiteful choices are another. We find that partisans do not choose what is Pareto optimal but are willing to take a hit to their payoff to reduce payoffs for the other side.

There is a long literature (Amira, Wright and Goya-Tocchetto 2019).

1 Data and Research Design

To assess how partisans choose policy, we surveyed a nationally representative sample of people selected by YouGov (Rivers 2007) as part of a Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) module. We used a small vignette to check whether partisans prefer a Pareto optimal policy or not. In particular, we showed Democrats Figure 1a and Republicans 1b and asked them: "Which plan do you support? — Smith Plan or Williams Plan." We randomized the order of responses. We expect most people to choose the Pareto optimal policy—the Smith Plan.

¹<https://news.gallup.com/poll/203198/presidential-approval-ratings-donald-trump.aspx>



(a) Treatment Shown to Democrats



(b) Shown to Republicans

Figure 1: Vignettes

2 Results

As Table 1 shows, two-third of the Democrats and three-fourths of the Republicans choose the Williams Plan rather than the Smith Plan.

	Democrat	Republican
Smith Plan	0.33	0.26
Williams Plan	0.67	0.74

Table 1: Most Frequently Implicated Domains

References

- Amira, Karyn, Jennifer Cole Wright and Daniela Goya-Tocchetto. 2019. "In-Group Love Versus Out-Group Hate: Which Is More Important to Partisans and When?" *Political Behavior* pp. 1–22.
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