

# Explaining Partisan Affect: Partisan Response to Partisan Response

Douglas J. Ahler\*

Carolyn E. Roush<sup>†</sup>

Gaurav Sood<sup>‡</sup>

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## Abstract

What causes affective polarization? Explanations are traditionally divided into “principled” and “unprincipled” sources. We propose a third, seemingly principled — but ultimately not — basis for partisan animus. Democrats and Republicans are notoriously motivated reasoners, and this lazy thinking is increasingly on display. If citizens recognize and punish motivated reasoning, but asymmetrically across party lines, their feelings toward Democratic and Republican supporters are liable to polarize in a manner consistent with recent trends. Because we lack opportunities to observe partisans’ response to non-motivated reasoning, we rely on survey experiments in which we exogenously manipulate partisans’ sense of faulty reasoning in their own ranks or among out-partisans. We present results from a pilot study: Republicans appear to display a “bias blind spot,” but with a small number of Republican respondents, the apparent effect is imprecisely estimated; we fail to find this pattern among Democratic respondents. Instead, we find stronger evidence of “partisan cheerleading”: Democrats and Republicans both appear to punish in-party supporters for *non-motivated* reasoning. We discuss these results, along with a couple of anomalies, in the context of preparing for a larger-*n*, nationally representative study manipulating partisans’ sense of economy-related motivated reasoning on both sides. We present a design that is ready to field and welcome all comments, questions, and suggestions.

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\*Assistant Professor of Political Science, Florida State University, [dahler@fsu.edu](mailto:dahler@fsu.edu)

<sup>†</sup>Democracy Postdoctoral Fellow, the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation at the Harvard Kennedy School, [carolyn\\_roush@hks.harvard.edu](mailto:carolyn_roush@hks.harvard.edu)

<sup>‡</sup>Independent researcher, [gsood07@gmail.com](mailto:gsood07@gmail.com)

Polarization is a defining feature of contemporary U.S. politics. Increasingly, it bleeds into broader society. According to a recent Pew study, Americans perceive party conflict as the defining cleavage of the day: 86% of Americans believe that strong conflict exists between Democrats and Republicans today (with 64% describing that conflict as “very strong”). For comparison, 65% of Americans say that strong conflict exists between black and white citizens, with just 27% describing that conflict as “very strong” (Gramlich 2017). At the mass level, this conflict manifests itself affectively (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012). Democrats and Republicans increasingly dislike each other, see the other party as a threat to the nation’s well being, discriminate against out-party supporters, and would prefer to avoid social contact with them (Pew 2014). Ultimately, some argue, this animus and distrust has the potential to undermine trust in government and democratic legitimacy (Hetherington and Rudolph 2015).

What explains this increasing hostility between Democratic and Republican supporters? Obviously, there is no singular cause. We can, however, group potential explanations into broader categories. One sensible dichotomy, proposed by Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes (2012), is that partisan affect may be *principled* or *unprincipled*. Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes conceive of principled affect as grounded in policy preferences: Democrats may dislike Republicans because they find their policy positions unpalatable, and vice versa. They find little support for this hypothesis, instead arguing that “the mere act of identifying with a political party is sufficient to trigger negative evaluations of the opposition” (2012, 407). Subsequent research has generally supported this conclusion. For example, partisan anger and bias appear to be more related to political identities than policy preferences (Mason 2015). And the psychology of affective polarization generally supports “unprincipled animus.” Not only do longstanding personality traits predict citizens’ animus toward the out-party (Webster 2018), but negativity toward the other side appears to be deeply ingrained and automatic (Iyengar and Westwood 2014).

But even if partisan animus doesn't stem from policy preferences — a proposition still up for debate (e.g., [Rogowski and Sutherland 2016](#)) — it may still be principled. People may dislike the out-party not because of what they believe, but instead because of the behavior they observe. Specifically, we suspect that citizens increasingly dislike the other side because they observe their opponents engaging in blatant motivated reasoning. Examples of this type of bias in the real world are abundant. Partisans process information in a biased way and reason toward factual conclusions that are congenial to their party, often ignoring contrary details ([Lodge and Taber 2013](#)). For example, who sits in the White House colors partisans' economic evaluations ([Bartels 2002](#); [Bisgaard 2015](#)), and their responses to political scandals depend on the party involved ([Ahler and Sood 2014](#)). Moreover, these behaviors are unlikely to escape the attention of most citizens. Just as the media highlights and reinforces perceptions of social or ideological divisions among partisans, so too does it highlight and reinforce perceptions of out-party bias. For example, the kind of faulty political reasoning that often accompanies partisans' response to co-party scandals is extensively covered by the media, and particularly among outlets that do not share the partisan affiliation of those involved in the scandal ([Budak, Goel and Rao 2014](#); [Puglisi and Snyder 2011](#)).

Citizens, however, are unlikely to dwell equally on all types of partisan bias. We believe part of the reason why out-party evaluations have plummeted over time while in-party evaluations have remained relatively stable ([Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012](#); [Hetherington and Weiler 2009](#)) is because partisans tend to disproportionately attend to the bias of their opponents while ignoring their own. This phenomenon, known as the “bias blind spot,” is a common cognitive bias in which people can correctly identify bias in others but not errors in their own thinking ([Pronin, Lin and Ross 2002](#); [Pronin 2007](#)). In an era in which partisan identities are particularly salient ([Bartels 2000](#); [Hetherington 2001](#)), we suspect that this tendency extends beyond the individual to the hive mind that is the mass

party — especially because people generally ascribe good characteristics to in-groups and negative ones to out-groups in a blanket fashion (Alexander, Brewer and Hermann 1999). And because cognitive biases are generally considered to be undesirable, observing the other side’s motivated reasoning is likely to confirm partisans’ preconceived notions of their opponents as “bad people” — thus reinforcing attitudes and heightening affective polarization.

In this paper, we investigate this potential source of partisan animus. Specifically, we rely on two experiments to determine whether partisans’ exposure to out-party bias increases their negative feelings toward other side. In this early draft, we present evidence from a pilot study suggesting that partisans’ observation of out-party bias may exacerbate polarization, although these apparent effects are imprecisely estimated. Contrary to our expectations, we also find that partisans *do* appear to react to bias on their own side by punishing co-partisans for not sufficiently participating in “partisan cheer-leading” (Bullock et al. 2015). These findings, however, may be an artifact of flaws in our pilot design. Accordingly, we lay out our plans for administering a large-*n*, nationally representative survey which we anticipate being fielded next month.

## Principled Partisan Affect, or a Partisan Bias Blind Spot?

Partisans are notoriously lazy reasoners. The bulk seem unfazed by their own lousy arguments: news feeds and comments sections across the internet are menageries of systematic inaccuracy, wishful thinking, and whataboutism (more formally defined as *bolstering* by Abelson 1959). This may lead Americans to walk away from inter-party conversations frustrated. Essentially, *second-order reasoning*—reactions to the other side’s political reasoning—could be a principled source of partisan animus.

How principled is another question. If partisans observe motivated reasoning

on both sides of the political spectrum—and update their feelings toward both parties accordingly—second-order reasoning is unbiased. We could think of such behavior as “principled partisanship”: Democrats and Republicans feel more warmly toward their own party, but react negatively to lazy reasoning on either side. Such second-order reasoning could fuel dislike between the parties but would be unlikely to polarize partisan sentiments, since both Democrats and Republicans alike would ultimately become discouraged with supporters of *both* parties. But what if people have biased second-order beliefs about partisan motivated reasoning? That is, what if they observe and disapprove of out-party motivated reasoning but fail to do so when their co-partisans show bias? Indeed, this is exactly what we should expect from humans’ tendency to have a general “bias blind spot” (Pronin, Lin and Ross 2002; Pronin 2007).

The effect of such “motivated updating” would be polarization. If Democrats grouse about Republicans’ reasoning failures without penalizing their co-partisans, and Republicans eschew Democrats’ hackery without checking their own, the feelings that everyone reports about the out-party are liable to decline while in-party sentiment holds constant. This is exactly the pattern we’ve observed over the past several decades—perhaps not coincidentally, since the emergence of “guerilla tactics” (Schickler 2001) in congressional conflict.

Another, even more perverse, possibility exists. Partisans may react negatively to reasoning failures on *both* sides. That is, people might malign out-party supporters for their own motivated reasoning while also disapproving of their co-partisans’ failure to reason to the “appropriate” conclusion. We have reason to expect such *second-order partisan cheerleading*. When partisans don’t know a political fact, they’ll often assume the party-congenial version, in the absence of incentives for accuracy (Bullock et al. 2015). This is first-order partisan cheerleading: just as Lakers fans conclude that Lonzo Ball’s three-point shot will eventually fall, Republican supporters believe that the FBI

**Figure 1: A Typology of Partisan Reasoning**

When partisans see in-party bias, they...	When partisans see out-party bias, they...			
		Like the out-party more	Don't change out-party feelings	Like the out-party less
	Like the in-party more	No theoretical reason to expect these outcomes	Partisan cheerleading	
	Don't change in-party feelings		Partisan reasoning unimportant	Motivated updating
	Like the in-party less		Unbiased updating	

is “working to delegitimize the president” (Kahn 2018). But how do citizens (or hoops fans) react to their co-partisans who don’t adopt those congenial conclusions? Declining in-party affect would be evidence of *second-order* partisan cheerleading—or encouraging co-partisans to reason in a motivated fashion by sanctioning unbiased reasoners.

We summarize these possibilities in Figure 1. The typology summarizes potential aggregate outcomes under various types of partisan reasoning. For example, if partisans observe biased reasoning among both in-party and out-party supporters and update their feelings about both parties accordingly, we find ourselves in the bottom right cell labeled “principled partisanship.” As noted earlier, this type of reasoning is unlikely to yield polarization because supporters of both parties shift their opinions of the parties, in the same direction, in accordance with current events. But other forms of second-order reasoning about current events, shown in the red cells, are more likely to polarize Democrats and Republicans. For example, if citizens only react to faulty out-party reasoning—“motivated updating”—their feelings toward the parties will polarize. In sum, if people do evaluate the parties according to the quality of their supporters’ reasoning, second-order reasoning is liable to exacerbate polarization unless Democrats evaluate their co-partisans’ reasoning the same way they do Republicans’ (and vice versa).

## **Pilot: Partisan Response to Partisan Response to Controversy**

Does observation of out-party bias exacerbate affective polarization? Unfortunately, we lack the causal leverage to answer this question using observational data. Democrats and Republicans interpret real-world events through their own “perceptual screen[s]” (Campbell et al. 1960) more or less simultaneously, making it impossible to isolate any independent effect that observing out-party bias may have on out-party dislike. Furthermore, we lack real-world counterfactuals. Since partisan bias is so widespread, we rarely have opportunities observe how people react to out-partisans “negatively updating” their evaluations of the out-party or its leaders. To circumvent these problems, we rely upon a randomized, controlled experiment to determine if and how partisans’ exposure to out-party bias exacerbates the negativity they feel for their opponents. Specifically, we use a series of vignettes featuring real political controversies and manipulate whether or not co-partisan politicians subsequently lost support among their base. This design holds constant both the controversy and the elite embroiled in the controversy, which helps to rule out important confounding variables that could muddle inferences drawn from observational data.

We focus on controversies (and partisans’ reaction to them) in this experiment for a few reasons. For one, controversies are a relatively easy way for citizens to hold politicians accountable for their actions. Typically, political accountability is assessed in one of two ways: (1) whether elected officials espouse and pursue the policies favored by their constituents and/or (2) whether elected officials are seen as contributing positively to government performance (most commonly assessed by economic outcomes). Evaluating politicians on these bases requires a certain level of political sophistication and objectivity that most ordinary citizens lack. As a result, people often fail to hold elected officials

accountable using these metrics (e.g., Achen and Bartels 2016; Bartels 2008; Healy and Lenz 2014; Lenz 2012; Sniderman and Stiglitz 2012; Sood and Iyengar 2014). Evaluating a specific controversy or misstep, on the other hand, requires much less cognitive effort and investment. For one, voters do not have to proactively search for information about these types of controversies; they are covered extensively by the media, and in particular by ideologically dissimilar outlets (Budak, Goel and Rao 2014; Puglisi and Snyder 2011). Secondly, controversies often surround topics that are nominally nonideological in content. For example, our vignettes feature two prominent, real world controversies concerning a salient administrative failure and a blatant attempt to prevent a high-stakes compromise. Because these outcomes are almost universally undesirable, observing the other side’s failure to punish their leaders may strike partisans as particularly egregious — thus heightening out-party animosity.

To test this theory, we recruited 930 people to participate in a survey administered through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk in November 2013. To preclude suspicion, we told respondents they would be participating in a survey on political media consumption and political learning. Prior to our experiment, we posed a question to determine whether or not respondents were paying attention to the survey. In particular, the question asked respondents to mark two particular responses. Of the 930 respondents, 38 respondents failed to complete the task as requested. We removed these participants from our sample as we felt that they were merely adding noise to the data. Because we are interested in *partisans’* reactions to outparty bias, we further subset our analysis to include only self-identified and leaning partisans.<sup>1</sup> Of the 726 self-identified and leaning partisans, 552 are Democrats, consistent with the general liberal bias in MTurk samples (Berinsky, Huber and Lenz 2012).

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<sup>1</sup>We group together “leaning” Independents with “strong” and “weak” partisans per previous research demonstrating Independent leaners think and behave like partisans (Keith et al. 1992).



Participants were randomly assigned to read a news story on (what was) one of three contemporary political controversies: (1) the troubled rollout of the U.S. health exchange website, Healthcare.gov (which we classify as a Democratic controversy), (2) Senator Ted Cruz’s decision to force a government shutdown (which we classify as a Republican controversy), and (3) Toronto mayor Rob Ford’s drug abuse scandal (our control). We selected these the Cruz and Healthcare.gov cases because they were timely examples of real-world, high-profile missteps that generated significant news coverage. Within these two experimental groups, we further manipulated whether Democrats’ (Republicans’) opinions of Obama (Cruz) changed in response to the blunder. This created five conditions based on vignette content: (1) *Democrats - Unbiased*, in which Democrats show less support for Obama post-controversy, (2) *Democrats - Biased*, in which Democrats maintain high support for Obama post-controversy, (3) *Republicans - Unbiased*, in which Republicans show less support for Cruz post-controversy, (4) *Republicans - Biased*, in which Republicans maintain high support for Cruz post-controversy, and (5) *Control*. (See Appendix A1 for vignettes.) After exposing respondents to these stories, we asked them to rate the Democratic and Republican parties using feeling thermometers. We use party feeling thermometer scores as our dependent variables in this study because they are the most common means by which to measure affective polarization (e.g., [Haidt and Hetherington 2012](#); [Hetherington and Rudolph 2015](#); [Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012](#); [Iyengar and Westwood 2014](#); [Mason 2015](#)).

Though our sample is disproportionately Democratic, we analyze the results of our experiment separately among Democrats and Republicans to detect any partisan differences in response to the treatments.<sup>2</sup> We also elect to analyze the feeling thermometers as separate dependent variables, as previous research demonstrates that the growing gulf in

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<sup>2</sup>Research suggests that Democrats and Republicans may process information differently ([Grossman and Hopkins 2016](#)).

partisan affect has been caused primarily by increasing dislike of the outparty and not by a corresponding increase in warm inparty feelings (Haidt and Hetherington 2012; Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012). As out-party negativity is the “prime mover” over time, we might also expect our experiments to produce greater variation in the out-party feeling thermometers compared to the in-party feeling thermometers. Accordingly, our analysis produces four OLS regressions that analyze the impact of our experimental manipulation on out- and in-party affect among Democrats and Republicans.

For each model, we include four dummy variables representing assignment to one of our experimental conditions - (1) *Out-party - Unbiased* (Democrats - Unbiased for Republicans; Republicans - Unbiased for Democrats); (2) *Out-Party - Biased* (Democrats - Biased for Republicans; Republicans - Biased for Democrats); (3) *In-Party - Unbiased* (Democrats - Unbiased for Democrats and Republicans - Unbiased for Republicans); and (4) *In-Party - Biased* (Democrats - Biased for Democrats and Republicans - Biased for Republicans).<sup>3</sup> Respondents receive a value of 1 if they were assigned to that particular condition and a value of 0 if they were not. The dependent variables — the in- and out-party feeling thermometers — range from 0 to 100. Positive coefficients indicate an increase in warmth toward the party in question; negative coefficients indicate a decrease in warmth toward the party in question.

Given our theory that partisans respond disproportionately to out-party bias and that observation of out-party bias heightens negative feelings toward the other side, we expect the largest experimental effects to appear among those respondents assigned to the *Out-Party - Unbiased* or *Out-Party - Biased* conditions. It is our expectation that observing the other’s side lack of response to a controversy (*Out-Party - Biased*) increases negative affect toward the outparty (meaning that coefficients in these conditions should be negative). Conversely, those partisans who observe the other side reacting in a more

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<sup>3</sup>Control is omitted as the reference category.

“unbiased” manner — those assigned to the *Out-Party - Unbiased* — should feel, on average, more warmly toward their opponents, since the vignette suggests that their political opponents are more rational than anticipated. We have fewer expectations about how our experiment might affect people’s feelings toward their own side. Since we argue partisans’ response to bias is asymmetric, we do not expect information about whether one’s own side engaged or did not engage in motivated reasoning to meaningfully influence in-party affect.<sup>4</sup> Finally, we should observe little to no effect of assignment to either the *Out-Party - Unbiased* or *Out-Party - Biased* conditions on in-party affect and for a similar null effect of assignment to the *In-Party - Unbiased* or *In-Party - Biased* conditions on out-party affect, since it is not immediately clear why information about one’s own party’s bias (or lack thereof) should influence feelings toward the opposite party.

Table 1 presents the results of our experiment. We find mixed support for our hypotheses. Looking first at how our treatments may have affected Republicans’ attitudes toward the Democratic Party (Column 1), we find a substantively significant increase in Republicans’ warm feelings toward the Democratic Party after they were told that Democrats changed their opinions of Obama following the Healthcare.gov blunder. Republicans in this condition rated the Democratic Party on average about 6 percentage points warmer ( $\hat{\beta} = 6.640$ ) compared to those in the control group. That being said, this effect is not statistically significant at conventional levels ( $p=0.22$ ).<sup>5</sup> Those Democrats who were also assigned to the *Out-Party - Unbiased* condition, on the other hand, did not appear to respond significantly to the treatment. Being told that Republicans “correctly”

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<sup>4</sup>As noted previously, in-party feeling thermometer scores have remained relatively stable over time, which suggests these ratings are far less sensitive to stimuli than out-party ratings (Haidt and Hetherington 2012; Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012). The idea that in-party affect would be more difficult to move than out-party affect is also well supported by social identity research. People are motivated to maintain a positive in-group image and to disparage the out-group (Tajfel and Turner 1979). Therefore, we might expect partisans to fail to update their evaluations of their own side when they observe in-party bias even as they more “accurately” update their evaluations of the other party when they observe out-party bias.

<sup>5</sup>This is likely due to the small number of Republicans in the study.

updated their approval of Cruz following the government shutdown did not appear to alter Democrats' feelings toward their opponents in any substantively or significantly meaningful way ( $\hat{\beta} = 0.428$ ,  $p=0.89$ ). Overall, Republicans' behavior in response to this treatment appeared to conform to our expectations while Democrats' did not.

**Table 1: Party Affect by Experimental Condition**

	Outparty Affect		Inparty Affect	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Republicans	Democrats	Republicans	Democrats
Out-Party - Unbiased	6.640 (5.409)	0.428 (2.799)	8.991* (4.943)	-6.026** (2.749)
Out-Party - Biased	-0.972 (5.409)	1.222 (2.970)	-2.880 (4.943)	-2.635 (2.918)
In-Party - Unbiased	2.942 (5.190)	2.920 (2.848)	-3.337 (4.744)	-5.317* (2.798)
In-Party - Biased	-4.191 (5.314)	4.075 (2.820)	1.375 (4.859)	-1.102 (2.270)
Constant	30.585*** (3.549)	23.580*** (2.078)	63.171*** (3.244)	68.010*** (2.042)
Observations	172	552	172	552
R-squared	0.025	0.006	0.042	0.013

Standard errors in parentheses.

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \* $p < 0.1$ , two-tailed.

Source: 2013 MTurk Study.

Assignment to the *Out-Party - Biased* condition, on the other hand, did not appear to alter either Democrats' or Republicans' feelings toward their opponents (Columns 1 and 2). Neither coefficient ( $\hat{\beta} = -0.972$ ,  $p=0.86$  for Republicans;  $\hat{\beta} = 1.222$ ,  $p=0.68$  for Democrats) is substantively or statistically significant. While our original expectation was that assignment to these conditions would moderate out-party antipathy, we instead

find that informing partisans that the other side maintained its support for their leader in the wake of controversy has little to no substantive effect on their out-party evaluations.

While these results may appear puzzling at first, our treatments may have failed to move out-party affect because partisans are predisposed to assume that the out-party will react in a biased manner. That is, partisans may anticipate that out-party politicians will continue to receive sustained support from their followers after a scandal because such behavior is commonplace in American politics.<sup>6</sup> This may also explain why we see more of an effect (at least among Republicans) in the *Out-Party - Unbiased* condition: respondents were affected more by news that the out-party was *unbiased* because this information is unusual and surprising (e.g., [Maheswaran and Chaiken 2011](#)).

Some of the largest experimental effects emerge in those conditions in which we expected null results. Perhaps most interestingly, both groups of partisans appeared to feel *less* warmly toward their own side after being told co-partisan politicians lost support among their base (row 3 in Columns 3 and 4). On average, those Republicans who were told that Cruz's approval dropped rated the Republican Party three percentage points more negatively (though this effect is not statistically significant at conventional levels;  $\hat{\beta} = -3.337, p=0.48$ ). The effect among Democratic respondents in the *In-Party - Unbiased* condition was also substantively large and statistically significant; on average, those Democrats who were told their copartisans approved less of Obama following the misstep rated their own party about five degrees cooler ( $\hat{\beta} = -5.317, p=0.06$ ). Taken together, these results suggest that while partisans may punish the other side for engaging in motivated reasoning, they actually *reward* their own side for exhibiting favorable bias toward a co-party politician. In this way, partisans seem to approve of "partisan cheerleading" ([Bullock et al. 2015](#)) on their own side but punish their opponents for engaging in the

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<sup>6</sup>Indeed, previous work demonstrates that co-party politicians do not tend to lose support among partisans in the wake of scandals ([Ahler and Sood 2014](#)).

same practice.

Finally, we find some unexpected and perplexing results in our remaining conditions. Specifically, we find that out-party affect appears to be responsive to cues from one's own party and vice versa. While most of these effects are not statistically significant, their direction and magnitude warrant a closer look. For example, both Republicans and Democrats who were told that their own party reneged its support for a co-partisan leader rated the *other party*, on average, about three degrees warmer than their co-partisans in the control group ( $\hat{\beta}_{In-Party - Unbiased} = 2.942, p=0.57$  for Republicans;  $\hat{\beta}_{In-Party - Unbiased} = 2.920, p=0.30$  for Democrats). We also found that both groups of partisans appeared to rate their own side about three degrees *cooler* after learning that the other side engaged in motivated reasoning ( $\hat{\beta}_{Out-Party - Biased} = -2.880, p=0.56$  for Republicans;  $\hat{\beta}_{Out-Party - Biased} = -2.635, p=0.36$  for Democrats).

For the remaining conditions, we found that Democrats and Republicans differed in their responses to the same treatment. For example, those Republicans who were told that their own party engaged in motivated reasoning (*In-Party - Biased*) rated the other side about four percentage points *less* favorably ( $\hat{\beta} = -4.191, p=0.43$ ), while Democrats responded by rating the other side about four percentage points *more* favorably ( $\hat{\beta} = 4.075, p=0.15$ ). While neither of these effects are statistically significant, we find a similar discrepancy in partisans' response to the *Out-Party - Biased* condition. Here, we find that Republicans rated their own party a statistically significant nine percentage points warmer when they observed a loss in Democratic support for Obama ( $\hat{\beta} = 8.991, p=0.07$ ), and Democrats rated their own party a statistically significant 6 points cooler after observing similar behavior among Republicans ( $\hat{\beta} = -6.026, p=0.03$ ). These are, in fact, the largest effect sizes in the study and among the few that are statistically significant at conventional levels. While the discrepancy between positive and negative effects may be reflective of the fact that partisans think differently from one another (Grossman and Hopkins 2016),

we are nevertheless puzzled by the fact that out- (in)-party feeling thermometers move significantly in response to in- (out)-party treatments. We welcome any and all thoughts or interpretations concerning these results.

## **Research Design, Study II: Partisan Response to Partisan Retrospective Evaluations**

While some of the results above conformed to our expectations, many others did not. There are, however, some flaws in the study's design that suggest it may not be the best test of our theory. First, the relatively small number of respondents in the study makes it difficult to draw reliable statistical inferences. This is particularly problematic when drawing generalizations about Republican identifiers; on average, each experimental group had only a little more than 30 Republican respondents. While there are fewer statistical obstacles to analyzing Democrats' behavior in the study — each condition had about 100 Democratic respondents — we may still lack a large enough sample size to detect small effects (e.g., [Cohen 1992](#)).

Secondly, our treatments may not be strong enough to move partisan affect. In the design above, we manipulated perceptions of motivated reasoning by exposing participants to partisans' biased/unbiased approval ratings of political leaders. While bias in approval ratings is certainly one manifestation of motivated reasoning, it is also one of the most commonly observed in American politics. People may anticipate — and accept — that partisans will always favor in-party politicians and dislike out-party politicians because approval ratings are consistently tightly correlated with party identification.<sup>7</sup> Other types of motivated reasoning would perhaps strike partisans as less benign. For example,

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<sup>7</sup>This might also explain why we observe partisans punishing their own side for not engaging in bias in our pilot study: they see approval ratings as a mostly partisan attitude and dislike it when their co-partisans fail to sufficiently support their "team."

partisans overly incorporate congenial information and dismiss evidence that challenges their beliefs, even when arguments against their position are much stronger than their own side's (Druckman, Peterson and Slothuus 2013; Taber and Lodge 2006). Furthermore, they frequently misinterpret objective facts in order to maintain consistency with their prior beliefs (Bartels 2002; Gaines et al. 2007). Partisans may, in fact, increase their negative perceptions of the other side after being made aware of more brazen instances of motivated reasoning.

Finally, our design in the pilot does not test how partisans might respond when they are exposed to information demonstrating *both* in- and out-party bias. That is, we only tested how partisans responded to evidence of bias (or lack thereof) from one party at a time. In the real world, however, partisans often observe simultaneous partisan bias from both sides in reacting to the same news, fact, or event. Does being made aware of one's own biases attenuate the hostility partisans may feel when observing the other side engaging in motivated reasoning? While we think this is unlikely to be the case, we have not yet explored this possibility.

In an attempt to improve upon these flaws, we plan on administering a new survey to a nationally representative sample of adults in April 2018. Working with YouGov, we will recruit 1,500 participants — including equal numbers of Democrats and Republicans<sup>8</sup> — to participate in an experiment that we believe provides a clearer test of our theory.<sup>9</sup> Once again, to preclude suspicion, we will tell respondents that they will be participating in a survey designed to understand how people learn and what they pick up from various media.

We plan to manipulate perceptions of motivated reasoning by selectively exposing

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<sup>8</sup>A larger *n* and a balance on party identification will allow us to circumvent the small sample problems we encountered in the pilot study.

<sup>9</sup>We had originally prepared to administer this as part of an omnibus, cross-institutional survey in early March 2018, but circumstances beyond our control forced us to delay its launch. Instead, we present our research design here, and welcome any suggestions or critiques that might improve the experiment.



respondents to information about real-world changes in partisans' economic evaluations following the election of Donald Trump. Gallup polls administered just a week before and a week after the 2016 election demonstrated that partisans significantly shifted their evaluations of the economy in response to Trump's victory: namely, Republicans became more optimistic while Democrats became more pessimistic.<sup>10</sup> This kind of bias, we believe, will strike partisans as more egregious than that inherent in approval ratings. Partisans may tolerate bias in approval ratings because they constitute a subjective partisan *attitude*; tolerating bias in the interpretation of political *facts*, on the other hand, is an entirely different matter. We believe observing this kind of bias might inspire more pronounced changes in partisan affect.

To construct our treatments, we altered a real article from *Business Insider* that highlighted these phenomena. Specifically, we changed the original title — “Republicans and Democrats Have Dramatically Shifted Their Views of the U.S. Economy Since the Election” (Bryan 2016) — and content of the article to fit one of three treatment conditions: (1) one that highlights the Democrats' shift (“Democrats Have Dramatically Shifted Their Views...” - *Democrats - Biased* condition), (2) one that highlights the Republicans' shift (“Republicans Have Dramatically Shifted Their Views...” - *Republicans - Biased* condition), and (3) one that highlights the shifts among both partisan groups (preserving the original headline - *Bipartisan Bias* condition). In addition to altering the text and title, we also made two more modifications to the original article in constructing our treatments. First, we added a quote from an out-party supporter reacting to the shift, per previous research suggesting that narratives are more persuasive than statistics (Kahneman 2011).<sup>11</sup> Second, we added a graph showing displaying the trends described in the article to reflect

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<sup>10</sup>Specifically, prior to the election, only 16% of Republicans believed the economy was getting better, compared to 49% just a week later. At the same time, the percentage of Democrats who said the economy was improving dropped from 61% to 46% (Gallup 2016).

<sup>11</sup>For the third treatment condition displaying bipartisan bias, we included quotes from in-party and out-party members.

the fact that the addition of images and/or illustrations increases reading comprehension (Gambrell and Jawitz 1993).

In addition to our three treatment conditions, we also created a control condition using a slightly modified version of a real article from *The Hill* concerning the results of a recent poll about the economy.<sup>12</sup> This piece only reports the aggregate results from the poll; it does not highlight any differences in evaluations across partisan groups. We believe that by holding the subject matter — economic evaluations — across treatment and control groups, we can isolate the effect of exposure to biased partisan perceptions while ameliorating any concerns related to differences in topic selection. (See Appendix A2 for experimental vignettes.)

Following random assignment to one of these four groups, respondents will once rate the parties using the party feeling thermometers. As was the case in our previous experiment, we expect partisans to disproportionately punish the out-group for engaging in bias while either failing to punish or rewarding their own side for exhibiting the same kind of faulty reasoning. That is, we should observe those partisans who observe out-party bias (Democrats in the *Republicans - Biased* condition and Republicans in *Democrats - Biased* condition) to exhibit more negative out-party feelings than their counterparts in the control group. On the other hand, we expect that partisans who observe bias on their own side (Democrats in the *Democrats - Biased* condition and Republicans in *Republicans - Biased* condition) will differ little from their counterparts in the control group when it comes to the average score they assign to their own party. While we observed some evidence of partisan cheerleading in our earlier experiment — that is, partisans appeared to feel more negatively toward their own side after being told that their fellow partisans did *not* engage in bias — we do not necessarily expect similar results in this experiment. Whereas

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<sup>12</sup>Once again, we added a graph that summarizes the text of the article to maintain as much visual similarity as possible in the vignettes across conditions.

people may want their co-partisans to maintain support for an embroiled co-party politician, it is less likely that they will be disappointed in their co-partisans for not engaging in more blatant partisan reasoning. While we do not necessarily expect partisans to punish their own side for exhibiting bias, we do expect them to largely overlook in-party bias and disproportionately focus on the biased reasoning of the out-party (Pronin, Lin and Ross 2002; Pronin 2007). For similar reasons, we also expect an asymmetric partisan response among respondents assigned to the *Bipartisan Bias* condition. Even though respondents in this condition will be made aware of their own side's biases, we do not expect them to temper their evaluations of the out-party accordingly. Therefore, we should expect those assigned to the *Bipartisan Bias* to behave similarly to those assigned to conditions highlighting in- or out-party bias: partisans should not meaningfully change their evaluations of their own side, but should continue to reward the faulty reasoning of the out-party with more negative feeling thermometer scores.

Finally, we also plan to ask respondents to rate how well a series of personality traits — including “ignorant,” “sincere,” “open to reason,” “smug,” “selfish,” “patriotic,” and “hypocritical”<sup>13</sup> — describe Democrats and Republicans. The benefit here is twofold. First, divergence in trait ratings are indicative of affective polarization (Hetherington, Long and Rudolph 2016). Asking respondents to make these evaluations post-treatment thus gives us another set of dependent variables to analyze for evidence that our experiment produced changes partisan affect. Secondly, examining whether differences emerge across treatment groups for the “hypocritical” or “open to reason” ratings in particular might help us pinpoint the specific mechanism linking bias to out-party animus. While we do not specifically prime specific traits in our vignettes, we believe that these terms (or concepts) in particular are activated when partisans observe out-party bias. Seeing

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<sup>13</sup>These trait evaluations regularly appear in large scale surveys like the American National Election Studies.

evidence of the out-party's flawed thinking may cause partisans to conclude that their opponents are impervious to facts. Therefore, we should expect those partisans who observe out-party bias to characterize the opposition as less "open to reason" than their counterparts in the control group. Similarly, observing evidence of out-party bias may prompt respondents to see the other side as "hypocritical," as it can be used as ammunition to explain away prior accusations of bias from the out-party.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, we should expect partisans exposed to out-party bias to rate the other party as more hypocritical than their counterparts in the control group. Of course, given the theory we laid out about, we should again observe an asymmetry in response: those partisans who observe bias on the part of their own party — even in the *Bipartisan Bias* condition — should not be any more likely to ascribe these negative traits to their own side.

## Discussion and Conclusion

When partisans debate each other, scroll through Facebook, watch certain cable news programs, or read comments sections online, they are likely to encounter motivated reasoning—"on both sides." How they react has implications for affective polarization. If citizens hold their opponents accountable for their faulty reasoning while excusing their own, their out-party disdain would grow while their in-party sentiments would hold steady—exactly the pattern we've observed over past decades (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012).

How do citizens reason about partisan motivated reasoning? The data from our pilot study are largely inconclusive but suggest interesting patterns. Republicans' feelings toward Democrats improve six points when told that Democrats *did not* reach motivated conclusions when thinking about the healthcare.gov debacle, but with so few Republican respondents, this apparent effect is imprecisely estimated. Democrats, on the other hand,

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<sup>14</sup>Admittedly, our thinking here is underdeveloped. But we do have a strong suspicion that observing instances of hypocrisy and "whataboutism" are tightly connected to negative out-party affect.

did not appear fazed by information that Republicans punished Ted Cruz for his *Green Eggs and Ham* stunt, but neither did they react to information that Republicans did not do so. More apparent is evidence of partisan cheerleading: supporters of both parties appear to rate their co-partisans more negatively upon learning they reacted to an in-party controversy in an *unbiased* manner.<sup>15</sup> In sum, the evidence thus far suggests that when party supporters observe faulty partisan reasoning, they are liable to end up in the upper right cell in Figure 1: party cheerleading, coupled with the possibility of motivated updating, which can polarize partisan sentiment.

This comes with a huge caveat. Not only are these results imprecisely estimated and relatively opaque, but theory-unexpected results further muddle interpretation. Among the largest apparent effects from the pilot: Republicans' feelings toward their own party improve when they learn that Democrats punish Barack Obama for healthcare.gov's troubled roll-out, while Democrats' feelings toward their own party worsen when they learn Republicans punish Ted Cruz for his role in the shutdown. It's possible these discrepant results stem from differences between the two treatments. It's also possible the sample plays a role: MTurk Republicans tend to be outside the party mainstream. For these reasons, we are planning a nationally-representative survey with treatments that are as identical as possible across respondent partisanship. Furthermore, we propose presenting respondents with evidence of partisan motivated reasoning (or not) about economic facts, which may seem more egregious—and thus provide higher-impact, clearer treatments.

We suspect that partisan animosity has many roots. The existing dichotomy between “principled” and “unprincipled” sources of affective polarization overlooks a third possibility: partisans may have a principled basis for disliking the other party, but fail to recognize that same behavior among their own side. We find this a fruitful avenue of re-

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<sup>15</sup>Pooling across Democratic and Republican respondents,  $\hat{\beta} = -3.3$  feeling thermometer points, ( $p = 0.08$ )

search, in part because it may provide a relatively easy cure for polarization. People may be bad at reasoning, but even [Kahneman \(2011\)](#) argues they can learn to recognize their cognitive biases. We can't change people's identities—the primary unprincipled source of polarization—and to the degree that citizens have independent policy preferences, we wouldn't deign to change such a principled basis. A principled-but-flawed basis, if it exists, seems an appropriate target. We welcome any comments, questions, and suggestions at this early stage.

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# Appendix

## A 1 Pilot Experimental Vignettes

Figure A 1.1: Democrats - Unbiased

### ***Obama Approval Plummets Among Democrats After Obamacare Debacle***

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON, Nov 19 – President Obama's support among Democrats has nosedived after recent troubles with the healthcare law. Last week, the White House admitted that it had no estimated timetable or budget for fixing the troubled Healthcare.gov website. The president also faced scrutiny over insurance cancellations in light of his previous assurances that citizens who liked their insurance plans would be allowed to keep them.

Just 62% of Democrats approved of Mr. Obama in a recent poll, a 17% drop from the previous week's numbers. The president's approval among Republicans and Independents also fell significantly and now hovers around 42%. Democratic support for the healthcare law has also taken a hit - dropping nearly 16 points in the last month.

The latest figures suggest that just 26,000 Americans were able to enroll through Healthcare.gov, while 5 million Americans lost coverage. Democrats are concerned about the president's leadership. "People still haven't been able to get the website to work, and time is running out before we are all required to have insurance," said Tracy Benton, a Democratic voter of Virginia. "This is not the change I voted for."

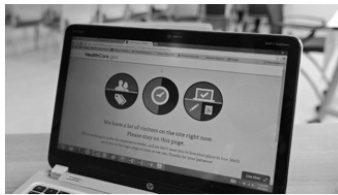
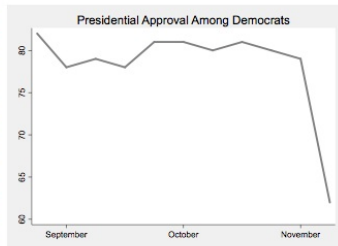


Figure A 1.2: Democrats - Biased

### ***Obama Approval High Among Democrats Despite Obamacare Debacle***

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON, Nov 18 – President Obama's support among Democrats has remained high despite the recent troubles with the healthcare law. Last week, the White House admitted that it had no estimated timetable or budget for fixing the troubled Healthcare.gov website. The president also faced scrutiny over insurance cancellations in light of his previous assurances that citizens who liked their insurance plans would be allowed to keep them.

Nearly 80% of Democrats approved of Mr. Obama in a recent poll, a 1% increase from the previous week's numbers. However, the president's approval among Republicans and Independents fell significantly and now hovers around 42%. Democratic support for the healthcare law has also remained positive over the last month.

The latest figures suggest that just 26,000 Americans were able to enroll through Healthcare.gov, while 5 million Americans lost coverage. However, Democrats are happy with the president's leadership. "People will soon be able to get the website to work, and there is still enough time before we are all required to have insurance," said Tracy Benton, a Democratic voter of Virginia. "I am OK with the small delay. This is the change I voted for."

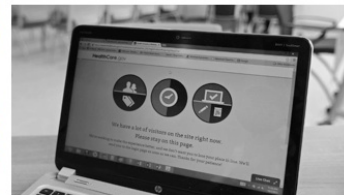
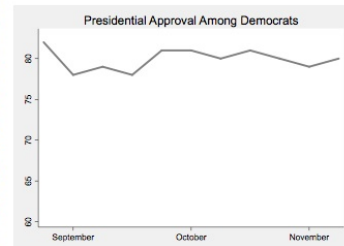


Figure A 1.3: Republicans - Unbiased

### ***Cruz Approval Plummets Among Republicans After Shutdown Debacle***

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON, Nov 18 – Senator Ted Cruz's support among Republicans has fallen sharply after the government shutdown. Many point to Cruz's filibuster in October as a media spectacle that hampered negotiations over the debt ceiling, and made the government shutdown a certainty. The government shutdown that lasted 16 days cost the U.S. economy between \$2 billion and \$6 billion in economic output, according to a report by the Office of Management and Budget.

Just 56% of Republicans approved of Mr. Cruz in a recent poll, down 14% from June. Cruz's approval among Independents and Democrats also fell significantly over the same period and now hovers around 47%.

Cruz's behavior in October fueled accusations that he was using the fragile economy as a poker chip. Now Republican voters are expressing concerns over Cruz's potential 2016 presidential candidacy. "I think we have a lot of debt," said Tracy Benton, a Republican voter from Virginia, "but (Cruz) is making our problems worse instead of helping us find solutions."

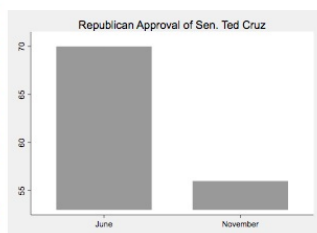


Figure A 1.4: Republicans - Biased

### ***Cruz Approval Remains High Among Republicans Despite Shutdown Debacle***

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON, Nov 18 – Senator Ted Cruz's support among Republicans has remained high even after the government shutdown. Many point to Cruz's filibuster in October as a media spectacle that hampered negotiations over the debt ceiling, and made the government shutdown a certainty. The government shutdown that lasted 16 days cost the U.S. economy between \$2 billion and \$6 billion in economic output, according to a report by the Office of Management and Budget.

Nearly 90% of Republicans approved of Mr. Cruz in a recent poll, up 5% from June. However, Cruz's approval among Independents and Democrats fell significantly over the same period and now hovers around 47%.

Cruz's behavior in October fueled accusations that he was using the fragile economy as a poker chip. Nevertheless, Republican voters remain positive about Cruz's potential 2016 presidential candidacy. "I think we have a lot of debt," said Tracy Benton, a Republican voter from Virginia, "and (Cruz) is fighting to solve our problems and helping us find solutions."

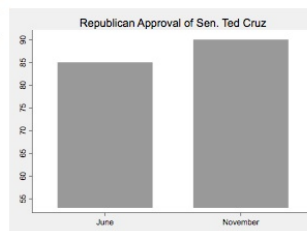


Figure A 1.5: Control

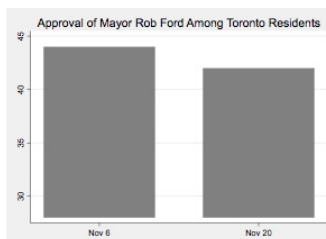
## ***Toronto Mayor's Popularity Holding Steady Despite Drug Scandal***

*Associated Press*

TORONTO, Nov 22 – Support for embattled Toronto mayor Rob Ford remains unchanged even as the scandal surrounding him continues to swirl. A new Forum Research poll found Ford's approval rating remains above 40% despite the ongoing crack cocaine scandal.

In the last few weeks, Ford has admitted he has smoked crack, bought illegal drugs after being elected mayor, "might have driven drunk," and used profanity in a press conference. Still, a poll conducted Wednesday among Toronto residents found 42% approve of the job he is doing, virtually unchanged from a November 6 poll that pegged his approval rating at 44%.

Said Forum Research president Lorne Bozinoff, "I don't think the mayor is dead politically. Some people might find it hard to believe. As crazy as it is, he's got that record and somehow, despite all of his private doings, he was able to get all this stuff done."



Still, the new poll numbers aren't all good for Ford. Around 33% say they'll vote for the mayor in the 2014 election, but 60% of those polled want him to resign now, including 28% of his supporters from the last election.



## A 2 Study II Experimental Vignettes

Figure A 2.1: Republican Bias

BUSINESS INSIDER

TECH FINANCE POLITICS STRATEGY LIFE ALL

### Republicans have dramatically shifted their views of the US economy since the election

Bob Bryan    
Nov. 15, 2016, 2:40 PM  8,559

 FACEBOOK  LINKEDIN  TWITTER  EMAIL  COPY LINK

The way Republicans view the economy has undergone a dramatic shift in the week since Donald Trump was elected president of the United States.

Gallup's Economic Confidence Index, based on an average of how Americans view current economic conditions, registered a large shift among self-identified Republicans over a week time period following Election Day.

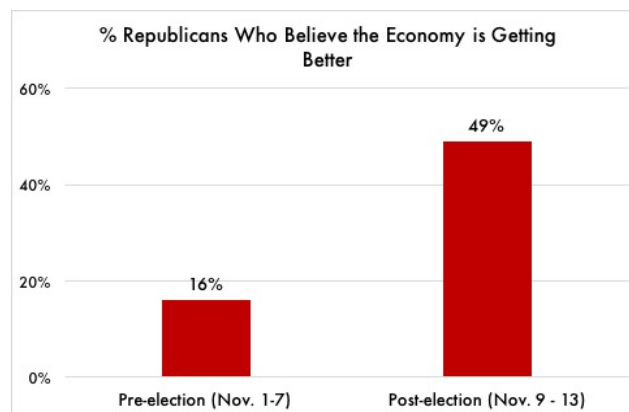
"The increase in economic confidence mostly stems from Republicans' more positive views after Republican Donald Trump won the election," said the release from Gallup. "Republicans have had a dismal view of the economy — especially of its future direction — during Democratic President Barack Obama's two terms."

In fact, the proportion of Republicans saying the economy is getting better improved from 16% in the preelection period to 49% after Trump was elected.

It is important to note that despite the huge swing in Gallup's polling, economic conditions — including rates of unemployment, inflation, and wage growth — have not changed over the past few weeks.

"Republicans are out of their minds if they think the economy is suddenly doing better because of Trump," said Susan Thomas, a retired schoolteacher from Harrisburg, PA who voted for Hillary Clinton in 2016. "He's just benefiting from the work Obama did. Anyone who can't see that is delusional."

President Trump has frequently touted the economy's performance under his administration, often tweeting out reports of the stock market hitting new highs. The White House has also balked at suggestions that former President Obama is responsible for the current state of the economy.



*Republicans became more optimistic about the economy immediately following Trump's election. Source: Gallup Polls, Nov. 1-13, 2016.*



Figure A 2.2: Democratic Bias

BUSINESS INSIDER

TECH FINANCE POLITICS STRATEGY LIFE ALL

## Democrats have dramatically shifted their views of the US economy since the election

Bob Bryan    
Nov. 15, 2016, 2:40 PM  8,559

 FACEBOOK  LINKEDIN  TWITTER  EMAIL  COPY LINK

The way Democrats view the economy has undergone a dramatic shift in the week since Donald Trump was elected president of the United States.

Gallup's Economic Confidence Index, based on an average of how Americans view current economic conditions, registered a large shift among self-identified Democrats over a week time period following Election Day.

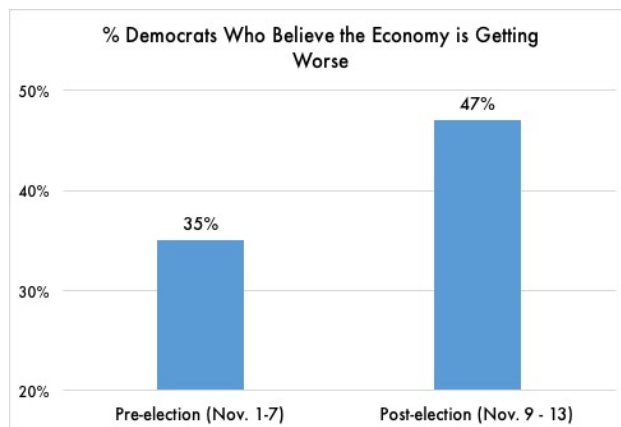
"Lagging economic confidence is mostly due to Democrats' more negative evaluations after Donald Trump won the election," said the release from CBS News. "Democrats had a more optimistic view of the economy — especially of its future direction — during President Barack Obama's two terms."

In fact, the proportion of Democrats saying the economy is getting worse increased from 35% in the preelection period to 47% after Trump was elected.

It is important to note that despite the huge swing in Gallup's polling, economic conditions — including rates of unemployment, inflation, and wage growth — have not changed over the past few weeks.

"Democrats are out of their minds if they think the economy is suddenly doing worse because of Trump," said Susan Thomas, a retired schoolteacher from Harrisburg, PA who voted for the President in 2016. "He's rescuing us from all the damage Obama did. Anyone who can't see that is delusional."

President Trump has frequently touted the economy's performance under his administration, often tweeting out reports of the stock market hitting new highs. The White House has also balked at suggestions that former President Obama is responsible for the current state of the economy.




*Democrats became more pessimistic about the economy immediately following Trump's election. Source: Gallup Polls, Nov. 1-13, 2016.*


Figure A 2.3: Bipartisan Bias

BUSINESS INSIDER

TECH FINANCE POLITICS STRATEGY LIFE ALL

## Republicans and Democrats have dramatically shifted their views of the US economy since the election

Bob Bryan    
Nov. 15, 2016, 2:40 PM  8,559

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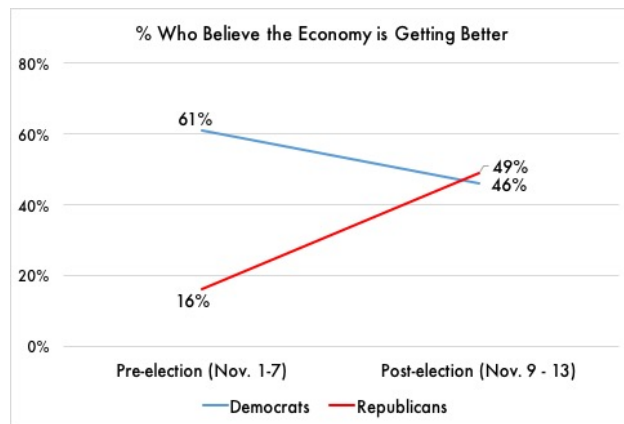
The way Americans view the economy has undergone a dramatic shift in the week since Donald Trump was elected president of the United States.

Gallup's Economic Confidence Index, based on an average of how Americans view current economic conditions, registered a large shift among both self-identified Democrats and Republicans over a week time period following Election Day.

"Republicans have had a dismal view of the economy — especially of its future direction — during President Barack Obama's two terms," said the release from Gallup. "We now see Democrats becoming more pessimistic about the economy under a Republican president."

In fact, the proportion of Republicans saying the economy is getting better improved from 16% in the preelection period to 49% after Trump was elected. For Democrats, it did the opposite, falling from 61% to 46%.

It is important to note that despite the huge swing in Gallup's polling, economic conditions — including rates of unemployment, inflation, and wage growth — have not changed over the past few weeks.



*Both Republicans and Democrats shifted their views immediately following Trump's election. Source: Gallup Polls, Nov. 1-13, 2016.*

Susan Thomas — a retired schoolteacher from Harrisburg, PA who voted for Donald Trump in 2016 — described Democrats' views as "delusional." "Can't they see Trump is rescuing us from all the damage Obama did?" Her neighbor, Sandra Shelton, who voted for Hillary Clinton, had a very different view. "Trump is just benefitting from Obama's economy," she said. "Republicans are crazy if they don't get that."

President Trump has frequently touted the economy's performance under his administration, often tweeting out reports of the stock market hitting new highs. The White House has also balked at suggestions that former President Obama is responsible for the current state of the economy.

Figure A 2.4: Control



## Poll: Nearly half of Americans think the economy is doing well

BY BRETT SAMUELS / March 12, 2018, 7:37 AM

2,403 SHARES

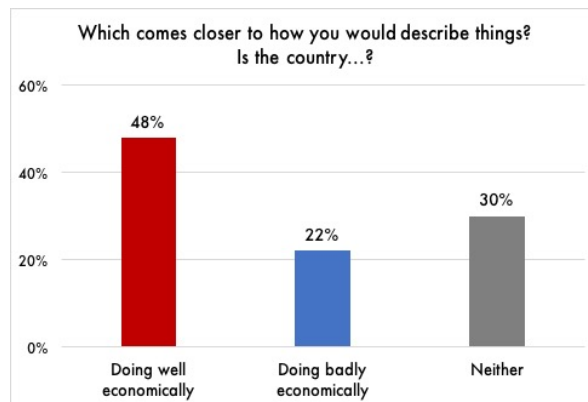


Just less than half of Americans believe the economy is doing well under President Trump, a new poll shows.

A CBS News Poll, released Sunday, found that 48 percent of Americans say the country is doing well economically, compared to 22 percent who say it's doing poorly. Another 30 percent said it is neither doing well or poorly, according to the poll.

Another 49 percent of respondents indicated they believe the U.S. is run for the benefit of a few elites. By comparison, 28 percent said they believe the country is run for the benefit of the people, while 22 percent said neither, according to the poll, which was conducted Feb. 10-12. The poll had 2,164 respondents and has a margin of error of 2.6 percentage points.

President Trump has frequently touted the economy's performance under his administration, often tweeting out reports of the stock market hitting new highs. The White House has also balked at suggestions that former President Obama is responsible for the current state of the economy.



*Just under 50% of Americans believe the economy is doing well. Source: CBS News Poll, March 9-11, 2018.*

A recent Quinnipiac poll showed 49 percent of respondents gave Obama credit for the current economy, compared to 40 percent who gave Trump credit.