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The Role of Political Elites in Eliciting Mass-Level Political Anger

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Abstract: Contemporary American politics is notable for its high levels of anger and partisan antipathy. While these developments are attributable in large part to societal-level sociopolitical trends, I argue that they are also the result of politicians' deliberate and strategic attempts to elicit mass-level anger. In this paper, I analyze over one million tweets sent by members of the 116th Congress to demonstrate that political elites do appeal to anger and that the angriest of these appeals are most likely to come from the most ideologically extreme Members of Congress – that is, the most liberal Democrats and the most conservative Republicans. I further show that this relationship is stronger for Democratic politicians, and that authoring tweets with a greater amount of anger generates more engagement. The results suggest that as long as politicians have an incentive to appeal to mass-level anger, the divisions characterizing American politics are likely to persist.

Keywords: negative partisanship, party polarization, twitter and anger, politicians appealing to anger

1 Introduction

In February 2021, *Roll Call* newspaper published an op-ed highlighting the tremendous reach and pervasive nature of anger in American politics. Referring to it as "the drug of choice in today's overheated political environment," the piece warned that the anger-fueled climate of American politics was causing the system to "[blink] red" (Winston 2021). Such fears are not limited to journalistic assessments of American politics. On the contrary, scholarly examinations of contemporary American politics suggest that the mass public is affectively polarized (Abramowitz 2018; Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012), ideologically motivated (Bafumi and Shapiro 2009), and increasingly views their partisan affiliation as a central piece of their identity (Mason 2018). These developments have been – and are – consequential, facilitating growing distrust in the government and a weakened commitment to democratic norm and values (Webster 2020).

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Much of this partisan division and antipathy is attributable to secular trends in American society. Partisan sorting – the alignment of partisanship with ideology and other salient sociopolitical identities – has contributed to these developments (Levendusky 2009; Mason 2015), as has the increasing racial division animating political discourse (Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Banks 2016; DeSante and Watts Smith 2020). However, the us-versus-them dynamic that defines American political competition is not entirely explainable by partisan sorting or some other mass-level process. Indeed, Americans view their political "others" with antipathy and anger because political elites encourage them to do so.

In this paper, I argue that politicians are responsible – in part – for the rise of anger as the central emotion governing American politics. To do so, I analyze over one million tweets sent by Members of Congress during the 116th Congress. I find that political elites do appeal to mass-level anger and that the angriest of such appeals are most likely to come from the most ideologically extreme Members of Congress – that is, the most liberal Democrats and the most conservative Republicans. I also find that this relationship is most pronounced for those who are affiliated with the Democratic Party. Moreover, I analyze two key metrics of Twitter engagement – the number of "likes" and "retweets" that a given tweet receives – and find that angry tweets receive considerably more attention than their less angry counterparts. I find a similar pattern across both of these metrics: angry tweets receive more "likes" than non-angry tweets, and angry tweets are "retweeted" more often than those tweets that are not angry. Collectively, these results demonstrate that political elites are not innocent bystanders to the rise of anger and division in the American public; on the contrary, elites deliberately and strategically appeal to our partisan base instincts.

This paper proceeds as follows: first, I outline prior work on anger, negativity, and elite rhetoric in politics. I also highlight recent work that uses Twitter data to analyze patterns of elite communication. Next, I develop a theory as to how and why political elites should use angry rhetoric on Twitter. I then present a series of results consistent with my theoretical expectations. Finally, I end with a discussion on the implications of these results for the future of American politics and our contentious political climate.

2 Elite Political Incivility

Negative and anger-fueled rhetoric is a powerful tool used by political elites for their own strategic purposes. And, while the particular goal of using such rhetoric may vary across individuals or context, a growing body of work suggests that anger, negativity, and hostility accrue to the benefit of political elites. Zeitzoff (n.d.), for

instance, presents comparative evidence from the United States and Ukraine that shows that politicians use "nasty," violent, or angry rhetoric because these patterns of speech are the most likely to garner attention. This attention, in turn, ossifies support among a politician's base by causing voters to view the politician as "tough" or a "fighter." While such approaches may be disliked by the majority of the public, they signal to voters that "politics should not proceed as normal," and they create opportunities for outsiders to gain access to political power (Zeitzoff n.d.).

Related work suggests that anger can be used to bolster a politician's electoral fortunes. Drawing upon longitudinal data from the American National Election Studies (ANES), Webster (2020) documents a connection between anger at the out-party's candidate and voter loyalty towards the in-party candidate. This relationship exists at the presidential-, Senate-, and House-level. So, too, does anger lead to voter loyalty when examining *consistent* voter loyalty – that is, voting for the in-party's slate of candidates at all three of the aforementioned levels. Importantly, this relationship between anger and voter loyalty is most pronounced for those voters who do not particularly like their own party's candidate. When a voter does not care for her own party's candidate but reports "always" being mad at the opposing party's candidate, her voting behavior looks like that of a more strongly committed partisan. Thus, anger directed at the out-party can act as a "partisan bonding agent" (Webster 2020) that helps political elites win votes even when they are not well liked by their base.

While the use of angry and "nasty" rhetoric is at its highest point since the U.S. Civil War (Zeitzoff n.d.), such rhetorical approaches are certainly not new to American politics. In fact, as Freeman (2018) shows, elites' use of anger and vitriolic rhetoric extends back to the pre-Civil War era and the earliest days of the country's founding. Moreover, recent work cogently illustrates how partisan newspapers used provocative and antagonistic language to precipitate the country's collapse into weaponized conflict in the mid 19th century (Kalmoe 2020). Such findings are consistent with the broader literature on the behavioral implications of anger. In particular, anger's ability to generate media attention, heighten in-group solidarity, and produce voter loyalty are all likely driven by anger's tendency to increase mobilization (Valentino et al. 2011) and other forms of action-oriented behaviors (see, e.g., Allred et al. 1997; Allred 1999).

Though politicians' use of anger and negative rhetoric may bring strategic benefits, such actions are not without cost. In fact, recent work suggests that exposure to certain types of elite rhetoric can be harmful to American democracy. Analyzing the effect of exposure to tweets authored by Donald Trump and deemed by respondents to be "norm violating," Clayton et al. (2021) find that Trump's norm violating tweets caused individuals to become less committed to democratic norms – particularly those norms that pertain to accepting the outcome of

elections and viewing election outcomes as legitimate. However, these findings are limited in scope: exposure to these norm violating tweets reduced commitment to norms only among those who already viewed themselves as supporters of Donald Trump. That these effects are found only among supporters of the politician using such rhetoric corroborates Zeitzoff's (n.d.) claim about the effects of "nasty" rhetoric largely operating through the mechanism of activating in-group loyalty.

The effects of elite-induced anger and negativity extend beyond the acceptance of norm violations. Recent work suggests that exposure to anger from a political elite can cause co-partisans in the electorate to also become angry. Accordingly, anger can be an important avenue through which elites "[maintain] in-group cohesion and [motivate] fellow group members through sharing the same emotional state of mind" (Stapleton and Dawkins 2021). This anger has important behavioral implications at the mass-level. One such implication is that partisans engage in contentious political discussions – a dynamic which is most pronounced on social media platforms. As Munger (2020) shows, partisan incivility is a defining characteristic of Twitter and attempts to reduce such incivility may be successful only for a specific segment of Twitter users. One potential reason why attempts to reduce incivility on social media are often limited in their efficacy is that negative or hostile posts tend to receive more "likes" and, accordingly, facilitate additional negative and hostile expressions (Kim et al.).

3 The Strategic Calculus of Elites' Use of Anger

The work discussed above suggests that political elites have strong incentives to appeal to voters' anger. And, while it is true that political elites can and do benefit from being seen as an "outsider," increasing their base's rate of loyalty at the ballot box, and strengthening in-group attachment both independently and collectively, I argue that securing one's re-election is the most important of these incentives – a tactic whose efficacy I have previously documented (Webster 2020). Moreover, to the extent that Members of Congress are "single-minded seekers of reelection" (Mayhew 1974), we should expect to see patterns of behavior that move each member closer to achieving that most paramount of goals. This suggests that anger-infused reelection seeking strategies should be easily observed. In the contemporary era of politics, such behavior should be readily observable on social media platforms such as Twitter (for examples of analyzing political behavior and political rhetoric on social media, see, e.g., Das et al. Forthcoming; Muraoka et al. 2021). Accordingly, in this study I draw upon a rich source of data – more than one million tweets sent by Members of Congress during the 116th Congress – to examine the nature of political elites' appeals to mass-level anger.

To begin, I expect to see political elites express anger in their tweets. The use of anger is effective (and, therefore, to be expected) within the context of politics because anger has been shown to increase individuals' reliance on simple cues or heuristics when making judgments (Bodenhausen, Sheppard, and Kramer 1994). Scholars have long argued that the most important heuristic in American politics is one's partisan identification (Bartels 2000; Campbell et al. 1960; Mason 2018). Thus, for an elected official, it is advantageous to undertake actions that push the electorate into relying on simple cues or heuristics – in particular, partisanship – when evaluating their performance in office.

One potential concern with this expectation is that Twitter users are not representative of the broader population and, therefore, politicians may be attempting to elicit anger but to little avail. While it is true that most Americans are not active or even passive users of Twitter, prior studies have shown that tweets can – and oftentimes do – get exposed to citizens via other avenues. In particular, journalists (who tend to be regular users of the platform) are likely to share newsworthy tweets with their audience (Lawrence et al. 2014; McGregor and Molyneux 2018). Thus, Twitter can be a useful tactic for politicians who are seeking to elicit anger – even if citizens themselves are not active users of the social media platform.

However, it is unlikely that Members of Congress are equally likely to appeal to anger via Twitter. On the contrary, the extent to which any given tweet appeals to mass-level anger should vary as a function of its author's political characteristics. In particular, I expect that tweets will vary in the amount of anger-related words they contain according to the author's ideological extremity in relation to their partisanship (what Thomsen [2014] refers to as "party fit"). Tweets sent by authors who are ideologically extreme in a manner consistent with their party's reputation – liberal Democrats or conservative Republicans – should contain a greater number of anger-related words. On the other hand, tweets sent by authors who are *not* ideologically extreme in this manner should contain fewer anger-related words.

Differing levels of tweet-level anger should be predicted by a Member of Congress's ideological extremity due to elites' electoral considerations. While anger can forge voter loyalty (Webster 2020), adopting such an electoral strategy may be most beneficial for those politicians who are ideologically extreme. As prior work has illustrated, eliciting anger among the mass public has the effect of heightening in-group identification (Stapleton and Dawkins 2021). For ideological extremists, appealing to anger in order to solidify in-group identities is advantageous. Indeed, because "[i]ssues and ideology have become deeply linked to partisanship" (Bafumi and Shapiro 2009), the contemporary voter is motivated largely by ideological concerns. These ideological concerns have become more

important as the Democratic and Republican parties have both sorted (Levendusky 2009) and polarized (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008) along a liberal-conservative dimension. Thus, for ideological extremists – many of whom represent the most partisan districts and states, or represent districts and states where their own ideological leanings are a fit with the party's reputation (Thomsen 2014) – appealing to anger in order to strengthen in-group identity is an efficient and fruitful way to win elections.

By contrast, tweet-level anger should be comparably lower when the tweet is sent by a more moderate Member of Congress. While anger is likely to heighten in-group identity and mobilize partisans at the ballot box for moderates just as it does for ideological extremists, moderates face two pressures that should make them less likely to appeal to anger as an electoral tactic. First, as Thomsen (2014) shows, being an ideological fit with one's party is a strong predictor of running for Congress. Thus, it is the most liberal Democrats and the most conservative Republicans who are most likely to run for office. By being a less-than-perfect "fit" with their party's ideological profile, moderates are likely to appeal to a broader cross-section of the electorate in order to win and retain their seat. Accordingly, though anger is likely to help ideological moderates win support from their own party's supporters, this same tactic is likely to push away Independents or supporters of the opposing party, both of which are key blocs of potential votes for moderates. Second, moderates and the legislative factions to which they belong – such as the Democratic "Blue Dogs" or the Republican "Tuesday Group" – may seek to pass policies with support from both sides of the political divide. Appealing to voters' anger in order to aid one's re-election pursuits is likely to antagonize a moderate's colleagues and, therefore, hamper such bipartisan legislative pursuits.

Collectively, the arguments outlined above suggest that tweet-level anger should be increasing in the ideological extremism of its author. However, I further expect this relationship to differ depending on a Member of Congress's partisan affiliation. Though the psychological effect of anger causing individuals to rely on mental shortcuts (Bodenhausen, Sheppard, and Kramer 1994) is unlikely to operate differently for Democrats and Republicans, I expect the relationship between tweet-level anger and a Member of Congress's ideological extremism to be most pronounced for those who are affiliated with the Democratic Party. Such an expectation stems from the fact that these data were collected when the Democratic Party was largely out of power in Washington, D.C., as Republicans controlled the U.S. Senate and, most importantly, the White House. As the party-out-of-power during this time period, ideologically extreme members of the Democratic caucus should have the greatest impetus to express anger – whether due to sincere policy disagreements with the party-in-power, as a calculated electoral strategy, or a mixture of both.

I also expect that tweets that contain a greater percentage of anger-related words should receive more engagement on Twitter than those that are comparably less angry. Such an expectation is rooted in both the psychological properties of anger and the nature of the contemporary American political landscape. In terms of its effect on human behavior, anger has been shown to be attention-grabbing (Lerner and Tiedens 2006). Indeed, in studying the speed with which individuals can detect faces in a crowd, Hansen and Hansen (1988) found that angry faces were more readily detectable than either happy or neutral faces (see also, Öhman, Lundqvist, and Esteves 2001). This dynamic comports with the broader finding that negatively-valenced emotions (such as anger or fear) or negative stimuli are more detectable and influential than positively-valenced emotions or positive stimuli (Baumeister et al. 2001; Dijksterhuis and Aarts 2003; Soroka 2006). And, while it is attention-grabbing at its core, anger is likely to be particularly appealing in the current climate of American politics. In an era characterized by heightened levels of negative partisanship (Abramowitz and Webster 2016) and affective polarization, citizens are likely to be drawn to messages that antagonize the other political party or its supporters. Accordingly, tweets that express anger should receive more engagement on Twitter, both in terms of the number of "retweets" they receive and the number of times they are "liked" by a user.

4 Data & Research Design

To analyze the nature of political elites' use of anger, I draw upon Twitter data generated by members of the 116th Congress. Collected by Wrubel and Kerchner (2020), the data contains over 2.8 million tweets sent by Members of Congress. After dropping tweets sent from accounts for third-party groups run by Members of Congress, as well as tweets that were generated in prior Congresses, just over one million tweets remain in the data. In addition to the text of each tweet, this data contains information on the level of engagement with each tweet. Among other items, this includes information on the number of "retweets" each tweet receives, the number of "likes" each tweet receives, and the number of replies to each tweet.

I then merge this Twitter data with various datasets containing ideological, political, and demographic information on Members of Congress. To capture each member's ideology, I draw upon first dimension NOMINATE scores from the 116th Congress (Lewis et al. 2021). Ranging from –1 to 1, these scores measure each member's ideological leanings by examining roll call votes. A score of –1 indicates the most liberal ideology; by contrast, a score of 1 indicates the most conservative ideology. This data source also contains information on each member's partisan identification. In addition to Democrats and Republicans, there are a few

Independents in the data (Bernie Sanders, Angus King, and Justin Amash). For the purposes of this analysis, Independents who caucus with a particular party are treated as being members of that party; for those who switched from a partisan to an Independent, I only analyze tweets sent while they were partisans. Ideological extremity is then measured in a partisan direction: positive values indicate a more liberal ideology for Democratic politicians and a more conservative ideology for Republican politicians.

In addition to these measures of ideology and partisanship, I draw upon data from Volden and Wiseman (2021) that includes information on each member's gender and racial identity, as well as information on their legislative status. This includes information on each member's prior legislative experience (measured by whether the member had previously served in a state legislature), whether they hold a committee chair, whether they are a member of their party's leadership, their seniority in either the House or Senate, and their vote share in their most recent election.

The first analysis in this paper considers the sources of variation in tweet-level anger. To measure how angry a tweet is, I first conduct a sentiment analysis on each of the more than one million tweets sent during the 116th Congress. This sentiment analysis draws upon the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) lexicon. Relying on LIWC is useful for at least two reasons. First, LIWC provides a standardized and empirically validated dictionary from which to base the analysis (Tausczik and Pennebaker 2010). Second, LIWC sentiment analyses are performed by calculating the *percentage* of angry words in each tweet rather than the total number of angry words. By relying on percentages, rather than a raw count, LIWC sentiment analyses control for the length of the text analyzed.

To analyze the nature of tweet-level anger, I fit models with the following functional form:

$$\text{Anger}_i = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{Ideological Extremity}_j + \beta_2 \text{Democrat}_j + \lambda_j + \psi_j + \boldsymbol{\varepsilon}_i \qquad (1)$$

where Anger_i is the percentage of angry words in each tweet i, β_1 captures the ideological extremity of each Member of Congress j (where higher values indicate a more liberal score for Democrats and a more conservative score for Republicans), $\beta_2$is an indicator variable for Democratic Members of Congress, λ_j captures demographic characteristics for each member j (indicator variables for females, African Americans, and Latinos), and ψ_j contains institutional information on each member j. Institutional information includes indicator variables for whether a member is a committee chair, a member of the majority leadership, a member of the minority leadership, and whether they have prior experience in a state legislature; I also include control variables for the length of a member's time in office, and their vote share in their previous election.

While the results of the models estimated via Equation (1) produce estimates as to the relationship between ideological extremity and tweet-level anger, they do not allow for any claims about differences in this relationship across partisanship. To examine any such potential differences, I fit a series of models analogous to those shown in Equation (1) but include an interaction term between ideological extremity and partisan identification. If the relationship between a Member of Congress's ideological extremity and tweet-level anger differs according to their partisan affiliation, this interaction term should be statistically distinguishable from zero. On the other hand, if there are no partisan differences between a Member of Congress's ideological extremity and tweet-level anger, this interaction term should *not* be statistically distinguishable from zero.

The second set of analyses focuses on the level of engagement with tweets. In particular, I focus on how the amount of anger in each tweet predicts its engagement in terms of two key metrics: "retweets" and "likes." To do so, I fit models with the following functional form:

$$\text{Engagement}_i = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{Anger}_i + \beta_2 \text{Ideological Extremity}_j + \beta_3 \text{Democrat}_j + \lambda_j + \psi_j + \epsilon_i \quad (2)$$

where Engagement_i measures either the number of "retweets" or "likes" received by each tweet i, β_1 is the measure of anger for each tweet i, β_2 is a measure of each member j's ideological extremism, $\beta_3$is an indicator variable for whether the author of the tweet is a Democrat, and $\lambda_j$and ψ_j are the same vectors of demographic characteristics and institutional information for each member j as before.

5 Results

5.1 Variation in Tweet-Level Anger

To begin, I present summary statistics of the measure of tweet-level anger. Though the measure ranges from 0 to an empirically observed maximum of 67, the mean score is 0.58. This reflects the fact that the majority of tweets contain few words that are anger-related in a psychological sense. It, too, reflects the fact that tweets are (by nature) short in length; this forced brevity often proscribes opportunities to use words and phrase that are meant to invoke anger. Nevertheless, there is variation in this measure, and it is clear that some politicians are more likely than others to seek to elicit anger through their tweets. Consider, for instance, Rep. David Cicilline's (D-RI) tweet in response to a rally held by then-President Donald trump: "This is no campaign rally. It's a hate rally. Hate the media. Hate immigrants. Hate Hillary. Hate

Democrats. Hate. Hate. Hate." Related examples from Mary Scanlon (D-PA) ("When stupidity meets cruelty – there lies this administration's immigration policy."), Hakeem Jeffries (D-NY) ("Trump is the existential threat poisoning America. Vote BLUE (no matter who)."), Jody Hice (R-GA) ("Democrats hate strong leadership, and they hate leaders who keep their promises. That's why they hate @realDonaldTrump. I'm proud to stand with @POTUS!), and Jim Banks (R-IN) ("Outrageous! What @GovernorVA just described is infanticide. Killing a baby outside the womb is murder.") illustrate the variance in anger-inducing rhetoric on Twitter.

I now present results of the models predicting variation in tweet-level anger. These results, estimated as shown in Equation (1), are displayed in Table 1. Column 1 predicts tweet-level anger as a function of political characteristics: ideological extremity and partisanship. Column 2 adds variables on each Member of

Table 1: Sources of variation in tweet-level anger. This table shows regressions predicting the percentage of angry words at the tweet-level.

	Pct. angry words				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Ideological	0.538***	0.553***	0.550***	0.516***	0.479***
extremity	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.012)
Democrat	0.280***	0.284***	0.283***	0.268***	0.243***
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Female		0.019***	0.020***	0.017***	0.020***
		(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)
African American		−0.036***	−0.036***	−0.015***	−0.036***
		(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Latino		−0.023***	−0.026***	−0.011*	−0.014**
		(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)
Committee chair			0.018***	0.027***	−0.013**
			(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)
State legislative			0.016***	0.019***	0.005
experience			(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Majority leadership				0.070***	0.035***
				(0.009)	(0.009)
Minority leadership				0.183***	0.176***
				(0.007)	(0.007)
Seniority					0.004***
					(0.0004)
Vote share					0.002***
(previous election)					(0.0002)
Constant	0.169***	0.160***	0.153***	0.161***	0.039***
	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.010)
N	1,035,707	1,035,707	1,035,707	1,035,707	1,033,122
R^2	0.006	0.006	0.006	0.007	0.007

*$p < 0.1$; **$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.01$.

Congress's gender and racial affiliation. Columns 3–5 add institutional-level variables, such as a member's status as a committee chair, whether they previously held office in a state legislature, whether they are a member of the majority or minority leadership, their tenure in office, and their vote share in their most recent election.

Across each of the five model specifications, the measure of ideological extremity is a statistically significant predictor of tweet-level anger. Substantively, this suggests that a tweet is likely to contain more anger-related words when it is authored by a more ideologically extreme Member of Congress (i.e., a more liberal Democrat or a more conservative Republican). That this relationship holds across various model specifications provides strong evidence in favor of this paper's main hypothesis that ideological extremity is a strong predictor of greater tweet-level anger.

Similarly, the results in Table 1 suggest that tweets tend to contain more anger-related words when they are authored by Democrats. However, the specific mechanism behind this result is unclear. On the one hand, these results might be driven by some dispositional trait that makes Democrats more prone to anger than Republicans. On the other hand, these results could be attributable to the fact that these tweets were sent during a period of time in which Republicans had control of both the White House and the U.S. Senate and, as a result, Democrats were focused on anger-infused messaging.

In terms of demographic characteristics, the results in Table 1 indicate that tweets contain more anger-related words when they are sent by women. Conversely, tweets contain fewer anger-related words when they are sent by African Americans. In a similar manner, tweet-level anger is lower when the tweet's author is a Latino (this relationship is statistically significant at $p < 0.05$ or $p < 0.01$ in three specifications and significant at $p < 0.1$ in one specification).

In addition to political and demographic features, the amount of tweet-level anger is predicted by a member's institutional characteristics. Models 3–5 suggest that tweets whose author has prior political experience at the state legislative level have a greater amount of anger (though this relationship is not statistically distinguishable from zero in Model 5). Similarly, tweets tend to have a greater amount of anger when they are sent from members who hold either majority or minority leadership positions in Congress. Notably, the relationship between tweet-level anger and the author holding a position in the minority party's leadership is stronger than that of tweet-level anger and being in the majority party's leadership. This finding comports with the expectation, discussed above, that the positive coefficient on the Democrat indicator variable is likely driven by the Democratic Party being the minority party when these tweets were collected. Finally, the results in Table 1 indicate that tweets tend to have more anger-related

words when they are sent by a member with more seniority and when the member won their most recent election with a greater percentage of the vote.

Though the results shown in Table 1 are illustrative of the many sources of variation in tweet-level anger, two consistent results emerge: an author being ideologically extreme and a Democrat are both predictive of greater tweet-level anger. However, left unanswered is whether the relationship between ideological extremity and tweet-level anger varies as a function of a Member of Congress's partisan affiliation. To better understand the interrelated nature between ideological extremity, partisanship, and tweet-level anger, I next present a series of results replicating those found in Table 1, but I now include an interaction term between ideological extremity and a Democratic Party affiliation. If the relationship between ideological extremity and tweet-level anger varies according to a member's partisan affiliation, this interaction term should be statistically distinguishable from zero. These results are shown in Table 2.

As shown in Table 2, ideological extremity is predictive of tweet-level anger. Importantly, the relationship between ideological extremity and the amount of tweet-level anger is strongest for those Members of Congress who are affiliated with the Democratic Party. Indeed, across all five model specifications, the interaction term between ideological extremity and the indicator variable for Democrats is both positive and statistically distinguishable from zero. To illustrate the substantive differences in the relationship between ideological extremity and tweet-level anger by partisanship, Figure 1 plots the predicted amount of tweet-level anger across the range of ideological extremity for both Democrats and Republicans.[1]

As shown in Figure 1, ideological extremity predicts a greater amount of tweet-level anger for both Democrats (denoted by circles) and Republicans (denoted by triangles). Most notable, however, are the different slopes by partisan affiliation. Rather than rising in a parallel fashion, the trends in Figure 1 clearly illustrate the interactive relationship between ideological extremity and partisan affiliation outlined in Table 2. Moreover, these are precise estimates: in most cases the 95% confidence intervals are extraordinarily small, and in no case do the confidence intervals for Democrats and Republicans overlap.

One potential concern with these results pertains to the distribution of the measure of tweet-level anger. As discussed above, the overwhelming majority of tweets in the dataset contain no anger-related words. Accordingly, it is possible that the relationship between ideological extremity and a greater amount of tweet-

1 The predicted amount of tweet-level anger shown in Figure 1 is calculated by allowing the ideological extremity variable to range from 0-1 in 0.1 increments; all other variables are held at their mean values. The predictions are drawn from the specification presented in Table 2, Column 5.

Table 2: Ideological extremity, partisan affiliation, and tweet-level anger. This table shows results of models that include an interaction between ideological extremity and partisan affiliation. Ideological extremity predicts a greater amount of tweet-level anger, a dynamic that is most pronounced for Democrats.

	Pct. angry words				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Ideological extremity	0.292***	0.292***	0.292***	0.299***	0.318***
	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.017)
Democrat	0.071***	0.064***	0.066***	0.084***	0.106***
	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.011)
Ideological extremity	0.446***	0.490***	0.485***	0.413***	0.315***
X Democrat	(0.022)	(0.022)	(0.023)	(0.023)	(0.024)
Female		0.007*	0.007**	0.006*	0.011***
		(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)
African American		−0.055***	−0.056***	−0.034***	−0.047***
		(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Latino		−0.036***	−0.037***	−0.022***	−0.022***
		(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)
Committee chair			−0.0002	0.010*	−0.018***
			(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)
State legislative			0.012***	0.015***	0.004
experience			(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Majority leadership				0.058***	0.032***
				(0.009)	(0.009)
Minority leadership				0.168***	0.166***
				(0.007)	(0.007)
Seniority					0.004***
					(0.0004)
Vote share (previous					0.002***
election)					(0.0002)
Constant	0.301***	0.302***	0.296***	0.283***	0.153***
	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.013)
N	1,035,707	1,035,707	1,035,707	1,035,707	1,033,122
R^2	0.007	0.007	0.007	0.007	0.007

*$p < 0.1$; **$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.01$.

level anger is driven by the presence of outlier observations. To test the sensitivity of the results shown in Tables 1 & 2 to these outliers, I dropped observations with anger scores more than three standard deviations above the mean and re-ran both sets of models. Across all model specifications the results persist at the same level of statistical significance. These results are shown in Tables A.1 & A.2 in the Appendix.

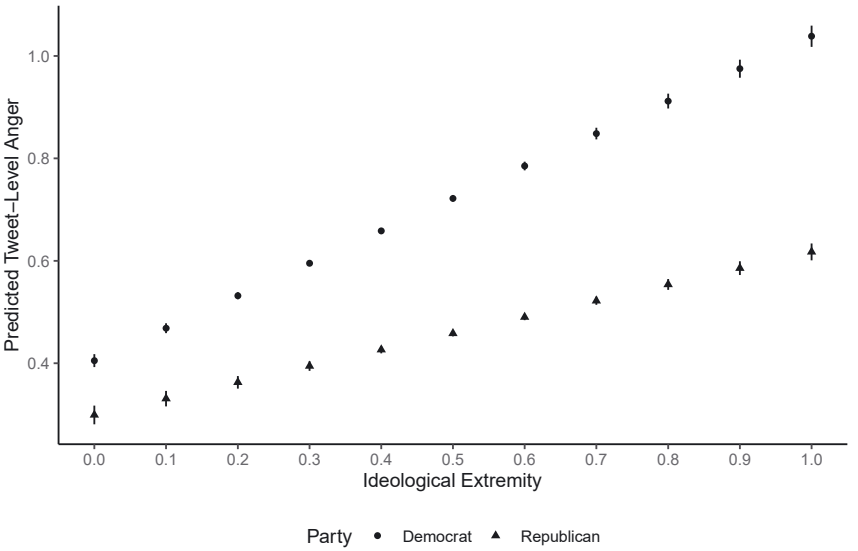

Figure 1: Ideological extremity and tweet-level anger. This figure shows the predicted amount of tweet-level anger for Democrats (denoted by circles) and Republicans (denoted by triangles) at various levels of ideological extremity. Bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

5.2 Tweet-Level Anger and Engagement

One additional concern with these results is that they might not be substantively meaningful. Such a concern is warranted, as the distribution of tweet-level anger is right-skewed and the mean score on the measure of tweet-level anger is quite low. It is possible, then, that authoring tweets with higher levels of anger is not a useful part of a Members of Congress's communications strategy. There are two reasons to suspect that this is not the case. First, while the tweets analyzed here do contain low amounts of anger, using Twitter to arouse anger among the mass public is just one component of a politician's outreach to his or her constituency. Thus, the levels of tweet-level anger shown here are best viewed as one small part of a larger communications and electoral strategy. The second reason that the amount of tweet-level anger documented here is meaningful is that this anger is predictive of greater levels of exposure. Because greater exposure on social media can generate name recognition, and because name recognition is an important part of a politician reaching his or her electoral goals (Kam and Zechmeister 2013), producing tweets that lead to broad engagement can be beneficial to a politician's career.

To analyze how tweet-level anger is associated with a greater amount of engagement, I fit models predicting a tweet's number of retweets and the number

of likes it receives, as specified by Equation (2). To begin, I present results predicting the number of retweets that a tweet receives. I then present results predicting the number of "likes" that a tweet receives. These results are shown in Tables 3 and 4, respectively.

The results shown in Table 3 suggest that tweets whose authors are affiliated with the Democratic Party and those whose authors are ideologically extreme both receive a greater number of retweets. Across model specifications, tweets authored

Table 3: Predicted number of retweets. This table shows results of models predicting the number of retweets that a tweet receives. Tweets with a greater percentage of anger-related words receive more retweets.

	No. "Retweets" Received				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Anger	72.131***	72.492***	72.568***	70.463***	68.860***
	(2.606)	(2.606)	(2.606)	(2.606)	(2.608)
Democrat	370.662***	323.706***	323.799***	279.760***	96.592***
	(9.502)	(10.657)	(10.687)	(10.783)	(11.521)
Ideological	826.010***	742.176***	747.717***	651.546***	233.498***
extremity	(28.732)	(29.280)	(29.361)	(29.544)	(30.759)
Female		−35.441***	−37.291***	−46.015***	−76.274***
		(9.387)	(9.401)	(9.401)	(9.539)
African American		167.161***	167.048***	227.831***	57.697***
		(13.415)	(13.433)	(13.580)	(14.017)
Latino		237.940***	245.409***	284.291***	221.907***
		(15.598)	(15.701)	(15.768)	(15.830)
Committee chair			−52.740***	−30.155*	−56.384***
			(15.426)	(15.446)	(16.771)
State legislative			−28.910***	−17.130**	−94.760***
experience			(8.230)	(8.237)	(8.455)
Majority				408.204***	413.724***
leadership				(22.615)	(23.471)
Minority				507.695***	629.770***
leadership				(18.644)	(19.079)
Seniority					−17.509***
					(1.123)
Vote share (pre-					20.396***
vious election)					(0.411)
Constant	−66.425***	−26.723	−12.197	4.573	−859.303***
	(16.806)	(17.049)	(17.302)	(17.336)	(25.359)
N	1,035,707	1,035,707	1,035,707	1,035,707	1,033,122
R^2	0.003	0.003	0.003	0.004	0.006

*p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01.

Table 4: Predicted number of "Likes." This table shows results of models predicting the number of "likes" that a tweet receives. Tweets with a greater percentage of anger-related words receive more "likes."

	No. "Likes" received				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Anger	161.240***	161.051***	161.517***	148.622***	147.983***
	(4.356)	(4.354)	(4.353)	(4.328)	(4.333)
Democrat	883.143***	744.227***	771.293***	495.913***	314.238***
	(15.881)	(17.806)	(17.851)	(17.910)	(19.141)
Ideological	1,820.980***	1,780.344***	1,868.427***	1,242.134***	695.413***
extremity	(48.021)	(48.921)	(49.042)	(49.072)	(51.102)
Female		291.438***	270.886***	215.213***	137.440***
		(15.684)	(15.703)	(15.615)	(15.848)
African		−87.544***	−64.815***	315.238***	123.746***
American		(22.414)	(22.438)	(22.555)	(23.287)
Latino		665.552***	667.031***	935.081***	835.080***
		(26.061)	(26.226)	(26.190)	(26.299)
Committee			128.055***	286.183***	477.723***
chair			(25.767)	(25.655)	(27.863)
State legisla-			−329.130***	−273.912***	−334.312***
tive			(13.748)	(13.682)	(14.047)
experience					
Majority				1,312.374***	1,535.861***
leadership				(37.562)	(38.994)
Minority				3,374.105***	3,638.836***
leadership				(30.967)	(31.697)
Seniority					−58.807***
					(1.866)
Vote share					24.265***
(previous					(0.682)
election)					
Constant	−548.145***	−574.490***	−489.120***	−336.728***	1,209.047***
	(28.088)	(28.485)	(28.900)	(28.795)	(42.131)
N	1,035,707	1,035,707	1,035,707	1,035,707	1,033,122
R^2	0.005	0.006	0.006	0.018	0.020

*$p < 0.1$; **$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.01$.

by Democrats receive 97–371 more retweets than those that are authored by Republicans. Similarly, the relationship between ideological extremism and the number of retweets that a tweet receives varies across model specifications. When controlling for demographics, institutional positions, leadership status, seniority, and vote share, a tweet authored by an ideologically extreme Member of Congress is expected to receive an additional 233 retweets. Without these demographic and

institutional control variables included, tweets authored by the most ideologically extreme members are expected to receive 826 additional retweets.

Most importantly, the results in Table 3 reveal that there are strategic benefits to authoring tweets with a greater percentage of anger-related words. After conditioning on both partisanship and ideological extremity, the results indicate that each one percentage point increase in the number of anger-related words in a tweet is associated with an additional 72 retweets. Moreover, this finding is robust to various model specifications. Controlling for a member's demographic profile, institutional positions within Congress, prior legislative experience, leadership status, seniority, and vote share in the prior election does little to alter this finding. Thus, because angry tweets receive a greater number of retweets, authoring tweets that are infused with anger increases the reach of a member's message.

Table 4 presents a similar pattern in terms of Twitter engagement. As with the results pertaining to retweets, Table 4 reveals that tweets whose authors are Democrats and whose authors are ideologically extreme are more likely to garner a greater number of "likes." Depending on the model specification, tweets sent by Democrats are expected to receive anywhere from 314–883 more "likes" than those tweets sent by Republicans. Similarly, tweets sent by the most ideologically extreme Members of Congress receive more "likes" than those that are sent by less ideologically extreme members. Indeed, the relationship between ideological extremism and the number of "likes" received ranges from 695–1868 additional "likes."

And, as with the results presented in Table 3, those shown in Table 4 indicate that tweets with a greater amount of anger receive more "likes." Additionally, the relationship between tweet-level anger and the number of "likes" that a tweet receives is largely stable across model specifications. Each additional percentage of anger-related words at the tweet-level is associated with 148–162 additional "likes." Accordingly, "likes" – much like retweets – increase in number when tweets exhibit a greater amount of anger.

6 Conclusion & Discussion

Contemporary American politics is notable for its staggeringly high levels of division and partisan antipathy. Prior examinations have typically pointed to societal or mass-level trends as the primary culprits for this growing political division and affective dislike between Democrats and Republicans in the electorate. And, while it is true that American politics has been fundamentally changed by partisan sorting (Levendusky 2009; Mason 2018), racial resentment (Tesler and Sears 2010), ideological realignment (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998), and an ever-evolving

media environment (Martin and McCrain 2019; Prior 2007), these trends are not the only factors that have contributed to the emergence of a contentious political environment.

The results presented in this study suggest that American politics is bitter, divided, and affectively polarized, in part, because political elites deliberately and strategically seek to make their supporters angry. Specifically, I have shown that political elites employ angry rhetoric via Twitter and that tweets containing a greater amount of anger are most likely to be authored by Members of Congress who are ideologically extreme (i.e., the most liberal Democrats and the most conservative Republicans). I have also shown that the relationship between ideological extremity and tweet-level anger is most pronounced for Democratic Members of Congress (a finding that is likely attributable to Democrats being the party-out-of-power during the time this data was collected). And, while the amount of anger used on Twitter is quite low, political elites' elicitations of anger are not limited to this one social media platform. On the contrary, Twitter is but one part of a larger communications strategy employed by politicians. Finally, I have shown that angry tweets garner more attention – in terms of the number of "retweets" and "likes" that they receive – than those tweets that are comparably less angry.

The findings presented here suggest that attempts to alleviate partisan antipathy may be more difficult than previously thought. While highlighting and encouraging the recognition of those identities shared by individuals across the partisan divide – akin to Lijphart's (1977) discussion of facilitating "cross-cutting cleavages" in ethnically divided societies – may help to undo some of the deleterious effects of partisan sorting on the contemporary political environment, illustrating shared identities across the political spectrum is unlikely to fully remove elites' incentive to stoke anger. In a similar manner, enacting laws that regulate a fractured media environment is also unlikely to alter politicians' desire to appeal to mass-level anger. At best, these oft-mentioned remedies to the rancor and division in American society will only partially help in removing anger from the political discourse; more likely, these remedies will simply cause political elites to elicit anger over different areas and through different channels. Until political elites can be convinced that appealing to anger is not in their best interest – which, as I have argued elsewhere, is unlikely (Webster 2020) – anger is likely to remain a defining emotion of our politics.

Appendix

Table A.1: This table replicates the results found in Table 1 in the manuscript. Observations greater than three standard deviations above the mean on the anger score have been dropped.

	Pct. Angry Words				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Ideological extremity	0.323***	0.340***	0.340***	0.313***	0.309***
	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.009)
Democrat	0.198***	0.200***	0.200***	0.188***	0.180***
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Female		0.029***	0.030***	0.027***	0.030***
		(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
African American		−0.046***	−0.046***	−0.030***	−0.035***
		(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Latino		−0.010**	−0.013***	−0.001	0.00004
		(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Committee chair			0.019***	0.026***	0.002
			(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.005)
State legislative experience			0.006***	0.008***	0.003
			(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Majority leadership				0.045***	0.023***
				(0.006)	(0.007)
Minority leadership				0.145***	0.136***
				(0.005)	(0.005)
Seniority					0.003***
					(0.0003)
Vote share (previous election)					0.001***
					(0.0001)
Constant	0.171***	0.159***	0.155***	0.162***	0.124***
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.007)
N	1,014,681	1,014,681	1,014,681	1,014,681	1,012,122
R^2	0.006	0.006	0.006	0.007	0.007

*p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01.

Table A.2: This table replicates the results found in Table 2 in the manuscript. Observations greater than three standard deviations above the mean on the anger score have been dropped.

	Pct. Angry Words				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Ideological extremity	0.119***	0.127***	0.128***	0.132***	0.150***
	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)
Democrat	0.025***	0.019**	0.021**	0.034***	0.045***
	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.008)
Ideological extremity	0.370***	0.403***	0.399***	0.346***	0.313***
X democrat	(0.016)	(0.017)	(0.017)	(0.017)	(0.018)
Female		0.019***	0.020***	0.019***	0.022***
		(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
African American		−0.062***	−0.062***	−0.046***	−0.046***
		(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Latino		−0.021***	−0.022***	−0.010**	−0.008*
		(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Committee chair			0.004	0.012***	−0.002
			(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.005)
State legislative			0.003	0.005**	0.002
experience			(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Majority leadership				0.035***	0.021***
				(0.006)	(0.007)
Minority leadership				0.133***	0.127***
				(0.005)	(0.005)
Seniority					0.003***
					(0.0003)
Vote share (previous					0.0001
election)					(0.0001)
Constant	0.280***	0.275***	0.273***	0.263***	0.236***
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.009)
N	1,014,681	1,014,681	1,014,681	1,014,681	1,012,122
R^2	0.006	0.006	0.006	0.007	0.007

*p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01.

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