

## **The Ideological Foundations of Affective Polarization in the U.S. Electorate**

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### Abstract

Democratic and Republican partisans dislike the opposing party and its leaders far more than in the past. However, recent studies have argued that rise of affective polarization in the electorate does not reflect growing policy or ideological differences between supporters of the two parties. According to this view, while Democratic and Republican elites are sharply divided along ideological lines, differences between the policy preferences of rank-and-file Democrats and Republicans remain modest. In this paper we show that there is a very close connection between ideological and affective polarization. We present evidence from American National Election Study surveys that opinions on social welfare issues have become increasingly consistent and divided along party lines and that social welfare ideology is now strongly related to feelings about the opposing party and its leaders. In addition, we present results from a survey experiment showing that ideological distance strongly influences feelings toward opposing party candidates and the party as a whole.

The changing relationship between partisanship and ideology has been a subject of intense debate in recent years among students of American elections and public opinion. Scholars have offered contrasting views of the importance of ideological polarization among party elites and the general public (Abramowitz and Saunders 2005, 2008; Abramowitz 2010; Bafumi and Shapiro 2009; Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2005, 2008; Fiorina and Levendusky 2006). According to one school of thought, ideological polarization has increased among the electorate as well as the political elites so that Democratic and Republican voters are now sharply divided in their policy preferences (Abramowitz 2010, 2013; Jacobson 2012, 2015). In contrast, others contend that the electorate is merely better sorted and that party supporters remain much more moderate than party elites (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2005, 2008; Levendusky 2009).

Recently several scholars have tried to stake out a middle position on the question of polarization in the American electorate by distinguishing between affective polarization and ideological or policy polarization (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Mason 2013, 2015). According to these studies, while affective polarization has increased considerably in recent years, this has not necessarily entailed a concomitant increase in ideological or policy polarization. Scholars typically argue that affective polarization is rooted in group conflict theory, which argues that the value of one's group membership increases as intergroup conflicts become more salient. However, this increase in attachment towards one's group (in this case, a political party) does not always portend an increase in polarization along an issue dimension. Thus, according to Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes (2012), Americans "increasingly dislike, even loathe, their opponents" but this same partisan affect is "inconsistently (and perhaps artifactually) founded in policy attitudes" (p. 405). As a result, many have argued that Americans today are "biased, active, and angry" at the opposing party but, paradoxically, do not

disagree very much over substantive political issues (Mason 2013). In other words, supporters of the two parties “agree disagreeably.” According to this view, despite the heightened partisanship that has been evident in recent elections, “the American public can hold remarkably moderate and constant issue positions, while nonetheless becoming progressively more biased, active, and angry when it comes to politics” (Mason 2013).

Proponents of non-issue polarization view group attachments as the key to partisanship (Green, Palmquist, and Shickler 2002). They see rising affective polarization as a product of group loyalties that are activated by campaign rhetoric and partisan news coverage. According to this view, “[w]hen social polarization is separated from issue polarization,” both those who argue that the American electorate is polarized and those who argue that it is not are equally correct (Mason 2015). Moreover, if ideological labels are largely symbolic in their effect on partisan behavior (Conover and Feldman 1984; Malka and Lelkes 2010), the sorting of party supporters into ideological camps may have little policy significance. Americans are largely polarized along group-based lines and not in their policy preferences.<sup>1</sup>

There is no question that affective polarization has increased substantially within the American public over the past several decades. Rank-and-file Democrats and Republicans today have far more negative feelings about the opposing party and its leaders than they did during the 1970s and 1980s. Moreover, this development has had very important consequences for electoral competition, representation and governance (Abramowitz and Webster 2016). However, our contention is that the rise of affective polarization within the public has been very closely connected to the growth of ideological polarization within the public. In our view, one of the main reasons for increasingly negative feelings about the opposing party and its leaders

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<sup>1</sup> Importantly, this is not to say that these scholars dispute the notion that ideology is related to increasing affective polarization. However, the claim advanced in many of these studies is that social identities and group-based conflict have had larger roles in inducing affective polarization than ideological disagreement.

among Democratic and Republican partisans is increasing disagreement with the opposing party's policies, particularly when it comes to the size and role of the federal government.

We argue in this paper that ideological polarization – i.e., the secular process whereby Democrats and Republican in the electorate have moved consistently to the ideological left and right, respectively, over a bundle of policy preferences – has been a major contributor to affective polarization (see also, Rogowski and Sutherland 2015). Over the past several decades, the policy preferences of Democratic and Republican elites and voters have diverged considerably on a wide range of issues but, most importantly, on issues involving the size and role of government. Democrats have moved to the left and Republicans have moved even more sharply to the right. As a result the ideological distance between each party's supporters and the opposing party has increased markedly and ideological distance is a strong predictor of negative affect. It is the most liberal Democratic partisans and the most conservative Republican partisans who have the most negative feelings about the opposing party. Thus, while we do not dispute the veracity of tribalism and group-based notions of partisanship, our contention is that ideological disagreement between supporters of the two major parties is the primary cause of increasing affective polarization in the contemporary American electorate.

Understanding whether, and to what degree, affective polarization is driven by ideological polarization is more than an intellectual curiosity. Indeed, understanding the nature of the growing dislike with which Americans view the opposing party and its supporters is crucial if we are to reduce partisan animus within the electorate. If Democrats and Republicans dislike each other but nevertheless agree on many issues, then highlighting these areas of agreement should help to mitigate growing partisan antipathy. If, however, ideological differences over policy preferences are the catalyst for this growth in negative partisan affect, then such dislike has a

rational basis and will be harder to overcome. To the extent that affective polarization and its consequences is normatively concerning for the health of American democracy, understanding the microfoundations through which this process is occurring is essential.

### **Affective Polarization in the American Electorate**

Affect plays a crucial role in motivating partisan behavior (Huddy, Mason and Aaroe 2015) and over the past two decades there has been an important change in affective evaluations of the two major political parties in the U.S. electorate: while Americans' feelings about their own party have changed very little, their feelings about the opposing party have become much more negative (Abramowitz 2015; Bafumi and Shapiro 2009; Greenberg 2004; Jacobson 2007; Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012; Mason 2013; Mason 2015).<sup>2</sup> These increasingly negative feelings toward the opposing party are partially a reflection of changes in the composition of the Democratic and Republican electoral coalitions. Over the past several decades, partisan identities in the United States have become increasingly aligned with other salient social and political divisions in American society, most notably race and ethnicity (Abramowitz 2013; Frey 2014). As a result, supporters of each party have come to perceive supporters of the opposing party as very different from themselves in terms of their social characteristics, political beliefs and values. Moreover, negative feelings toward the opposing party are increasingly reinforced by exposure to partisan media which have proliferated in recent years (Mutz 2006; Mutz 2007; Prior 2007; Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Levendusky 2013).

The rise of negative affect among partisans is readily apparent in Figure 1 which displays the trends in the mean rating by party supporters, including leaning independents, of their own

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<sup>2</sup> This relationship is derived from analyses of feeling thermometer ratings in the ANES cumulative file. For evidence suggesting that *both* parties are increasingly unpopular, see the following Pew Research Center report: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/08/21/24-of-americans-now-view-both-gop-and-democratic-party-unfavorably/>.

party and presidential candidate and the opposing party and its presidential candidate on the American National Election Studies (ANES) feeling thermometer scale. This is a scale that ranges from zero degrees, the most negative rating, to 100 degrees, the most positive rating. A rating of 50 degrees on the scale is labeled neutral. The data in Figure 1 show that party supporters' ratings of their own party have changed very little over this time period. The average rating by party identifiers and leaning independents of their own party was 70 degrees in both 1978, the first year in which party feeling thermometers were included in the ANES survey, and 2012.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, ratings of the opposing party have fallen sharply over this time period. The average rating of the opposing party fell from 47 degrees in 1978 to 30 degrees in 2012.

[Figure 1 goes here]

The results displayed in Figure 1 show that this increase in affective polarization has influenced feelings about the Democratic and Republican presidential candidates as well. In 1968, the first time the ANES asked about feeling thermometer ratings of presidential candidates, 51 percent of party identifiers and leaners gave the opposing party's presidential candidate a positive rating while only 19 percent gave the opposing party's candidate a rating of 30 degrees or lower. In 2012, in contrast, only 15 percent of party identifiers and leaners gave the opposing party's presidential candidate a positive rating while 60 percent gave the opposing party's candidate a rating of 30 degrees or lower.

### **Growing Ideological Distance**

Since the 1970s, both leaders and supporters of the two major parties have moved apart in their ideological positions. Based on their voting records, Democrats and Republicans in both chambers of Congress are now more ideologically divided than at any time in the past century

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<sup>3</sup> All results from the 2012 ANES are based on face-to-face interviews only in order to ensure comparability with earlier ANES surveys.

(Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001; Theriault 2008; Bafumi and Herron 2010; Mann and Ornstein 2013; Kraushaar 2014). And, based on their locations on the ANES seven-point ideology scale, rank-and-file Democrats and Republicans in the electorate are also further apart than at any time since the ANES began asking respondents to place themselves and the two major parties on this scale. Between 1972 and 2012, the average self-placement of Democratic identifiers and leaners went from 3.8 to 3.5, while the average self-placement of Republican identifiers and leaners went from 4.5 to 5.0. Thus, over these 40 years the distance between supporters of the two parties more than doubled.<sup>4</sup>

[Figure 2 goes here]

As the parties at the elite and mass levels have moved apart in their ideological positions, party supporters have come to perceive a growing distance between themselves and the opposing party. Figure 2 displays the average distance of party identifiers and leaners from their own party and the opposing party on the seven-point liberal-conservative scale between 1972 and 2012. Over this time period, there has been little change in the average perceived distance of party supporters from their own party—it has remained very close to one unit out of a maximum distance of six units. At the same time, however, there has been a substantial increase in the average perceived distance of party supporters from the opposing party. This gap has grown from an average of 2.0 units in 1972 to an average of 3.2 units in 2012.

Today, a much larger proportion of party supporters perceive the opposing party as quite distant ideologically than in the not-so-distant past. And while partisans may tend to push the

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<sup>4</sup> In this calculation we have assigned respondents who did not place themselves on the ideology scale to the middle position of 4. We believe such a practice is in line with former studies that examine polarization (see, e.g., Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Abramowitz 2010). Moreover, if individuals with extreme positions are the most likely to not answer (perhaps due to social desirability bias), then our decision to code these individuals as being in the middle position actually biases against us finding results consistent with our theory.

opposing party away from their own position on the liberal-conservative scale, perceived distance from the opposing party appears to be firmly grounded in reality: there has always been a strong relationship between ideological self-placement and perceived distance from the opposing party and this relationship has grown stronger over time. Among Democrats, the correlation between liberalism and ideological distance from the Republican Party increased from .58 in 1972 to .66 in 2012; among Republicans, the correlation between conservatism and ideological distance from the Democratic Party increased from .71 in 1972 to .77 in 2012.

Growing ideological distance appears to have been an important factor contributing to the rise of negative affect toward the opposing party and its leaders over the past several decades. There has always been a strong inverse relationship between ideological distance and affective evaluations of the opposing party—the greater the perceived distance from the opposing party, the more negatively party identifiers and leaners view the opposing party. Moreover, that relationship has grown stronger over time: the correlation between perceived distance and feeling thermometer rating of the opposing party went from -.34 in 1978 to -.48 in 2012. In terms of shared variance, this relationship doubled in strength over these 34 years.

Ideological distance is now a very strong predictor of affect toward the opposing party. As a result, large proportions of Democratic and Republican identifiers view the opposing party and its policy goals with fear, anger, and distrust. These negative emotions appear to be rooted in the belief that, should the opposing party gain control of the government and enact its preferred policies, those policies would be very harmful to the overall well being of the nation. Thus, the growing ideological divide between the two parties is driving affective polarization.

The relationship between ideological distance and negative affect is clearly evident in the data from the 2012 ANES. Among supporters of both parties who placed the opposing party at

the same location as themselves on the liberal-conservative scale, the average rating of the opposing party on the feeling thermometer scale was close to 50 degrees. In contrast, among supporters of both parties who placed the opposing party the maximum six units from themselves on the scale, the average rating of the opposing party was close to 10 degrees.

Perceived ideological disagreement appears to depend on ideological self-identification. Liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans generally perceive the other party as very far from themselves on the standard seven-point ideology scale and tend to have very negative feelings toward that party. According to data from the 2012 ANES, Democrats who placed themselves at 1 or 2 on the ideology scale gave the Republican Party an average rating of 21 degrees on the feeling thermometer scale; likewise, Republicans who placed themselves at 6 or 7 on the scale gave the Democratic Party an average rating of 23 degrees. In contrast, Democrats who placed themselves at 4-7 on the ideology scale gave the Republican Party an average rating of 35 degrees on the feeling thermometer scale; likewise, Republicans who placed themselves at 1-4 on the ideology scale gave the Democratic Party an average rating of 43 degrees.

### **Policy Consistency and Ideological Thinking in the American Electorate**

While there clearly appears to be a rather strong relationship between ideological identification and feelings toward the opposing party among rank-and-file Democrats and Republicans, the meaning of ideological identification among ordinary Americans has itself been the subject of some dispute. According to one school of thought, ideological identification in the public is largely symbolic and has little connection with actual policy preferences (Conover and Feldman 1981; Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012; Mason 2015). These scholars argue that Americans in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, like their counterparts in the 1950s (Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964), display low levels of consistency in their views on policy issues.

Evidence from American National Election Studies surveys suggests, however, that opinions on social welfare policy issues within the American public have become increasingly consistent over the past three decades and that opinions on these issues are now far more consistent than they were as recently as the 1980s. Table 1 displays trends in the average correlations among opinions on the only four social welfare policy issues included in every ANES presidential election survey between 1984 and 2012. These issues were government aid to blacks; government vs. private health insurance; government vs. personal responsibility for jobs and living standards; and the tradeoff between government services and taxes. Opinions on all of these issues were measured by seven-point scales. Table 1 also shows the trends in the average correlations of opinions on these issues with both ideological identification and party identification.<sup>5</sup>

[Table 1 goes here]

The results in Table 1 show that between 1984 and 2012 there was a marked increase in the consistency of opinions on these social welfare policy issues. An increase in the average inter-item correlation from .25 to .41 means that, in terms of shared variance, the relationships among opinions on these issues were an average of 2.7 times stronger in 2012 than in 1984. Likewise, the increase in the average correlation of opinions on these four issues with ideological identification from .20 to .39 means that these relationships were almost four times stronger in 2012 than in 1984 and the increase in the average correlation of opinions on these four issues with party identification from .24 to .44 means that these relationships were more than three times stronger in 2012 than in 1984. This implies that ideological polarization has increased over

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<sup>5</sup> For all of the seven-point policy scales as well as the seven-point ideology scale, respondents who did not place themselves on the scale were assigned to the middle position.

time. As we will show later, this increase in the divide over ideology and policy preferences has played a large role in perpetuating affective polarization within the American electorate.

These results suggest that a large proportion of the public now hold fairly consistent views on social welfare policy issues and that their opinions on these issues are closely connected with both their ideological identification and their party identification. From the standpoint of constructing a measure of social welfare ideology, however, the availability of only four issue questions is problematic. Fortunately, the 2012 ANES survey included, in addition to these four questions, a large number of other questions measuring attitudes on different aspects of social welfare policy. We identified 13 items that could be combined to create a rather cohesive scale measuring social welfare liberalism-conservatism. In addition to the four questions included in earlier surveys, these items included a seven-point scale measuring opinions on the 2012 health care law, three dichotomous questions measuring general attitudes toward the role of government and government regulation, and five questions measuring attitudes toward federal spending on domestic social programs. The average correlation (Pearson's  $r$ ) among the items included in the general social welfare ideology scale was .45 with a range from .29 to .61 and a reliability analysis of the scale produced a Cronbach's alpha of .84, well above the generally accepted cutoff of .70 for a satisfactory scale. Moreover, a principal component analysis shows that the overwhelming majority of the variance in this measure is explained by one dimension. Accordingly, we feel confident that our scale holds together well.

### **The Party Divide over Social Welfare Policy**

Our analysis of attitudes on social welfare policy issues in the 2012 ANES survey indicates that members of the public hold fairly consistent views on these issues and that there is a rather deep divide between supporters of the two major parties over social welfare policy with

Democrats tilting to the left and Republicans tilting even more decidedly to the right. This division is clearly evident in Figure 4 which displays the distribution of social welfare policy preferences among supporters of the two parties including independents leaning toward a party. In order to simplify the presentation we have collapsed the original factor scores into six categories with three categories to the left-of-center on the scale and three categories to the right-of-center on the scale.

[Figure 4 goes here]

The results displayed in Figure 4 show that while the divide between rank-and-file supporters of the two parties over social welfare policy was not as deep as the divide between Democrats and Republicans in Congress, it was quite large. There was only a small amount of overlap between supporters of the two parties among the public with 84 percent of Democrats located to the left of center and 81 percent of Republicans located to the right of center. The correlation between the social welfare policy scale and the seven-point party identification scale was a very strong .69.

### **Policy Preferences and Affect**

We are most interested here in how strongly policy preferences are related to feelings about the two major political parties and their leaders. According to one school of thought, Democrats and Republicans today oftentimes “agree disagreeably” due to convergence between ideological and partisan identification, combined with increased group conflict (Mason 2015). This implies that the policy preferences of party supporters may have little or no influence on their feelings toward the parties and their leaders. However, the results displayed in Table 3 raise doubts about this implication. This table displays correlations of policy preferences on three types of issues—

social welfare, abortion and gay rights—with feeling thermometer ratings of the Democratic and Republican parties and presidential candidates in 2012.

Abortion policy preferences were measured by a scale based on seven questions in the ANES survey—the traditional four-point abortion policy question and six questions asking about the acceptability of abortion under various conditions: as a matter of choice, to protect the health of the mother, in case of rape, in case of incest, in case of fetal abnormalities and for financial reasons. The average correlation (Pearson's  $r$ ) among the seven questions included in the abortion scale was .56 with a range from .40 to .67 and a reliability analysis of the scale produced a Cronbach's alpha of .88, well above the generally accepted cutoff of .70 for a satisfactory scale.

Gay rights policy preferences were measured by a two-item additive scale. The two questions asked about same sex marriage and adoption rights for gay couples. The correlation between responses to these questions was a very strong .64 indicating that they were both measuring the same underlying policy dimension. Unfortunately, no other gay rights questions were asked of the entire sample. Scores on the gay rights scale ranged from 1 for those who took the most liberal position on both questions to 4 for those who took the most conservative position on both questions.

[Table 2 goes here]

The results displayed in Table 2 show that feelings toward the Democratic and Republican parties and their presidential candidates were strongly related to social welfare policy preferences. Specifically, conservative views on social welfare policy were strongly associated with negative feelings toward Barack Obama and the Democratic Party and with positive feelings toward Mitt Romney and the Republican Party. Likewise, conservative views on

abortion policy and gay rights were associated with negative feelings toward Obama and the Democratic Party and with positive feelings toward Romney and the Republican Party, although these relationships were considerably weaker than those for social welfare policy.

The relationships between social welfare policy preferences and feelings toward the 2012 presidential candidates were quite impressive, especially in the case of President Obama. Average feeling thermometer ratings of Obama ranged from 92 degrees among those with very liberal policy views to 13 degrees among those with very conservative policy views, a difference of 79 degrees out of a maximum of 100. Likewise, average feeling thermometer ratings of Romney ranged from 21 degrees among those with very liberal policy views to 76 degrees among those with very conservative policy views, a difference of 55 degrees out of a maximum of 100.

To provide a more definitive test of the role of policy disagreement in the development of negative affect toward the opposing party and its leaders, we conducted two regression analyses—one with feeling thermometer ratings of the opposing party as the dependent variable and one with feeling thermometer ratings of the opposing party presidential candidate as the dependent variable. Our independent variables in these regression analyses were social welfare policy preferences, abortion policy preferences, gay rights preferences, strength of party identification and a measure of media exposure to the campaign to see whether greater exposure to negative campaign communications might be contributing to the formation of negative feelings toward the opposing party and its presidential candidate. The policy variables were coded based on the respondent's party identification to measure disagreement with the policies of the opposing party and its candidate: for Democrats, greater liberalism was coded as higher

disagreement and for Republicans greater conservatism was coded as higher disagreement. The results of these regression analyses are displayed in Table 3.

[Table 3 goes here]

The results of these two regression analyses show that social welfare ideology was the strongest predictor of party supporters' feelings about both the opposing party and the opposing party's presidential candidate. Liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans had the most negative feelings toward both the opposing party and its presidential candidate while conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans had the most positive feelings toward the opposing party and its presidential candidate. Opinions on abortion policy and gay rights also had significant effects on feelings toward the opposing party and its presidential candidate but these effects were considerably weaker than those for opinions on social welfare policy. As expected strong partisans had more negative feelings about the opposing party and its presidential candidate than weak partisans or independent leaners. Finally, exposure to the campaign in the media had a fairly weak negative effect on feelings toward the opposing party and its presidential candidate.

An alternative way to measure affective polarization is to examine the factors that predict the difference in individuals' feeling thermometer ratings between the two major parties, as well as the difference between the two major parties' presidential candidates. Thus, in Table 4 we re-run the models shown in Table 3 but change the dependent variables to measure the absolute difference in individuals' feeling thermometer ratings of the two parties and their presidential candidates. Higher values on this dependent variable indicate higher degrees of affective polarization.

[Table 4 goes here.]

Much like the results of the model specifications shown in Table 3, the results here suggest that affective polarization is, to a large extent, driven by differences in individuals' ideological policy preferences. In terms of both differences in feeling thermometer ratings between parties and the parties' presidential candidates, how an individual scores on our measure of social welfare ideology continues to be an important predictor. The measure of gay rights preferences also predicts higher levels of affective polarization, as does exposure to campaign media. One important difference between these models and the models shown in Table 3 is that being a strong partisan is now a bigger predictor of affective polarization than our measure of social welfare ideology. While this suggests that partisan tribalism plays a role in explaining affective polarization (Mason 2015; Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012), the fact that ideological differences over policy remain important predictors as well suggests that, despite the tribal nature of partisanship in the contemporary political era, Americans vehemently disagree over the proper role and size of government.

Moreover, as described above, policy differences within the electorate have grown considerably since the 1970s. At the same time, strength of partisanship has remained relatively stable. Thus, while both strength of partisanship and ideological differences about policy play a role in predicting affective polarization, it is the increasing divide over ideology that is the chief catalyst for Americans' dislike of the opposing party and its supporters.

The findings presented in Tables 3 & 4 cast doubt on theories that argue that Americans' affective dislike of the opposing political party and its supporters is not due to ideological disagreements over policy. Indeed, if Americans disliked the opposing political party due to notions of group-based affiliations or pure tribalism, we should not be seeing such strong relationships between social welfare ideology, gay rights policy, abortion policy, and affective

evaluations of the opposing political party and its candidates. That we do see consistently strong relationships between ideological preferences over policy and affect towards the opposing party suggests that the growth of affective polarization in the American electorate is, to a large extent, driven by sincere disagreements over policy.

One potential source of apprehension about these results is that they are limited to just one period of time. In order to allay these concerns, we created a different measure of social welfare ideology using data from the ANES cumulative file that extends back to 1984. Though this measure is not identical to the one used in Tables 3 and 4 due to data limitation issues, the same trend holds over this longer time period: social welfare ideology extremity is predictive of affective polarization. These results are available in the Online Appendix.

### **Explaining Republican Anger and Fear toward Obama**

These results suggest (though certainly do not *prove*) that policy preferences, especially preferences over social welfare policy, strongly influence partisans' feelings about the opposing party and its leaders. The more partisans disagree with the opposing party's policies, the more they dislike that party and its candidate. But thus far our findings have been limited to one measure of affect—feeling thermometer scores. To provide a robustness check regarding our results, we conducted an additional set of analyses based on a different measure of affect—feelings of anger and fear among Republicans toward President Obama.

Almost from the moment that Barack Obama took the oath of office in January of 2009, opposition to the President's leadership and policies among Republican leaders in Congress and elsewhere has been fierce. This opposition has frequently been highly personal, with prominent Republican and conservative leaders, especially those aligned with the tea party movement, regularly questioning Obama's patriotism, religious beliefs and even whether he was legally

entitled to serve as president (Klein 2015). These personal attacks on the President apparently resonated with many rank-and-file Republican voters: almost seven years after Obama took office, polls continued to find that large proportions of Republicans believed that he was foreign-born and a Muslim (Frizell 2015).

The 2012 ANES survey included a series of questions designed to measure specific negative and positive emotional responses to President Obama and his Republican challenger, Mitt Romney. Specifically, the survey asked respondents how often they felt angry, afraid, proud and hopeful in response to the candidates—always, most of the time, about half the time, some of the time or never. The results indicated that negative emotional reactions to the President, especially anger, were quite common among Republicans: 49 percent of Republicans, including independents leaning toward the Republican Party, reported feeling angry at Obama at least half the time and 34 percent reported feeling angry at Obama most of the time or always. Republicans were not as fearful of Obama as they were angry at him, but 31 percent reported feeling afraid of Obama at least half the time and 20 percent reported feeling afraid of him most of the time or always.<sup>6</sup>

[Figure 6 goes here]

We are primarily interested in whether emotional responses to Barack Obama among Republicans were related to their policy preferences, especially their preferences on social welfare policy. As a first cut at answering this question, Figure 6 displays the relationship between social welfare ideology and feelings of anger and fear toward President Obama among Republicans. The results provide strong initial support for our hypothesis that policy preferences influence emotional responses: greater conservatism is clearly associated with higher levels of

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<sup>6</sup> Democrats were considerably less angry and somewhat less fearful toward Mitt Romney than Republicans were toward Obama: 35 percent of Democrats reported feeling angry at Romney at least half the time and 27 percent reported feeling afraid of Romney at least half the time.

fear and especially anger toward Obama. Among moderate-to-liberal Republicans, barely 20 percent reported feeling angry with Obama at least half the time and barely 10 percent reported feeling afraid of him at least half the time. In contrast, among very conservative Republicans—a much larger group—close to 80 percent reported feeling angry at Obama at least half the time and close to 50 percent reported feeling afraid of him at least half the time.

The results in Figure 6 suggest that strongly negative emotional reactions to President Obama among many Republicans in 2012 reflected strong disagreement with the President’s policies among social welfare conservatives. To provide a more definitive test of this hypothesis, we conducted a regression analysis of negative emotional reactions to Obama among Republicans. Our dependent variable in this analysis was a two-item emotional negativity scale combining feelings of anger and feelings of fear—the correlation between the anger and fear questions was .66 among all respondents and .57 among Republicans. Our independent variables were the social welfare policy scale, the abortion policy scale, the gay rights scale, a dummy variable for strong partisans, our campaign exposure scale and a scale measuring level of exposure to Fox News based on questions asking respondents how often they watched five different Fox News programs. We included the Fox News scale based on our expectation that exposure to Fox News programs would lead to more negative feelings toward Barack Obama. The results of the regression analysis are displayed in Table 5.

[Table 5 goes here]

The results in Table 5 provide strong support for our hypothesis that the intensity of negative emotional responses to President Obama among Republicans are based on their policy preferences, especially their preferences in the area of social welfare policy. Social welfare ideology had by far the strongest influence on emotional responses to Obama—stronger than

strength of partisanship, stronger than campaign exposure and stronger than Fox News exposure. Opinions on abortion policy also had a slight effect on emotional responses to Obama but this effect was much weaker than that of social welfare ideology, and it was just shy of conventional levels of statistical significance. It is clear from these results that feelings of anger and fear toward Obama among rank-and-file Republicans are highly associated with ideology and policy preferences—negative affect, whether measured by the feeling thermometer scale or by questions about feelings of anger and fear, is strongest among those with the most conservative policy preferences and weakest among those with more moderate policy preferences.

### **Assessing Causality: Experimental Manipulation of Ideological Distance**

Thus far, we have argued that the rise of affective polarization has been directly related to the concomitant growth in ideological polarization: greater ideological extremity is associated with more negative affect. However, the fact that there is a strong relationship between ideological extremity and negative affect does not necessarily mean that there is a causal relationship between these two variables. Therefore, in order to provide a more definitive test of our hypothesis, we conducted a survey experiment in which we manipulated the ideological distance between an individual and a hypothetical candidate from the opposing party running in that individual's congressional district. Our sample of 3,207 individuals was obtained via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) service. Increasingly popular within political science, MTurk is a cost effective way to obtain survey respondents. While the samples obtained from MTurk are not representative of the United States writ large, research suggests that samples obtained this way are more representative than convenience samples such as those obtained on university campuses (Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz 2012).

In order to assess the causal relationship between ideological distance and affective polarization, we utilized a blocked randomization design. After blocking on an individual's stated party affiliation, we randomized individuals into one of three groups: an "extreme ideologue" treatment group, a "moderate ideologue" treatment group, or a control group.<sup>7</sup> In the control group, individuals were told that a candidate from the opposing political party was running for a congressional seat in their district. Individuals were also told that this candidate was 43 years old and had served for three terms as a state legislator. No information on the ideological preferences of this candidate was provided. In addition to this limited biographical information, the "moderate ideologue" treatment described a moderate-to-liberal Republican candidate for Democratic respondents or a moderate-to-conservative Democrat for Republican respondents. Finally, the "extreme ideologue" treatment described a very conservative Republican candidate for Democratic respondents or a very liberal Democratic candidate for Republican respondents. The exact wording of the text used for these manipulations can be found in the Online Appendix. After the experimental manipulation, respondents were asked a series of questions designed to measure feelings toward the opposing party's candidate and the opposing party as a whole. We focus here on individuals' ratings of opposing party's candidates on a "feeling thermometer" scale that ranges from 0 to 10.<sup>8</sup> If affective polarization is driven by ideological differences between supporters of the two parties, then partisans should dislike opposing party candidates more strongly when those candidates are perceived as ideologically extreme and less strongly when those candidates are perceived as relatively moderate. If our theory is wrong and ideology has no effect on affective polarization, then there should be no

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<sup>7</sup> Party affiliation was measured on a seven-point self-placement scale. We classified independent leaners as partisans. Those who self-identified as a pure independent were dropped from the analysis.

<sup>8</sup> Participants were told that a rating of zero indicates a "very negative feeling," a rating of five indicates a "neutral feeling," and a rating of ten indicates a "very positive feeling."

difference between the ratings treated individuals give to the opposing party's candidate and those given by individuals in the control group.

Our theory predicts that individuals assigned to the "extreme ideologue" treatment condition should give much lower evaluations of the opposing party's candidate than those assigned to the control group. Likewise, because those who received the "moderate ideologue" treatment received information about a candidate who was closer to their own party's ideological views, they should view the opposing party's candidate more favorably than those in the control condition.

[Figure 5 goes here]

The coefficient estimates for our treatment effects, displayed in Figure 5, confirm our central argument that ideological differences are the foundation of affective polarization. As expected, Democrats and Republicans who were exposed to the "extreme ideologue" treatment had much lower affective ratings of the opposing party's candidate than those who were given no ideological information about the other party's candidate. Among Democrats, being exposed to this treatment lowered the ratings of the Republican candidate by 2.23 points. For Republicans, the effect was a drop of 1.81 points in affect toward the Democratic candidate. In contrast, when partisans were exposed to the "moderate ideologue" treatment they had more *positive* feelings toward the opposing party's candidates. For Democrats, exposure to the "moderate ideologue" treatment caused their affective evaluations of the Republican candidate to increase by 2.77 points. For Republicans exposed to the "moderate ideologue" treatment, this effect was an increase of 2.04 points. In addition to being highly statistically significant, all of these effects are substantively strong. Indeed, considering the fact that the feeling thermometer scale

individuals used to rate the opposing party's candidate ranges from only 0 to 10, the effects we found here are quite large.

These results are consistent with those of Rogowski and Sutherland (2015) who found that the ideological distance *between* competing candidates strongly influenced affective polarization: the greater the distance between the candidates, the larger the difference in affective evaluations. However, the experimental design we use here differs from the one used by Rogowski and Sutherland (2015) in one key way. In our study, participants were given no information about the ideology of their own party's candidates. In the Rogowski and Sutherland (2015) experiment, participants were told about the ideology of *both* parties' candidates. Thus, for Rogowski and Sutherland (2015) the increase in affective polarization is obtained when individuals are told about the relative ideological distance between two competing candidates. However, our results do not depend on voters knowing the ideological views of both parties' candidates. Indeed, participants in our study were given no information about the ideology of their own party's candidates. Our results indicate that knowing just the ideology of the opposing party's candidate alone can strongly influence feelings toward that candidate. We believe that this is an important finding because, especially when the opposing party candidate is an incumbent, voters may know little or nothing about the ideological views of their own party's nominee.

Beyond affecting how individuals view the opposing party's candidates, our experiment also suggests that individuals who are given this ideological information update their views on the opposing party as a whole. In addition to asking experiment participants to rate the opposing party's candidate on a 0-10 scale, we also asked participants to rate the opposing party on a

feeling thermometer scale ranging from 0-100.<sup>9</sup> The effects of being presented with ideological information about a political candidate on individuals' affective evaluations of the opposing party as a whole are displayed in Figure 6.

[Figure 6 goes here.]

Similar to what we found in regards to individuals' affective evaluations of the opposing party's candidates, experiment participants became more favorable in an affective sense toward the opposing party when told that the opposing party's candidate was not an extreme ideologue. Indeed, Republicans who were told about a moderate-to-conservative Democrat rated the Democratic Party 11.5 points higher on the feeling thermometer scale than those who were provided no ideological information about the candidate. Similarly, Democrats who were told about a moderate-to-liberal Republican rated the Republican Party 13.7 points higher on the feeling thermometer scale. By contrast, Republicans who were told about a liberal Democrat rated the Democratic Party 3.8 points lower on the feeling thermometer scale. This effect is even larger for Democrats; there was a 7.3 point reduction in ratings on the feeling thermometer scale for Democrats exposed to the "extreme ideologue" treatment. These findings suggest that obtaining ideological information about the out-party candidate not only reduces affective evaluations of that candidate, but it also lowers affective ratings of the entire out-party. Ideology, it appears, has a broad causal role in altering the degree of affective polarization within the electorate.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

Our findings call into question the claims of some scholars that affective polarization in the American electorate can and should be separated from ideological or issue polarization and that

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<sup>9</sup> The effects we obtain on candidate evaluations and party evaluations are not directly comparable because the affect scores were measured on different scales. However, the patterns are quite similar and the effects are always in the same – and expected – direction.

ordinary Americans are polarized when it comes to affect but not when it comes to ideology or issues. Like these scholars, we find that affective polarization has increased sharply in recent years and that this trend is due entirely to increasingly negative feelings toward the opposing party and its leaders among Democrats and Republicans. Rather than being largely based off of tribal affiliations, however, we find clear evidence of ideological thinking among voters within the domain of social welfare policy and a rather sharp divide on these issues between supporters of the two major parties with Democrats tilting to the left and Republicans tilting even more strongly to the right. More importantly, we find clear evidence that feelings about the opposing party and its leaders are strongly related to social welfare policy preferences: conservative Republicans hold far more negative feelings about the Democratic Party and its leaders than moderate-to-liberal Republicans and liberal Democrats hold far more negative feelings about the Republican Party and its leaders than moderate-to-conservative Democrats. Moreover, the results of our survey experiment provide clear evidence that there is a causal relationship between ideological distance and affect—the greater the ideological distance, the more negative the affect. Partisan identity alone does not lead to strongly negative feelings toward those on the other side. It is partisan identity combined with policy disagreement that produces such feelings.

Our findings, along with those of Rogowski and Sutherland (2015), indicate that there is a rational basis to voters' emotional responses to political leaders and groups—negative affect is based to a large extent on policy disagreement. Moreover, this relationship is strongest among the most politically engaged members of the public (see also, Abramowitz 2010). The more involved they are in the political process, the more Americans' emotional reactions to parties and candidates reflect their policy preferences. These findings show that when it comes to politics, reason and emotion are almost inseparable. The rise of negative affect and incivility in

American politics is closely connected with the rise of ideological polarization among the public as well as among political elites. Democrats and Republicans dislike each other today because they disagree with each other about many issues and especially about the fundamental question of the role of government in American society. It is very hard to disagree without being disagreeable when there are so many issues on which we disagree and the disagreements on many of these issues are so deep.

Unfortunately the reality of sharp partisan divisions over policy issues makes the possibility of reconciliation and cooperation between those in opposing partisan camps much less likely. If Democrats and Republicans really had much in common but were nevertheless polarized in opinions due to group-based notions of partisan conflict, then it might be possible to point out the areas of agreement to partisans and reduce the level of animus toward the other side. In this case, getting to better know those on the other side could actually reduce the intensity of partisan conflict. But if in fact we truly disagree on issues and ideological viewpoints, then getting to better know those on the other side of the political divide could end up exacerbating conflict by increasing awareness of deep disagreements over important issues. Rational dislike of the other party may be more difficult to overcome than irrational dislike.

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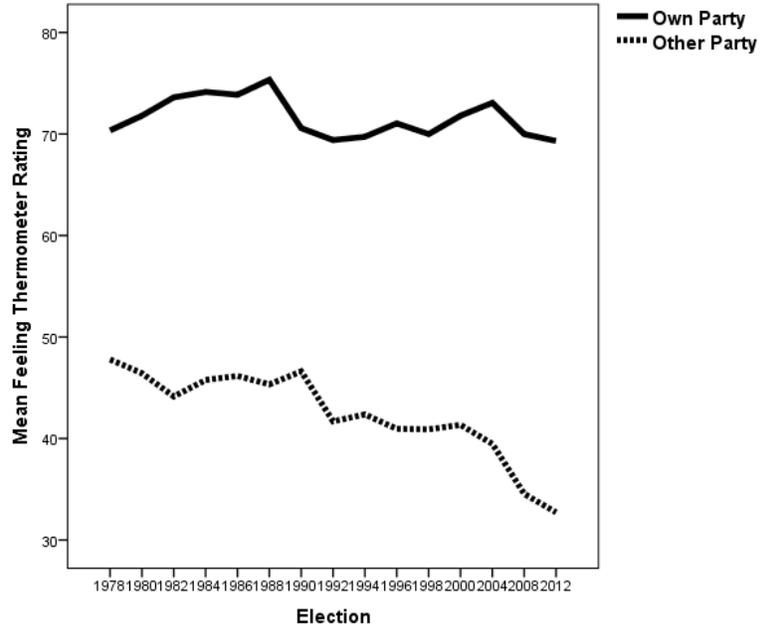
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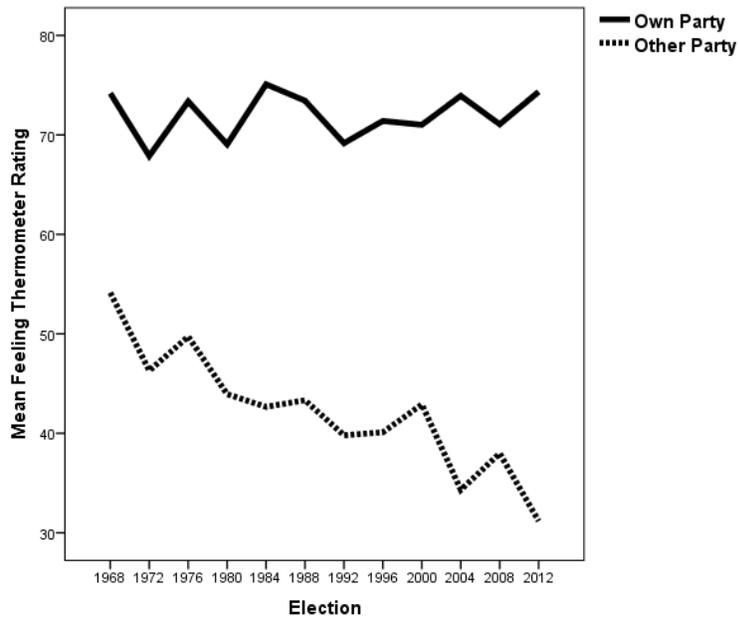
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Figure 1  
Trends in Feeling Thermometer Ratings of Parties and Presidential Candidates

Parties

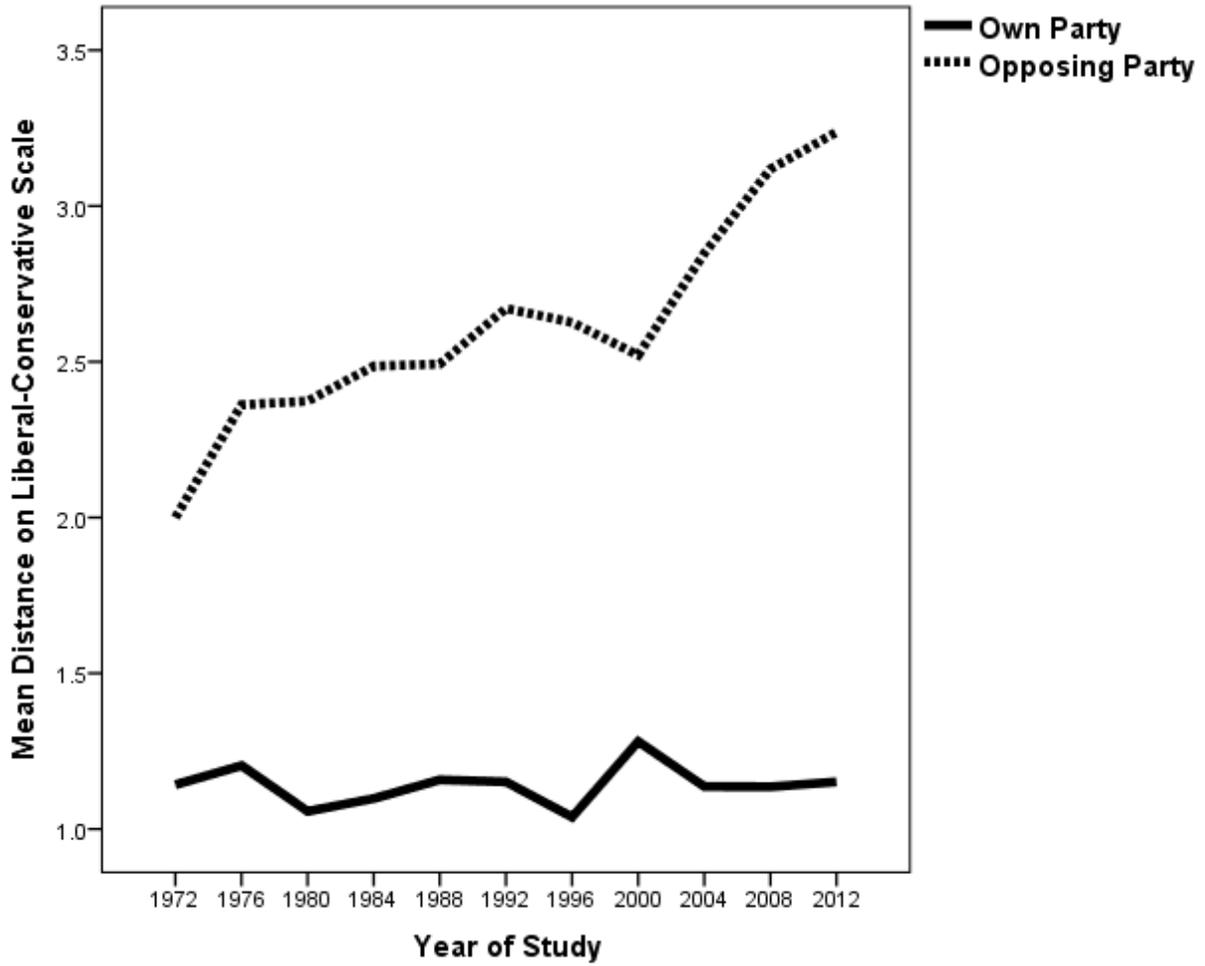


Presidential Candidates



Source: ANES Cumulative File

Figure 2  
Trend in Perceived Distance from Own Party and Opposing Party on Liberal-Conservative Scale, 1972-2012



Source: ANES Cumulative File

Table 1  
The Rise of Constraint on Social Welfare Policy Issues: 1984-2012

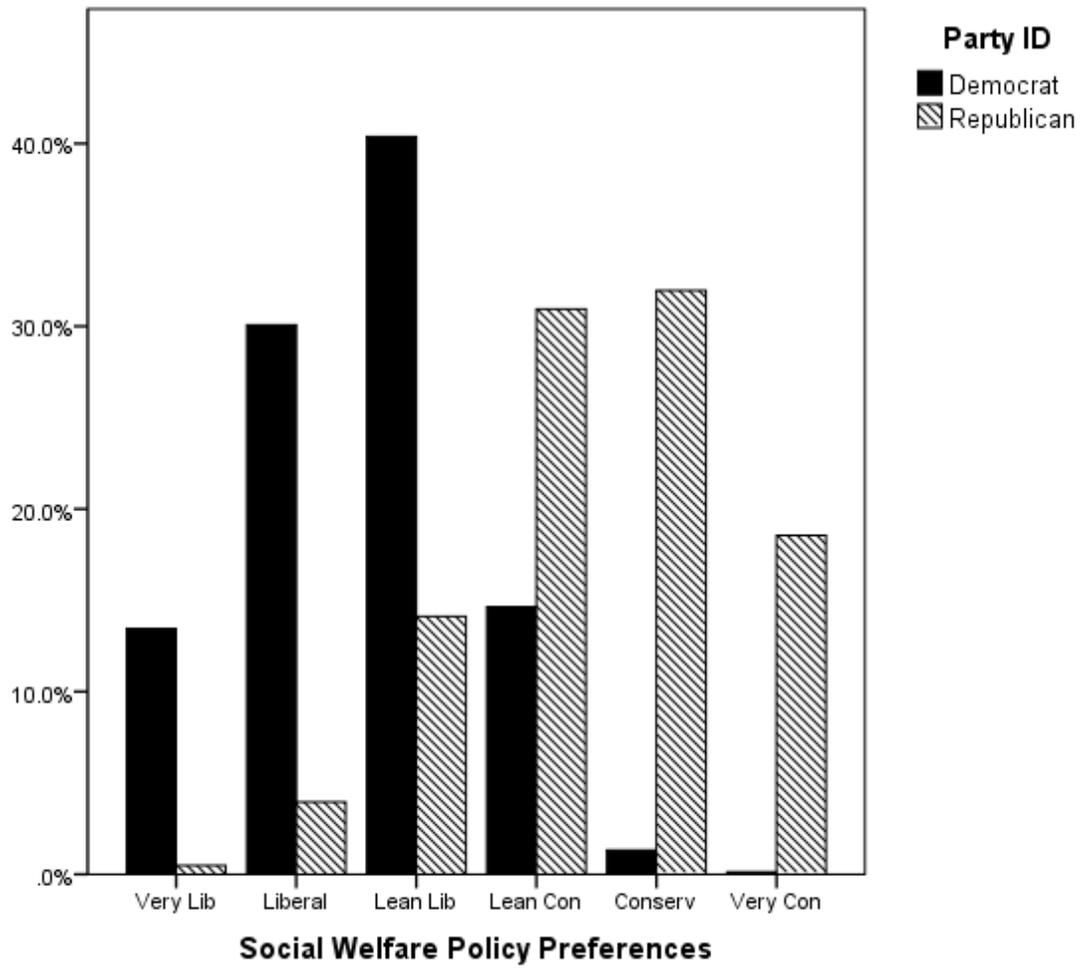
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Year	Average Correlation among Issue Questions	Average Correlation of Issue Questions with	
		Ideological ID	Party ID
1984	.25	.20	.24
1988	.30	.23	.26
1992	.29	.24	.26
1996	.35	.31	.33
2000	.23	.24	.27
2004	.35	.35	.36
2008	.38	.35	.39
2012	.41	.39	.44

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Source: ANES Cumulative File

Figure 3  
Polarization in the 2012 Electorate: Position on Social Welfare Policy Scale by  
Party Identification



Source: 2012 ANES

Table 2  
Correlations of Domestic Policy Scales with Feeling Thermometer Ratings of Parties  
and Presidential Candidates in 2012

Policy Scale	Correlation with Rating of			
	Obama	Dem Party	Romney	Rep Party
Social Welfare	-.73	-.69	.60	.48
Abortion	-.32	-.25	.34	.30
Gay Rights	-.34	-.27	.31	.27

Note: All correlations are significant at .01 level based on one-tailed t-tests.

Source: 2012 ANES

Table 3  
Results of Regression Analyses of Feeling Thermometer Ratings of Opposing Party and  
Opposing Party Presidential Candidate in 2012

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Opposing Party

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Independent Variable	B	(Std. Error)	Beta	t	Sig.
Social Welfare Ideology	-.866	(.080)	-.286	-10.81	.001
Abort Policy	-.244	(.065)	-.103	-3.78	.001
Gay Rights	-1.484	(.539)	-.078	-2.76	.01
Strong Partisan	-9.755	(1.230)	-.219	-7.94	.001
Campaign Exposure	-.130	(.223)	-.016	-.58	.56

Adjusted R<sup>2</sup> = .30

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Opposing Party Presidential Candidate

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Independent Variable	B	(Std. Error)	Beta	t	Sig.
Social Welfare Ideology	-1.025	(.093)	-.312	-11.00	.001
Abort Policy	-.184	(.075)	-.071	-2.44	.05
Gay Rights	-2.410	(.628)	-.116	-3.84	.001
Strong Partisan	-7.798	(1.433)	-.161	-5.44	.001
Campaign Exposure	-.371	(.260)	-.043	-1.43	.15

Adjusted R<sup>2</sup> = .271

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Note: Estimated coefficients for intercepts and demographic control variables not shown. Significance levels based on one-tailed t-tests.

Source: 2012 ANES

Table 4  
Results of Regression Analyses of Difference in Feeling Thermometer Ratings of  
Opposing Party and Opposing Party Presidential Candidate in 2012

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Difference in Party Ratings

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Independent Variable	B	(Std. Error)	Beta	t	Sig.
Social Welfare Ideology	.715	(.105)	.172	6.83	.001
Abortion Policy	.145	(.085)	.045	1.73	.08
Gay Rights	2.739	(.704)	.105	3.89	.001
Strong Partisan	22.364	(1.606)	.367	13.92	.001
Campaign Exposure	.706	(.291)	.065	2.42	.02

Adjusted R<sup>2</sup> = .352

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Difference in Party Candidate Ratings

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Independent Variable	B	(Std. Error)	Beta	t	Sig.
Social Welfare Ideology	.822	(.111)	.203	3.38	.001
Abort Policy	.177	(.089)	.055	1.97	.05
Gay Rights	1.779	(.744)	.070	2.39	.05
Strong Partisan	15.868	(1.698)	.270	9.34	.001
Campaign Exposure	1.212	(.308)	.114	3.93	.001

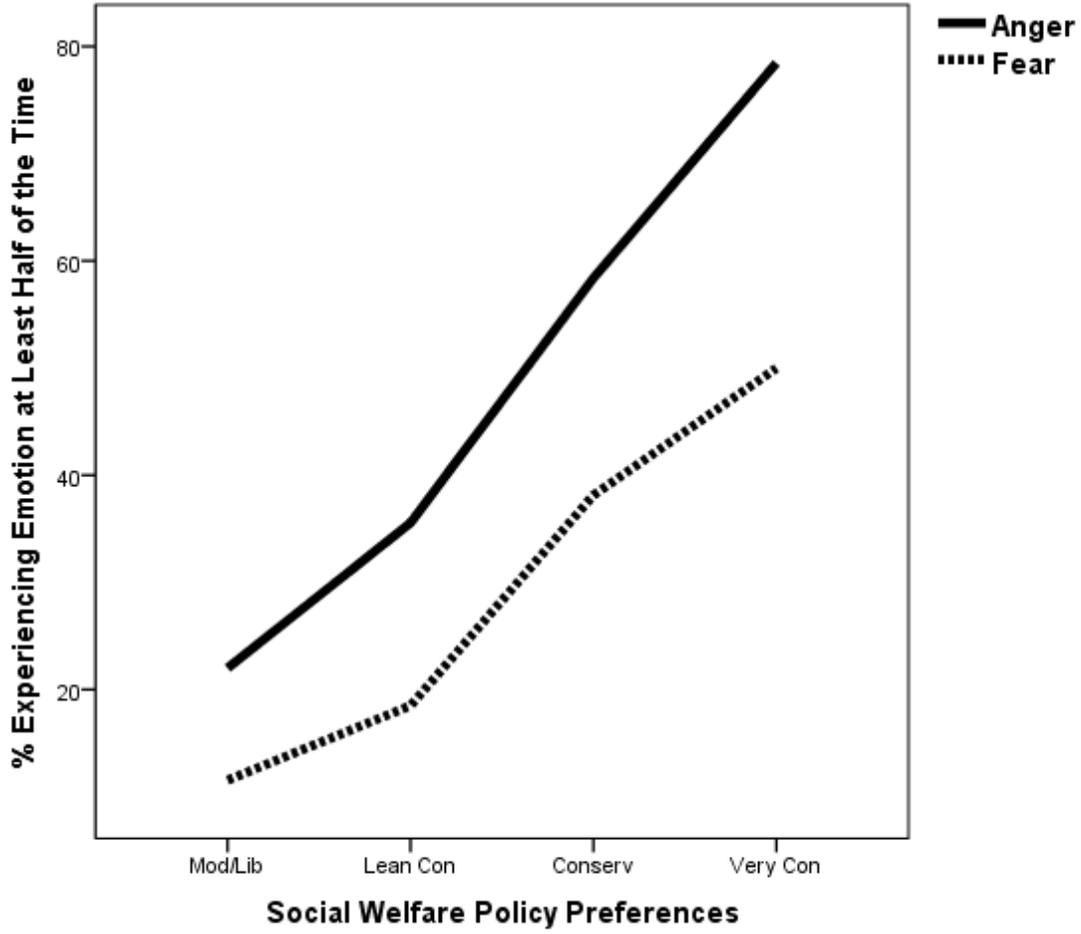
Adjusted R<sup>2</sup> = .299

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Note: Estimated coefficients for intercepts and demographic control variables not shown. Significance levels based on one-tailed t-tests.

Source: 2012 ANES

Figure 4  
Ideology and Emotion: Percentage of Republicans Experiencing Anger or Fear toward Obama at Least Half of the Time by Social Welfare Ideology



Source: 2012 ANES

Table 5  
Results of Regression Analysis of Negative Emotional Response to Obama among  
Republicans in 2012

Independent Variable	B	(Std. Error)	Beta	t	Sig.
Social Welfare Ideology	.086	(.018)	.330	4.76	.001
Abortion Policy	.024	(.013)	.104	1.82	.07
Gay Rights	.142	(.133)	.070	1.06	.29
Strong Partisan	.655	(.286)	.132	2.29	.05
Campaign Exposure	.088	(.051)	.108	1.72	.08
Fox News Exposure	.159	(.069)	.125	2.30	.02

Adjusted R<sup>2</sup> = .291

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Note: Estimated coefficients for intercepts and demographic control variables not shown. Significance levels based on one-tailed t-tests.

Source: 2012 ANES

Figure 5

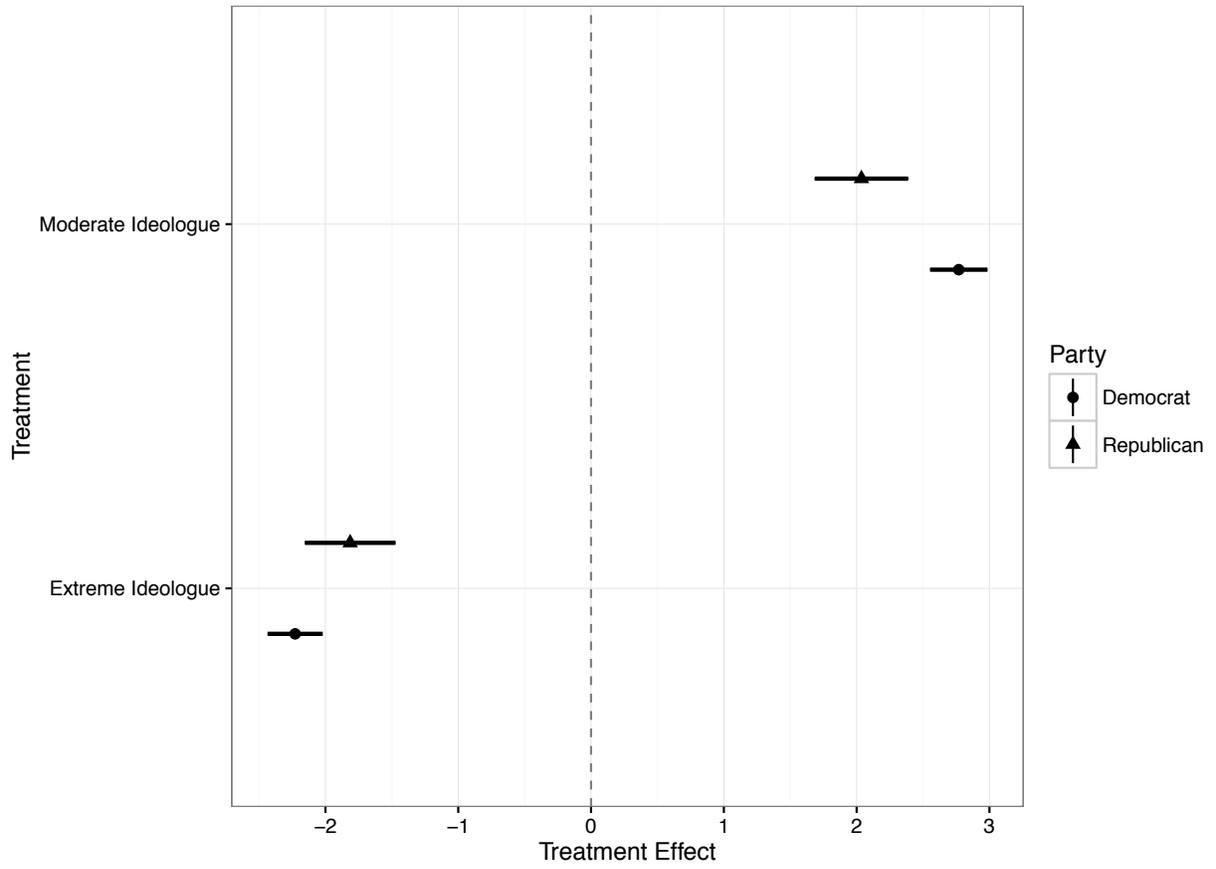


Figure 6

