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WHAT DO WE MEASURE WHEN WE MEASURE AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION?

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Abstract Affective polarization—the tendency of Democrats and Republicans to dislike and distrust one another—has become an important phenomenon in American politics. Yet, despite scholarly attention to this topic, two measurement lacunae remain. First, how do the different measures of this concept relate to one another—are they interchangeable? Second, these items all ask respondents about the parties. When individuals answer them, do they think of voters, elites, or both? We demonstrate differences across items, and scholars should carefully think about which items best match their particular research question. Second, we show that when answering questions about the other party, individuals think about elites more than voters. More generally, individuals dislike voters from the other party, but they harbor even more animus toward the other party's elites. The research note concludes by discussing the consequences for both measuring this concept and understanding its ramifications.

For nearly two decades, scholars have analyzed voters' issue positions to determine whether the mass public is, in fact, polarized (Fiorina 2017). In recent years, however, there is a growing awareness that this does not fully capture partisan conflict in the contemporary United States. Regardless of where they stand on the issues, Americans increasingly dislike, distrust, and do not want

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to interact with those from the other party, a tendency known as affective polarization (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012). This divisiveness vitiates political trust (Hetherington and Rudolph 2015), hampers interpersonal relations (Huber and Malhotra 2017), and hinders economic exchanges (McConnell et al. 2018).

Yet, two significant measurement lacunae remain. First, scholars use a wide-ranging assortment of items to measure affective polarization, but there is little sense of how these items relate to one another: Are they interchangeable? Second, these measures ask respondents to evaluate "the Democratic Party" or "the Republican Party." But whom do voters imagine when they answer such questions: ordinary voters or elected officials?

Addressing these questions with an original survey experiment, we document how the different measures relate to one another, finding that nearly all of them are strongly interrelated. The exception is the social-distance measures, which we argue tap a distinctive aspect of affective polarization. Further, the results show that when people think about the other party, they think primarily about political elites rather than voters. While they dislike both elites and ordinary voters from the other party, they especially dislike the other party's elites. These findings have important implications for how scholars measure affective polarization, and for our understanding of its underlying dynamic.

What Is Affective Polarization, and How Do We Measure It?

Affective polarization stems from an individual's identification with a political party. Identifying with a party divides the world into a liked ingroup (one's own party), and a disliked outgroup (the opposing party; Tajfel and Turner 1979). This identification gives rise to ingroup favoritism and bias, which is at the heart of affective polarization: the tendency of people identifying as Republicans or Democrats to view opposing partisans negatively and copartisans positively (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012, 406; Iyengar and Westwood 2015, 691).

Scholars typically measure affective polarization via survey instruments (Iyengar et al. 2019). The most common is a feeling thermometer rating that asks respondents to rate how cold or warm they feel toward the Democratic Party and the Republican Party (Lelkes and Westwood 2017, 489). A second instrument asks respondents to rate how well various traits describe the parties. Positive traits include patriotism, intelligence, honesty, open-mindedness, and generosity; negative traits include hypocrisy, selfishness, and meanness (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Garrett et al. 2014). A third approach is to ask citizens to rate the extent to which they trust the parties to do what is right (Levendusky 2013). A final set of questions gauge how comfortable people are having close friends from the other party, having neighbors from the other

party, and having their children marry someone from the other party (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Levendusky and Malhotra 2016). These items are known as social-distance measures, as they gauge the level of intimacy (distance) individuals are comfortable having with those from the other party.

How do these various measures of affective polarization relate to one another? Prior studies provide little insight into this question; most studies include only one or two measures and do not explicitly compare them. Two general types of these measures exist: While thermometers, trait ratings, and trust measures are general attitudes about broad objects (i.e., parties), social-distance items capture attitudes about particular behavioral outcomes (e.g., your child marrying someone from the other party). These two should be only marginally related, given how "[e]mpirical research has shown repeatedly that the relation between general attitudes and specific behaviors [and related measures] tends to be very low" (Fishbein and Ajzen 2010, 278).

A distinct question concerns the targets of all of these measures: When someone rates "the Democratic Party" on a feeling thermometer, or rates whether "Democrats" are selfish, whom are they considering? Is it Democratic voters or elected officials like Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer? As Iyengar and his colleagues (2012, 411) acknowledge, the existing measures are ambiguous on this point: "We will not be able to clarify whether respondents were thinking of partisan voters or party leaders when providing their thermometer scores." The same is true for any of the other items; if someone says Republicans are untrustworthy, is that their Republican neighbor, or is that an assessment of President Trump? This distinction is not only crucial to understanding what people affectively envision when asked about the "party," but it also underlines that people might feel differently toward other voters than they do toward elites.

Data and Measures

To answer these questions, we conducted an original survey with Bovitz Inc., which collected the data from a nonprobability-based but representative (on all key census demographics) sample of the United States. The survey was administered via the Internet in December 2017 with a sample of 2,224 respondents (see Online Appendix section 1 for details on the sample). Respondent were asked to assess the parties using the aforementioned metrics: feeling thermometers for each party, trait ratings for each party, trust scores for each party, and the three social-distance items (comfort with the other party as friends, neighbors, or as a son/daughter-in-law). The trait ratings included the eight previously mentioned characteristics and were aggregated to create a net rating of positive minus negative traits ($\alpha = 0.9$ for both parties). We also merged the three social-distance measures ($\alpha = 0.8$). Analyzing the trait or social-distance items separately yielded similar results to those reported below.

To understand who respondents think about when answering questions about parties, we included an experimental component for the three general affective polarization measures—the thermometers, trait ratings, and trust measures. Participants were randomly assigned to versions that asked them to evaluate "Democratic (Republican) Party voters," "Democratic (Republican) Party candidates and elected officials," or "the Democratic (Republican) Party." For example, someone assigned to the voter condition would rate Democratic (Republican) Party voters on the feeling thermometer score, and state whether they thought the voters were selfish, mean, and so on. Treatment assignment was held constant within individuals to avoid alerting them to the purpose of the experimental manipulation.

The experiment allows us to see how explicitly priming different foci changes answers (do respondents feel differently about elites vs. voters?), and to see which one is more closely related to the version where they rate "the party" (i.e., the standard version used in the literature). We did not include experimental variations for the social-distance items, as pilot testing suggested people were incredulous when asked about living near elected officials of the other party or having their children marry such people (i.e., they thought such scenarios were extremely unlikely). The full question wording for all items is given in Online Appendix section 5.

Results

Given our interest in affective polarization, we restrict our analysis to partisans (including partisan leaners), consistent with earlier studies. To begin, consider the correlation matrix of the measures of affective polarization, presented in table 1. Here, we pool across the different experimental conditions, but analyzing the data separately by condition yields largely similar results (see Online Appendix section 2). The correlations are calculated in two different ways, both of which have been used in the previous literature. The top panel shows the correlations between the various measures looking only at outparty evaluations (i.e., how Democrats rate Republicans). The bottom panel presents the items looking at the difference between inparty and outparty ratings (i.e., Democrats' evaluations of Democrats minus their evaluations of Republicans) to correct for interpersonal differences in scale usage.

What is most striking in table 1 is that all of the items are strongly correlated with one another, with one exception: the social-distance items. This holds for both versions of this calculation. Indeed, the correlations between the social-distance items and the other measures are less than half of the correlations between the other measures.[1] This coheres with the idea that thermometers,

1. We cannot directly compare our social-distance measures to those used by Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes (2012), as our items use a slightly different response scale and the data were collected at a different point in time. We also are unable to directly explore a point raised by Klar, Krupnikov, and Ryan (2018)—that the social-distance items may capture a general aversion to politics separate from affective polarization.

Table 1. Correlation matrix, measures of affective polarization

Correlation matrix, outparty affect items				
	Feeling thermometer	Trait ratings	Trust ratings	Social-distance items
Feeling thermometer	1.00			
Trait ratings	0.52	1.00		
Trust rating	0.57	0.63	1.00	
Social-distance items	–0.21	–0.19	–0.25	1.00
Correlation matrix, party difference (inparty – outparty) items				
	Feeling thermometer	Trait ratings	Trust ratings	Social-distance items
Feeling thermometer	1.00			
Trait ratings	0.44	1.00		
Trust rating	0.64	0.54	1.00	
Social-distance items	0.22	0.12	0.21	1.0

NOTE.—Cell entries are the pairwise polychoric correlations between the various measures of affective polarization. The top half of the table presents the correlations between the items measuring affect toward the other party (i.e., Democrats' rating of Republicans; $N = 1{,}641$). The bottom half presents the correlation between the differenced versions of the items (i.e., Democrats' rating of Democrats minus their rating of Republicans; $N = 1{,}639$).

trait ratings, and trust measures differ from the specific behavioral outcomes captured by the social-distance items. To be clear, this does not mean that one measure is "better" than another; rather, they gauge different manifestations of affective polarization.[2] Scholars need to consider which measures are most appropriate to their own particular research question. If one's goal is to predict behavior, such as partisan discrimination, versions of the social-distance items seem preferable. Alternatively, general measures seem optimal for understanding citizens' self-images and prejudicial feelings.

To determine whether individuals think of the party as voters, elites, or some combination of the two, we analyze the impact of the experimental conditions. Table 2 presents regression results where each outcome measure is regressed on indicators for the experimental conditions (the excluded condition is the voter condition). Assessments of the other party, rather than differences between the parties, serve as the dependent variable here. Our goal is to understand whether people think of voters or elites when assessing the party, so focusing on evaluations of one party—rather than the difference between parties—is the more sensible quantity of interest here. Analyzing the difference in the context of the experiment is essentially analyzing a difference-in-difference, which is not analytically useful here.

Table 2 shows a clear and consistent pattern of results: On every measure, respondents are more negative toward the elites of the other party than they are toward voters. For example, on the feeling thermometer rating item, individuals rate the opposing party's voters at 28.8 degrees, but they rate the other party's candidates and elected officials at 24.7 degrees. The same is true on every other measure: They rate elites more negatively on traits, and they trust them less.[3] These findings highlight that while Americans do not like the other party's voters, they exhibit particular negativity toward partisan elites (Fiorina 2017). In the context of political polarization, it is thus important to differentiate between people's assessments of voters and of elites (Levendusky and Malhotra 2016).

Further, our results show that when people evaluate the other party—as the standard measures of affective polarization ask them to do—they think of elites more than ordinary voters. While the ratings of elites and parties are

2. We explored the convergent validity of each affective polarization measure by correlating each with the four commonly used predictive variables: partisan importance, partisan social identity, partisan ambivalence, and negative partisanship. We find all measures strongly relate to these variables, suggesting that they all meaningfully capture variation in partisan animosity. See Online Appendix section 3 for details.

3. Interestingly, the 1980 American National Election Studies conducted a similar experiment, comparing thermometers that asked about "Republicans/Democrats" or "the Democratic Party/the Republican Party." It finds larger differences—10–12 percent greater scores for "Republicans/Democrats." In short, the relative animus felt toward elite (compared to voters) may have been higher even during periods of lower overall affective polarization. Even so, it is possible that during different times, voter-directed affective polarization could exceed elite-directed affective polarization.

Table 2. Differences in affective polarization by target for other party items

	(1) Outparty feeling thermometer	(2) Trait ratings of the other party	(3) Trust in the other party
Elites condition	–4.11**	–0.26**	–0.09
	(1.34)	(0.10)	(0.06)
Parties condition	–5.36**	–0.30**	–0.11#
	(1.35)	(0.10)	(0.06)
Constant	28.79**	–1.30**	1.89**
	(0.95)	(0.07)	(0.04)
Significant difference between elite/party conditions?	*N* ($p = 0.35$)	*N* ($p = 0.67$)	*N* ($p = 0.76$)
Observations	1,703	1,660	1,662
R-squared	0.01	0.01	0.00

NOTE.—Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients with associated standard errors in parentheses. The models regress indicator variables for the experimental conditions on each of the measures of affective polarization.

#$p < 0.1$; **$p < 0.01$, all tests are two-tailed

always significantly less than the ratings of voters, the ratings of elites and parties typically cannot be differentiated from one another (see the bottom section of table 2). Perhaps not surprisingly, people think of the opposing party in terms of those most often associated with those labels: the president (when from the other party), members of Congress, and other elected officials. Part of what scholars have called affective polarization, then, is not simply dislike of the opposing party, but is dislike of the opposing party's *elites*.

Conclusion

This study advances scholars' knowledge of how to measure affective polarization in two related ways. First, in comparing various measures of affective polarization, we find most measures are strongly related to one another. The exception is the social-distance items, which tap individuals' willingness to interact with those from the other party. Second, when scholars use items that measure feelings toward "parties," they are capturing attitudes toward elites more than toward voters. Moreover, people may not like voters from the other party, but they dislike the other party's elites even more.

Both findings have important implications for how scholars should measure affective polarization. One can think about four different possible types of items: overall assessments of ordinary voters (i.e., a feeling thermometer of Democratic voters); social-distance measures involving ordinary voters;

overall assessments of elites (i.e., feeling thermometer ratings of Democratic elected officials); or social-distance items involving elites (i.e., how comfortable would you be meeting with or having a meal with a Democratic member of Congress?). Any of these four are potentially quite useful, but in different circumstances. For example, to understand voters' willingness to interact with those from the other party, social-distance measures about ordinary voters are needed, and should be paired with direct behavioral measures. But if scholars seek to understand, for example, how partisan animosity shapes political evaluations, then general assessments of elites are needed. We encourage scholars to think about how these different types of measures fit their particular research questions. Understanding the causes and consequences of affective polarization requires a careful matching of the measures to the underlying concept and the goals of the study.

These findings also help us understand the downstream consequences of affective polarization. For example, the displeasure respondents express with elites reveals why people are unhappy with—and feel poorly represented by—the political system (Fiorina 2017). Moreover, it underlines Hetherington and Rudolph's (2015) finding that affective polarization drives down trust in government in part because it reflects trust in the other party's elites. For example, in our study, nearly half of respondents in the elite condition (47 percent) "almost never" trust the other party to do what is right, so it is little wonder that they think government does not work when the other party is in power.

Despite that relatively pessimistic finding, we can end on a more positive note. While affective polarization is certainly real, Americans are still—by and large—willing to interact with those from the other party, at least in some settings. For example, over 80 percent of our sample is at least somewhat comfortable being friends or neighbors with those from the other party. Even in an affectively polarized era, there are important limits to it, and it is important not to push the point too far (see also Lelkes and Westwood 2017).

Further, while partisanship is obviously an important political identity, voters often see other identities as even more important. In our survey, we asked people how important six different identities were to them: their national (American) identity, their racial identity, their religious identity, their gender identity, their class identity, and their partisan identity. Of these, partisanship ties for *last* place with class, significantly below *all* of the others (see Online Appendix section 4). While part of this might simply reflect the low esteem in which Americans typically hold political parties, it does offer an important reminder that ordinary voters attach importance to many dimensions of their identities, not just their partisanship. Emphasizing these other identities can mitigate affective polarization (Levendusky 2018), and also deepens our understanding of our current polarized political moment.

Supplementary Data

Supplementary data are freely available at *Public Opinion Quarterly* online.

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