**Chapter 18: Affective Polarization in the American Public**

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**Abstract:** Affective polarization in the United States – the gap between individuals’ positive feelings toward their own political party and negative feelings toward the opposing party – has increased markedly in the past two decades. We review recent scholarship on affective polarization, focusing on causes, social and political consequences, and antidotes. This work shows a link between affective polarization and some concerning behaviors such as deleterious reactions to COVID-19. However, connections between affective polarization and dire political outcomes such as democratic backsliding and violence remain unclear. While possible antidotes to affective polarization focus on correcting stereotypes or priming common identities, more work is needed to determine which causes and antidotes apply most directly to politicalconsequences.

**Keywords:** Affective polarization, partisan animosity, ideological polarization, partisan prejudice, political parties

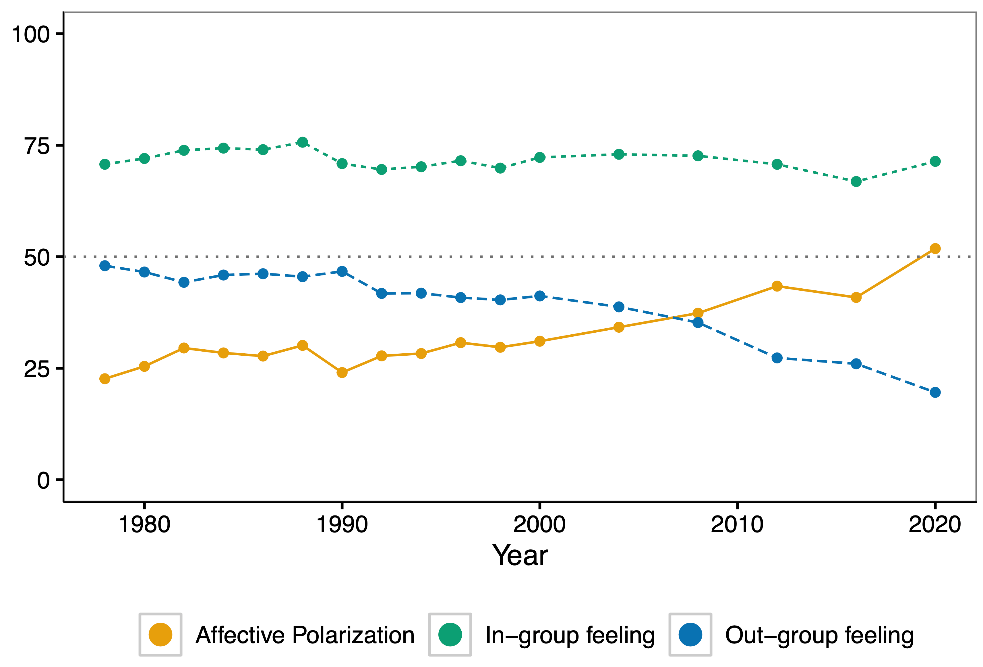
A functioning political system needs competition between alternative visions of the public good, and thus, some level of ideological polarization. For much of the 20th century, scholars of American politics worried about weak parties and insufficient polarization (Fiorina, 1980). This changed in the 21st century with scholars recognizing the resilience and increasing strength of partisanship at the elite level (Hetherington, 2001).

Although many scholars remain skeptical about mass ideological polarization (Fiorina and Abrams, 2008), it has become a point of consensus that *something* concerning is happening.Scholars have called polarization in the U.S. public an “acrimonious matter” (Finkel et al., 2020, p. 533). The general public also believes that polarization has increased (Lelkes, 2016). What exactly is going on? It is now rather indisputable that there has been an increase in affective polarization in the public – Americans increasingly dislike and distrust those from the other party (Iyengar et al., 2012; Iyengar et al., 2019), to the point where out-group hate now exceeds in-group love (Iyengar and Krupenkin, 2018). Evidence suggests that this partisan animosity is frequently *not* tied to substantive beliefs (Mason, 2018). Scholars worry that affective polarization precludes opportunities for compromise and mutually beneficial policies (Whitt et al., 2020), weakens support for democratic norms (Graham and Svolik, 2020), and undermines trust in government (Hetherington and Rudolph, 2015) – all of which raise concerns about democratic backsliding (e.g., Kingzette et al., n.d.). Indeed, levels of partisan animosity parallel those found between religious groups in post-conflict societies (Carlin and Love, 2016). In this chapter, we review recent research on affective polarization, its causes, consequences, and potential solutions, with a focus on the mass public in the U.S. We point out that the connection between affective polarization and most dire anti-democratic political consequences is unclear, at best. Thus, scholars need to think carefully about what they intend to target (e.g., affective polarization, support for democratic norms) when devising interventions.

**1. Defining Affective Polarization and Trends**

Historically, work on polarization concerned the *ideological polarization* of issue positions or attitudes. In the U.S. Congress, the two parties have clearly become more internally homogenous and further apart from each other (McCarty, 2019). Trends in the mass public, however, are murkier: some argue that the public remains relatively moderate and not terribly ideological (Fiorina and Abrams, 2008), while others argue that the mass public has become more deeply divided over time (Abramowitz, 2010). There are data to support both positions – the American public remains moderate, though there is some greater divergence (and ideological constraint across issues) among strong partisans (Lelkes, 2016). There is much more agreement that *affective polarization* – the gap between individuals’ positive feelings toward their own political party and negative feelings toward the opposing party – is occurring. There are several common survey measures to assess levels of affective polarization: 1) feeling thermometers that ask respondents to rate how cold or warm they feel towards the parties on a 0 (very cold) to 100 (very warm) scale; 2) trait measures that ask respondents to rate partisans when it comes to being hypocritical, selfish, honest, or generous, among other traits; 3) trust measures about how much one can trust the parties; and 4) social distance measures that ask about individuals’ comfort in having their child marry someone from another party or having a friend from the other party (Druckman and Levendusky, 2019).

**Figure 18.1: Affective Polarization Over Time**



As measured by any of these metrics, affective polarization has clearly increased in the U.S. public. Figure 1 displays the trend for feeling thermometers with data from the American National Election Studies (ANES) survey.[[1]](#footnote-1) Affective polarization – i.e., the feeling thermometer differential (in-party – out-party) – averaged about 25º in the 1970s and 1980s and is now greater than 50º. The figure shows this largely reflects an increase in out-party animus with average feeling thermometer scores toward out-partisans dropping from roughly 48º in the 1970’s to about 20º today (Finkel et al., 2020). Scholars have further documented affective mass polarization in countries other than the U.S. Westwood et al. (2018) show that in four countries, levels of partisan discrimination exceed those found between other social groups (see also Gidron et al., 2020).

**2. Causes of Affective Polarization**

The most prominent theory of affective polarization posits that it is driven by partisanship as a social identity (Iyengar et al., 2019; Finkel et al., 2020). We organize the causes into external causes (media, ideological and social sorting, elite influence, and political institutions), and internal causes (social identity, stereotypes, traits).

*External Causes*

The effect of the changing media environment represents one of the most-studied external causes of affective polarization. Much work on media in recent decades concerns the echo chambers hypothesis, that partisans are now surrounded by favorable political information environments. The most recent work has tended to study the Internet (as opposed to, for instance, cable news). Three recent studies illustrate what we know and do not know about the Internet’s effect on affective polarization. Lelkes et al. (2017) use state right-of-way laws – which affect the costs of building Internet infrastructure – as an instrument for broadband Internet access by county. Using large-scale surveys in 2004 and 2008, they find that greater Internet access in a county increased polarized feelings toward the Presidential candidates. On the other hand, Boxell et al. (2017) assess ANES data from 1972-2016 by age cohorts according to their likelihood of using the Internet and social media. They find that the largest increases in a polarization index over time – which included a measure for affective polarization – occurred among the oldest cohort that was the least likely to use the Internet. Their predictive models find a small effect of Internet use on polarization. Regarding the effects of social media specifically, Allcott et al. (2020) conduct a large-scale experiment in which individuals deactivated their Facebook accounts for the four weeks prior to the 2018 midterms. The authors find that Facebook deactivation reduces polarization, measured as an index. The effect on affective polarization was negative, but not significant, suggesting social media may have some effect. Taken together, the studies suggest that the Internet affects affective polarization, although it seems to be a small effect (Iyengar et al., 2019; Boxell et al., 2017).

It is difficult to draw conclusions about the mechanism through which the Internet influences affective polarization. Some authors have questioned how the Internet can polarize if online news consumption is actually less politically homogenous than offline consumption (Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2011; see also Bakshy et al., 2015). However, greater homogeneity of news online compared with offline is not necessarily a precondition for more affective polarization. The Internet could increase polarization because it increases the total amount of political news to which people are exposed (Lelkes et al., 2017), or because it increases the visibility of partisan signals (relative to offline interactions) (Settle, 2018). Other studies also have investigated whether exposure to cross-cutting social media information decreases affective polarization, an assumption that would logically follow from the echo chambers hypothesis. Findings have been mixed whether such depolarization occurs. The different findings are plausibly explained by the characteristics of the treatments employed in distinct experiments; an out-party news subscription could reduce negative affect (Levy, 2021), while a Twitter bot providing cross-cutting tweets could increase it (Bail et al., 2018).

Social processes, particularly sorting in the electorate, serve as another major driver of affective polarization. Beginning with a party alignment often attributed to the Civil Rights era in the 1960s, partisans have become more ideologically sorted. Democrats and Republicans in the electorate could more clearly perceive party cues to endorse a particular ideology, and became likely to switch their ideological identification accordingly (Levendusky, 2009) – conservative Democrats became liberal and liberal Republicans became conservative. Research also reveals increased public sorting on other characteristics. Racial, religious, and geographic identities have become more aligned with partisanship. While partisan and demographic sorting can beneficially provide clearer political information to voters (Levendusky, 2009), Mason (2018) argues that it turns partisanship into a “mega-identity.” She (2016) provides experimental evidence that “social sorting is a more reliable emotional prod then either partisanship or issue polarization alone” (14), concluding that “as social sorting increases in the American electorate, the cooler heads inspired by cross-cutting identities are likely to be taking up a smaller portion of the electorate” (1). In other words, social sorting leads people to harbor more animus towards the other party that looks less and less like them. Sorting in the electorate may now be so complete that partisanship and race are enmeshed in the public mind. Westwood and Peterson (n.d.) provide evidence that priming one such identity will also trigger positive-or-negative affect toward the other.

The interplay between elites and the mass public serves as another external driver of affective polarization. Rogowski and Sutherland (2016) implement an experiment finding that individuals’ affective candidate evaluations are responsive to elite ideological polarization (also see Gidron et al., 2021). Webster and Abramowitz (2017) similarly use ANES data to show that the public’s welfare attitudes are strongly related to affective evaluations of elites and the parties. Affective attitudes in the public may also be directly impacted by the tone of political elites which has become increasingly partisan over time (Gentzkow et al., 2019). Lau et al. (2017), for instance, use a dynamic process tracing experiment to indicate that diverse media environments with negative campaign rhetoric leads to greater affective polarization.

In addition to elite-public interactions, a variety of meso-level institutions contribute to intensifying affective polarization. Pierson and Schickler (2020) provide a framework by which meso-level institutions either “self-correct” against partisan division or become self-reinforcing “engines of polarization.” Whereas separation of powers, checks and balances, and federalism traditionally frustrate attempts at consolidating power, modern institutional arrangements intensify division. The alignment of interest groups with particular parties, and the weakening of state parties may all increase affective polarization. Others have similarly shown a relationship between negative affect in the public and the nationalization of U.S. elections and media (Abramowitz and Webster, 2016). Gidron et al. (2020) provide a comparative perspective on institutions. Their analysis suggests that economic conditions – like unemployment and inequality – and majoritarian institutions – like single-member voting districts – are more strongly related to mass affective polarization, while elite ideological polarization is less strongly related.

*Internal (Individual-Level) Causes*

The main psychological factor theorized to underly affective polarization is partisanship as a social identity. Individuals develop lasting attachments to their party identification, which tend to endure through life even in the face of major political events like wars, recessions, or electoral landslides (Green et al., 2002). These theories highlight that many aspects of partisan behavior are expressive rather than instrumental, as partisans are likened to cheering sports fans (Green et al., 2002, pg. 221) or “two teams fighting over a trophy” (Mason, 2018, pg. 4). Huddy et al. (2015) produce a well-known experimental result that electoral victories produce stronger emotional reactions from partisans than policy victories, indicating a likely triumph of expressive goals.

In part drawing on theories of party as a social identity, an emerging literature investigates how negative partisan affect stems from stereotyping. Ahler and Sood (2018) ask respondents to estimate the proportion of Democrats or Republicans that possess certain demographic characteristics and find that respondents overestimate the prevalence of “prototypical” characteristics by large margins. For instance, respondents estimate that 31.7% of Democrats are lesbian, gay, or bisexual, when the true figure in the sample was 6.3%. Individuals also overestimated the proportion of Republicans who were evangelicals by 20 percentage points. The authors further show that these misperceptions predict in-party loyalty and feelings of social distance from the out-party (also see Rothschild et al., 2018). Additional work indicates that partisans tend to view the other party as more ideologically extreme and engaged (Druckman et al., n.d.), more prejudiced (Moore-Berg et al., 2020), and more obstructionist (Lees and Cikara, 2020) than they actually are.

Notably, most accounts of affective polarization highlight the extent to which negative affective attitudes are *disconnected* from instrumental beliefs such as ideological or values-based beliefs about policy. One recent piece of evidence in this regard (Barber and Pope, 2018) finds that self-described conservatives are likely to follow a “Trump cue” even when Donald Trump embraces policies that contradict conservative principles. Still, it would be a mistake to conclude that affective polarization has no connection to substantive beliefs. Indeed, studies cited above suggest that public-and-elite policy attitudes are intertwined with public affective attitudes (Webster and Abramowitz, 2017). For instance, personality traits – and thus one’s ideological profile – have been linked to pro-group attitudes (Zmigrod et al., 2021). And while trends in sorting and ideological polarization indicate the electorate has not become more extreme, a non-trivial amount of sorted partisans can still have meaningful beliefs. More work can likely address the interaction of partisan social identity and instrumental beliefs (see also Mummolo et al., 2019, Dias and Lelkes, n.d.,).

Finally, some scholars show how psychological traits influence affective polarization. For instance, Simas et al. (2020) show that those with more empathetic dispositions are more affectively polarized. This is the case because such people primarily direct their empathy toward their party and not the other party. Moreover, while empathetic individuals may interact more with members of the opposite party, it can backfire if out-party members engage in ostensibly harmful behaviors. Luttig (2017) looks at authoritarianism, arguing that it increases affective polarization due to its relationship with need for belonging and in-group favoritism. The author finds evidence across multiple waves of ANES data that authoritarians in both parties are more affectively polarized.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**3. Consequences of Affective Polarization**

When it comes to the consequences of affective polarization, extant work focuses on non-political or social effects and political impacts. We discuss each in turn, highlighting extant gaps in the literature.

*Non-Political Consequences*

The rise of affective polarization led many to explore whether partisanship spills over into non-political domains. In what follows, we discuss three types of evidence: 1) studies concerning individuals’ general behavior toward those from the other party, such as trust exhibited in a behavioral game, 2) studies revealing the impact on social relationships including living arrangements and social gatherings, and 3) studies about economic discrimination based on partisanship (Iyengar et al., 2019).

A common approach to assess broad behaviors toward the other party is to use behavioral games. For example, Carlin and Love (2016) use a partisan trust game, in which one player is given a sum of money, and can decide to triple some portion of the money by sharing it with the other player. The amount shared serves as a measure of trust, because the second player decides how much money, if any, to return back to the first player. The authors find that people exhibit much less trust when their partner is from the other party. In fact, the partisan trust gap outsizes those based on race. Iyengar and Westwood (2015) offer similar results with behavior games. They also show that implicit partisan bias (e.g., subconscious antipathy towards the out-party) exceeds implicit racial bias and that partisans prefer their co-partisans for academic scholarships, regardless of academic qualifications and again dwarfing racial bias. At the extreme, partisans dehumanize one another, comparing out-partisans to sub-humans (e.g., rating how evolved out-partisans are on a scale from an apelike picture to a fully human picture). Martherus et al. (2019) find evidence of a strong relationship between affective polarization (using thermometer ratings) and dehumanization (see also Cassese, 2019).

Other work suggests that feelings of animus toward the other side affect social relationships including with whom one wants to live, date, and marry. For instance, Shafranek (2019) finds that respondents strongly prefer co-partisan roommates even in the presence of the other individuating information such as cleanliness, musical tastes, values, and hobbies. Partisans avoid living with a member of the other party at roughly the same level as they avoid someone described as “not at all clean and tidy.” That said, the effect of avoiding those from the other party is particularly acute when those individuals are also interested in politics. This echoes work by Klar et al. (2018) and Druckman et al. (n.d.) who show that affective polarization depends on whether those from the other party are politically engaged: polarization is much lower when the other partisans are less engaged.

Partisanship also influences partner and family dynamics: Huber and Malhotra (2017) use data from online dating websites to show that partisan matching increases the likelihood of an exchange of messages by 9.5%. Further, married couple and parent-to-offspring partisan agreement has increased over time, with spousal selection occurring on political bases (Iyengar et al., 2018). Chen and Rohla (2018) use smartphone tracking data to show that divided family Thanksgiving dinners were shorter by 20-30 minutes following the tense 2016 election (relative to 2015). Whether partisanship drives geographic choices remains debated (c.f. Cho et al., 2013; Mummolo and Nall, 2017); however, for one reason or another partisans live in areas where they have virtually no exposure to those from the other party (Brown and Enos, 2021). Similarly, Lee and Bearman (2020) show that, over time, personal networks have become smaller and more homogeneous in terms of partisanship, stemming partially from more topics being seen as political.

Another non-political area where affective polarization matters is the economy. McConnell et al. (2018) show that workers would charge 6.5% less to a co-partisan (relative to a non-partisan) for doing a copyediting job. They also find that partisans are more likely to purchase a discounted gift card from events involving their own party (versus the other party), and more likely to forgo an economic bonus if it involves making a nominal contribution to the other party. Gift and Gift (2015) sent out ostensibly real job applications in a liberal and conservative county. They varied the presence of a partisan signal (e.g., having worked for a partisan campaign and been a member of the College Republicans/Democrats), finding that job seekers with minority (majority) partisan affiliations were substantially less (more) likely to obtain a callback (relative to applicants with no partisan affiliation).

In all, there seems to be evidence that affective polarization influences general behavior toward out-partisans, social relationships, and economic behaviors. However, one shortcoming in this literature is that, with the exception of Martherus et al. (2019), none of the studies we reviewed explicitly use measures of affective polarization (thermometers, traits, social distance items). It is not clear that other measures, like partisan identity strength, serve as an appropriate substitute for measuring negative affect, so the relationship between negative affect and social discrimination demonstrated by the literature is not as strong as it could be. Studies seeking to tie discrimination effects to affective polarization should employ feeling thermometers or other measures of affective polarization when possible, to ensure that the individuals discriminating are indeed those who are affectively polarized (as opposed to a more general partisan bias) (see Lelkes and Westwood, 2017).

Another unanswered question concerns the mechanism: it is not clear whether behaviors reflect dislike of the opposing party, broadly speaking, or whether individuals infer other information (such as issue positions or values) from party labels. Orr and Huber (2020) present evidence that policy congruence with another individual (e.g., shared issue positions) dwarf the impact of partisanship in evaluations of other specific individuals. However, Dias and Lelkes (n.d.) argue that individuals can also infer one’s partisanship from their policy positions on party-branded issues. They find evidence for both a meaningful “policy-over-party” (individuals infer one’s policy position from their party label) and a “party-over-policy” (people infer one’s partisan identity from their stated policy positions) effect, although the latter was larger. Further work is likely needed to assess the role of branded or unbranded issues in moderating these two types of effects.

*Political Consequences*

The last few years have seen a substantial number of inquiries regarding the impact of affective polarization on 1) participation, including electoral activities and social media behaviors; 2) policy attitudes and voting preferences; and 3) support for democratic principles. Iyengar and Krupenkin (2018) show that as affective polarization has risen so has its impact on political participation. Specifically, over time, out-party animus has become a substantial driver of both voting and non-voting forms of electoral participation (e.g., attending a rally, donating money). While most view participation as a normative good, the authors point to a troubling implication: “elected officials no longer need to campaign on their own merits; instead, they have good reason to try even harder to denigrate the opposition” (214). Affective polarization also seems to motivate forms of deleterious action on social media. Osmundsen et al. (2021) offer evidence that out-party dislike correlates with sharing fake news stories that disparage the other side. Rathje et al. (2021) show members of the public more frequently like or retweet with angry reactions posts from the news media or members of Congress when they reference the other party.

Turning to policy attitudes and voting preferences, Druckman et al. (2021) argue that out-party animus leads partisans to do the opposite of what the other party endorses. The authors test this in the context of COVID-19 (in the spring of 2020), showing a strong relationship between pre-pandemic measures of out-party animus and policy attitudes surrounding the pandemic (e.g., partisans with high animus have more divided views on stay-at-home orders than those with less animus). Abramowitz and Webster (2016) tie out-party animus to voting, showing that it correlates with the rise of straight-ticket voting: voters are much less likely to split their tickets and vote for the other party (also see Smidt, 2017).

Affective polarization also can impact institutional functioning, which can be a problem for democratic governance. Hetherington and Rudolph (2015) show that affective polarization has politicized trust such that partisans only trust government when it is run by their party. This, in turn, leads to gridlock since representatives have little incentive to compromise. The authors (217) explain that “partisans do not want their members of Congress to compromise with the devil.” This could eventually have implications for how democracies function. Levendusky (n.d.) similarly points out that affective polarization contributes to perceptions of greater ideological difference between the parties that reduces support for compromise (also see Armaly and Enders, 2020).

More fundamentally, affective polarization could reduce support for democratic norms – that is, the rules and values considered essential for constitutional government. If these norms erode, then there is a serious risk of democratic backsliding or even failure (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). Graham and Svolik (2020) find that partisans prefer candidates from their own party even if they violate norms such as electoral fairness, checks and balances, and/or civil liberties. They find this is particularly true for extremists; however, they do not directly measure affective polarization. Kingzette et al. (n.d.) do directly measure affective polarization and find a strong correlation such that polarized partisans oppose constitutional protections (e.g., limits on executive power) when their party is in power but support protections when their party is not in power.

*Does Affective Polarization Affect Political Outcomes?*

As is the case with non-political consequences, there remains uncertainty about the severity of political consequences. For instance, some studies report more limited connections between affective polarization and support for democratic norms. Westwood et al. (2019) report that affectively polarized partisans are more apt to want to investigate the other party for corruption, but no more likely to endorse using tear gas on a group of protesters from the other side (also see Lelkes and Westwood, 2017). Costa (2020) shows that people do *not* prefer representatives who promote negative partisanship (e.g., accusing the other party of being corrupt or immoral); rather, they attend much more to whether representatives share their policy views. Bartels (2020) finds that Republicans are more likely to hold anti-democratic attitudes when they have high levels of ethnic antagonism, while party affect does not have a notable effect. Finally, Kalmoe and Mason (2020) oddly find a small, inverse relationship between individuals’ out-party evaluations and their support for partisan violence.

More generally, Broockman et al. (2020) point out that much of the work on the political consequences of affective polarization suffers from causal identification challenges since polarization is not exogenously manipulated. These authors use a partisan trust game to manipulate affective polarization, and then have participants engage in various experiments on accountability (e.g., learning about issue positions of their representatives), adopting a party’s position (cue taking), supporting bi-partisanship, endorsing democratic norms (e.g., have state legislators decide election results), and perceptions of objective conditions (e.g., unemployment rate under Trump). They find no impact of affective polarization on any of these outcomes, arguing that affective polarization is primarily a social, interpersonal phenomenon.

What is one to conclude? It seems unwise to either conclude that dire effects have been proven or that there are no political effects. Citizens seem to prefer substantive representation, and there is insufficient evidence on the most extreme outcomes concerning democratic norms and violence. On the other hand, evidence on various forms of electoral participation (Iyengar and Krupenkin 2018) and conditional effects of policy cue-taking (Druckman et al. 2021) suggest affective polarization can matter. Furthermore, when affective polarization does matter, the consequences can be substantial. In the case of Druckman et al.’s (2021) study which used an exogenous measure of out-party animus, affective polarization contributed to the flouting of public health guidelines and likely lead to the loss of life (e.g., Gollwitzer et al., 2020). Overall, the mix of evidence suggests that the political impact of affective polarization depends on the nature of elite communications and social networks, and the extent to which the topic is conflictual, salient and politicized, among other factors.

Brookman et al.’s (2020) larger claim that affective polarization is a purely social phenomenon, and their evidence supporting it, is well taken. But attempts to experimentally induce affective polarization should be interpreted cautiously, as affective polarization reflects over-time processes via media effects and social sorting. In some sense, the authors’ assessment of the literature coheres with our argument for more consistency in the way different authors specify the theoretical relationship between constructs. Their argument raises a larger issue of whether scholarly interest really concerns the acute consequences of partisan affect, or the consequences of the social processes underlying affective polarization. Relatedly, few have considered the relationship between the social and political consequences of affective polarization. If affective polarization leads to social discrimination, it can alter the contexts in which people live (Brown and Enos, 2021) and that, in turn, can shape political attitudes and behaviors (Sinclair, 2012). The social consequences may be important *because* they feedback into political consequences, but few have studied this possibility.

**4. Antidotes to Affective Polarization**

A virtual cottage industry has arisen aimed at vitiating polarization. This includes a sizeable number of practitioner bridging organizations – such as Unify America, Braver Angels, and the One America Movement– that work with communities to connect those from different parties and ideologies. Scholars also have proposed various antidotes aimed directly at affective polarization (Finkel et al., 2020). These can be classified into psychological, social, and institutional approaches.

Levendusky (2018) offers a widely discussed antidote building on the common group identity model from social psychology. He shows that when individuals are primed to recognize their American identity (e.g., reading an article about the strength of America and writing about what they like best about America), they exhibit much less animosity towards the opposing party. In a natural experiment he shows that out-party animosity shrinks during times that prime national identity (e.g., July 4th, the Olympics). An alternative approach is to accentuate intellectual humility, which is people’s ability to recognize the fallibility of their knowledge. Krumrei-Mancuso and Newman (2021) show that those with higher levels of intellectual humility are more politically tolerant of those who disagree with them (c.f., Colombo et al., 2020). These findings lend themselves to potential interventions.

Another promising psychological approach involves corrections to misperceptions about the other party. For example, Druckman et al. (n.d.) find that partisans vastly overestimate the ideological extremity and engagement of a typical out-party member. Thinking of such an extremist generates animus, but that animosity shrinks when partisans instead rate the actual typical out-party member (i.e., ones who are relatively moderate). Lees and Cikara (2020) show that partisans perceive the other side as much more likely to be opposed to their party’s activities than they actually are, and consequently perceive that party to be purposefully obstructive. They find that providing participants with actual opposition beliefs of the other party substantially reduces negative perceptions, particularly among those with the most inaccurate perceptions (also see Moore-Berg et al., 2020).

Antidotes can also target cross-party social contacts and relationships. Levendusky and Stecula (n.d.) show that having Democrats and Republicans come together and have political discussions substantially reduces affective polarization. The effect, which lasts at least a week, stems from the discussions leading partisans to realize they have more in common with those form the other party, have a better understanding of their perspectives, and to have increased feelings of being respected (although see Carlson and Settle, n.d.). Kalla and Brookman (2021) show that campaign activists who worked to persuade voters with opposing views became less affectively polarized thanks to those cross-party interactions. The mechanism at work is one of perspective-getting that humanizes and individuates out-partisans. Levendusky (n.d.) goes further to see if contact can be emulated by asking people to think about friends, families, and co-workers they have from the other party – this intervention also reduces affective polarization (c.f., Wojcieszak and Warner, 2020). With regards to perceptions of elites, Huddy and Yair (2020) show that observing warm political interactions between opposing party leaders also reduces affective polarization, whereas learning about policy compromises between them does not.

Structural institutional reforms also could matter. Electoral reform could help as countries with majoritarian electoral institutions exhibit higher levels of affective polarization (Gidron et al. 2020). This may occur because such systems pit few parties against one another and because, in other systems that require coalitions, parties who govern together temper animus towards one another (Gidron et al., 2020; Gidron et al. 2021). That said, it is not clear that the United States could realistically shift to proportional representation elections, especially in an era of partisan gamesmanship at the elite level (see Lee 2009). Existing reform proposals address campaign spending contributions and gerrymandering (Finkel et al. 2020), but these efforts too are endogenous with elite party competition. Finkel et al. (2020) also point out that commonly suggested changes to the media environment – such as amending online algorithms to reduce echo chambers – could be counterproductive (see Bail et al. 2018).

In sum, the last few years has seen notable progress in identifying antidotes to affective polarization. The key seems to be to find ways that lead partisans to avoid stereotypes, and instead individuate those from the other party and recognize commonalities. This is a common formula for reducing hostility between any two groups. One challenge for these antidotes moving forward will be to translate these approaches into scalable interventions. Perhaps even more important is to study antidotes with an eye on the political consequences of affective polarization. Given the ambiguous relationship between affective polarization measures and democratic norms, those concerned about the latter may be better off devising distinct interventions that are not focused on polarization.

**5. Conclusion**

Affective polarization is a key element of the current U.S. political environment, and there has been lots of new research in recent years illuminating the subject. While many predicted consequences of affective polarization have not been empirically demonstrated, we do think there is more than enough cause for concern. A strong amount of evidence documents the causes of affective polarization, the widespread social consequences, and possible antidotes.

At the same time, there are certainly lots of open questions about affective polarization. As we have noted throughout, certain constructs that are distinct tend to get treated interchangeably across studies, and different authors may operate from different overarching models of what causes what. For instance, we have a lot to uncover regarding the mechanisms underlying any media effects on affective polarization. Furthermore, while there is strong evidence for social identity and social sorting serving as a major driver, the possible role of instrumental or ideological beliefs can still be further clarified. When it comes to the social consequences of affective polarization, many studies assume that discrimination results from affective polarization or do not employ common measures of affective polarization. Even for the common measures, there is inconsistency in whether scholars use measures of in-party like, out-party animus or a combination (c.f., Iyengar and Westwood, 2015; Druckman et al., 2021). Rudolph and Hetherington (n.d.) offer insight on this question, showing that in-party love matters more in non-political setting while out-party hate dominates in political contexts. Future work can build on this to identify even more precisely which matters and when.

Ultimately, all of the measurement challenges complicate our ability to understand political consequences. While direct study of the political consequences of affective polarization has increased markedly, there can be much more clarity on which causes – media, social sorting, social discrimination, or negative affect itself – most impact politics. Similarly, while work on interventions has also increased, we do not simply want to reduce negative affect without also reducing negative political consequences. From the evidence reviewed here, affective polarization has been shown to alter voting turnout and vote-choice (and likely, the corresponding incentives for campaigns), and the functioning of political institutions. The worst effects for democratic backsliding or violence may not be definitive from the research, but still represent a real possibility.

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1. This graph was created by Sean Westwood and shared with us on February 16, 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. We omit discussion of motivated reasoning and misinformation as a cause and/or a consequence of affective polarization. These literatures are certainly pertinent to discussions of affective polarization, but only a small number of studies have directly linked motivated reasoning or misinformation to affective polarization (see Garrett et al., 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)