

Are There Still Limits on Partisan Prejudice?

Sean J. Westwood¹, Erik Peterson², and Yphtach Lelkes³

¹Department of Government, Dartmouth College

²Department of Political Science, Texas A&M University

³Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania

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Abstract

Partisan affective polarization is believed, by some, to stem from vitriolic elite political discourse. We explore this account by replicating several 2014 studies that examine partisan prejudice. Despite claims of elevated partisan affective polarization from pundits, this extensive replication offers no evidence of an increase in the public's partisan prejudice between 2014 and 2017. Divides in feeling thermometer ratings of the two political parties remained stable and there was no overall increase in measures of partisan prejudice between periods. This is consistent with results from the 2012 and 2016 ANES. Moreover, the most affectively polarized members of the public became no more likely to hold prejudicial attitudes towards the other party. Despite an intervening campaign with elevated elite hostility and rampant post-election discord, the limits on partisan prejudice identified in prior research remain in place. This stability is important for understanding the nature and malleability of partisan affect.

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Several accounts assert that elite rhetoric causes partisan affective polarization (see e.g., Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes, 2012). If true, the combination of one of the most acrimonious presidential elections in modern history (Pew, 2016; Fowler, Ridout, and Franz, 2016) and a contentious post-election period should increase affective polarization. We replicate a prior study on the boundaries of affective polarization and show, in contrast to this expectation, that elevated partisan rancor among political elites has not increased affective polarization among the public. This represents critical evidence that the public’s feelings toward the other party change have not paralleled increases in elite and policy polarization. The stability we find is important for understanding the nature and malleability of partisan affect.

The 2016 election was marked by appeals to “fear and anger” (Bhat et al., 2016). Ninety percent of Hillary Clinton’s ads attacked Donald Trump’s character (Fowler, Ridout, and Franz, 2016), and Trump regularly called for Clinton’s jailing. Campaign media coverage in 2016 was, outside of 2000, the most negative in recent history, and focused heavily on the legal and moral wrongdoing of the candidates (Patterson, 2016). Ultimately, the 2016 race left pundits unable to “think of a campaign that’s been this personal and this negative” (PBS, 2016) and led 92% of voters to assess the election’s tone as more negative than previous campaigns (Pew, 2016). This rancor continued after the election, as those on the left vocally questioned whether Trump would end American democracy (Mounk, 2018) and the president often declined to enforce norms of governance. But do perceptions of increasing partisan hostility among the pundit class correspond to actual movement in the public’s affective polarization? Is movement even possible or do ceiling effects tamper further polarization?

This note details a replication effort examining whether affective polarization tracks this uptick in elite hostility in the post-2016 era. We employ a widely-used framework for measuring prejudice (Allport, 1954). Its prior application in 2014 revealed clear limits on the scope of partisan prejudice (Lelkes and Westwood, 2017). While affectively polarized partisans in this work were more likely to avoid members of the other party and support preferential treatment for co-partisan politicians, they failed to endorse direct harm to their political

opponents. Have these bounds on partisan prejudice since eroded?

We compare this evidence on partisan prejudice in 2014 to a replication study from 2017.¹ This enables an over-time comparison in which neither survey is uniquely inflated by its position in the campaign timeline and captures baseline, non-campaign levels of partisan prejudice. We find no evidence of a general increase in partisan prejudice over this time period. The most affectively polarized members of the public became no more likely to display attitudes placing them in the highest level Allport's framework of prejudice we test. To complement this off-cycle comparison with evidence collected during political campaigns, we also analyze data from the 2012 and 2016 ANES. Here we also fail to observe an increase in affective polarization over this time period.

Overall, despite an intervening campaign with substantial elite conflict, we show that previously identified limits on partisan prejudice remain in place. This implies that either 1) elite rhetoric is less successful at elevating affective polarization than previously supposed, or 2) affective polarization has reached a ceiling at which elites are unable to generate additional out-party animus.

From Elite Hostility to Affective Polarization

Partisan hostility is a prominent element of elite political discourse. In Congress, legislators regularly taunt their partisan opponents (Grimmer and King, 2011). On the campaign trail, candidates use negative advertising to critique their challengers (Fowler, Ridout, and Franz, 2016). This extends to news coverage, where partisan media outlets produce a steady flow of coverage insulting the other party (Berry and Sobieraj, 2014). Prior scholarship offers several paths for how this elite hostility can produce affective polarization among the public.

¹We recognize that unlike 2017, 2014 was a midterm election year and past work shows that partisan affect cycles with elections Michelitch and Utych (2018), our 2014 data were collected 6-7 months before the midterm.

One path relates to the media’s role in generating affective polarization through the combination of a high-choice media environment and a proliferation of partisan news outlets (e.g., Sunstein, 2017). For those exposed to it, partisan news teaches that being a member of their party involves hostility towards the opposition. This point is made by pejorative comparisons of out-partisans to Nazis (Berry and Sobieraj, 2014) and a focus on the opposing party’s flaws, such as involvement in scandals (Budak, Goel, and Rao, 2016). Evidence from survey and experimental studies links partisan news exposure to affective polarization (Levendusky, 2013; Kelly Garrett et al., 2014).

A second focus is the role of negative political campaigning in bringing elite hostility to the public. Like partisan news, campaigns increase the salience of an individual’s partisan identity (Michelitch and Utych, 2018) and, in an era of negative campaigning, portray the other party as an existential threat (Bhat et al., 2016; Fowler, Ridout, and Franz, 2016). Unlike partisan news, campaigns use advertisements and outreach to create persistent exposure to this negativity among individuals who might otherwise avoid it. Indicative of this, residents of battleground states are more affectively polarized than those with less campaign exposure (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes, 2012). Additionally, people are far more polarized at the end of political campaigns than the beginning (Sood and Iyengar, 2016), especially those exposed to negative campaign ads. However, in contrast to these findings, Ridout et al. (2018) find affective polarization in 2014 was negatively correlated with both the level of advertising in a media market.

As indicated by both public assessments of campaign tone (Pew, 2016) and scholarly analyses of campaign content (Faris et al., 2017; Fowler, Ridout, and Franz, 2016; Patterson, 2016; Bhat et al., 2016), these potential sources of affective polarization were elevated in 2016. As a result, the last two years offer a possible break-point for examining the consequences of elite animus for affective polarization. If accounts of the relationship between elite discourse and affective polarization are true, we should expect an increase in affective polarization among the American public over the last several years.

Stable Affective Partisan Polarization

We begin by comparing affective polarization over time in two contexts: outside of political campaigns and during the peak Presidential campaign environment. First, to compare affective polarization outside of campaigns we use surveys conducted on respondents from the Research Now/SSI panel (collected via Qualtrics)² in 2017 ($n=1,377$) and the SSI panel in 2014 ($N=2,045$).³ The 2017 data were collected in June and the 2014 data were collected in the first half of the year. Leaners were coded as partisans and pure independents were excluded. Second, to compare affective polarization at the height of political campaigns—where it may be elevated in a cyclical fashion (Michelitch and Utych, 2018)—we use the 2012 and 2016 American National Election Studies, both collected in the final months of each presidential campaign.

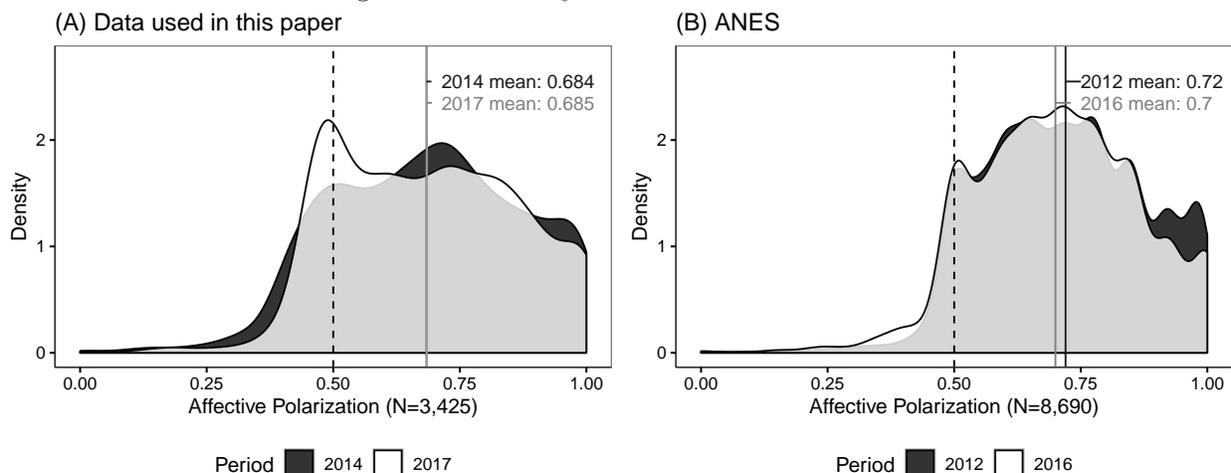
Both comparisons measure affective polarization as the difference in feeling thermometer ratings of the party an individual identifies with and their rating of the other party (e.g., Hetherington and Weiler, 2009; Haidt and Hetherington, 2012; Mason, 2015). This difference is re-scaled between zero and one. Higher numbers indicate greater affective polarization. If elite hostility spilled into the public, we would anticipate more affective polarization in the later surveys.

Figure 1 indicates this is not the case. The left panel shows the average level of affective polarization in the two non-election surveys is nearly identical (mean difference = -0.002, 95% confidence interval [-0.014, 0.010]). The distribution remains similar, with no movement toward the upper end of the scale. If anything, the public appears less polarized in 2017 rela-

²Although purchased through Qualtrics, the sample originated from the same panel as 2014—Research Now/SSI.

³Both studies were quota sampled to benchmarks from the American Community Survey.

Figure 1: Stability in Affective Polarization



tive to 2014, a shift driven by a drop in in-party warmth. The right panel shows this pattern is mirrored in the ANES surveys conducted at the peak of recent political campaigns. Here too affective polarization did not increase between 2012 and 2016. Both comparisons offer no indication that the 2016 election and subsequent period of Trump governance meaningfully changed partisan affect. This provides evidence against the perspective that the 2016 election provided a break-point in partisan affect.

Measuring Partisan Prejudice

To probe for potential consequences of elite hostility beyond this baseline measure of partisan affect, we follow previous research using survey and behavioral measures to capture manifestations of affective polarization (e.g., Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes, 2012; Mason, 2015; McConnell et al., 2018). Here we replicate four studies from Lelkes and Westwood (2017) which measure a spectrum of increasingly severe forms of partisan prejudice using a framework from Allport (1954).

Study 1: antilocution

Study 1 captures the lowest level of prejudice in the Allport framework in which individuals speak poorly of their opponents and oppose speech critical of their party and aligns with conceptions of prejudice as the promotion of “unmitigated, derogatory stereotypes” (Jackman, 2005, p.96).

We use an experimental framework to assess the degree to which affective polarization moderates the willingness to spread vitriolic political speech (operationalized as news content). This allows us to document the behavior for a representative group of citizens and to show the influence of partisan hatred on this behavior. Participants completed our experiment under the guise of helping a news organization decide what information it should feature on its website. Participants were therefore given the opportunity to promote or suppress negative news content in a realistic setting.

An opinion piece⁴ was submitted by a reader, participants were told, and our news website needed input on the quality of the article. In this sense, the design replicates the content aggregation and assessment processes present in many online news outlets.

Under this pretense participants were randomly assigned to read one of two news opinion articles: a column from Fox News blaming congressional gridlock on Democrats or an MSNBC column blaming Republicans for the gridlock. The two stories were identical, with only the source and the name of the party altered. The text of the manipulations appear in Appendix Table A1. After reading the article participants were asked if they would endorse the article for inclusion on the news organization’s website. This design made it possible to measure the extent to which partisans are likely to share and endorse news content that criticizes the opposition, and the extent to which partisans are likely to recommend against sharing news content that criticizes their own party.

The sample (N=265) was almost evenly split between Democrats (52.83%) and Republicans (47.17%). It was 69.06% white and 30.94% non-white. There were roughly the same number of men and women 50.94% versus 49.06%, respectively). A majority of respondents had at least college degree (55.85%), 26.04% had some college, and 18.11% had a high school degree or less.

⁴We use an opinion story because it serves as a conservative test of how willing partisans are to denigrate the opposition. Profane language and ad homonym attacks evoke a stronger affective response in pretests, but these kind of messages are taken less seriously by respondents.

Study 2: Avoidance

Study 2 measures a second, more severe tier of prejudice—avoidance. This measures intentional avoidance of members of the other political party, a concern given increasing social distance between the parties (e.g., Huber and Malhotra, 2017; Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes, 2012).

We test avoidance using a team formation task. As part of the task participants choose between ostensibly real participants that varied on a variety of attributes. This experiment allows us to determine whether sharing a party identity is more important than having a skilled teammate and, as a result, the impact that affective polarization has on any preference for avoiding the opposition..

Participants were told that they would complete a series of puzzles (simplified word completion tasks based on crossword puzzle clues) in teams.⁵ The tasks and all clues had nothing to do with politics. Participants were asked to complete three rounds of the word completion task in order to increase the validity of the design, to increase comprehension of what the group would do, and to demonstrate the importance of intelligence and education in the tasks. To enhance the believability of the task, each participant was placed in a “waiting room” and told that it would take a moment for a sufficiently large group of other people completing the survey to gather.

After a short amount of time, participants were told that they were randomly selected by our software to continue as one of two team leaders. The other leader, they were told, had already picked her team and the respondent would need to select three players from a list of four for the second team. To incentivize the task participants were told that their success/score would hinge on both their abilities and the abilities of their team. Participants were explicitly told that the person not picked as a team member would be excluded from participating in the remainder of the study. The player profiles were constructed so that the least academically qualified player was an Independent. Two partisans (one Democrat and

⁵See Lelkes and Westwood (2017) for stimuli and instructions.

one Republican) are essentially the same, both listed with college educations. An additional Independent had qualifications that were lower than those of the partisans, but higher than the high school-educated Independent (see Appendix Table A3). Participants could therefore select the three players with the highest level of education (tolerating a member of the political out-party) or make a selection that excluded the political out-party in favor of the less academically qualified Independents. The order of each player was randomized, participants only completed one round of team selection, and all other traits were fixed.

The sample (N=351) leaned Democratic (56.98%). It was 71.51% white and 28.49% non-white. There were roughly the same number of men and women 50.94% versus 49.06%, respectively). A majority of respondents had at least college degree (59.85%), 26.04% had some college, and 18.11% had a high school degree or less.

Study 3.1 and 3.2: Discrimination

Study 3.1 and 3.2 evaluate the third level of prejudice: discrimination. Discrimination can manifest in many ways, from allocating different punishments for different groups, or, conversely, withholding rights or benefits from groups. Importantly, this level requires intentional actions designed to harm the opposing group. To explore the relationship between partisan affective polarization and the willingness of participants to make decisions that discriminate against the political opposition we conduct two experiments in differing contexts. We construct our experiments to detect discriminatory preferences in situations where discrimination would violate core democratic norms.

Study 3.1: Discrimination: Endorse Use of Tear Gas

This study tests how partisan biases affect responses to the suppression of political demonstrations—an example of where discriminatory behavior would be particularly troubling for the health of American democracy. Participants read a newspaper story titled, “Police Use Tear Gas on Peaceful Young [Democrat/Republican] Protest.” The story described a situation where police officers broke up a peaceful student protest. Participants were asked two target questions. First participants reported whether they “agree or disagree

with the decision to use tear gas on the protesters.” Next participants were told, “The cost of the police response is unknown at this point, but the city can fine the protests any amount up to \$10,000. What amount, if any, do you think the city should fine the group of protesters?” participants answered using a slider widget. (see Appendix Table A7 for the full treatment).

The sample (N=372) was slightly more Democratic (52.69%) than Republican (47.31%). 73.92% of the sample was white. There were slightly more men (52.15%) than women (47.84%) in the sample. A majority of respondents had at least college degree (62.37%), 23.39% had some college, and 14.25% had a high school degree or less.

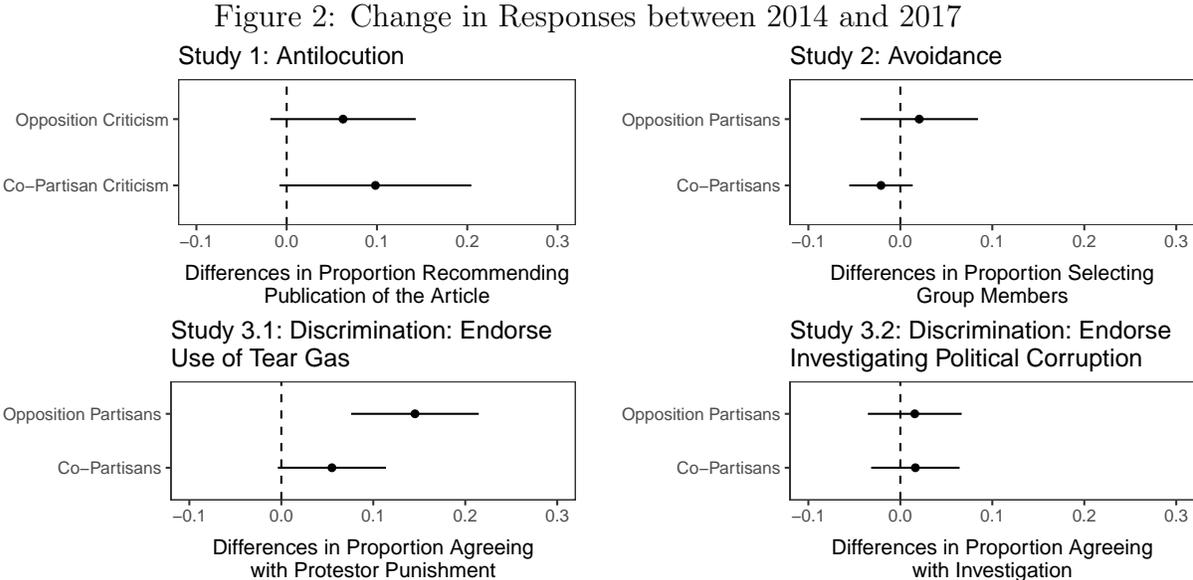
Study 3.2: Discrimination: Endorse Investigating Political Corruption

Scandals represent a substantial challenge to democratic governance. In this study we alter the domain where we explore discrimination to focus on a situation where actual wrongdoing has occurred. We use a scenario where a political elite has violated fund raising laws to advance his political party. The structure of a newspaper article with randomly varied partisan actors is retained. Participants read a faux newspaper article entitled “Donations from Millionaire Businessman to [Republican/Democratic] Super PACs in Question.” The article reported that investigators were looking into possibly illegal donations that may have swayed an election (see Appendix Table A10 for the full treatment). Participants were asked if they supported or opposed an investigation on a seven-point bipolar scale ranging from “strongly oppose” to “strongly support”, which was recoded to range between 0 and 1.

The sample (N=402) was slightly more Democratic (54.98%) than Republican (47.31%). There were more white respondents (70.90%) than non-white respondents (20.10%). There were slightly fewer men (48.01%) than women (51.99%) in the sample. A majority of respondents had at least college degree (59.95%), 18.66% had some college, and 21.39% had a high school degree or less.

Overall Results: No Increase in Overall Partisan Prejudice

We compare results in these replication studies back to results from 2014. If elite hostility elevated partisan prejudice among the public (and if those effects persisted beyond an election period), we would anticipate observing higher average levels of out-party prejudice and in-party favoritism in the replications. For all following analysis affective polarization was recoded to range between 0 and 1. Figure 2 displays the mean difference of these outcomes between 2017 and 2014 along with a confidence interval.⁶



Mean differences in proportions between 2014 and 2017 with 95% confidence intervals.

There is no evidence for a general increase in partisan prejudice across these measures.⁷ In Study 1 there is greater interest in stories that are critical of both the in-group or the out-

⁶Results in tabular form appear in the appendix. Additional results replicating Study 2.2 and additional results from Study 3.1 are included as the appendix (Tables A4 and A9 and Figures A1).

⁷There is no general evidence of heterogeneity by party in the 2014 or 2017 data, although sub-setting to partisan groups produces smaller samples.

group. with individuals endorsing publication of stories critical of both the other party (mean difference = 0.060, 95% *CI* [-0.020, 0.139]) and their co-partisans (mean difference = 0.104, 95% *CI* [-0.000, 0.207]) at slightly higher rates than 2014, although in each case these between-year differences are not statistically significant. Controlling for year, participants are more likely to support publication of content critical of the opposition relative to content critical of co-partisans ($\beta = 0.373$, $T = 11.943$, $P < .001$).

For Study 2, respondents were no more likely to exclude political opponents (mean difference = 0.021, 95% *CI* [-0.043, 0.084]) or include co-partisans (mean difference = -0.021, 95% *CI* [-0.056, 0.013]) in 2017 relative to 2014.

Study 3.1 offers the lone instance of an increase in partisan prejudice between the two waves of the study. In 2017 individuals are more willing to support punishing protesters from an opposing partisan group than in 2014 (mean difference = 0.145, 95% *CI* [0.076, 0.215]). As indicated by the positive (though not significant) difference for punishment of a co-partisan protester (mean difference = 0.055, 95% *CI* [-0.004, 0.114]), this is part of general elevated willingness to punish protesters. Controlling for year, participants are more likely to agree with punishing opposing partisans relative to punishing co-partisans ($\beta = 0.104$, $T = 4.538$, $P < .001$).

Finally, Study 3.2 offers no evidence of increased partisan prejudice in political corruption investigations. We observe similar levels of willingness to investigate co-partisan (mean difference = 0.016, 95% *CI* [-0.032, 0.064]) and out-partisan politicians (mean difference = 0.015, 95% *CI* [-0.035, 0.067]) in 2017 and 2014. Controlling for year, participants are more willing to investigate opposing partisans relative to co-partisans ($\beta = 0.126$, $T = 7.030$, $P < .001$).

In sum, we find no evidence of a general increase in partisan prejudice between 2014 and 2017. When a difference between the time periods did occur, attitudes towards both the co-partisans and the other party move in the same direction. We do note that some of the samples are not extremely large, but we are powered in 2017 to detect effects smaller than

those observed in 2014. Furthermore, the differences between 2014 and 2017 are substantively very small.

No Increase in Prejudice Among the Affectively Polarized

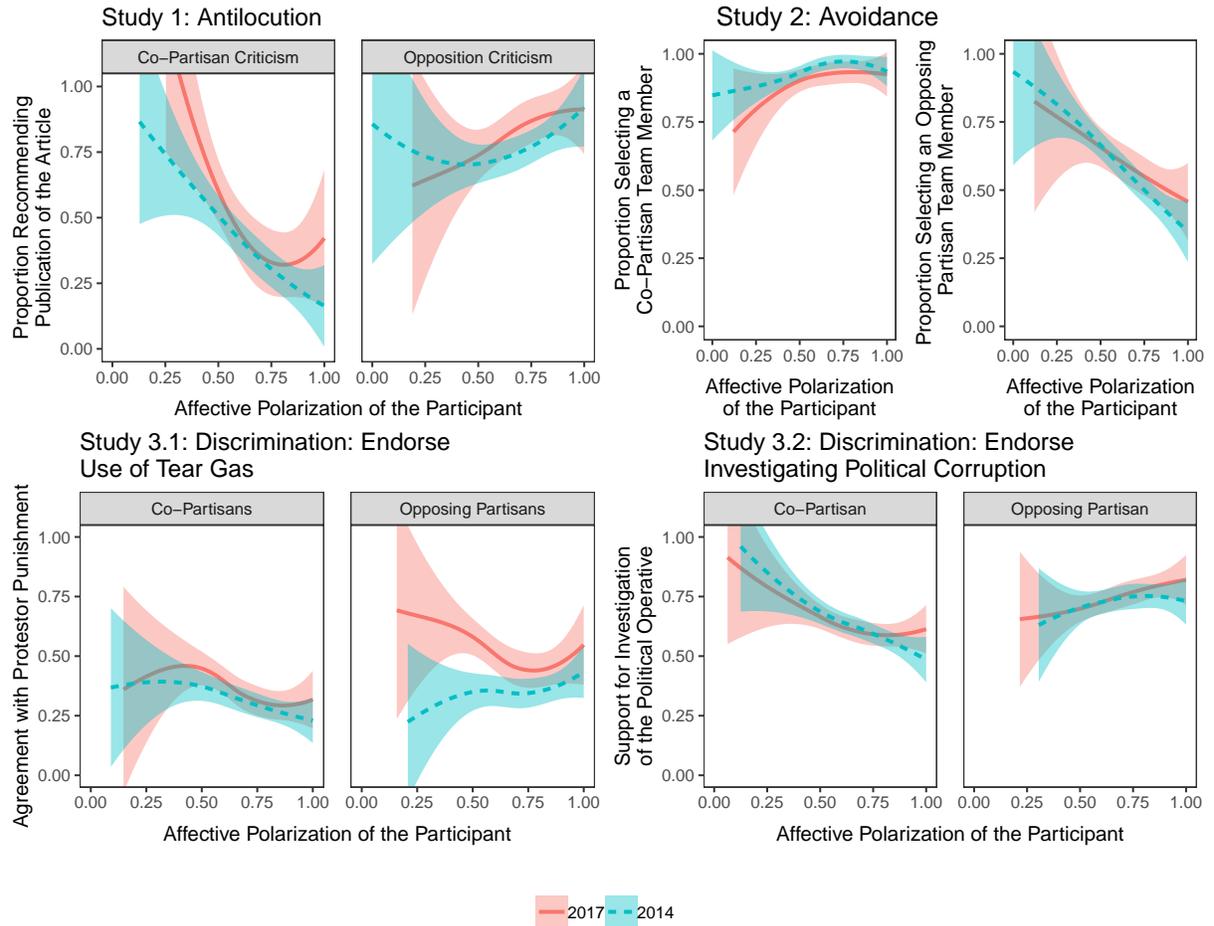
The previous sections demonstrate that affective polarization and partisan prejudice among the public have remained stable in periods studied. However, this focus on the overall population may cloud any effects of increased elite hostility among those with high levels of affective polarization. Do the affectively polarized now hold attitudes placing them further up the hierarchy of partisan prejudice than in the past?

To consider this possibility, we examine how these measures of prejudice vary based on the affective polarization of the respondent. Specifically, we regress the outcome variable in each study on a respondent's level of affective polarization using a LOESS regression. Figure 3 displays the results from both the original studies conducted in 2014 and the replication studies from 2017. Changes among those with high levels of affective polarization would manifest as gaps between the two lines at the upper end of the affective polarization scale.

Overlaying the results from the two periods show highly similar patterns. To more clearly contextualize the relationship between affective polarization and our outcome measures, we augment the LOESS visualization with results from OLS regressions. In study 1, those with high levels of affective polarization suppress criticism of co-partisans ($\beta = 0.747$, $T = -5.823$, $P < .001$), and support criticism of opposing partisans ($\beta = 0.332$, $T = 2.923$, $P < .01$). Next, in study 2, the polarized avoid members of the other party ($\beta = -0.564$, $T = -7.100$, $P < .001$) and selected co-partisans ($\beta = 0.104$, $T = 2.513$, $P < .05$). Study 3.1 shows that the highly polarized are no more likely to agree with punishing opposing partisans ($\beta = -0.066$, $T = -0.650$, $P > .05$) and less likely to agree with punishing co-partisans ($\beta = -0.302$, $T = -3.620$, $P < .001$). The highly polarized are less likely support corruption investigations of co-partisan politicians ($\beta = -0.302$, $T = -4.347$, $P < .001$) and more likely to support corruption investigations of opposing partisans ($\beta = .167$, $T = 2.141$, $P < .05$)

In all cases we control for the year of the study. We only find that year is significant in

Figure 3: Change in Responses by Affective Polarization (2014 - 2017)



study 3.1, where people were more willing to punish protesters from opposing partisans at lower rates in 2014 than in 2017 ($\beta = -0.141$, $T = -3.980$, $P < .001$).

Across these different studies, the relationship between affective polarization and these measures of partisan prejudice is not statistically or substantively different between 2017 to 2014 (with the exception of opposing partisans in study 3.1—one of eight comparisons). Overall, similar constraints continue to exist on partisan prejudice even among those with high levels of affective polarization.

Conclusion

Based on an elite-driven model of partisan affect, affective polarization should have increased in the Trump era. We find one piece of evidence consistent with this claim. In 2017 partisans were more supportive of punishing out-party protesters than they were three years

prior. This change is alarming, but it does not appear to be part of a broader trend. Across the other outcomes examined in our extensive replication study, there is no evidence of an increase in out-party animus over this time period.

This finding has two interpretations relevant to elite-driven models of affective polarization: either 1) elite rhetoric is less successful at elevating affective polarization than previously supposed, or 2) polarization has reached a ceiling at which elites are unable to generate additional out-party animus. Given that the one instance of elevated out-party hostility occurred for protester punishment, an outcome with relatively low levels of support in 2014 and hence far from any potential upper bound, we believe the lack of change found on the other outcomes is consistent with the latter perspective in which already high levels of out-party animus are difficult to elevate further. While adjudicating between these alternatives requires additional study, this replication has important implications for understanding the boundaries of affective polarization.

The purpose of this manuscript is not to identify causal mechanisms for the lack of change in partisan animosity, but rather it is to document results that are counter to the prevailing account of ever increasing partisan animosity (e.g., Patterson, 2016; Bhat et al., 2016; Fowler, Ridout, and Franz, 2016). These results stand as an important descriptive contribution to our understanding of partisan affective biases and possible ceiling effects.

It is also important to note that we do not employ a research design that isolates variation in elite rhetoric from other changes that occurred between the two time periods. While we fail to observe expected changes in affect predicted by models tying elite hostility to affective polarization, we do not assess the causal contribution of elite rhetoric. Nevertheless, we show that previously identified limits on partisan prejudice are robust to a contentious election, a pattern consistent with recent field experiments that identify minimal campaign effects in general election campaigns (Kalla and Broockman, 2018)

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Question Wording

Race: What is your race? (White/Caucasian; African American; Hispanic; Asian; Native American; Pacific Island; Other)

Gender: What is your gender? (Male; Female)

Education: What is the highest level of education you have completed? Less than High School; High School/GED; Some College; 2-year College Degree; 4-year College Degree; Masters Degree; Doctoral Degree; Professional Degree (JD, MD)

Party ID:

Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or some other party? (Democrat, Republican, Independent, Other)

(If Independent or Other selected) Do you consider yourself to be closer to the Democratic Party or Republican Party? (Democratic Party, Republican Party, Neither)

(If Democrat) Would you say that you are a...

Strong Democrat

Not a Strong Democrat

(If Republican) Would you say that you are a...

Strong Republican

Not a Strong Republican

Feeling Thermometers: On a scale from 0 (coldest) to 100 (warmest) how do you feel about the following people and groups? (Republicans, Democrats)

Study 1 DV A large website that posts stories from many different news sources is considering sharing the article you just read. Do you think they should post this article? (Yes, No)

Study 3.1 DV 1 Do you agree or disagree with the decision to use tear gas on the protesters? (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree)

Study 3.1 DV 2 The cost of the police response is unknown at this point, but the city can fine the protests any amount up to \$10,000. What amount, if any, do you think the city should fine the group of protesters?)

Study 3.2 DV Do you support or oppose the investigation of Alan Gregory? (Strongly Support, Support, Somewhat Support, Neither Support nor Oppose, Somewhat Oppose, Oppose, Strongly Oppose)