Political Identity and Party Polarization in the American Electorate

David C. Kimball
Joseph Anthony
Tyler Chance
University of Missouri-St. Louis
dkimball@umsl.edu

Abstract

Using data from the ANES surveys we examine the structure and correlates of affective polarization, the growing contempt for political opponents in the United States. While some argue that ideology is an important source of mass polarization, social and political identities remain the strongest forces producing affective polarization. Elite polarization makes party identification and other group attributes more salient and encourages the mass public to view politics in zero-sum “us versus them” terms. Increased party conflict invites mass followers to internalize those conflicts and denigrate their political opponents more than in the past. We examine historical trends as well as the latest data from the 2016 election cycle. We find that partisanship and other group attitudes are most strongly associated with the growth of affective polarization in the mass public. We also find that group-based attitudes outperform ideological measures in explaining the choice for president in 2016. Identity politics is in full flower in the Trump era.

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Introduction

Polarization has become a defining feature of contemporary American politics. Evidence of ideological polarization among party elites has fueled a debate about the nature and extent of polarization among the American public. While much of the early debate focused on an ideological definition of polarization, recently attention has shifted to psychological dimensions of polarization. Increased partisan disagreement among politicians and activists has fostered a more attentive public and a stronger sense of partisan identity among mass partisans. Polarized politics encourages the public to view party competition in zero-sum “us versus them” terms and denigrate their political opponents more than in the past.

One manifestation is increased fear and loathing of political opponents among the mass public, often termed “affective polarization” (Mason 2015; Abramowitz 2015; Lelkes, Sood, and Iyengar 2017). Americans have become more polarized in their basic evaluations of the two major political parties and leading public officials. Supporters of both parties express increasing levels of contempt toward the opposite party and its presidential candidates, with the 2016 election cycle producing record levels of out-party demonization. Polarized ratings of the two major parties have many roots, but identity politics rooted in partisanship and group-based attitudes remain the most powerful predictors of affective polarization. Using data from the American National Election Studies, we find that partisanship and other group attitudes are most strongly associated with the growth of affective polarization in the mass public. We also find that group-based attitudes outperform ideological measures in explaining the choice for president in 2016. The forces producing affective polarization show no signs of abating in 2017. Identity politics is in full flower in the Trump era.
The Growth of Affective Polarization

One by-product of increased elite-level partisan conflict is growing contempt for opposing partisans among the mass public. One piece of evidence comes from thermometer ratings of political parties and presidential candidates, according to national surveys conducted by the American National Election Studies.\(^1\) The thermometer questions ask respondents to rate groups or political figures on a scale from 0 to 100, with higher values indicating warmer feelings and lower scores indicating more animosity toward the group or political figure. As these data show, during the past forty years Republicans and Democrats have consistently rated their own party positively, at an average rating of approximately 70 degrees, with a modest decline during the most recent decade. However, ratings of the opposite party have dropped substantially during the same period, particularly since the turn of the 21\(^{st}\) century. Mean ratings of the opposite party were close to 50 degrees in 1980 but have dropped to 31 degrees in 2016, a record low for the series. The absolute difference between thermometer ratings of the two major parties has become a fairly common measure of “affective polarization” (e.g., Iyengar et al. 2012; Theodoridis 2017). As the solid curve in Figure 1 shows, the average gap in affection for each of the major political parties has increased from roughly 21 degrees in 1978 to roughly 35 degrees in 2012 and 2016.

Evidence of affective polarization is even more compelling when we examine thermometer ratings of the presidential candidates. Over the past several decades we see the same pattern of consistent positive ratings for the candidate of one’s own party but sharply declining ratings of the opposite party’s candidate (Webster and Abramowitz 2017). The negative ratings of presidential

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\(^1\) For the 2012 and 2016 ANES surveys one sample of respondents was interviewed face-to-face, the traditional mode for ANES surveys, and the other sample completed the survey on the Internet. There is some evidence indicating that Internet surveys tend to generate more negative and polarized assessments than the face-to-face samples (Atkeson, Adams, and Alvarez 2014; Kimball, Summary and Vorst 2014). To maintain consistency with prior ANES surveys, for analyses historical trends we only use the face-to-face samples of the 2012 and 2016 surveys. We apply sampling weights in all of the analyses.
candidates plumbed new depths in the 2016 presidential election, when 30% of respondents rated Donald Trump at 0 degrees and 23% rated Hillary Clinton at 0 degrees. To put these numbers in perspective, the only prior candidates to reach double digit percentages for a 0 degree thermometer rating are Barack Obama in 2012 (11%), Mitt Romney in 2012 (13%), and George W. Bush in 2004 (13%). As the dashed line in Figure 2 shows, the mean difference in thermometer ratings for the two major party candidates increased from 31 degrees in 1968 and 1976 to 51 degrees in 2016, a record level of affective polarization for the series.

Figure 1. Growth in Affective Polarization, 1968-2016

Source: ANES Cumulative Data File; 2016 ANES Time Series Study
There is other evidence of affective polarization in the American public. Substantial portions of each party (especially strong partisans) report feeling angry about the opposing party and its candidates (Mason 2015; Miller and Conover 2015). Strong party identifiers are also more likely to endorse the use of unsavory tactics to win an election or policy debate (Miller and Conover 2015). Hostility to out-partisans extends beyond the political domain. Americans are less trusting of members of the opposite party (Iyengar and Westwood 2014), and people discriminate against members of the opposing party in hiring decisions, employee behavior, and consumer choices (Iyengar and Westwood 2014; McConnell et al. 2017). Furthermore, more than 30 percent of Americans say they would be “displeased” if one of their children married someone from the opposite party (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012). Evidence of increasing bias and hostility toward out-partisans is growing and it casts the American public in an uncharitable light.

Explaining Affective Polarization

However, some recent studies conclude that ideology is an important source of affective polarization (Rogowski and Sutherland 2015; Webster and Abramowitz 2017). In a straightforward application of the median voter theorem (Downs 1958), the argument is that when the opposite party and its candidates adopt more extreme ideological positions then other voters tend to dislike them more. This is a plausible explanation, since there is clear evidence of elite ideological polarization in the United States (e.g., McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2008). This view of affective polarization in service of ideology casts polarization and the American public in a much more favorable light.

We are skeptical of the claim that ideology is a driving force behind affective polarization. Seminal studies, old and new, conclude that much of the American public is “innocent of ideology” (Converse 1964). Roughly half of American adults identify as moderates or do not place themselves
on an ideological scale at all. No more than 20 percent demonstrate a command of ideological concepts (Converse 1964). Similarly, most Americans do not hold consistent policy preferences across different issues, and policy preferences are not very stable over time (for more recent evidence, see Lewis-Beck et al. 2008; Kinder and Kalmoe 2017).

Party sorting (a growing correlation between partisanship and ideological identification) has indeed occurred, and this is an important element of polarization in the United States. However, sorting is occurring mainly because people are shifting their ideology and policy positions to make them consistent with their party identification, not the other way around (Levendusky 2009). Even party activists have changed their policy preferences on hot-button issues to align them more closely with the party platform (Layman et al. 2010). Constituents often change their policy opinions in response to the announced positions of their elected representatives, and constituents do not appear to punish legislators who take positions at odds with constituent preferences (Broockman and Butler 2017; Rogers 2017). A recent study finds that many Republican voters are willing to change their policy preferences to align them with positions adopted by President Trump, even when Trump advocates liberal positions (Barber and Pope 2017). Furthermore, strong Republicans were more susceptible to Trump opinion leadership than weak and leaning Republicans. Party loyalty seems to trump ideological reasoning, and ideology in the mass public seems to be a product of other attitudes and behavior rather than a causal variable.

Rather than ideology, we argue that group identities and group attitudes are the driving forces behind the growing affective polarization in American politics. Two recently published books summarize a lot of evidence on American public opinion and voting behavior and both conclude that group-based theories, rather than ideological reasoning, better explain mass political behavior (Achen and Bartels 2016; Kinder and Kalmoe 2017). That is, people tend to understand politics in
terms of group interests and group identities, and voters often act on group-based attitudes. This is consistent with longstanding research on social identity, which argues that people derive their own sense of self from their membership in groups. The motivation to identify with an in-group that is distinct from a perceived out-group is powerful. Social identity theory predicts that group conflict (which is the essence of politics) strengthens group identities and fosters in-group favoritism and hostility toward out-groups (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Brown 2000). Group differences in resources and advantages form the basis for enduring social and political conflicts (Tilly 1998). Furthermore, public evaluations of a variety of public policies tend to be “group-centric” (Nelson and Kinder 1996) – that is, support for a particular policy is shaped by public attitudes toward the groups most affected by the policy (e.g., Schneider and Ingram 1993).

The most important group identity in politics, is party identification. The authors of The American Voter developed the concept of party identification to resemble other social group identities, like religion (Campbell et al. 1960). Party loyalties are developed early in life, are relatively stable over time, and shape the way we view the world. Strong partisans stand out from other partisans in terms of their robust social identity with a political party, which produces higher levels of voter loyalty and political activism (Greene 2004; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002; Miller and Conover 2015). Recent research indicates that partisan identity, and hostility toward the opposing party, are deeply ingrained and automatic links in the human brain that precede reflection and reasoning (Iyengar and Westwood 2014; Theodoridis 2017).

Furthermore, party identification shapes other political attitudes and behavior. A strong party identifier “tends to see what is favorable to his partisan orientation” (Campbell et al. 1960: 133). Strengthened party identification causes a shift in policy preferences and evaluations of public

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2 For example, a recent study found that supporters of Hillary Clinton’s defeat in the 2016 presidential election strengthened the political and gender identities of her supporters (Gomez et al. 2017).
officials (Gerber, Huber, and Washington 2010; Lodge and Taber 2013). In addition, partisans are motivated to believe things that make their party look good, even when those beliefs are factually incorrect (Bartels 2002; Jerit and Barabas 2012). As Mason puts it, a partisan is “more like a sports fan than like a banker choosing an investment” (2015).

Finally, the political environment can increase the salience of party identification and other group identities and prime associated group biases. Exposure to political campaigns strengthens partisan identity and increases affective polarization (Gerber, Huber, and Washington 2010; Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012; Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013; Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe 2015). Consumption of partisan media also increases hostility toward out-partisans (Levendusky 2013; Lelkes, Sood, and Iyengar 2017). Thus, increasing elite-level polarization makes inter-party differences more salient to the mass public, which reinforce partisan identities among voters. For these reasons we expect partisanship to be a stronger predictor of affective polarization than ideology.

Figure 2 provides a preliminary comparison of partisanship and ideology as predictors of affective polarization, based on ANES election surveys conducted from 1978 to 2016. The vertical axis in the figure measures the difference in thermometer ratings of the two major parties. The left panel of the figure depicts the mean party thermometer differences by strength of party identification. As the graph shows, the thermometer measure is very effective at discriminating between various levels of strength of partisanship. Strong partisans produce significantly more polarized ratings of the two parties than weaker partisans, and the difference between strong partisans versus each of the weaker partisan groups has grown by about five to ten degrees over the past 38 years.3 The differences between weak and leaning partisans are not as pronounced, but weak

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3 For all analyses in this paper we treat Independents who lean toward a party as partisans.
partisans consistently hold more polarized evaluations of the two parties than leaning partisans. For strong partisans, the difference in party thermometer ratings increased from roughly 39 degrees in 1978 to roughly 55 degrees in 2012 and 2016. Affective polarization has risen for weak and leaning partisans as well, while pure Independents have remained in a low (5-10 degree) range throughout this period. The evidence suggests that party identification has become more salient during this time period.

The right-hand panel in Figure 2 depicts the same measure of affective polarization for different categories of ideological identification over the same period. We measure ideology with the ANES question that asks respondents to place themselves on a seven-point scale from extremely liberal at one end to extremely conservative at the other end. Roughly 28 percent of ANES respondents in this sample did not place themselves on the seven-point ideology scale, yet those non-respondents are on par with weak partisans when it comes to their polarized ratings of the two parties, including an increase in affective polarization over time. Moderates, who placed themselves at the midpoint of the ideology scale (23 percent of the sample), are fairly similar to leaning partisans in the trend and levels of affective polarization. If ideology is a driving force behind affective polarization, then it is not clear why moderates and non-respondents rate the two parties so differently. Ideologues, who placed themselves on the liberal or conservative side of the ideology scale, comprise a bit less than half of the ANES sample, and their ratings of the two parties are more polarized than the other two groups, and ideologues have become more polarized over time. Nevertheless, ideologues are only 8 to 15 degrees more polarized, on average, than the other two less ideological groups. Overall, strength of partisanship is more strongly associated with affective partisanship than ideological identification. While not pictured here, we find similar patterns with the thermometer ratings of presidential candidates. When it comes to affective polarization party is the more important group identity than ideology.
Figure 2. Affective Polarization by Strength of Partisanship and Ideology

Source: ANES Cumulative Data File; 2016 ANES Time Series Study
To provide a more thorough examination we estimate a regression model of affective polarization which controls for additional public opinion measures. Using data from ANES surveys conducted since 1988, we examine several group attitudes and ideological measures as correlates of affective polarization over the past few decades.

**Group Attitudes**

As noted above, public evaluations of social groups are essential elements of American politics. Many people tend to understand politics in terms of group interests, and voters tend to evaluate political parties and candidates based on the groups associated with them (Campbell et al. 1960; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008). Politics inevitably involves competition and conflict among social groups, and those conflicts tend to attract extra attention in the heat of a political campaign. Political parties are especially important as coalitions of groups and interests. As a result, public evaluations of social groups help shape the nature of party conflict. If politics is more polarized by party, a likely by-product is increased conflict between groups that affiliate with opposing parties. An important recent work argues that the Republican Party is primarily organized around ideological goals while the Democratic Party is primarily defined as a coalition of organized groups (Grossmann and Hopkins 2015). This leads to “asymmetric” conflict between the parties, where Republicans are motivated by broad conservative principles while Democrats are motivated by discrete policies demanded by groups in the party coalition. Others argue that ideological labels are simply additional group identities that provide further clues about one’s partisan identity (Kinder and Kalmoe 2017). For example, while most Americans do not seem to understand ideological concepts, most do know that the GOP is the more conservative party (72 percent answered this question correctly in the 2016 ANES survey). People who do not follow politics very closely still form beliefs about groups in society and rely on those beliefs to evaluate the political parties. In this section we focus on group
attitudes that can be measured using the ANES Cumulative Data File. This includes attitudes toward
groups commonly associated with one of the major political parties and racial resentment.

Since the 1980s ANES surveys have measured public evaluations of many groups in society
using the feeling thermometer questions. We average the thermometer ratings of groups associated
with each party coalition to create a Democratic-aligned group measure and a Republican-aligned
group measure (a measure developed in Anthony and Kimball 2016). The group measure for
Democrats includes thermometer ratings of environmentalists, feminists, gays and lesbians, liberals,
labor unions, people on welfare, and undocumented immigrants. The group measure for
Republicans includes ratings of big business, Christian fundamentalists, the military and
conservatives. As in other measures, Democrats and Republicans have polarized over time in their
thermometer ratings of groups associated with each party coalition (by roughly 5 degrees over the
past few decades), and we also observe a decline in ratings of groups aligned with one’s opposing
party (Anthony and Kimball 2016, 25-28). We measure polarization in group ratings by computing
the difference between the thermometer measures of Democratic-aligned groups and Republican-
aligned groups. Once again, the mean distance between the two group thermometer ratings reaches
its highest point in the 2016 ANES sample (21 degrees).

We also measure racial attitudes with the ANES Cumulative Data File. While many scholars
have observed a decline in overt racism in American public opinion, “racial resentment” has
emerged as a powerful variable in the wake of the civil rights movement. Racial resentment centers
on a belief that a lack of work ethic accounts for inequality between black and white Americans.

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4 When we factor analyze all of the items they form two factors that confirm our hypothesized party coalitions (see also,
Weisberg, Haynes, and Krosnick 1995). Both group items form reliable scales ($\alpha = .76$ for ratings of Democratic-aligned
groups and $\alpha = .68$ for ratings of Republican-aligned groups). The 2016 ANES survey was missing some of these feeling
thermometer items, so we included the Tea Party and rich people in the Republican group measure and Black Lives
Matter and transgender individuals in the Democratic group measure for 2016.
Since there are substantial differences between black and white voters in their support for the two major parties, we expect racial resentment to be associated with polarized ratings of the parties. Racial resentment gained potency in public opinion during the presidency of Barack Obama, the first black President in American history (Tesler and Sears 2010). Given prominence of racial themes in the 2016 presidential campaign (for example, Donald Trump’s frequent “law and order” refrain in his stump speeches and his angry denunciations of black protestors at some of his rallies), racial resentment remained potent even without President Obama on the ballot. Racial resentment has not diminished over the last two decades and it is associated with a variety of policy attitudes and voting choices (Kinder and Sanders 1996; Tesler and Sears 2010).

We measure racial resentment based on four questions that ask respondents the degree to which they agree or disagree with statements about the status of blacks in society (Tesler and Sears 2010, 19). Responses to these four items are averaged together to create the racial resentment index and we rescale it to range from 0 to 1 (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .75$). Higher values indicate higher levels of racial resentment. As Figure 3 shows, racial resentment has become more aligned with partisanship during the last few decades. The gap in mean resentment between supporters of the two major parties more than doubles from the 1980s to the 2010s. Not to sound like a broken record, but the 2016 sample produces the largest difference between Democrats and Republicans in mean racial resentment scores over the entire series. It is not just ideological preferences that have become more sorted with partisanship over the last few decades. Group attitudes have become sorted as well. We fold the resentment scale at the midpoint to measure extremity of attitudes on racial resentment, and we expect respondents closer to either extreme to hold more polarized views of the two major parties.
Policy Attitudes

Ideological preferences are also common predictors of party polarization, as more extreme ideological positions are associated with more polarized ratings of the parties. As noted above, we control for ideology by using the item that asks respondents to place themselves on a seven-point scale from extremely liberal at one end to extremely conservative at the other end. We fold the scale at the midpoint and examine each gradation of ideological extremism as a separate category (respondents who did not place themselves on the ideological identification scale serve as the reference category). More extreme ideologues should produce more polarized ratings of the two major parties and their presidential candidates than moderates and non-respondents.
We include two additional measures of that tap separate economic and cultural dimensions of political preferences, using measures available in the ANES Cumulative Data File since 1988. One is a measure of social welfare policy preferences, based on eight items. Four items are seven-point scales that ask for preferences on (1) government aid to blacks, (2) government versus personal responsibility for jobs and living standards, (3) the government services and spending scale, and (4) government versus private health insurance. The other four items measure preferences for increased or decreased federal spending on (1) poor people, (2) child care, (3) public schools, and (4) welfare programs. All eight items were recoded to a common scale and then averaged together to create a social welfare policy scale ($\alpha=.80$). Webster and Abramowitz (2017) show that social welfare policy preferences have become more strongly correlated with partisanship since the 1980s. We fold the social welfare scale at the midpoint to measure extremity of preferences on social welfare policies, and we expect respondents closer to either extreme to hold more polarized views of the two major parties.

To measure cultural values, we use a measure of moral traditionalism which focuses on “the degree to which conservative or orthodox moral standards should guide the public and private life of the nation” (Goren 2013, 5). Moral traditionalism undergirds several policy debates in the United States, including abortion and gay rights; and moral traditionalism has been a source of partisan conflict since the 1960s (Goren 2013). In addition, traditional moral values have become more aligned with party identification since the 1980s (Kimball, Summary, and Vorst 2014). We measure moral traditionalism using four questions that ask respondents the degree to which they agree or disagree with statements about newer lifestyles, changing moral behavior, traditional family values, 

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5 Similar items are used by Webster and Abramowitz (2017) to create a social welfare policy scale. Those who answered “don’t know” were placed at the midpoint of each scale. The 2016 ANES survey did not include the government versus private health insurance question, so we substituted a 7-point scale measuring support for the Affordable Care Act.

6 We recoded “don’t know” responses to the midpoint of each item.
and tolerance for different moral standards. Responses were averaged together to create a moral traditionalism scale (α=.64). Higher values indicate a stronger preference for traditional moral values. We again fold the scale at the midpoint to measure value extremity. We expect people near either pole to produce more polarized thermometer ratings of the two parties and their presidential candidates.

To produce a more rigorous examination of the association between group attitudes, policy attitudes and affective polarization we estimate two ordinary least squares regression models. For the first model the dependent variable is the absolute difference in party thermometer ratings, and for the second model the dependent variable is the absolute difference between thermometer ratings of the two major party presidential candidates. Each of the measures of attitude extremity described above are included as independent variables in each model. We include a trend variable to see if affective polarization grows each decade, after controlling for the other measures. The results of both regression analyses are presented in Table 1.

As previewed by Figure 2, strength of partisanship stands out as the most potent predictor of affective polarization, even when controlling other political attitudes. Holding the other variables constant, strong partisans rate the two parties roughly 36 degrees farther apart than do pure Independents, and strong partisans rate the two presidential candidates about 25 degrees farther apart than pure Independents. Weak and leaning partisans are substantially more polarized than pure Independents as well. Weak partisans produce party thermometer ratings roughly 6 degrees more polarized, on average, than leaning partisans. However, weak and leaning partisans are statistically indistinguishable from each other in ratings of presidential candidates.
### Table 1. Predictors of Affective Polarization, 1988-2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>Political Parties</th>
<th>Presidential Candidates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group Attitudes</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong partisan</td>
<td>35.9 (0.7)**</td>
<td>25.4 (0.9)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak partisan</td>
<td>18.0 (0.6)**</td>
<td>9.5 (0.9)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaning partisan</td>
<td>12.0 (0.7)**</td>
<td>8.5 (0.9)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Reference group: Pure Indep.]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polarization in group ratings</td>
<td>.27 (0.01)**</td>
<td>.32 (0.02)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extremity of racial resentment</td>
<td>6.8 (1.2)**</td>
<td>13.0 (1.6)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Policy Attitudes</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extreme ideology</td>
<td>7.6 (0.9)**</td>
<td>7.7 (1.2)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular ideology</td>
<td>2.1 (0.5)**</td>
<td>4.6 (0.7)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slight ideology</td>
<td>-1.4 (0.5)**</td>
<td>1.0 (0.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>-1.9 (0.5)**</td>
<td>0.7 (0.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Reference group: Non-response]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extremity of social welfare policy</td>
<td>2.8 (0.2)**</td>
<td>2.7 (0.3)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extremity of moral traditionalism</td>
<td>-0.9 (1.3)</td>
<td>5.0 (1.7)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Decade trend</strong></td>
<td>2.0 (0.5)**</td>
<td>3.8 (0.2)**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

R²: .32  
N: 15,813

Source: ANES Cumulative Data File; ANES 2016 Time Series Study.

Note. OLS coefficients (standard errors in parentheses). Intercept term not shown. The dependent variable is the absolute difference between thermometer ratings of the two parties (model 1) or the major presidential candidates (model 2).

Two-tailed: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001

Furthermore, other group attitudes are important as well. The differences in thermometer ratings of groups aligned with each party is the second strongest predictor of affective polarization after strength of partisanship. Moving from the 10th percentile to the 90th percentile on the group thermometer measure is associated with a 10 degree increase in polarization on the party thermometers and an 11 degree increase in polarization on the candidate thermometer ratings.

Extreme attitudes on the racial resentment scale have a somewhat weaker, but statistically significant, relationship with affective polarization. Moving from the 10th percentile to the 90th percentile on the
racial resentment measure is associated with a 3 degree increase in polarization on the party thermometers and a 6 degree increase in polarization on the candidate thermometer ratings.

After controlling for partisanship and other group attitudes we find that ideological preferences are statistically significant predictors of affective polarization, although the effects are substantively weaker. Extreme ideologues (4% of the ANES sample) rate the two parties and their presidential candidates roughly 8 degrees farther apart than do non-respondents on the ideological placement question, a smaller gap in affective polarization than the difference between leaning partisans and pure Independents. Furthermore, there is little discernable difference in affective polarization between slight ideologues, moderates, and non-respondents on the ideology measure. Even regular ideologues (the next step down from extreme ideologues) are just 2 to 5 degrees more polarized than non-respondents.

We also find that social welfare policy preferences are associated with both measures of affective polarization. Moving from the 10th percentile to the 90th percentile on the extremity of social welfare preferences is associated with a 6 degree increase in polarization on the party thermometer ratings and candidate thermometer ratings. Meanwhile, traditional moral values are, at best, a weak predictor of affective polarization. Finally, polarization increased 2 degrees per decade for the party thermometer measure and almost 4 degrees per decade for the candidate thermometers, even after controlling for group attitudes and policy preferences. Thus, some of the growth in affective polarization remains unexplained. Nevertheless, group attitudes seem to explain substantially more of the variation in affective polarization than ideology and policy-based measures.

2016: A Group Attitudes Election

The 2016 presidential campaign gave new meaning to the term “identity politics.” The Democrats nominated the more moderate of the two frontrunning candidates and Republican
voters eschewed several more traditional conservative candidates in favor of Donald Trump. A Cruz versus Sanders general election campaign could have been an ideological battle royale. Instead, Trump versus Clinton provided a different campaign that highlighted several group identities and attitudes. For example, Hillary Clinton became the first woman in American history to be a major party nominee for President. This raised the salience of the role of women in society during the campaign.

Furthermore, while Donald Trump has behaved as a more traditional conservative as President, during the presidential campaign (including the nomination phase) he staked out decidedly non-conservative positions on several issues, including foreign policy, trade, entitlements, and eminent domain. During one of the primary debates Trump even said that “millions of women” have been “helped greatly” by Planned Parenthood (Paquette 2016). Donald Trump certainly did not offer a consistent conservative ideology on the campaign trail. What Trump did serve up to GOP voters, in heaping portions far exceeding what any competitor could provide, was red meat. No Republican candidate went after as many groups that antagonize GOP voters – the Clintons, President Obama, the media, Muslims, immigrants, protesters, people of color, labor unions – with as much gusto as Trump. While conventional wisdom tends to hold that campaign appeals to prejudice need to be subtle and implied, Trump eschewed the dog whistle for the bullhorn. In this type of campaign environment how do group attitudes and ideological measures fare in explaining the choice for President in 2016?

To answer this question, we estimate a regression model of the vote for president in 2016, comparing a set of group attitudes and a set of ideology measures as predictors. The 2016 ANES data include a wider range of public opinion measures than the cumulative file, allowing us to examine some additional measures of group attitudes and ideological preferences. Our group
attitudes include the familiar seven-point party identification scale, and it is coded so that higher values denote Republicans. We include the mean thermometer rating of groups associated with the Democratic Party, described above. These items form a reliable scale ($\alpha = .85$) and many of the groups that comprise the scale (unions, gays and lesbians, transgender people, feminists, and Black Lives Matter) were frequent reference points during the campaign. We also include the mean thermometer rating of groups associated with the Republican Party. Similarly, many of the groups contained in the scale (such as rich people, big business, Christian fundamentalists, and the Tea Party) were frequent targets of Democratic campaign rhetoric, and these items also form a reliable scale ($\alpha = .79$). We expect voting for Trump to be negatively associated with the Democratic Party group measure and positively associated with the Republican Party group measure.

It is something of an understatement to say that racially charged rhetoric was a common feature of the 2016 campaign. Before he was a presidential candidate, Donald Trump may have been best known in politics as the champion of birtherism – the false claim that President Obama was not born in the United States. Trump regularly retweeted messages from white supremacists during the campaign and he was slow to distance his campaign from the support of David Duke, a former Ku Klux Klan leader (Kessler 2016). Trump frequently denigrated the Black Lives Matter movement and he hired as a key campaign advisor Steve Bannon, the Breitbart News executive and self-professed leader of the Alt-Right movement (Shear, Haberman, and Schmidt 2016). Hillary Clinton also brought attention to the concept of implicit racial bias during the campaign. Thus, we expect racial attitudes to be correlated with the vote for president. We use the racial resentment scale described above, and it should be positively associated with a vote for Trump.

Immigrants may have been an even more frequent rhetorical target than African Americans during the 2016 campaign. Donald Trump owned the immigration issue and he launched his
presidential campaign by denigrating Mexican-American immigrants, calling them “rapists.” He led chants of “build the wall” while on the campaign stump. Trump noted the Mexican heritage of a federal judge in criticizing the judge’s ruling against him in the Trump University case (Kopan and Jarrett 2017). He proposed banning Muslims from entering the United States, and he falsely claimed that thousands of Muslims in New Jersey celebrated the attacks against the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 (Kessler 2015). Thus, we also expect that attitudes toward immigrants help predict the vote for president in 2016. We create a measure of hostility to immigrants based on responses to four ANES questions that ask whether immigrants (1) increase crime, (2) harm America’s culture, (3) take away jobs, and (4) are good for America’s economy. Each item was recoded to a 0-1 scale, with higher values indicating greater antipathy toward immigrants, and the four variables were averaged together to form an immigrant attitude scale ($\alpha = 0.81$). We expect the immigration measure to be positively correlated with a vote for Trump.

Finally, the 2016 presidential campaign included charged rhetoric about the role of women in politics and society. The Clinton campaign frequently invoked equal rights for women and nodded toward the historic nature of her bid as the first woman running as a major party nominee for president. Trump faced allegations of sexual assault from several women after the “Access Hollywood” tape was made public. In addition, the campaign featured familiar debates over abortion, contraception, equal pay, and workplace rights for women. There is a consistent gender gap in voting and party identification, and exit polls indicate that the 2016 presidential election produced the largest gender gap in the polling era. Thus, beliefs about the role of women are likely to be another group attitude influencing vote choice in 2016. Our group attitude measure is modern sexism, a concept that taps beliefs about changing gender roles and discrimination against women (Glick and Fiske 2011). Six ANES items ask about media coverage of sex discrimination, work and homemaking roles for men versus women, whether women demanding equality seek special favors,
whether complaining about sex discrimination creates more problems, whether a working mother can bond with her children, and whether it is important to elect more women to office. We averaged responses to the six questions to create a modern sexism scale (α=.65). Higher values indicate more traditional views about women in society and should be associated with a greater likelihood of voting for Trump.

In addition to group attitudes, we amass a series of ideological measures as predictors of the vote for president in 2016. One is the seven-point ideological placement measure described above. Higher scores indicate more conservative respondents, so the ideology measure should be positively correlated with a vote for Trump. We also include measures of social welfare policy and moral traditionalism, also described above. Both variables are coded so that they should be positively related to voting for Donald Trump.

We examine the value of egalitarianism as another source of partisan conflict in American politics. Egalitarianism, which emphasizes equal opportunity and treatment regardless of personal characteristics, is closely related to a range of policy preferences (Feldman 1988) and undergirds some of the racial differences in opinion on several policies (Kinder and Sanders 1996). We create a measure of egalitarianism based on responses to four ANES questions that ask about (1) the need for equal opportunity, (2) whether it is a problem that some don’t have an equal chance in life, (3) whether we should worry less about equality, and (4) whether there would be fewer problems if people were treated more fairly. Each item was recoded to a 0-1 scale, with higher values indicating greater support for equality, and the four variables were averaged together to form an immigrant

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7 We do not make use of the follow-up ideology question for non-respondents in the 2016 ANES data because the follow-up was only asked of face-to-face respondents.
attitude scale ($\alpha = 0.68$). We expect the egalitarianism measure to be negatively correlated with a vote for Trump.

Finally, some have argued that Trump was successful at appealing to the aspirations and fears of white working-class people facing economic troubles, while the Clinton campaign failed to reach these voters (e.g., Confessore and Cohn 2016). To test this hypothesis, we rely on three ANES items about financial vulnerabilities. These questions ask respondents whether they (1) can afford to pay all of their health care costs, (2) worry about their financial situation, and (3) are able to make their housing payments. Each item was recoded to a 0-1 scale, with higher values indicating higher levels of economic anxiety, and the three variables were averaged together to form an economic anxiety scale ($\alpha = 0.70$). We expect economic anxiety to be positively associated with a vote for Trump. We use logistic regression to estimate the vote choice model, with the dependent variable coded 0 for Clinton voters and 1 for Trump voters. The coefficient estimates and standard errors are reported in Table 2 in the appendix. We estimate one model using just group attitudes as predictors (column 1), a model with only ideology measures as predictors (column 2), and a combined model including both sets of predictors (column 3).

The results in Table 2 show that group attitudes are much more potent that ideology measures in explaining vote choice in the 2016 presidential election. The goodness-of-fit measures are substantially stronger for the group model in column 1 than for the ideology model in column 2. In the combined model (column 3) the group attitude measures all produce statistically significant logit coefficients signed in the expected direction, while just two of the ideology measures generate statistically significant coefficients. The group model seems to dominate the ideology model of vote choice in 2016.
The independent variables are not all coded on the same scale, and some have skewed distributions. Thus, we use the model estimates from column 3 of Table 2 to calculate how much the expected probability of voting for Donald Trump changes, on average, when moving from the 10th percentile to the 90th percentile on each independent variable. These calculations are summarized in Figure 4.\textsuperscript{8} Group attitudes, led by partisanship, are all associated with the presidential voting decision. Shifting from low to high scores on each of the group measures is associated with a 10 point or larger increase in the predicted probability of voting for Trump. By comparison, only

\textsuperscript{8} The predicted probabilities reported in the text are “as observed” – calculated while leaving other independent variables at observed values and then averaging over all cases in the sample (see Hanmer and Kalkan 2013).
social welfare preferences and moral traditionalism are statistically significant correlates of the vote for president in 2016, and those effects are a bit weaker than each of the group attitudes. Furthermore, after controlling for group attitudes we find that economic anxiety is neither statistically nor substantively associated with the choice between Trump and Clinton. An economic anxiety explanation of the 2016 presidential election is not supported by the ANES data. In explaining the choice for president in 2016 group attitudes trump ideology.

**Conclusion**

Identity politics are ascendant. Party conflict in the United States has increased in frequency and intensity over the past few decades, making partisanship and other politically relevant group identities more salient to the mass public. This environment encourages partisans to view politics as a zero-sum “us versus them” struggle, and it motivates partisans to engage in biased processes of information seeking and reasoning. As a result, Americans express growing levels of contempt for members of the opposite party, with the 2016 cycle setting new records for polarized public assessments of the two major parties and their presidential candidates. Polarized ratings of the political parties derive from many sources, but group attitudes and identities are the most powerful sources of affective polarization. Our definition of party sorting should be broadened – in addition to the stronger correlation between party identification and ideology, there is a growing association between partisanship and several group-based attitudes.

The increased hostility toward opposing political groups among the mass public offers a target-rich environment for campaigns eager to mobilize the base of either party. Appeals that emphasize fear and threats from political opponents are more effective at motivating mass political

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9 If we limit the sample to white voters then all of the group attitudes are statistically correlated with support for Trump but moral traditionalism is the only ideology measure that reaches statistical significance in the combined model.
activity than positive proposals (Miller 2013). Politicians can appeal to feelings of contempt, anger and fear to draw citizens into the political arena. Since group identities and attitudes come in many hues, campaigns fashioning appeals to encourage revulsion of the opposition can draw from a rainbow palette of public attitudes. It should not be a surprise that Russian efforts to influence the 2016 election included phony social media campaigns playing both sides in group conflicts over race, immigration, and religion in the United States (Glaser 2017; Entous, Timberg, and Dwoskin 2017). They found several areas where the American polity is vulnerable to social discord. As of this writing, there is no evidence of leaders in either party pulling back from appeals to group-based prejudices. The hotly contested Virginia gubernatorial campaign of 2017 is one example. In the closing weeks of the campaign Ed Gillespie, the Republican candidate, ran controversial TV ads featuring Salvadoran gangs, threats from other immigrants, sex offenders, and Confederate monuments. Not to be outdone, a group supporting Ralph Northam, the Democratic candidate, produced an ad picturing a pickup truck with a Gillespie bumper sticker chasing after a group of non-white kids. In shades of 2016, the Virginia campaign features fake social media activity too (Robillard 2017). Truth sometimes is stranger than fiction.

Increasing levels of affective polarization in the mass public create new challenges for policymaking. There is an ancient proverb that says "He who rides a tiger is afraid to dismount" (Simpson and Speake 2008). Once a risky venture has begun, it may be more dangerous to stop than to continue. Having repeatedly stoked contempt for the opposition among party supporters, it can be dangerous for politicians to shift to governing, which requires negotiation and compromise. Polarization has increased the reliable base in each party and reduced the number of voters that respond to short-term political forces (Smidt 2015). Thus, there is less incentive for politicians to the pragmatic needs of unattached voters. Each party’s core supporters, who dislike the opposite party the most, may signal to politicians that they do not want to compromise. This seems to be a bigger
problem for Republicans than for Democrats right now. In the 2016 ANES data, 74 percent of Democrats but only 54 percent of Republicans say they prefer government officials who compromise. Similarly, 43 percent of Republicans but just 29 percent of Democrats agree that compromise means selling out one’s principles. Furthermore, both thermometer measures of affective polarization are positively associated with opposition to compromise among Republicans, but not among Democrats.

Relatedly, contempt for the out-party is not a governing agenda. If a party coalition is most united around disdain for the opposition rather than a policy program, then legislating will be more difficult than people may think. For example, a recent national survey found that twice as many Republicans strongly dislike Hillary Clinton as strongly like President Trump (Pew Research Center 2017). This may help explain some of the GOP’s recent legislative troubles in Congress. Republican candidates for national office have promised, almost uniformly, to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act for many years. Yet after winning the White House and majority control of both chambers of Congress, repeal efforts in 2017 failed even with reconciliation rules that required no Democratic votes to pass the repeal legislation. Now President Trump and Republicans have moved on to tax reform, again using reconciliation rules. It may be smart politics for Republicans to keep attacking Hillary Clinton even though she lost the election and has shown no interest in running for office again, but Republicans in the Trump era have yet to demonstrate that they can enact major domestic legislation. The rise of affective polarization will not make governing any easier, nor will it make political campaigning any more civil.
References


### Appendix

#### Table 2. Predictors of Major Party Vote for President in 2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>Group model</th>
<th>Ideology model</th>
<th>Combined</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group Attitudes</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party identification</td>
<td>.87 (.06)**</td>
<td>.83 (.07)**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial resentment</td>
<td>3.1 (0.5)**</td>
<td>2.8 (0.5)**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigrant attitudes</td>
<td>2.5 (0.6)**</td>
<td>2.5 (0.6)**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern sexism</td>
<td>4.0 (0.9)**</td>
<td>3.4 (0.9)**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic group thermometer</td>
<td>-.05 (.01)**</td>
<td>-.05 (.01)**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican group thermometer</td>
<td>.04 (.01)**</td>
<td>.04 (.01)**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ideology Measures</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>.84 (.08)**</td>
<td>-.03 (.12)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social welfare policy</td>
<td>.73 (.08)**</td>
<td>.39 (.11)**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral traditionalism</td>
<td>3.9 (0.4)**</td>
<td>1.5 (0.6)*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egalitarianism</td>
<td>-2.3 (0.4)**</td>
<td>-.19 (.64)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic anxiety</td>
<td>.77 (.31)**</td>
<td>.59 (.40)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo R²</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correctly predicted</td>
<td>92.8%</td>
<td>84.6%</td>
<td>93.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>2,458</td>
<td>2,455</td>
<td>2,450</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ANES 2016 Time Series Study.

Note. Logit coefficients (standard errors in parentheses). Intercept term not shown. The dependent variable is the vote for President (1=Trump, 0=Clinton).

Two-tailed: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$