INTRODUCTION TO PART 2

Disagreement is a permanent and intractable feature of political life. In the United States, nearly half of all Republicans and Democrats say they almost never agree with the other party’s positions. Whether the topic is health care, the economy, foreign affairs, education, the environment, privatization, energy, or immigration, it seems nearly impossible for political opponents to agree.

Political disagreement is often a good thing for a healthy democracy. We expect values and preferences to differ in a pluralistic society, and reasonable citizens understand that people of goodwill can disagree about moral and political issues. For this reason, theorizing about liberal democracy has focused largely on disagreements concerning moral and political values, while taking for granted that citizens tend to agree on the facts. However, political disagreements often go beyond political values and even include disputes about matters of fact. Moreover, political debates are increasingly polarized in democratic societies. As a result, political opponents are unable to find agreement and also have highly unfavorable views of each other, regarding one another as immoral, stupid, and lazy. This is a significant problem for democratic politics. Political disagreements are becoming increasingly unreasonable, which makes it difficult to deliberate productively with others and find compromise.

In the first chapter of this section, Shanto Iyengar summarizes a wide range of evidence of increasing levels of polarization, particularly in the United States. Unlike previous research on political polarization, Iyengar’s focus is not the ideological extremity of party positions. Instead, he explores a new form of polarization that centers on fear and dislike of one’s political opponents. This phenomenon of animosity between the parties is known as affective polarization. Iyengar surveys the evidence bearing on the extent of affective polarization, traces its origins to the power of partisanship as a social identity, and explains the factors that have intensified partisan animus. This chapter concludes by reflecting on the implications of heightened partisan animus for the democratic process.

The next chapter, by J. Adam Carter, explores the relationship between political disagreements and political relativism. According to Carter, the question of whether the present trend toward increased political polarization will continue is not just a matter for the social sciences; there are also important philosophical questions to consider. In particular, he considers the idea that both parties to (at least some) political disagreements are right relative to their own perspective. There are two strands of argument for this conclusion: the first involves premises
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about epistemic circularity; the second diagnoses some political disagreements as ‘faultless’ on
the basis of semantic considerations. This chapter demonstrates how key ideas from epistemology and the philosophy of language (e.g. about deep disagreement, epistemic circularity, semantic relativism) bear on our understanding of political disagreement.

Richard Rowland and Robert Simpson also illustrate how key ideas from epistemology can shed light on foundational issues in political philosophy. In particular, they examine the connection between epistemic permissivism and reasonable pluralism. Intuitively, there is a difference in how we think about pluralism in epistemological vs. political contexts. In politics, it seems perfectly okay to hold one set of political commitments while also thinking it perfectly reasonable for someone in a similar position to have a totally different set of political commitments. Ordinarily, however, it seems problematically arbitrary to hold a particular belief on some issue while also thinking it perfectly reasonable to hold a totally different belief on the same issue given the same evidence. What explains the difference? This chapter considers several explanatory theses that might make sense of this fact.

Elizabeth Edenberg’s chapter brings together debates in political philosophy and epistemology over what we should do when we disagree. She argues that we must be cautious about applying one debate to the other because there are significant differences that may threaten this project. For example, there are important differences between civic peers and epistemic peers. Moreover, the scope of the relevant disagreements varies according to whether the methodology chosen falls within ideal theory or non-ideal theory. Further, epistemologists tend to analyze the rationality of individuals’ beliefs whereas political philosophers focus on the just governance of a diverse society. Nevertheless, Edenberg claims there are important lessons to learn by considering these debates side by side.

In the next chapter, Daniel Singer and his colleagues use the tools of formal social epistemology to understand how information spreads and how it can influence the beliefs of others. While epistemic network models have been used in philosophy mostly by philosophers of science and social epistemologists, this chapter discusses how epistemic network models can be used to investigate political polarization. It introduces the idea of an epistemic network model and then discusses a series of models for political polarization. The chapter concludes with ideas about how epistemic network models can be used to answer other questions in political epistemology, such as the connection between group beliefs and political legitimacy; how judicial beliefs impact the positions of courts; how social position affects access to knowledge and vice versa; and how epistemic and other injustices are perpetrated and become systematized.

The chapter by Emily McWilliams looks at how political beliefs are formed and maintained in polarized environments. Specifically, she examines how self-serving, directional biases in the ways that people gather and process evidence can make their beliefs resistant to change. By adopting an evidentialist theory of epistemic justification, McWilliams argues that the self-serving biases which influence our beliefs do not actually undermine the justification of these beliefs. This is a counterintuitive result. Thus, McWilliams concludes that evidentialism does not provide us with a complete theory of justification.

In the final chapter of this section, Michael Hannon and Jeroen de Ridder examine the nature, function, and meaning of political beliefs. According to an intuitive and widely accepted view, many citizens have stable and meaningful political beliefs and they choose to support political candidates or parties on the basis of these beliefs. But Hannon and de Ridder call this view into question. They argue that political beliefs differ from ordinary
world-modeling beliefs because political beliefs typically do not aim at truth. Moreover, they draw on empirical evidence from political science and psychology to argue that most people lack stable and meaningful political beliefs. Hannon and de Ridder propose that the psychological basis for voting behavior is not an individual’s political beliefs but rather group identity, and they briefly reflect on what this means for normative democratic theory.
8
THE POLARIZATION OF AMERICAN POLITICS
Shanto Iyengar

The impeachment trial of U.S. President Donald Trump illustrates vividly the phenomenon of party polarization: intense conflict and ill will across the party divide, and intransigent political preferences that are unresponsive to strong evidence. In this chapter, I will review the political science literature documenting the extent of party polarization and identify possible explanations of the intensified partisan conflict. In closing, I offer some speculative thoughts on how polarization may threaten fundamental democratic norms and institutions.

Defining polarization

Political scientists have typically treated polarization as a matter of ideology, proposing the ideological distance between party platforms as the appropriate yardstick. By this metric, it is clear that elected officials representing the two major American parties have indeed polarized over the past half century (Fleisher and Bond, 2001; Hetherington, 2002; McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal, 2006). However, the jury is still out on whether rank-and-file partisans have followed suit. Some scholars present data showing that most partisans are centrist on the issues despite the movement of their leaders to the ideological extremes (Fiorina, Abrams and Pope, 2008). Others claim that over time party members have gradually emulated the extreme views of party elites (Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008).

Extremity of public opinion on the issues is but one way of defining partisan polarization. An alternative definition, rooted in social psychology, considers mass polarization as the extent to which partisans view each other as a disliked out-group. In the U.S. two-party system, partisanship is about identifying with the “Democrat” group or the “Republican” group (Green, Palmquist and Schickler, 2002; Huddy, Mason and Aaroe, 2015). Once people adopt a partisan identity, they immediately categorize the world into an in-group (their own party) and an out-group (the opposing party) (Iyengar et al., 2018). Psychologists have demonstrated that any in-group versus out-group distinction, even one based on the most trivial of shared characteristics, triggers both positive feelings for the in-group and negative evaluations of the out-group (Billig and Tajfel, 1973). The more salient the group to the sense of personal identity, the stronger these inter-group divisions (Gaertner et al., 1993).

For Americans, partisanship is a particularly salient and powerful identity. It is acquired at a young age and remains stable over the life cycle, notwithstanding significant shifts in
personal circumstances (Sears, 1975). Moreover, political campaigns—the formal occasions for expressing citizens’ partisan identity—recur frequently, and last for many months. The frequency and duration of campaigns provide individuals multiple opportunities to be reminded of their partisan identity. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that this sense of partisan identity elicits strong feelings of hostility toward political opponents, a phenomenon political scientists refer to as affective polarization.

Affective polarization: the evidence

There is now a burgeoning literature documenting the extent to which partisans treat each other as a disliked out-group. Most of the evidence derives from national surveys, but also includes behavioral indicators of discrimination and measures of implicit or sub-conscious partisan prejudice.

Survey measures of partisan affect

Survey researchers have tracked Americans’ feelings toward the parties and their followers since the 1970s. The one indicator with the greatest longevity is the “feeling thermometer” question. Introduced into the American National Election Studies in 1970, the measure has since been widely adopted by other survey organizations (Weisberg and Rusk, 1970). The question asks respondents to rate the two parties or “Democrats” and “Republicans” on a scale ranging from (0) indicating coldness to (100) indicating warmth. Since the measure targets both parties, by dividing the sample into Democrats and Republicans, it is possible to track in-group and out-group affect over the past half century.¹

As widely reported in scholarly outlets and the popular press, the trends in the feeling thermometer scores reveal substantially increased affective polarization over time. As shown in Figure 8.1, which plots the in-party and out-party thermometer scores in the ANES time series, the gap between the in- and out-party thermometer scores steadily increased from around 23 degrees in 1978 to 41 in 2016 (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, 2012). As the figure makes clear, virtually all the increase in affective polarization has occurred because of increased animus toward the opposing party. Warm feelings for one’s own party have remained stable across the entire period.

Figure 8.1 ANES party feeling thermometers (1976–2016).
Stronger hostility for the out-party is a recent, but rapidly escalating trend that began at the turn of the century. While the percentage of partisans who rated the out-party between 1 and 49 on the thermometer has increased steadily since the 1980s, the share of partisans expressing intense negativity for the out-party (ratings of 0) remained quite small until 2000. Post-2000, the size of this group has surged dramatically—from 8% in 2000 to 21% in 2016 (Iyengar and Krupenkin, 2018). Thus, the first two decades of the twenty-first century represent an acute era of polarization, in which what was only mild dislike for political opponents now appears to be a deeper form of animus.

A parallel pattern reappears when we track respondents’ feelings toward the presidential candidates. Until about 2000, partisans reported only ambivalent feelings toward the opposing party’s nominee (average feeling thermometer scores of around 40). However, beginning in 2004, feelings toward the out-party candidate turn colder, with average thermometer scores dropping to around 15 in 2016. As in the case of the party thermometers, partisans’ feelings toward their own party nominee are unchanged, the strengthened polarization occurs because of increased hostility toward the opposing party nominee.

The feeling thermometer data show clearly that the party divide elicits affective polarization. It is important, however, to place the findings on partisan affect in some context. How does partisanship compare with other salient cleavages as a source of group polarization? Fortunately, the feeling thermometers have been applied to multiple groups making it possible to compare in-group versus out-group evaluations based on party with evaluations based on race, religion, region, and other relevant groupings. The comparisons reveal that party is easily the most affectively laden group divide in the U.S. Social out-groups including Muslims, Hindus, atheists, Latinos, African Americans, gays, and poor people all elicit much warmer thermometer scores than the out-party (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, 2012).

This contrast between the party divide and socio-cultural divides should alert us to a major limitation of self-reported indicators of group affect. Survey responses are highly reactive and susceptible to intentional exaggeration/suppression based on normative pressures. In the case of race, religion, gender, and other social divides, the expression of animus toward out-groups is tempered by strong social norms (Maccoby and Maccoby, 1954). Most individuals are prone to comply with applicable norms when asked sensitive questions. In the case of the party divide, however, there are no corresponding pressures to moderate disapproval of political opponents. If anything, the rhetoric and actions of political leaders convey to their followers that hostility directed at the opposition is not only acceptable, but also appropriate.

**Implicit measures**

The normative pressures facing survey respondents make it difficult to establish a fair comparison of social with political divides as a basis for out-group animus. Fortunately, psychologists have developed an array of implicit or sub-conscious measures of group prejudice. These implicit measures provide a more valid comparison of the bases for prejudice because they are much harder to manipulate than explicit self-reports and less susceptible to impression management or political correctness (Boysen, Vogel and Madon, 2006).

Iyengar and Westwood (2015) developed a Party Implicit Association Test (Party IAT, based on the brief version of the Race IAT) to document unconscious partisan bias. Their results showed ingrained implicit bias with approximately 70% of Democrats and Republicans showing a bias in favor of their party. Interestingly, implicit bias proved less extensive than explicit bias as measured through survey questions; 91% of Republicans and 75% of Democrats in the same study explicitly evaluated their party more favorably. This is an
important reversal from the case of race or religion where social norms restrain the expression of conscious hostility toward out-groups resulting in higher levels of implicit over explicit prejudice.

To place the results from their Party IAT in context, Iyengar and Westwood also administered the Race IAT. Surprisingly, relative to implicit racial bias, implicit partisan bias proved more widespread. The difference in the D-score—the operational indicator of implicit bias across the party divide was 0.50, while the corresponding difference in implicit racial bias across the racial divide was only 0.18. Thus, prejudice toward the out-party exceeded comparable bias directed at the racial out-group by more than 150%!

**Indicators of social distance**

An even more unobtrusive measure of partisan affect is social distance, the extent to which individuals feel comfortable interacting with out-group members in a variety of different settings. If partisans take their political affiliation seriously, they should be averse to entering into close inter-personal relations with their opponents. The most vivid evidence of increased social distance across the party divide concerns inter-party marriage. In the early 1960s, the percentage of partisans expressing concern over the prospect of their son or daughter marrying someone from the opposition party was in the single digits, but some 45 years later, it had risen to more than 25% (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, 2012). Among Republicans, one-half expressed dismay at the prospect of their offspring marrying a Democrat. Today, the party divisions and resulting out-party animus are sufficiently strong to motivate partisans to associate with like-minded others.

More compelling evidence of increased social distance based on party affiliation comes from online dating sites and other available sources of “big data” including national voter files indicating that the party cue does in fact influence the decision to enter into inter-personal relations. In a longitudinal analysis spanning 1965–2015, the authors find that spousal agreement on partisanship moved from 73% to 82%, while disagreement fell from 13% to 6% (Iyengar, Konitzer and Tedin, 2018). Since the 1965 sample of spouses had been married for decades, they had many opportunities to persuade their partner, thus inflating the observed level of agreement. When the researchers limited the focus to younger couples, they found a more impressive shift in spousal agreement; among recently married couples in 1973, spousal agreement registered at 54.3%. For the comparable group of recently married couples in the 2014 national voter file, spousal partisan agreement reached 73.9%. This is an increase of 36% in partisan agreement among couples who have had little opportunity to persuade each other.

Online dating sites are a rich source of data on the politics underlying inter-personal attraction. Huber and Malhotra leverage data from a major dating website where they gained access to both the daters’ personal profiles and their messaging behavior (Huber and Malhotra, 2017). They found that partisan agreement increases the likelihood of two people exchanging messages by 10%. To put that difference in perspective, the comparable difference for couples matched on socio-economic status (using education as the indicator) was 11%. Thus, partisanship appears to be just as relevant as social standing in the process of selecting a romantic partner.

The fact that individuals date and marry co-partisans does not necessarily mean that politics was the basis for their choice. Agreement on partisanship may be a byproduct of spousal selection on some other attribute correlated with partisan identity, such as economic status. While some researchers argue that partisan agreement among couples is in fact “induced”
or accidental, others provide evidence in favor of an active selection model in which the political affiliation of the prospective partner is the point of attraction. Huber and Malhotra (2017), for instance, show that ideology and partisanship both predict reciprocal online messaging on dating sites even after controlling for alternative bases of spousal attraction. Iyengar et al. (2018) present similar results, showing that spousal agreement in the current era is more attributable to selection based on politics than alternative mechanisms including induced selection, the homogeneity of marriage markets, and agreement due to one spouse gradually persuading the other.

Dating and marriage both entail long-term and more intimate relationships. Does politics also impede the initiation of more casual friendships? Surveys by the Pew Research Center (2017) suggest that it does. About 64% of Democrats and 55% of Republicans say they have “just a few” or “no” close friends who are from the other political party. Thus, partisanship appears to act as a litmus test even at the level of casual social encounters.

**Behavioral evidence of partisan bias**

Survey measures of partisan affect are subject to several limitations, since people can answer questions in ways that do not reveal their true feelings. In response, scholars have turned to behavioral manifestations of partisan animus in both lab and naturalistic settings. Iyengar and Westwood (2015) have used economic games as a platform for documenting the extent to which partisans are willing to endow or withhold financial rewards from players who either share or do not share their partisan affiliation. In the trust game, the researcher gives Player 1 an initial endowment ($10) and instructs her that she is free to give all, some, or none to Player 2 (said to be a member of a designated group). Player 1 is further informed that any amount she donates to Player 2 will be tripled by the researcher, and that Player 2 is free (although under no obligation to do so) to transfer an amount back to Player 1. The dictator game is an abbreviated version of the trust game in which there is no opportunity for Player 2 to return funds to Player 1 and where the researcher does not add to the funds transferred. Since there is no opportunity for Player 1 to observe the strategy of Player 2, variation in the amount Player 1 allocates to the different categories represented by Player 2 in the dictator game is attributable only to group dislike and prejudice. As Fershtman and Gneezy put it, “any transfer distribution differences in the dictator game must be due to a taste for discrimination” (Fershtman and Gneezy, 2001).

The trust and dictator games provide a consequential test of out-group bias, for they assess the extent to which participants are willing to transfer money they would otherwise receive themselves to co-partisans while simultaneously withholding money from opposing partisans. For both the trust game and the dictator game, partisan bias emerges as the difference between the amount allocated to co-partisans and opposing partisans. The results reported by Iyengar and Westwood show the expected pattern; co-partisans consistently receive a bonus while opposing partisans are subject to a financial penalty (Iyengar and Westwood, 2015). As in the case of implicit bias, the effects of party affiliation on donations exceeded the effects of ethnicity. In fact, the effects of racial similarity proved negligible and not significant—co-ethnics were treated more generously (by eight cents) in the dictator game, but incurred a loss (seven cents) in the trust game. As in the case of the survey data, social norms appear to suppress racial discrimination in the trust and dictator games.

Iyengar and Westwood shed further light on the extent of affective polarization by comparing the effects of partisan and racial cues on non-political judgments (Iyengar and Westwood, 2015). In one study, they asked participants to select one of two candidates for a
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colleage scholarship. The candidates (both high school students) had similar academic credentials, but differed in their ethnicity (White or African American) or partisanship (Democrat or Republican). The results indicated little racial bias; Whites, in fact, preferred the African American applicant (55.8%). In contrast, partisan favoritism was widespread; 79.2% of Democrats picked the Democratic applicant, and 80% of Republicans picked the Republican applicant. These results held even when the out-partisan candidate had a significantly higher GPA (4.0 vs. 3.5); in fact, the probability of a partisan selecting the more qualified out-party candidate was never above 30%.

In an important extension to the behavioral literature, researchers have shown that partisanship can distort labor markets. Using an audit design, Gift and Gift (2015) mailed out resumes signaling job applicants’ partisan affiliation in a heavily Democratic area and a heavily Republican area. They found that in the Democratic county, Democratic resumes were 2.4% points more likely to receive a callback than Republican resumes; the corresponding partisan preference for Republican resumes in the Republican county was 5.6% points. Whereas Gift and Gift examine employer preferences, McConnell et al. (2018) examine the other side of the labor market and study how partisanship affects employee behavior. The researchers hired workers to complete an online editing task and subtly signaled the partisan identification of the employer. Unlike Gift and Gift, they mainly find evidence of in-group favoritism as opposed to out-group prejudice. The only significant differences occurred between the co-partisan condition and the control group. People exhibited a willingness to accept lower compensation (by 6.5%) from a partisan congruent employer. At the same time, they performed lower-quality work and exhibited less effort. Although the mechanism for this performance deficit is unclear, one possibility is that they perceive the employer to be of higher quality and therefore less likely to make copy-editing mistakes.

In summary, evidence from self-reported feelings toward the parties, sub-conscious partisan prejudice, increased social distance based on political affiliation, and multiple instances of behavioral discrimination against opposing partisans all converge on the finding of intensified party polarization in the U.S. We turn next to consider the factors that may have contributed to this phenomenon.

Possible explanations

The period over which mass polarization has intensified (1980–today) coincides with several major changes in American society and politics, including changes in the media environment, increased social homophily, and partisan sorting or greater differentiation between Democrats and Republicans. In addition to independently inducing hostility toward opponents, each of these factors reinforce the others, further contributing to the rise of affective polarization.

First, in the last 50 years, the percentage of “sorted” partisans, i.e., partisans who identify with the party most closely reflecting their ideology, has steadily increased (Levendusky, 2009). When most Democrats [Republicans] are also liberals [conservatives], they are less likely to encounter conflicting political ideas and identities, and are more likely to see non-identifiers as socially distant (Roccas and Brewer, 2002). Sorting likely leads people to perceive both opposing partisans and co-partisans as more extreme than they really are, with misperceptions being more acute for opposing partisans (Levendusky and Malhotra, 2016).

As partisan and ideological identities have come into alignment, other salient social identities, including race and religion, also converged with partisanship. Democrats are increasingly the party of women, non-whites, professionals, and residents of urban areas, while...
Republican voters are disproportionately older white men, evangelical Christians, and residents of rural areas. This decline of crosscutting identities is at the root of affective polarization according to Mason (2018). She has shown that those with consistent partisan and ideological identities became more hostile towards the out-party without necessarily changing their ideological positions, and those that have aligned religious, racial, and partisan identities react more emotionally to information that threatens their partisan identities or issue stances. In essence, sorting has made it much easier for partisans to make generalized inferences about the opposing side, even if those inferences are inaccurate.

A second potential cause of strengthened polarization is social homophily. We have described studies documenting strengthened processes of socialization by which families come to agree on their partisan loyalties. Family agreement creates an inter-personal echo chamber that facilitates polarization. When family members identify with the same party, they also express more extreme positions on the issues and harbor hostile views toward their opponents. In the case of a 2015 national survey of married couples, respondents evaluated the presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump (using the ANES 100 point feeling thermometer). Among spouses who agreed on their party identification, the average difference between the in- and out-party candidate thermometer score was 59 points (70 vs. 11 degrees). Among the few pairs consisting of spouses with divergent loyalties (Democrat-Republican pairings), this margin of difference fell by more than 30 degrees. Partisan agreement within the family strengthens polarization (Iyengar, Konitzer and Tedin, 2018).

Given the importance of family socialization to the development of partisan attitudes, the rate at which any given society undergoes polarization will be conditional on the extent to which partisans grow up in homogeneous environments. Recent simulations by Klofstad, McDermott and Hatemi (2013) suggest that spousal agreement induces ideological polarization within the family fairly rapidly, with most of the increased polarization occurring as early as the fifth generation. We would similarly expect generations to move increasingly apart on their feelings toward the opposing party to the extent family members share these sentiments.

Finally, a third potential contributor to affective polarization is technology. The revolution in information technology has empowered consumers to encounter news on their own terms. The availability of 24-hour cable news channels provided partisans with their first real opportunity to obtain news from like-minded sources (Fox News first for Republicans, and MSNBC later for Democrats). The development of the Internet provided a much wider range of media choices, which greatly facilitated partisans’ ability to obtain political information and commentary consistent with their leanings. In a break with the dominant paradigm of non-partisan journalism, a growing number of outlets, motivated in part by the commercial success of the Fox News network, offered reporting in varying guises of partisan commentary. Many of these online partisan outlets depict the opposing party in harsh terms (Berry and Sobieraj, 2014) and focus disproportionately on out-party scandals (real or imagined). The political blogosphere, with hundreds of players providing news and analysis—often vitriolic—developed rapidly as a partisan platform, with very little cross-party exposure (Adamic and Natalie, 2005; Lawrence, Sides and Farrell, 2010). The creation of vast online social networks permitted extensive recirculation of news reports, even to those not particularly motivated to seek out news. Several scholars have thus singled out the technologically enhanced media environment and partisans’ ability to encounter “friendly” information providers as an especially influential agent of polarization (Sunstein, 2017).
While there are good reasons to believe that the new media environment has contributed to the growth in partisan animus, by facilitating access to partisan news and commentary, it is possible that enhanced consumer choice also sets in motion processes that weaken polarization. As media platforms have multiplied, consumers gain access not only to more news providers, but also to entertainment providers. The availability of entertainment programming on demand enables some to drop out of the political arena entirely (Prior, 2007). Thus, the net impact of the increased empowerment of consumers is unclear.

In fact, despite the myriad changes in the media environment, the evidence to date demonstrating that news consumption exacerbates polarization is less than unequivocal. While experimental studies of online browsing behavior confirm the tendency of partisans to self-select into distinct audiences (Iyengar and Hahn, 2009; Stroud, 2011) more generalizable real-world studies find few traces of audience segregation. In their pioneering analysis of Americans’ web browsing behavior (conducted in 2008), Gentzkow and Shapiro (2011) found that online audiences were only slightly more segregated than audiences for network or cable news. They concluded, “Internet news consumers with homogeneous news diets are rare. These findings may mitigate concerns…. that the Internet will increase ideological polarization and threaten democracy” (p. 1831). However, more recent work—also based on large-scale tracking of online browsing behavior—suggests that the segregation of news audiences is increasing. A 2013 study showed that although most people relied on ideologically diverse online sources such as web aggregators, audience segregation tended to increase among individuals who used search engines to locate news stories and among social media users who encountered links in their news feed (Flaxman, Goel and Rao, 2016). Both these pathways to news exposure feature personalized algorithms, making it more likely that individuals encounter information consistent with their political loyalties. In the case of Facebook, now a major source of news, most individuals find themselves in politically homogeneous networks, increasing the likelihood of exposure to polarizing messages (Bakshy, Messing and Adamic, 2015).

To the extent partisans do gravitate to like-minded news providers, has the diffusion of high-speed Internet facilitated this behavior? Here too, the evidence is mixed. In those parts of the country where broadband is more available, traffic to partisan news sites is greater (Lelkes, Sood and Iyengar, 2017). Moreover, Lelkes, Sood and Iyengar go on to show that broadband diffusion has strengthened partisan affect. Moving from a county with the fewest number of broadband providers to a county with the highest number increased affective polarization by roughly 0.07 (an effect roughly half as large as the effect of partisans’ political interest). On the other hand, Boxell, Gentzkow and Shapiro (2017) demonstrate that affective polarization has increased the most among those least likely to use social media and the Internet. Given these inconsistent results, it is too early to conclude that Internet usage (and the availability of a wider array of information) plays a causal role in the growth of affective polarization.

**Conclusion**

The phenomenon of affective polarization—the tendency of Democrats and Republicans to treat each other as a stigmatized out-group—has far-reaching consequences for the behavior of politicians. For one thing, it creates incentives for politicians to use inflammatory rhetoric and demonize their opponents. The most frequent and enthusiastic chant at Republican rallies in 2016 was “lock her up.” Illegal immigrants, in Trump’s words, were “rapists and drug dealers.” Earlier, during the debate over the passage of the Affordable Care Act, some Republicans likened the mandatory insurance requirement in the law to the forced
deportation of Jews by the Nazis. In response, the liberal commentator Keith Olbermann declared that Republicans’ opposition to the law was tantamount to racism. Symptomatic of the pressures facing politicians to demonstrate their party colors, a study found that taunting of the opposition party is the most frequent theme in congressional press releases (Grimmer and King, 2011).

At the level of electoral politics, heightened polarization has made it almost impossible for partisans to abandon their party’s candidates, no matter their limitations. The release of the Access Hollywood tape—in which Trump made crude references to his willingness and ability to grope women—would surely have ended the candidacy of any presidential candidate in any election cycle from the 1980s or 1990s. Yet the impact on Donald Trump’s poll numbers was miniscule. And in Alabama, in the 2017 Senate election, evidence of Republican candidate Roy Moore’s inappropriate relations with under-age women hardly caused concern among Republican voters, a mere 7% of whom defected.

Partisans have become so committed to their party that scholars have had to update the standard finding of public opinion research—voter ignorance of current events. Today, partisans are not only uninformed, but also misinformed, and deliberately misinformed (Berinsky, 2017; Flynn, Nyhan and Reifler, 2017). Partisan voters have become reliable team players whose loyalty provides politicians considerable leeway to guide and lead public opinion. As a result, when candidates make claims that are false, there is the very real possibility of voter manipulation. Well before he became a presidential candidate, Donald Trump was the principal sponsor of the conspiracy-oriented “birther” theory concerning former President Barack Obama’s place of birth and citizenship. Since taking office, Trump has continued to show little respect for facts and evidence. He claimed that extensive voter fraud was responsible for his loss in the popular vote and that charges of possible collusion between his campaign and the Russian government amount to a “hoax.” What’s more, he frequently attacks the credibility of the American press by referring to stories critical of his leadership as “fake news.” Trump’s rhetoric has persuaded Republicans, many of whom believe in Trump’s false claims.

All told, intensified affective polarization portends serious repercussions, especially during times of political turmoil. There are multiple parallels between Watergate and the current era, yet polarization has fundamentally altered the political dynamics of scandal. Investigative news reports that brought to light the cover-up in the Nixon White House became widely accepted as credible evidence of official wrongdoing. The media spotlight resulted in a significant erosion of President Nixon’s approval among both Democrats and Republicans. In contrast, the multiple investigations swirling around the Trump administration have, to date, done little to undermine his standing among Republicans. Partisans’ willingness to ignore information that challenges their sense of political identity is disturbing and undermines the ability of the press to act as the “fourth branch of government.” President Trump famously claimed that he could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody at no cost to his electoral support. We can only hope that he is mistaken.

Note

1 Following conventional practice, scholars of affective polarization measure party identification using the standard ANES seven-point question ranging from strongly Republican to strongly Democratic. Most scholars classify independent “leaners” as partisans and exclude pure independents from consideration (this group represents less than 15% of the electorate in the 2016 ANES). Democratic and Republican evaluations of their own side constitute the measure of in-group affect while partisans’ evaluations of their opponents provide the measure of out-group affect.
References


