

# Social Capital in a Divided America: The Relationship between Economic Bridging and Affective Polarization

By  
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Does political polarization decline as relational bridges are built between people from different social and economic backgrounds? Circumstantial evidence supports the existence of a relationship: social capital has declined during the same period that affective polarization has risen. To date, though, we have lacked data to test whether the two are, in fact, dynamically related. In this article, I measure the extent of bridging social capital among people within zip codes, generated from 21 billion Facebook friendships of 72.2 million Americans. Using two measures of affective polarization—feeling thermometers and partisan traits—the analysis shows that people who live in communities with more economic bridging are less affectively polarized and that conversations among people who have different political views is a possible causal mechanism. These effects are more pronounced for the affluent and for Republicans—and for affluent Republicans most of all.

*Keywords:* social capital; polarization; economic bridging; political discussion

Affective polarization is the defining characteristic of contemporary American politics. Increasingly, Americans express dislike, even hatred, toward those of the “other” party (Iyengar et al. 2019; Mason 2018). Republicans dislike Democrats and Democrats dislike Republicans—a state of affairs with many negative consequences. For one, a society with heightened partisan animus is simply a less pleasant place to live. Anyone who has experienced a disagreement among family or friends

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that has gone from political to personal can attest to the fact that a world rife with affective polarization can be unpleasant indeed and even rupture personal relationships. But concerns about affective polarization go beyond the personal, as the implications of a high level of affective polarization for American democracy are profound. Both within and across its separate branches, chambers, and levels of government, the U.S. political system requires at least a modicum of cooperation and compromise—both of which are more difficult to accomplish in an environment poisoned by personal antagonism (Pierson and Schickler 2020). Nor are affective polarization's consequences limited to those in public office. Among the general public, partisan animus can lead people to think the worst of their political opponents, causing them to question democratic norms like the peaceful transfer of power and free speech for all, doubt the legitimacy of our elections, and potentially even endorse violence against those who support the “other” party (Kalmoe and Mason 2022; Kingzette et al. 2021).<sup>1</sup>

While volumes have been written on the potential correlates and causes of affective polarization, one potential explanation has to date been unexplored. Could high affective polarization be a product of low social capital? Circumstantial evidence shows that the timing fits: affective polarization has grown over the same period that social capital has declined. A common measure of affective polarization is feeling thermometer (FT) scores for cross-partisans (how Republicans feel about Democrats and Democrats about Republicans); and according to the American National Election Study, from 1980 to 2020, the average FT score for the other party fell from 47 to 19 degrees. In other words, it dropped from just under neutral (which is 50) to well below. Even more striking, in 2020, 40 percent of Americans selected 0 as their FT score for the other party—far and away the modal response. In 1980, also a presidential election year, only 7 percent gave the other party a 0, while the modal response was the midpoint of 50 (24 percent). This is also the period in which multiple measures of social capital—from membership in voluntary associations to picnics to, most famously, bowling leagues—fell (Putnam and Garrett 2020). As Putnam (2001) has memorably put it, Americans are “bowling alone.”

Of course, two corresponding time trends do not demonstrate a causal link. However, theory suggests that they could be connected. The canonical definition of social capital is “connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (Putnam 2001, 19). Social capital, in other words, promotes a sense of community—that “we are all in this together.” It follows, then, that social capital would foster a greater appreciation for people with differing political views and, thus, lower affective polarization. In employing the concept to explain governmental performance in Italy, Putnam (1994) argued that social capital is what “makes democracy work.” The ability to work with people across political lines is a vital part of a functioning democracy.

Theory suggests more specifically that a greater appreciation for those who identify with an opposing political party should be fostered by *bridging* social capital, as distinguished from *bonding* social capital. To again quote Putnam (2001) in *Bowling Alone*, bonding networks are “inward-looking and tend to

reinforce exclusive identities and homogeneous groups,” while those that bridge “are outward-looking and encompass people across diverse social cleavages” (2001, 22). In political terms, bridging social capital is akin to what Mutz (2006) describes as a deliberative social network, operationalized as conversations between people of different partisan backgrounds.

While bonding versus bridging has long been a theoretical distinction, differentiating between them has not previously been empirically possible. Consider, for example, a common index of social capital for U.S. counties, created by researchers at Pennsylvania State University (Rupasingha, Goetz, and Freshwater 2006). The Penn State Index includes various measures of organizational density, including the number of civic, religious, labor, political, nonprofit, and business groups; the number of fitness and recreational establishments, sports teams and clubs, golf courses, and bowling alleys; voter turnout; and the census response rate. Since the index relies heavily on tallying the total number of organizations, it offers no way to determine whether their members engage in bonding or bridging. Even if it did, findings might well be unreliable, as it is possible for an organization to foster bonding and bridging simultaneously. For example, a religious congregation is, by definition, a form of bonding social capital—everyone who belongs to the congregation shares a religion—but can also serve to bridge if it includes people of different races or income levels.

At the time that *Bowling Alone* was written, Putnam lamented the lack of data on social bridging:

Exhaustive descriptions of social networks in America—even at a single point in time—do not exist. I have found no reliable, comprehensive, nationwide measures of social capital that neatly distinguish between “bridgingness” and “bondingness.” (Putnam 2001, 24)

Such a measure now exists. Recently, Chetty et al. (2022a, 2022b) have introduced a new way of measuring bridging social capital that is described in more detail below. In brief, Chetty et al. have tapped into data from Facebook to measure what I will refer to as *economic bridging*—that is, connections among people with different socioeconomic status—for 72.2 million Americans. Because of the size and scope of these data, Chetty et al. have generated measures of economic bridging at the granular level of the zip code, a close approximation of Americans’ neighborhoods. This article employs this innovative measure of connections across economic lines—a form of bridging across the social cleavage of socioeconomic status—to test the potential relationship between social capital and affective polarization.

While there is more to be said about the nature of these data, the first step is to consider why, theoretically, we might expect that living in a place with more economic bridging would lead to less affective polarization. The answer lies in the explanations for affective polarization itself, one of which is the fact that party identification is related to other mutually reinforcing social categories. Given the general human tendency toward homophily, Americans increasingly associate only with people who share the same partisanship because they are

likely to associate with people who share many other characteristics related to partisanship—including income (Mason 2018). Even if people are not deliberately selecting a friendship network on the basis of politics, they may nonetheless end up with a politically homogeneous group of friends, simply by making friends with people who have a common background and shared interests. This phenomenon matters because homophily can fuel animosity toward people not represented in one's network (Mutz 2006). It is much easier to believe the worst about people who identify with the other party when you do not know any of them (Levendusky 2023).

Why, though, would connections among people of different socioeconomic status lessen affective *political* polarization? After all, economic bridging is not partisan bridging. One explanation is that connections among people with a different socioeconomic status are a proxy for partisan connections. Notwithstanding the shifting class coalitions of the parties, low-socioeconomic-status (SES) Americans (those with an income of less than \$30,000) are still most likely to be Democrats, with a more even partisan split among those with high incomes (more than \$100,000). Thus, it could be that connections between people of different SES are a *de facto* form of partisan mixing, which dampens the negative feelings people might otherwise have about people of the other party. Another possibility—not necessarily in tension with the first—is that economic bridging softens people's general perceptions of people different from themselves and, thus, leads to a greater sense of acceptance of “the other,” whether defined by politics or some other identity.

## Economic Bridging

The innovation of this analysis lies in employing a new measure of bridging social capital generated from Facebook data, as developed by Chetty et al. (2022a, 2022b). It measures the extent to which people within a given zip code or county have Facebook friends of a different SES within that same zip code or county.<sup>2</sup> There is, however, a lot more to it than this brief description. The data are derived from 72.2 million Facebook users in May 2022 who (1) were aged 25 to 44 (because they have the highest Facebook usage rate), (2) resided in the U.S., (3) were active on Facebook at least once in 30 days, and (4) had at least 100 U.S.-based Facebook friends. This is a total of 21 billion “friendships.”

In these data, socioeconomic status is measured using a machine-learning algorithm that combines a wide range of indicators, “such as average incomes in the individual's neighborhood and self-reported educational attainment” (Chetty et al. 2022a, 2). Each individual's SES percentile rank is then estimated relative to their birth cohort. (Readers interested in learning more about these measures are encouraged to consult Chetty et al. for details, particularly the online Supplementary Information for their two 2022 *Nature* articles.)

Because this is a new measure, discussion of its pros and cons is warranted. Facebook has the advantage of being nearly ubiquitous. Furthermore, “number

of Facebook friends” is an objective measure, not subject to problems of faulty recall or social desirability, as survey questions would be. On the other hand, the meaning of a “friend” on Facebook is ambiguous. It could be someone with whom you engage frequently, or it could be someone with whom you have no relationship beyond clicking on an online profile. Note that building on previous research employing Facebook data, Chetty et al. consider “social network data as a proxy for real-world friendships rather than online interactions *per se*” (2022a, 1) and are thus not meant to study online networks. For the purposes of predicting affective polarization—which is arguably compounded by online activity and rhetoric—it is less clear that Facebook-generated social network characteristics are merely a proxy for connections offline. It is at least plausible that online social networks *per se* are important for understanding how people feel about the “other” party.

Using the same measure of economic bridging, Chetty et al. (2022a, 2022b) have shown that people who are from places where connections across economic lines are more common are themselves more economically mobile—a finding that supports the idea that online economic bridging measured this way has tangible consequences “in real life.” One explanation for the impact of weak ties on economic mobility is that, when exposed to people of higher SES, people of a lower SES broaden their horizons for education and employment. The logic for affective polarization is similar, except that horizons are broadened for people of all socioeconomic backgrounds. In this case, the changed attitude is not about one’s economic and educational prospects, but instead a more positive perception of people with a different political perspective. Thus, I hypothesize that communities with more economic bridging foster lower affective polarization.

On the other hand, it could also be that because affective polarization is rooted in a social identity, overcoming negativity toward out-partisans requires more than weak ties—that is, loose connections within an open network. Perhaps partisan animus is only lessened with deeper relationships in a closed network.

Owing to the sheer scope of Facebook, economic bridging can be measured within a zip code, a much smaller geographic unit than has previously been possible. This is critical, as social capital is best understood as a community-level phenomenon. The challenge is that measuring social capital within a community is difficult and, up to now, has been limited to either the state or county. Such high levels of aggregation are problematic for examining how individuals are affected by their communities. States are obviously a large—in some cases, very large—geographic unit, as is often true for counties as well. While not perfect, the zip code<sup>3</sup> is a much better approximation of a community—that is, the people with whom one actually interacts.

It is important to stress that this analysis measures economic bridging—that is, social capital—for a community and not the individual. Thus, the question is not whether the respondent has Facebook friends with a different SES but whether the respondent lives in a community where, on average, others have social connections across economic lines. This approach is consistent with how Chetty et al. (2022a, 2022b) have studied economic mobility, as they have found that it is the level of economic connectedness within a person’s community, and not an

individual's own social connections, that most strongly correlates with upward mobility. It is also consistent with the original conception of social capital which, as suggested by the name, is fundamentally about *social* characteristics of a community or network, not individualized traits. Social capital reflects community-level norms and networks. Other research has found that community-level social capital has an impact on individuals' behavior, often even more than individuals' characteristics (Campbell 2006; Knack and Kropf 1998).

In sum, the Facebook data enable two improvements on past measures of social capital. First, where previously bridging and bonding were indistinguishable, we now have a measure of bridging specifically. Second, this measure of bridging is for the zip code, a much lower level of aggregation—and thus a better approximation of an individual's community—than the county or state.

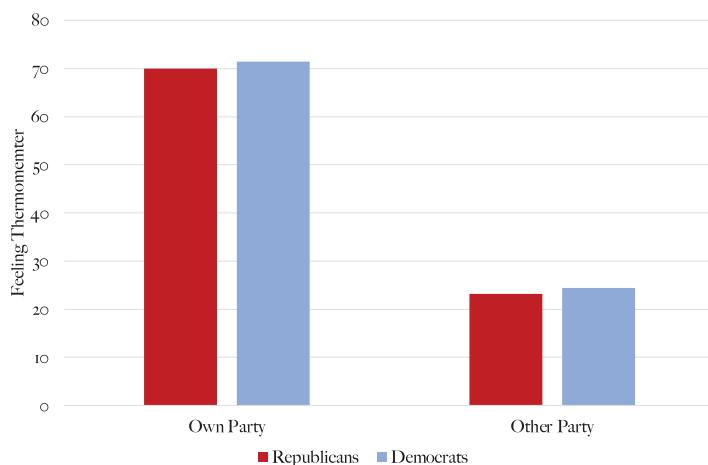
## Affective Polarization

The individual-level data for the analysis come from the Notre Dame Health of Democracy Survey (NDHDS), a nationally representative survey conducted online with a national probability sample by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC). The survey was conducted in the fall of 2022, prior to the mid-term election, in both English and Spanish. It has a sample size of 1,557 and has been weighted to match the demographics of the U.S. population. As this analysis includes only people with a partisan identity, the effective sample size for the models below is 1,326.

In these data, affective polarization is measured in two ways, both of which are widely used in the polarization literature (Druckman and Levendusky 2019). The first is with FT scores toward out-partisans, for example, the FT score a Republican gives Democrats and vice versa. Respondents are asked to rate both Republicans and Democrats on a 0 (colder, more negative) to 100 (warmer, more positive) scale.<sup>4</sup> The second measure of affective polarization asks people about the traits, positive and negative, that they associate with cross-partisans, e.g., how well Democrats feel each trait describes Republicans and vice versa.<sup>5</sup> The positive traits are intelligent, open-minded, honest, and generous; the negative traits include selfish, hypocritical, mean, and close-minded. The fact that these data include two distinct measures of affective polarization provides a robustness check for any conclusions we might draw. While objections can be raised about either way of gauging cross-partisan perceptions, convergence between the two strengthens the case for the relationship between bridging social capital and affective polarization.

Using either method, we can see that Americans have a high degree of affective polarization and that identifiers with the two main parties have mirror-image perceptions of each other and of their copartisans. Figure 1 displays FT scores that Republicans and Democrats alike give identifiers with their own party as well as those who support the other party. (Independents are omitted). Notice that perceptions of both the in- and out-party are nearly identical. The same is

FIGURE 1  
Feeling Thermometer Scores: Republicans and Democrats Are Nearly Identical



SOURCE: 2022 Notre Dame Health of Democracy Survey.

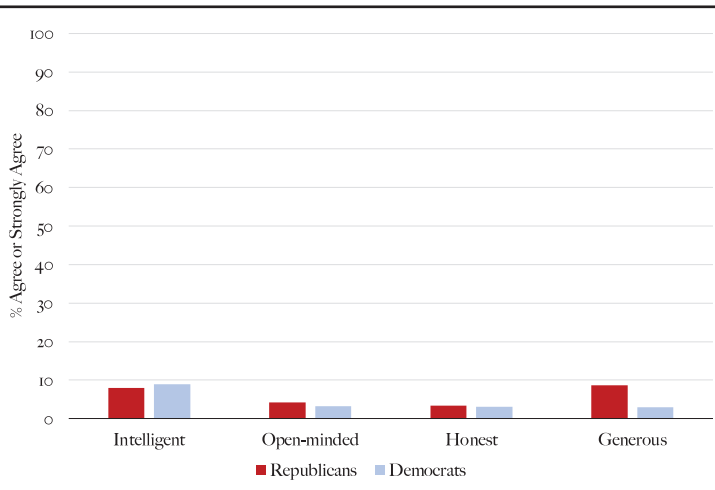
true for both negative and positive traits. Figures 2 and 3 show how people feel about cross-partisans—that is, how Democrats view Republicans, and Republicans view Democrats. In other words, Republicans and Democrats have comparable views of one another. Affective polarization is not concentrated among identifiers with one party in particular.

## Analysis

The logic of the analysis is to test whether individuals' attitudes toward people who identify with the other party are related to the degree of economic bridging within their zip code. This requires merging the zip code data into the individual-level survey. The models thus predict individual-level attitudes using aggregate-level (contextual) variables, while also controlling for a host of other individual-level and contextual characteristics.

The contextual variables include the Penn State Index of social capital at the county level, which enables a comparison with economic bridging within the zip code. In addition, the measures include two economic measures by zip code—median income and Gini coefficient. The former ensures that economic bridging is not simply proxying for overall income level (whether high or low), while the latter controls for economic heterogeneity. It could be that economic bridging is more common in communities with greater income variability, as they provide more opportunities for rich and poor to mix. The variables also include the

FIGURE 2  
 Republicans and Democrats Agree on Something: There Is Little Good to Say about the Other Party



SOURCE: 2022 Notre Dame Health of Democracy Survey.

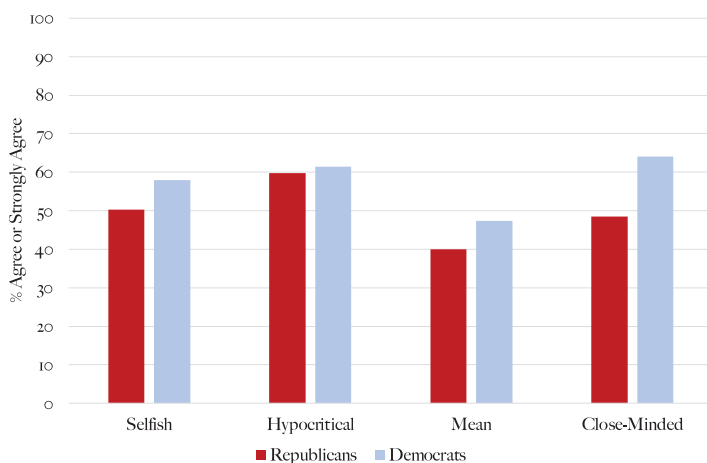
closeness of the 2020 presidential vote, as partisan bridging may be more common in places with greater political diversity.

The individual-level controls include party identification (dichotomous indicator for Republican), as effects may differ by party. In addition, the models control for being a strong partisan, as we might expect the intensity of partisanship to drive greater affective polarization. In addition, the models include a host of standard demographic controls, which guard against the possibility of a spurious relationship between economic bridging and affective polarization. These include age, gender, education, income, marital status (dichotomous for married), frequency of religious attendance, and variables for African American and Hispanic. Note that because the dependent variables—both FTs and partisan traits—ask about the other party, these models only include people who identify with a party (including partisan leaners). Independents are thus omitted from the analysis.

FT models employ the score a respondent gives people who identify with the other party—that is, Republicans’ perception of Democrats and Democrats’ perception of Republicans. In addition, the models control for the FT score that respondents give their own party, accounting for the possibility that some people give both parties higher or lower scores. The dependent variable for partisan traits index (PTI) models is the sum of negative traits, but reversed so that a higher number means less negative/more positive. In both of these models, a positive coefficient corresponds to lower affective polarization. To allow



FIGURE 3  
They Also Agree That There Are Bad Things to Say about the Other Party



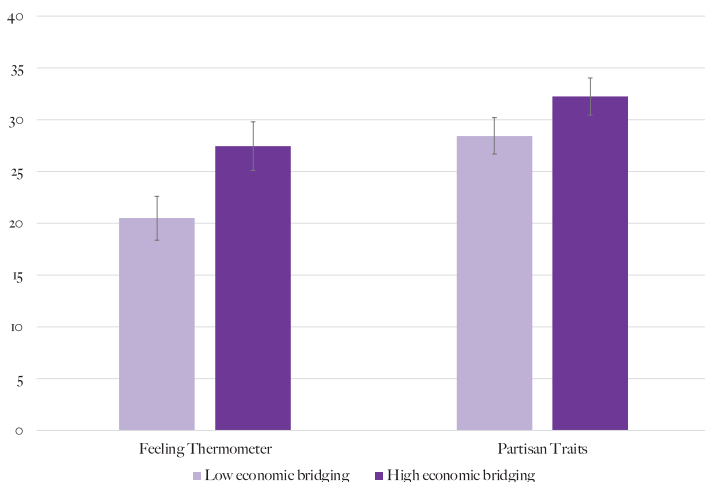
SOURCE: 2022 Notre Dame Health of Democracy Survey.

for intuitive comparisons, both dependent variables are coded on a 0 to 100 scale. Similarly, all of the independent variables are coded 0 to 1, except for the FT score for one's own party which, like the score for the other party, is coded 0 to 100.

The results are displayed in Figure 4, which contains the marginal effect of moving from a community with low (10th percentile) to high (90th percentile) economic bridging. Economic bridging clearly corresponds to lower affective polarization (positive coefficient) as measured with FTs, as the coefficient is large and statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ), and the marginal effect shows a clear difference between zip codes where economic bridging is low versus high. Economic bridging is also in the direction of lower polarization for the model employing the PTI, with a  $p$ -value of .10 (two-tailed).

Table 1 compares the coefficients for both economic bridging within the zip code and the conventional county-level index of social capital. In contrast to economic bridging, the conventional measure of social capital has an inconsistent relationship to affective polarization, depending on how it is measured. It has a positive, but insignificant, coefficient for the FTs (i.e., more social capital corresponds to less affective polarization) but a negative, and significant, coefficient for the PTIs (i.e., higher social capital means more affective polarization). Why the inconsistent results? The answer is not obvious, but recall that this measure combines many different indicators, without any way of differentiating between bonding and bridging social capital. Furthermore, it is averaged across the county, which in many places is a large unit, in both geographic size and

FIGURE 4  
More Economic Bridging Correlates with Less Affective Polarization



SOURCE: 2022 Notre Dame Health of Democracy Survey.  
NOTE: Control variables as described in the text. See Table A1 in the online appendix for the complete results. Error bars represent 83.5 percent confidence intervals.

TABLE 1  
Comparing Predictors of Affective Polarization Coefficients from Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) Regression Model

	Feeling Thermometer	Partisan Traits
Economic Connectedness, Zip Code	13.9 (5.9)**	7.8 (4.9)*
Penn State Social Capital Index, County	10.2 (6.0)	-17.0 (5.1)**

NOTE: Control variables as described in the text. See Table A1 in the online appendix for the complete results. Standard errors in parentheses.  
\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ .

population. The lesson here is that an explicit measure of bridging social capital, measured at the community level, corresponds with less affective polarization. A more general measure of social capital, measured across a whole county, provides conflicting results.

We have thus arrived at a preliminary answer to the question of whether social capital, specifically of the bridging variety, is related to affective polarization: yes. Controlling for a variety of other potentially confounding factors, people who live in communities (zip codes) with more bridging across economic lines have a

higher regard for people who identify with a different political party—an effect that is clearly significant for FT scores and marginally so for the perception of traits associated with people who identify with the other party.

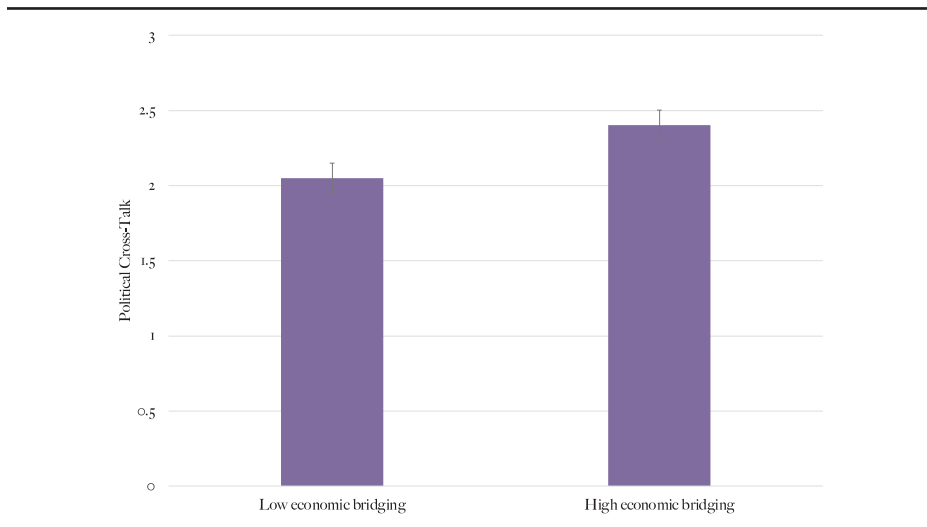
This conclusion, however, only leads to more questions. It is reasonable to ask whether the coefficient for economic bridging, while statistically significant, is substantively significant. Is it large or small? In the FT model, its coefficient (13.9) has the largest magnitude of any statistically significant variable in the model, *even identification as a strong partisan* (8.5). Another way to consider magnitude is to compare the effect of moving from low (10th percentile) to high (90th percentile) in economic bridging to the drop in national-level average FT scores over the past 40 years. Recall that in the American National Election Study, FT scores toward the other party fell approximately 28 points. The magnitude of economic bridging's relationship to FT scores is roughly half that. In other words, economic bridging closes roughly half of the rise in affective polarization over the past four decades—a sizable amount.

### *Political cross talk*

The plausibility of the connection between economic bridging and lower affective polarization is strengthened by identifying a potential causal mechanism. One possibility is that more economic bridging is also associated with exposure to people who have a different political outlook. If so, it would suggest that places with more cross-class connections are also communities in which people engage in political cross talk. Such conversations may foster a greater appreciation for people of a different political persuasion (Levendusky and Stecula 2021; Santoro and Broockman 2022). To see if this is the case, I employ a question from the NDHDS that asked respondents how often they “talk about politics with people I disagree with.”<sup>6</sup> The model is identical to those presented previously, except that, to ensure that it is not simply reflecting an individual's tendency to discuss politics in general, it includes a control for the frequency of discussions with people who have the same political views.

Figure 5 displays the marginal effect on political cross talk of moving from a community with low to high economic bridging. As seen in the figure, people who live in places with greater economic bridging are more likely to engage in political cross talk. Granted, with cross-sectional data, it is impossible to tell the direction of causation, as it could also be that people with a higher regard for people with opposing political views are more likely to hold political conversations with them. However, even if that is the case (and the actual relationship is no doubt reciprocal), it is still notable that both lower affective polarization and more political cross talk are more common in communities with greater economic bridging. At a minimum, these results are a plausibility check for the relationship between *economic* bridging and *political* attitudes.

FIGURE 5  
More Economic Bridging Correlates with More Political Cross Talk



SOURCE: 2022 Notre Dame Health of Democracy Survey.  
NOTE: Control variables as described in the text. See Table A2 in the online appendix for the complete results. Error bars represent 83.5 percent confidence intervals.

*Party and income*

Given the results for the whole population, a logical question is whether economic bridging has a different impact on Republicans and Democrats. Figure 6a and b present the results for identifiers with the two parties separately. For FT scores, the effect is statistically significant for both Democrats and Republicans, but larger for the latter. For partisan traits, the effect of economic bridging is in a positive direction (less negativity) but does not reach a conventional level of significance for either.

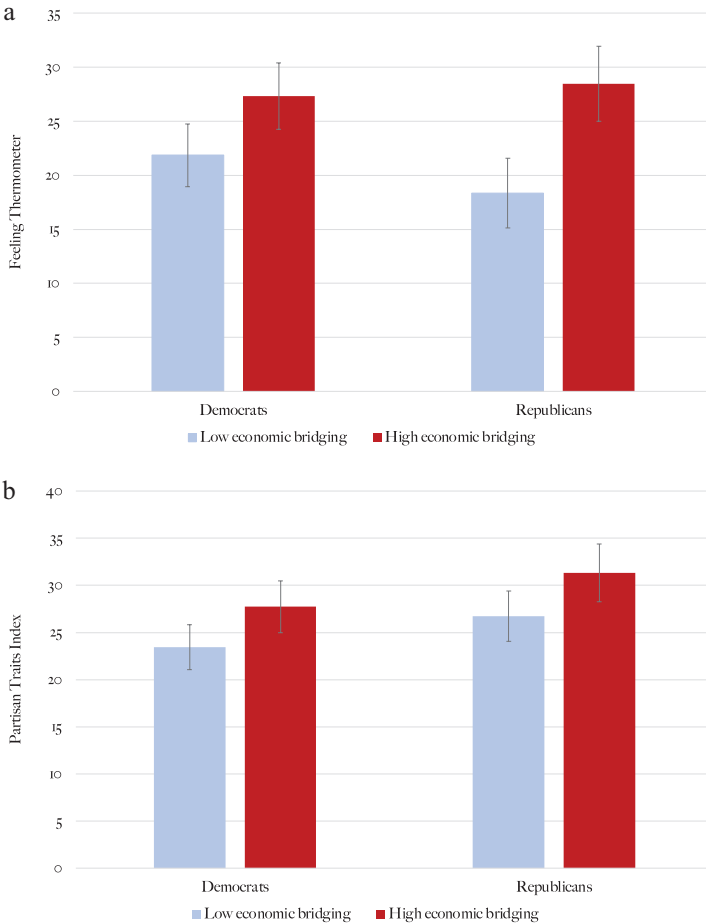
More illuminating is the combination of partisanship and income. When the two are combined, the only consistent statistically significant results are found among high-income (\$100,000 or more) Republicans, as economic bridging has a positive relationship with both FTs and partisan traits. Among Democrats, there is only one effect: economic bridging has a positive relationship with partisan traits (less negativity) for low-to-middle-income Democrats. However, it is only half the size of the effect for high-income Republicans.

Table 2 shows the coefficients for each income-party group (the complete results are found in the online appendix), while Figure 7 displays the marginal effects for high-income Republicans.

Why does living in a community with economic bridging have more of an impact on Republicans, and specifically those Republicans with a high income?

FIGURE 6

(a) Economic Bridging Correlates with Higher Feeling Thermometer Scores for the Other Party. (b) More Economic Bridging Is Positively, but Not Significantly, Correlated with Negative Partisan Traits for the Other Party



SOURCE: 2022 Notre Dame Health of Democracy Survey.

NOTE: Control variables as described in the text. See the online appendix for the complete results. Error bars represent 83.5 percent confidence intervals.

It is not because high-income Republicans have an especially high level of affective polarization. Whether measured by FT or PTI scores, high-income Republicans' feelings about the other party are nearly identical to those of low-income Republicans or Democrats of any income level.

TABLE 2  
 Comparing the Effect of Economic Bridging on Affective Polarization  
 Coefficients from OLS Regression Models

	Feeling Thermometer	Partisan Traits
High-income Republicans	46.5 (18.7)**	30.4 (15.7)**
Low-to-middle-income Republicans	10.9 (11.0)	4.6 (10.5)
High-income Democrats	-1.6 (13.0)	-7.5 (10.8)
Low-to-middle-income Democrats	10.71 (10.4)	15.2 (8.6)**

NOTE: Control variables as described in the text. See Tables A4 and A5 in the online appendix for the complete results. Standard errors in parentheses.

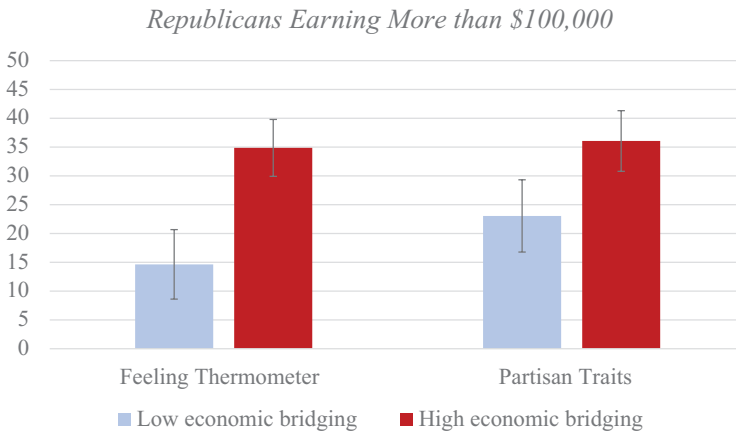
\*\* $p < .05$ .

One possibility is that high-income Republicans in places with high economic bridging are more likely to discuss politics with people who hold different views. There is some evidence for this explanation. The coefficient for economic bridging as a predictor of political cross talk is largest for high-income Republicans. In fact, economic bridging's impact is not statistically significant for low-income Republicans and is in the wrong direction for high-income Democrats (i.e., more economic bridging predicts less frequent political conversation that involve disagreement). While economic bridging is significant and positive for low-income Democrats, its magnitude is considerably smaller than for high-income Republicans.<sup>7</sup>

These results, however, only raise the question of why economic bridging leads to more political cross talk among high-income Republicans in particular. While the existing data do not provide a definitive answer, a few possible explanations can be ruled out. It does not appear to be the case that high-income Republicans are "primed" for the effect of economic bridging by either having an unusually high level of affective polarization, a low level of political cross talk, or a tendency to live in communities with low economic bridging. Recall that Democrats and Republicans do not have different baseline perceptions of those who identify with the opposing party, regardless of their income level.

It is, however, possible that affluent Republicans are most likely to be in a social network with people of a similar background and are thus generally unlikely to encounter political disagreement. Chetty et al. (2022a, 2022b) note that homophily (friendships with people of the same class background) is more common among people with a high socioeconomic status. Perhaps class homophily is even more pronounced among Republicans and thus accentuates the impact of economic bridging within their communities. It could also be that there is something about Republicans' partisan attitudes that makes them most likely to be affected by economic bridging. For example, perhaps their perceptions of Democrats are rooted in stereotypes about low-income people that are countered in places with more economic bridging. Whatever the explanation, more

FIGURE 7  
Economic Bridging Correlates with Less Affective Polarization  
among Affluent Republicans



SOURCE: 2022 Notre Dame Health of Democracy Survey.

NOTE: Control variables as described in the text. See Tables A4 and A5 in the online appendix for the complete results. Error bars represent 83.5 percent confidence intervals.

research is obviously needed to determine why economic bridging has the largest impact on this particular group.

## Discussion

This article began by posing the question of whether affective polarization is related to the amount of social capital, specifically of the bridging variety, within a community. The short answer to that question is, yes, there is a relationship. Unlike the most common measure of social capital (the Penn State Index), which does not distinguish between bonding and bridging, a Facebook-derived index of economic bridging predicts a lower level of affective polarization, whether measured using FT scores or a description of the traits found in people of the opposing party. The fact that the relationship is the same regardless of how affective polarization is measured increases confidence in the robustness of the relationship. Furthermore, this analysis shows that economic bridging does not have the same relationship with affective polarization for everyone, as the results are largest and only statistically significant for affluent Republicans. Of course, whether that relationship is causal remains unanswered. Now that the correlation has been demonstrated, we need further research to determine causality—perhaps starting with high-income Republicans.

This article also posed the question of whether a decline—a change—in social capital is related to an increase—again, a change—in affective polarization; obviously, this question cannot be answered with cross-sectional data. But just as a correlation justifies and informs causal testing, so too does a relationship over space justify analysis over time. Such a study would not be easy to undertake, especially because it would require a measure of economic bridging that predates Facebook, but the current analysis suggests that it would be worth attempting.

Future studies might also examine different types of bridging. Is economic bridging merely one among many forms of social connections that lessen affective polarization? Or is there something about cross-class bridges that produces the observed lowering of affective polarization? These measures of economic bridging establish that it is possible to use Facebook data to measure one type of bridging. In theory, it should be possible to generate comparable measures for other social categories, either from Facebook or other social media platforms. A logical place to start would be connections across political lines. What about interracial connections? Or relationships between people of different religious backgrounds?

There is also more to be learned about the use of data from Facebook specifically. Facebook is widely, although not universally, used, as reflected in the fact that the measure employed in this analysis comes from people ages 25 to 44, the cohort most likely to be Facebook users. Furthermore, the precise mechanism that connects economic bridging through an online social network into attitudes “in real life” is not clear. As noted above, the creators of this measure assume that economic bridging measured on Facebook serves as a proxy for cross-class connections in the “real world.” Alternatively, however, perhaps the Facebook platform enables people to learn more about their “friends” who are different from themselves than would be possible from fleeting connections in the offline realm. A Facebook feed can provide a glimpse into many aspects of someone’s life. Perhaps the sharing of information on Facebook leads to a softening of attitudes toward people about whom one would otherwise feel antagonistic.

The fact that economic bridging is measured within the community (zip code) leads also to the question of whether lower affective polarization results from simply living in a place where such bridging is common, whether or not a given individual makes those connections. Or is the reduction in affective polarization limited to those people who actually engage in cross-class bridging, even if only by friending people on Facebook?

With all of these unanswered questions, one might ask what we *have* learned. At a minimum, we have seen evidence that two of the most-discussed trends studied by social scientists—declining social capital and rising affective polarization—are plausibly related to one another. And it is not only that social capital in general has declined, but specifically cross-class bridging. The most precipitous decline has been in federated organizations, which, while typically segregated by race and gender, historically had economically diverse memberships (Skocpol 2004)—an example of how bonding and bridging are not necessarily mutually exclusive. While chapter-based fraternal organizations are not the only venue in which people of different backgrounds might come together,



their dramatic collapse is a leading example of how cross-class bridging has become less common. When coupled with greater geographic segregation by class, it is easy to see how Americans of different incomes have fewer opportunities to mingle.

In closing, I ask the reader to consider the possibility that the correlations shown here *are* causal—that more economic bridging within a community really does lessen affective polarization. If correct, this conclusion not only helps to explain why we are currently experiencing affective polarization, but it also suggests potential interventions to lower the boil on interpartisan hostility. If the mechanism is economic bridging in general, both online and offline, then one way to foster better feelings across partisan lines is to find ways to bring people of different economic backgrounds together. Reviving fraternal organizations seems unlikely, but people might find common cause in other ways, such as cheering for a local sports team, pop-culture fan groups, and community volunteering (Levendusky 2023). More controversially, public policy could be aimed toward more contact across economic lines, such as mixed-income housing, economically integrated neighborhoods, and public school boundaries designed to mix children of different economic backgrounds. If future research were to conclude that it is online economic bridging that matters most, it would suggest finding ways that social media and other forms of online interaction can create connections across class lines.

I do not mean to be glib and suggest that cross-class bridging is easy to cultivate. The very fact that the contemporary U.S. has such economic segregation underscores the obstacles to making connections across social classes. Nor should we assume that any solution is simply a matter of throwing people of different backgrounds together. A generation of research into social contact has demonstrated that interactions among people of different social groups do not always produce positive outcomes (Pettigrew 1998). Yet the fact that there is variation in economic bridging suggests that it is possible to create conditions in which it is more common. Perhaps economic bridging can be a palliative for polarization.

## Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

## Notes

1. The degree to which affective polarization erodes support for democratic norms is a matter of debate in the literature (Broockman, Kalla, and Westwood 2022; Voelkel et al. 2023), but I am aware of no one who argues that affective polarization is a positive development for American democracy.

2. To quote Chetty et al., “We define the level of economic connectedness in a community as the average share of above-median-SES friends among below-median-SES members of that community divided by 50% to quantify the average degree of under-representation of high-SES people among low-SES people” (2022a, 3).

3. More precisely, the zip code tabulation area.

4. The question was worded as follows: “We’d like to get your feelings toward some political figures and groups. Please rate the following groups or people on something we call the FT. Ratings between 50 degrees and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorable and warm toward the person or group. Ratings between 0 degrees and 50 degrees mean that you feel unfavorable or cold toward that person or group. Ratings of 50 mean that you don’t feel particularly warm or cold toward the person or group.”

5. The question was worded as follows: “Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement about the Republican/Democratic Party.” The options given with each trait were *strongly disagree*, *disagree*, *somewhat disagree*, *neither agree or disagree*, *somewhat agree*, and *agree*.

6. Response options were *never*, *less than once a month*, *once or twice a month*, *about once a week*, *a few times each week*, *about once a day*, and *several times every day*.

7. Specifically, the coefficients are 1.3 (low-to-middle-income Democrats) versus 2.2 (high-income Republicans). Remember that economic bridging is coded 0 to 1, which means that economic bridging’s relationship to cross talk is nearly a full unit greater for high-income Republicans. This is equivalent to moving from “a few times a week” to “about once a day.” See Table A6 in the online appendix.

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