

# Does Affective Polarization Contribute to Democratic Backsliding in America?

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A notable development in 21st-century American politics is the rise of affective polarization: partisans increasingly dislike and distrust those affiliated with the other political party. We offer a wide-ranging review of the nature of party identification; the factors that contribute to affective polarization; and the consequences of this kind of polarization on electoral politics, democratic transgressions, and democratic functioning. We conclude that there is scant evidence of a direct link between affective polarization and democratic backsliding in the U.S., and we argue that understanding the erosion of democratic norms and institutions means that we should consider a wider range of potential causal factors among elites and the general citizenry. Affective polarization has likely made democratic functioning more difficult, though, so interventions to address it are worthwhile: these should focus on core causes rather than on behavioral symptoms.

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On December 12, 2000, the U.S. Supreme Court, by a five-to-four decision, ordered

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an end to the recount of contested presidential ballots in the State of Florida. Therefore, Republican George W. Bush won the state of Florida by a margin of 537 votes out of 5,963,110 votes cast, or 0.009 percent. With the Florida result, Bush then had 271 total Electoral College votes, one more than the 270 required for victory. Gore responded by stating, “Partisan rancor must now be put aside. . . . I accept the finality of the outcome, which will be ratified next Monday in the Electoral College. . . . And tonight, for the sake of our unity as a people and the strength of our democracy, I offer my concession.” Bush graciously responded that the “nation must rise above a house divided. . . . I was not elected to serve one party, but to serve one nation” (History.com Editors 2009).

Twenty years later, on December 11, 2020, the Supreme Court dismissed a suit filed by the Texas Attorney General seeking to invalidate the 2020 presidential election results in Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. The intent was to shift the election result to President Donald Trump, despite his loss to Joe Biden by 74 Electoral College votes. Trump’s reaction to the official result in 2020 could not contrast more starkly with Gore’s concession in 2000. Once Biden was declared the winner, Trump asserted that “it remains shocking that the Biden campaign . . . wants ballots counted even if they are fraudulent, manufactured, or cast by ineligible or deceased voters. Only a party engaged in wrongdoing would unlawfully keep observers out of the count room—and then fight in court to block their access. So what is Biden hiding? I will not rest until the American people have the honest vote count they deserve and that democracy demands” (*Al Jazeera* 2020). Trump and his legal team filed more than 60 lawsuits alleging fraud or other improprieties. Courts dismissed their claims for lack of evidence, often with stinging rebukes even by judges appointed by Republicans. Trump persisted, insisting that the election had been stolen from him due to voter fraud. He further pledged to pardon those convicted for the January 6th Capitol insurrection if he were to win the presidency in 2024 (Wallis 2022).

What accounts for the stark contrast between the candidates’ behaviors in the 2000 and 2020 elections? The two decades in question encompass dramatic societal and technological transformations. Politically, few if any trends over this period are as clear as the rise of affective polarization—that is, the extent to which partisans view their opponents with disdain. As Iyengar et al. (2019, 13) describe the phenomenon, “Ordinary Americans increasingly dislike and distrust those from the other party. . . . Democrats and Republicans both say that the other party’s members are hypocritical, selfish, and closed-minded, and they are unwilling to socialize across party lines, or even to partner with opponents in a variety of other activities” (also see Druckman and Levy 2022).

The implications of affective polarization for American democracy, and particularly the possibility of democratic backsliding, remain hotly debated. Some scholars foresee dire consequences (e.g., Finkel et al. 2020); others question whether feelings of out-group hostility undermine support for democratic norms (e.g., Broockman, Kalla, and Westwood 2022); still others take a cautious middle ground (e.g., Lelkes and Westwood 2017).

In this article, we assess whether affective polarization has adverse spillovers that may contribute to democratic backsliding (i.e., the deterioration of democratic

institutions and accountability). We begin with a brief overview of party identification—the foundational concept underlying affective polarization. We then describe various symptoms of affective polarization and offer possible explanations for the increased state of polarization. Next, we review the evidence concerning the effects of affective polarization on electoral politics, democratic transgressions, and governmental functioning. Our review reveals scant evidence that polarization directly contributes to democratic backsliding. That said, there is reason to suspect that it contributes to governmental dysfunction. For this reason, it is crucial to study affective polarization. We argue, however, that it is exceedingly narrow to view mass affective polarization as a necessary condition of democratic erosion, which typically depends on elite actions. Affective polarization may play some role, but a holistic account of backsliding needs to attend to various elite-, societal-, and citizen-level factors and the interplay among them (Druckman 2023b). It could be that affective polarization sometimes contributes to erosion, but erosion can presumably occur without affective polarization. Even so, since affective polarization can contribute to dysfunctional government, it is crucial to consider ways to ameliorate it. Counter to current trends, we suggest such work should focus on the core causes of affective polarization rather than its behavioral symptoms.

## Partisanship

The literature on how people feel about partisan groups grows out of a much larger literature on party identification, defined as the tendency to see oneself as part of a broader group such as Democrats or Republicans. As originally formulated by Campbell et al. (1960), identification with partisan groups comprises both cognitive and affective components. Party identifiers typically feel that they share a common purpose or outlook with fellow partisans, and they draw an invidious distinction between their own partisan group and partisan opponents. Feelings of attachment may be elicited by a political event, such as a candidate debate, or something more mundane, such as exposure to a party label on a ballot.

One of the key empirical claims surrounding this characterization of party identification is that such attachments tend to persist over time, perhaps because self-conceptions are inherently resistant to change or because “perceptual screens” cause partisans to filter out unflattering news about their party (Campbell et al. 1960, 133). Although the extent to which partisans ignore untoward information is the source of active academic debate (Bartels 2002; Gerber and Green 1998), there is no doubt that partisans express sharply divided evaluations of current events, politicians, or anything else that has become emblematic of party. And while large segments of the electorate harbor weak party attachments, those who identify with a political party tend to change party affiliations slowly, if at all, over long stretches of time (Green and Palmquist 1994; Green and Platzman 2022; Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers 2009; Schickler and Green 1997; Sears and Funk 1999). Although party attachments are often fluid through young adulthood, as people age, they become more entrenched in their partisan identity (Converse 1969; Dinas 2014).

Party attachments profoundly shape public opinion and political behavior, but to understand the etiology of partisan rancor, we must ask how and why partisans develop an attachment to their partisan group in the first place. Scholarly debates spanning several decades offer three competing theoretical perspectives.

The first theory emphasizes the role of spatial proximity. An individual prefers the party whose issue positions are “closer” to their own by some metric. For example, suppose the issue dimension of concern to the voter is social welfare liberalism. If this voter were staunchly opposed to social welfare spending, the Republican Party would be more spatially proximal than the Democratic Party. In the absence of information about the issue stances of specific candidates, this voter might make a “standing decision” in favor of Republican candidates due to their presumed like-mindedness. Affiliation with a political party, from this theoretical vantage point, may be viewed as a decision shortcut, with party labels serving as shorthand for ideological location.

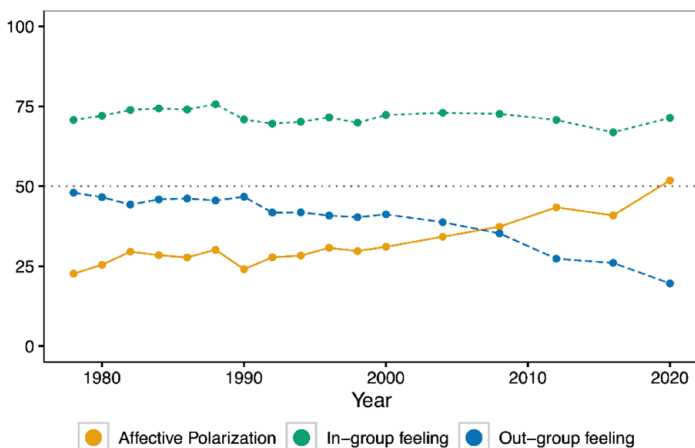
A second class of theories stresses the role of performance evaluations, especially evaluations of the president, who is emblematic of a party. Arguing that party identification may be regarded as a “running tally” of past performance evaluations, Fiorina (1981) demonstrated that individuals in panel surveys changed their party attachments as their evaluations of the president changed; positive evaluations led voters to the president’s party, while negative evaluations attracted them to the opposing party. Although this specific demonstration has drawn criticism on methodological lines (Green 1990), it seems clear that performance evaluations shape beliefs about party competence, even if they do not markedly alter respondents’ party attachments (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002, ch. 5). In aggregate data, evaluations of the party in power deteriorate during economic recessions and improve during expansions, and even the balance of party identification shifts gradually during economic swings (Green, Hamel, and Miller 2023; MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1989).

A final theory of partisan-attitude change stresses the role of group affinities and stereotypes. This theory is premised on the idea that people have a sense of which groups they like or dislike as well as a mapping of which groups are associated with which parties (Ahler and Sood 2018; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002). For example, consider a white person who dislikes Black people and associates them with the Democratic Party; all else being equal, this perception leads to more negative assessments of the Democratic Party. Like the spatial model of issue proximity, a model of group affinities implies that partisan attitudes represent a weighted average of feelings toward a range of different groups that are, to varying degrees, associated with one party or another. Each of these models shapes how we understand the nature and origins of affective polarization, which we discuss next.

## Affective Polarization

Historically, work on partisan polarization focused on the *ideological polarization* of issue positions or attitudes. In the U.S. Congress, the two parties have clearly

FIGURE 1  
Affective Polarization over Time



become more internally homogenous and ideologically divergent (McCarty 2019). Trends in the mass public, however, are murkier: some argue that the public remains relatively moderate (Fiorina and Abrams 2008), while others argue that the mass public has become more deeply divided over time (Abramowitz 2011). Both positions have merit—the American public remains moderate, though there seems to be greater divergence (and ideological constraint across issues) among strong partisans (Lelkes 2016). In contrast to the mixed outlook concerning mass ideological polarization, there is scholarly consensus that affective polarization—a widening gap between individuals’ positive feelings toward their own political party and negative feelings toward the opposing party—is occurring. While there are several common survey measures of partisan affect, the most commonly employed one is a feeling thermometer. It asks respondents to rate how cold or warm they feel toward the parties on a 0 (*very cold*) to 100 (*very warm*) scale (Druckman and Levendusky 2019).

By this metric, affective polarization has clearly increased in the U.S. since the 1970s. Figure 1 displays the trend for party feeling thermometers from the American National Election Studies (ANES) survey. Affective polarization—defined as the in-party-minus-out-party thermometer difference—averaged about 25° in the 1970s and 1980s and is now greater than 50°. The figure shows that the increased level of polarization is driven mainly by changes in out-party animus, with average feeling thermometer ratings of partisan opponents falling from roughly 48° in the 1970s to about 20° today (Finkel et al. 2020). While the increase in affective polarization is not unique to the U.S. (e.g., Gidron, Adams, and Horne 2020; Westwood et al. 2018), the rate of increase is greater here than in other industrialized democracies (Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro 2022). Since the major shift in affect is limited to feelings toward the out party, some studies limit their focus to partisan animus, while others employ the difference in the

thermometer ratings. For our purposes, we treat these operationalizations synonymously.<sup>1</sup>

### *Why has affective polarization increased?*

While all three aforementioned models of partisanship may play a role in affective polarization, most point to the social identity basis of partisanship as the source of the out-group hostility (Tajfel 1970) that drives affective polarization. That said, social identity with a partisan group is not the sole driver of affective polarization, with ideological distance playing some role (e.g., Orr and Huber 2020; also see West and Iyengar 2022). Indeed, scholars have identified a range of potential causes for increased levels of affective polarization.

One substantial driver involves long-term societal processes, particularly that of sorting within the electorate. Beginning with a party alignment often attributed to the Civil Rights era in the 1960s, partisans have become more ideologically “sorted.” Democrats and Republicans increasingly perceive the connections between their partisan and ideological affiliations and alter their ideological identification accordingly (Levendusky 2009)—conservative Democrats became liberal, and liberal Republicans became conservative. Research also reveals increased public sorting on other characteristics. Racial, religious, and geographic identities have gradually become more aligned with partisanship. Mason (2018) argues that this pattern of reinforcing cleavages turns partisanship into a “mega-identity.” She provides experimental evidence that “social sorting is a more reliable emotional prod than either partisanship or issue polarization alone” (Mason 2016, 14) and concludes that “as social sorting increases in the American electorate, the cooler heads inspired by cross-cutting identities are likely to be taking up a smaller portion of the electorate” (Mason 2016, 1). In other words, social sorting leads people to harbor more animus toward the other party, whose members look less and less like them. Sorting in the electorate may now be so complete that partisanship and race are enmeshed in the public mind (Westwood and Peterson 2022).<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the most-studied potential cause of affective polarization is the changing media environment. Much work on political communication in recent decades addresses the echo chamber hypothesis—that partisans are now immersed in congenial information environments (Broockman and Kalla 2023). Although the initial work on selective exposure focused mainly on cable television (Iyengar and Hahn 2008; Levendusky 2013)—the platform that provided the clearest choices in the partisan alignment of particular news providers—more recent work focuses on the Internet and social media. For example, Lelkes, Sood, and Iyengar (2017) used state right-of-way laws, which affect the costs of building Internet infrastructure, as an instrument for broadband Internet access by county. Using large-scale surveys in 2004 and 2008, they find that greater Internet access increased polarized feelings toward the presidential candidates (cf. Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro 2017).

Exposure to one-sided information is especially prevalent on social media platforms, where personalized algorithms and politically homogeneous online

networks (see Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic 2015) make it more likely that individuals encounter information consistent with their political leanings. Scholars have recently deployed “deprivation” designs to assess the polarizing effects of social media. In one such study, Allcott et al. (2020) incentivized Facebook users to deactivate their Facebook accounts for the four weeks prior to the 2018 midterms. The results showed that Facebook deactivation reduced polarization, measured as a multi-item index (e.g., issue polarization, belief polarization, affective polarization). The effect on affective polarization alone was negative but fell short of statistical significance, suggesting social media may, at best, have limited effect (also see Nyhan et al. 2023). Levy (2021) implemented an experiment that randomly exposed individuals to conservative or liberal news outlets on Facebook. His finding that exposure to the counterattitudinal news decreases affective polarization (relative to exposure to the proattitudinal news) implies that echo chambers and the lack of counterattitudinal exposure can contribute to affective polarization (c.f., Bail et al. 2018). Taken together, the evidence suggests that the technologically enhanced information environment contributes to affective polarization, although the effect seems to be small (Iyengar et al. 2019).

The interplay between elites and the mass public acts as another driver of affective polarization. Rogowski and Sutherland (2016) experimentally manipulated the policy positions taken by elites and find that respondents’ evaluations of candidates are responsive to elite ideological polarization (also see Orr and Huber 2020). Webster and Abramowitz (2017) similarly used ANES data to show that the public’s social welfare policy preferences are strongly related to evaluations of elites and the parties. While the gradual diffusion of ideological extremity from elites to the mass public likely contributes to increased out-party animus, contrary evidence suggests that it is partisan identity that determines policy preferences and perceptions of ideological extremity (see, for instance, Dias and Lelkes 2022).

Affective attitudes in the public may also be directly shaped by the tone of elite political rhetoric, which has become increasingly partisan and uncivil, even vitriolic, over time (Berry and Sobieraj 2014; Geer 2006; Gentzkow, Shapiro, and Taddy 2019). Lau et al. (2017), for instance, used a dynamic process-tracing experiment to show that diverse media environments with negative campaign rhetoric lead to greater affective polarization. Sood and Iyengar (2016) used longitudinal survey data collected over the course of multiple presidential campaigns to show that exposure to negative advertising boosts out-party animus.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, socialization processes play a role in generating affective polarization. Older people, with longer partisan histories, tend to have a higher level of affective polarization (Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro 2017), *but*, at the same time, younger people are entering the electorate with more polarized attitudes than prior cohorts (Phillips 2022), reflecting an earlier acquisition of animosity due to parental influence (Tyler and Iyengar 2023). This latter effect coheres with the fact that married-couple and parent-to-offspring partisan agreement has increased over time, with spousal selection occurring on political grounds (Iyengar, Konitzer, and Tedin 2018). The role of family socialization is particularly notable

as it portends more polarized generations to come (see Klostad, McDermott, and Hatemi 2013).

Our discussion thus far focuses on societal, structural, and contextual factors that influence levels of affective polarization. Others focus more on psychological processes that begin with the aforementioned conceptions of partisanship.<sup>4</sup> For instance, a robust literature investigates how negative partisan affect stems from stereotyping, driven largely by social identity perceptions. Ahler and Sood (2018) asked respondents to estimate the proportion of Democrats or Republicans that possess certain demographic characteristics and found that respondents overestimate the prevalence of “prototypical” characteristics by large margins. For instance, respondents estimate that 31.7 percent of Democrats are lesbian, gay, or bisexual, when the true figure in the sample was 6.3 percent. Individuals also overestimated the proportion of Republicans who were evangelicals by 20 percentage points. The authors further show that these misperceptions predict in-party loyalty and feelings of social distance from the out-party (also see Rothschild et al. 2019). Additional work indicates that partisans tend to view the other party as more ideologically extreme and engaged (Druckman et al. 2022), more prejudiced (Moore-Berg et al. 2020), and more obstructionist (Lees and Cikara 2020) than they actually are. These stereotypes, in turn, contribute to increased animosity or other negative evaluations of the opposing party. For example, Druckman et al. (2022) experimentally varied whether partisans assess moderate or extreme members of the other party. They report that affective polarization is much higher when the evaluations concern extremists. Moreover, when the targets were described in generic terms (e.g., “Democrats” and “Republicans”), the ratings match those found in the extremist conditions, even though the reality is that most partisans in their data were moderate. That said, this and related work raises the question: where do partisan stereotypes emerge from? Most invoke the causes discussed above, particularly media and campaigns. For example, Druckman et al. (2022, 1108) state, “Citizens assume the pictures they see on mass media and on social media reflect reality, and thus they assume that out-partisans are extremists deeply committed to politics.” Wilson, Parker, and Feinberg (2020, 225) state, “Political elites have become both more polarized themselves and more incentivized to stoke polarization among voters, . . . partisan media selectively portrays political opponents in caricatured and polarizing ways, and . . . via social media people actively contribute to shaping a political landscape that disproportionately reinforces and amplifies extremity and outrage.”

Alternatively, as mentioned, some point to elite behavior as a source of affective polarization. This view follows from the spatial proximity theory of partisanship. If we prefer our party allies over out-partisans because of where the parties stand on issues, then affective polarization should wax and wane based on the platforms embraced by party leaders (Kollman and Jackson 2021). Affective polarization is expected in the wake of long-term ideological polarization among party leaders and/or the growing prominence of issues that dramatize the ideological chasm between the parties (e.g., so-called culture war issues [Goren and Chapp 2017]). Further, efforts to diffuse ideological discord by showing elites’ bipartisan commitment to shared policy goals could be expected to reduce



affective polarization. The psychological correlate then is perceptions of elite partisan stances, but the underlying systemic factor is the nature of the party systems and campaigns. To sustainably decrease affective polarization, these systemic causes must be addressed.<sup>5</sup>

As we will later discuss, it is important to recognize the psychological underpinnings of the level of affective polarization and their tie to conceptions of partisanship. But these psychological drivers are likely symptomatic of the underlying elements that determine the nature of the system. These systemic factors include sorting, the high-choice media environment, opinion leadership by elites, and socialization.

## The Political and Democratic Consequences of Affective Polarization

Initial work on the consequences of affective polarization focused on interpersonal relations. Early studies documented partisans' tendency to socially distance themselves from opposing partisans (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012). For instance, partisans distrust those from the other party (Carlin and Love 2016; Iyengar and Westwood 2015); dehumanize their opponents (Cassese 2021; Kalmoe and Mason 2022; Martherus et al. 2021); avoid living, socializing, or working with those from the other party (Huber and Malhotra 2017, Iyengar, Konitzer, and Tedin 2018; Klar, Krupnikov, and Ryan 2018; Shafranek 2020); and discriminate against political opponents in a variety of real-world settings (Gift and Gift 2015; McConnell et al. 2018).<sup>6</sup> Although early work tended to ignore political or systemic effects (Iyengar et al. 2019), the past few years have provided a robust set of studies on which to draw.

Our specific interest lies in how affective polarization affects democratic backsliding, defined as “a deterioration of qualities associated with democratic governance, within any regime” (Waldner and Lust 2018, 95). This backsliding often involves elite actors using legal and ostensibly legitimate actions to isolate those in power from accountability, thereby moving the system in the direction of autocracy (e.g., Bermeo 2016). Even so, following virtually all extant affective polarization work, we focus on citizens.<sup>7</sup> The overarching question is whether high levels of citizen affective polarization contribute to democratic erosion. We consider three distinct domains in which this could occur: electoral politics, democratic institutions and norms, and democratic functioning.

### *Affective polarization and electoral behaviors*

Democratic backsliding presumably occurs most proximately via the actions of office holders; as one author puts it, “Democracy erodes from the top” (Bartels 2023). Models of backsliding typically focus on how elites exploit legal loopholes to dismantle norms (Helmke, Kroeger, and Paine 2022), how elites manipulate the perceived democratic status quo to erode institutions (Grillo and Prato 2023),

or how coalition politics pushes elites to undertake undemocratic actions (Grumbach 2022). Nonetheless, these office holders gain office via elections, and thus it is important to isolate the impact of affective polarization on citizens' electoral behaviors, most notably, participation and voting.

Iyengar and Krupenkin (2018) show that as affective polarization has risen, so too has its impact on political participation. Specifically, over time, out-party animus has become a substantial driver of both voting and other forms of electoral participation (e.g., attending a rally, donating money). Similarly, Mason (2018) finds that social-partisan sorting—a correlate of affective polarization—increases activism in terms of donating and volunteering in elections (also see Wagner 2021).<sup>8</sup> While most view participation as a normative good, these authors warn otherwise. Mason explains that the activism stemming from bias and anger is disconnected from policy goals and performance and is instead driven by a desire to “defeat the other side” (126). Iyengar and Krupenkin (2018, 214) offer a similar perspective: “elected officials no longer need to campaign on their own merits; instead, they have good reason to try even harder to denigrate the opposition.”

The (potential) relationship between animus and participation raises an important question. Are politically engaged polarized voters willing to hold their representatives accountable, or would they vote for them regardless of performance or undemocratic actions? Some evidence suggests the latter. For example, Abramowitz and Webster (2016) tie affective polarization to the rise of straight-ticket voting: polarized voters are much less likely to split their tickets and vote for the other party (also see Smidt 2017). Graham and Svobik (2020) find that partisans prefer candidates from their own party even if they violate norms such as electoral fairness, checks and balances, and/or civil liberties.<sup>9</sup> In their mega-study, Voelkel, Stagnaro, et al. (2023) manipulated affective polarization (in nearly two dozen distinct ways) such that it decreases; they find the manipulations lead to less support for undemocratic candidates from respondents' parties (e.g., candidates who would not accept the results of elections they lose). On the other hand, Broockman, Kalla, and Westwood (2022) find that inducing higher levels of affective polarization, via an interpersonal trust game, does not increase partisan loyalty, does not decrease accountability evaluations (e.g., assessing candidates based on whether their votes agreed with the respondent's positions), and does not decrease support for democratic norms. The authors suggest that it is not affective polarization but other (possibly related variables) that shape accountability, democratic norms, and so on.

Reconciling these conflicting results is beyond our purview. Even if we could, an outstanding question is whether voters who may participate and vote for their party's candidates regardless of their democratic standing actually prefer undemocratic behaviors. That is, such (exogenously) polarized voters, if they do act in this fashion, may feel forced to choose between two evils: a candidate with whom they fundamentally disagree on ideological grounds or a candidate with whom they agree, but who engages in undemocratic actions. Gidengil, Stolle, and Bergeron-Boutin (2022) show that partisans are indeed willing to trade off democratic norms for ideological gains. In this case, though, the problem may lie as

much, if not more, with the electoral and party systems as with polarized voters (see, e.g., Hall 2019). By putting forth candidates who advocate undemocratic practices, the parties limit voter choice. When provided with a broader spectrum of choices, voters may well prefer democratic candidates (e.g., Bright Line Watch 2022) who share their policy views but who do not denigrate the other party (Costa 2021).<sup>10</sup>

In sum, there is limited evidence of a link between affective polarization and preference for an undemocratic candidate; and to the extent it does occur, the source of the problem may well lie more with party recruitment of candidates than with affectively polarized voters (although it may be that the parties nominate extremists in response to their base). Of course, this is not to excuse such voter behavior per se; however, it is not clear in such scenarios that voters, given their options in a single election, necessarily view their votes for a particular candidate as substantially contributing to backsliding (Ahmed 2023). The more pressing, direct question is, Does affective polarization lead voters to support or engage in democratically transgressive actions?

### *Affective polarization and democratic institutions*

Transgressions against democratic institutions occur when actors violate a law, democratic norm, or democratic ideal or engage in a power-consolidating institutional change (Ahmed 2023). Such actions normalize undemocratic behaviors and provide leeway for authoritarian elites; and when enough citizens engage in—or merely support—them, they contribute to democratic backsliding. Obviously, it is important to both define “democratic” and to identify actions that are “undemocratic.”

One basic conceptualization comes from Dahl (1971), who emphasizes two dimensions: contestation, where members of the political system can contest the conduct of government (via elections, speech, etc.), and participatory inclusiveness in the right to contest and to have their rights protected without discrimination (e.g., civil rights). Dahl thus provides some conceptual structure; however, identifying precise violations, particularly regarding norms, remains a challenge for those working in this area.<sup>11</sup> With these caveats in mind, what does extant work suggest?

As previously noted, research suggests that partisans are biased in their social evaluations of those from the other party, perhaps indicating low levels of tolerance. More direct studies of political tolerance (i.e., tolerance regarding political actions) and affective polarization provide a more mixed picture. For example, Dias, Druckman, and Levendusky (forthcoming) find no evidence that more affectively polarized partisans exhibit an increased likelihood of sanctioning the speech of those from the other party; rather, sanctioning (or “canceling”) is based entirely on the content of the speech and occurs independently of levels of affective polarization. Relatedly, Chong, Citrin, and Levy (2022) document a transformation, via social learning, of reduced tolerance (among Americans) for offensive expressions about race, gender, and religious groups. This trend is particularly noteworthy among liberals, who historically exhibited strong support for free

speech. With regard to affective polarization, the authors explain that (affective) polarization “fails to explain the trajectory of tolerance in the public” (2022, 19). Westwood, Peterson, and Lelkes (2019) report that affectively polarized partisans are more apt to want to investigate the other party for corruption but no more likely to endorse using tear gas on a group of protesters from the other side (also see Lelkes and Westwood 2017; cf. Bankert 2024; Hartevelde, Mendoza, and Roodujin 2022). In short, the available evidence does not point to a strong relationship between affective polarization and participatory intolerance.

The same can be said when we look at contestation, specifically concerning the rules of elections and governance. In their aforementioned study, Broockman, Kalla, and Westwood (2022) find no evidence that randomly induced affective polarization leads to greater support for democratic norm violations such as legislatures overriding election outcomes, parties ignoring unfavorable court rulings, and election officials consolidating polling places in areas with many voters from the other party.<sup>12</sup> Voelkel, Chu, et al. (2023) similarly find no effects on analogous measures.<sup>13</sup> And in a sample of Republican voters, Bartels (2020) finds that it is not partisan affect but ethnic antagonism that generates opposition to democratic norms, including agreeing that strong leaders must sometimes bend rules.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, Kingzette et al. (2021) report an observational relationship between affective polarization and opposition to democratic norms, from data during the Trump administration. However, in an extension that adds data from the Biden administration, Druckman et al. (2024) find the relationship to be statistically significant but substantively very small.

Even less evidence exists for a relationship with breaking the law in response to one’s party losing an election or engaging in partisan violence. Public concern about political violence has been notably high (Walter 2022), spurred by violent events such as those in Charlottesville, Portland, and, most notably, the January 6th insurrection (Glaun 2021). Political violence can be thought of as a democratic norm violation insofar as it constitutes a substitution of violence for politics. Yet multiple studies find either no or a negative relationship between affective polarization and support for partisan or political violence (e.g., Hartevelde, Mendoza, and Roodujin 2022; Mernyk et al. 2022; Voelkel, Chu, et al. 2023; Voelkel, Stagnaro, et al. 2023; although see Bankert 2024). For instance, prior to the November 2020 election, Druckman et al. (2024) asked a panel of respondents, whose affective polarization had been measured a year and a half earlier, how likely they would be to break the law without engaging in violence (e.g., defacing public property) and to engage in violence if the candidate from the opposing party won a contested election. Affective polarization did not predict willingness either to break the law or to engage in violence. Moreover, the percentages of people who reported they would likely pursue either activity was very small (e.g., only 2.3 percent said they would be “very likely” to engage in violence, and that could be expressive responding). We should not be surprised by these null results: while political violence is typically driven by ideological commitments that oppose the existing system of governance (Uscinski et al. 2021; Webber et al. 2020), those who are affectively polarized have in fact embraced the system as evidenced by their more extreme evaluations of the different parties.

In sum, despite the monotonic rise in affective polarization and ostensibly concurrent trend in antidemocratic practices in the U.S., there is scant evidence, at the micro level, that the former is a causal driver of the latter. There is a smattering of evidence suggesting a relationship in certain circumstances (e.g., Druckman et al. 2024; Harteveld, Mendoza, and Roodujin 2022; Westwood, Peterson, and Lelkes 2019), but clearly those worried about citizens' direct role in condoning or actively participating in democratic transgressions should focus on variables other than affective polarization.

### *Affective polarization and democratic functioning*

A final area of work concerns democratic functioning—that is, attitudes that do not directly undermine the tenets of the democracy but make the formation of cross-party coalitions more difficult. In the contemporary American context, where party elites have increasingly moved apart, public divides can contribute to increased gridlock to a point that can endanger the attainment of otherwise widely shared policy goals. At a most basic level is a concern that affective polarization leads partisans to live in different realities. Some argue that a functioning democracy, one where compromises can be reached, requires that citizens accept a shared set of facts (Carey et al. 2019; Jee, Lueders, and Myrick 2022). Without a shared understanding, dysfunction might well evolve into erosion (Jee, Lueders, and Myrick 2022, 761).

Jenke (2023) draws on three distinct data sets to show that affective polarization shapes information belief: citizens with higher levels of affective polarization are more likely to believe in-party-congruent misinformation and less likely to believe out-party-congruent misinformation. For instance, more than their less affectively polarized copartisans, polarized Democrats (Republicans) exhibit more (fewer) false beliefs that Donald Trump admitted a greater number of unauthorized immigrants during his first three years in office than Barack Obama did in his first three years and are also less (more) likely to assert that there was much illegal voting in the 2016 election. It is these types of affectively polarized partisans from both parties who, as Peterson and Iyengar (2021, 133) put it, “seek out information with congenial slant and sincerely adopt inaccurate beliefs that cast their party in a favorable light.” Along these lines, affectively polarized partisans are more likely than others to share fake news stories that disparage the other side (Osmundsen et al. 2021).

Indeed, living in distinct realities likely contributes to other types of divides. For example, Druckman et al. (2021) argue that out-party animus leads partisans to do the opposite of what the other party endorses. When the authors tested this in the context of COVID-19, they found a strong relationship between pre-pandemic measures of out-party animus and policy attitudes surrounding the pandemic (e.g., partisans with high animus had more divided views on stay-at-home orders than those with less animus [also see Flores et al. 2022]). Druckman et al. (2024) further present cross-sectional relationships between affective polarization and aggregate policy gaps across a range of policies on which party elites

differ (e.g., raising the minimum wage to \$15 an hour, supporting the Affordable Care Act, or providing a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants).

High levels of animosity also contribute to very different evaluations of incumbents, regardless of performance. For instance, early in the pandemic during the Trump administration, high-animus Democrats (Republicans) evaluated the country's response to COVID-19 much more negatively (positively) than less polarized Democrats (Republicans). This finding coheres with work that demonstrates a relationship between affective polarization and trust in government: affective polarization has politicized trust to the extent that partisans only trust government when it is run by their party (Hetherington and Rudolph 2015). This, in turn, can lead to gridlock since representatives have little incentive to compromise. Hetherington and Rudolph (2015, 217) explain that "partisans do not want their members of Congress to compromise with the devil." Levendusky (2023) and Druckman et al. (2024) show that affective polarization contributes to opposition to compromise, particularly when it means that one's own party needs to do the compromising (e.g., in a spending proposal when resolution means compromise that is further from their party's ideal and closer to their opponents' preference; see also Harteveld, Mendoza, and Roodujin 2022).

Even in this domain of democratic functioning, however, the evidence is not entirely consistent, particularly that gleaned from more causally definitive studies. In their aforementioned experiment, Broockman, Kalla, and Westwood (2022) report no relationship between their manipulated version(s) of affective polarization and perceptions of objective conditions (i.e., economic and COVID-19), support for bipartisanship, or adoption of party-consistent positions (also see Santoro and Broockman 2022). Yet in contrast, Voelkel, Stagnaro, et al.'s (2023) large-scale experiment finds relationships between affective polarization, opposition to compromise/bipartisanship, and belief in politicized facts. Future experimental work is crucial in this domain, ideally involving longer-term treatments that durably influence affective polarization levels and are followed by the random exposure to partisan cues or other information/scenarios.

What is less disputed is that affective polarization vitiates interpersonal tolerance, a construct akin to social trust. Even the Broockman, Kalla, and Westwood (2022) study finds that affective polarization interventions reduce one's comfort with being friends, neighbors, or discussants with those from the other party. This finding is also affirmed by A. Lee's (2022) work showing that perceived polarization, a correlate of affective polarization (Druckman et al. 2022), undermines social trust. And, as she (2022, 1552) explains, "If the public does not trust each other to do the right thing and is unwilling to put aside personal interests for the common good, the country will find it harder to achieve collective goals."<sup>15</sup> While the direct path from lower social trust to erosion may not be entirely clear, diminished trust might well undermine the cooperation and reciprocity needed for a stable democracy (Weingast 1997).

### *Summary: Studying affective polarization and democratic backsliding*

The evidence reviewed here makes clear that the relationship between affective polarization and democratic stability is far from straightforward. With that

caveat in mind, we offer a few summary points. First, affective polarization seems to stimulate political participation (cf. Ahn and Mutz 2023), particularly those forms of participation aimed at making one's party win and the other party lose. Participation itself is thought to be normatively desirable in general, but there are unanswered questions about whether affect-driven participation makes those participating unresponsive to performance or policy-based information. Indeed, some evidence suggests that relatively high levels of affective polarization induce straight-ticket voting and, in some instances, opting for a partisan candidate who engages in undemocratic practices. On this last point, the important takeaway is that it does not seem as though a politically consequential number of partisans—polarized or not—possess an outright preference for an undemocratic candidate. Instead, voters likely opt for such a candidate when their other option is an out-partisan presumed to have very divergent policy views and values. Their behavior may not be ideal, but the problem lies as much with the nomination system as with affectively polarized voters. Second, there is scant evidence that affectively polarized partisans support undemocratic practices. While such support may exist among the American public, the primary lever does not appear to be partisan affect. Third, there is evidence, although not entirely consistent, that as affective polarization increases, so do attitudes that could contribute to governmental dysfunction—including coalescing around alternative facts, policy polarization, evaluations detached from actual performance, resistance to compromise, and lower social trust.

One could reasonably ask whether any of these relationships matter for democratic performance and erosion. Unfortunately, they do. As intimated, erosion is not a process that occurs among citizens *per se* but, rather, refers to a system-level movement driven largely by elite decision-making. Insofar as elites in democratic contexts are constrained partially by the expectations of their supporters, a more affectively polarized election base means those elites might be less constrained in taking extreme positions, evading compromise, or even providing false information. Elite actors may even be able to put forth undemocratic candidates who will still win; regardless, a small number of elites can leverage polarization to erode the system. As Grillo and Prato (2023, 71) state, “Democratic backsliding can occur even when most citizens and most politicians intrinsically value democracy.” COVID-19 provides a telling example insofar as affectively polarized partisans took extremely divergent policy positions, based on distinctive factual interpretations of the pandemic (Druckman et al. 2021). One of the most well-established findings in the COVID-19 social science literature is that political polarization undermined a successful public health response (Ruggeri et al. 2024). If affectively polarized partisans do not trust one another, it is difficult to mount an effective collective response.

Because affectively polarized partisans are also more engaged partisans, the signals they send to each set of party elites lead to very different policy prescriptions. Not only did this undermine the collective response to COVID-19, with disastrous health consequences, but it also emboldened democratic elites to engage in backsliding behaviors (e.g., restricting the media, limiting legislative oversight), even though such authoritarian tactics did little to curb the pandemic (Edgell et al. 2021). Put another way, as explicated, affective polarization

contributed to a dysfunctional response (Druckman et al. 2021; Flores et al. 2022) that increased threat and grievances (Boese et al. 2022, 26) and lay the foundation for undemocratic practices (Roccatto et al. 2021). This relatively indirect path from individual affectively polarized attitudes to democratic erosion explains an ostensible ecological inconsistency: there is scant evidence that partisans with higher levels of affective polarization explicitly support undemocratic practices. Yet macro data suggests that systemic “toxic” polarization contributes to backsliding (Boese et al. 2022, 31–34). Indeed, Orhan (2022) demonstrates such a systemic relationship across 53 countries over nearly 25 years. The connection likely lies less in direct antidemocratic beliefs on the part of affectively polarized citizens and more in existence of governmental dysfunction that elites exploit to consolidate power.

This potential relationship between affective polarization and governmental dysfunction, along with the documented social ramifications of affective polarization (Iyengar et al. 2019), means that efforts to temper affective polarization are crucial—and certainly worthy of study. To answer the question “what contributes to democratic backsliding?”, scholars of American politics need to consider the broad range of potential factors (e.g., Mettler and Lieberman 2020). As explained, backsliding occurs most proximately due to elite behaviors, and thus studying elites is crucial. Further, as noted, various societal-level dynamics, such as the nationalization of media and parties, affect erosion and the partisan alignment of interest groups (Pierson and Schickler 2020). Other micro-level factors surely matter, such as antiestablishment orientations (Uscinski et al. 2021), group threat (Bartels 2020; Mutz 2018), and system justification (Jost 2020). A compelling account of democratic backsliding requires the study of elite, societal, and citizen dynamics that contribute to erosive outcomes (Druckman 2023b). “Blame” for erosion should not be attributed solely to citizens and their levels of affective polarization. Consideration of such multiple levels of actors reveals the interplay among them (e.g., political elites stoking democratic dysfunction and partisan hostility that spurs mass affective polarization that, in turn, contributes to the acceptance of antidemocratic elected officials).

## “Treatments” for Affective Polarization

Given the many downsides of affective polarization (e.g., democratic dysfunction, the undermining of social relations), it is understandable that civic-minded organizations and scholars have launched a variety of initiatives aimed at depolarizing the American public (Hartman et al. 2022).

In what follows, we provide a brief assessment of such efforts. In a world of perfect knowledge, treatments would target the underlying causes (rather than the symptoms) of the problem at hand. In the case of affective polarization, as we have already suggested, the underlying causes are likely societal or systemic factors, including overlapping social and political cleavages (sorting), a media environment that caters to niche political audiences, opinion leadership by elites, and socialization dynamics. Fueled by a confluence of demographic, economic, and



technological changes, these conditions have developed over several decades. The U.S. has become a multiethnic society. The public now has instant access to a multiplicity rather than a handful of information sources, many of which are comfortable with spreading falsehoods that, in earlier times, were subject to stronger norms of journalistic professionalism (or journalistic outlets in a less precarious economic position). Those in office have become much more likely to engage in vitriolic partisan rhetoric (Gentzkow, Shapiro, and Taddy 2019). And recent cohorts of voters have entered the electorate under conditions very distinct from those of the past. Given the breadth of these changes and the significant time span over which they have evolved, any expectation of “quick fixes” seems unrealistic.

Since it is overwhelmingly likely that the factors leading to affective polarization are societal, rather than individual, it seems questionable that proposed treatments focused on individuals’ dispositions, will, on their own, ultimately prove fruitful. That said, the early results have appeared promising. One approach with especially strong results (Ahler and Sood 2018; Lees and Cikara 2020; Mernyk et al. 2022; Moore-Berg et al. 2020; Ruggeri et al. 2021) is to provide partisans with corrective information concerning the personal characteristics of their opponents. This involves, for example, providing partisans with accurate information (e.g., survey findings) that those from the other side are not as prejudiced or obstructionist as is commonly believed (due to exaggerated negative portrayals). The concern about these types of corrections, though, is that they focus on the symptom of partisans’ exaggerated stereotypes rather than the underlying cause, which, as we have explained, is presumably the altered media and campaign environment.

The role of campaigns and media coverage as causal factors accentuates the limitation of treatments aimed at correcting inaccurate stereotypes. Nowadays accurate and inaccurate information are *both* readily available to everyone. A recent study provided participants with both stereotype-consistent and stereotype-inconsistent information; this more realistic (corrective) treatment had null effects on partisan animus (Druckman 2023a). A key takeaway, then, is that proposed treatments need to be applicable to the real world. Asking partisans to engage in cross-party conversations (Levendusky 2023; Levendusky and Stecula 2021; Rossiter 2023; Santoro and Broockman 2022) or to participate in a deliberative poll (Fishkin et al. 2021) may contribute to increased amity and understanding, but we rarely encounter the stimuli and experiences delivered by these treatments in everyday life. Social networks are increasingly homogeneous, and partisans typically lack the motivation or opportunity to engage in civic activity on the scale of a deliberative poll. Exposure to a bipartisan commitment toward shared policy goals could reduce affective polarization, but increased ideological polarization makes unifying rhetoric infrequent, and elites who make conciliatory gestures to the other side risk being branded as traitors to their party.

A recent “mega study” tested 25 interventions under identical experimental conditions (Voelkel, Stagnaro, et al. 2023). All the interventions took the form of brief (up to eight-minute) informational presentations or psychological “nudges” designed to alter misperceptions, facilitate contact with opposing partisans,

increase empathy, increase awareness of threats to American democracy, offer partisan cues, and so on. Twenty-three of the interventions reduced levels of out-party animus.<sup>16</sup> The authors concluded that their results “provide a toolkit of promising strategies for practitioners and shed new theoretical light on challenges facing American democracy.”

This and related work offer valuable insights into the psychological processes underlying affective polarization and, as such, provide a picture of proximate causes and potential antidotes.<sup>17</sup> However, as we discussed, the unanswered question is whether these types of treatments (focused on symptoms) can scale up and whether they can withstand the structural and contextual realities of politics. We are not optimistic. Put another way, although these behavioral interventions may be useful to document why structural changes could be helpful and which structural changes are most efficacious, they may not work in the current environment. For instance, encouraging people to be more empathetic, trusting, and cooperative may work in isolation, but creating the conditions that can encourage empathy and intergroup cooperation in the real world is difficult to sustain. To the extent that misperceptions spread through repeated exposure to biased news sources, we need interventions that boost media literacy and encourage consumers to sample more widely from the media menu. Similarly, if repeated exposure to the rhetoric of candidates running for office encourages partisans to express hostile attitudes or have exaggerated stereotypes, appropriate, enduring reforms would target the behavior of elites by creating disincentives for negative campaigning or creating incentives for bipartisan coordination on democratic norms.<sup>18</sup> The development of high school social studies curricula that include discussions of the state of polarization and reinforce basic democratic norms could potentially weaken the intergenerational transmission of partisan animus. More generally, Paulsen, Scheve, and Stasavage (2023) highlight the positive democratic returns from investments in schooling. All told, we believe that treatments targeting individual processing rather than societal conditions are unlikely to yield direct long-term benefits unless they are connected to broader reform efforts. We recognize that structural or contextual antidotes—such as those that focus on media, elite behavior, and socialization—face substantial implementation hurdles, but they likely constitute the best way to address high levels of affective polarization that stem largely from institutional and societal dynamics.

## Conclusion

We began this article with a discussion comparing the political environment in 2000 and 2020. Less than two years before the 2000 election, the nation was consumed by the impeachment of President Clinton for lying under oath and obstructing justice in connection with his sexual relationship with White House intern Monica Lewinsky. Partisans split on whether the impeachment was warranted (Miller 1999). Following Newt Gingrich’s 1994 Contract with America campaign concomitant partisan rhetoric, it seemed at the time like a high point of partisan conflict. Alas, three decades later, in the aftermath of two presidential

impeachments and a violent assault on the Capitol, the partisan divide now dwarfs the state of affairs in 2000.

Perhaps a further increase in affective polarization could occur without a measurable impact on democratic backsliding. But that does not seem to be where we are. There is considerable evidence that affective polarization has adverse effects on social relations and political functioning. Therefore, efforts to reverse its course are appropriate—but only to the extent that they focus on root causes: demographic trends that reinforce socioeconomic cleavages, the emergence of a high-choice media system, the widespread use of hostile rhetoric by political elites, and polarized socialization.

None of these contributing factors is easily treated. One that deserves particular attention is socialization. As we noted, partisan attitudes develop at an early age, and today the level of affective polarization is significant even among the youngest of youth cohorts (e.g., age 11). The rapid intergenerational transmission of partisan animus and the significant decline in political tolerance (Chong, Citrin, and Levy 2022) together suggest that what appears acrimonious today may appear to be relatively amicable two decades from now.

## Notes

1. That said, Bankert (2024) draws a distinction between positive and negative partisanship. She argues that positive partisanship contributes to desirable behaviors such as turnout and campaign volunteering, while negative partisanship (animosity) contributes to demonization and antidemocratic attitudes.

2. This is largely consistent with the group-identity portrait of partisanship. The parties have become increasingly associated with certain social groups over time. For instance, as Barack Obama became the Democratic nominee and eventual president (Tesler 2016), many white people came to associate the Democratic Party with Black people; conversely, the ethnic rhetoric of Donald Trump led white people to associate the Republican Party with non-Hispanic white people (Zingher 2018). Relatedly, attitudes toward social groups (e.g., LGBT+ people) have changed over time, leading people to reevaluate the parties they associate with them.

3. In addition to elite-public interactions, a variety of meso-level institutions contribute to intensified affective polarization. Pierson and Schickler (2020) provide a framework by which meso-level institutions either “self-correct” against partisan division or become self-reinforcing “engines of polarization.” They suggest that the alignment of interest groups with particular parties and the weakening of state parties may increase affective polarization. Others have similarly shown a relationship between negative affect in the public and the nationalization of U.S. elections and media (Abramowitz and Webster 2016).

4. There is some other work that looks at distinct psychological factors such as personality traits (e.g., authoritarianism) (Luttig 2017; Zmigrod et al. 2021) and empathy (showing surprisingly that those with more empathetic dispositions are more affectively polarized [Simas, Clifford, and Kirkland 2020]).

5. A similar case is true following from the running tally conception of party identification. Here, affective polarization grows out of divergent evaluations of party performance in office. It is sometimes argued, for example, that the coasts of the U.S. experienced an economic boom during the Obama era that bur-nished the image of Democrats in those states, while those in the center of the country experienced economic distress and a loss of industrial jobs that led to disaffection with Democrats. One could imagine affective polarization growing out of the sense that the other party is indifferent to the well-being of one’s region; and an analogous argument could hold for ethnic or occupational categories, which might experience divergent government performance. In this case, though, it reflects the trajectory of the larger party system.

6. While not central to our focus, three points are worth making regarding this work. First, most of the work does not actually demonstrate a relationship between affective polarization and outcomes per se, but rather reveals partisan discrimination. Second, the outcomes studied here typically focus on evaluations of individual others rather than on parties writ large. Third, as intimated, scholars debate the extent to which partisan group affiliation or issue/ideological preferences drive these relationships (cf. Dias and Lelkes 2022; Orr and Huber 2020).

7. One exception is Druckman et al.'s (2023) study of state legislators' affective polarization.

8. Ahn and Mutz (2023), in contrast, find that thermometers toward (presidential) candidates rather than affective polarization (thermometers toward the parties) affect participation.

9. They find this is particularly true for extremists; however, they do not directly measure affective polarization, instead showing a relationship with ideological polarization (e.g., extremists are more likely to support undemocratic candidates).

10. The Bright Line Watch (2022) reports that voters (from both parties and Independents) report prioritizing candidates who would protect democracy over ones who would best match their policy preferences or be more likely to win in a general election. That said, policy congruence remains vitally important to voters (with 35 percent prioritizing it over protecting democracy), and when faced with actual candidates with clearer policy positions, even more may defect, but again this may be due to the choices rather than an undemocratic preference. Along these lines, Graham and Svulik (2020) showed that the vast majority of their respondents value democracy and recognize democratic violations. This raises the question of whether support for undemocratic candidates is a problem due to voters per se or the parties and the system. This is not to minimize the general threat of such behaviors; however, our acute focus is on affective polarization among voters.

11. Moreover, engaging in transgressions can sometimes enhance democracy, with an obvious example being the Civil Rights movement.

12. For this outcome, they replicate these results with three distinct manipulations of affective polarization (beyond the aforementioned trust game).

13. Recall Voelkel, Stagnaro, et al. (2023) report a relationship between affective polarization and support for undemocratic candidates; in short, they find candidate support to be distinct from (albeit related to) support for undemocratic practices.

14. Harteveld, Mendoza, and Rooduijn (2022) report some relationships (e.g., with banning some out-parties from running for office) via an experiment (although there is no effect on the idea of condoning elite transgressions).

15. Even if such feelings do not directly shape network choices, the reality is that, over the past three decades, Americans' personal networks have become smaller and more homogeneous in terms of political preferences, apparently because "important matters" are increasingly framed as ideologically significant (B. Lee and Bearman 2020). There also has been a rise in residential partisan segregation such that a large proportion of voters live with virtually no exposure to those from the other party (Brown and Enos 2021). Those who live in more partisan-concentrated neighborhoods are more apt to follow visible partisan (polarizing) norms, such as Republicans in more Republican areas being less likely to wear a mask during the COVID-19 pandemic (Baxter-King et al. 2022).

16. The authors explored the durability of 10 of the interventions (two weeks later), finding significant sustained reductions in affective polarization for six of the 10.

17. Many of the tested interventions have a theoretical basis in theories of partisanship, as discussed; however, our point is that one needs to consider why parties are operating as they are.

18. A few candidates have begun to take steps to restore civility and dialogue in campaigns. In the 2020 gubernatorial race in Utah, the two major candidates (Spencer Cox and Chris Peterson) released a joint television commercial in which both pledged to wage a substantive and positive campaign. This was one of the most successful interventions in the mega study (Voelkel, Stagnaro, et al. 2023).

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