

# Are There Still Limits on Partisan Prejudice?

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## Abstract

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

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

The 2016 election was marked by appeals to “fear and anger” (Bhat et al., 2016, pg. 25), with 90 percent of Hillary Clinton’s ads attacking Donald Trump’s character (Fowler, Ridout, and Franz, 2016), and Trump regularly calling for Clinton’s jailing. Campaign media coverage in 2016 was, outside of 2000, the most negative in recent history, and focused heavily on the legal and moral wrongdoing of the candidates (Patterson, 2016). Ultimately, the 2016 race left pundits unable to “think of a campaign that’s been this personal and this negative” (PBS, 2016) and led 92% of voters to assess the election’s tone as more negative than previous campaigns (Pew, 2016). This rancor continued after the election, as those on the left vocally questioned if Trump would end American democracy (Mounk, 2018) and the president often declined to enforce norms of governance.

Because elite-driven accounts of partisan affect anticipate that high levels of hostility will increase affective polarization among the public, a replication of prior claims about the limits of affective polarization is necessary. This note details a replication effort examining affective polarization in a widely-used framework for measuring prejudice (Allport, 1954). Its prior application in 2014 revealed clear limits on the scope of partisan prejudice (Lelkes and Westwood, 2017). While affectively polarized partisans were more likely to avoid members of the other party and support preferential treatment for co-partisan politicians, they failed

to endorse direct harm to their political opponents. Have these bounds on partisan prejudice since eroded?

Replicating Lelkes and Westwood (2017), we find no evidence of increased affective polarization or partisan prejudice between 2014 and 2017. Differences in feeling thermometer ratings of the two political parties remained stable. There was no general increase in partisan prejudice. The most affectively polarized members of the public became no more likely to display attitudes placing them in the upper tier of Allport's prejudicial framework. Despite an intervening campaign with substantial elite conflict, previously identified limits on partisan prejudice remain in place.

This implies that either 1) elite rhetoric is less successful at elevating affective polarization than previously supposed or 2) affective polarization has reached a ceiling at which elites are unable to generate additional out-party animus.

## **From Elite Hostility to Affective Polarization**

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

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

A second focus is the role of negative political campaigning in bringing elite hostility to the public. Like partisan news, campaigns increase the salience of an individual’s partisan identity (Tesler, 2015) and, in an era of negative campaigning, portray the other party as an existential threat (Bhat et al., 2016; Fowler, Ridout, and Franz, 2016). Unlike partisan news, campaigns use advertisements and outreach to create persistent exposure to this negativity among individuals who might otherwise avoid it. Indicative of this, residents of battleground states are more affectively polarized than those with less campaign exposure (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes, 2012). Additionally, people are far more polarized at the end of political campaigns than the beginning (Sood and Iyengar, 2016), especially those exposed to negative campaign ads. However, in contrast to these findings, Ridout et al. (2018) find affective polarization in 2014 was negatively correlated with both the level of advertising in a media market in the two prior years and the total amount of advertising that occurred in a media market between 1998 and 2012.

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

## **Stable Affective Partisan Polarization**

We begin by comparing the distribution of affective polarization in surveys conducted on respondents from the Qualtrics panel in 2017 (n=1,377) and the SSI panel in 2014 (N=2,560).<sup>1</sup> We use a standard measure of affective polarization, the difference between

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<sup>1</sup>Both studies were quota sampled to benchmarks from the ACS.

an individual’s feeling thermometer rating of the party they identify with and their rating of the other party (e.g., Hetherington and Weiler, 2009; Haidt and Hetherington, 2012; Mason, 2015). This difference is re-scaled between zero and one. Higher numbers indicate greater affective polarization. If elite hostility spilled into the broader public, we would anticipate more affective polarization in 2017 than 2014.

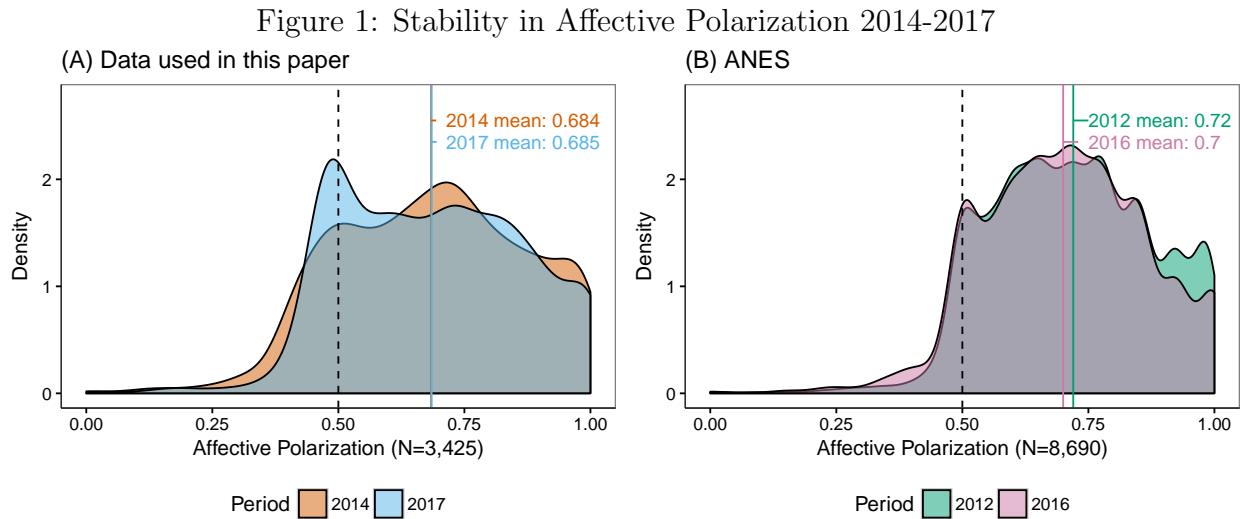


Figure 1 indicates this is not the case. The left panel shows the average level of affective polarization in the two surveys is nearly identical (mean difference: -0.002, 95% confidence interval [-0.014, 0.010]). The distribution also remains similar, with no movement toward the upper end of the scale. If anything, the public appears less polarized in 2017 relative to 2014. This effect is driven by a drop in in-party warmth after 2016. The right panel shows that this pattern is also mirrored in the American National Election Study, where affective polarization did not increase between 2012 and 2016. This initial comparison offers no indication that the 2016 election and the following period of Trump governance has produced meaningful changes in partisan affect.

## Scaling Partisan Prejudice

To probe for potential consequences of elite hostility beyond this baseline measure of partisan affect, we follow previous research using survey and behavioral measures to capture

manifestations of affective polarization (e.g., Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes, 2012; Mason, 2015; McConnell et al., ND). In this case we use surveys on Qualtrics Panels to replicate four studies from Lelkes and Westwood (2017) which measures a spectrum of increasingly severe forms of partisan prejudice using a framework from Allport (1954). We briefly introduce each study below.<sup>2</sup>

Study 1 measures one form of prejudice—antilocution—by assessing a respondent’s willingness to share a news article randomly assigned to be critical of either their party or the other party. This captures the extent to which individuals speak badly of their opponents and oppose speech critical of their party, the lowest level of prejudice in the Allport framework, and aligns with conceptions of prejudice as the promotion of “unmitigated, derogatory stereotypes” (Jackman, 2005, p.96).

Study 2 measures a second, more severe tier of prejudice—avoidance—by asking respondents to select a team for completing a set of puzzles. Before making a selection, they were provided with characteristics of potential teammates, including their partisanship. The profiles were designed so that respondents prioritizing overall team quality would need to select a teammate from the opposing political party. This measures intentional avoidance of members of the other political party, a concern given increasing social distance between the parties (e.g., Huber and Malhotra, 2017; Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes, 2012).

Finally, the third, most pronounced form of prejudice—discrimination—was measured in two studies. Study 3.1 probed respondents’ willingness to endorse the use of tear gas by police to suppress political action by a group with a randomly assigned party label. Study 3.2 examined their support for investigating charges of political corruption made against a public official, again with the official’s partisanship randomly assigned. This represents the upper tier of partisan prejudice in Allport’s framework in which individuals intentionally harm the opposing party, in this case by violating core democratic norms of equal justice

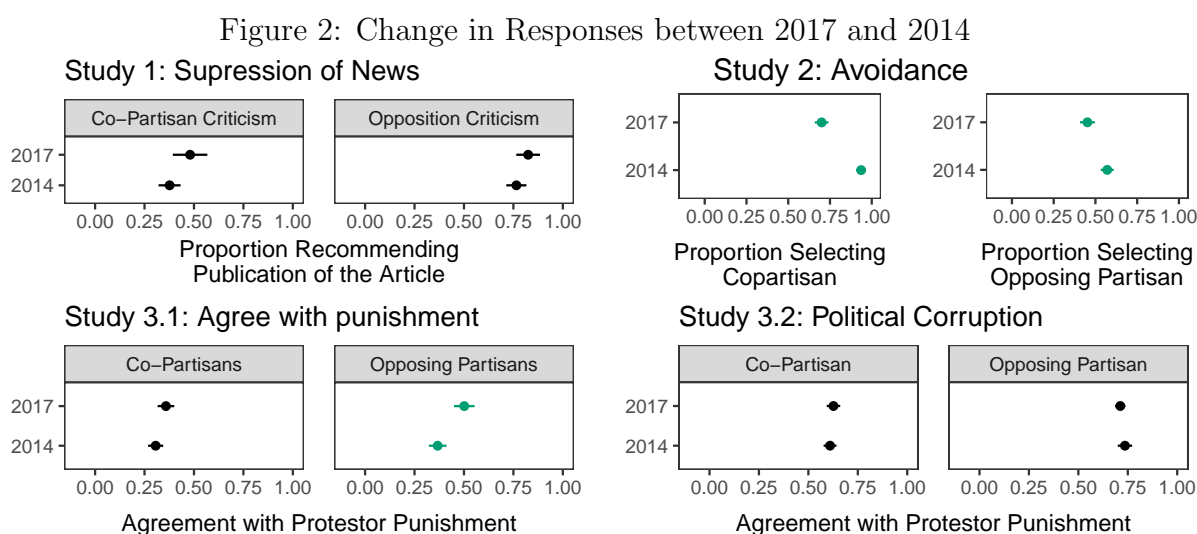
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<sup>2</sup>The supporting information contains a full description of each study protocol.

(McCloskey and Zaller, 1984).

## No Increase in Overall Partisan Prejudice

We compare the average levels of prejudice in these replication studies back to the same set of studies from 2014. If elite hostility elevated partisan prejudice among the public, we would anticipate observing higher average levels of out-party prejudice and in-party favoritism in the replications. Figure 2 displays the mean levels of these outcome measures in 2017 and 2014 along with a confidence interval.<sup>3</sup>



Mean differences with 95% confidence intervals. Differences between 2014 and 2017 that are significant at the .05 level are in green.

There is no evidence for a general increase in partisan prejudice across these measures. In Study 1 there is less censoring of all types with individuals endorsing publication of stories critical of both the other party and their co-partisans at slightly higher rates than 2014, although in each case these between-year differences are not statistically significant.

For Study 2, respondents exclude partisans of all types – both political opponents and co-partisans – from their groups to a greater degree than in 2014. The drop in inclusion

<sup>3</sup>Additional studies replicating other aspects of Lelkes and Westwood (2017) produce similar results and are described in the appendix.

is larger for co-partisans than for political opponents, a pattern that is not indicative of elevated in-party favoritism, but rather increased avoidance of all types of partisans (Klar, Krupnikov, and Ryan, 2018).

Study 3.1 offers the lone instance of an increase in partisan prejudice between the two waves of the study. In 2017 individuals are more willing to support punishing protesters from an opposing partisan group than in 2014. However, as indicated by the positive (though not significant) difference for punishment of a co-partisan protester, this is part of elevated willingness to punish protesters of all types. This general distaste of protest, in part, may be due to the fielding of these replication surveys during an intense period of media coverage covering white supremacist marches in Charlottesville Virginia, which may have elevated respondent opposition to protests.

Finally, Study 3.2 offers no evidence of increased partisan prejudice in political corruption investigations. We observe similar levels of willingness to investigate co-partisan and out-partisan politicians in 2017 and 2014.

In sum, Figure 1 offers no evidence of a general increase in partisan prejudice between 2014 and 2017. When differences between the time periods do occur, elevated avoidance of all types of partisans in Study 2 and increased willingness to punish all types of protests in Study 3.1 represents a mixed set of findings with respect to partisan prejudice, since attitudes towards both the co-partisans and the other party move in the same direction.

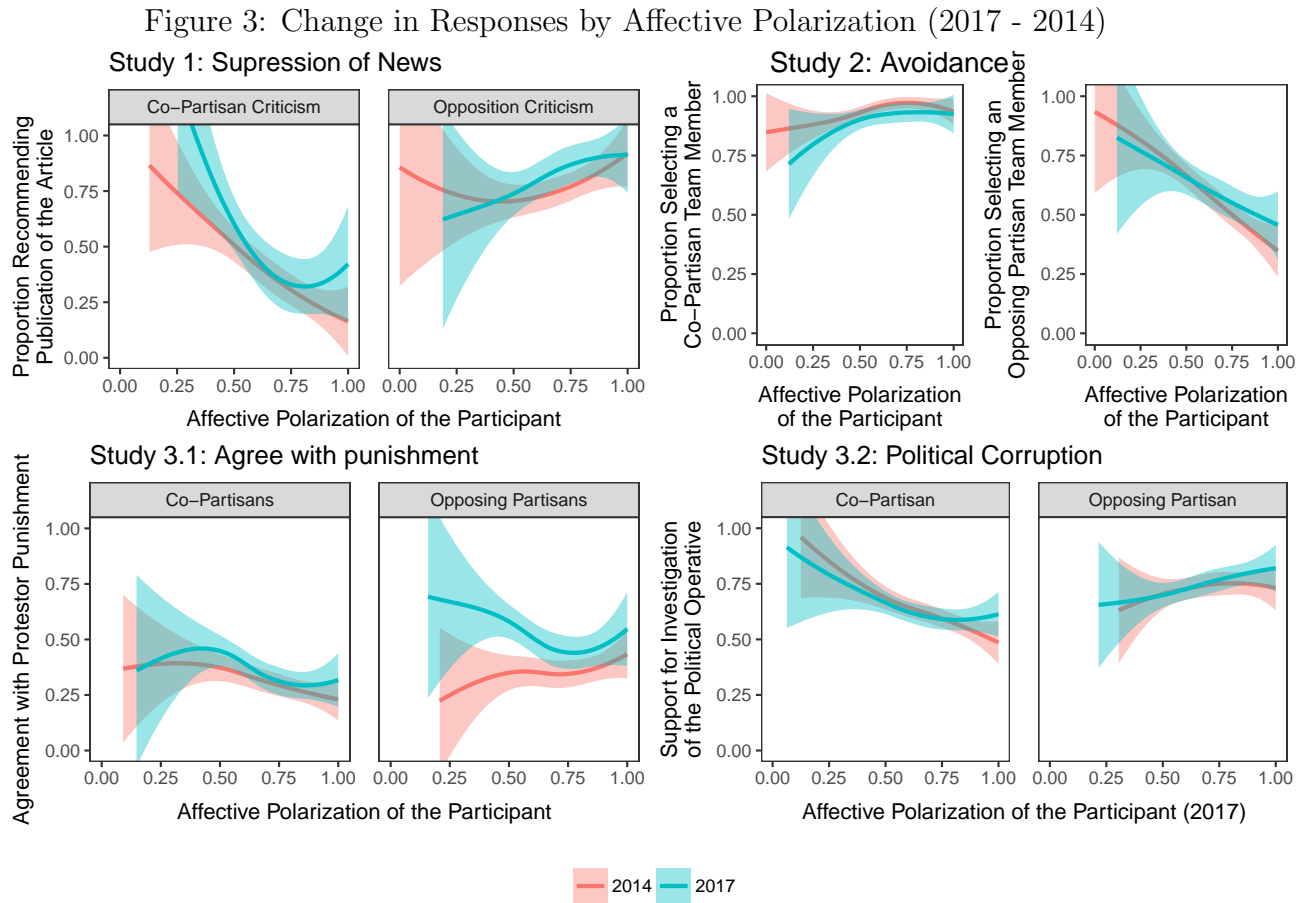
## **No Increase in Prejudice Among the Affectively Polarized**

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

To consider this possibility, we examine how these measures of prejudice vary based on the affective polarization of the respondent. Specifically, we regress the outcome variable in



each study on a respondent’s level of affective polarization using a LOESS regression. Figure 3 displays the results from both the original studies conducted in 2014 and the replication studies from 2017.<sup>4</sup> Changes among those with high levels of affective polarization would manifest as gaps between the two lines at the upper end of the affective polarization scale.



Overlaying the results from the two periods show highly similar patterns. Those with high levels of affective polarization suppress criticism of their co-partisans (Study 1), avoid members of the other party (Study 2) and support corruption investigations of co-partisan politicians (Study 3.2) at similar levels in both 2014 and 2017. The sole exception to this overall pattern occurs in Study 3.1 where those with low levels of affective polarization

<sup>4</sup>Our findings remain the same when using linear regression models, see appendix.

support punishing protesters from the other party at greater rates than the past. Across these different studies, the relationship between affective polarization and these measures of partisan prejudice is not statistically or substantively different between 2017 to 2014. Overall, similar constraints continue to exist on partisan prejudice even among those with high levels of affective polarization.

## Conclusion

Based on an elite-driven model of partisan affect, affective polarization should have increased in the Trump era. We find no evidence of such shifts in our extensive replication study. This has two interpretations relevant to elite-driven models of affective polarization: either 1) elite rhetoric is less successful at elevating affective polarization than previously supposed, or 2) polarization has reached a ceiling at which elites are unable to generate additional out-party animus. While adjudicating between these alternatives requires additional study, this replication has important implications for understanding the boundaries of affective polarization.

It is also important to note that we do not employ a research design that isolates variation in elite rhetoric from other changes that occurred between the two time periods. This means that, while we fail to observe expected changes in affect predicted by models tying elite hostility to affective polarization, we do not assess the causal contribution of elite rhetoric. Nevertheless, this does show that previously identified limits on partisan prejudice are robust to a contentious election.

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