

Political Science 1 - Political Polarization

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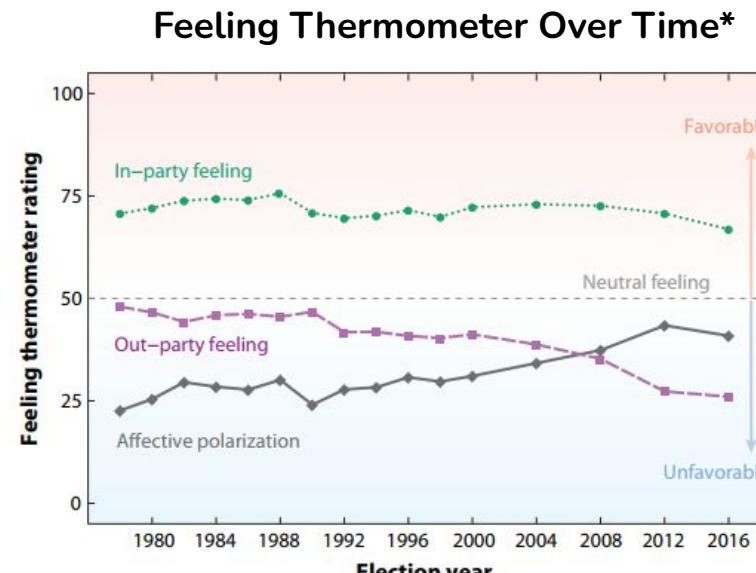
What Do We Mean By “Affective Polarization”?

- Affective polarization refers to the animosity formed between two different groups of people [DA18].
- This can take multiple forms, but for now we'll focus largely on political polarization
- Some alternative frameworks:
 - Racial polarization
 - Social polarization



How is Polarization Measured?

- One common method is a “**feeling thermometer**” question
- Participants rate their feelings on a group (e.g. political parties) from cold (0) to warm (100)
- As out-party feeling declines, affective polarization rises
 - Starts at around the beginning of the ‘90s and continuing to this day



*figure taken from [DA18]



How is Polarization Measured? Cont.

- Alternative methods include:
 - **Trait ratings** (e.g., intelligent, open-minded, selfish, mean)
 - **Social distance** - how comfortable individuals feel interacting with out-group members in various situations.
- Measured using self-reported surveys.



Political Polarization and Media

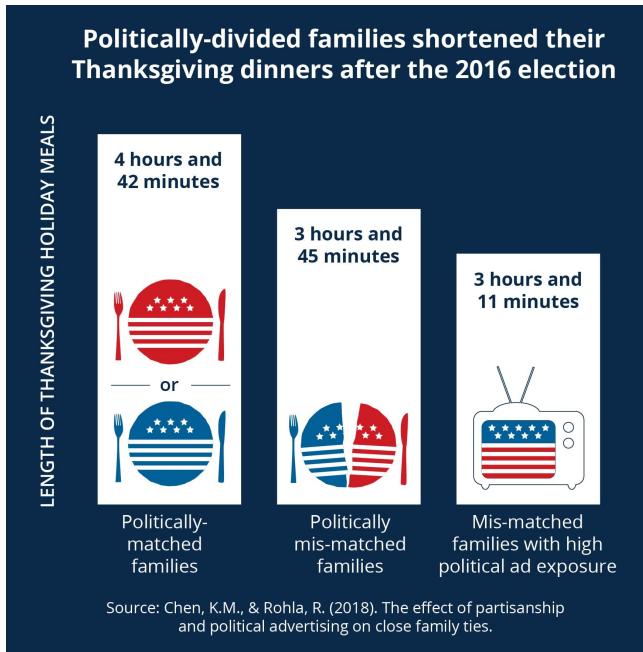
- Political parties tend to focus on different areas of the political spectrum.
 - Democrats : Liberal :: Republican : Conservative
- Partisans typically view outsiders as socially distant, and therefore are less likely to encounter opposing political viewpoints [DA18].
- Accelerated by partisan news outlets, which typically lack balanced content, potentially persuading viewers to adopt extreme ideological positions [DA18].
- Currently, it is premature to reach any firm conclusions about the role of “echo chambers,” either in-person or online as a cause of affective polarization [DA18].



The Political Consequences of Affective Polarization

- Affective polarization is inevitable in a society with groups that have conflicting goals.
- This is problematic in U.S. politics because it makes both parties unwilling to even interact with people across party lines [DA18].
- More research is needed on the effects on this in different political contexts.
 - Why did Roy Moore get the votes of the vast majority of Republican voters?

The Nonpolitical Consequences of Affective Polarization



- Social Consequences [DA18]
 - The percentage of Americans who would be somewhat or very unhappy if their child married someone of the opposite party has increased by about 35% over the last 50 years, with Republicans especially sensitive to cross-party marriage.
 - Apolitical benchmark: 17-20% of people don't want their child to marry a fan of an opposing baseball team



How Can We Reduce Affective Polarization?

1. Rectify misconceptions of opposing groups
 - a. Changing the stereotypes of US political parties (e.g. Democrats as minorities in coastal cities, Republicans as largely rich white men)
2. Shifting perspectives of partisans to see rivals as common Americans, rather than as political opponents [DA17][DA18].
 - a. National holidays - Fourth of July
 - b. Informative news media
3. Engagement through contact theory
4. Unfortunately, what we currently have is limited, since it's unclear which specific strategies will work and which will fail [DA18].



Works Cited

Levendusky, M. S. (2018). Americans, not partisans: Can priming American national identity reduce affective polarization? *The Journal of Politics*, 80(1), 59-70. [\[DA17\]](#)

Iyengar, S., Lelkes, Y., Levendusky, M., Malhotra, N., & Westwood, S. J. (2019). The origins and consequences of affective polarization in the United States. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 22, 129-146. [\[DA18\]](#)



The Nonpolitical Consequences of Affective Polarization

- Social Consequences [DA18]
 - Relationships
 - Professionals
 - Physicians may give different advice on politicized health topics (e.g. abortion) but not apolitical ones.
 - Labor markets
 - Perceptions on the economy
 - Partisans tend to believe that economic outcomes are positive when their party is in power, and negative when their opponents are.
- Research is not fully comprehensive yet.