

Affective and Perceptual Polarization Among Party Activists^{*}

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Abstract

Despite a surge of interest in the polarization of the American public in areas other than policy preferences, there has been little work examining whether (and how) non-policy polarization extends to party activists. Few surveys have enough party activists to analyze them separately. Because they are highly politically engaged activists are highly polarized in their policy preferences. But it is not clear from previous work whether they are polarized outside of the policy realm, and some reason to suspect that they might not be. Does their very high level of political sophistication better enable them to separate the policy and non-policy realm or are they instead even more consumed by blind tribalism than the rest of the country? This research note exploits a rare nationally representative survey of 1,000 Democratic and Republican Party activists to examine two types of non-policy polarization: “affective” polarization and bias in beliefs about national conditions. It finds substantial polarization among activists in both areas, suggesting that party activists are not more “rational” (or exclusively policy-focused) in their polarization. It also finds that, among activists, racial resentment is more frequently associated with these types of non-policy polarization than other political predispositions.

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In recent years, political scientists have studied a variety of aspects of American political polarization. Most scholars agree that Democrats' and Republicans' roll call votes in Congress have become more distinctive over the past 40 years (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2016). Yet, scholars have vigorously debated the nature of partisan polarization at the mass-level. Some disagree about whether the mass public's policy preferences have become more extreme over the same 40 years that political elites have become more polarized, or whether the public has only become better sorted into parties that match people's ideological preferences (Abramowitz 2010; Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Abramowitz 2012; Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2011).

At the same time, the study of mass-level polarization has gone beyond policy preferences in two different ways. The first looks at people's tendency to dislike members of the other party in ways apart from their policy disagreements. This "affective polarization" consists of a simple visceral dislike and a desire to not interact with members of the other party. Since the 1960s, Americans are much more disapproving of a family member marrying someone from the opposite party (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012), increasingly perceive members of the other party as having negative personality traits (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012) and as less desirable romantic partners for themselves (Nicholson et al. 2016; Huber and Malhotra 2017; Hersh, Eitan D. and Ghitza, Yair 2016). They also exhibit increasingly negative implicit associations with members of the other party (Iyengar and Westwood 2015), cooperate and join teams with them less often (Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Westwood and Lelkes 2017), report feeling more "cold" and angry toward them (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Mason 2015b), and evaluate their resumes more negatively when they apply for a job (Gift and Gift 2014)

or scholarship (Iyengar and Westwood 2015).³ Further work has found that affective polarization is especially large among those who strongly socially identify with their party on top of their ideological affinity with it (Mason 2015b, [a] 2015).

A second form of party polarization that is also distinct from policy preference polarization is partisan differences in how people perceive national conditions, sometimes called partisan perceptual bias. Members of the president's party tend to see the country as doing better than members of the opposition party do. Party differences in perceptions of economic performance have been studied most extensively, but the same phenomenon also occurs in at least the following additional areas: perceptions of inflation, the deficit, national security, and nation's moral climate (Bartels 2002; Ladd 2012; Enns, Kellstedt, and McAvoy 2012; Gerber and Huber 2010, 2009; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2014; Sides 2016). In each case, the president's party thinks conditions are better than the opposing party does.

Having polarized preferences does not seem to require affective polarization or perceptual biases out of some desire for logical consistency. One could imagine a person strongly disagreeing with the other party about all aspects of government policy, but still interacting with them in aspects of social life where political discussions are unlikely to arise or differences in political values are unlikely to have any consequence. One could also imagine acknowledging that sometimes there are positive national conditions under the president of the other party and negative national conditions under your own party's president, perhaps because the president's power over national conditions has limits. Even if you believe that all of your party's president's

³ But see Westwood and Lelkes (2017) on the lack of bias against out-partisans in views about rights to political free expression and tolerance of political corruption.

policies are correct and the other party's president's policies are wrong, outcomes could be determined by things outside of the current president's control, such as the actions of Congress, the courts or the bureaucracy, or by policy-makers in the past whose consequences are just now being felt, or events and policies in the rest of the world. Yet, while they logically need not go together, in the mass public, policy polarization over time has been accompanied by greater affective and perceptual partisan biases.

While there has been a lot of research in recent years on these two types of polarization, there has not been much looking at how these phenomena vary by political engagement. In the study of policy preferences, one of the most seminal findings is that people with different levels of political engagement comprehend politics differently and thus have different preferences and respond differently to persuasive messages (Converse 1964; Zaller 1992). Yet we know little about how affective partisanship and perceptual biases differ (if at all) between the highly politically engaged and the rest of the public.

This is a surprising gap because much of the scholarly debate about policy preference polarization has involved differentiating between political elites and the broader public. Most scholars agree that the policy preferences of political elites have become more extreme over the last 40 years. The debate centers on whether these more extreme elite positions have filtered down and made the broader mass public more extreme, or whether they have just forced the more moderate mass public to choose among the more extreme positions offered by political elites (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2011; Abramowitz 2012, 2010). Yet the mass/elite distinction has received relatively little examination in the affective polarization and perceptual bias literature.

This paper looks at a special segment of the most politically engaged (or politically “elite”) portion of the public. These are not just people who can correctly answer basic knowledge questions about prominent politicians or who say they are interested in politics or consume large amounts of political news. Those are the politically engaged portions of the public that high quality political surveys can identify. Yet my goal here is to go beyond that and look at party activists. Rather than just following politics closely, I define party activists as people who are personally involved in electioneering, through giving money, volunteering, working in politics, or running for office themselves.

These people are very important, even though political surveys usually do not have enough of them to analyze their beliefs and attitudes. Support from party activists can help candidates win their party nominations at the local level all the way up to the presidential level (e.g., Cohen et al. 2008). A party’s future candidates themselves are often past party activists. Even in the general election, enthusiastic support from party activists can help candidates win by giving them more money and better campaign organizations.

As a result, the beliefs and preferences of activists may be an important harbinger of the health and future of the political system. One could imagine that, unlike the broader mass public, activists are sophisticated enough to distinguish between the policy and non-policy realm. They also might have a firm grasp of our national circumstances, at least partly because they are astute enough to know that the current president’s influence over the state of the nation is fairly limited and that their policy-grounded political preferences need not always match the current state of the nation. On the other hand, one could imagine that party activists are consumed by partisan

furor to such an extent that it pervades all aspects of their life, leading to unusually high amounts of affective polarization and perceptual bias.

Which of these scenarios is correct has consequences. If activists eschew vilifying the opposing party, and maintain an accurate view of the world, they could make it much more likely that future elected leaders do the same by filtering out other candidates for office. On the other hand, if activists fully embrace affective and perceptual polarization, it is more likely that future elected leaders will embrace them as well, because activists will either be those future leaders or will encourage and support those types of candidates.

The Data

This paper exploits a rare national survey of political activists to measure affective partisanship and biased perceptions among this section of the public. I placed several questions about affective polarization, partisan perceptual bias and several measures of political predispositions on a national survey of Democratic and Republican Party activists conducted by the survey firm YouGov.⁴ The sample is selected using two screener questions. They are below.

1. Thinking about political campaigns, which, if any, of the following have you done in the last four years?

(Answers offered for each: Yes, No, Unsure)

- a) Contributed money to a political candidate
- b) Attended a political campaign event such as a fundraiser or rally
- c) Done volunteer work for a political campaign
- d) Made phone calls to voters asking them to support a political candidate

⁴ The survey was a collaboration between YouGov and the Huffington Post. It contained some questions requested by the Huffington Post and some requested by two other academic researchers in addition to the questions used here. It was fielded on January 14-20, 2016.

2. Have you ever...?

(Answers offered for each: Yes, No, Unsure)

- a) Been a paid staffer for a political campaign or an elected public official?
- b) Run for or held elected public office?
- c) Been an official in a political party (such as a local party chair or a precinct representative)?

Respondents were only classified as “activists” if they said yes to at least two of the activities in question #1 or at least one of the activities in question #2 or both. Using these filters, YouGov gathered a national sample of 500 Democratic activists and 500 Republican activists, which I use below.

Analysis

Among the most common measures of affective polarization are discomfort with someone in your family marrying someone from the other party and an unwillingness to date or marry someone from the other party yourself. Figure 1 compares the willingness of Democratic and Republican activists to marry someone from the opposite party “if you were otherwise compatible with him or her.” It finds substantial affective polarization among activists in both parties. 56% of Democratic activists either “absolutely” or “probably” would not marry a Republican. A large but slightly smaller percentage, 49%, of Republican activists “absolutely” or “probably” would not marry a Democrat. Only 14% of Democratic activists and 22% of Republican activists would definitely marry someone of the other party if they were otherwise compatible with them.

The next two figures look at polarization in perceptions of national conditions. The survey of activists asks two questions probing perceptions of the years that Barack Obama was president. One concerns how the unemployment rate changed between 2009 and 2016 (when

the survey was conducted), while the other asks whether the United States became “more or less secure from foreign enemies” over that same time period.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the national unemployment rate was 7.8% in January 2017 and 4.9% in January 2016 when this survey was conducted. Figure 2 compares perceptions of the unemployment rate across parties. There are dramatic differences. Almost all Democratic activists believe that the unemployment rate dropped between 2009 and 2016. 70% of Democratic activists say unemployment is “much lower” and an additional 22% say it is “somewhat lower.” In contrast, Republican activists’ perceptions of unemployment are highly varied. Only 13% of Republican activists think the unemployment rate is “much lower.” If you add in those who think it is “somewhat lower,” only 40% of Republican activists think the unemployment rate shrunk at all from 2009 to 2016, with the remainder thinking it either “stayed about the same” or grew.

Figure 3 turns to activists’ perceptions of whether the United States became “more or less secure from its foreign enemies” between 2009 and 2016. Here, it is Republicans who are in remarkable agreement. 81% of Republican activists said that the US is much less secure and an additional 11% say that it was somewhat less secure. In contrast, almost all Democratic activists think the US is either more secure or there was no change.

This survey also allows one to see what political attributes tend to be correlated with these forms of non-policy polarization. Table 1 uses regression models to test which major political predispositions are more strongly associated with not wanted to marry someone of the opposite party. Among both Democrats and Republicans, partisan social identity and a self-reported ideology that matches your party are strongly associated with preferring to marry someone from

your own party. Racial resentment is also related to partisan marriage preferences among activists on both sides. Among Democratic activists, those who are less racially resentful are less open to marrying a Republican, while among Republicans those with more racial resentment are less open to marrying a Democrat. Neither authoritarianism, preferences on whether the government should provide jobs, nor preferences on abortion are associated with marriage preferences when the other predispositions taken into account.

In a similar way, the regression models in Tables 3 and 4 look at the relationships between the same predispositions and partisan bias in perceptions of unemployment and national security. In contrast to marriage preferences, I find little evidence that perceptions of unemployment are related to partisan social identity. Among Democrats, ideological self-placement is correlated with unemployment perceptions, but that association goes away when controlling for racial resentment. In a multivariate model with all variables included, racial resentment is the largest correlate of unemployment perceptions, with authoritarianism, attitudes toward government guaranteeing jobs and attitudes on abortion having smaller but significant associations. Among Republicans, the association between ideological self-placement and perceptions of unemployment also shrinks when controls are added.⁵ As with the Democrats, the largest correlate of unemployment perceptions among Republican activists is racial resentment. But in contrast to Democrats, I find no detectable association between authoritarianism and unemployment perceptions when the other predispositions are held constant.

⁵ It is still modestly sized yet not statistically significant at conventional levels.

Table 3 shows that there are different correlates of perceptions of national security among Democratic and Republican activists. The main differences are in partisan social identity and ideological self-placement. Partisan social identity is strongly associated with Democratic activists viewing the US as more secure, but not at all associated with the Republicans' security perceptions. Ideological self-placement has a large association with Republican activists' national security perceptions, while among the Democrats that association largely vanishes when controls are included. Among Republican activists, more conservative attitudes on government job guarantees and abortion are also modestly associated with perceiving the US as less secure. Finally, as with unemployment, party activists on both sides perceive more negative change in national conditions under since 2009 if they are more racially resentful, a relationship that holds up even with controls.

The one fairly consistent pattern is the correlation between racial resentment and all the measures of non-policy polarization. Democrats have more perceptual bias when they are less racially resentful and Republicans have more perceptual bias when they are more racially resentful. In terms of marriage, Democrats are less likely to want to marry a Republican if they are less racially resentful, and Republicans are less likely to want to marry a Democrat if they are more racially resentful.

Finally, I use a survey experiment for one final test of affective polarization. For this, I have selected a personal decision that many people have experience with and is distant from politics, but may involve casual conversation and close physical proximity with another person: selecting a dentist. The survey presents the respondents with two possible dentists and asks which they would prefer to hire to maintain their teeth. The question is as follows:

I'd like to ask you a question about in order to study how people select dentists and use dental insurance. When you need to pick a new dentist, which one of the following hypothetical dentists would you prefer?

Robert Allen is 45 years old and has been practicing dentistry in your area for the past 15 years. He completed college and dental school at the University of Michigan. He treats a broad range of patients and enjoys developing long-term relationships with them. In his free time, he enjoys running and has run several half-marathons.

Thomas Porter is 47 years old and has been practicing dentistry in your area for the past 18 years. He completed college at the University of Virginia and dental school at the University of Pennsylvania. He prides himself on listening to patients' needs and explaining treatment options in everyday language. In his free time, he serves on the governing board of the local county [Republican/Democrat] party organization.

Which would you prefer as your dentist?

- 1) Strongly prefer Robert Allen
- 2) Somewhat prefer Robert Allen
- 3) Somewhat prefer Thomas Porter
- 4) Strongly prefer Thomas Porter

There is a paragraph describing each dentist, as you might encounter on a dentist office's web page or in a directory of various dentists. Details are provided, such as where each dentist went to college and dental school, what he especially likes about his dental practice and what he does in his free time. The biographies are meant to provide sufficient detail both to be realistic and to prevent any big differences in how impressive each dentist's background appears. However, it is not essential that their non-political attributes be exactly equally appealing, only that each is a plausible choice. The key question is not how relatively appealing their nonpolitical attributes are, but the effect of an experimental manipulation of partisanship.

The first dentist, Robert Allen, is described the same way to all respondents. However, the last sentence of the biographic paragraph for the second dentist, Thomas Porter, which says what

he does in his free time, says that he on the governing board of his local political party organization. It randomly varies whether this is a local Democratic or Republican organization. If activists make hiring decisions in nonpolitical contexts based on partisanship, one would expect partisans to be less likely to choose Dr. Porter when he is from other opposite party and instead choose Dr. Allen. Yet when they share partisanship with Porter, you would expect partisans to be more likely to choose Porter over Allen.

Figures 4 and 5 show the results for Republicans and Democrats, respectively. There is strong partisan bias in dentist selection among activists in both parties. When Porter is a Democrat, the most popular response from Republican activists is somewhat preferring Allen as their dentist, which 50% choose. Yet when Porter is a Republican, the most popular response is somewhat preferring Porter, with 59% selecting that option. In contrast, among Democratic activists, when Porter is a Democrat, the most popular response was somewhat preferring Porter, selected by 62%. In contrast, when Porter is a Republican, the most popular option is somewhat preferring Allen, selected by 49% of Democratic activists.

One shouldn't over-interpret how much movement there is here. In all conditions, more people select the "somewhat" than the "strongly" response options. Most of the movement is between "somewhat" preferring Porter and "somewhat" preferring Davis. People do not appear to be moving the whole length of the scale. On the optimistic side, perhaps this means that the effect is not so large that it is unrealistic, as it might be if people had detected the purpose of the survey and were trying to give the researcher what he or she wanted. The cue produces a large but not unrealistic effect. There is also a lot of variation in responses that is not explained by the party cue. A bivariate regression of dentist preference on treatment condition (shown in the first

column of Table 4) produces an r^2 of 32% among Democrats and 38% among Republicans. People are not just mechanically following the party cue wherever it leads. Yet it does seem to be an important influence on their choices.

Finally, the effect of partisanship on dentist selection is remarkably consistent across Democratic and Republican activists' other political predispositions. To illustrate this, Table 4 shows the coefficients from bivariate regressions of dentist preference on experimental condition. (Porter being labeled a Republican is coded as 1 in the independent variable and strongly preferring Porter as your dentist is coded as 1 in the dependent variable.) The first column shows the effect among all Democrats and all Republicans. The coefficient is -0.34 among Democrats and 0.38 among Republicans. The other columns show the same regression, but among small subgroups of Democrats and Republicans.

To check for variation in the effect across predispositions in an accessible way, I picked types of predispositions that were relatively rare among Democratic and Republican activists, and thus variation in the effect among them might not be detected because it doesn't much affect the overall party coefficients. Among Democratic activists, the experimental effect is fairly consistent (ranging from -0.22 to -0.32) among those who have low social identity with the party, are not liberal, are racially resentful, authoritarian, oppose government guaranteeing jobs, are not liberal on abortion, are under 50 years old, have less than a college degree, and are African American. Similarly, there is relatively little variation (ranging from 0.21 to 0.42) among Republican activists. Table 4 shows that the effect is fairly consistent among the those with low social identity with the party, who are not conservative, are not racially resentful, are not authoritarian, support government guaranteeing jobs, are not conservative on abortion, are

under 50 years old, have less than a college degree, and are African American (this shows the largest effect, .42, but this comes from only 5 respondents). Overall, the stability of the dentist partisanship treatment effect is striking. Even racial resentment, which is associated with polarization in perceptions of national conditions and with whether one is upset if a family member marries someone of the opposite party, is not related to partisan dentist choice.

Conclusion

While non-policy polarization among the broader mass public is a hot topic in political science, no my knowledge no previous study has looked at non-policy polarization among activists. This is a crucial omission because the beliefs and preferences of activists can influence which politicians get nominated and elected to office in the future. This paper finds that activists are heavily polarized outside of the policy realm, both in terms of affective polarization (measured by the willingness to marry someone of the other party and hire a dentist of the other party) and in terms of party differences in perceptions of national conditions (measured with perceptions of unemployment and national security). This polarization is large, suggesting that we cannot expect activists to serve as gate-keepers who will stop candidates from their party who demonize the other side or spread misinformation from getting nominated and elected.

I find that different types of predispositions are correlated with these different types of non-policy polarization. Partisanship in dentist preferences is remarkable consistent across predispositions. However, among predispositions, one's level of racial resentment is most frequently associated with non-policy polarization, including marriage preferences and perceptions of national conditions. There is reason to suspect that some (but not all) of the

troubling non-policy polarization among party activists is related to differences between the parties in levels of racial resentment.

Figure 1: Partisan Marriage Attitudes among Democrats and Republicans

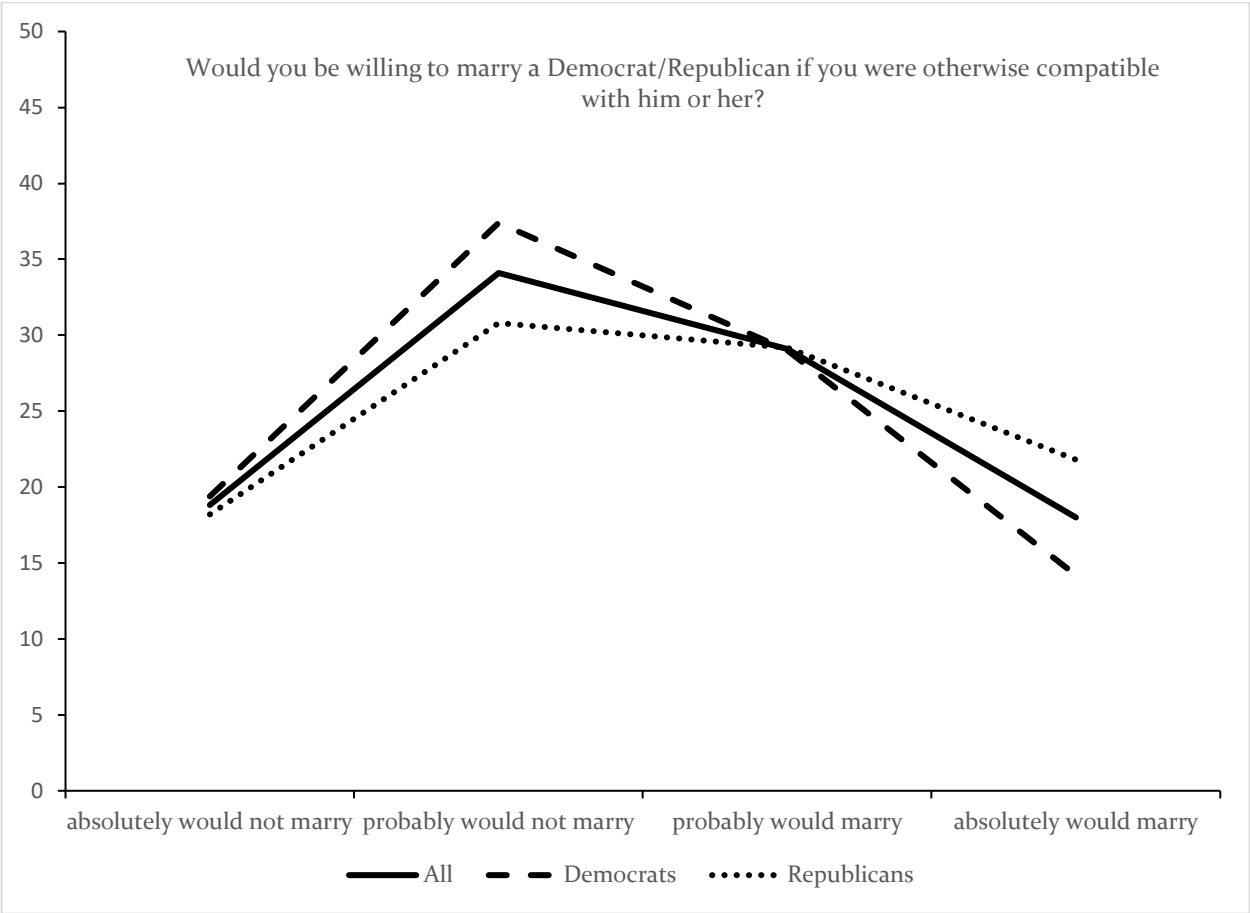


Figure 2: Perceptions of Unemployment among Democrats and Republicans

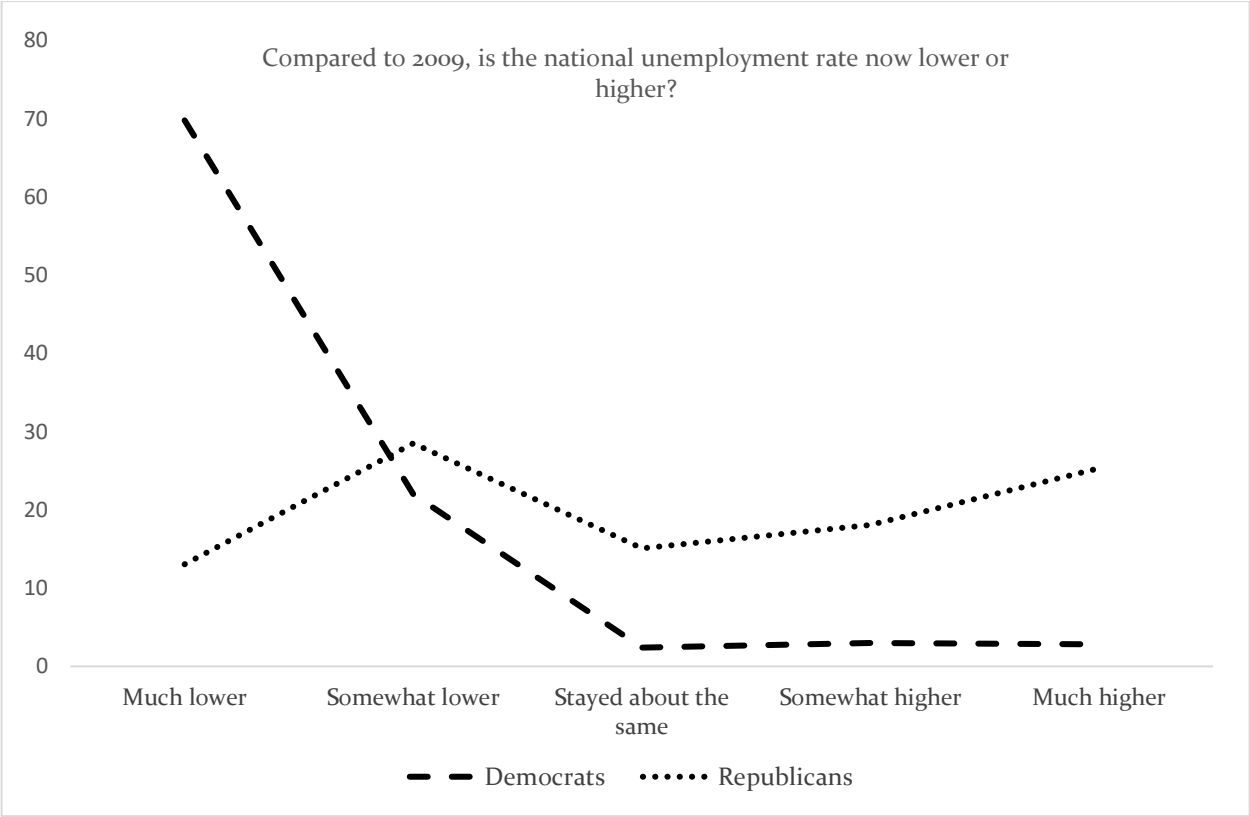


Figure 3: Perceptions of Security among Democrats and Republicans

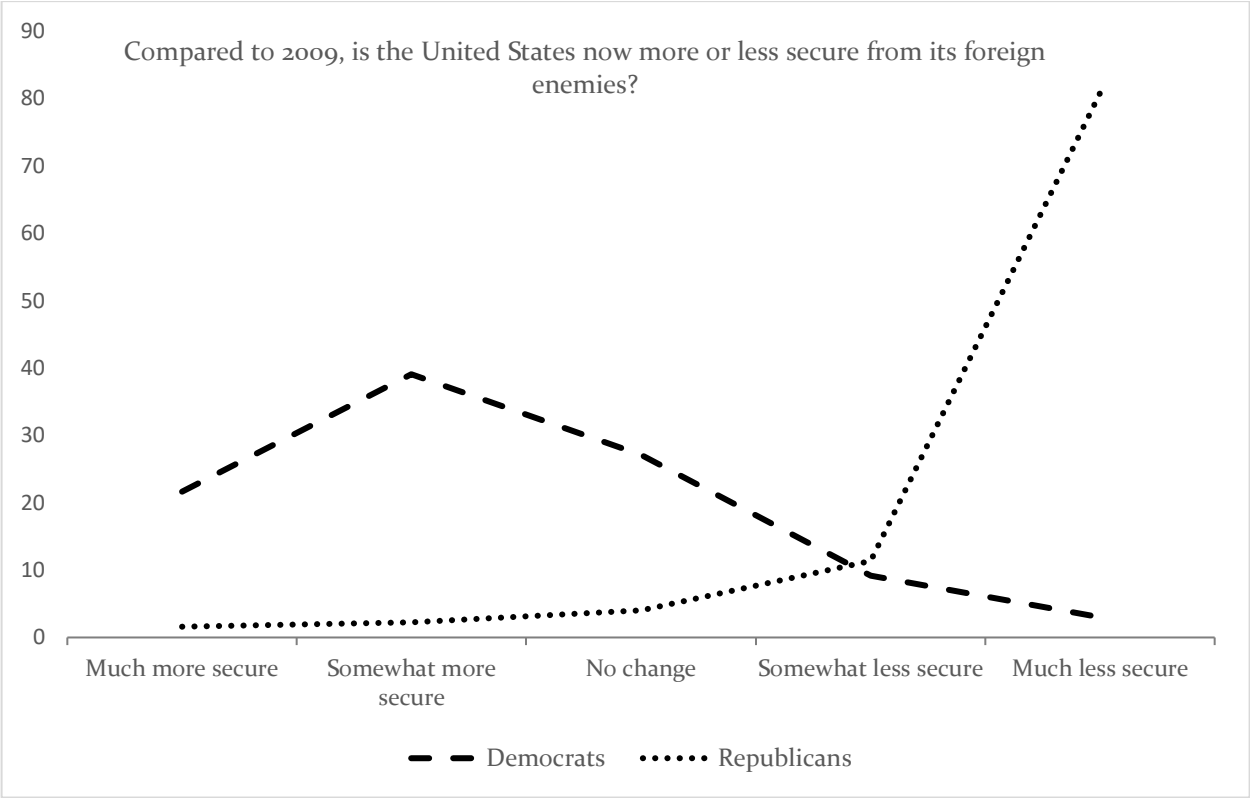


Figure 4: Dentist Preferences Among Republicans

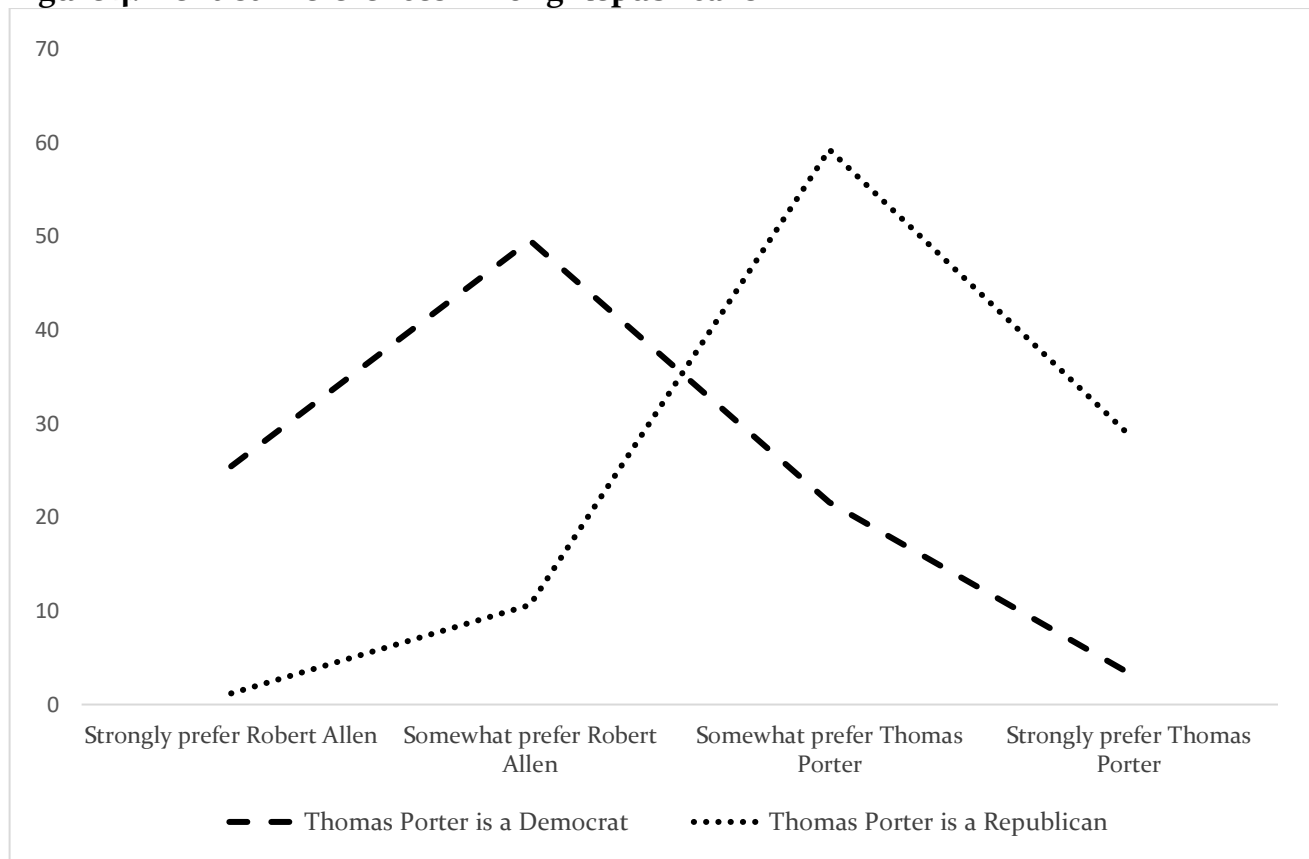


Figure 5: Dentist Preferences Among Democrats

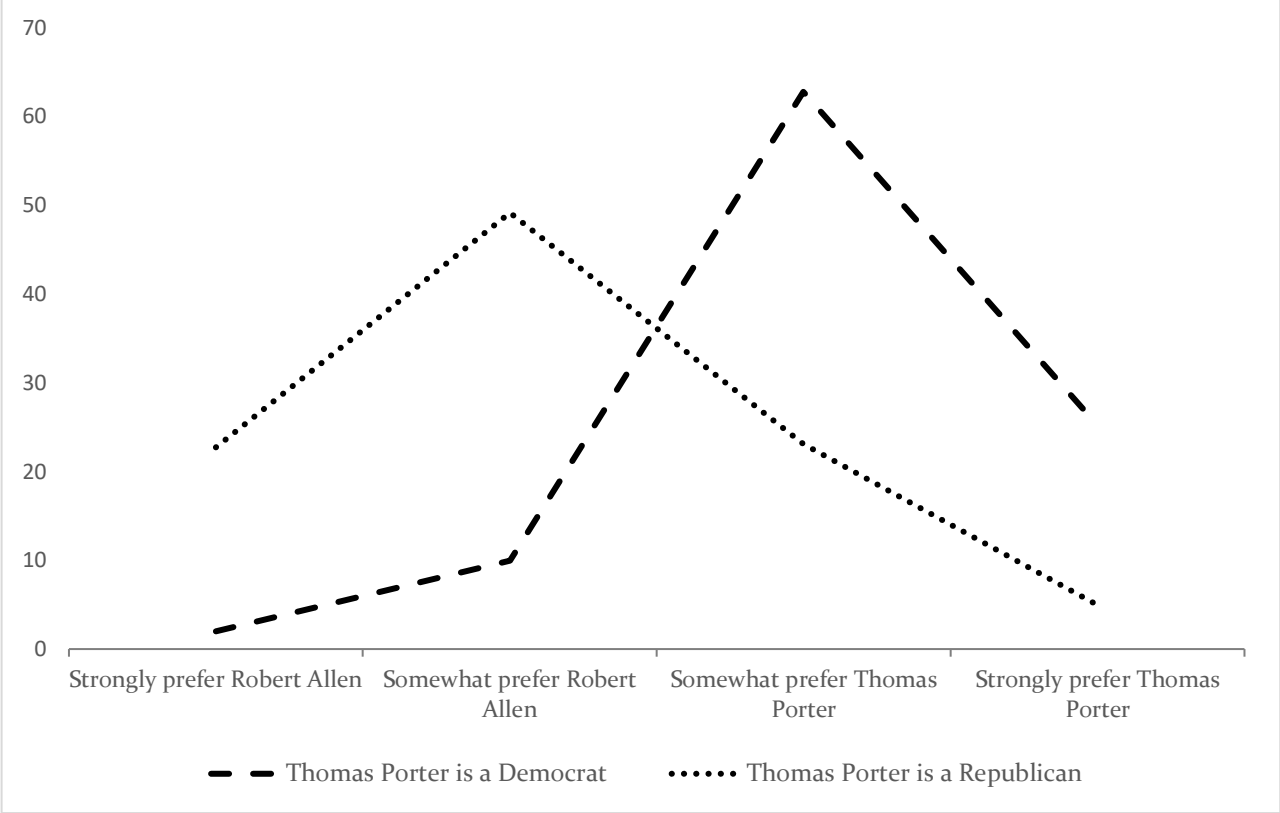


Table 1: Correlates of Partisan Marriage Attitudes

	<i>Democrats Only</i>			<i>Republicans Only</i>		
Partisan Social Identity	-0.24*	-0.22*	-0.22*	-0.19*	-0.19*	-0.19*
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Ideology	0.28*	0.18*	0.19*	-0.50*	-0.46*	-0.44*
	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)
Racial Resentment		0.19*	0.19*		-0.15*	-0.15*
		(0.05)	(0.05)		(0.05)	(0.05)
Authoritarianism		-0.01	-0.01		-0.02	-0.01
		(0.03)	(0.03)		(0.03)	(0.03)
Government Jobs			0.05			-0.03
			(0.05)			(0.03)
Abortion			-0.06			-0.02
			(0.05)			(0.04)
Constant	0.45*	0.42*	0.43*	0.91*	1.01*	1.02*
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.06)
r²	0.13	0.16	0.17	0.18	0.20	0.20
n	500	477	473	497	484	477

* p < .05

Note: All variables are coded to range from 0 to 1 with the other categories equally spaced in between.

Table 2: Correlates of Perceptions of Unemployment Change Since 2009

	<i>Democrats Only</i>			<i>Republicans Only</i>		
Partisan Social Identity	0.03 (0.05)	0.02 (0.04)	0.02 (0.04)	-0.11 (0.07)	-0.08 (0.07)	-0.07 (0.07)
Ideology	-0.15* (0.05)	0.04 (0.05)	0.07 (0.05)	-0.20* (0.09)	-0.18* (0.09)	-0.13 (0.10)
Racial Resentment		-0.28* (0.05)	-0.25* (0.05)		-0.20* (0.08)	-0.21* (0.08)
Authoritarianism		-0.10* (0.03)	-0.07* (0.03)		-0.02 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.04)
Government Jobs			-0.12* (0.04)			0.00 (0.05)
Abortion			-0.11* (0.05)			-0.07 (0.06)
Constant	0.90* (0.04)	0.94* (0.04)	0.94* (0.04)	0.70* (0.08)	0.83* (0.09)	0.83* (0.09)
r²	0.02	0.14	0.16	0.02	0.03	0.04
n	500	477	473	495	482	475

* p < .05

Note: All variables are coded to range from 0 to 1 with the other categories equally spaced in between.

Table 3: Correlates of Perceptions of U. S. More or Less Secure from Foreign Enemies Since 2009

	<i>Democrats Only</i>			<i>Republicans Only</i>		
Partisan Social Identity	0.25*	0.25*	0.24*	-0.03	-0.01	-0.01
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Ideology	-0.16*	-0.06	-0.07	-0.32*	-0.27*	-0.20*
	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Racial Resentment		-0.20*	-0.19*		-0.17*	-0.14*
		(0.05)	(0.05)		(0.04)	(0.04)
Authoritarianism		-0.03	-0.02		0.04*	0.04
		(0.04)	(0.04)		(0.02)	(0.02)
Government Jobs			-0.05			-0.07*
			(0.05)			(0.03)
Abortion			0.03			-0.08*
			(0.05)			(0.03)
Constant	0.53*	0.55*	0.56*	0.36*	0.43*	0.45*
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.05)
r²	0.08	0.12	0.12	0.10	0.12	0.15
n	499	476	472	497	484	477

* p < .05

Note: All variables are coded to range from 0 to 1 with the other categories equally spaced in between.

Table 4: Party Motivated Dentist Selection Among Different Subgroups

Effect of Porter Being a Republican (Instead of a Democrat) on Selecting Porter as Dentist

Among Subgroups of Democrats

All Democrats	Low Social Identity	Not Liberal	Racially Resentful	Authoritarian	Conservative on Jobs	Not Liberal on Abortion	Under 50	Less than College Degree	African Americans
-0.34*	-0.22*	-0.25*	-0.27*	-0.32*	-0.28*	-0.24*	-0.28*	-0.31*	-0.28*
(0.02)	(0.04)	(0.06)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.11)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.03)	(0.09)
n=492	n=177	n=94	n=207	n=146	n=30	n=105	n=130	n=261	n=46

Among Subgroups of Republicans

All Republicans	Low Social Identity	Not Conservative	Not Racially Resentful	Not Authoritarian	Liberal on Jobs	Not Conservative on Abortion	Under 50	Less than College Degree	African Americans
0.38*	0.28*	0.28*	0.21*	0.34*	0.31*	0.25*	0.39*	0.35*	0.42
(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.07)	(0.05)	(0.03)	(0.07)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.03)	(0.34)
n=489	n=254	n=63	n=119	n=194	n=66	n=131	n=102	n=274	n=5

* p < .05

Note: Entries show bivariate regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. All variables are coded to range from 0 to 1 with the other categories equally spaced in between.

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