

Independents, Leaners, and Identity: Affective Polarization and Nonpartisans in the United States

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Dissertation Abstract

A considerable amount of research in American politics focuses on the growing affective polarization between Republicans and Democrats. This dissertation analyzes the role of independents, defined as people who do not affiliate with one of the two major political parties, in affective polarization. These party outsiders are understudied even though represent a plurality of the US electorate. Previous research defines independents who lean towards one of the two major political parties as “hidden partisans” who disdain contentious politics and prefer to keep their political views private (Klar & Krupnikov, 2016). I argue it is necessary to incorporate independents and the concept of multidimensional partisanship (Weisberg, 1980) to accurately measure affective polarization in the US. My research studies three aspects of non-partisanship: 1) do independents who reject identifying with the two major parties have an in-group affect (i.e., positive feelings) for other non-partisans, 2) whether it is possible to inflate in-group affect for independents by priming respondents to think about polarization and inter-party conflict, and 3) how nonpartisans compare to their partisan counterparts in terms of conspiratorial thinking. Using nationally representative survey data over time as well as survey experiments, this dissertation explores aspects of nonpartisans that are overlooked in the study of affective polarization in the US.

Chapter 1: Independents, Leaners, and Identity - Affective Polarization for Partisans and Nonpartisan Groups

Abstract

The dramatic increase in affective polarization - the tendency for partisans to dislike and distrust those from the opposing political party - has become a hallmark of US politics. Yet existing measures of affective polarization focus only on partisans (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012), leaving an important question unanswered: do political independents (leaners and pure independents) exhibit the same in-group bias as self-identified partisans? With the plurality of Americans identifying as independent (Gallup, 2022), the existence of a nonpartisan group identity would have important implications. Using unique feeling thermometer scores placed on two national surveys in 2020 and 2022, it utilizes a novel feeling thermometer measure that incorporates independents to measure potential in-group favoritism among independents. Results provide preliminary evidence that independents have positive in-group affect similar to partisans — they exhibit out-group disdain for partisans and independent leaners rate themselves and their affiliated partisan group higher than the opposition. Thus, independents may be a tribe of their own.

Introduction

While party polarization has rapidly expanded over the last two decades, with deserved attention from scholars and the mass media, so has the percentage of Americans who identify with neither political party. Today, independents — people who do not affiliate with the Republican or Democratic parties — make up the plurality of the US population, consistently over 40 percent in Gallup’s monthly tracking polls (Gallup, 2023). Some Americans are pure independents with no stated preference for one of the two political parties, whereas most independents lean Republican or lean Democrat. In surveys, these individuals don't identify with one of the parties immediately, though, in a follow-up question, some leaners indicate they lean more closely toward one of the parties. Do political independents (both leaners and pure independents) have in-group affect comparable to their partisan counterparts? Since independents account for a large proportion of the electorate, their attitudes and identity matter when studying US public opinion and voting behavior. Existing research on affective polarization omits the measurement of independents and their attitudes towards partisan and non-partisan groups, measuring only affective polarization among Democrats and Republicans. Using novel feeling thermometer scores placed on two national surveys, this study develops an affective polarization measure that incorporates independents to target potential in-group favoritism among independents and out-group antipathy for partisan groups. Results show independents may have a social identity because they feel more warmly about independents than do Republicans and Democrats about independents.

Independents are a heterogeneous group. Conventional wisdom among campaign consultants and political scientists alike contends that independents aren't all that independent. This is because when independent voters are asked if they "lean" Democrat or Republican, most

tend to choose one or the other. Given plurality (winner-take-all) election rules, most competitive candidates represent the Democratic or Republican parties; independents are forced to vote for a major party candidate to avoid wasting their vote. Another explanation is independents are cross-pressured on contentious policy issues between the two major political parties (Keith et al., 1992).

Previous research often defines independents that lean towards one of the two major political parties as partisans, since they consistently vote for party candidates in two-party centric elections (Klar & Krupnikov, 2016; Petrocik, 2009; Keith et al., 1992). One of the arguments of this study is that leaners should not be lumped in with their most proximate political party and instead should be studied as their own group. In fact, independents have been shown to have unique preferences about the political system and policy issues. Large sample surveys from Pew's Political Typology Quiz from the American Trends Panel estimate that between 15-20 percent of the population are pure independents who have different policy preferences than independent leaners (Pew Research Center, 2022). Perhaps more importantly, intense dislike of the opposing party, which has surged over the past two decades among partisans, has followed a similar trajectory among independents who lean toward the Republican and Democratic parties (Doherty et al., 2020).

The rise of affective polarization - most notably, the tendency for partisans to dislike and distrust those from the other party (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012) - is one of the most striking developments of twenty-first-century US politics (Finkel, 2020). The parties are increasingly ideologically congruent and polarized (Abramowitz, 2023). Affective polarization has wide-ranging implications for social and economic welfare, affecting familiar relationship decisions about work, commerce, where to live, and whom to date and marry (Iyengar et al., 2019). In the

past decade, scholars have analyzed crucial dimensions of this political divide demonstrating that affective polarization (and its key underlying component, out-party animus) relates to policy beliefs (Druckman et al., 2020), manifests cross-nationally in a comparative context (Gidron et al., 2020) and is fueled by significant divisions in ideology (Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016).

Yet all these accounts have solely focused on partisans (self-identified Democrats or Republicans) to understand growing levels of affective polarization. Political surveys have omitted questions asking feeling thermometers for independents as a group. Do political independents (both leaners and pure independents) exhibit the same in-group bias as self-identified partisans? Independents have generally been studied because of their disdain for partisans or in terms of out-group affect (i.e., Klar & Krupnikov 2016).

The published literature does not address political independents in terms of in-group identity. The conventional wisdom is that independents don't have a similar sense of self-identity as Republicans and Democrats, or that to the degree that they do, it would be weaker and more diffuse because they are less knowledgeable or engaged in politics (Campbell et al., 1960). This study seeks to examine if independents (both leaners and pure independents) have a similar in-group identity bias as self-identified partisans. The argument is rooted in the notion that an identity – a psychological, internalized sense of attachment to a group – can provide an important cognitive structure through which individuals navigate and participate in the political and social world (Conover, 1984; Miller et al., 1981; Greene, 1999; Huddy, 2003; Mason, 2016). A significant body of evidence indicates that as humans, our need to belong, to see ourselves as similar to others with whom we share common goals, is innate. Independents, who avoid affiliating with partisans, should gravitate towards others who also identify as independents, thus fostering a group identity. And just like partisans, independents should have higher levels of

positive affect towards those in their own group compared to those who are not (out-party animus).

To investigate these claims, unique survey questions are placed on two random-sample national surveys. The questions are used to measure levels of in-group bias among partisans and non-partisans. Traditional conceptualizations of affective polarization are calculated by subtracting feeling thermometer scores of the in-group from feeling thermometer scores of the out-group (see Gidron et al., 2019). This classic conceptualization works well when analyzing partisans in a two-party-centric system (i.e., Republicans and Democrats) but omits independents/nonpartisans from the equation². To account for the inclusion of a third group, a new method to measure affective polarization is developed by using the difference between the in-group and the average of the two out-group parties.

The contribution of this study is to extend the literature on affective polarization and group identity to include independents. Much of the literature on affective polarization excludes independents as respondents and the standard feeling thermometers do not include independents as response options.

Results indicate pure independents exhibit in-group favoritism towards their group (i.e., other independents) and out-group animus towards both political parties. Independents who lean towards one party show a dual identity, with high in-group favoritism towards both independents as a group and the political party they lean towards, as well as out-group disdain for the opposing political party.

² The concept of independents becomes more complicated in multiparty systems. This study is focused on American politics with plurality election rules and a two-party system.

Independent Politics

Research in political science generally considers independents to be "hidden partisans" who dislike the major parties and contentious politics but consistently vote for party candidates in two-party centric elections (Klar & Krupnikov, 2016; Keith et al., 1992). On policy issues, independents who lean toward one party or the other may have preferences as strong as self-identified strong partisans (Keith et al., 1992). Pure independents, roughly 15 percent of the US adult population, tend to be less engaged in politics and are less likely to vote (Killan, 2012). Keith and colleagues (1992) argue that the supposed increase in political independence in the United States is a myth. They find that leaners vote like partisans and resemble partisans in many behaviors and attitudes, while true independent voters remain politically uninformed and inactive as they were originally described in *The American Voter* (Campbell et al., 1980; Lewis-Beck et al., 2008).

In a landmark book, Klar and Krupnikov offer a different contribution to the American political literature on independent voters. Their book, *Independent Politics* (2016), presents carefully considered evidence on how nominally independent voters participate - or refuse to participate - in politics; from the watercooler to the voting booth, "people refuse to engage in consequential political actions simply because these actions could make them appear partisan" (p. 3). The central argument is that political fighting (i.e., contentious and divisive politics) leads to citizens hiding their true partisan preferences. Thus, a growing number of people self-report as independents in an attempt to hide their preferences. However, concealing partisanship does not stop at self-reporting identification; such individuals also disengage from social and political actions that could reveal their partisan leaning. Klar and Krupnikov contend that people go undercover because the partisan label is associated with negativity, disagreement, and gridlock.

Since people want to make a positive impression on others, they are reluctant to take on a label the public condemns, and instead opt for one viewed more favorably.

Two factors shape this outcome—the extent of partisan disagreement and an individual's level of concern with how others perceive him or her. The higher each one, the more we are likely to see partisanship masked, or to be “hidden partisans.” In a follow-up study, Klar, Krupnikov, and Ryan (2018) find that Americans broadly dislike people who are interested or engaged in politics, especially those whose identity is rooted in partisanship. Politics is messy and there is a negative connotation to having strong partisan opinions. They offer valid data to refute counterarguments, including that independents are turning away from the two major parties because they are becoming apolitical, malleable, or sympathetic to third parties.

In brief, Klar and Krupnikov (2016) argue that independents who lean towards one of the two political parties are “hidden partisans;” politics is a private decision and while they may hold policy opinions like partisans (or even be stronger in their partisanship) they don't want to voice these opinions publicly. The authors’ core insight is that some Americans shy away from partisanship because it is perceived as socially undesirable, posing serious costs to a vibrant democracy. Their empirical tests focus on independents’ attitudes and behavior that result from out-group animus of partisan conflict.

Affective Polarization and Self-Sorted Partisans

While there is limited scholarship on independents, there is a large and growing literature on affective polarization between the US’s two major political parties and their supporters. This polarization comes in two forms: ideological polarization on policy issues (the increasing ideological distance between the parties) and affective polarization (the increasing geographic self-sorting and feelings of antipathy between members of opposing parties). This study focuses

on the latter because affective polarization has been tied to social identities in the published literature (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012; Mason, 2016; Abramowitz et al., 2018). This research on affective polarization finds a growing emotional dislike for members of the opposite party, which can extend to marriage (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012; Huber & Malhotra, 2017), hiring members of the opposite party (Gift & Gift, 2015; Lelkes & Westwood, 2017), blaming members of the party opposite for past crises (Bisgaard, 2015), trust (Carlin & Love, 2013), and residential segregation so as not to live near the opposite party (Brown & Enos, 2021).

Political scientists have shown that social group identities are often the lines upon which political parties are formed due to their stability and significance (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967). Political party affiliation has become one of these social groups and now provides a basis for individuals' self-conceptions as well as out-group animosity (Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2008; Huddy, Mason, & Aarøe, 2015). This automatic identification is part of a series of behavioral consequences that inevitably flow from identification with a party (Iyengar et al., 2019). Like policy issue salience, identities more salient to an individual's personal identification will trigger stronger intergroup divisions and emotional affect (Gaertner et al., 1993). Mason (2018) uses careful empirical analysis to show that affective polarization is not driven by disagreement over policy issues but is rather a social identity; politics becomes a contest where the game is for a favored party to win at all costs and the opposing party to lose.

Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes (2012) draw on social identity theory to advance the idea of mass affective polarization; affective polarization is distinct from ideological polarization where citizens differ based on policy considerations. The authors suggest that when citizens identify with political parties, it activates a negative affect toward the opposing party (i.e., out-party animus). Over time external factors such as negative campaigning and partisan media exacerbate

partisan animus and contribute to a hostile political environment. Specifically, they find the use of same-party media sources is correlated with stronger affective polarization, and the use of cross-party media sources is correlated with less polarization, holding all else equal. Levendusky and Malhotra (2016) go further by examining the consequences of the media's coverage of political polarization. Results find that media coverage of divisions between Democrats and Republicans decreases ideological divisions in the electorate but increases affective polarization, with partisans blaming the other party for polarization. These influential studies help develop the theoretical underpinning of affective polarization; this study aims to extend this research to examine non-partisans versus partisans.

Social Identity Theory: In-groups and Out-groups

An important contribution to the line of research above is Liliana Mason's 2018 book *Uncivil Agreement*, which argues party identification has become more powerful today because it overlaps with other social identities (see also Abramowitz, 2018). As mentioned above, she argues that party polarization in the US electorate is more about allegiance to social groups defined by race and ethnicity, religion, age cohort, ideology, or geography. This political divide between Republicans and Democrats is only partially based on genuine policy disagreements and is rooted more in divergent social identities. These social identities now overlap more with partisan identities, moving Americans further apart over the past half-century, i.e., partisan affiliations now also imply differences in ideology, demographics, and geography (rural vs. urban) reinforcing distance from, and competition with, those who belong to the opposing party. In Mason's words, partisanship has become a "mega-identity" or "conflict extension" (Layman et al., 2016). This extreme polarization has been defined as "tribal," with the parties as two warring factions (Mason & Wronski, 2018). This growing affective polarization divides Americans and

makes members of one party even see members of the other party as a threat to the country or a source of political violence (Kalmoe & Mason, 2022).

Central in Mason's theory is the concept of in-groups and out-groups or the parties as two competing teams or tribes. She illustrates contemporary party polarization by summarizing a 1954 social experiment in which 22 fifth-grade boys were unknowingly split into two separate teams—named the Eagles and the Rattlers—at separate campsites at a state park (Sherif, 1988). The results of the experiment revealed two dozen highly similar boys who had previously not known one another had formed into nearly warring tribes. The experiment illustrates the power of in-group bias. Democrats and Republicans have an increased resentment toward each other, even though they may agree on some basic policy issues.

As Abramowitz argues in *The Great Alignment* (2018), polarization of Congress arose and persists because it accurately reflects divisions in American society, not because of divisions between political elites. The important difference in the current era compared to the past is the rise of "negative partisanship" where people vote to prevent the other party from gaining power (defense) more than to support their favored party or candidate (offense). Although members of one side may have internal disagreements, they are motivated to a far greater extent by hatred of the other side (Abramowitz & Webster, 2018).

The state of the literature does not address independents to the same degree as partisans. In the US, most research in political science and psychology focuses on partisans to understand growing political polarization and biases in political decision-making (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001). Not only is partisanship a psychological attachment to a group (Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2008), but it is also one of the most important heuristics in voting decisions (Campbell et al.,

1960). How do independents (both leaners and pure independents) measure up to their partisan counterparts?

Expanding the Theory of Affective Polarization

Combining strains of research from political behavior and political psychology, this study tests how different partisan subgroups (partisans, independents leaners, and pure independents) view themselves and others focusing on group affect rather than measuring differences in policy preferences or ideology. In general, independents were seen as uninformed, unengaged, and outside the political system (i.e., *the American Voter*) or protest voters (i.e., Rapoport & Stone, 2007). The work of Keith et al. (1992) brought into focus that many independents were informed and held opinions on policy issues and candidates similar to strong partisans in many cases. Klar and Krupnikov (2016) introduced a political psychology perspective, seeking to understand what motivates independents to be undercover partisans. The focus is largely on a disdain for contentious politics and partisanship--for independents, the out-group. This study adds to this important literature but takes a different approach. Instead of measuring what motivates independents to be non-partisan, it focuses on whether they have an in-group attachment to other people like them. Instead of seeing independents as low-informed, deviant, or even undercover, it measures if independents view themselves in terms of in-group identity.

While Mason (2018) refers to the social psychology theory of in-groups and out-groups as tribalism, in-group affinity and out-group disdain don't necessarily go together. Brewer (1999) contends negative outgroup attitudes are not necessarily a by-product of in-group favoritism. In-group identification can be defined as self-investment in the group, which encompasses being satisfied with one's group membership, feeling solidarity with the group members, and considering the group an important aspect of one's self-concept (Tajfel, 1978). It fosters a strong

attachment and commitment to the group that is independent of attitudes towards out-groups (Brewer, 1999).

As discussed previously, there is an innate human trait of wanting to associate with like-minded individuals who share common goals (Conover, 1984; Huddy, 2003; Lau, 1989; Mill et al., 1981). Independents, who avoid affiliating with partisans, may gravitate towards others who also identify as independent, thus fostering a group identity. While hidden partisans may have disdain for anyone who says they are partisan, it is possible that independents who lean towards one of the two parties may have favorable opinions of independents and the party they lean towards *simultaneously*. While contentious politics may be a partial motivation for why people choose to be independent (Klar & Krupnikov, 2016), it is also possible that independents prefer to identify with other independents. This research modifies the concept of independents as undercover partisans by considering both in-group and out-group attitudes.

A critic might argue one problem with a group-based definition here is that, unlike identification with a political party, which may be loosely bundled together with issue preferences or ideology, there are many reasons why someone may identify as "independent" as it can be influenced by various factors. But as Achen and Bartels (2016), Mason (2016; 2018), and others contend, opinions on policy issues even among self-identified partisans are highly heterogeneous. Take for example wide divisions among Republicans in views of free trade and promoting the global economy versus protectionism and tariffs.

Following the logic of Klar, Krupnikov (2016), and Ryan (2018), it is expected that independents will express out-group animus for partisan groups since "hidden partisans" see politics as contentious and dislike people whose identity is rooted in partisanship. At the same time, independents should express positive in-group affect using Mason's (2016, 2018)

framework of social identity theory and allegiance to a social group. Thus, the following research hypotheses are developed:

Hypothesis 1: Independents (including leaners and pure independents) should have higher in-group favorability relative to partisan out-groups (Democrats and Republicans).

Hypothesis 2: Pure independents should express favorable in-group affect toward independents and exhibit out-group disdain towards partisans.

Hypothesis 3: Independent leaners should express favorable in-group affect toward independents and their corresponding partisan group and exhibit out-group disdain towards the opposing party.

Data and Methods

This study uses unique identical survey questions designed by the author and placed on two national surveys in 2020 and 2022. With a 1,000-person nationally representative sample, the 2020 Cooperative Election Study (CES) is conducted by YouGov for Harvard University. Feeling thermometer scores are used to measure attitudes towards partisans and non-partisans. This feeling thermometer included the typical options (Democrats and Republicans) as well as a novel option, independents. These data were collected in November before the 2020 presidential election and the January 6th US Capitol insurrection. The distribution of responses to the 7-point party identification scale approximates the full 60,000-person CES sample, Pew, and others. Using CES/YouGov weights, the sample appears normally distributed across partisan groups (see Appendix tables).

These same feeling thermometer questions were also run on the 2022 Collaborative Midterm Survey (CMS), conducted by YouGov for Cornell University. The 6,400-person

nationally representative sample provides robustness for the 2020 CES data and was collected in after the 2020 presidential election and the January 6th US Capitol insurrection. Using CMS/YouGov weights, the sample also appears normally distributed across partisan groups (see Appendix tables). The use of the same data vendor and weights make the results comparable, but one sample was collected before and one after the January 6th, 2021 insurrection, a height of contentious politics where polarization led to violence.

The most popular survey measure to gauge affective polarization is the feeling thermometer. Respondents are often asked to rate their feelings towards their own party and the opposing party. Widely used election surveys such as the American National Election Survey (ANES) and the Cooperative Election Survey (CES) do not ask respondents to rate independents. To fill this gap, this study uses a series of feeling thermometer (FT) questions asking the respondent to rate each group on a scale from 0 to 100, with 100 being extremely warm (favorable) 0 extremely cold (unfavorable), and 50 neutral. Respondents are asked to rate "Democrats," "Republicans," "Independents," and "Elected Officials in Washington DC," to distinguish between political elites and ordinary people. Analyses of the feeling thermometer scores are conducted for the overall sample and subgroups defined by partisanship. All respondents regardless of their partisanship are asked to rate all four groups.

A concern is that feeling thermometer scores do not necessarily distinguish if respondents are attributing their rating to out-group voters or party elites; thus, research on affective polarization is overestimating the results because people often think of elites instead of ordinary citizens when answering survey questions (Druckman et al., 2006). As Druckman and Levendusky (2019) note they are not able to “clarify whether respondents were thinking of partisan voters or party leaders when providing their thermometer scores” (4). The elected

official category in Figures 1.1 – 1.4 acts as a reference group to compare partisan and nonpartisan groups. From these simple cross tabs alone, there is evidence people dislike elected officials compared to ordinary citizens. This concern is less of an issue for this study since few elected officials are independent.

Results 2020 CES

Figure 1.1 Average Feeling Thermometer Score of Partisan and Non-Partisan Groups by Partisanship using 3-point PID (CES 2020)

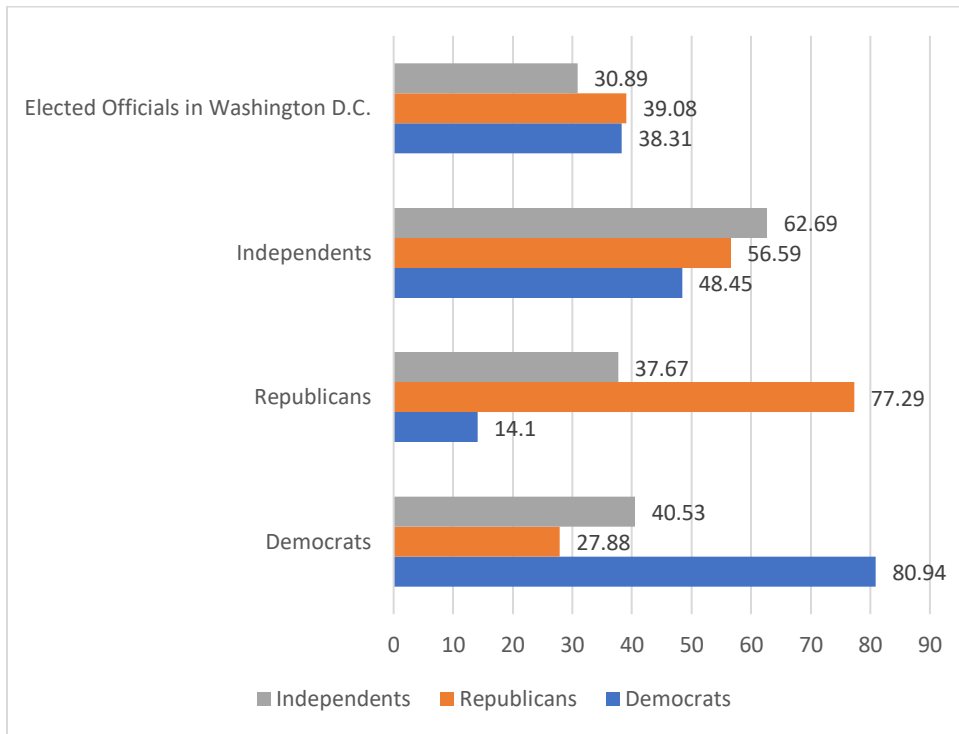
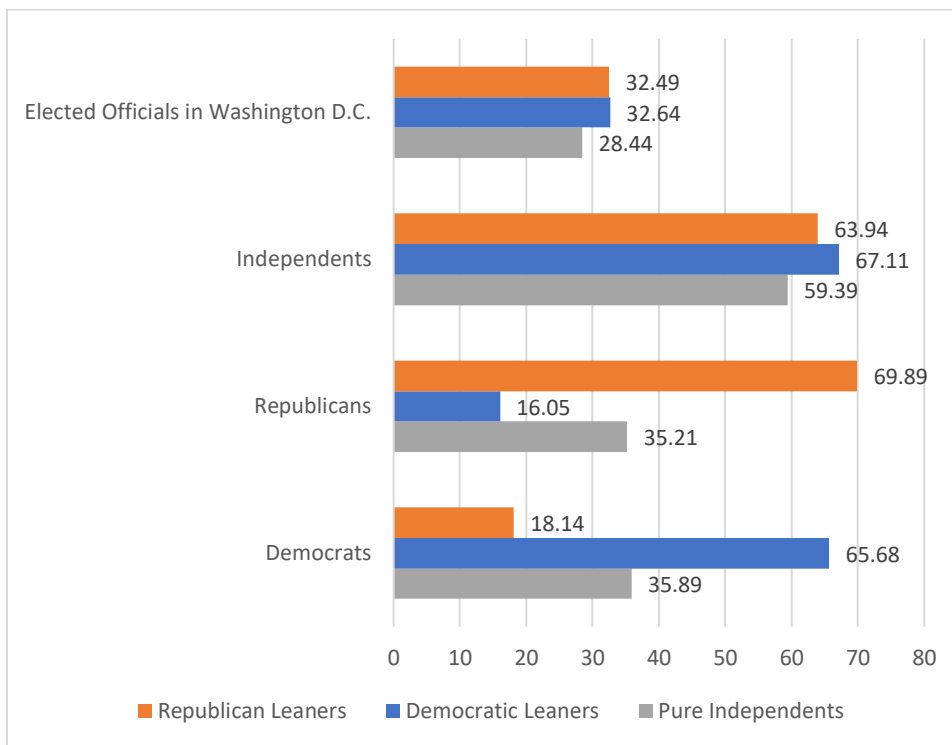


Figure 1.1 shows partisan and non-partisan feeling thermometer scores among a subsample of Democrats, Republicans, and independents using a 3-category party identification from the 2020 survey (see also Appendix Tables A1-A3). Here, independents that lean Democratic and Republican and combined with pure independents. As expected, Democrats rate their own party members very high (almost 81 on the 0-100 scale), while they rate Republicans very low (14 out of 100). Similar to Democrats, Republicans score their own party members high (77 out of 100), and the opposing party low (28), but not as low as Democrats rank GOP. Republicans rank elected officials about the same as the national average. These results show ingroup bias and favorability. So far, there is evidence of symmetric party polarization - Democrats dislike Republicans about the same as Republicans dislike Democrats.

Among a sample of independents (pure and leaners) using the 3-point party ID, Figure 1.1 finds independents rank other independents the highest (63 out of 100), and Democrats and Republican partisans moderately low. Independents rate elected officials lower than partisans on the national average. On a foundational level, these data suggest that independents have ingroup favorability.

Figure 1.2 Independent Leaners and Pure Independents' Average Feeling Thermometer Scores of Partisans and Non-Partisan Groups (2020 CES)

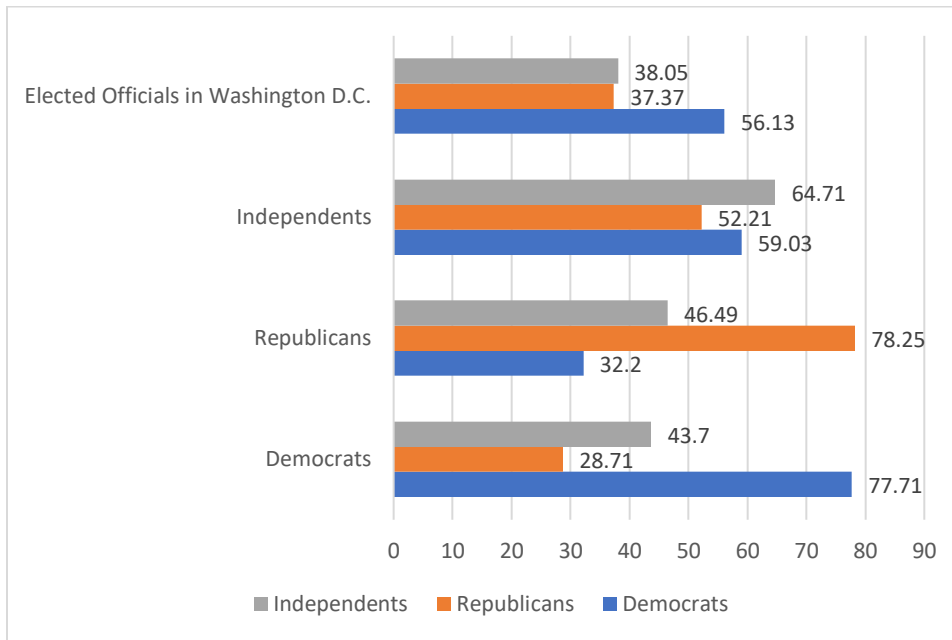


Going further, Figure 1.2 uses a 7-point party identification, showing pure independents (who do not lean towards one of the two major parties, shown in grey bar) rank independents overall high (59 out of 100), while rating Republicans and Democrats low (35 of 100). This group gives elected officials the lowest support of any group. These results are consistent with Figure 1 for independents overall – they appear to show ingroup favorability.

Figure 1.2 also shows among independents that lean Democrat (see also Appendix tables), they surprisingly ranked both Democrats (66) and independents (67) high and Republicans very low (16 out of 100). Interestingly, leaners are most favorable toward Democrats and independents – a very different pattern than pure independents. Among independents leaning Republican, in-group favoritism is also evident; Republicans and independents scored the highest, and Democrats scored very low. In sum, the pattern for feeling thermometer scores for leaners is different than for pure independents.

Results 2022 CMS

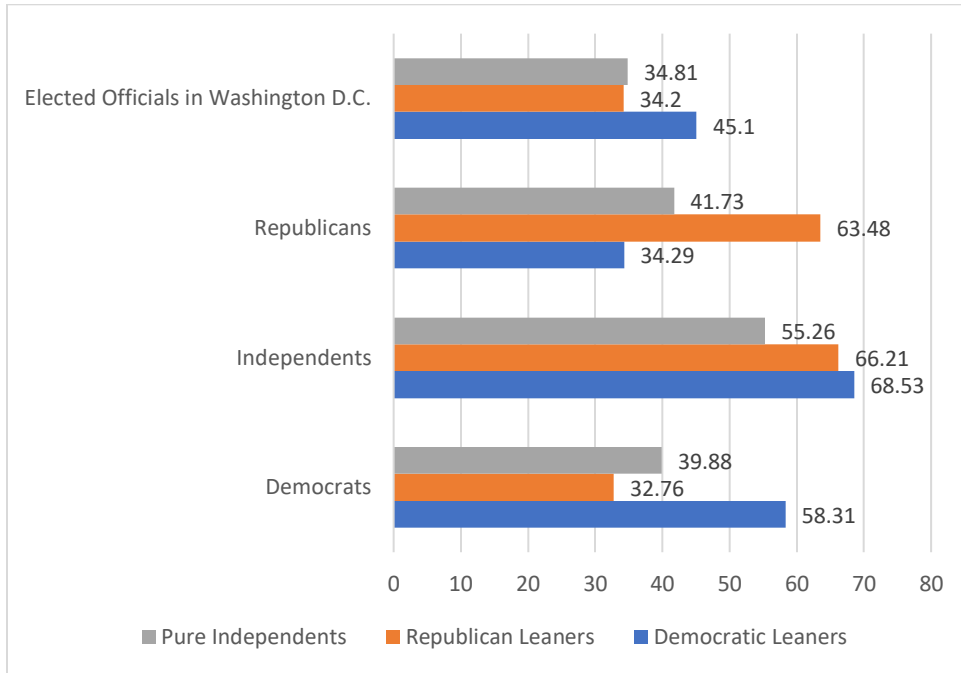
Figure 1.3 Average Feeling Thermometer Score of Partisan and Non-Partisan Groups by Partisanship using 3-point PID (CMS 2022)



Identical survey questions were replicated on the 2022 CMS with a much larger sample and post the traumatic January 6th insurrection. Figure 1.3 shows a similar pattern as Figure 1.1. Using the 3-point party ID, independents (pure and leaners) independents rank other independents the highest (65 out of 100), and Democrats and Republican partisans somewhat lower. Consistent with a known pattern, Democrats rate their own party members very high

(almost 78 on the 0-100 scale), while they rate Republicans much lower (28 out of 100). Similar to Democrats, Republicans score their own party members high (78 out of 100), and the opposing party low (32), but not as low as Democrats rank GOP.

Figure 1.4 Independent Leaners and Pure Independents' Average Feeling Thermometer Scores of Partisans and Non-Partisan Groups (CMS 2022)



Over the two years, results remained constant. Figure 1.4 uses a 7-point party identification and the 2022 data mirrors the patterns from the 2020 data; pure independents rank independents overall moderately high (55 out of 100) while rating Republicans and Democrats low (42 and 40 respectively). Among independents that lean Democrat (see also Appendix tables), they also ranked both Democrats (58) and independents (69) high and Republicans very low (34 out of 100). The pattern holds for independents leaning Republican; Republicans (63) and independents (66) scored the highest, and Democrats scored very low (32). Two separate national surveys conducted two years apart during a period of historic contentious politics with a

contested US presidential election reveal a similar pattern of independents expressing in-group affect for other independents.

These data provide initial support for the notion that independents have a greater in-group affect for their own group compared to partisans. The results are striking. The simple breakdown of feeling thermometer results provides evidence that the partisan groups behave as expected, preferring their own party group, and scoring other partisan groups low on the 0-100 scale. Similarly, the feeling thermometers above provide evidence that independents behave as expected, preferring their own group – with independent leaners feeling as warm for their partisan counterparts as independents. Pure independents feel equally neutral towards both partisans. These data provide evidence that independents have rudimentary aspects of a social group.

Analysis of Relative Rankings

It is possible, however, that demographic factors may bias these results, since we know, for example, that young people (Dalton, 2013) are more likely to identify as independent, and some racial and ethnic groups, particularly Latinos and Asians (Hajnal & Lee, 2011). The 2020 CES data is used to estimate multiple regression models where affective polarization scores are calculated as the difference between the in-group and the average of the two out-groups for Democrats (1), Republicans (2), and independents (3), creating a relative difference measure (similar results found using the 2022 data but not reported due to space constraints). Relative in-group/out-group favorability for Democrats, Republicans, and independents are the outcome variables. A series of binary variables for partisanship (PID 7) are the primary explanatory variable with strong Democrats as the reference group. The statistical models control for gender (coded females 1, males 0), age (measured in years), education (ordinal scale from less than high

school to post-graduate), political ideology (in a 7-point scale with higher values more conservative), and binary variables for Black and Latino respondents. A covariate for Asian Americans is omitted due to small sample sizes.

Table 1.1 Multiple Regressions of Affective Polarization Scores for Partisans and Nonpartisan Groups

	(1) FT for Democrats minus out-groups (Republicans + independents)	(2) FT for Republicans minus out-groups (Democrats + independents)	(3) FT for Independents minus out-groups (Democrats + Republicans)
Strong Democrat	Reference group	Reference group	Reference group
Not Very Strong Democrat	-17.864*** (-4.86)	10.558*** (3.39)	7.305** (2.73)
Lean Democrat	-27.970*** (-8.02)	1.339 (0.46)	26.631*** (9.11)
Pure independents	-60.160*** (-10.73)	31.257*** (7.65)	28.903*** (7.54)
Lean Republican	-100.257*** (-15.26)	73.859*** (16.10)	26.398*** (6.00)
Not Very Strong Republican	-75.418*** (-9.93)	69.872*** (13.39)	5.546 (1.18)
Strong Republican	-90.012*** (-10.26)	89.547*** (17.41)	0.465 (0.08)
Female	6.413* (1.97)	-1.493 (-0.67)	-4.920* (-2.27)
Age (years)	0.218* (2.24)	-0.050 (-0.75)	-0.168** (-2.62)
Education (6-point scale)	-0.137 (-0.16)	-1.466* (-2.20)	1.603* (2.43)
Latino	-5.251 (-1.41)	4.031 (1.36)	1.220 (0.35)

Black	-1.193 (-0.26)	-3.083 (-0.96)	4.276 (1.30)
Ideology (higher values more conservative)	-2.521 (-1.59)	4.878*** (4.52)	-2.357* (-2.19)
Constant	46.777*** (7.36)	-54.731*** (-10.77)	7.954 (1.65)
<i>N</i>	977	977	977

Understandardized OLS regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

The results hold and are consistent with the descriptive statistics (see also Appendix Tables 1.4 – 1.6 for results without the relative scores). Controlling for gender, age, education, race, and political ideology, Table 1 shows that the coefficients for independents' rating of other independents are statistically significant and positive, controlling for demographic factors. Democratic leaners (compared to strong Democrats) rate independents on average 26.6 points higher than the average of Democrats and Republicans. Similarly, independents leaning Republican (compared to strong Democrats) rate independents 26.4 points higher than the outgroup (Democrats and Republicans). Pure independents like their own group the most, rating independents on average almost 30 points higher than the out-groups. This contrasts with strong Republicans who on average rate Republicans 90 points higher than Democrats and independents while rating Democrats 90 points lower than the out-groups. While in-group identity is moderated compared to partisans, it is clearly there.

Appendix Tables A1.4-A1.6 replicate the model in Table 1.1 but predict raw feeling thermometer scores for Democrats and Republicans rather than the relative measure of in-group versus out-group. The results are consistent. As shown in Table A1.2, all partisan groups have lower FT scores for Democrats than the reference group strong Democrats, controlling for other factors. Not strong Democrats rate Democrats 10 points lower than strong Democrats on the 100-

point scale, while independents leaning Democratic rate them 16 points lower. These results show that out-group animus operates in parallel to in-group favorability. Pure independents are unique, and rate Democrats 40 points lower than strong Democrats, while independents leaning GOP dislike Democrats more than strong Republicans (60 points lower vs. 50 points lower). Independent group identity may be more muted among pure independents compared to leaners because this group has been found to be composed of individuals who are less engaged in politics (Doherty et al., 2020).

As expected, all partisan groups have a warmer feeling towards the GOP than the reference category strong Democrats. However, independents who lean Democrat, consistent with the hidden partisan thesis (Klar & Krupnikov, 2016), are the closest to strong Democrats. Controlling for other factors, strong Republicans rate the Republican party 67 points more than strong Democrats. The results of the multivariate analysis are consistent with the descriptive analysis, but the effects are often stronger. While independents don't like elected officials in DC, the effect sizes are small compared to how much they like their own non-partisan group.

When scholars use a feeling thermometer, they can use different calculations to measure affective polarization. The relative difference measures used here examines how much an individual dislikes the other party in relation to one's own party. The absolute measure (which Gidron et al., 2019 employs) presented in the Appendix tables examines how much an individual dislikes the out-party. The drawback of the latter is that it may not measure polarization but rather disdain for politics. Consistent results across the two measures increase confidence in the results.

Conclusion

Understanding independents and their motivations is clearly important, and this study finds evidence that independents display in-party warmth and out-party disdain, which supports their argument. Despite popular preconceived notions, independents aren't a unified political bloc: their backgrounds and viewpoints cover a wide spectrum. However, the literature has yet to explore if independents share similar in-group affinities as their partisan counterparts and how it manifests. This study sought to examine whether independents have in-group affect comparable to their partisan counterparts. Using feeling thermometer scores placed on national 2020 and 2022 surveys, it employs an existing affective polarization measure that incorporates independents to measure potential in-group favoritism among independents and out-group antipathy for partisan groups. Results provide evidence that independents (pure and leaners) have positive in-group affect similar to, but more muted, compared to partisans.

These findings may matter for understanding US electoral outcomes because independents are the plurality of the electorate and we cannot understand political behavior without studying them. While partisans have been found to be increasingly ideologically congruent and polarized (Abramowitz, 2023) others argue the implications of affective polarization may be overblown (see Broockman, Kalla, & Westwood 2022). The research on affective polarization may exaggerate its impact in part because studies omit independents.

An advantage of using feeling thermometer ratings, at least in the US, is data availability for Democratic and Republican partisan groups. The American National Election Studies (ANES) tracks questions concerning partisan affect temporally and has revealed that affective polarization has increased since the 1980s (Iyengar et al., 2019). As such, many studies leverage the feeling thermometer to gain a better understanding of affective polarization over time (see

Gidron et al., 2019). Ideally, the ANES time series would have included a question about how independents rate themselves and partisan groups. Unfortunately, such data does not exist, but based on this study could be included in the future.

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Appendix Chapter 1

Table A1.1a: CES 2020 Feeling Thermometer among Democrats (PID=3)

	Observations	Mean	Standard Dev.	Min	Max
Democrats	372	80.94	29.62	1	100
Republicans	370	14.10	20.30	0	99
Independents	370	48.45	23.28	0	100
Elected Officials	373	38.31	22.19	0	100

Table A1.1b: CES 2020 Feeling Thermometer among Republicans (PID=3)

	Observations	Mean	Standard Dev.	Min	Max
Democrats	226	27.88	80.84	0	100
Republicans	232	77.29	21.35	1	100
Independents	232	56.59	25.48	0	100
Elected Officials	232	39.08	24.64	0	100

Table A1.1c: CES 2020 Feeling Thermometer among Independents (PID=3)

	Observations	Mean	Standard Dev.	Min	Max
Democrats	390	40.53	45.32	0	100
Republicans	392	37.67	30.38	0	100
Independents	394	62.69	27.76	0	100
Elected Officials	395	30.89	23.76	0	100

Table A1.1d: CES 2020 Feeling Thermometer among Pure Independents (PID=7)

	Observations	Mean	Standard Dev.	Min	Max
Democrats	988	35.89	55.94	0	100
Republicans	994	35.21	35.58	0	100
Independents	996	59.39	26.63	0	100
Elected Officials	1,000	28.44	23.68	0	100

Table A1e: CES 2020 Feeling Thermometer among Democratic Leaners (PID=7)

	Observations	Mean	Standard Dev.	Min	Max
Democrats	115	65.68	25.26	0	100
Republicans	114	16.05	28.79	0	100
Independents	114	67.11	24.08	1	100
Elected Officials	115	32.64	26.56	0	100

Table A1.1f: CES 2020 Feeling Thermometer among Republican Leaners (PID=7)

	Observations	Mean	Standard Dev.	Min	Max
Democrats	91	18.14	55.34	0	100
Republicans	91	69.89	20.59	5	100
Independents	92	63.94	27.21	0	100
Elected Officials	92	32.49	25.03	0	94

Table A1.2a: CMS 2022 Feeling Thermometer among Democrats (PID=3)

	Observations	Mean	Standard Dev.	Min	Max
Democrats	2,502	77.71	21.44	0	100
Republicans	2,498	32.20	29.61	0	100
Independents	2,491	59.02	22.02	0	100
Elected Officials	2,505	56.13	25.29	0	100

Table A1.2b: CMS 2022 Feeling Thermometer among Independents (PID=3)

	Observations	Mean	Standard Dev.	Min	Max
Democrats	2,065	43.70	26.79	0	100
Republicans	2,064	46.49	27.50	0	100
Independents	2,067	64.71	22.66	0	100
Elected Officials	2,070	38.05	25.12	0	100

Table A1.2c: CMS 2022 Feeling Thermometer among Republicans (PID=3)

	Observations	Mean	Standard Dev.	Min	Max
Democrats	1,751	28.71	27.72	0	100
Republicans	1,751	78.25	21.13	0	100
Independents	1,744	52.21	22.99	0	100
Elected Officials	1,752	37.37	27.16	0	100

Table A1.2d: CMS 2022 Feeling Thermometer among Democratic Leaners (PID=7)

	Observations	Mean	Standard Dev.	Min	Max
Democrats	720	58.31	23.48	0	100
Independents	721	68.53	21.26	0	100
Republicans	719	34.29	26.45	0	100
Elected Officials	717	45.10	24.31	0	100

Table A1.2e: CMS 2022 Feeling Thermometer among Pure Independents (PID=7)

	Observations	Mean	Standard Dev.	Min	Max
Democrats	668	39.88	24.26	0	100
Independents	666	59.26	23.17	0	100
Republicans	669	41.73	24.14	0	100
Elected Officials	672	34.81	23.82	0	100

Table A1.2f: CMS 2022 Feeling Thermometer among Republican Leaners (PID=7)

	Observations	Mean	Standard Dev.	Min	Max
Democrats	677	32.76	25.76	0	100
Independents	680	66.21	22.51	0	100
Republicans	676	63.48	22.91	0	100
Elected Officials	681	34.20	25.64	0	100

Table A1.3: CMS 2022 Feeling Thermometer among individuals who say “Party identity isn’t important”

	Observations	Mean	Standard Dev.	Min	Max
Democrats	2,672	47.02	28.37	0	100
Independents	2,659	56.92	21.38	0	100
Republicans	2,668	48.99	28.90	0	100

Table A1.4: Predicting Higher FT for Independents (Multiple Regression)

Variable	Coef.	SE	t	P > t
<i>Partisanship</i>				
Strong Democrat	--	--	--	--
Not very strong Democrat	6.31	2.45	2.57	0.010
<i>Lean Democrat</i>	20.79	2.79	7.44	0.000
<i>Pure independent</i>	17.12	3.01	5.68	0.000
<i>Lean Republican</i>	23.33	3.61	6.47	0.000
Not very strong Republican	6.26	3.17	1.97	0.049
Strong Republican	7.69	3.31	2.32	0.020
<i>Demographic controls</i>				
Female	- 1.51	1.67	-0.90	0.368
Age	-0.10	0.47	-2.16	0.031
Education	0.54	0.56	0.97	0.333

Latino/a	-0.33	3.08	-0.11	0.915
Black	7.42	2,82	2.63	0.009
Ideology	-2.71	0.83	-3.28	0.001
Constant	55.22	4.33	12.74	0.000
<i>N</i> = 995				

F(12, 982) = 9.87; Prob > f = 0.0000

Table A1.5: Predicting Higher FT for Democrats (Multiple Regression)

Variable	Coef.	SE	t	P > t
<i>Partisanship</i>				
Strong Democrat	--	--	--	--
Not very strong Democrat	-10.20	3.00	-3.40	0.001
Lean Democrat	-15.77	2.98	-5.30	0.000
Pure independent	-41.61	5.26	-7.92	0.000
Lean Republican	-60.10	6.17	-9.75	0.000
Not very strong Republican	-47.05	7.07	-6.65	0.000
Strong Republican	-51.84	8.44	-6.14	0.000
<i>Demographic controls</i>				
Female	6.28	3.06	2.05	0.040
Age	0.14	0.09	1.51	0.131
Education	-0.40	0.80	-0.50	0.616
Latino/a	-4.12	3.20	-1.29	0.198
Black	4.17	4.11	1.01	0.311
Ideology (higher values more conservative)	-2.89	1.47	-1.97	0.049
Constant	80.54	5.91	13.62	0.000
<i>N</i> = 987				

F(12, 974) = 40.39; Prob > f = 0.0000

Table A1.6: Predicting Higher FT for Republicans (Multiple Regression)

Variable	Coef.	SE	t	P > t
<i>Partisanship</i>				
Strong Democrat	--	--	--	--
Not very strong Democrat	8.90	2.42	3.67	0.000
Lean Democrat	3.97	2.03	1.91	0.057
Pure independent	18.99	2.81	6.79	0.000
Lean Republican	54.87	2.81	19.55	0.000
Not very strong Republican	49.46	3.02	16.40	0.000
Strong Republican	67.29	2.58	26.06	0.000
<i>Demographic controls</i>				
Female	- 0.82	1.40	0.58	0.559
Age	- 0.02	0.04	-0.53	0.594
Education	- 1.43	0.46	-3.12	0.002
Latino/a	2.08	2.39	0.87	0.383
Black	2.67	2.38	1.12	0.262
Ideology (higher values for more conservative)	2.23	0.74	-3.02	0.003
Constant	12.13	3.53	3.43	0.001
<i>N</i> = 993				

F(12, 974) = 213.26; Prob > f = 0.0000

Chapter 2: Partisanship and Independence - Does Polarization Change In-group Affect Among Nonpartisans (and Partisans)?

Abstract

Does priming independents and independent leaners to think about polarization and even violence resulting from polarization change evaluations of independents, Democrats, and Republicans? Existing research in political science generally considers independents to be "hidden partisans" who hold preferences on policy issues and candidates similar to partisans but go undercover because of contentious politics and political divides (Klar & Krupnikov, 2016). Other research reveals multiple dimensions of partisanship in which the strength of two-party attachment and a preference for independence are distinct and unrelated (Weisberg, 1980). Under this condition, making contentious politics more salient would not change in-group affect among independents. This study tests under what conditions independents express in-group affect for other independents; I hypothesize that giving non-partisans information about interparty conflict will make in-group feelings among independents more salient. It uses a series of randomized survey experiments to examine if independents, leaners, and partisans given different frames/information about polarization change their in-group affect and out-group antipathy. Results show the experiment generally did not change non-partisans' feelings for other independents. The null results may be because the questions used for the survey experiments were not strong enough, or that independence is more enduring than previously believed.

Executive Summary

The puzzle: We live in a world with record high levels of affective polarization in US politics - does this affect the way nonpartisans feel about themselves and partisans?

Research question: After discovering that independents express an in-group affect for other non-partisans (Chapter 1), can we use survey experiments about political polarization to inflate this sentiment?

Why it matters: In classic political science research independents were a dimension of partisanship and their attitudes were measured and studied relative to partisans (Weisberg 1980). Today, scholars of affective polarization focus on people who affiliate with the Democratic and Republican parties, while independents are understudied. The results of this study add to our understanding of independence as a component of partisanship.

What we expect: Building on insights from the hidden partisan hypothesis (Klar and Krupnikov, 2016), the survey experiments test if contentious party politics is a reason why such a high number of people in the US identify as independent/have a high affect for other independents. If the results are null, we can assume the strength of independence (Weisberg, 1980) is largely the factor at play or the treatments were too weak. Some people prefer independents, regardless of whether they lean toward one party or another, or whether they are prompted by the problem of growing political polarization.

Introduction

Much of the research in American politics on partisanship focuses on growing affective polarization between people who identify with the Republican versus Democrat Parties. Iyengar and Westwood in their seminal piece (2015) demonstrate how hostile feelings (and emotions) for the opposing party are ingrained, habitual, or automatic in voters' minds. Americans continue to experience extreme divides over a wide range of policy issues and political leaders, with extensive research focused on affective polarization by measuring attitudes and opinions among partisans (i.e., Republicans and Democrats) (Iyengar et al., 2012, Huddy et al., 2015; Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Zingher, 2022; Mason 2018). Party preferences can drive people to make choices outside of the political realm, including what they eat, what they wear, medical care, and where they live (Dyck & Person-Merkowitz, 2023). Even large-scale experiments manipulating algorithms on Facebook to reduce polarized information content for thousands of people cannot change the behavior and opinions of partisans (Nyhan et al., 2023). It is well-documented that political polarization has grown over the past two decades (Abramowitz, 2018) with public opinion scholars focusing primarily on partisans. Does the rise of polarization affect the way nonpartisans feel about themselves and the two parties?

Polarization scholars rarely consider independents, now a plurality of US adults. These party outsiders are understudied. Previous research defines independents who lean towards one of the two major political parties as “hidden partisans” who disdain contentious politics and prefer to keep their political views private (Klar & Krupnikov, 2016). Another motivation for the rise of independent politics may be a preference for other people who are not partisan. Building on Weisberg’s (1980) concept of multiple dimensions of partisanship, I argue it is critical to incorporate independents in the study of partisanship to more accurately measure and understand polarization. Does growing party polarization shape in-group affect among independents? Or do

independents have warm feelings for other non-partisans that are unrelated to how they feel about the two major parties, but consistent with a multidimensional concept of partisanship (Weisberg, 1980)?

The theory of negative and positive partisan identities sheds light on independent identities in the US and beyond - revealing a dimension to partisanship that opposes or agrees with both parties. Working four decades ago before the current spike in mass and elite polarization, Weisberg (1980) argues for a more nuanced understanding of independents than those who are solely uninformed and non-ideological (Campbell et al., 1960). Rather than perceiving this group as the simple midpoint between Democrats and Republicans, independents might negatively identify with a political party or even identify positively with both. Using factor analysis of indicators of party identification from the 1980 CPS National Election Study, Weisberg found four separate dimensions to party identification: 1) an independent factor, 2) a partisan direction factor, 3) a strength of partisanship factor, and 4) a party system factor. Correlations using feeling thermometer scales (0-100) indicate that some partisans dislike independents, some independents dislike partisans, some people dislike both partisans and independents, and others dislike both. For Weisberg (1980) and other scholars working at this time, independence is a dimension of partisanship, distinct from how people view the two-party system.

Chapter 1 of this dissertation found people who identify as independent have an in-group affect (i.e., positive feelings) about others who are also non-partisans, similar to how Democrats have positive feelings for other Democrats and Republicans for Republicans (see also Kamieniecki, 1988). This in-group affect is another reason to identify as independent beyond disdain for the two major political parties or hidden partisanship. Can in-group affect

among independents (shown in Chapter 1) be manipulated or changed by priming respondents to think about polarization and inter-party conflict? I hypothesize that priming independents about polarization and contentious politics will make them rate other independents higher, consistent with the hidden partisan thesis.

This study seeks to investigate if independents express in-group affect with other independents because of concerns about high polarization or rather because of a belief in independence. It uses a series of survey experiments from a 2020 nationally representative sample to explore these questions.

The results of Chapter 2 find when priming independents to think about polarization or even violence resulting from polarization, in-group affect among independents did not change. Survey experiments are used to manipulate the informational context when people answer feeling thermometer questions asking them to rate their feelings about partisan groups. The experiments prompt people to consider how concerned they are about polarization in Washington DC, elected officials working across party lines, and attention to the Jan 6th attack on the US Capitol. Respondents were then asked to rate Democrats, Republicans, and independents with the control group not receiving information about polarization. Results find independents rated other independents highly whether or not they received information about polarization and contentious politics. The result suggests in-group affect among independents is robust to changing contexts, such as growing political polarization. It is consistent with Weisberg's (1980) findings that some people are high on an "independence" dimension of partisanship that is not necessarily related to views about party politics. If a multidimensional conception of partisanship is at play, then scholars of affective polarization need to include independents in their work.

Theory of Multidimensionality of Party Identification: Independence vs. Partisan Strength

The concept of partisanship as multidimensional provides the logic for why independents have a higher affect for other non-partisans (see Chapter 1) and why growing polarization may not change their in-group affect (tested in Chapter 2). Some people prioritize independence, which is a separate dimension from the strength of partisanship, as discussed below.

Classic research in political science using quantitative survey data challenged the traditional concept of party identification and its measurement. Early work by Petrocik (1974) showed the presence of non-monotonic partisan attitudes across the seven groups identified by the classic partisanship scale (strong Republican to strong Democratic) built on American National Election Study (ANES) items. This spawned literature four decades ago pointing out the flaws of the linear classic scale; many of which the arguments still relevant today. Petrocik (1974) finds that typical conclusions about the behaviors of independents and partisans are not correct, particularly in the case of leaning independents and weak partisans. Results indicate that leaning independents are higher on some types of political involvement than weak identifiers. Independent leaners are less likely to identify and vote a straight ticket, but they are more politically involved than weak identifiers. This implies that the categories of strength of partisanship are out of order - not related monotonically in an ordered system consisting of sets where each set is contained in the previous set.

Petrocik's early work finds that the most important factors affecting the likelihood of being an independent leaner or a weak partisan are education, income, race, and region - with education and income making up much of the variance in the probability of being a leaner. Leaners participate in election campaigns at a higher rate than weak identifiers because leaners

are more educated and therefore some have higher incomes and enjoy advantages over weak identifiers that are relevant to involvement. These same patterns are evident today, with the addition of non-whites who are more likely to identify as independents and leaners (Hajnal & Lee, 2011).

As discussed above, negative and positive partisan identities are an important dimension of partisanship with some people opposed to both parties. Using factor analysis of indicators of party identification from the 1980 CPS National Election Study, Weisberg (1980) found four separate dimensions to party identification: 1) an independent factor, 2) a partisan direction factor, 3) a strength of partisanship factor, and 4) a party system factor. The results using feeling thermometer scales and correlations found some independents negatively identify with one political party and positively with another, or they identify positively with both or dislike both. The results highlight that favoring independence is more than a dislike of political parties.

Valentine and Van Wingen (1980) find independent leaners are more independent, not more partisan than weak party identifiers, and conclude partisan strength and independence are two distinct entities. Building on Weisberg (1980) and using the 1980 and 1984 American National Election Study and CPS surveys, Kamieniecki (1988) finds political independents exhibit a greater affect for other non-partisans than disdain for the parties using correlations with feeling thermometer scales, consistent with the results of Chapter 1. His work also shows people high on the strength of independence scale are more likely to reject the parties. In contrast, people with higher partisan strength are associated with more support for parties and opposition to independence. This notion resembles Klar and Krupnikov's work (2016), which suggests that an independent identity might develop in opposition to established political parties.

Weisberg and the other scholars working during this period interpret this litany of findings to mean that the public sees political independence as more complex than the absence of identification with one of the two major political parties. This classic research inspired by Weisberg's theory of multidimensionality suggests that political independence is its own dimension, separate from the strength of partisanship. Consistent with this early research, we might expect independents to exhibit positive in-group affect (emotions) for other independents regardless of levels of polarization.³

Affective Polarization in the US

As polarization among elites and the mass public has grown over the past two decades, scholars have been focused on Democrats and Republicans, and the study of people not affiliated with the two parties (independents) was largely ignored (with some important exceptions noted above). Since the early work of Weisberg and his colleagues, the notion of affective polarization has taken a front seat in understanding partisanship in the US Iyengar and Westwood (2015) show how hostile feelings for the opposing party are ingrained, habitual, and automatic in voters' minds. Affective polarization stems from the human need to build social identities and group affiliations around stable shared identities (Iyengar et al., 2019). Individuals represent complex packages of these broad socioeconomic and cultural categories. However, researchers have shown that individuals instinctively self-image themselves as representative of broader groups (Brewer, 1991; Tajfel, 1978). Existing measures of affective polarization focus only on partisans (Iyengar et al., 2012) and have overlooked the study of

³ Today Weisberg's research is not well integrated into contemporary political science. This may be because the rise of polarization at the elite and mass level moved scholars away from studying independents. Fifty years ago, the empirical research was more simple and relied on correlations and scaling. Independents as protest voters was solidified by the work of Stone and Rapport's book *Three's a Crowd: The Dynamic of Third Parties, Ross Perot, and the Republican Resurgence* (2007). Political scientists may also have partisan biases, as support for third-party candidates (i.e., Nader, Perot, etc.) can disrupt two-party politics where the losing candidate can win the presidency.

independents. But if partisanship is multi-dimensional and includes independents, then scholars of affective polarization need to include independents in their work.

Party affiliation is an important basis for individuals' self-conceptions as well as in-group and out-group animosity (Huddy et al., 2015). This automatic identification is part of a series of behavioral consequences that inevitably flow from identification with a party (Iyengar et al., 2019). Political scientists have shown that group identities (demographic, geographic, ideological, religious) are often the lines upon which political parties are formed due to their stability and significance (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967; Mason, 2018). Division in society into in and out-groups is an instinctive part of human social identification and the existence of an in-party (i.e., "our" party) necessitates an out party or many out parties (the opposing party, or out party; see Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

The sorting of Americans into two camps with strong party attachments is key to understanding the emergence of affective polarization. A half-century ago the parties lacked the ideological and demographic homogeneity to form the basis of identity to motivate in and out-group behavior but that has changed (Abramowitz, 2018). Today, the sorting of social groups into parties has led to an environment where partisanship plays a larger role than it did previously (Mason, 2018). The American public has effectively sorted itself into opposing parties which are now more homogeneous in terms of religion/non-religious, geography, demographics, ideology, values, policy, etc. (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Hetherington, 2009; Somer & McCoy, 2018). When the parties are ideologically homogenous, partisans are more likely to view out-party members as socially distant (Roccas & Brewer, 2002) and more likely to perceive both in and out-partisans as ideologically extreme (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016). The decline of cross-cutting identities further fuels affective polarization and contributes

to the otherizing of the out-group (Mason, 2015; 2018).

Partisan sorting creates an environment where individuals can more easily make generalized inferences about the out party and its members, regardless of the accuracy of those inferences. As the groups become more dissimilar, animosity increases and reinforces how social identities play a key role in growing levels of affective polarization (Iyengar et al., 2019).

In a new book, *The Power of Partisanship*, Dyck and Person-Merkowitz (2023) find that party attachments are stronger and more malleable than underlying values or ideology. Political polarization in the current information echo system creates more divergences and party preferences drive people to make choices outside of the political realm, including what they eat, what they wear, and what care they drive. In contrast, the authors find political independents respond to their environmental context in more rational and informed ways than partisans and less divisive.

Partisan attitudes are also resilient to changing informational contexts. A major study of Facebook and Instagram users attempted to alter the algorithms driving the way posts were delivered to reduce polarizing messages (Nyhan et al., 2023). While it is well established that social media platforms funnel users with partisan information with which they are likely to agree (creating echo chambers), what is unknown is whether changing the algorithms could reduce political polarization. Nyhan and colleagues (2023) used Meta for data to run experiments that altered the feeds of thousands of people using these platforms leading up to the 2020 election to see if they could change political beliefs or polarization by exposing them to different types of information. In one experiment, one-third of the posts Facebook users saw from partisan sources were omitted. The results reveal that changing the algorithms and exposure to less polarizing information had little impact on reducing sentiments of opposing party antipathy, highlighting

how enduring partisanship is. How does this growing polarization affect independents' views of other non-partisans and partisans?

Independent Politics in an Era of Polarization

Before most research on affective polarization, Weisberg (1980) noted that the one-dimensional partisanship measure (i.e., strong Democrat - strong Republican) is unable to capture the possible distinction between (and combination of) positive and negative party identification as well as their changing relationship to each other over time. Research in political science generally considers independents to be "hidden partisans" who dislike the major parties and contentious politics but consistently vote for party candidates in two-party-centric elections (Keith et al., 1992). Klar and Krupnikov in *Independent Politics* (2016), argue that political fighting (i.e., divisive politics) leads citizens to hide their true partisan preferences. But concealing partisanship does not stop at self-reporting identification; such individuals also disengage from social and political actions that could reveal their partisan leaning including being less engaged in politics. Since most people want to make a positive impression on others (at least initially), they are reluctant to take on a label the public condemns, and instead, opt for one viewed more favorably.

Recent survey data supports the claim that independents, and many partisans, don't like the two major political parties. Today nearly one in two Americans are dissatisfied with the country's two-party system and hold negative opinions of both the Republican and Democratic Parties, and this sentiment has increased over the past two decades. The 2022 Collaborative Midterm Survey from Cornell (Enns, Barry & Schuldt, 2022) found only a third (34%) of US adults strongly agree (7%) or somewhat agree (27%) with the statement "My political views are adequately represented by the two-party system," while 46% disagree (26% somewhat and

24% strongly). A separate large sample 2022 Pew survey of 6,174 US adults also found the parties are increasingly unpopular; only 4 in 10 Americans (regardless of party affiliation) have a very or somewhat favorable opinion of the Democratic or the Republican parties and this negative sentiment is growing over the past two decades (Doherty, Kiley, Asheer & Price, 2022). Additionally, 44% of independents leaning Republicans and Democrats don't like either of the parties (Doherty, Kiley, Asheer & Price, 2022). This negative sentiment about the parties tracks growing affective polarization in the US, yet few scholars have explored how affective polarization affects non-partisans.

Since the January 6th attack on the US capitol, extreme party polarization can even be linked to violence - partisanship leads a sizeable minority of Americans to support violence or wish harm on the other party's leaders and followers, especially after they lose elections (Kalmoe & Mason, 2022). If contentious politics causes independents to go undercover, does it also cause independents to have a higher in-group affect for independents?

Consistent with Weisberg (1980), others argue that different factors drive in-group favoritism from outgroup contempt. While independents dislike people who are politically interested and too partisan (Klar, Krupnikov & Ryan, 2018), they may not express in-group affect for other independents. While Mason (2016) refers to the social psychology theory of in-groups and out-groups as tribal, in-group affinity and out-group disdain don't necessarily go together. Brewer (1999) argues negative out-group attitudes are not necessarily a by-product of in-group favoritism and vice versa. In-group identification can be defined as self-investment in the group, which encompasses being satisfied with one's group membership, feeling solidarity with the group members, and considering the group an important aspect of one's self-concept (Tajfel, 1978). It fosters a strong attachment and commitment to the group that is independent

of attitudes towards out-groups (Brewer et al., 1993; Brewer, 1999). Such findings suggest in-group affect among independents may not be dependent on rising polarization.

Recent research in comparative politics contends affective polarization doesn't necessitate party politics. Affective polarization is not necessarily about an attachment to a particular party (Appelstien et al., 2023). For instance, people can be affectively polarized based on whether they are pro or against Brexit, an issue that crosscuts the parties in the UK. Hobolt et al.'s (2021) finding that Brexit attitudes led to affective polarization suggests that partisan attachment is not a requirement for affective polarization. If independents are a loose ideological group, then they can also experience in-group affect and affective polarization. Such research implies polarization may be unrelated to in-group identity among independents.

This study explores these questions:

Hypothesis 1: When primed (i.e., given information) to think about polarization, independents and independent leaners will express more favorable in-group affect toward independents.

OR

Hypothesis 2: When primed to think about polarization, independents and independent leaners will not express more favorable in-group affect toward independents.

Data and Method

This study replicates the survey design from Chapter 1 but adds to it a randomized survey experiment designed to prime respondents about political divisions in the US immediately before measuring the feeling thermometer questions for partisans and non-partisans. Using a nationally representative sample of 1,000 US adults, the questions were run on the 2022 Comparative Election Survey (CES) before the US midterm elections. Using feeling thermometer questions, respondents were asked to rate Democrats, Republicans, and independents on a 0-100 scale. The feeling thermometer included the typical options

(Democrats and Republicans) as well as a novel option, independents. As a comparison, respondents were also asked to rate elected officials in Washington DC. Table 2.1 details the treatment groups and the control group which received no priming question.

Table 2.1 Experimental Survey Design about Contentious Politics

Control group	Treatment 1	Treatment 2	Treatment 3
No prime	Importance of political leaders working across party lines	Political divisions among partisans in Washington DC	Attention paid to the Jan 6 th insurrection
FT Qs: GOP, Dem, Independents, elected officials	Yes	Yes	Yes
N=250	N=250	N=250	N=250

The 1,000-person sample was divided into four groups: three treatments and one control. The control group received no priming question and was only asked to rate Republicans, Democrats, independents, and elected officials in Washington DC on a 0-100 feeling thermometer score.

The three treatment groups received additional information before being asked to give their feeling thermometer ranking of the aforementioned groups. The primes were designed to be similar to what has been used in previous research (Klar & Krupnikov, 2016) and to subtly get respondents to think about different forms of polarization in US politics (Zaller, 1992). The intention was to highlight the problem of polarization before being asked to rate partisans and non-partisans. The experiment sought to explore if priming independents to think about political divides and contentious politics would change how they evaluated independents and partisans.

Treatment group 1 aimed to prime respondents to think about the importance of political leaders working across party lines, before being given the question on FT questions. The priming question wording was, “How important is it that we have political leaders that can work across

the aisle?” with response options on a five-point Likert scale from very important to very unimportant. A majority (52%) said it was extremely or very important and an additional 31% somewhat important party leaders work together. Combined 83 percent of respondents agreed with the priming question.

Treatment group 2 was also primed to think about polarization before answering the feeling thermometer questions, but this time with an emphasis on inter-party conflict and the inability of parties to work together in Washington DC. Respondents were asked “This coming year, do you think Republicans and Democrats in Washington will work together more to solve problems or do you think they will bicker and oppose one another more than usual?” with response options – “work together more, bicker and oppose one another more than usual, or same as in past.” As expected, a large majority felt elected officials would bicker and oppose one another more than usual or the same as in the past. Only 9 percent of respondents felt Republican and Democratic party leaders would work together more this session, while 57 percent said they would “bicker and oppose one another more than usual” (i.e., polarization getting worse) and 24 percent said it would be the same as in the past. The majority thus felt polarization was getting worse.

Lastly, treatment group 3 intended to make respondents think about the Jan 6th, 2021, insurrection and polarization leading to violence. Respondents were asked “Overall, how much attention would you say has been paid to the (January 6, 2021) riot at the Capitol and its impacts?” with response options – “too much attention, too little attention, or about the right amount of attention.” Responses to the priming question were evenly divided with 33 percent saying too much attention, 31 percent too little, and 35 percent about right. Over two-thirds (68 percent) said too much or the right amount of attention, reflecting January 6th received a lot of

attention in the news media.

Results

1) Do Partisan Groups Respond Differently to the Priming Questions?

Despite the power of randomized survey experiments, a threat to this form of research is if different partisan groups respond to the treatments heterogeneously. To explore this concern, the treatment questions were recoded into binary variables to be used as the outcome variable in a logistic regression model for a pre-analysis check. Of the individuals who received treatment 1, 52% said it was very or extremely important for political leaders to work across party lines. These respondents were coded 1 for the analysis below – the remaining 48% were coded 0. In treatment 2, 57% of individuals believed the bickering between Democrats and Republicans would get worse (coded 1) and 43% believed it would stay the same or get better (coded 0). Lastly, in treatment 3, 33% believed there was too much attention paid to the Jan 6th insurrection (coded 1) and 67% believed it was about right or too little (coded 0).

Table 2.2 reports three logistic regression models using the treatments as dependent variables with binary variables for Democrats and Republicans with independents as the reference group using a 3-point party ID question. For treatments 1 and 2, the coefficients are not statically significant ($p > 0.05$) meaning that Democrats, Republicans, and independents did not read the question differently. That is, a roughly equal number of Democrats, Republicans, and independents are worried about rising polarization. However, for treatment 3 (Jan 6th), Republicans were more likely to believe that too much attention was paid to Jan 6th and Democrats were more likely to believe too little or just the right amount of attention compared to independents, as expected. Thus, treatment 3 is a weaker prime than treatments 1 and 2 which do not exhibit partisan bias.

Table 2.2: Do Partisans Respond Differently to the Experimental Priming Questions?

Covariates	Treatment 1: Extremely or Very Important Political Leaders Work Across Party Lines	Treatment 2: Democrats and Republicans will bicker and oppose more than usual	Treatment 3: Too much attention paid to Jan 6 th insurrection
Democrats	-0.08 (0.30)	0.52 (0.29)	-1.97** (0.45)
Republicans	0.04 (0.31)	0.21 (0.32)	1.30** (0.36)
Constant	-.16 (0.21)	-0.10 (0.19)	-0.42 (0.22)
LR Chi-Square	2.60	3.36	62.94
Prob > chi2	0.2728	0.1826	0.000
N	243	253	251

Unstandardized logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses estimated using CES survey weights

** P-value<0.01, * P-value <0.05

II) How do Independents (including leaners) Respond to the Contentious Politics Treatments?

Despite a large majority of Americans that believe polarization is a major problem, priming people to think the importance of political leaders working across party lines, growing political divides between Democrats and Republicans in Washington DC, or violence resulting from January 6th insurrection did *not* significantly change how independents feel about other independents when using FT scores (see Figure 2.1, grey bars) or how independents leaners (Republican or Democrat) feel about independents (see Figures 2.2 and 2.3, grey bars). The experiment suggests polarization does not change independents' sense of self-identity. Consistent with early work by Weisberg (1980), feelings about the party system are separate from independence and do not directly shape in-group affect among independents, consistent with the main research hypothesis 2.

In Figure 2.1, independents gave other independents a FT rating of 67 out of 100 in the control condition, significantly higher than other groups including Republicans, Democrats, or elected officials in Washington DC. When primed to think about the importance of political leaders working across party lines (treatment 1), the independents rating for independents as a

group dropped to 66.4, but this difference is not statistically significant ($t = -0.81$, $p = 0.42$). In the third group of bars, respondents were primed to evaluate whether political divides in the nation's capital were getting better or worse. Independents still rated other independents the highest (64/100) but again the differences when compared to the control group were not statistically significant ($t = -0.14$, $p = 0.87$). Finally, respondents in treatment group 4 were primed to think about January 6th. Independents rated other independents the highest (64/100) and this difference is not statistically significant compared to the control group ($t = -0.70$, $p = 0.49$). These results may indicate that either the primes were not strong enough, or the way independents process in-group affect is not driven by thinking about party polarization.

In Figure 2.2, independents who leaned GOP gave both Republicans and independents a FT rating of 60 out of 100 in the control condition, significantly higher than Democrats or elected officials in Washington DC. When primed to think about the importance of political leaders working across party lines (treatment 1), independents leaning GOP gave a slightly higher FT score for Republicans than they did independents (63 and 60 respectively), but this difference is not statistically significant from the control ($t = -1.18$, $p = 0.89$). The same pattern appears in the other treatment groups (treatments 2 and 3) where respondents still rated Republicans and independents by far the highest out of the four groups, but again the differences were not statistically significant compared to the control group (T2: $t = -0.14$, $p = 0.89$; T3: $t = -0.67$, $p = 0.75$).

In Figure 2.3, independents who leaned Democrat rated other independents the highest (70) and Democrats closely behind (67) in the control group. Although independents leaning Democrat felt more positively about independents than the party they lean toward (compared to Republican leaners), all three treatment conditions were statistically insignificant compared to

the control group. It is worth noting that when the survey was conducted in late October/early November 2022, Democrats controlled both chambers of Congress and the presidency and Republicans were the underdog or out-party in national government. While both independent-leaning Democrats and Republicans rated their closest party lower in the treatment conditions, these differences were not statistically significant with one exception. It is possible that another survey experiment with different primes could have resulted in significant differences.

Figure 2.1 Among Independents (3 Point Party ID) Mean FT for Partisan Groups by Treatment Group

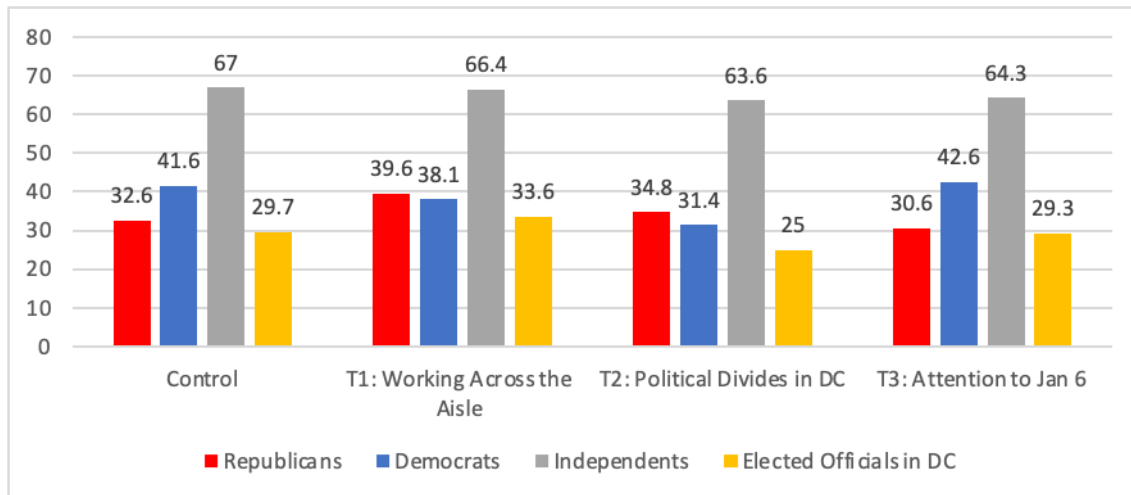


Figure 2.2 Among Independents Leaning GOP Mean FT for Partisan Groups by Treatment Group

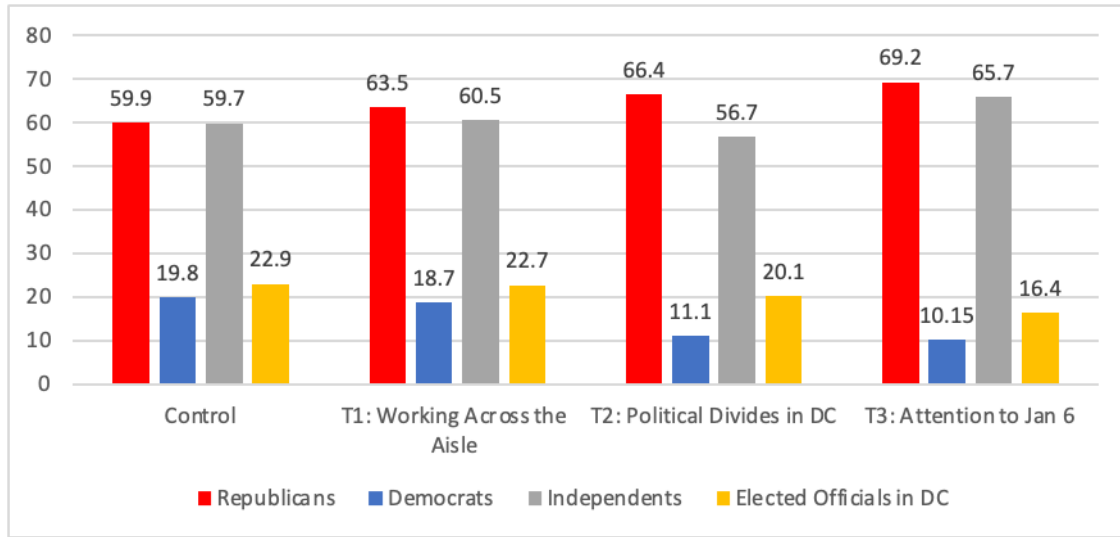
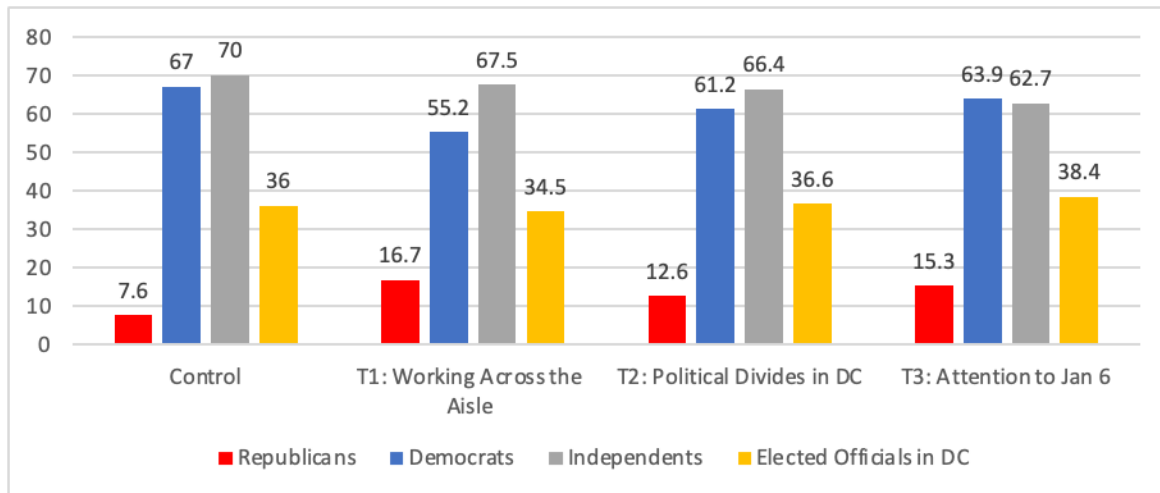


Figure 2.3 Among Independents Leaning Democrat Mean FT for Partisan Groups by Treatment Group



III) How do Partisans (Democrats and Republicans) Respond to the Polarization Experiment?

To recap, the experimental treatments asking respondents to think about political divides in Washington DC or January 6th did not significantly change how independents (including leaners) felt about their non-partisan group. However, among independents leaning Democrat, there was one case where the experiment lowered evaluations of Democrats (in one of three

conditions, statistically significant).

Figures 2.4-2.5 repeat the analysis presented above among independents but now show the results for a subsample of Republicans versus a subsample of Democrats and the mean feeling thermometer score for partisan groups. In the control condition, Republicans rate other Republicans very highly (75) (see Figure 2.4). In the three treatment conditions, Republican in-group affect for other Republicans modestly drops to between 70-71 (4-point difference), but this difference is not statistically significant in terms of independent sample t-tests from the control condition. Similarly, in the control condition, Democrats rate other Democrats very highly (77/100). In treatments 1 and 2, this rating drops to 74 and 75 (3 and 4 points) but the differences again are not statistically significant (see appendix).

Figure 2.4 Among Republicans Mean FT for Partisan Groups by Treatment Group

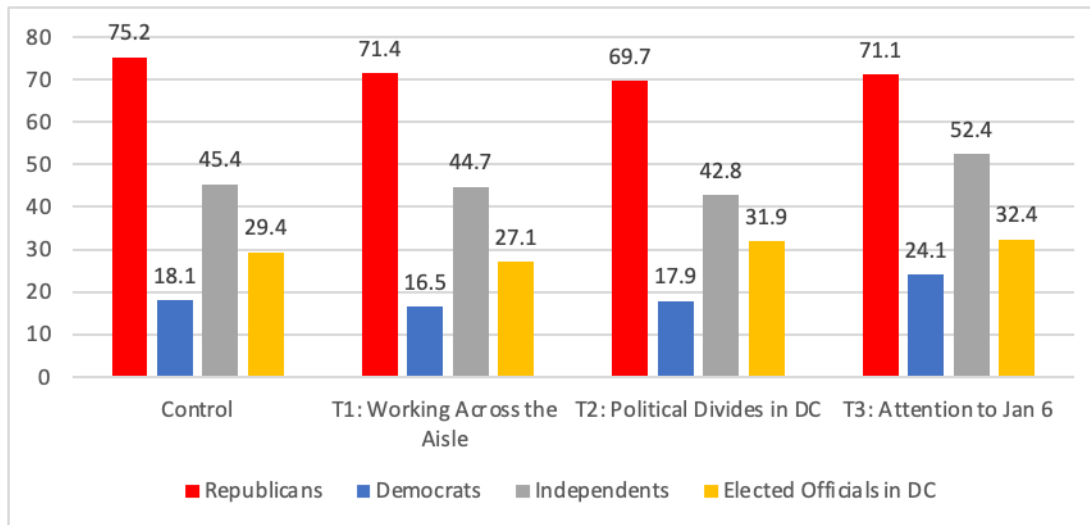
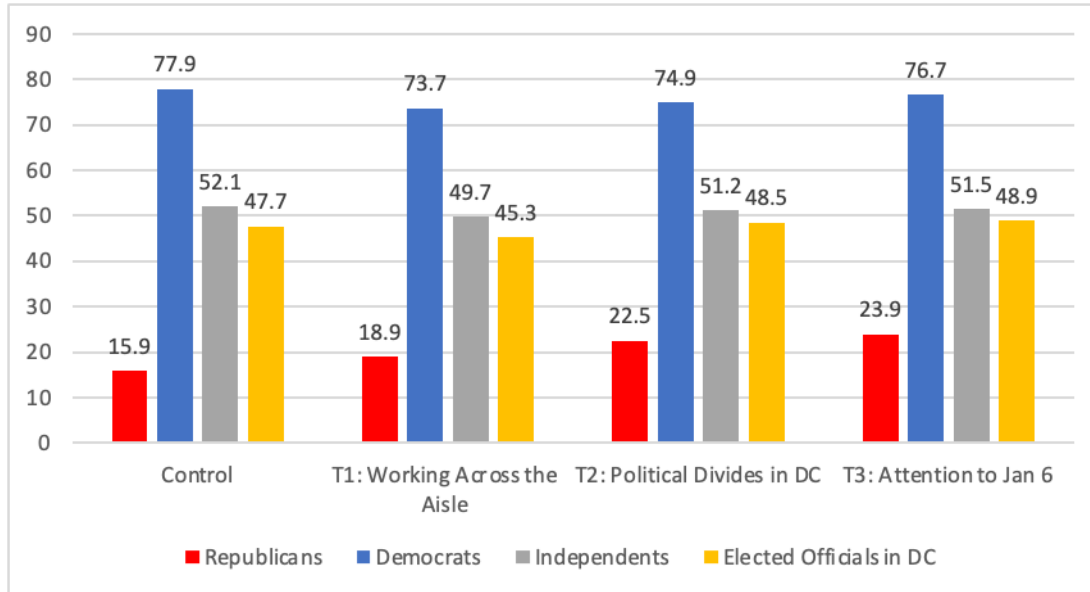


Figure 2.5 Among Democrats Mean FT for Partisan Groups by Treatment Group



Limitations of the Research Design

Despite widespread public concern that polarization is a problem, a randomized survey experiment asking people to think about contentious politics did not result in statistically significant changes to how independents evaluate other independents or to how partisans evaluate their in-group. When giving people additional information about interparty conflicts and even violence resulting from polarization, the affect for other independents remained constant and did not waver. This suggests that in-group affect among non-partisans is enduring, and stronger than something that can be modified with a survey experiment. Even changing Meta algorithms couldn't change the behavior and opinions of partisans (Nyhan et al., 2023).

Priming experiments are intended to subtly get respondents to think about other issues, without them realizing they are being primed. A majority of respondents reacted to the prime, suggesting they were effective to some degree. It is possible that a different research design could have used stronger primes, in which case the null results may be because the treatments

are too weak.

Conclusion

Polarization is widely recognized as a problem in American politics. A recent YouGov survey found a large majority of Republicans (73 percent), independents (65 percent), and Democrats (59 percent) "think that the country is more divided than usual." This sentiment is widespread and expressed by large majorities that live in cities, suburbs, and rural areas (McKown-Dawson, 2023). How does growing polarization affect non-partisans?

This study employed a randomized survey experiment using nationally representative survey data to examine if independents and independent leaners primed with different degrees of contentious politics change their in-group affect and out-group antipathy. Results indicate that among independents and leaners, contentious politics may modestly modify in-group affect for their nearest proximate party, but the experiment did change their feelings for other independents. The null results of the experiment suggest a preference for being independent remains a distinctive factor from views about the party system that can't be altered by asking people to think about polarization. With party attachments more powerful and pervasive than ever, the strength of independence may exhibit a similar stronghold. It is documented that independents are less likely to be influenced by partisan echo chambers in an increasingly polarized world and more likely to respond rationally (Dyck & Person-Merkowitz, 2023). Perhaps it isn't about being apolitical or distasteful for party politics, but rather the strength of independence is the key factor at play.

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Appendix Chapter 2

Table A2.2: Results for Independents (3 Point Party ID)- Mean FT for Partisan Groups

	Control group	Treatment 1	Treatment 2	Treatment 3
Mean Feeling Thermometer Score 0-100	Control Group	Contentious politics—Jan 6th	Contentious politics—GOP and Dems working together this session	Contentious politics—political leaders working across party lines
GOP	32.6	30.6	34.8	39.6
Democrat	41.6	42.6	31.4	38.1
Independent	67.01	64.3	63.6	66.4
Elected Officials DC	29.7	29.3	25.0	33.6
	N=250	N=250	N=250	N=250

Table A2.3: Results for Independents Leaners (7 Point Party ID) - Mean FT for Partisan Groups

Treatment group	Control group	Treat 1 Jan 6th	Treat 2 Work Together	Treat 3 political leaders cross party lines	Control group	Treat 1 Jan 6th	Treat 2 Work Together	Treat 3 political leaders cross party lines
	Lean Dem	Lean Dem	Lean Dem	Lean Dem	Lean GOP	Lean GOP	Lean GOP	Lean GOP
GOP	7.6	15.3	12.6	16.7	59.9	69.2	66.4	63.5
Democrat	67.0	63.9	61.2	55.2	19.8	10.15	11.1	18.7
Independent	70.0	62.7	66.4	67.5	59.7	65.7	56.7	60.5
Elected Officials DC	36.0	38.4	36.6	34.5	22.9	16.4	20.1	22.7

Chapter 3: Belief in Election Fraud in the 2020 Election: An Analysis of Partisans, Leaners, and Independents

Abstract

A prominent explanation for the prevalence of conspiracy theories is that they are a form of motivated reasoning, most common among liberals and conservatives who are highly knowledgeable about politics but have low political trust (Miller, Sanders, & Farhart, 2016). Previous research has focused on partisans rather than nonpartisans, leaving an important question unanswered: Are independents more immune to conspiratorial thinking since they are outside of partisan conflict? How do independents (including independent leaners) versus partisans view concerns about widespread fraud in the 2020 US presidential election? Does the type of election fraud make a difference? Building on the work by Klar and Krupnikov (2016) that argues independents are hidden partisans, this study aims to incorporate nonpartisans into research on conspiracy theories (Uscinski and Parent, 2014). It utilizes unique survey experiments placed on two nationally representative surveys: the 2020 and 2022 Congressional Election Survey (CES) of 1,000 US adults each. Across the two years, results indicate Republicans believed there was widespread fraud in the 2020 election regardless of the source (immigrants, mail ballots, dead people voting), while Democrats were much less likely to believe there was fraud of any sort. Independent leaners generally have stronger opinions (positive and negative) than their strong partisan counterparts on whether fraud played a role in the 2020 presidential election. Rather than solely the domain of partisans, nonpartisans widely believe in conspiracy theories.

Executive Summary

The puzzle: Are independents more immune to conspiratorial thinking since they are outside of partisan conflict? Or do independents who lean towards one political party or another, as well as pure independents believe or reject conspiracy theories similar to people who strongly identify with a political party?

Research question: How do independents (including independent leaners) versus partisans view concerns about widespread fraud in the 2020 US presidential election?

Why it matters: While most research on conspiratorial beliefs has focused on partisans, studying conspiracy theories through the lens of independents helps us better understand how the plurality of Americans is grappling with misinformation related to US democracy. It also sheds light on whether they have unique beliefs or have attitudes similar to partisans.

What we expect: Building on insights from the hidden partisan hypothesis (Klar and Krupnikov, 2016), we would expect independent leaners to respond in congruence with their partisan counterparts when answering questions about 2020 election fraud; Republican leaners are more likely to believe election fraud occurred whereas Democratic leaners are less likely.

Introduction

On November 15th, 2022, former President Donald Trump announced his candidacy for president in 2024 to supporters at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida. The former president repeated the claim (stated hundreds of times before) that the 2020 presidential election was stolen, and he was the rightful winner—it was the “Big Steal.” Numerous public opinion polls indicate that this highly salient conspiracy theory is widely believed among Republican partisans. A prominent explanation for the prevalence of conspiracy theories is that they are a form of motivated reasoning (Redlawsk, 2002), most common among Democrats and Republicans who are highly knowledgeable about politics but with low political trust (Miller, Sanders, & Farhart, 2016). Given that independents are outside the highly contentious two-party arena of US politics, are they more immune to conspiratorial thinking? How do independents, including leaners, view concerns about widespread fraud in the 2020 presidential election? Does it matter what type of fraud? *While most research on conspiratorial beliefs has focused on partisans, studying conspiracy theories through the lens of nonpartisans helps us better understand both independents and the growing problem of misinformation in a post-truth era* (Tufekci, 2017).

A 2021 national opinion poll found that more than half of Republican partisans believed widespread corruption occurred in the 2020 presidential election, much higher than in the past; six in 10 Republicans believe the November’s presidential election was stolen from Trump due to “widespread voter fraud” according to a Reuters/Ipsos poll of 1,005 respondents (Oliphant & Kahn, 2021). While decades of survey data before 2020 showed the public had generally high support for the integrity of US elections with relatively low perceptions of corruption, former President Trump was an outspoken proponent of election fraud, linked to absentee mail ballots

used widely during the COVID-19 pandemic. The *Washington Post's* fact-checking database found Trump made 30,573 false or misleading claims during his presidency, nearly half of which occurred in his final year as president; the database found Trump averaged about six claims a day in his first year as president, rising to 39 false or misleading claims a day in his final year (Kessler, 2021). Election fraud was a common topic. Since actual election fraud is extremely rare in US politics, these claims fall under the category of misinformation.

Conspiracy theories have been used to explain major events from national tragedies, terrorist attacks and wars, natural disasters, and mass violence to national accomplishments, election outcomes, and power structures (Uscinski & Parent, 2014). In the build-up to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and Crimea, Putin cited the conspiracy theory that Ukrainians were eating their babies to rally Russians around the cause (Maza, 2018). These widespread rumors have characterized recent US electoral cycles and have consequences including declining trust in government and democratic elections, the exacerbation of affective polarization, the proliferation of misinformation, and more (Lazer et al., 2018).

The belief in conspiracy theories can be exacerbated by political and ethnic group conflict as illustrated by the widespread belief former President Obama was not born in the US leading up to the 2008 election (an idea promoted by Trump before he ran for president). Research finds white Republicans who were both racially conservative and highly knowledgeable about politics had the most skepticism about Obama's birthplace (Jardina & Traugott, 2018). While latent predisposition to believe in conspiracy theories is often independent of ideology (Uscinski, Klofstad, & Atkinson, 2016) unless the conspiracy theory is promoted by an elected official for political gain (i.e., Trump's claims of election fraud or claims that Russia hacked electronic voting machines in the 2016 election), conspiracy theories may

also lead to increased violence (Klamoe & Mason, 2022), as witnessed by the January 6th insurrection.

A growing body of work has examined the psychological underpinnings of conspiracy theory endorsement, arguing that the propensity to believe in such misinformation and political rumors is a function of underlying predispositions and partisan-motivated reasoning. However, few scholars have studied if non-partisans endorse conspiracy theories. This study builds on research by Klar and Krupnikov (2016) on independents as hidden partisans to understand mass opinions about fraud in the 2020 US presidential election. Drawing on a unique survey experiment placed on both the 2020 and 2022 Congressional Election Survey (CES) of 2,000 US adults combined, the results find independent leaners have equal to or stronger opinions than strong partisans on the issue of election fraud.

Conspiracy Theories and Politics

Scholars working in social psychology have identified conspiratorial thinking as a form of motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1980; Lau & Redlawsk, 2006; Redlawsk, Civettini, & Emmerson, 2010; Bolsen, Druckman, & Cook, 2014), common among liberals and conservatives who are highly knowledgeable about politics but with low political trust (Miller, Sanders & Farhart, 2016). High levels of political knowledge have been found to exacerbate motivated reasoning and using heuristics for information processing generally (Bartels, 2008; Lau & Redlawsk, 2001; Lodge & Taber, 2013). In a study when individuals were given the same number of pro and con arguments about an issue, less informed respondents chose to look at a balanced number of pro and con arguments, whereas the highly informed chose to look at a higher proportion of attitude-consistent than attitude-inconsistent arguments (Taber & Lodge, 2006).

Belief in conspiracy theories is a psychological phenomenon (Hoffstadter, 1964) that until recently has been relatively understudied; they are part of a spectrum of psychological responses to politics, conflict, and society (Uscinski & Parent, 2014). Not only are conspiracy theories widely believed by the mass public across all partisan stripes (Enders et al., 2022), but they are promoted by those who feel defenseless in a power conflict (Douglas et al., 2019). Conspiracy theorists in general are advocated by outsiders or underdogs, strategically used by the losing side of a political conflict to protect themselves. Conspiracy theories run the gamut of misinformation and can be intensified during periods of high political polarization or societal conflict. For example, during the US Civil War, belief in conspiracy theories about the British forces was widespread among the US colonists (Uscinski & Parent, 2014). They can be promoted by liberals, conservatives, men, women, and people of any race, ethnicity, religion, region, age, or other demographic factor (Enders et al., 2022).

Under growing affective polarization (Mason, 2018; Gidron, Adams & Horne, 2020), an increase in beliefs in a conspiracy may occur as partisanship is an important social group attachment like other group identities such as race/ethnicity, region, gender, or age. Conspiracy theories, after all, are strategies used by political underdogs or electoral losers (Miller, Farhart, & Sanders, 2021) to deal with intergroup conflict, referred to as an early warning system for group security (Uscinski & Parent, 2014). The party not in control of government or “out-party” is more vulnerable to conspiracies, as they have fewer chances of acquiring power and political actors use conspiratorial rhetoric to mobilize supporters. Conspiracy theory beliefs are also associated with political violence (Greenhill & Oppenheim, 2017), such as that which occurred on January 6, 2021, at the US Capitol Building.

Using survey questions placed on the 2012 Cooperative Election Study (CES), research finds that before elections, roughly equal numbers of people from both parties believe that the election will be rigged if their side loses, but that electoral losers (rather than winners) tend to believe in fraud after elections at higher rates (Edleson et al., 2017). Similar studies find losers, especially if the loss is surprising, may be more likely to be motivated to search for an explanation. Miller, Farhart, and Sanders (2021) report that electoral losers are more likely to engage in conspiratorial thinking than electoral winners. Results based on three election years in the US (2016, 2018, and 2020) provide consistent support for the "conspiracies are for losers" hypothesis. Similarly, people who experience misfortune, such as a lost job, have been found to endorse conspiracy theories as a means of explaining their bad fortunes. In the published research, it is assumed that losers are partisan losers.

Uscinski, Klofstad, and Atkinson (2016) sought to answer why people believe in conspiracy theories. Their study developed a four-item scale to measure latent predispositions for conspiratorial thinking among the general public based on work by McCloskey and Cong (1985). Their results suggest belief in individual conspiracy theories is highly dependent on an individual's latent predispositions, i.e., some individuals are more at risk. In their study, the authors experimentally manipulated an experiment involving media bias, a component of the conservative political discourse. Nevertheless, new information also exhibits strong effects on low-information partisans in the case of new conspiracy theories coming to the fore. The results of the experiment using information cues found new information appears to have only limited success in reversing conspiratorial beliefs— it is not information that drives conspiratorial beliefs, it is the latent predispositions that matter most. Additionally, the results indicate that partisanship strongly affects the propensity to see a conspiracy when the conspiracy has a partisan element.

These results are consistent with previous research focusing on partisan affect and motivated reasoning (i.e., Lau & Redlawsk, 2006).

People also turn to conspiracy theories when important psychological needs aren't being met. Douglass et al. (2017) show that such narratives can fulfill our need for security, for instance, when societal events seem random, and for social belonging. Such findings help explain why many Americans, including QAnon supporters, turned to extreme explanations for the COVID-19 pandemic. Daniel Romer suggests that nearly a third of US adults think the virus is a bioweapon created by the Chinese government (Romer & Jamieson, 2020).

A recent study in the *European Journal of Social Psychology* argues that conspiracy theories fulfill four basic principles: they impact people's health, personal relationships, and safety; they are universal in that beliefs in them are widespread across history, cultures, and geographies; they are affective (emotional) given that negative emotions and non-rational deliberations cause conspiracy beliefs (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018). Most importantly, belief in conspiracy theories is social, as they are closely associated with psychological motivations underlying intergroup conflict. Under high political conflict, conspiratorial thinking among partisans is likely to be common (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018; Uscinski & Parent, 2014). This suggests that independents should be less susceptible to conspiratorial thinking, unless they are actually just hidden partisans (Klar & Krupnikov, 2016), or people who prefer to keep their political beliefs private and avoid contentious politics but still align with the parties on policy issues. This study provides a test of the hidden partisan thesis by studying attitudes toward election fraud in US elections promoted by a Republican politician.

This topic has also been studied by scholars working in the field of public opinion, voting, and elections—indicating that the type of election fraud may matter. Given the

widespread discussion of election fraud since the Trump presidency in the 2016 presidential election, Alvarez and Li (2021) find that voters who cast mail ballots are less confident about their votes being counted correctly than in-person voters. The authors use an online survey of registered voters in a single election jurisdiction, Orange County (CA), implemented immediately after the November 2018 midterm elections. Using item response theory as well as voters' perceptions of various elections or voter fraud to measure voting experience and social media usage, they find for all voters (mail voting or in-person voting), individuals with poor experiences with the voting process report less confidence in the election. Additionally, voters who have strong concerns about election fraud are less likely to report being confident in the election. These results suggest that conspiracy theories can be associated with a decline in voter confidence in election administration at the national level. Given that attitudes about election fraud are colored both by strategic factors and psychological phenomena (e.g., a latent tendency to believe in conspiracy theories), how does partisanship affect beliefs about election integrity in the 2020 election? The following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 1: Across partisan and nonpartisan groups, belief in election fraud in the 2020 presidential election will vary when prompted about different examples of election fraud.

Hypothesis 2: Republican partisans will be more likely to believe in conjectures about election fraud compared to Democrats.

Incorporating Independents

Much of the previous research (Miller, Farhart, & Sanders, 2021; Edleson et al., 2017), focuses on partisans. However, extensive research on the US two-party system finds independents, or those without a party attachment, are the least likely to vote, be mobilized by campaigns and parties, or have feelings of efficacy. This group has been found to have the lowest political trust (Donovan & Bowler, 2013) and political knowledge. These are factors that may overlap with a tendency to believe in conspiracy theories.

Today, dissatisfaction with two-party politics is at an all-time high. A 2021 Gallup poll reports that 62 percent of Americans believe the Democratic and Republican parties are doing a poor job of representing their constituents and that a third party is needed (Jones, 2021). Four in 10 Americans don't identify with either of the two parties, labeling themselves political independents (Gallup, 2023). However, scholars find that most independents lean toward one of the two parties and in two-party elections vote like partisans (Keith et al., 1992).

Research in political science generally considers independents to be "hidden partisans" who dislike the major parties and contentious politics but consistently vote for party candidates in two-party centric elections (Klar & Krupnikov 2016; Keith et al., 1992). On policy issues, independents who lean toward one party or the other may have preferences as strong as self-identified strong partisans (Keith et al. 1992). Pure independents, roughly 10 percent of the US adult population, tend to be less engaged in politics and are less likely to vote (Dimock et al., 2021). Keith and colleagues (1992) argue that the supposed increase in political independence in the United States is a myth. They find that leaners vote like partisans and resemble partisans in many behaviors and attitudes, while true independent voters remain as politically uninformed and inactive as they were originally described in *The American Voter* (Campbell et al., 1960).

Klar and Krupnikov in their book, *Independent Politics* (2016), present carefully considered evidence on how nominally independent voters participate - or refuse to participate - in politics. Their core insight is that some Americans shy away from partisanship because it is perceived as socially undesirable, posing serious costs to a vibrant democracy. From the water cooler to the voting booth, "people refuse to engage inconsequential political actions simply because these actions could make them appear partisan" (p. 3). The argument is that political flighting leads citizens to hide their true partisan preferences. Thus, a growing number of people self-report as independents in an attempt to hide their preferences. Klar and Krupnikov contend that people go undercover because the partisan label is associated with negativity, disagreement, and gridlock. Since people want to make a positive impression on others, they are reluctant to take on a label the public condemns, and instead opt for one viewed more favorably. Two factors shape this result—the presence of partisan disagreement and an individual's level of concern with how others perceive him or her. The higher is each one, the more we are likely to see partisanship masked. In a follow-up study, Klar, Krupnikov, and Ryan (2018) find that Americans broadly dislike people who are politically interested and contentious in politics, especially those whose identity is rooted in partisanship.

Building on work by Klar and Krupnikov (2016) who argue independents who tend to vote for one of the two US major parties are hidden partisans, it may be independents are the most susceptible to political rumors given their lower trust in government, the parties, and political efficacy. Partisan leaners see politics as a private decision, not a public identity, and may hold beliefs as strong or stronger than partisans in accordance with the hidden partisan hypothesis. Notably, many independent leaners use the independent label to distance themselves from their party but are just as ideological (Klar, Krupnikov, & Barry, 2022). They have been

referred to as “disgruntled partisans.” Thus, it is expected that independents who lean Democrat will be less susceptible to beliefs in election fraud, and independents who lean Republican will be more susceptible to beliefs in election fraud.

Hypothesis 3: Independents who define themselves as “leaners” will act in accordance (both directionally and in terms of degree of belief) with their partisan counterparts consistent with the hidden partisanship theory.

Finally, innovative research in political psychology argues some people are more susceptible to believing in conspiracy theories regardless of ideology. Uscinski, Klofstad, and Atkinson (2016) develop a “summary conspiratorial predispositions measure” (p. 5) by using four statements to tap underlying conspiratorial predispositions adapted from McClosky and Chong's (1985) work (see more discussion below). This study contends that even after controlling for this latent predisposition to believe in or reject conspiracy theories, partisan leaners will have as strong if not stronger attitudes about election fraud in the US than strong partisans.

Hypothesis 4: Controlling for latent conspiratorial thinking (Uscinski, Klofstad, & Atkinson, 2016), partisanship will predict belief in conspiratorial thinking with leaners mirroring strong partisans.

Data and Methods

To gauge public attitudes/perceptions of election fraud and its relationship to partisan and nonpartisan identity, this study draws on an original randomized survey experiment placed on two nationally representative surveys of US adults: the 2020 and 2022 Cooperative Election

Study (CES, formerly CCES) for a total of 2000 respondents. The CES is a nationally representative 60,000+ person internet survey conducted by the survey firm YouGov. Of the respondents, 1,000 nationally representative respondents were asked about their concerns about different forms of election fraud each year.

Respondents were randomly assigned to receive one of four questions about voter fraud in US elections.⁴ Below is the question wording for the survey experiment and the main results. Each treatment group had roughly 250 respondents. Table 3.1 shows randomization was successful, and the treatment groups are balanced. The question language is as follows: “For the following questions, please answer with a “true” or “false” response.”

Table 3.1 Summary Statistics (Mean) Pre-Treatment Covariates for Randomization (CES)

Randomization-Treatment Groups	Age	Education	Female	White	Conservative Ideology (1-5)
2022					
Voter fraud	50.10	3.52	.53	.70	2.88
Illegal immigrants voting	50.51	3.53	.52	.69	2.90
Dead voter registration	50.59	3.68	.57	.73	2.96
Mail in voting fraud	50.11	3.49	.55	.67	3.01
2020					
Voter fraud	52.28	3.74	.61	.68	3.01
Illegal immigrants voting	52.75	3.81	.53	.77	2.97
Dead voter registration	50.31	3.76	.57	.77	2.94
Mail in voting fraud	51.78	3.91	.57	.75	2.93

Results

Table 3.2 shows the percentage of Americans from the survey experiment for the control (generic election fraud) versus the three treatment groups (mail, registrations of dead people, and illegal immigrants voting) that believe in election fraud. In 2020, a high percentage (~41%) believed voter fraud is a major issue in US elections (generic question) dropping to 36% in the

⁴ This study does not employ panel data. The samples from the 2020 and 2022 CES are separate cross-sections.

2022 survey. This statistic aligns with other national large sample surveys: according to the 2022 Comparative Midterm Election survey of 20,000 respondents, one-third (34%) of US adults said Biden was probably or definitely not the rightful winner of the 2020 election. This helps provide confidence in the results reported here.

A surprisingly high percentage of Americans believe the registration of dead people is often used. Over the two years of the study, there is an increase in the number of respondents who are unsure that “voter fraud is a major issue in US elections” over the two years. More than 38% believe "mail-in voting is not as secure as in-person voting" in 2020 and this rises by nearly 8.5% in 2022. The belief that illegal immigrants often vote in US elections was the lowest among the treatments, expressed by roughly 30% of the sample across the two-year period. Except for the last treatment group, the data does not find evidence to support hypothesis 1.

Table 3.2 Change in Belief in Election Fraud 2020-2022 US Adults, by Experimental Treatment Groups

	Control		Treatment 1		Treatment 2		Treatment 3	
	Voter fraud is a major issue in US Elections		Illegal immigrants often vote in US elections		Some people use the registration of dead voters to vote multiple times		Mail-in voting is not as secure as in-person voting	
Survey Yr	2020	2022	2020	2022	2020	2022	2020	2022
True	40.9	36.4	29.05	28.3	40.38	44.5	38.39	46.8
False	52.07	43.3	52.38	43.8	46.48	34.6	54.03	40.9
Don't know	7.83	20.26	18.57	27.9	13.15	21.0	7.58	12.3
Total	100		100		100		100	

Estimated using CES survey weights.

At the heart of this analysis, Table 3.3 reports the results of the survey experiment broken down by 7-point party identification from 1 (Strong Democrat) to 7 (Strong Republican).

Analyzing strong and not strong partisans, as well as leaners to the survey experiment reveals

important variations across the partisan groups. Across all treatment groups in 2020 and 2022, leaners were the most likely group to believe in election fraud as strong partisans, consistent with hypothesis 3.

Table 3.3 Percent Who Believe in Various Forms of Election Fraud 2020 & 2022: Partisanship by Experimental Treatment Groups

Survey	Strong Democrat		Not Strong Democrat		Lean Democrat		Indep.		Lean GOP		Not Strong GOP		Strong GOP	
	'20	'22	'20	'22	'20	'22	'20	'22	'20	'22	'20	'22	'20	'22
Voter fraud major issue	13.6	25.1	10.5	33.1	11.1	7.4	41.6	15.9	66.7	53.6	68.8	54.1	88.9	86.6
Illegal immigrants often vote	4.6	10.8	11.1	6.2	9.5	13.8	24.3	17.7	75	47.2	38.9	57.8	76.5	56
Use registration of dead voters	8.1	7.3	14.3	26.9	0	16.1	42.3	40.6	83.3	97.3	82.6	68.4	91.7	76.4
Mail-in voting is not as secure	5.4	32.6	28.6	41.3	0	6.8	32.4	37.5	80.8	95	80	65.3	84.9	70.2
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Estimated using CES survey weights.

Figure 3.1 Percent who believe “Voter fraud is a major issue” in 2020 & 2022

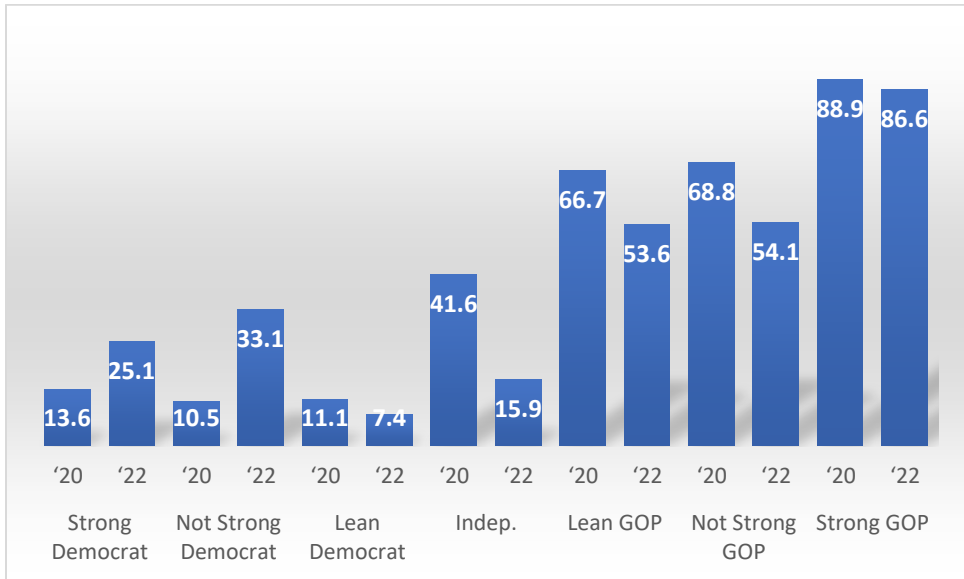


Figure 3.2 Percent who believe “Illegal immigrants often vote” in 2020 & 2022

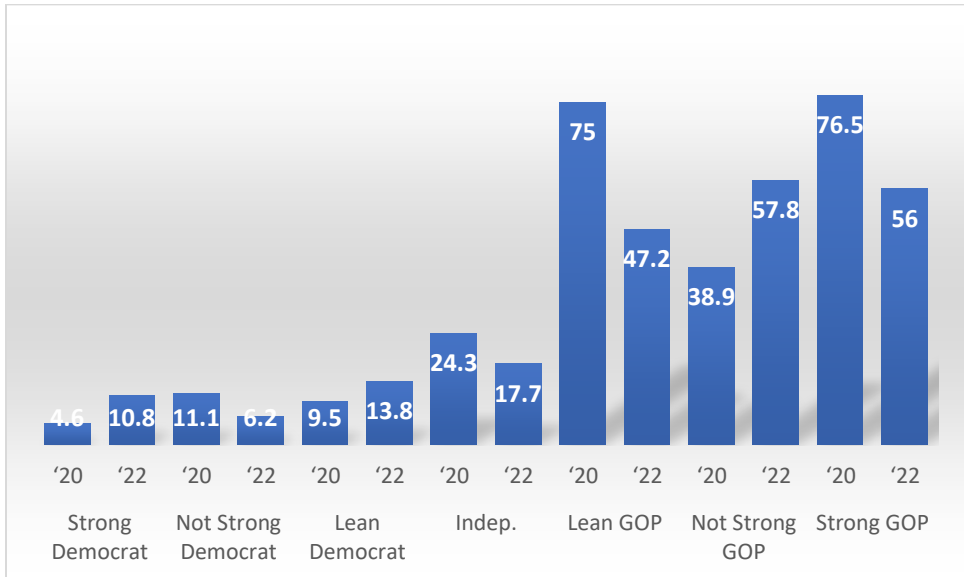


Figure 3.3 Percent who believe “Some people use the registration of dead voters” in 2020 & 2022

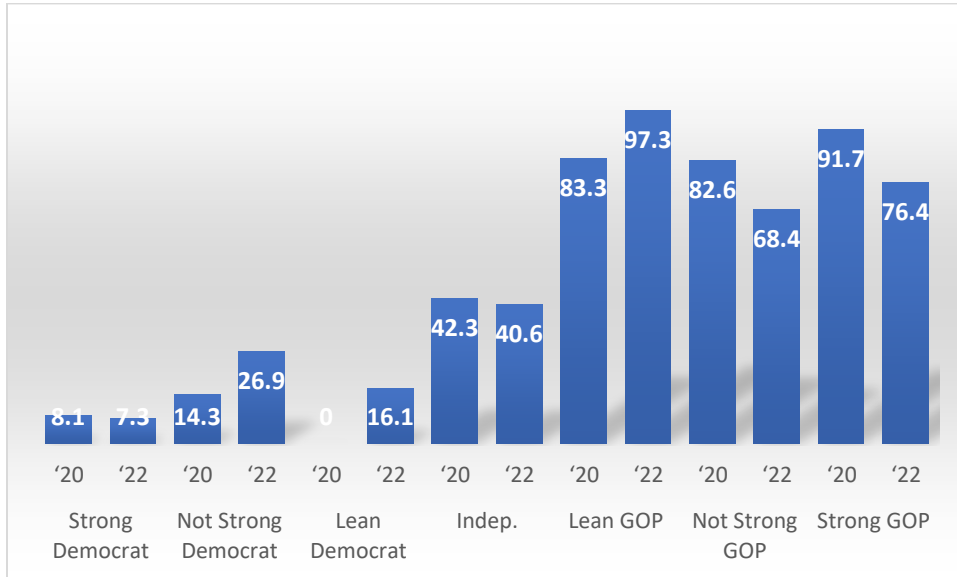
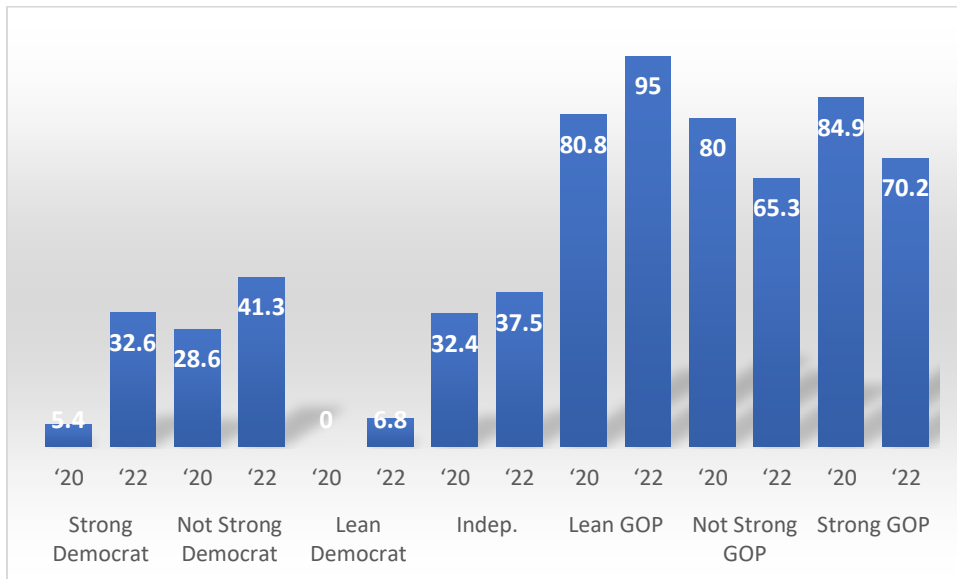


Figure 3.4 Percent who believe “Mail-in voting is not as secure as in-person voting” in 2020 & 2022



Electoral winners (Democrats in the 2020 election) are the least likely to believe in voter fraud while electoral losers (Republicans) are much more likely to engage in conspiratorial thinking, consistent with previous research. The results are surprisingly consistent across the different question wordings/treatments, but again, there are subtle variations in this pattern and

generally a lower concern for illegal immigrants voting than general voter fraud or fraud due to mail-in ballots. The results provide support for hypothesis 2.

In 2020, results show that nearly 9 in 10 strong Republicans believe "voter fraud is a major issue in US elections," 77% believe illegal immigrants often vote, 92% believe the registration of dead people is often used, and 85% believe mail voting is not as secure as in-person. Among independents leaning Republican, the percentages are lower but nonetheless consistent; 67% of GOP leaners believe general voter fraud is a major issue, 75% believe illegal immigrants frequently vote, 83% believe the registration of dead people is regularly used and 80% believe mail voting is not secure. In some cases, these numbers are much lower for not-strong Republicans where just 39% believe illegal immigrants regularly vote. A similar pattern remains for 2022, apart from illegal immigrants voting which drops significantly among Republican leaners over the two years. Although higher than all Democrat subgroups, strong Republicans show a slight decrease in conspiratorial thinking concerning election fraud across all treatment groups in 2022. However, Republican leaners increased belief in "registration of dead people" and "mail-in voting" conditions (both +14%) from 2020 to 2022 suggesting they are even more prone to conspiratorial thinking than strong Republicans.

On the other end of the spectrum, the results reveal that independents leaning Democrat reject claims about voter fraud compared to strong Democrats in 2020 and 2022. In 2020, Democratic leaners were less likely than strong Democrats to believe in election fraud in all experimental conditions except for the "illegal immigrants often vote" condition. Over two years, Democratic leaners became less likely to believe voter fraud is a serious issue in the US (-4%), whereas strong Democrats significantly increased (+11%). The same pattern appears in the "mail-in voting" condition, where strong Democrats became more likely to believe "mail-in

voting is not as secure as in-person voting” (+26.8%), unlike Democratic leaners where there was virtually no change in percent. These findings allow us to support hypothesis 3.

While the sample sizes are not large, these data provide support for previous research arguing that independents are hidden partisans (Keith et al., 1992; Klar & Krupnikov, 2016) and believe in election fraud with often stronger contours than that of strong partisan counterparts. The results also provide evidence that there is an increased concern about mail-in voting since the 2020 election despite partisanship.

Measuring Latent Conspiratorial Thinking

Uscinski, Klofstad, and Atkinson (2016) developed a “summary conspiratorial predispositions measure” (p. 5) by using a battery of four statements designed to tap underlying conspiratorial predispositions adapted from McClosky and Chong's (1985) work. Agreement with each statement was measured on a 5-point scale running from 1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree. The authors created a summary measure of each respondent's disposition toward conspiratorial thinking using factor analysis to create a single dimension based on agreement with the following statements:

1. Much of our lives are being controlled by plots hatched in secret places
2. Even though we live in a democracy, a few people will always run things away
3. The people who really ‘run’ the country are not known to the voters
4. Big events like wars, economic recessions, and the outcomes of elections are controlled by small groups of people who are working in secret against the rest of us.”

This study replicated these questions and creation of the conspiratorial thinking index using the 2022 CES. Figure 3.5 and Figure 3.6 provide a visualization of the distribution of the

population that has an underlying predisposition to conspiratorial thinking from the 2022 CES survey. This is the percentage of the population that is at risk for believing in conspiracy theories. The variable follows a normal distribution, implying the proportion of individuals who are prone to conspiratorial thinking is roughly equal to those who are not, with most people falling somewhere in between (see new research by Ender et al. 2022 who find liberals and conservatives are equally likely to believe in conspiracy theories).

Figure 3.5 Distribution Conspiratorial Thinking (Battery), 2022 CES

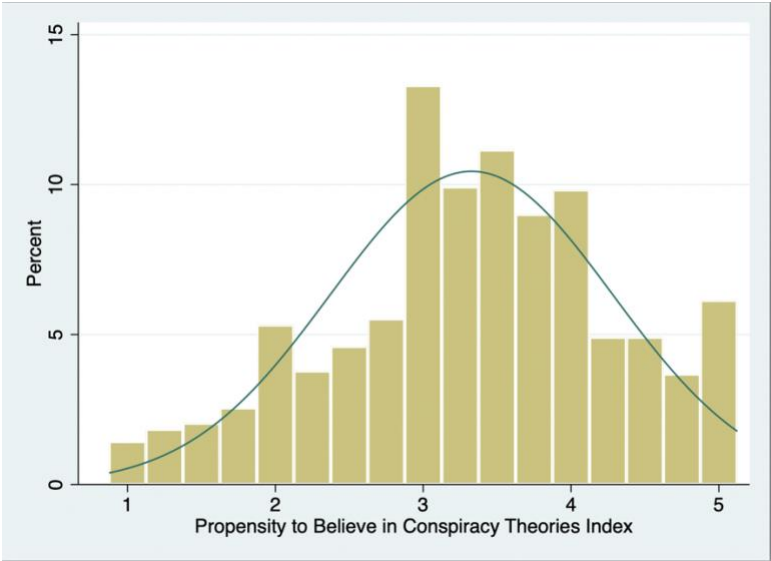
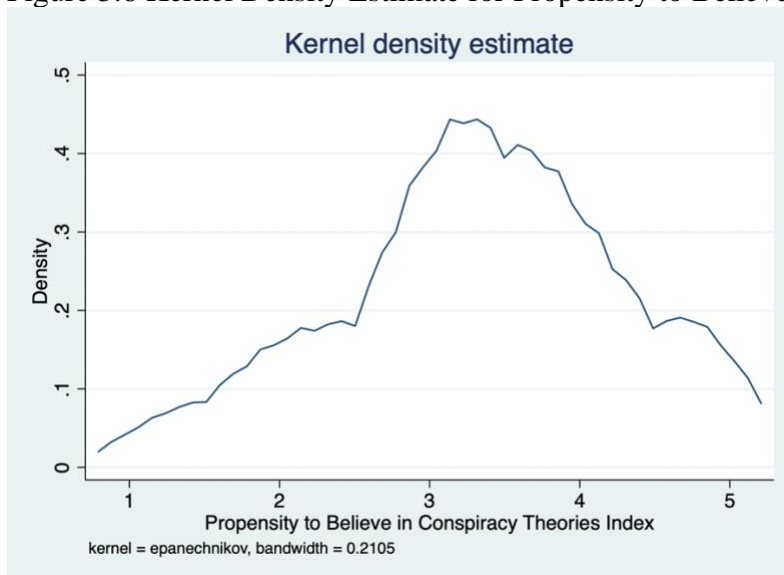


Figure 3.6 Kernel Density Estimate for Propensity to Believe Conspiracy Theories Index



Multivariate Analysis Predicting Belief in Election Fraud

Multivariate analysis is used to test the relationship between beliefs in widespread election fraud and partisan identification, focusing on people who identify as independent to ensure that other factors are not confounding the results (see Table 3.4). The models are not intended to be causal, given the complex set of factors that drive partisan identification (Green, Palmquist & Schickler, 2004), but are used to explore the relationship between partisans, non-partisans, and belief in conspiracy theories. The 2022 survey provided the opportunity to control for latent conspiratorial thinking (see Figure 3.1), a factor strongly linked to individual beliefs in conspiracy theories in the US and globally (Enders et al., 2022). Controlling for this latent predisposition to believe in misinformation (Uscinski, Klofstad, and Atkinson 2016), does it change the relationship between partisanship and belief in election fraud reported in Table 3.2?

The primary explanatory variable is the experimentally manipulated belief in different forms of fraud in US elections, where respondents were randomly assigned to one of four treatment groups. Belief in election fraud in general is used as the reference group or control

condition. The belief that 1) illegal immigrants are voting, 2) dead people are included in registration rolls and 3) mail-in ballots cause fraud are the three treatment conditions.

The models include covariates for social media consumption in the last 24 hours, given the prevalence of misinformation online, as well as a scale measuring political knowledge from factual questions about government (higher values indicate more knowledge measuring by knowing which party controlled the US House and Senate). Age is measured in years, an ordinal variable for highest formal education, and binary variables for gender (female coded 1, male 0) and racial and ethnic group. Ideology is an ordinal variable with higher values indicating more conservative.

The results of the multivariate analysis are striking (see Table 3.4). Odds ratios are reported to simplify the substantive interpretation of the logistic regression models. Only three treatment conditions over the two years are statistically significant. In 2020 and 2022, respondents who received the illegal immigrant condition were roughly 45% less likely to believe in election fraud compared to those who received the generic election fraud condition in aggregate. In 2022, those who got the mail-in voting treatment were 75% more likely to believe in election fraud than the generic election fraud condition. All the other years and treatment conditions did not reach a statistical significance level of at least $p = 0.1$. However, there is some evidence in support of hypothesis 1, as belief in illegal immigrants voting is much lower than the other types and mail voting fraud higher.⁵

Controlling for demographic factors and ideology, leaners are overall more likely to believe (reject) election fraud than strong Republicans (Democrats). The 2022 models include

⁵ Interactions between the treatment condition and the latent conspiracy index are not significant.

the covariate for latent disposition to believe in conspiracy theories (Uscinski, Klobstad, & Atkinson 2016), and is considered the more precise model. In terms of partisanship, lean Republicans were 5 times more likely in 2022 in conspiracy theories than strong Democrats. Run-of-the-mill Republicans and strong Republicans follow the same logic; in 2022, they were ~3% more likely to believe in conspiracy theories compared to strong Democrats, which is significantly less than the probabilities in 2020. Lean Democrats are 65% less likely to believe in conspiracy theories than strong Democrats in 2022 but are not statistically different in 2020. The differences for not strong Democrats are statically insignificant.

Using the conspiracy theory battery, those who ranked high were two times as likely to believe in conspiracy theories, consistent with published research (Uscinski, Klobstad, & Atkinson, 2016). The only other statistically significant factors are ideology, social media use, and political knowledge. Each of these variables increases the probability of believing in conspiracy theories at the 0.01 level. These data provide evidence that generally independent leaners may be more likely to support or reject election fraud in 2020 than their strong partisan counterparts.

Conclusion

Donald Trump's efforts to overturn the 2020 election brought the US to the brink of a democratic crisis. Refusing to concede his loss to Joe Biden, he attempted to use every lever available to try and throw out the results of the election, pressuring state lawmakers, Congress, and the courts to declare him the winner. In 2022, several Republicans who embraced election denialism lost their races to be the top election official in their state. But at the same time, many Republicans who unabashedly embraced the idea and aided Trump's efforts to overturn the election were re-elected and, in some cases, elevated to higher office. Because self-identified

independents make up the plurality of the US population, it is essential to study how nonpartisans contributed to such electoral outcomes.

The results of this study provide evidence that independent leaners act similarly to their partisan counterparts and corroborate the notion of "hidden partisans" (Keith et al., 1992; Klar & Krupnikov, 2016). They believe in election fraud with strong partisan contours suggesting affective/emotional partisanship is at play and consistent with research arguing the belief in conspiracy theories is a social act (van Prooijen & Douglass, 2018). Overall, electoral winners (Democrats in the 2020 election) are the least likely to believe in voter fraud while electoral losers (Republicans) are much more likely to believe in conspiracy theories concerning election fraud. Democracy relies on an informed and engaged public responding in rational ways to the real-life facts and challenges that lie ahead. Party polarization and electoral winners/losers have been a dominant lens to understanding growing and widespread belief in conspiracy theories in the twenty-first century. More research needs to be conducted on how nonpartisans are incorporated into this framework.

Table 3.4 Probability of Believing in Election Fraud by Partisan Identification, Experimentally Manipulated (2020 & 2022)

(Note interpretation odds ratio—values above 1=positive relationship, below 1=negative relationship)

VARIABLES	2022 Odds Ratios	2020 Odds Ratio
<i>Control condition—generic election fraud</i>	--	--
Treatment—illegal immigrants Voting	0.534* (0.179)	0.562* (0.197)
Treatment—registrations of dead people used	1.506 (0.482)	1.201 (0.407)
Treatment—Mail voting is less secure than in-person	1.743* (0.572)	1.087 (0.350)
<i>Reference—Strong Democrat</i>	--	--
Not Strong Democrat	0.845 (0.382)	1.253 (0.556)
Lean Democrat	0.351** (0.168)	0.394 (0.290)
Independent	0.780 (0.340)	2.235* (0.965)
Lean Republican	4.907*** (2.298)	10.29*** (5.259)
Not Strong Republican	3.091** (1.390)	7.566*** (3.376)
Strong Republican	2.668** (1.172)	15.07*** (7.348)
Conspiratorial thinking battery	2.004*** (0.330)	
Age	0.997 (0.008)	0.998 (0.010)
Education	0.884* (0.066)	0.941 (0.077)
Female	1.111 (0.247)	0.689 (0.173)
Black	0.799 (0.314)	1.107 (0.448)
Latino	0.738 (0.294)	0.945 (0.487)
Other race	0.594 (0.379)	1.015 (0.516)
Conservative Ideology	1.723*** (0.238)	1.853*** (0.344)
Social media use last 24 hours	2.214*** (0.668)	0.944 (0.287)
Political knowledge	1.299** (0.173)	0.989 (0.171)
Constant	0.005*** (0.005)	0.058** (0.074)
Observations	976	849
Wald Chi2	177.94 (.000)	162.12 (.000)
Pseudo R Square	.37	.29

Odds ratios from logistic regression model, robust standard error in parentheses, survey weights used. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1 Note: conspiratorial question batter only asked on 2022 survey.

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