

**The Other Side of Sorting:
Social Fractionalization of American Parties Causes Negative Partisanship**

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Abstract

Social sorting has left the two major parties with more distinct social profiles, leading partisans whose identities match these profiles to feel stronger identification with their party and increased animosity toward the opposition. But how well does the average partisan's social identity match their party's profile? Although it may seem counterintuitive, social sorting does not dictate increased homogeneity within parties, so the parties' increasingly narrow social profiles may actually decrease many partisans' sense of belonging. Applying a classic comparative politics measure to ANES data, we find that social fractionalization is on the rise within parties, especially among Democrats, and within-party cleavages are moving from cross-cutting to reinforcing. When we experimentally prime these same sources of tension within parties, individuals lacking strong party allegiances do not defect, but instead seem to rally around their hatred of the opposition, helping to explain the rise of negative partisanship.

So strong is this propensity of mankind to fall into mutual animosities, that where no substantial occasion presents itself, the most frivolous and fanciful distinctions have been sufficient to kindle their unfriendly passions and excite their most violent conflicts.

James Madison, *Federalist 10*

As James Madison argued, factions are an inevitable part of politics in any free and diverse society. But, as long as lines of social division crosscut one another, no single majority faction will ever be able to dominate. Under the stress of internal tensions, majority coalitions will always buckle. Of course, Madison was not accounting for the influence of American political parties, which seek to overcome this natural tendency toward factionalism as they attempt to build and maintain majority coalitions.

Traditionally, American parties have struggled to accomplish their task, fracturing, realigning, and occasionally disappearing altogether, due to internal tensions. However, recent research suggests things may be changing. As partisan, ideological, and demographic identities come into alignment, party preferences seem to be turning into social identities, breeding a sense of “us versus them” (Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Mason 2018). Thus, despite the innumerable dimensions along which the American electorate might potentially be cleaved, politics feels as if it is playing out on a single dimension. And despite the virtually infinite variety of coalitions that could be formed, parties feel like rival “tribes” locked in eternal battle (Mason and Wronski 2018). As a result, it may seem inevitable that mutual animosities will only continue to grow as voters continue to sort, spiraling toward ever more intense polarization in a partisan “doom loop” (Drutman 2019).

This paper points out that there is another side to sorting—a side that receives little attention: the tensions sorting creates *within* parties. First, sorting between parties does not

guarantee a rise in homogeneity within parties. Sorting is defined as an increase in the likelihood that a randomly selected member of a given group identifies as a member of a given party. But this does not necessarily mean that a larger share of that party will be comprised of members of that group. The most important factor here is the interplay between sorting and demographic change: if a group is declining as a fraction of the overall population (e.g., whites, Christians, the middle class, etc.), sorting may not increase the fraction of the party comprised of that group.

Second, the intersection between two demographic groups will always be comprised of a smaller number of people than either of the original two groups, unless one of the two groups is contained entirely within the other. Thus, as parties sort across more and more dimensions, the image of prototypical Republican and Democrat (i.e., those who are perfectly sorted) will become narrower, representing a smaller and smaller proportion of actual party identifiers. For example, African Americans and women have both sorted into the Democratic Party, while Christians have sorted out, but if an individual imagines the prototypical Democrat to be a non-Christian African American woman, that image only represents a small fraction of actual Democrats. Thus, if parties remain heterogenous, sorting may actually decrease a large percentage of partisans' sense that their party represents people like them.

How do these theoretical propositions correspond with what is actually happening within party coalitions? We show that, due to the changing demographics of the American electorate, the parties—particularly the Democrats—experience increasing internal *fractionalization*, a concept common to comparative politics but rarely applied to the study of American politics. When we ask partisans about the groups competing for influence within *American politics*, most express a desire for their group to have more influence, as one would expect. More surprising, however, when we ask them about the groups competing for influence within *their party* (rather

than within American politics), they express very similar concerns, confirming that partisans do not merely sense a power struggle *between* parties, but also *within* their own party.

How might these internal tensions affect parties? On one hand, such tensions might fray coalitions and increase third party voting, possibly even portending realignment. On the other hand, fear of fracturing their party coalition might motivate partisans to stick with their coalition even if they feel marginalized. If this latter hypothesis holds, it would help to explain the mysterious rise of *negative partisanship*—partisanship that appears to be rooted in hatred of the opposition party rather than love of one’s own party (Abramowitz and Webster 2016, 2018; Bankert 2021).¹ Building on the theory of lesser of two evils identity defense (Groenendyk 2012, 2013, 2018), we show that experimentally priming partisans to consider tensions within their party, as opposed to tensions between parties, does not fracture party coalitions. Instead, weak and leaning partisans report increased animosity toward the opposition party and decreased willingness to vote for a third party, but no change in affect toward their own party, consistent with negative partisanship.

The Negative Partisanship Puzzle

Social identity sorting serves as an elegant explanation for why strong partisans who love their party increasingly hate the opposition party (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Mason 2018). But, as shown in Figure 1, affect toward the opposition party has become more negative even among

¹ Given the conceptual ambiguity surrounding negative partisanship (Lelkes 2021), it is important to note that our analyses focus on partisan affect, which we distinguish both conceptually and empirically from party identification. We theorize that negative partisanship is a product of lesser of two evils identity defense (Groenendyk 2012, 2013, 2018). In other words, partisans come to hold intensely negative affect toward the opposition party because it helps them to justify continued loyalty to their own party in times of when that identity is threatened.

partisans who lack strong identities.² If partisan antipathy were merely being driven by the strengthening of partisan social identity among increasingly well-sorted partisans, this growing antipathy should be confined to those with the strongest identities, but this is clearly not the case. Instead, we see similar trends among strong partisans, weak partisans, and leaners. And, despite growing dissatisfaction with parties, partisan defection rates are decreasing, not just among strong partisans, but also weak partisans and leaners (Abramowitz and Webster 2016). This pattern among weak and leaning partisans is more consistent with what some have called negative partisanship—identification rooted in hatred of the opposition party as opposed to a strong attachment to one’s own party (Abramowitz and Webster 2018; Bankert 2021).

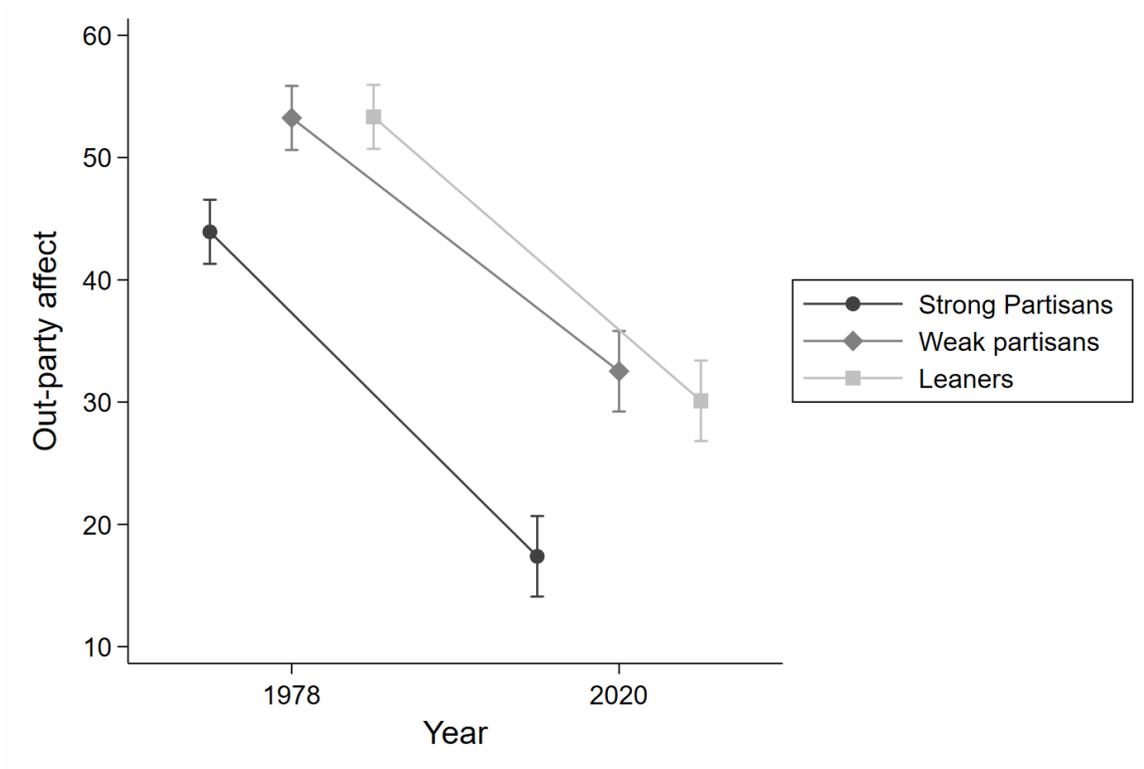


Figure 1. Trends in out-party affect by party identification strength
Note. See Table S1 in Supporting Information for numerical estimates

² A formal test indicates no differences in negative partisanship trends from 1978 to 2020 between strong partisans, weak partisans, and leaners ($F = 1.34, p = .272$).

What explains the rise of negative partisanship? One popular explanation for rising negative partisanship is racial sorting (Abramowitz and Webster 2018). Even though it constitutes a compelling reason for why partisans might feel increased animosity toward the opposition, but it is less clear why racial sorting would not simply lead to stronger “positive” social identification with parties, as others have suggested (Mason 2018; Mason and Wronski 2018). The same may be said for partisan media, another suggested reason for why negative partisanship is on the rise, since partisan media outlets tend to favor one side while attacking the other. To solve this puzzle, we focus on the other side of sorting—the tensions it creates *within* parties.

In recent decades, two interrelated processes have been reshaping party coalitions. One of them is social sorting: voters with distinct group identities such as race, religion, class, and ideology tend to concentrate in either the Democratic or Republican coalition (Abramowitz 2010; Levendusky 2009; Mason 2018). As a result, Democrats and Republicans are developing more narrow, distinct, and broadly recognizable social profiles (Claassen et al. 2021; Goggin, Henderson, and Theodoridis 2020). In addition, party coalitions are also being reshaped by demographic change: American society is becoming less religious (Voas and Chaves 2016), and more ethnically diverse. When demographic change outpaces social sorting or when sorting occurs unequally across another cleavage dimension (e.g., white Democrats are increasingly secular while the same trend is much less pronounced among nonwhite Democrats), it causes increased heterogeneity within parties.

Thus, while the average Democrat and the average Republican have become more distinct from each other, this does not necessarily imply that the two respective party coalitions

have become more internally homogenous or socially cohesive. In fact, when one considers these trends in tandem, one might expect just the opposite: While sorting is sharpening the *images* of the prototypical Republican in contrast to the prototypical Democrat, demographic changes mean these narrowing images are likely to constitute poor representations of actual party identifiers (Ahler and Sood 2018; Rothschild et al. 2019; Goggin, Henderson, and Theodoridis 2020). Thus, in contrast to the classic image of American parties as “big tent” coalitions, the parties’ new images as narrow, perhaps even exclusive, coalitions may lead some partisans to feel that, while they definitely do not fit in with the other party’s coalition, they do not fit particularly well within their own party’s coalition either. As a result, party allegiances come to be rooted in a desire to thwart the opposition rather than a desire to see one’s own party in office.

This account of negative partisanship accords well with what is known about identity threat. As an identity defense mechanism, partisans often react to group-image threats by expressing hostility toward the out-party (Amira, Cole Wright, and Goya-Tocchetto 2021; Groenendyk 2012, 2013; Rothschild, Keefer, and Hauri 2021), a defense mechanism also believed to underlie activation of racial stereotypes and prejudices (Kunda and Spencer 2003). If this is the case, social fractionalization *within* parties may be contributing to affective polarization *between* parties, particularly among weak partisans and learners who, lacking a more positive rationale for their party allegiance (e.g., holding an identity at the intersection of all the groups linked to that party), are more likely to fall back on a lesser of two evils justification strategy. Such a strategy is also highly efficient, requiring less knowledge and cognitive effort, since it alleviates the necessity to defend one’s party against attack. Rather than engaging the attacker on their terms, the partisan can simply rely on the handy quips and opposition stereotypes.

In a hostile climate, such an identity defense strategy can spiral out of control quickly. The more negative comments a partisan is forced to fend off, the more impossible it becomes to defend one's party, necessitating a change in strategy. When a person defends her partisan allegiance using a lesser of two evils strategy, she goes on the counterattack, highlighting the negative aspects of the other party and trying to convince her opponent to adopt a more negative view. Repeated use of this identity defense strategy is likely to breed outgroup animosity, and as the number of positive things people have to say about their own party decreases, the need to use this strategy increases. If tensions within parties are increasing along with division between parties, this type of identity defense is likely to become increasingly prominent, exacerbating animosity toward the opposition even among individuals who lack strong "positive" partisan identities.

U.S. Parties: Sorted but Fractionalized?

Despite all that is known about the growing division *between* parties, comparatively little attention has been focused on the impact of sorting *within* parties. Sorting need not necessitate increased party homogeneity, and the effect of demographic change on the internal composition and dynamics of American parties must not be dismissed. We address this using a measure of *social fractionalization*. While a rich literature examines the consequences of social fractionalization in comparative politics and political economy, the concept has largely failed to penetrate the American politics literature. Fractionalization is most broadly defined as the degree to which a society, or in this case a party, is divided into distinct groups or "types" that are roughly similar in size (Alesina et al. 2003). One of the most influential findings in comparative political economy concerns the negative relationship between fractionalization and important social and political outcomes: economic growth (Easterly and Levine 1997), public goods

provision (Alesina, Baqir, and Easterly 1999), and internal conflicts (Esteban and Ray 2008).

The individual-level process that underlies these aggregate-level negative consequences of fractionalization is broadly believed to be the erosion of social trust (for a comprehensive review, see Dinesen, Schaeffer, and Soenderskov 2020). Moreover, there is evidence that majoritarian systems, such as the U.S., tend to exacerbate the politics of social divisions rather than mitigate them (Huber 2012).

These sorts of social cleavages are among the major forces that have historically shaped party coalitions and party identification in the United States (Campbell et al. 1960; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002; Lazarsfeld, Gaudet, and Berelson 1948; Mason 2018), contributing to a number of realignments over the course of American history (Schattschneider 1960; Sundquist 1983). Given the amount of animosity between parties in modern American politics, it is often assumed by political commentators that Democrats and Republicans have become more socially unified. However, this conjecture has never been explicitly tested. Indeed, as we will demonstrate below, between-party sorting does not necessarily lead to greater within-party homogeneity, and there are reasons to suspect that social cohesion within the two parties has been declining. First, demographic changes making American society more diverse should have also affected the internal compositions of the party coalitions. Second, anecdotal evidence from the 2016 and 2020 presidential primaries suggests the presence of relatively stable divisions within the national party coalitions. Third, recent research indicates the existence of ideological factions within congressional parties (Clarke 2020), as well as divisions among ordinary partisans (Groenendyk, Sances, and Zhirkov 2020), some of which may be caused by partisans' individual differences in personality orientations, such as authoritarianism (Wronski et al. 2018).

Mathematically, within-party fractionalization can be observed in conjunction with

between-party sorting. Table 1 presents an example. For simplicity but without loss of generality, it deals with two parties and two groups in two time points. Demographic change from Time 1 to Time 2 leads to shifts in composition of both parties: the share of Group X is shrinking whereas the share of Group Y is growing. However, concurrent sorting slows this process down in Party A while speeding it up in Party B. Within-party fractionalization is calculated using the index calculated as one minus the sum of the squares of group shares s_k indexed $k = 1, \dots, K$:

$$(\text{fractionalization}) = 1 - \sum_{k=1}^K s_k^2.$$

The resulting indicator has a direct and intuitive interpretation: it is the probability that two randomly selected supporters of a party belong to different groups. It ranges from 0 to $(1 - K)/K$, where K is the total number of relevant groups. Between-party sorting is calculated using a difference-in-difference measure:

$$(\text{sorting}) = (s_{XA} - s_{XB}) - (s_{YA} - s_{YB}),$$

where s_{AB} is the share of Group X in Party B. Table 1 provides a hypothetical illustration of how between-party sorting increases from Time 1 to Time 2 even as fractionalization increases within both Party A and Party B.

Table 1. Increased sorting with increased fractionalization: a mathematical illustration

	Time 1	Time 2	Change
Party A			
Group X	.80	.70	-.10
Group Y	.20	.30	+.10
Difference	.60	.40	-.20
Fractionalization	.32	.42	+.10
Party B			
Group X	.80	.60	-.20
Group Y	.20	.40	+.20
Difference	.60	.20	-.40
Fractionalization	.32	.48	+.16
Sorting			
Difference-in-difference	.00	.20	+.20

While scholars tend to focus on fractionalization within countries, the same general logic should apply to any organization seeking to maintain cohesion across a diverse group of individuals, such as a political party. Therefore, just as fractionalization has been linked to less cooperation and more conflict within states, the same consequences might be found within political parties seeking to maintain coalitions broad enough to succeed in winner-take-all elections. Much depends on how individuals manage tension that may arise between their subordinate identities and their superordinate identities, regardless of whether they are national identities or partisan identities.

Study 1: The Rise of Fractionalization

Data

To trace the social compositions of U.S. partisan coalitions over recent decades, we use data from the American National Election Studies (ANES) time-series.³ We concentrate on four key social cleavages: race, religion, class, and ideology (see Table S2 in Supporting Information for the descriptions and coding of the corresponding ANES variables). Following recent studies, we treat ideological labels as social identities (Malka and Lelkes 2010; Devine 2015; Mason 2015). Our analysis covers years from 1972 (when the ideology question was first asked) to 2020, yielding a total of 21 time points. All analyses to follow focus on self-identified Democrats and Republicans (including leaners).

Results

We start by describing changes in composition of the two parties on race, religion, class, and

³ The American National Election Studies (www.electionstudies.org) are based on work supported by the National Science Foundation under grant numbers SES 1444721, 2014-2017, the University of Michigan, and Stanford University.

ideology from 1972 to 2020 (see Figure 2). In 1972, the Democratic coalition had white, Christian, working class, and ideologically moderate majorities. By 2020, the share of whites in the Democratic Party decreased to only a small majority, the share of non-religious people grew substantially, the shares of those from working-class and middle-class backgrounds was 50/50, and liberals slightly outnumbered moderates. The Republican coalition in 1972 was overwhelmingly white and Christian, while evenly divided between the working class and middle class as well as between moderates and conservatives. By 2020, the shares of whites and Christians within the Republican Party decreased, although these two groups remained clear majorities on the respective cleavage dimensions. Over the same time period, even splits on class and ideology among Republicans turned into dominance of the middle class and conservatives within the party.

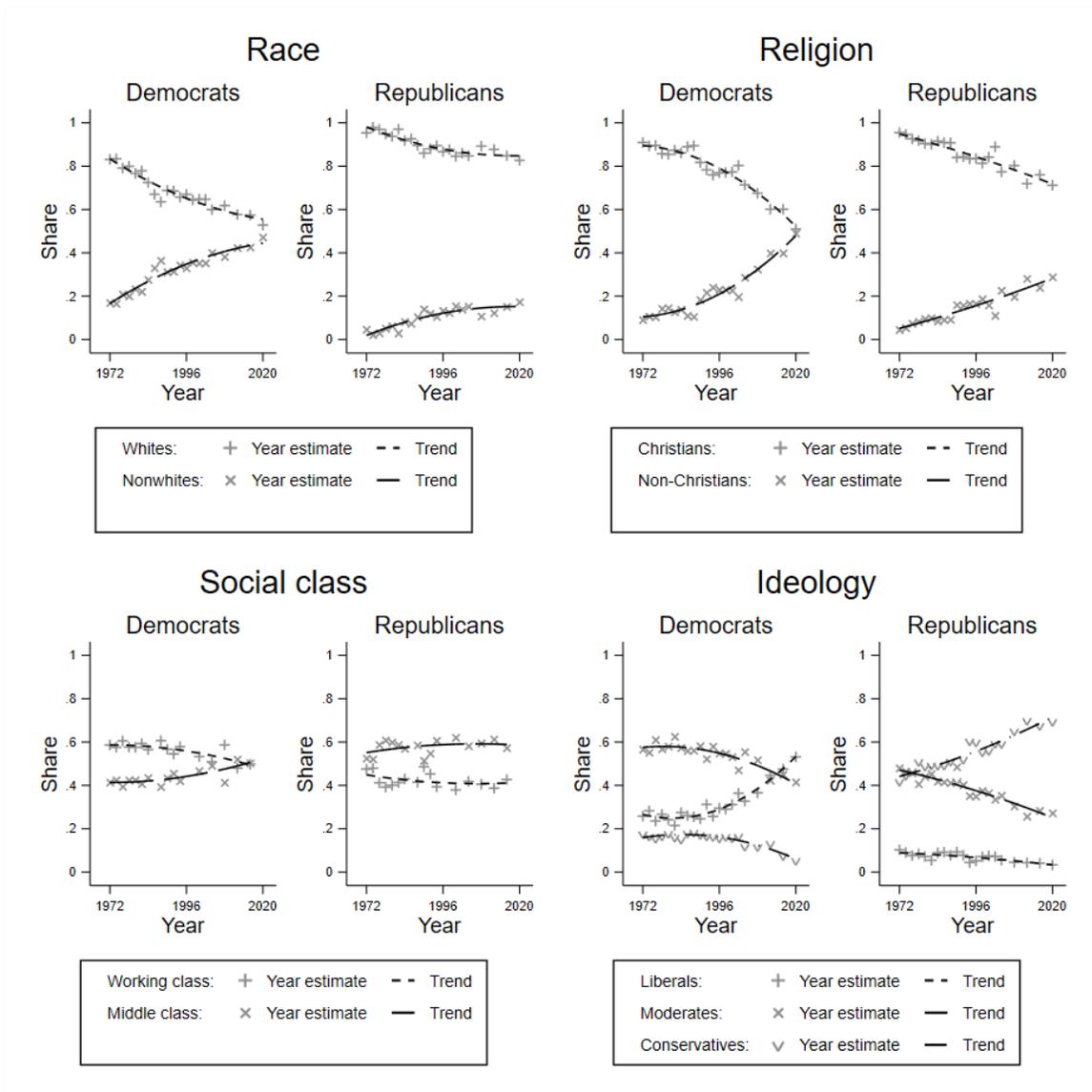


Figure 2. Party compositions from 1972 to 2016

Changes within the two partisan coalitions described above suggest that they have not become more homogenous. If anything, internal diversity seems to have increased, particularly among Democrats. Table 2 presents trends in fractionalization on the four dimensions, as well as the average, calculated using the ANES data from 1972 to 2020.⁴ They are estimated with simple

⁴ In five years (1986, 1996, 1998, 2002, and 2020), social class questions were not asked in the ANES surveys. For these years, we calculate average fractionalization using only race, religion, and ideology. Since the

OLS regressions of the following form:

$$(\text{fractionalization})_i = \alpha + \beta(\text{time})_i + \varepsilon_i,$$

Where α is the intercept, β is the time trend, ε is the error, and i is the year indicator.

Table 2. Estimated trends in parties' fractionalization

	Democrats		Republicans	
	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE
Race	0.21***	(0.03)	0.22***	(0.03)
Religion	0.35***	(0.03)	0.31***	(0.03)
Class	0.02*	(0.01)	-0.01	(0.01)
Ideology	0.01	(0.01)	-0.10***	(0.01)
Average	0.14***	(0.02)	0.09***	(0.02)

Note. SE = standard error

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Trend estimates show that fractionalization within the Democratic Party has been increasing on all analyzed social cleavage dimensions except ideology. The null effect on ideological fractionalization is produced by two trends: gradual exodus of conservatives from the Democratic coalition has decreased fractionalization while the growing share of committed liberals has increased it. The strongest increase in fractionalization among Democrats has occurred on race. As a result, average fractionalization among Democrats has been going up as well.

The Republican Party, in turn, has been getting more fractionalized on race and religion but, at the same time, more homogenous on ideology while experiencing no change on social class. Still, the average indicator of fractionalization in the Republican coalition is positive and significant on the 99.9% confidence level—due to very strong increase in racial and religious heterogeneity. The latter finding is important as it indicates gradual erosion of white and

ideology cleavage has three groups whereas race, religion, and social class have only two each, we rescale the ideology fractionalization index, so that all four indices have the same range from 0 to 1/2.

Christian majorities *within* the Republican Party, with the potential to cause anxiety among white Christian Republicans and a corresponding internal conflict inside the party.

So far, we have demonstrated that, on average, the two major U.S. parties are increasingly socially fractionalized. However, social cleavages are not uniformly associated with stronger political divisions. The character of cleavages is important: they can be cross-cutting (weak overlap between different group identities) or reinforcing (strong overlap). In political sociology, cross-cutting cleavages are associated with political stability and tolerance, whereas reinforcing cleavages are thought to cause political conflict and polarization (Lipset 1960).

Have social cleavages within American partisan coalitions been moving toward a cross-cutting or reinforcing structure between 1972 and 2020? To estimate trends in overlap between different intraparty cleavages, we use Cramer's V statistic—a measure of association between two nominal variables based on Pearson's chi-squared that can range from zero (no association, cross-cutting cleavages) to one (perfect association, reinforcing cleavages).⁵

Table 3 presents estimated trends in Cramer's V for all cleavage combinations. Among Democrats, three important cleavage pairs have been moving fast toward the reinforcing direction: race–religion, race–ideology, and class–ideology. The religion–class cleavage, however, has moved in the opposite direction. Still, average cleavage overlap among Democrats has been trending in the direction of the reinforcement. In the Republican coalition, the race–religion and religion–ideology cleavages have also been reinforcing with time. Still, the average trend in cleavage overlap for the Republican Party is not significant. Overall, this analysis corroborates results on changes in fractionalization: the Democratic Party is increasingly socially

⁵ Some statistical software calculates Cramer's V from -1 to 1 to show the direction of the association, similar to the correlation coefficient. However, we are interested in reinforcing cleavages without regard for direction. Therefore, we take absolute values of the Cramer's V statistic.

divided whereas changes within the Republican Party are muted. At the same time, neither of the two parties is becoming more socially unified.

Table 3. Estimated trends in cleavage overlap

	Democrats		Republicans	
	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE
Race–Religion	0.11 ^{***}	(0.03)	0.09 ^{**}	(0.03)
Race–Class	0.03	(0.03)	0.05	(0.03)
Race–Ideology	0.15 ^{***}	(0.03)	0.05	(0.04)
Religion–Class	–0.06 [*]	(0.03)	0.01	(0.03)
Religion–Ideology	–0.02	(0.02)	0.07 [*]	(0.03)
Class–Ideology	0.08 [*]	(0.04)	–0.05	(0.04)
Average	0.06 ^{***}	(0.02)	0.03	(0.02)

Note. SE = standard error

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Discussion

Study 1 provides strong support for our first conjecture: over the last four decades, American parties have become more socially fractionalized rather than more socially cohesive.

Furthermore, internal cleavages within parties have been gradually turning from cross-cutting to reinforcing. What are the potential political consequences of this process? It is easy to see that fractionalization within the Democratic and Republican coalitions coincided in timing with another essential process in U.S. politics: the rise of negative partisanship (Abramowitz and Webster 2016). We suggest that within-party fractionalization may have helped to promote between-party animosity by activating “less of two evils” identity defense (Groenendyk 2012, 2013, 2018). Since the ANES data does not allow us to test this hypothesis directly, in Study 2 we carry out an original survey experiment that explores voters’ perceptions of within-party divisions and isolates the causal effect of in-party fractionalization on both in-party and out-party affect as well as voting intentions using a priming experiment.

Study 2: The Consequences of Fractionalization

Data and Methods

To test our causal theory that social fractionalization within parties leads to negative partisanship, we experimentally manipulated the salience of potential divisions within parties relative to potential divisions between parties. We did this using the same social dimensions examined in our analyses of ANES data: race, religion, class, and ideology.

We collected our sample through Prolific, a crowdsourcing platform oriented toward academic researchers with a less experienced participant pool than MTurk (Peer et al. 2017). The questionnaire was completed by 787 participants. In this group, mean age was between 35 and 44 years; the sample was 48% female; 48.7% of respondents had a college degree; and the median household income category was \$50,000 to \$59,999. Although the sample was not representative of the U.S. population, it contained significant variation on the dimensions of interest: race (33.1% nonwhite), religion (39.4% Christian), class (44% working class), ideology (17% conservative), and partisanship (20.9% Republican). And, since our treatment was randomly assigned, any differences observed between treatment and control can only be attributed to the experiment and not to any other variable. Nonetheless, effect sizes may indeed differ from those of a national probability sample, especially given overrepresentation of Democrats.⁶ Thus, we present results separately for the two most relevant subgroups in our study—Republicans and Democrats—in addition to presenting pooled results across the two parties. After excluding non-leaning independents and supporters of other parties, we were left

⁶ Such overrepresentation is a common problem for crowdsourcing platforms that otherwise are more diverse than most common convenience samples in the social sciences (Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz 2012).

with a sample of 679 cases.⁷

Prior to the experiment, we measured party identification using the standard ANES questions. Those who reported strong identification with a party, weak identification with a party, or leaning toward a particular party read the version of the treatment questions pertaining to their party. Those assigned to the baseline condition received the version of the questions referencing American politics as opposed to the version referencing either party.

Participants assigned to the baseline experimental condition read: “These days, there are many groups competing for influence in American politics. We are interested to hear which groups you would like to have more influence versus less influence.” This was followed by a series of four questions asking participants whether they wanted particular groups to have more influence in American politics or whether they were happy with the current balance of influence between these groups. The questions, which were presented in random order, asked about the influence of whites versus non-whites, religious vs. non-religious people, working- vs. middle-class people, and conservatives vs. liberals vs. moderates. After answering these four questions, respondents were asked to discuss whether there was any particular group in American politics they were worried about gaining power in an open-ended format.⁸

Participants assigned to the treatment condition received the same series of questions except that the wording was altered to prime consideration of potential divisions *within* their party.⁹ Thus, the introduction read, “These days, there are many groups competing for influence

⁷ Non-leaning independents and supporters of other parties were excluded from analyses since we had no basis for making predictions about their response to treatments.

⁸ We replicated the main analyses using only respondents who actually answered the open-ended questions (i.e., explicitly mentioned the social groups they did not want to get power). Results were substantively the same as for the full sample (see Tables S8 and S9 in Supplementary Information).

⁹ Those who reported strong identification with a party, weak identification with a party, or leaning toward a particular party read the version of the treatment questions pertaining to their party. Those assigned to the

in the [Democratic Party/Republican Party]. We are interested to hear which groups you would like to have more influence versus less influence in the party.” This was followed by the same four closed-ended questions and one open-ended question asked in the baseline condition, except they referenced the Democratic Party or the Republican Party rather than “American politics.” The experiment was designed to prime participants about group competition within their party (i.e., *intraparty* division) vs. such competition in American politics more generally (i.e., *interparty* division).

After the experiment, respondents were asked about their affect toward the Democratic Party and the Republican Party using the ANES feeling thermometers. They also answered a question about their likelihood of voting for a third party in the future. The last items in the survey were about respondents’ identities relevant for the social cleavages we were interested in—race, religion, social class, and ideology. Questions about respondents’ age, gender, education, and income were included in the survey as well. See Supporting Information for the exact formulations of survey questions and answer options.

Results

We begin by presenting descriptive results showing how people feel about the balance of social group influence within their own party (i.e., the Democratic Party or Republican Party, the treatment condition) and within American politics more generally (i.e., the country as a whole, the baseline condition). Figure 3 shows that most people wish their own demographic groups had more power relative to other groups, both within their party (treatment condition) and within American politics more generally (baseline condition). Importantly, we see virtually identical

baseline condition, independently of their partisanship, received the version of the questions referencing American politics as opposed to the version referencing either party.

patterns across the treatment and baseline conditions.

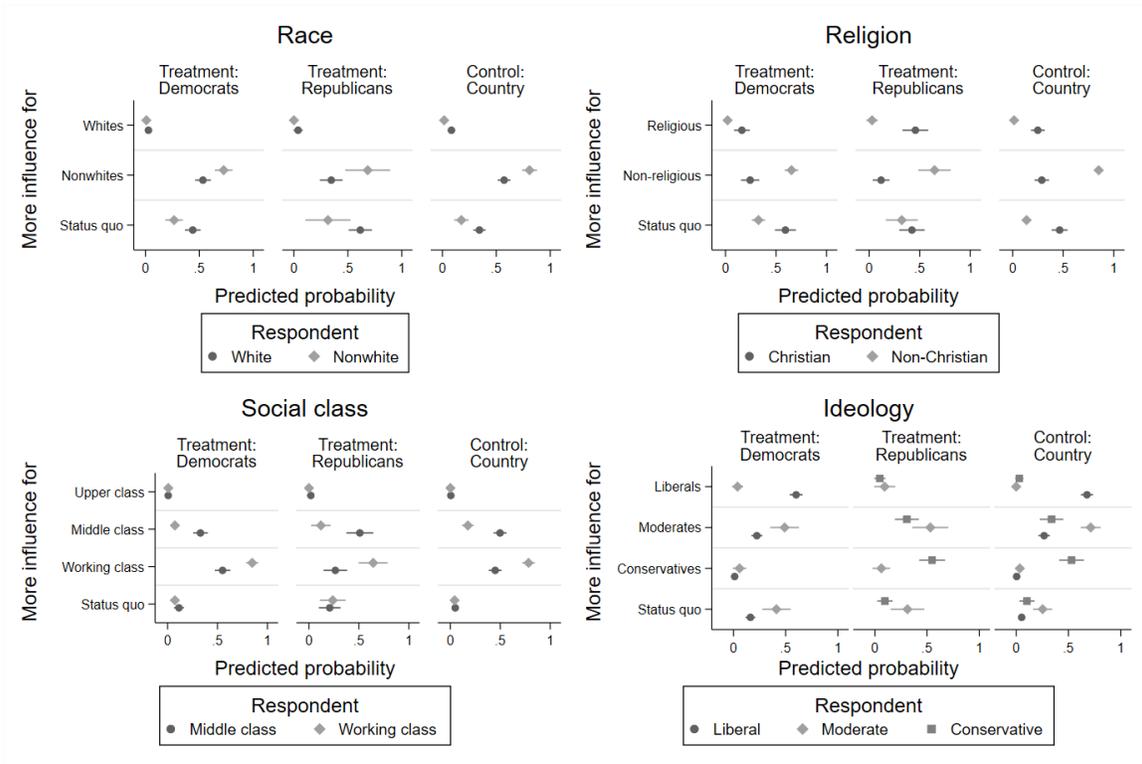


Figure 3. Respondents' preferences on groups' influence within the parties and American politics depending on their own identities
Note. Predicted probabilities based on multinomial logistic regressions. See Tables S3–S6 in Supporting Information for numerical results

Regardless of condition non-whites are more likely than whites to say that non-whites should have more influence, whereas whites are more likely to prefer the status quo, either because they feel their group already has substantial influence or for social desirability reasons. People who identify as Christians are more likely to say that they want religious people to have more influence in their party and less likely than non-Christians to say they want non-religious people to have more influence. Working class people, compared with middle class people, are less likely to say they wish middle-class people had more influence and somewhat more likely to say they wished working class people had more power. At the same time, many middle-class people say that they actually want working class people to have more power. Finally,

respondents want their ideological group to have more influence both within parties and in American politics.

These findings have two important implications. First, they suggest that social fractionalization on the dimensions observed in our ANES analyses has the potential to create perceptions of social conflict in the electorate. Across most demographics, people want their group to have more influence relative to other groups. And it is striking that these effects are virtually identical in the treatment and baseline conditions, suggesting people are not substantially happier with the balance of power in their own party than in American politics more generally. Second, these results suggest our experimental manipulation worked as planned. Frustrations about the relative influence of social groups are primed in both conditions, and only the nature (and not the intensity) of those frustrations is experimentally manipulated. Those in the baseline conditions think about who has too much and who has too little influence in American politics—thoughts that are likely to map onto *interparty* divisions. In contrast, those in the treatment condition think about who has too much and who has too little influence within their party—thoughts that, by definition, pertain to *intraparty* conflict.

Our next set of analyses examine how priming social fractionalization within parties impacts affect toward parties and partisan voting behavior. Since the intraparty tension priming effect should be strongest among those who feel like they fit imperfectly within their party, we interact the treatment with party identification strength. Our first series of analyses, displayed in Table 4 and Figure 4, show how the treatment affected participants' affect toward the out-party. Looking first at affect toward the out-party, we find a significant interaction effect ($p = .044$). Within partisan subgroups, leaners report significantly more animosity toward the opposition party, whereas strong partisans appear to report slightly less, although the effect is not

significant. These results are in the same direction and similar in size for Democrats and Republicans, although confidence intervals for Republicans are larger due to a smaller sample size. There is no corresponding interaction effect for the in-party affect.¹⁰

Table 4. Effect of treatment on out-party vs. in-party affect

	Out-party		In-party	
	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE
Treatment	-9.11*	(4.41)	3.71	(3.96)
PID strength	-6.89***	(1.33)	13.69***	(1.19)
Treatment × PID strength	3.79*	(1.88)	-1.91	(1.68)
Constant	34.71***	(3.07)	38.44***	(2.76)

Note. $N = 679$. SE = standard error

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

¹⁰ More detailed results for affect toward the in-party and for in-party vs. out-party affect difference (affective polarization) are presented in Figures S1 and S2 in Supporting Information. Specifically, there are no discernable treatment effect at any level of party identification strength or within either party. Therefore, the effect of treatment on affective polarization is driven exclusively by rise in negative partisanship.

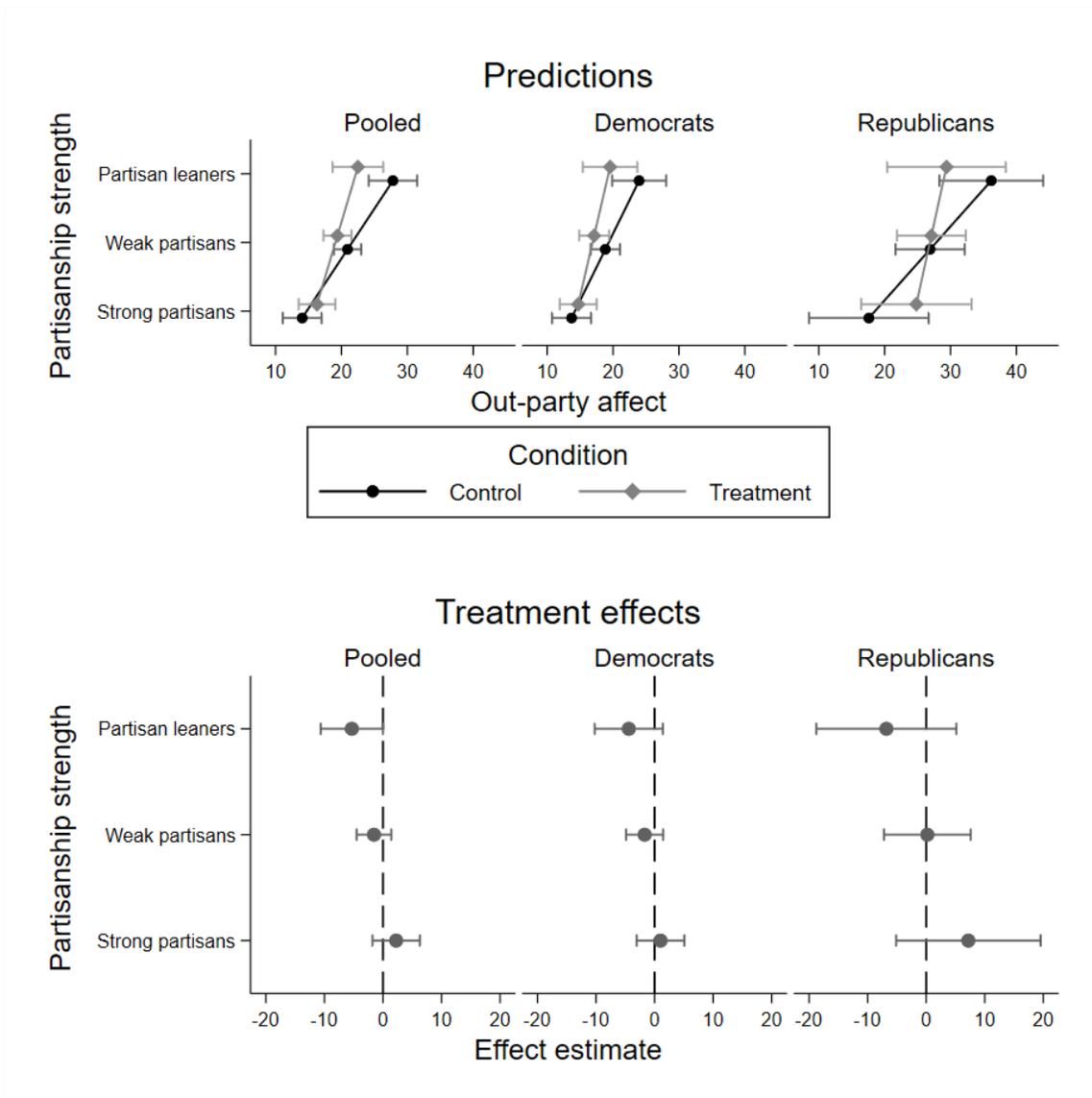


Figure 4. The effect of priming *intraparty* fractionalization on out-party affect

This pattern is consistent with a lesser of two evils identify justification strategy (Groenendyk 2012, 2013, 2018). Those whose partisan identities are most threatened by the treatment emphasize their hatred of the opposition to justify continued allegiance to their party coalition, resulting in negative partisanship (Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Bankert 2021). They support their party not because they particularly love that party, but because they loathe the opposition. And they must stand with their coalition to prevent the vote from splitting, which

would likely allow the other party to take power.

Of course, if this interpretation is correct, these individuals should not only express opposition hatred, but also show willingness to rally behind their coalition when it is threatened. Negative partisans do not merely loathe the opposition party more than they love their own party; they are also extremely loyal voters (Abramowitz and Webster 2016). Their motivation to thwart the opposition seems to motivate fidelity to their coalition even in the absence of a strong sense of identity or positive affect toward the party. For these individuals, third party candidates may be preferable, but they remain loyal to their party for the strategic purpose of preventing the opposition from taking power. Nonetheless, weak and leaning partisans are typically more likely to vote for third parties compared to strong partisans, and one might expect thoughts of intraparty tensions to increase this temptation, making for a conservative test.

Results displayed in Figure 5 show a pattern consistent with negative partisanship. First, as one would expect strong partisans are relatively unwilling to vote for third parties regardless of treatment exposure, since they are strongly attached to their party. Just as the sorting literature suggests, these individuals have strong affinity and loyalty to their party. However, as this allegiance declines, the story changes. Absent a strong attachment to one's party, interest in third party voting increases substantially. But when reminded of the fractionalization within their own party, these individuals retreat back to their party, apparently fearing that their coalition will fracture, and the opposition party will win. This pattern appears larger and is only statistically significant among Democrats—consistent with the results from Study 1 showing greater levels of internal divisions within the Democratic Party.

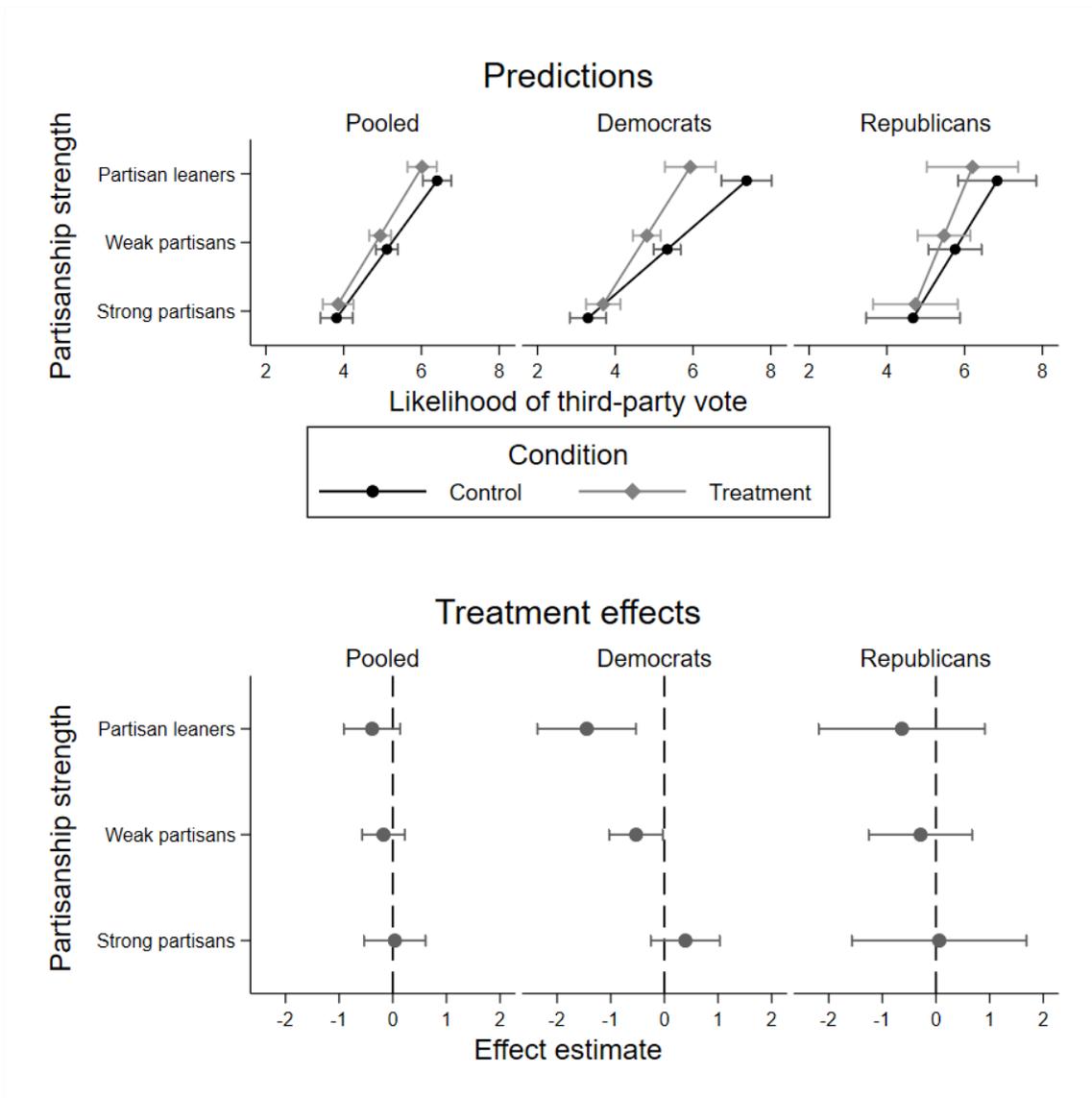


Figure 5. The effect of priming *intraparty* fractionalization on third-party voting
Note. See Table S7 in Supporting Information for regression results

Discussion

Overall, results from Study 2 show that the intraparty fractionalization observed in Study 1 is indeed affecting party politics. Consistent with research on partisan sorting, strong partisans appear quite unaffected by the treatment—likely, because they feel that their party suits them well. However, as party identification strength declines, and people feel like they fit less well within their party, the effect of the treatment changes. When reminded of their frustration over

the balance of power within their party, these individuals feel the strain. Consistent with negative partisanship (Abramowitz and Webster 2016, 2018; Bankert 2021) and lesser of two evils identity defense (Groenendyk 2012, 2013, 2018), they respond with increased animosity toward the opposition party, and treatment exposure appears to remind them of the fragility of their party coalition, leading to decreased enthusiasm for third party voting.

Conclusion

We have argued that, notwithstanding the well-documented sorting process, American parties are becoming more socially fractionalized, not more homogenous, and this within-party fractionalization is consequential for the understanding of U.S. party politics. Specifically, it helps to explain the rise of negative partisanship. More generally, we demonstrate how insights from comparative politics can help scholars to better understand current partisan polarization in the United States.

We started by estimating trends in internal compositions of the American parties from 1972 to 2016 using data from the American National Election Studies (ANES). We found that neither of the two partisan coalitions is becoming more socially unified. Quite to the contrary, the Democratic Party is becoming increasingly fractionalized on three analyzed dimensions: race, religion, and social class. The null effect for the fourth dimension—ideology—is also noteworthy since it is so often assumed that parties are becoming more ideologically homogenous. The Republican Party is also experiencing diverging trends as it is becoming more racially and religiously diverse, despite becoming ideologically unified. And intraparty social cleavages have been reinforcing over the analyzed time period, again, particularly among Democrats. Together, these results raise serious questions about internal party unity. Despite social and ideological sorting, parties—and especially the Democratic Party—are becoming

more heterogeneous, not less.

We complement our ANES analyses with an original survey experiment in which we explored the consequences of this within party fractionalization for U.S. partisan politics. Using the negative partisanship concept (Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Bankert 2021) and the lesser of two evils identity defense framework (Groenendyk 2012, 2013, 2018), we show that priming within-party group competition boosts negative partisanship among individuals who lack a strong sense of identity with their preferred party. Specifically, we see increased hostility toward the opposition party but no change in affect toward one's own party among individuals lacking strong party identities. Furthermore, priming within-party group competition leads these same individuals, who are typically quite interested in third parties, to report less willingness to vote for a third party. In all cases, results are stronger for Democratic identifiers than Republican identifiers, mirroring our ANES findings, which show greater fractionalization within the Democratic coalition.

These results shed important new light on party politics and negative partisanship in American politics. While it is certainly true that social sorting has led many partisans to feel a stronger sense of identity with their own party and increased animosity toward the opposition (Mason 2018; Mason and Wronski 2017), it is simultaneously true that fractionalization within parties is on the rise, leaving many Americans unsorted and identifying only weakly with, or merely leaning toward, one of the two parties.

This striking combination of social sorting and social fractionalization help to explain another puzzling trend. As shown in Figure 1, and consistent with negative partisanship, animosity toward the opposition party is not just rising among strong partisans with well-sorted social identities but also among weak partisans and leaners, suggesting social identity cannot tell

the whole story. Our results supplement this dominant account by showing why individuals who lack strong partisan social identities are nonetheless becoming increasingly angry with the opposition and loyal to their own party. In socially sorted yet fractionalized parties, many partisans are likely to question how well their party represents their interests relative to others in the party. At the same time, they recognize that this tension threatens the coalition, which reinforces loyal voting behavior. Thus, it appears that negative partisanship is, as least in part, a defensive reaction against growing intra-party fractionalization, and this helps to explain why partisan animosity is on the rise even among individuals without strong party identities.

Overall, our findings speak to the competing forces at play within party coalitions. While much attention has been paid to the effect of sorting on the well-sorted, far less attention has been paid to how sorting affects other partisans. Adding to a small number of studies that show evidence of divisions, not only *between* but also *within* the Democratic Party and the Republican Party (Clarke 2020; Groenendyk, Sances, and Zhirkov 2020; Wronski et al. 2018), we show evidence of rising social fractionalization within American parties. Thus, just as sorting is narrowing the images of the prototypical Democrat and Republican, the actual coalitions are becoming more diverse, and the social cleavages within parties are moving from cross-cutting to reinforcing. This is a potentially explosive combination. While negative partisanship is currently holding the coalitions together, internal cleavages within parties deserve more attention, such as a potential divide between Latinos and African Americans, two major Democratic constituencies (Gomez-Aguinaga, Sanchez, and Barreto 2021; Krupnikov and Piston 2016). Divisions within American party coalitions are clearly understudied compared to the division between parties, and within-party dynamics may have implications for the future of U.S. politics that are no less important than those happening between parties, perhaps even counteracting them.

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Supporting Information

Table S1. Trends in out-party affect by party identification strength

	Strong partisans	Weak partisans	Leaners
Out-party affect in 1972	43.9 ^{***} (1.30)	53.2 ^{***} (1.30)	53.3 ^{***} (1.30)
Change in out-party affect, 1972--2020	-26.5 ^{***} (2.52)	-20.7 ^{***} (2.52)	-23.2 ^{***} (2.52)

Note. Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table S2. Analyzed social cleavage dimensions

Cleavage dimension	Variable code	Categories: Analysis	Categories: ANES
Race	VCF0105b	White Nonwhite	White non-Hispanic Black non-Hispanic Hispanic Other or multiple races
Religion	VCF0128	Christian Other	Protestant Roman Catholic Jewish Other and none
Class	VCF0148	Working Middle	Lower class Average working Working-NA average or upper Upper working Average middle Middle class-NA average or upper Upper middle Upper class
Ideology	VCF0803	Liberal Moderate Conservative	Extremely liberal Liberal Slightly liberal Moderate, middle of the road Don't know; haven't thought much about it Slightly conservative Conservative Extremely conservative

Table S3. Respondents' preferences on groups' influence within the parties and American politics depending on their own identities: race

	Treatment: Democrats	Treatment: Republicans	Control
Respondents: whites			
More influence for whites	0.03* (0.01)	0.04 (0.02)	0.08*** (0.02)
More influence for nonwhites	0.53*** (0.04)	0.35*** (0.05)	0.57*** (0.03)
Preference for status quo	0.44*** (0.04)	0.62*** (0.06)	0.34*** (0.03)
Respondents: nonwhites			
More influence for whites	0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.00)	0.02 (0.01)
More influence for nonwhites	0.73*** (0.04)	0.68*** (0.11)	0.81*** (0.04)
Preference for status quo	0.27*** (0.04)	0.32** (0.11)	0.18*** (0.03)

Note. Predicted probabilities based on multinomial logistic regressions. Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table S4. Respondents' preferences on groups' influence within the parties and American politics depending on their own identities: religion

	Treatment: Democrats	Treatment: Republicans	Control
Respondents: Christians			
More influence for religious people	0.16*** (0.04)	0.46*** (0.06)	0.25*** (0.03)
More influence for non-religious people	0.24*** (0.05)	0.12** (0.04)	0.29*** (0.04)
Preference for status quo	0.59*** (0.05)	0.42*** (0.06)	0.46*** (0.04)
Respondents: non-Christians			
More influence for religious people	0.02* (0.01)	0.03 (0.03)	0.01 (0.01)
More influence for non-religious people	0.65*** (0.03)	0.65*** (0.08)	0.85*** (0.02)
Preference for status quo	0.33*** (0.03)	0.32*** (0.08)	0.14*** (0.02)

Note. Predicted probabilities based on multinomial logistic regressions. Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table S5. Respondents' preferences on groups' influence within the parties and American politics depending on their own identities: social class

	Treatment: Democrats	Treatment: Republicans	Control
Respondents: middle-class people			
More influence for upper-class people	0.01 (0.01)	0.02 (0.02)	0.00 (0.00)
More influence for middle-class people	0.33*** (0.04)	0.51*** (0.07)	0.50*** (0.03)
More influence for working-class people	0.55*** (0.04)	0.26*** (0.06)	0.45*** (0.03)
Preference for status quo	0.11*** (0.03)	0.21*** (0.06)	0.05*** (0.01)
Respondents: working-class people			
More influence for upper-class people	0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
More influence for middle-class people	0.07** (0.02)	0.12* (0.05)	0.17*** (0.03)
More influence for working-class people	0.85*** (0.03)	0.64*** (0.07)	0.78*** (0.03)
Preference for status quo	0.07** (0.02)	0.24*** (0.07)	0.04** (0.02)

Note. Predicted probabilities based on multinomial logistic regressions. Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table S6. Respondents' preferences on groups' influence within the parties and American politics depending on their own identities: ideology

	Treatment: Democrats	Treatment: Republicans	Control
Respondents: liberals			
More influence for liberals	0.60*** (0.03)		0.68*** (0.03)
More influence for moderates	0.22*** (0.03)		0.27*** (0.03)
More influence for conservatives	0.01 (0.01)		0.00 (0.00)
Preference for status quo	0.16*** (0.02)		0.05*** (0.01)
Respondents: moderates			
More influence for liberals	0.04 (0.03)	0.09 (0.05)	0.00 (0.00)
More influence for moderates	0.49*** (0.07)	0.53*** (0.09)	0.71*** (0.05)
More influence for conservatives	0.06 (0.03)	0.06 (0.04)	0.03 (0.02)
Preference for status quo	0.41*** (0.07)	0.31*** (0.08)	0.25*** (0.05)
Respondents: conservatives			
More influence for liberals		0.05 (0.03)	0.03 (0.02)
More influence for moderates		0.31*** (0.06)	0.34*** (0.06)
More influence for conservatives		0.55*** (0.06)	0.53*** (0.06)
Preference for status quo		0.10** (0.04)	0.10** (0.04)

Note. Predicted probabilities based on multinomial logistic regressions. Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

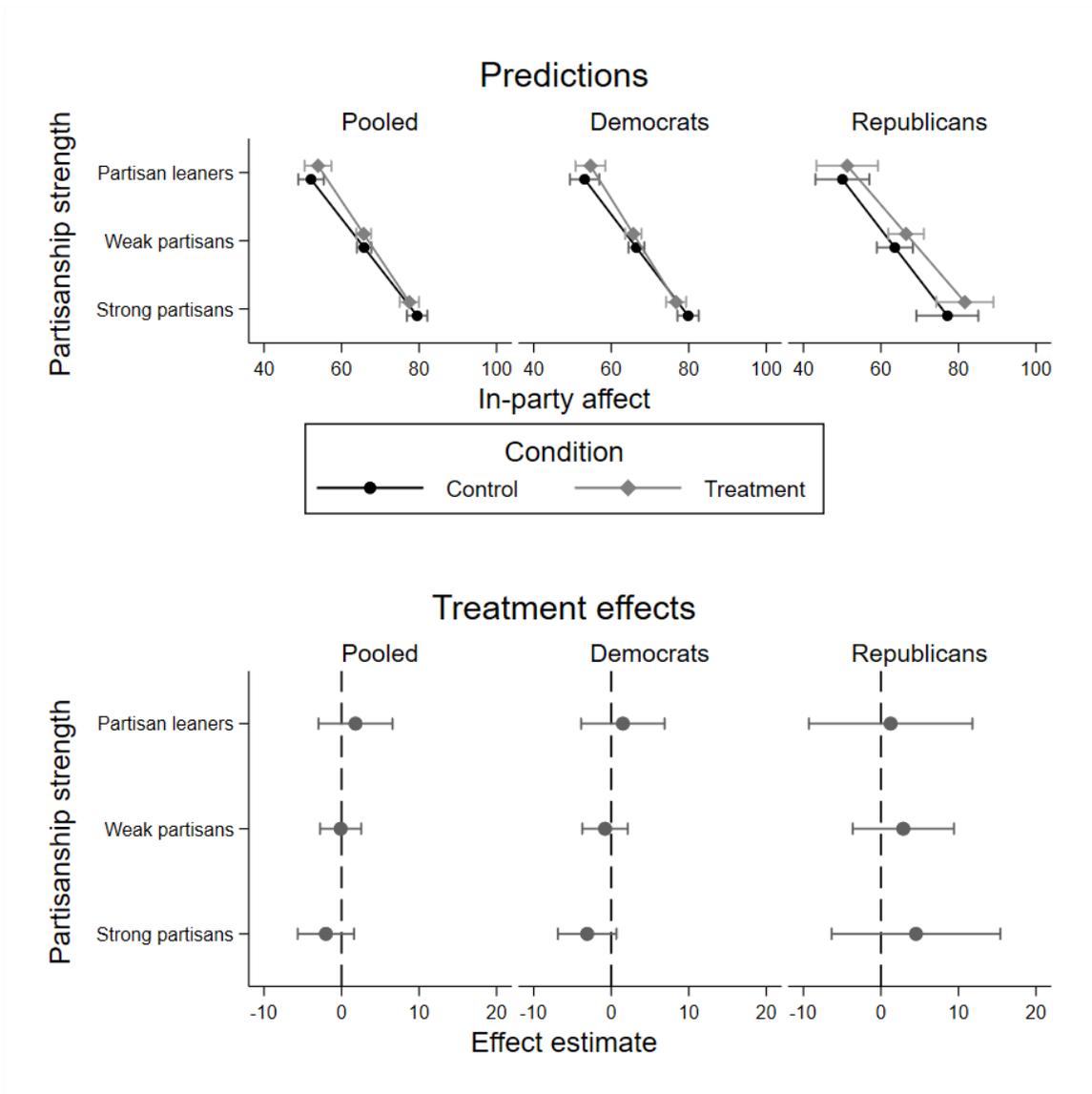


Figure S1. The effect of priming *intraparty* fractionalization on in-party affect

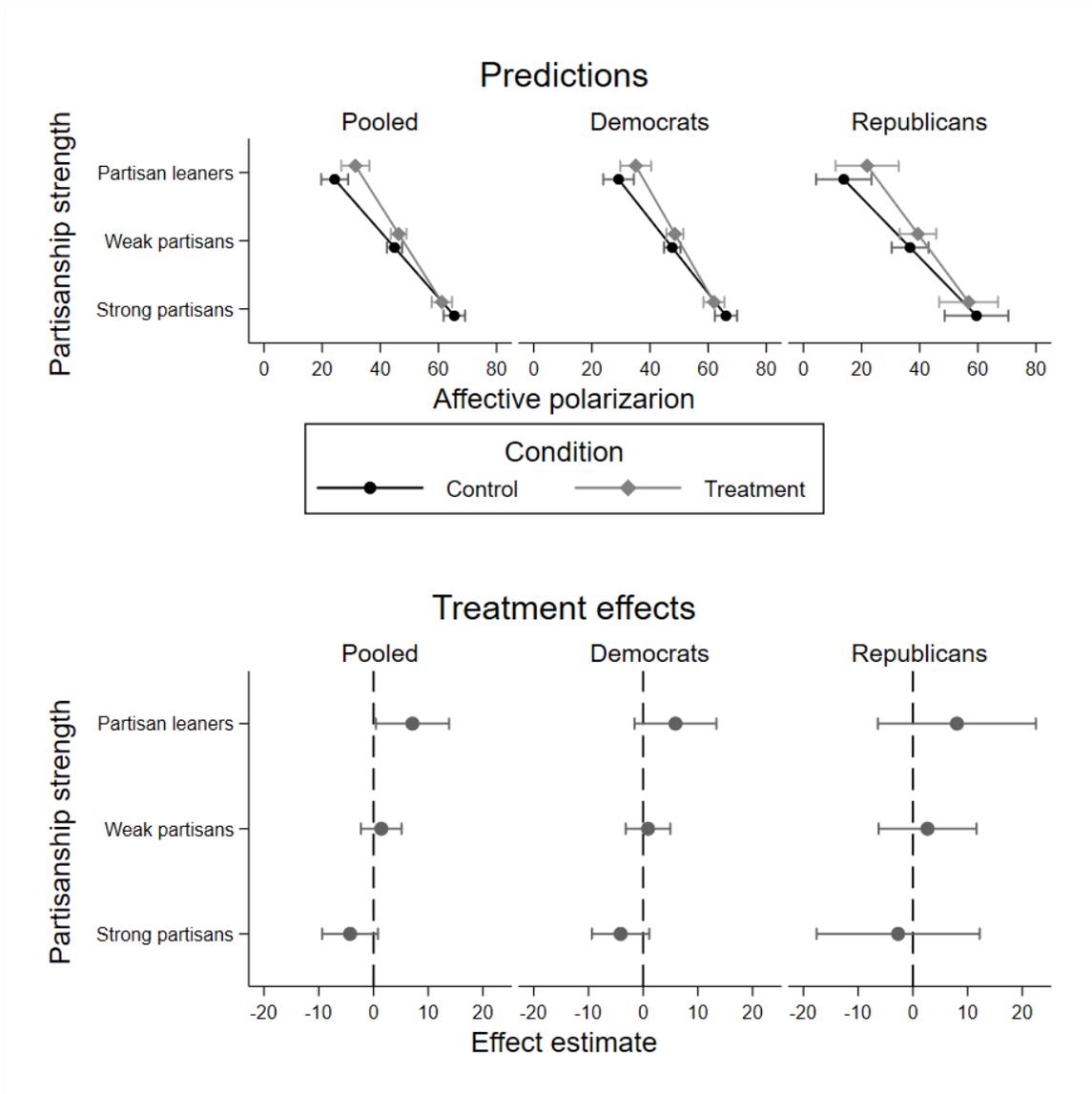


Figure S2. The effect of priming *intraparty* fractionalization on affective polarization

Table S7. The effect of priming *intraparty* fractionalization on third-party voting

	Coefficient	SE
Treatment	-1.97**	(0.65)
PID strength	-1.82***	(0.19)
Treatment × PID strength	0.79**	(0.27)
Constant	8.99***	(0.45)

Note. $N = 679$. SE = standard error

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table S8. Effect of treatment on out-party vs. in-party affect: only respondents who answered the open-ended questions

	Out-party		In-party	
	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE
Treatment	-10.96*	(4.62)	0.23	(4.22)
PID strength	-7.38***	(1.38)	13.18***	(1.26)
Treatment × PID strength	4.44*	(1.97)	-0.79	(1.80)
Constant	35.58***	(3.20)	40.11***	(2.92)

Note. $N = 590$. SE = standard error

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Table S9. The effect of priming *intraparty* fractionalization on third-party voting: only respondents who answered the open-ended questions

	Coefficient	SE
Treatment	-1.60*	(0.65)
PID strength	-1.77***	(0.19)
Treatment × PID strength	0.66*	(0.27)
Constant	8.99***	(0.45)

Note. $N = 590$. SE = standard error

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Study 2: Survey Items

Partisanship

Generally speaking, do you consider yourself to be a Democrat, a Republican, an independent, or what?

- Democrat
- Republican
- Independent
- Other (please specify)

[if Democrat]

Would you consider yourself to be a strong Democrat or not a very strong Democrat?

- Strong Democrat
- Not very strong Democrat

[if Republican]

Would you consider yourself to be a strong Republican or not a very strong Republican?

- Strong Republican
- Not very strong Republican

[if independent]

Would you consider yourself to be closer to the Republican Party or the Democratic Party?

- Closer to the Republican Party
- Closer to the Democratic Party
- Neither

Control

These days, there are many groups competing for influence in American politics. We are interested to hear which groups you would like to have more influence versus less influence.

How do you feel about the current balance of influence between whites and non-whites in American politics?

- I wish whites had more influence in American politics
- I wish non-whites had more influence in American politics
- I am happy with the current balance of influence between whites and non-whites in American politics

How do you feel about the current balance of influence between religious and non-religious people in American politics?

- I wish religious people had more influence in American politics
- I wish non-religious people had more influence in American politics
- I am happy with the current balance of influence between religious and non-religious people in American politics

How do you feel about the current balance of influence between upper-class, middle-class, and working-class people in American politics?

- I wish upper-class people had more influence in American politics
- I wish middle-class people had more influence in American politics
- I wish working-class people had more influence in American politics
- I am happy with the current balance of influence between upper-class, middle-class, and working-class people in American politics

How do you feel about the current balance of influence between liberals, moderates, and conservatives in American politics?

- I wish liberals had more influence in American politics
- I wish moderates had more influence in the American politics
- I wish conservatives had more influence in American politics.
- I am happy with the current balance of influence between liberals, moderates, and conservatives in American politics.

Is there any particular group in American politics that you worry about gaining power? If so, please take a few minutes to explain why.
[open-ended response]

Treatment: Democrats

These days, there are many groups competing for influence in the Democratic Party. We are interested to hear which groups you would like to have more influence versus less influence in the party.

How do you feel about the current balance of influence between whites and non-whites in the Democratic Party?

- I wish whites had more influence in the Democratic Party
- I wish non-whites had more influence in the Democratic Party
- I am happy with the current balance of influence between whites and non-whites in the Democratic Party

How do you feel about the current balance of influence between religious and non-religious people in the Democratic Party?

- I wish religious people had more influence in the Democratic Party
- I wish non-religious people had more influence in the Democratic Party
- I am happy with the current balance of influence between religious people and non-religious people in the Democratic Party

How do you feel about the current balance of influence between upper-class, middle-class, and working-class people in the Democratic Party?

- I wish upper-class people had more influence in the Democratic Party
- I wish middle-class people had more influence in the Democratic Party

- I wish working-class people had more influence in the Democratic Party
- I am happy with the current balance of influence between upper-class, middle-class, and working-class people in the Democratic Party

How do you feel about the current balance of influence between liberals, moderates, and conservatives in the Democratic Party?

- I wish liberals had more influence in the Democratic Party
- I wish moderates had more influence in the Democratic Party
- I wish conservatives had more influence in the Democratic Party.
- I am happy with the current balance of influence between liberals, moderates, and conservatives in the Democratic Party.

Is there any particular group in the Democratic Party that you worry about gaining power? If so, please take a few minutes to explain why.

[open-ended response]

Treatment: Republicans

These days, there are many groups competing for influence in the Republican Party. We are interested to hear which groups you would like to have more influence versus less influence in the party.

How do you feel about the current balance of influence between whites and non-whites in the Republican Party?

- I wish whites had more influence in the Republican Party
- I wish non-whites had more influence in the Republican Party
- I am happy with the current balance of influence between whites and non-whites in the Republican Party

How do you feel about the current balance of influence between religious and non-religious people in the Republican Party?

- I wish religious people had more influence in the Republican Party
- I wish non-religious people had more influence in the Republican Party
- I am happy with the current balance of influence between religious people and non-religious people in the Republican Party

How do you feel about the current balance of influence between upper-class, middle-class, and working-class people in the Republican Party?

- I wish upper-class people had more influence in the Republican Party
- I wish middle-class people had more influence in the Republican Party
- I wish working-class people had more influence in the Republican Party
- I am happy with the current balance of influence between upper class, middle-class, and working-class people in the Republican Party

How do you feel about the current balance of influence between liberals, moderates, and conservatives in the Republican Party?

- I wish liberals had more influence in the Republican Party
- I wish moderates had more influence in the Republican Party
- I wish conservatives had more influence in the Republican Party
- I am happy with the current balance of influence between liberals, moderates, and conservatives in the Republican Party.

Is there any particular group in the Republican Party that you worry about gaining power? If so, please take a few minutes to explain why.

[open-ended response]

Party feelings

We'd like to get your feelings toward the U.S. parties using something we call the feeling thermometer. Ratings between 50 degrees and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorable and warm toward the party. Ratings between 0 degrees and 50 degrees mean that you don't feel favorable toward the party and that you don't care too much for that party. You would rate the party at the 50 degree mark if you don't feel particularly warm or cold toward the party.

- Democratic Party
- Republican Party

Third party voting

On the scale where 0 means extremely unlikely and 10 means extremely likely, how likely is it that you would ever vote for a third party candidate?

[choose integer value from 0 to 10 using slider]

Demographics

Please indicate which racial and/or ethnic category applies best to you.

- White
- Black or African American
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- Hispanic or Latino
- Arab or Middle Eastern
- Other (please specify)

In terms of religion, which of the following comes closest to describing you?

- Mainline Protestant
- Catholic
- Evangelical Christian
- Other Christian

- Follower of a non-Christian religion
- Non-religious or secular person
- Atheist
- Other (please specify)

In terms of social class, which of the following comes closest to describing you?

- Middle class
- Working class
- Other (please specify)

We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. Here is a 7-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Where would you place yourself on this scale?

- Extremely liberal
- Liberal
- Slightly liberal
- Moderate
- Slightly conservative
- Conservative
- Extremely conservative