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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Political Psychology

Why can't we be friends? Untangling conjoined polarization in America

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Abstract

Party affiliation in the United States is increasingly aligned with multiple social identities. In this era of social sorting, to what extent is polarization motivated by partisan identities compared to other overlapping identities in non-political settings? Using a conjoint survey experiment to examine the multivariate nature of affective polarization, we find that political identity outweighs all other social identities in informing citizens' attitudes and projected behaviors towards others. In addition, we find that partisanship usually outweighs ideology, but ideology matters in driving polarization; Democrats dislike Republicans more than Republicans dislike Democrats; and partisan identity has a particularly strong effect on racial and religious biases and preferences. Contrary to assumptions, cross-cutting identities do not appear to dampen social polarization. We also find that, while out-group animosity is stronger than in-group sentiment in abstract attitudinal measurements, the results are mixed in interpersonal behavioral measurements, suggesting that partisan animus between citizens at the community level may be more nuanced than often suggested.

KEYWORDS

conjoint, identity, othering, partisanship, polarization, the United States

> One major concern is that partisan animus might spill over and affect behaviors and attitudes outside the political realm. It is one thing if partisan disagreements are confined to political contestations, but quite another if everyday interactions and life choices are compromised by politics. (Iyengar et al., 2019, 136)

INTRODUCTION

It is widely acknowledged that political polarization has intensified in recent years in the United States, and research indicates that divisions are no longer confined to the political realm but to the social as well, with Americans becoming increasingly averse to members of the opposing political party (Finkel et al., 2020). But, in an era of "social sorting" (Mason, 2016) and "conjoined polarization" (Cain & Zhang, 2016), how much of this divide is due directly to partisanship, and how much is attributable to other traits that are conflated with party identity? That is, when party affiliation increasingly intersects with identities such as ideology, race/ethnicity, class, religion, level of education, and geographic locale, how do we parse out what is most driving the divisions between our so-called "tribes" (Chua, 2018)?

In this study, we conduct a conjoint survey experiment with a multivariate analysis to answer the question: what factors are most responsible for motivating affective polarization? We focus on affective polarization, or increased dislike and distrust between the two major parties, and we are most interested in "social polarization" (Mason, 2015), or the social attitudes and behaviors of citizens towards *each other*, rather than towards elites (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019). In other words, rather than focusing on how citizens assess political parties or candidates, we look specifically at how citizens view other members of their communities. We also examine how partisan identity interacts with other social identities and demographics, and we explore the impact of cross-cutting identities—profiles that do not conform to partisan stereotypes—on mitigating polarization.

The article makes several key contributions. First, it examines which identity traits are most driving polarization and social sorting *relative to others*. Second, it focuses on how sorting manifests at the *interpersonal* (rather than political) level, and it challenges assumptions about the salience of out-group aversion (as opposed to in-group affinity) in those interactions. Finally, it is one of the first studies (in our knowledge) to test the impact of *cross-cutting identities* (those that do not fully conform to partisan stereotypes) on social polarization. The article is organized as follows: first, we provide an overview of the scholarly literature on affective polarization, including an explanation of our hypotheses. Next, we describe our methodology, followed by an analysis of the results. We conclude with a discussion on the implications and limitations of the findings and suggestions for further research.

LITERATURE REVIEW: PARTISANSHIP AND AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

Much has been written about polarization in the United States, with debates shifting from *if* Americans are polarized to *how* Americans are polarized. By its simplest definition, polarization is "the political distance separating partisans" (Talisse, 2019). Yet there are different ways to understand partisanship and to conceptualize the distance between parties. For example, Huddy et al. differentiate between an *instrumental* model of partisanship, which focuses on agreement with a party's issue stances; and an *expressive* model, which defines partisanship as a social identity that is largely stable and emotionally defensive in nature (2018, 173). In turn, polarization can be understood first as a divergence between parties' policy stances or second as increasing dislike between partisan identity groups (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2006; Fiorina, 2017).

In this study, we focus on the latter: expressive, identity-based polarization or affective polarization, typically characterized as increasing dislike by ordinary citizens of affiliates of a different political party (Iyengar & Westwood, 2014; Mason, 2015). Mason (2016) has demonstrated that this type of polarization goes beyond the merging of party and ideology to incorporate social identities such as religion, race, and education. While existing literature has

demonstrated that this social sorting exists, there is little scholarship exploring which of these often overlapping identities most drive citizens' attitudes and behaviors towards others, especially in social settings. We thus build upon the existing literature by untangling political and social identities to identify not just if, but *how they interact* relative to each other to inform individual preferences, particularly in non-political arenas. We also look more deeply at the *directional dynamics* of affective polarization by challenging the assumption that out-group aversion is stronger than in-group affinity, and we fill a gap in the literature by examining the impact of *cross-cutting identities* on polarization.

Political versus social identities

The concepts of expressive partisanship and affective polarization have roots in Social Identity Theory (SIT), a social psychology concept that emphasizes the development of personal identity based on group membership (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). According to SIT, "when people self-define in terms of their social identity, they generally seek to positively differentiate their ingroup from relevant outgroups" (Mols & Weber, 2013, 507; Tajfel & Turner, 1986, 16). Applying SIT to the US political context, it is evident that partisanship has become an increasingly salient social identity as political parties have "sorted" ideologically (Cassese, 2021; Iyengar et al., 2012, 2019; Iyengar & Krupenkin, 2018; Iyengar & Westwood, 2014; Mason, 2015, 2018).

Yet even as political identity has become more salient, many studies have demonstrated that political identity does not operate in a vacuum but is constantly overlapping with other identities, both in our conceptions of ourselves and our assumptions about others. As Winter notes, "party affiliation is a social identity that citizens understand in relation to other identities" (2020, 162; see also Green et al., 2002; Miller et al., 1991). Similarly, Goggin et al. identify "associative networks – issues, positions, traits, and other qualities that voters associate with party and ideological labels" (2019, 1005). Consequently, as Roccas and Brewer (2002) suggest, the "othering" impulse is intensified by the *assumed composite* that we assign to people of different parties. That is, overlapping political and social identities affect both our definitions of ourselves and our assumptions about others.

Yet how do we understand the dynamic between political identity and other identities? Is affective polarization driven by partisanship, or by biases rooted in other often assumed co-aligned identities, including traits more historically and socially pervasive, like race or class? Previous studies have shown that partisan divides exceed those of racial identity (Carmines & Nassar, 2022), and Westwood and Peterson (2020) show that racial and partisan divides reinforce each other. We build on these studies but extend the comparison to other identity variables and demographic traits beyond race to include gender, class, religion, education, and geographic origin. While recognizing that "ordinary voters attach importance to many dimensions of their identities, not just their partisanship" (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019, 121), we nevertheless predict that, when social divides occur, political differences will outweigh other social identities and demographics:

> **H1.** Political identity will have a stronger influence on social preferences than other identities, including but not limited to race and class.

Out-group aversion versus in-group affinity in everyday interactions

If we are correct that political identity is the primary driver of social polarization, it is crucial to explore the nuances of how those divisions develop. It is often assumed that

affective polarization mainly reflects animus toward members of the other party (Iyengar & Westwood, 2014; Mason, 2015; Weisel & Bohm, 2015). But SIT reminds us that this is not necessarily the case, emphasizing that inter-group dynamics do not occur in isolation, but rather depend on broader socio-structural contexts, such that the outcome of heightened social identification can flow in different directions depending on the prevailing norm of the group in question (Mols & Hart, 2018; Mols & Weber, 2013, 508). Indeed, many studies indicate that "in-group identification is independent of negative attitudes toward out-groups and… intergroup discrimination is motivated by preferential treatment of in-group members rather than direct hostility toward out-group members" (Brewer, 2002, 429). Notably for our study, Rudolph and Hetherington (2021) show that while out-party aversion is more dominant in political settings, in-party affection is more dominant in non-political settings.

It is also plausible that focusing on respondents' preferences towards other voters rather than elites dampens out-group aversion. As Druckman and Levendusky (2019) note, "while [people] dislike both elites and ordinary voters from the other party, they especially dislike the other party's elites" (115). In other words, people tend to view regular *members* of the other party more favorably than the *leaders* of the other party (Druckman et al., 2022, 1106). Knudsen (2020) finds a similar effect when comparing negative attitudes towards *voters* against attitudes towards *parties*, with parties having a more pronounced polarizing effect. In our experiment, which focuses solely on citizens (rather than party elites) in a social (rather than political) setting, we thus expect to see a more nuanced manifestation of affective polarization towards other citizens than the animosity observed in previous studies focusing on how participants view political parties or elites.

The type of measurement can also affect perceptions of out-party aversion versus in-party affinity. For example, Druckman and Levendusky (2019) show that social distance questions that measure *behaviors* (including projected behaviors) towards other citizens tend to reflect less animosity than thermometers or trait ratings that measure general *attitudes*. As discussed further in the methodology, we include two types of measurement: one is a more abstract favorability rating assessing attitudes, while the other is a forced-choice social distance measurement measuring projected behavior. We expect this to yield more blurring between in-group love and out-group hate than is usually observed or emphasized:

> **H2.** Out-party aversion will be more pronounced in abstract favorability/attitudinal measurements than in projected interpersonal behavior measurements.

Cross-cutting identities

What happens when individuals do not fit neatly into the in-group or out-group, such as when party, ideology, and other typically conjoined traits do not align? Some studies suggest that introducing or emphasizing cross-cutting identities can help reduce social polarization. For example, Winter (2020) notes that Dahl (1956) "credited cross-cutting cleavages with moderating political parties and ensuring stability" (160), and social identity complexity theory (Roccas & Brewer, 2002) likewise asserts that recognizing multiple in-groups leads to more inclusive structures.

Yet this effect has not been widely studied in political science. An important exception is Mason (2016), who suggests that cross-cutting identities can have a moderating effect on affective polarization. But Mason's study only analyzes responses to party and candidate-focused vignettes, as opposed to community-level attitudes or projected interpersonal behaviors. In a slightly different approach, looking at contextualized rather than cross-cutting identities per se, Rogowski and Sutherland (2016) demonstrate that polarizing effects can be largely mitigated with biographical details supplementing information about ideology, but they too focus

on views of public officials rather than social preferences. In this research, we build on both of these earlier studies by offering cross-cutting profiles with both political and non-political traits in the context of an everyday interaction. We predict both that respondents with cross-cutting identities will display less partisan bias and that profiles with cross-cutting identities will yield less polarized responses:

H3. Cross-cutting identities will dampen the effect of polarization.

Further debates

In addition to partisanship, as Democrats and Republicans have become increasingly sorted along liberal and conservative lines (Levendusky, 2009), some recent scholarship has identified ideology as an increasingly salient social identity (Devine, 2015; Malka & Lelkes, 2010; Norman, 2024; Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016), though studies have shown mixed results. Lelkes (2021) finds ideology to be an even stronger determinant than partisanship in measuring respondents' views of candidates, while Dias and Lelkes (2022) find partisan identity to be the primary mechanism of affective polarization at the interpersonal level.

Scholarship on both ideology and partisanship also raises questions about which "side" is most responsible for polarization. With ideology, some research has indicated that conservatives are more prone to partisan cues than liberals (Jost et al., 2003), though subsequent studies show no significant difference between the two (Ditto et al., 2019; Iyengar & Westwood, 2014; Norman, 2024). In terms of partisanship, Winter (2020, 167) finds that affective polarization has increased significantly for both parties over the past several decades, but has increased faster for Democrats than for Republicans (an average increase of 2.4 degrees per 4-year presidential term, compared with 1.8). But in looking at changes over recent years, Finkel et al. (2020) note that affective polarization has increased in both parties "at similar rates" (533).

In this study, we expect that partisan identity and ideological identity will both be significant in motivating social preferences, but we expect to see party identity to be even more salient as it increasingly encompasses ideology. We expect similar levels of bias from both Democrats and Republicans towards members of the opposite party and from liberals and conservatives towards each other:

H4a. Partisanship and ideology will both have a significant influence on social preferences, but partisan identity will outweigh ideology.

H4b. Democrats and Republicans (and liberals and conservatives) will demonstrate similar levels of in-group and out-group bias.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, we assess respondents' attitudes and projected behaviors towards other citizens in non-political social settings. To test our hypotheses, we used a pre-registered conjoint survey experiment. Conjoint experiments seek to shed light on complex causal questions, as they allow researchers to understand how respondents choose between options that vary across multiple dimensions of interest (Bansak et al., 2021, 23; Sniderman, 2018). The conjoint design asks respondents to repeatedly choose between a pair of alternative choices that randomly vary on certain characteristics. As respondents complete more and more questions, their responses can be aggregated to provide insight into which characteristics are most important in informing their choices. Although the choices in a conjoint experiment are artificial, research

has shown that conjoint experiments have high external validity and reliably predict real-world behavior (Hainmueller et al., 2014). In this context, and given our research aim to understand which of many intertwined identity attributes most drive social polarization, the conjoint design was a logical choice.

The forced-choice measurement strategy enabled by the conjoint approach has several principled advantages over traditional interval-level measurement strategies such as a "feeling thermometer." Specifically, we argue that forced choice measures are directly relevant to explaining decisions that citizens make to prioritize or deprioritize investing in different social groups or relationships. Forced-choice measures are also easier for respondents to complete and understand than traditional scale-rating tasks, and the measurement reduces desirability bias. This allows us to obtain more data at a higher quality than would be possible with traditional techniques. We discuss each of these points in more detail below.

First, the conjoint questions directly capture the kind of trade-offs respondents have to consider when making many important social decisions that involve allocating limited time and effort between competing choices, obligations, or opportunities. Respondents make such choices when they decide, for example, between which of several social clubs to invest in, where to move to, whom to hire, or whom to befriend, date, or marry. Indeed, previous research has shown that individuals make identity-driven preferences about others frequently in their personal and professional lives when selecting for employees (Gift & Gift, 2015), dating partners (Huber & Malhotra, 2017), college roommates (Murray, 2022), and neighbors (Gimpel & Hui, 2015). Even when choices do not appear binary, the constraints of each problem mean that choosing an option necessarily implies committing less to the alternatives; if one chooses to become a treasurer of a bowling club, this will leave them with less time in other social organizations of which they are a part. The forced-choice nature of the conjoint questions directly captures the trade-offs that characterize navigating social life, and the approach is useful for explaining the increasing polarization and sorting we seek to investigate in this study.

Second, emerging evidence suggests that paired choice questions may be easier for respondents to answer, and result in fewer "fatigue effects." This is because while it may be difficult for respondents to consistently say how much they like a given profile on a 7-or 100-point scale, it is cognitively less demanding for a respondent to select which of two profiles they like more. Additionally, conjoint experiments have been referred to as "game-like" (Zucco et al., 2019), and participants appear willing to complete more conjoint questions before becoming fatigued or losing enthusiasm than comparable scale-rating questions. These factors make us confident that conjoint questions allow us to obtain more, higher-quality data than similar scale-rating tasks.

The conjoint design is also useful in this study, as conjoint experiments mitigate social desirability bias by embedding sensitive attributes within a mix of other attributes (Horiuchi et al., 2021). While there remains an absence of norms around expressing animosity towards political opponents (Iyengar & Westwood, 2014), such norms arguably do exist around other social identities, such as race, religion, and gender. (This is not to say that expressions of animosity along those lines do not occur, but rather that respondents are often hesitant to lodge their responses in ways that are socially undesirable when asked outright about racial attitudes for example.) The conjoint design mitigates this issue by integrating those sensitive traits into broader profiles, so respondents are never directly asked if a sensitive attribute informed their choice.

In the experiment, respondents were presented with the prompt, "Imagine you meet the two following people at a community meeting in your area." They then viewed two side-by-side profiles describing a hypothetical "Person A" and "Person B," described by the following attributes: political party, ideology, race/ethnicity, regional background, education, yearly income, gender, and religion. The attribute values are summarized in Table 1, with an example

TABLE 1 Attribute values.

Party	Democrat/republican/independent
Ideology	Liberal/moderate/conservative
Race/Ethnicity	White/Black/Hispanic/Asian
Region	Northeast/Midwest/South/West
Education	High School/2-Year College/4-Year College/Post-Grad Degree
Income	Under $40K/$40–80K/$80–120K/Over 120K
Gender	Male/female
Religion	Christian/Jewish/Muslim/Atheist

TABLE 2 Example conjoint comparison.

Individual A	**Individual B**
Democrat	Republican
Moderate	Conservative
White	Black
Northeast	South
HS Grad	Post-grad
Under 40K	40-80K
Male	Male
Jewish	Atheist

comparison provided in Table 2. The attribute values were assigned randomly, and the order of attributes was randomized between tasks.

After viewing the two profiles, respondents were asked two sets of questions. First, they were asked to rank on a scale of 1 to 7 how favorably or unfavorably they viewed each of the individuals profiled. Second, they were presented with three forced-choice questions in which they were asked which individual they would prefer to have as (1) a friend, (2) a neighbor, and (3) a son or daughter-in-law. These questions, known as "social distance" measures, have been used in other polarization studies (Iyengar et al., 2012; Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016) to "gauge the level of intimacy (distance) individuals are comfortable having with those from the other party" (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019, 116). Both types of measurement were included to compare general *attitudes* and *projected behaviors*, as recommended by Druckman and Levendusky (2019). Respondents participated in the experiment three times, with new profiles randomly generated each time. Further details and an example of the experiment are available in Appendix A.

The experiment was administered online by YouGov ($N = 1330$ respondents; 5320 conjoint comparisons; 10,640 interval-level measures) in the United States in May to June 2022. YouGov is an international public opinion, research, and data analytics firm with a US panel representative of the general population in terms of partisanship, race/ethnicity, gender, income, and region (see SI for summary statistics).

We were principally interested in identifying differences in how Democrats/Republicans (and liberals/conservatives) react to profile attributes, and we conducted two complementary analyses to understand how these groups respond differently to the profiles presented in the survey. In our main analyses, we split the sample and analyzed the response to profiles among

Republicans and Democrats (and liberals and conservatives) separately. In a secondary analysis, we used a series of Hierarchical Bayesian models (developed by Jensen et al., 2021) to understand the differences in how partisans respond to profiles that are not explained by baseline differences in observables between the two groups. A further discussion of these approaches is detailed in Appendix B.

Lastly, we ran regressions to ascertain any statistical significance related to cross-cutting identities of either profiles or respondents. Cross-cutting identities include mixtures of demographic attributes that contrast with common *stereotypes* of Democrats/Republicans and liberals/conservatives. To test this, we ran models with categories including Black Republicans, Hispanic/Latino Republicans, Black conservatives, Hispanic/Latino conservatives, Christian Democrats, Christian liberals, and conservative Democrats. We based these categories on those identified by Mason (2016) as most common in partisan social sorting: ideology, race, and religion. Even though in reality such "cross-cutting" identities are quite common, they do not conform to the usual partisan stereotypes associated with social sorting. For example, in the 2024 election, many partisan Democrats and liberals found increased support from Hispanic and Black voters for the Republican candidate, Donald Trump, to be unexpected and surprising, despite there being many voters in each demographic group who identify as Republican and/or conservative (Cohn, 2024). Likewise, it is often assumed that practicing Christians will vote Republican or identify as conservative (Emerson, 2024), though there are many Christian-identifying Democrats and liberals in the voting population. Further details are available in the SI.

Analysis was performed using the R programming language, version 4.4.1 (R Core Team, 2024). Graphics were generated using the ggplot2 library for R (Wickham, 2016), and the dotwhisker library (Solt & Hu, 2024). Tables were produced using the stargazer package (Hlavac, 2022).

RESULTS

Our findings indicate that political identity outweighs all other social identities and demographics, including race, class, gender, religion, geographic locale, and education level, in determining how favorably or unfavorably respondents view others in a social setting. We also find that, while out-group animosity is stronger than in-group sentiment in abstract attitudinal measurements, the result is mixed in interpersonal behavior projections. Contrary to assumptions, cross-cutting identities do not appear to dampen social polarization. In addition, we find that partisanship outweighs ideology, but ideology still matters in driving polarization; Democrats dislike Republicans more than Republicans dislike Democrats, and partisan identity has a particularly strong effect on racial and religious biases. Each finding is discussed in more detail below.

Partisan identity outweighs all other social divisions

Across both of our measures, a respondent's political party[1] was one of the most powerful predictors of how favorably or unfavorably they viewed different profiles, eclipsing race,

[1]The seeming preference for Democrats over Republicans in the general coefficient estimates in Figure 1 likely reflects the over-representation of Democrats in the sample. See the SI for summary statistics. Note also that while the coefficients in Figure 1 compare Republicans and Democrats to the reference category (Independents), the regression also suggests that Democrats are rated more favorably than comparable Republicans, as the difference between the Republican and Democrat coefficients is significant.

class, and gender. The effect was stronger in the attitudinal/favorability measurements than in the projected behavior/social distance measurements, as discussed further below. The only other attribute that compared with partisanship was religion, with the coefficients associated with being Muslim and atheist being both significant and negative, indicating that, relative to Christians, Muslims and atheists are rated less favorably by respondents. Perhaps surprisingly, the coefficients associated with a profile being female or Black are positive and significant, with coefficient estimates of .09 each. This indicates that a profile who is female or Black will receive a rating .09 points higher than an otherwise identical profile who is not Black or female.

Figures 1 and 2 provide an illustration of these phenomena. The figures plot the coefficients (in the case of Figure 1) and Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs) (in Figure 2) that describe how survey participants respond to each profile attribute. To give an example, the coefficient associated with a profile being Black can be read off the fourth row of Figure 1. The confidence interval does not overlap zero, suggesting that this estimate is not readily explained by chance.

We also analyze the data separately for Republicans, Democrats, and Independents, allowing us to understand how these groups respond differently to conjoint profiles. The results of these analyses are shown in Figure 3 and Table 3, which report the estimated coefficients that describe how participants react to each characteristic a profile may have. As expected, the split-sample analyses show that the average marginal responses mask significant heterogeneity by group; Republican respondents significantly prefer Republican profiles to otherwise identical Independent ones, and Democrats significantly prefer Democratic profiles.

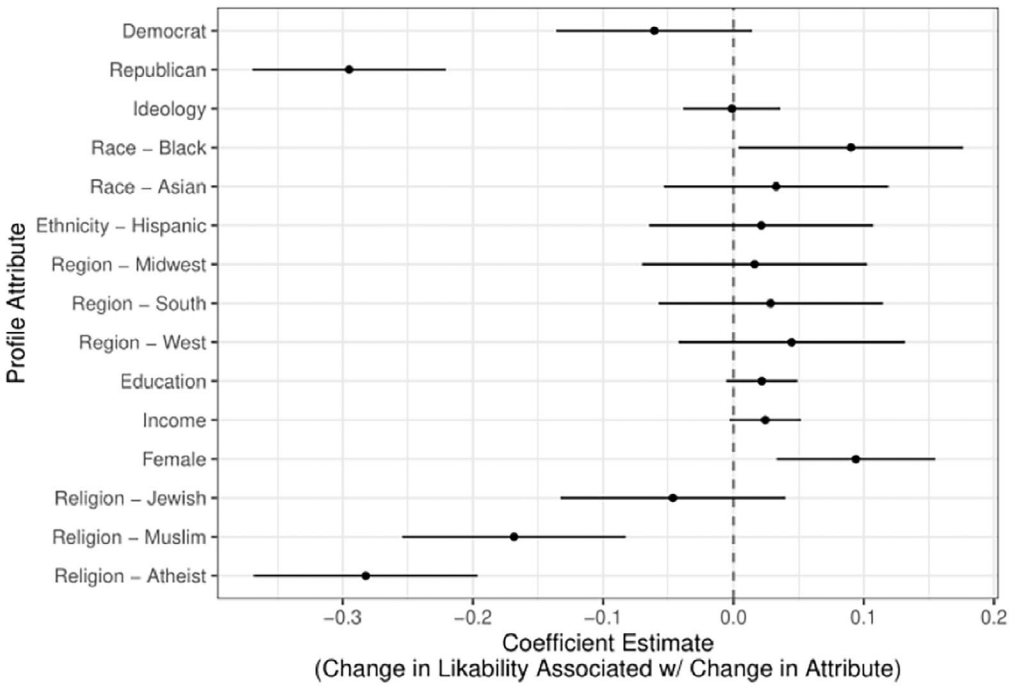

FIGURE 1 Coefficient estimates for favorability, entire sample.

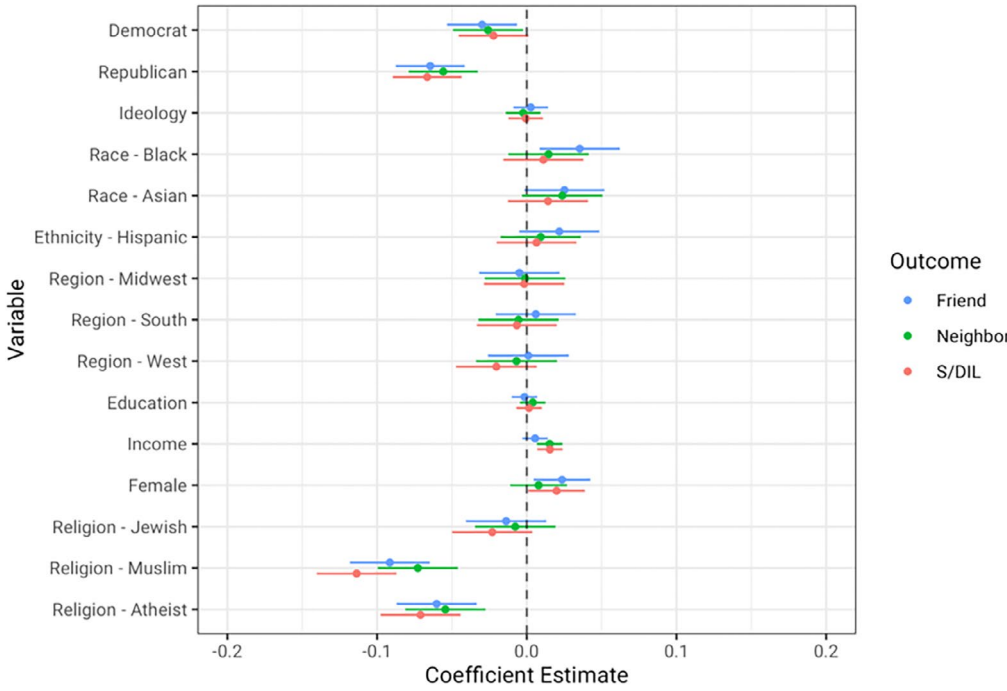

FIGURE 2 Coefficient estimates for binary-choice AMCE models, entire sample.

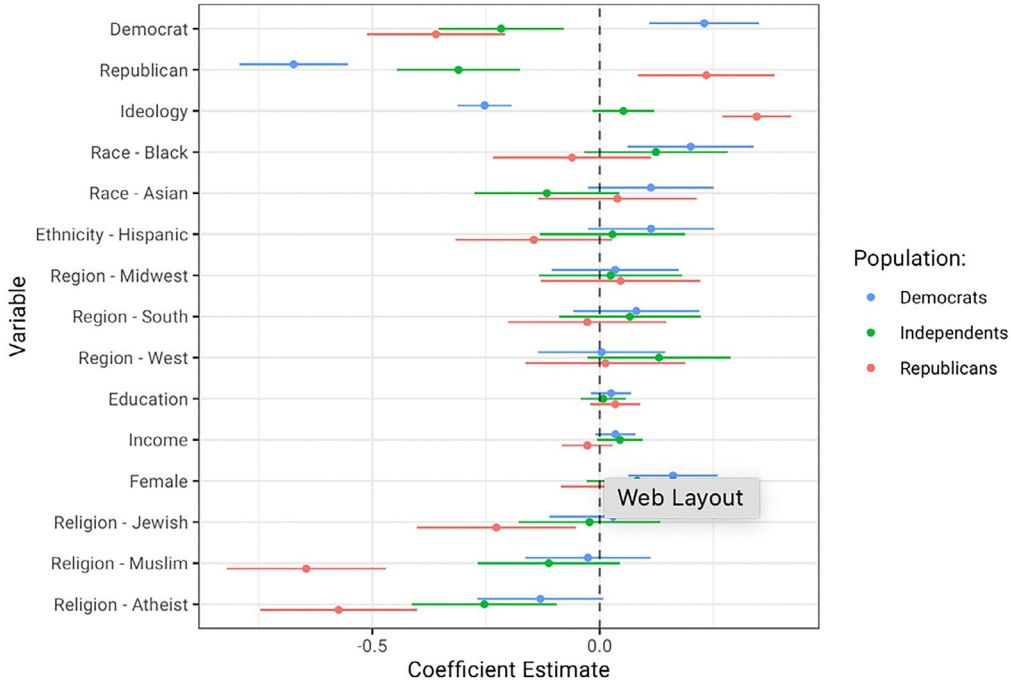

FIGURE 3 Coefficient estimates, sample split by respondents' political party.

TABLE 3 Regression of favorability on profile attributes.

	Dependent variable		
	Democrats	**Independents**	**Republicans**
Democrat	.230***	−.217***	−.360***
	(.062)	(.070)	(.077)
Republican	−.673***	−.311***	.235***
	(.061)	(.069)	(.077)
Ideology	−.253***	.052	.345***
	(.030)	(.035)	(.039)
Race – Black	.200***	.124	−.061
	(.071)	(.080)	(.089)
Race – Asian	.113	−.116	.039
	(.070)	(.081)	(.089)
Ethnicity – Hispanic	.113	.028	−.145*
	(.071)	(.081)	(.088)
Region – Midwest	.034	.024	.046
	(.071)	(.080)	(.089)
Region – South	.08	.067	−.027
	(.071)	(.079)	(.089)
Region – West	.004	.13	.013
	(.071)	(.080)	(.090)
Education	.025	.008	.034
	(.023)	(.025)	(.028)
Income	.035	.044*	−.027
	(.022)	(.026)	(.028)
Female	.161***	.082	.038
	(.050)	(.057)	(.063)
Religion – Jewish	.029	−.022	−.227*
	(.071)	(.079)	(.089)
Religion – Muslim	−.026	−.112	−.645***
	(.070)	(.080)	(.089)
Religion – Atheist	−.13*	−.254***	−.574***
	(.071)	(.081)	(.088)
Intercept	5.398***	4.700***	4.494***
	(.135)	(.153)	(.171)
Observations	3960	2904	2600
R-Squared	.078	.019	.077
Adjusted *R*-Squared	.075	.014	.071
Residual Std. Error	1.558 (df = 3944)	1.531 (df = 2888)	1.620 (df = 2584)

Note: *$p < 0.1$; **$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.01$.

Affective polarization (out-group animosity) is stronger than in-group affinity for attitudinal measures, but the results are mixed for behavioral measures

The findings indicate that out-group animosity usually outweighs in-group affinity for Democrats and Republicans, but, as predicted, the results are sensitive to the type of

measurement and vary by political party and ideology. In the general favorability measurements assessing attitudes, both parties demonstrated greater out-group aversion than in-group affection. On average, Democrats rated Democratic profiles .230 points more favorably than comparable independents and rated Republican profiles .673 points less favorably than similar Independent profiles. Similarly, Republicans rated Republican profiles .235 points higher and rated Democratic profiles .360 points lower than comparable Independent profiles. All of these comparisons are statistically significant at the $p = .05$ level. Out-group aversion and in-group affection between liberals and conservatives were present but less pronounced, with liberals disfavoring conservatives (−.481) more than preferring other liberals (.141), and conservatives disfavoring liberals (−.396) slightly more than favoring other conservatives (.327).

Determining the salience of out-group aversion versus in-group preference was more complicated when analyzing the forced-choice social distance question. We found that when separately analyzing data from Republicans and Democrats, out-group animosity appeared stronger than affection for in-groups. This is to say, Republicans penalized Democratic profiles more than they reacted positively to Republican profiles, and vice versa. However, when we fit a Hierarchical Bayesian model that sought to adjust for baseline differences between Republicans and Democrats, we found that in-group preference was significantly stronger than out-group aversion. We discuss both approaches in turn.

First, when we analyze the data for Republicans and Democrats separately, we find that, on average, Republicans penalize Democratic profiles more than they reward Republicans and vice-versa. Taking the forced-choice question about friendship as an example, Republicans on average would choose a Republican profile 9.3% more than a comparable Independent profile but would choose Democratic profiles to have as a friend 11% less than a comparable Independent profile. The difference was even more stark when considering Democratic respondents, who would prefer Democratic profiles over independents by an expected margin of 7% but prefer Independents to Republicans by a margin of 16%. By this analysis, the same phenomenon is observed across all of our forced-choice questions: Democrats dislike Republicans more than they like Independents, and Republicans on average dislike Democrats more than they prefer their fellow Republicans.

Are these phenomena due to genuine out-group animosity, or do they reflect baseline differences between Republicans and Democrats? This is to say, do Democrats and Republicans dislike each other because of their partisanship, or are the types of people who are already likely to penalize Democrats more common among Republicans (and vice-versa)? To answer this question, we employ a series of Hierarchical Bayesian models to try and adjust for differences in other observable characteristics between Republicans and Democrats. The technical details of this strategy are discussed in the appendix, but the main advantage of this approach is that it allows us to adjust for baseline differences in observables (age, race, sex) between Democrats and Republicans, at the cost of some modeling assumptions to more cleanly identify the effect of partisanship on conjoint profile responses.

Across all of our Bayesian models, we found that a profile and respondent sharing the same party predicted a significant increase in AMCEs, while the effect of a profile and respondent having different partisan affiliations was generally non-significant. In the friend model, for example, Republicans were predicted to respond significantly more favorably to Republican profiles than otherwise identical Independents ($\Delta\text{AMCE} = .122$, $p < .001$), but were not predicted to respond to Democratic profiles any more negatively than a comparable Independent ($\Delta\text{AMCE} = -.02$, $p = .96$). The same phenomenon was also observed among Democrats, who were predicted to respond more positively ($\Delta\text{AMCE} = .133$, $p < .001$), to Democratic profiles than comparable Independents, but were not predicted to respond to Republican profiles in a way that was significantly different from comparable independents ($\Delta\text{AMCE} = -.031$, $p = .33$). We found the same phenomenon when examining our two other forced-choice questions, but

not when applying the same modeling strategy to the likability-scale ratings. These findings suggest that the *strength* of polarizing attitudes may be smaller in the social distance measurements than in the general favorability measurements, implying that abstract political attitudes may not affect interpersonal interactions to the same degree, especially in regards to penalizing out-groups.

Cross-cutting identities have no discernible effect on reducing polarization

Contrary to our hypothesis, cross-cutting identities had no discernible effect on reducing polarization. This was the case when analyzing how respondents viewed profiles with cross-cutting identities and when analyzing how respondents with cross-cutting identities themselves viewed the profiles. For example, respondents were neither more nor less likely to prefer seemingly "atypical" Democrats or Republicans, and respondents who themselves have cross-cutting identities were neither more nor less likely to display partisan affinity. As discussed in the methodology, we define atypical respondents as those who break popular stereotypes of partisan/ideological group makeup. This underscores the strength of partisan identities, as even relatively diverse profiles and respondents are sorted most strongly by party and ideology.

Partisan identity and ideology both matter

As predicted, both partisan identity and ideology are significant in social preferences. The results indicate that both partisan identity and ideology (see Figure 4) are statistically significant in shaping social preferences, with political parties stronger in most but not all measures. Using the favorability rating measures, for example, Democrats preferred Democrats by .230 points

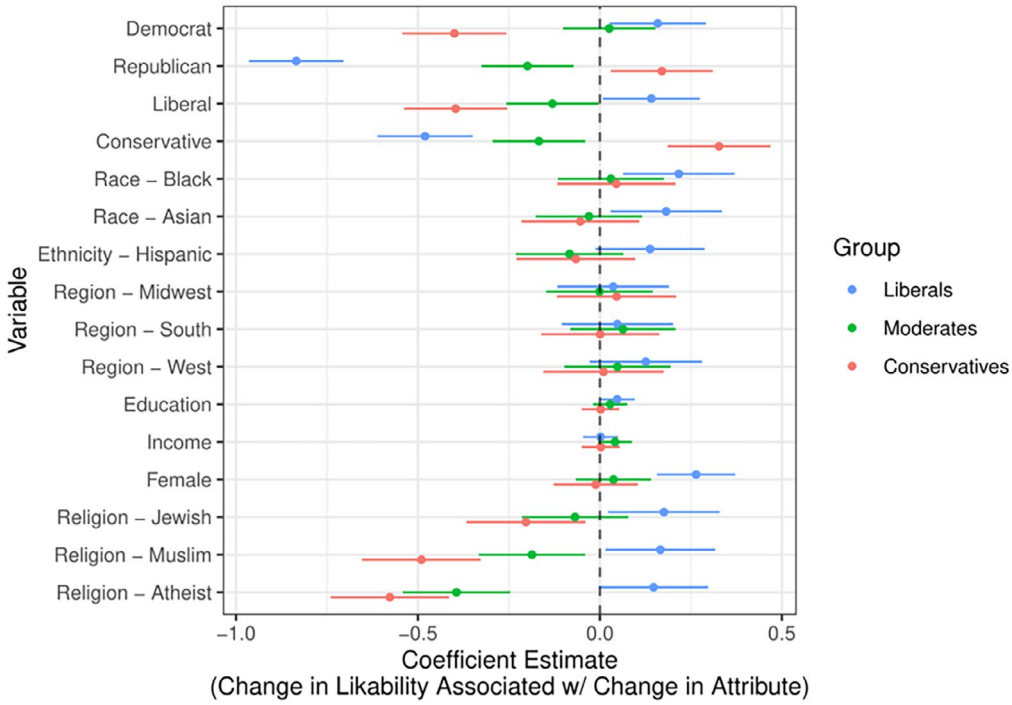

FIGURE 4 Split-sample by ideology (liberal/conservative).

on average, while liberals preferred liberals by .141. Democrats also disliked Republicans by −.673 points relative to comparable Independents, while liberals disliked conservatives by a still significant but smaller margin of −.481 points. For Democrats and liberals, then, party identity appears stronger than ideology.

The results are slightly different; however, for conservatives and Republicans. Republicans favored Republicans by an average of .235, while conservatives preferred other conservatives by .327 points on average. Republicans rated Democrats .360 points lower relative to independents, which was similar to the .396 margin by which conservatives disliked liberals relative to independents. For Republicans and conservatives, then, conservative identity is a stronger indicator than party. This may be due to the fact that while some Democrats still identify as conservative, few Republicans identify as liberal.

For both groups, the strongest evidence of out-group dislike was at the intersection of ideology and party, from liberals towards Republicans (−.834) and from conservatives towards Democrats (−.400). These levels of animosity outweighed those of Democrats towards Republicans and liberals towards conservatives and vice versa. This finding is in line with other research that indicates that stronger ideological identities are more likely to socially polarize (see for example Mason, 2016).

Democrats are more averse to Republicans than Republicans are to Democrats

Does one party dislike its out-group more than the other? The results indicate that Democrats display more dislike towards Republicans than Republicans do towards Democrats. In the favorability measurement, for example, the coefficient for Democrats' dislike of Republicans (−.673) was nearly twice that of Republicans' dislike of Democrats (−.360). This seems to represent a relatively recent shift. In 2014, for example, Pew reported that 43 percent of Republicans held a highly negative opinion of the Democratic party, while 38 percent of Democrats felt very unfavorably towards the GOP (Doherty, 2014). The strength of in-group preference was similar across both parties, though when looking at ideology, conservatives (.327) showed more than twice as much in-group affection than liberals (.141).

There is a significant difference between Republicans' and Democrats' racial and religious preferences

The split-sample estimates also revealed significant differences in how members of each party view race and religion. The difference between the coefficient for a Black profile is positive for Democrats and negative for Republicans, and the difference is statistically significant ($p = .05$), suggesting that Democrats view Black profiles more favorably than Republican respondents. This likely reflects the fact that Democrats view Black profiles significantly more positively (.200 scale-points) than otherwise identical profiles of other races. It should be noted that there is no significant data indicating that Republicans view Black profiles more negatively than otherwise identical profiles of other races, only that the *difference* between Republicans and Democrats on this variable is significant. Interestingly, when the same regression was run on white versus non-white respondents, the differences between the two groups were *not* statistically significant, indicating that partisan identity outweighs racial identity in influencing stated racial preferences (see Table 3 and Figure 3).

In the case of religion, Republicans view Jewish, Muslim, and atheist profiles significantly more negatively (by .227, .645, and .574 scale-points, respectively) than otherwise identical Christian profiles (see Table 3 and Figure 3). Democrats also view atheists more negatively than otherwise identical Christian profiles, while the estimate that encodes how Democrats

respond to a Muslim profile is negative but not significant. Though not directly predicted, these findings are in line with other research indicating the continuing salience of religion as a core social identity (Miles, 2019).

In terms of gender, Democrats responded more positively to female profiles (.161) than to male profiles. Republicans also had a slightly more positive response to female profiles, though not at significant levels, and there was no significant difference between how Democrats and Republicans viewed profiles of men and women. When looking at the gender of respondents, female respondents reacted more negatively to Republican profiles than male respondents, and the difference is statistically significant.

These findings are somewhat in line with other research indicating that partisan conflict mirrors other social divides (Winter, 2020, 162; see also Petrocik, 1987). But there are important distinctions as well. For example, Winter (2020) has found that Americans who identify with one of the two main parties have become "increasingly polarized" in their views on gender, race, and class (171). While this may be true by some measurements, the findings from our conjoint experiment reveal no significant class biases between the parties. Furthermore, the differences on race and, to a lesser extent, gender reflect a significant *affirmative* preference from Democrats rather than a *negative* bias from Republicans. This is a slightly different phenomenon than "polarization," when *both* parties move in *diverging* directions. With religion, both parties display some negative biases towards non-Christians, though much more so for Republicans. Despite claims that religious identity in the United States has been supplanted by politics (Hamid, 2021), the findings suggest that religion is still a salient issue, with social preferences for religious groups falling along political lines. This suggests the need for further attention to religion as a significant social identity, along with race, gender, and class.

IMPLICATIONS

It is clear that polarization has "spilled over" (Iyengar et al., 2019) and now affects attitudes outside the political realm, including in social interactions. To be sure, the findings indicate that partisanship is *the primary driver* of social divides in America today, outweighing race/ethnicity, class, level of education, geographic locale, and other demographic traits and identities in influencing social biases. It is true that many of these traits and identities are intertwined with partisan identity, yet even when we untangle those conjoined identities, partisanship remains the strongest and most significant indicator of social preferences.

Within the realm of social polarization, this study also highlights the need to differentiate between attitudinal and behavioral measures, as advocated by Druckman and Levendusky (2019). As indicated in the results, forced-choice projected behavior responses still reflect polarization, but they were less pronounced than attitudinal measures, and the results were mixed regarding the prevalence of in-group affection versus out-group animosity, suggesting that affective polarization may be more nuanced at the interpersonal behavioral level than sometimes assumed. The results partially support Druckman et al. (2022)'s recent finding that, at the interpersonal level, partisans are more likely to view members of the opposite party with indifference rather than with hostility, but we cannot say so conclusively.

For scholars, the findings underscores the need for further research on social polarization in the context of everyday interactions and projected behaviors, existing outside the sphere of politics. There is some emerging research in this area (Druckman et al., 2022; Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Rudolph & Hetherington, 2021), but the majority of studies still focus on attitudes towards elites or political parties in general, rather than on interpersonal relationships between voters. As Broockman et al. note, "the causal effects of affective polarization even in the social distance area may not be robust to more specific questions and may only appear

for more abstract survey questions where trade-offs and other dimensions to judge do not exist" (2022, 30). More research is needed in this area, drawing not only from political science but also from psychology and sociology to identify how different types of measurements reveal different levels of polarization.

For practitioners and policymakers, these findings have important implications as well. While the key findings may appear overall pessimistic, a nuanced reading provides some room for optimism. As discussed above, it is notable that our Bayesian analysis of the behavior-based interpersonal measurements (questions regarding preferred neighbors, friends, and sons/daughters-in-law) showed *no significant partisan animus*. Even though there was in-group preference on those questions in this analysis, that is distinct from the othering/aversion that was observed on the attitude-based favorability rating. This is in line with Druckman and Levendusky (2019)'s finding that, at least by some measurements, "Americans are still–by and large–willing to interact with those from the other party, at least in some settings" (121), suggesting that there may be limits to affective polarization. We need to be careful of over-reading the result, given that our split-sample analysis did reveal partisan animus at the interpersonal level. But at a time when many citizens fear increased violence or even the eruption of civil war along political lines (Orth, 2022; Walter, 2022), even these mixed results remind us to be cautious about stoking fears or deepening divides with assumptions about inevitable partisan animus at the interpersonal level.

The findings also underscore the need for more nuanced research on how partisan identity interacts with other social identities. We did not find significant differences between the parties in how they viewed gender or class attributes, but we did find significant differences between their preferences on race and religion. Our results suggest some caution here; however, in using the term "polarization" to describe partisan differences, they reflected more sorting than divergence. For example, the significant difference in racial attitudes reflected a Democrat preference, or positive "group sentiment" (Kane et al., 2021), for non-white profiles, rather than Republican aversion. These findings suggest the need for further studies comparing partisan levels of affirmation versus discrimination when looking at differences in racial attitudes. In the case of religion, the gap between the parties was rooted more in Republican disfavor towards non-Christians, especially toward Muslims and atheists. These findings indicate that—despite its seeming retreat—religion is still very much a salient social identity in America, especially for Republicans, requiring further attention and research. Not only does religious identity shape political views, but political identity also influences social views on religion and toward non-Christian religious minorities in particular.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Crucially, the findings indicate the need for further research on the impact of cross-cutting identities. We predicted that profiles and respondents who did not fit the stereotypical "conjoined polarization" identities would be less susceptible to polarizing tendencies, but this was not the case. Roccas and Brewer write that, "when a person acknowledges, and accepts, that memberships in multiple in-groups are not fully convergent or overlapping, the associated identity structure is both more inclusive and more complex" (2002, 88). We expected this to be reflected in the data, but we did not find that cross-cutting identities were any more (or less) accepted or accepting.

By definition, cross-cutting identities are difficult to measure and quantify, and are further complicated by the fact that, as previously mentioned, many "typical" alignments are based on assumptions and stereotypes. In addition, many individuals likely display some characteristics assumed atypical of their partisan identity that may not be captured in the data. We based our cross-cutting identities on those identified in the social sorting literature, but scholarship on

polarization would benefit from further exploration of cross-cutting identities and further innovation of methodologies to construct, quantify, and analyze such profiles based on available voter data.

Further research is also needed to better understand how the salience of distinct social identities for different individuals affects their responses. In our study, we acknowledge that there is some conflation of social identity—that is, a group identity meaningful to individual respondents—and demographic characteristics. Yet we cannot assume that all the demographic categories in question were equally meaningful for all respondents' self-definitions. This could only be ascertained by adding social identity questions to gauge respondents' self-definition (e.g., Likert scale questions such as "I am proud to be African American," or "Being Christian is important to me"). We opted not to include such questions to avoid priming respondents to center their own identity, preferring to keep the focus on their instinctual response to *others*' identities. But future studies might include self-definition questions to further unpack how belonging to certain demographic categories informs respondents' sense of self, as well as their attitudes or projected behaviors.

Further research is also necessary to assess how external cues influence respondents' preferences. While we focus on the identities motivating polarization, recent scholarship has shown that affective polarization between parties is not inevitable, but rather reflects an interplay between supply and demand factors that interact and reinforce each other (Mols & Hart, 2018, 152; Mols & Jetten, 2020, 1). According to Wilson et al. (2020), institutional processes (party leaders, politicians, media, and social media) contribute to voters' misperceptions of division among the electorate, which in turn contribute to a self-perpetuating cycle fueling animosity and polarization over time. Similarly, Gonzalez (2022) emphasizes the influence of antagonistic discourses and elite power dynamics in cultivating polarization, and McCoy et al. (2018) highlight the inherently relational nature of polarization and its instrumental political use.

At the same time, research has shown that highlighting supra or shared identities can dampen affective polarization; for example, Levendusky (2018) found that appealing to respondents' shared American identity made them less likely to see the opposing party as partisan rivals. Providing more nuanced information about the other party may also help reduce polarization; for example, showing partisans how members of both parties overestimate stereotypical traits in the other has been shown to decrease polarization when voters are presented with accurate portrayals (Ahler & Sood, 2018; Druckman et al., 2022). In other words, polarization is not automatic or innate, but rather is fueled by how partisans are conditioned to view themselves in relation to others. Thus, in future iterations of this study, we might add pre-questions to assess how respondents perceive the level of polarization in the US to better gauge their reference point, and/or give respondents primes or vignettes prior to the conjoint experiment to identify how different external cues affect their choices.

CONCLUSION

Our study demonstrates that partisan identity is a primary driver of America's social and cultural divides, and contrary to assumptions, cross-cutting identities do not appear to dampen social polarization. We also find that ideology matters in driving polarization; Democrats dislike Republicans more than Republicans dislike Democrats, and partisan identity has a particularly strong effect on racial and religious biases and preferences. But individuals may overcome political animus in some interpersonal interactions. Though results were mixed, the findings suggest that individuals may display more in-group affection rather than out-group aversion in some (though not all) analyses. This suggests that partisan animosity between citizens at the community level may be less pronounced than often suggested, underscoring the

necessity for further research to better identify how social polarization manifests in our everyday lives.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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APPENDIX A

Sample survey

Imagine you meet the two following people at a community meeting in your area:

Person A	Person B
Party	Party
Ideology	Ideology
Race/ethnicity	Race/ethnicity
Regional background	Regional background
Education	Education
Yearly income	Yearly income
Gender	Gender
Religion	Religion

Note: Order of attributes randomized between respondents.

Attribute values randomized with the following:

Party: Democrat/Republican/Independent.

Ideology: Liberal/Moderate/Conservative.

Race/Ethnicity: White/Black/Hispanic/Asian.

Regional background: Northeast/Midwest/South/West.

Education: HS grad/2-year college/4-year college/Post-grad.

Income: Under $40 K/$40-80 K/$80-120 K/Over $120 K.

Gender: Male/Female.

Religion: Christian/Jewish/Muslim/Atheist.

Question Unit 1:

On a scale of 1 (lowest) to 7 (highest), how favorably do you view each of the individuals profiled?

Person A.

Person B.

Question Unit 2:

Indicate which individual (A or B) you would prefer in each of the following scenarios:

- Having as a friend.
- Having as a neighbor.
- Having as a son/daughter-in-law.

Thank you for participating in this survey. The profiles and scenarios you read are hypothetical and are part of an academic experiment assessing opinions on political polarization.

APPENDIX B

(Online): Data Analysis

As stated in the text, we analyzed the data by employing two sets of complementary modeling strategies: a split-sample approach that shows that Republicans and Democrats react to profiles differently on average; and a series of hierarchical Bayesian models that show that these differences are not explained by other confounding factors.

First, we split our sample and separated ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions of our outcome measures on profile attributes for groups of interest (Republicans, Independents, and Democrats; liberals, moderates, and conservatives). Coefficients from these regressions recover the causal effects of profile attributes on favorability within each group of interest.

Specifically, we modeled the response y_{ij} of respondent i to question j as:

$$y_{ij} = x_j^T \beta + \varepsilon_{ij}$$

where x_j is the vector of conjoint profile characteristics (including an intercept), ε_{ij} is an idiosyncratic error term, and β is the coefficient vector of interest, the population-level effects of each conjoint attribute on likability. We estimated coefficients within the sub-populations of interest (Republicans, Democrats, and the entire sample) using OLS.

Our split-sample models allow us to estimate the average effect of each profile attribute within each sub-population, but we cannot be sure that differences in effects between sub-populations (say, between Democrats and Republicans) are not due to other underlying differences between the two groups. For this reason, we complemented our analysis with estimates from a series of hierarchical Bayesian models following those developed by Jensen et al. (2021), which allow us to control for observable confounding differences between groups. The hierarchical Bayesian models allow us to recover the predicted effect of a demographic attribute (i.e., partisanship or ideology) on the effect of each profile attribute on likability. For example, these models allow us to show that the difference in Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs) between Republicans and Democrats are still present even when controlling for baseline differences between the two groups. Central quantities of interest from this analysis are the predicted effects of partisan affiliation on the response to the religion, race, and partisanship of a profile.

Specifically, we fit a two-stage model in which individual responses were modeled as:

$$y_{ij} = x_j^T \beta + \varepsilon_{ij}$$

This stage of the model is identical to the previous OLS model, with the exception that the vector of coefficients β_i is specific to each individual. We modeled an individual i's coefficient that determines their response to conjoint attribute k as a function of their demographic characteristics:

$$\beta_{ik} = z_i^T \gamma + \varepsilon_{ik}$$

where z_i is a vector of the individual's demographic attributes, and γ represents the quantities of interest, the population-level effects of demographic attributes on the effect each profile attribute has on likability.

As each respondent completes only a small number of ratings and conjoint comparisons, the vectors β_i cannot be estimated for each individual, so we estimated the models using hierarchical Bayes models, which allow us to pool information between respondents, to the degree that the data suggests this is appropriate. We implemented our models using the STAN language (Carpenter et al., 2017) and using code adapted from Jensen et al. (2021). We verified the performance of our models by ensuring they could recover generating parameters in synthetic datasets. Model details, including our priors and convergence statistics, can be found in the SI.