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The Trump Era Legacy of Partisanism

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Abstract: What did Trump's four years do to our mass politics? Partisanism—a blind, often unyielding loyalty to one's own party—has come to define much of our political discourse, very much to the detriment of the American polity. Both the literature and the data on party evaluations confirm that people are behaving in ways that display not just consistent polarization but a deeper level of partisan bias, despite their lack of ideological consistency. Political science should respond to these developments with increased focus on the negative aspects of partisanship that can lead to this form of partisanism so dangerously exhibited in the Capitol riot, among other events, as well as a thoughtful classroom critique of these habits.

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1 What Have We Learned from the Trump Experience?

In the fall of 2020, as one of the strangest election cycles in American history built to its climax, I was teaching a class on political parties. In many respects the class was similar to what I have done before. How are parties organized? What is their history? What functions do they serve? I relied on Marjorie Hershey's text, *Party Politics in America*, as well as several outside readings on the nature of parties and the party system. In many respects, the semester was fairly familiar and ordinary. But in other ways, the semester was quite different. The class was held during COVID-19 restrictions, so it was entirely on Zoom. This alone would have been enough to make it seem different, but Zoom was, frankly, not the most difficult part of the semester.

Donald Trump was running for reelection, or at least standing for reelection since "running" seems like an odd term to use for the 2020 election. We spent a great deal of time discussing what he represented, how the party system was changing, and what we might expect about the future. Dysfunction was not just in the air but a backdrop for a lot of what went on during the semester. Some days,

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I had to discuss whether or not martial law was going to be declared. Other days, I was discussing President Trump's bizarre first debate performance.[1] Though I never had to discuss January 6 and the protest that evolved into a riot and an insurrection (the semester ended in time to avoid that), I did spend time discussing Trump's efforts to overturn the election and declare himself the winner, despite all evidence and constitutional authority that suggested otherwise. At one point I sent an email to the class attempting to clarify and put into perspective the fact that his efforts were in many respects unprecedented in American history.

Semesters like this change how one sees topics in political science. And I have been asking myself: what have we all learned about partisanship from the Trump era?[2] What should we be saying to students of parties? Political science majors? And concerned citizens in general? What needs to change about the political science research agenda?

My own answers end up being very glass half-empty (full?). While it is true that I think much of the political science literature of the past few years speaks to elements of the Trump era, I think we have a very long way to go in understanding the shifts and changes in our party system, and I wonder if we are emphasizing some of the wrong points, even while our research has illuminated some of the key problems. In this short comment, I'm going to focus on the literature on mass parties and polarization where I think I see the strengths and weaknesses of our discipline the best. Though of course there are other lessons (e.g. we should pay more attention to conspiracy theories; we should be more reflective about election law and how it affects turnout, etc.), what I keep coming back to is that we spend too much time referencing *polarization* and too little time referencing *partisanship*, especially the worst aspects of partisanship. Some might argue that these two terms are really just synonyms, though I do not think the literature truly uses them that way. And, if they are synonyms, do we really just have the two different terms for variation in language? I admit that the two terms overlap a great deal and have, in many respects, grown together—we now often speak of "partisan polarization." But the two terms are still used somewhat distinctly, and the problem is that the evidence that we are polarized is much more equivocal than that we are deeply and perhaps dangerously partisan, where I think the evidence is growing.

Moreover, when we talk about polarization it puts us as researchers or teachers at a distance from the problem. It is about a system, and a state of affairs, rather

1 Discussing the fly in Mike Pence's hair was more fun.

2 Yes, perhaps that era is not really over, but his presidency is over. I am not entertaining here the notion that he is likely to be the true head of his party again in a presidential election, though that possibility is not exactly remote. It is just too soon to tell and I think history and his age lessen such a prospect.

than a personal characteristic. Polarization can, after all, just be a fight between two sides. One side can be good (or at least more correct), another is evil (or at least less correct), and we simply choose which side we think is good and move on with politics.

When we talk about partisanship, it changes the nature of the problem. Partisanship is a problem that confronts almost all politically interested actors in their personal lives. How far to go? What are the limits? Focusing on partisanship—in some ways—puts the problem in stark relief, and though we do not have to believe that the two parties are the same or in any sense equal at any given moment, the processes of tribal partisanship suggest that both parties are potentially a danger to the republic. And since most people carry some degree of partisanship[3] there is a personal quality that is lost with the term polarization. But of course, the term partisanship is also difficult because it includes so much, some good and some bad.

What I want to suggest here is that one key lesson of this period is that political scientists need to spend more time discussing *partisanism*, rather than just polarization. By that I mean a kind of blind, often unyielding loyalty to one's own party that is antithetical to good government because it is *just* about the party label and not really tied to content. It is a motivation that is about tribal loyalties and not any kind of coherent set of principles. It is characterized most of all by extreme loyalty and an unwillingness to scrutinize or critique one's own side.

Part of the reason I think we need a new term is that we need something that goes beyond "partisanship" and permits unfettered discussion of the downside of partisanship. It is well-known that partisanship can lead to biases or problems.[4] At what point do we stop saying that it is simply a bias that skews our perceptions and when do we say that it crosses some kind of dangerous threshold? Given that the threshold of violence seems to be one people are now willing to cross (Kalmoe and Mason forthcoming), it is time we thought about a new term to help us rethink the strengths and—especially at this moment—the weaknesses of partisanship.

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3 I tend to think of partisans as being the weak and strong partisans who claim the label as well as the independents who will, when pressed, admit a tendency. There are good theoretical reasons to question this idea. After all, if the conventional story is that people have a psychological attachment and yet will not claim the label then there is clearly some kind of breakdown in the theory. Still, I find those objections to treating independents this way largely theoretical. On empirical grounds, I think the evidence that partisan leaners vote like partisans and are better thought of as fitting into the parties rather than into a mass group of independents fairly compelling (Keith et al. 1992). Though the literature I cite here varies in how it treats this subject, that tends to be the way I think about it, perhaps with some exceptions.

4 Partisanship is a "hell of a drug," as people sometimes say.

2 From Polarization to Partisanism

George Washington does not get a lot of attention from political scientists. In most respects this seems fair. His thinking is not obviously deep, and often not original. His most-read text (his Farewell Address), was largely ghost-written by others (James Madison and Alexander Hamilton). Still, I think Washington deserves more credit for accurately, almost prophetically, describing our own day and the type of partisanship we face. In speaking of parties, he writes that they

> serve to organize faction, to give it an artificial and extraordinary force; to put in the place of the delegated will of the nation the will of a party, often a small but artful and enterprising minority of the community; and, according to the alternate triumphs of different parties, to make the public administration the mirror of the ill-concerted and incongruous projects of faction.

Noting that parties are often content with a minority[5] he believes they are likely to ruin the administration of the government. He goes on to say that

> The alternate domination of one faction over another, sharpened by the spirit of revenge, natural to party dissension, which in different ages and countries has perpetrated the most horrid enormities, is itself a frightful despotism. But this leads at length to a more formal and permanent despotism. The disorders and miseries which result gradually incline the minds of men to seek security and repose in the absolute power of an individual; and sooner or later the chief of some prevailing faction, more able or more fortunate than his competitors, turns this disposition to the purposes of his own elevation, on the ruins of public liberty.

If that does not describe our own day—revenge, dissension, despotism, and the absolute power of an individual—then I do not know what could. President Trump's insistence on his personal rule and his need to remain president despite the constitutional and legal requirements of the election could not fit that description much better. Of course, Washington was speaking not just of the Republican Party but of what he called the "spirit of party." And it is this *partisanism* that worries me. Once we are talking about "revenge" leading to "despotism," we are outside of the realm of simple belonging or identification.

Partisanship conveys some sense of attachment or belonging to an organization and can be defined simply as the state of being a partisan—in our discipline's terms, having some kind of attachment to a party. Of course, this could go further. Merriam-Webster suggests partisanship can mean "strong and sometimes blind adherence to a particular party, faction, cause, or person." And this is the problem with the definition. Partisanship, as is well known in the literature, is not necessarily a bad

5 [Joke about Republicans here].

thing. It leads people to participate, learn more about politics, engage in important social movements, and generally attempt to make the world a better place (Aldrich 1995; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2004; Hershey 2017). This makes it a problematic term. When we say partisan do we mean "reasonably loyal" or do we mean something more nefarious? When I use the term partisanism, I mean something unequivocally negative—blind adherence, not thoughtful application. Merriam-Webster again defines *partisanism* as partisan spirit or conduct, and this conveys more what I mean when I say that I am worried about where partisanship is going in this country and how to talk about it to my students.

Political science and the related discussion seems to prefer the term "polarization" to describe political conflict. A Google Scholar search for "polarization" (and political science as a control) returns 416,000 hits (as of March 2021). A similar search of "partisanship" returns just 106,000 hits. "Partisanism" is obviously the least popular in that it returns just over 18,000 hits. It is clear that scholars like the term polarization the best. Perhaps it just sounds the most scientific. But I think a review of the literature suggests that partisanism, or at least a form of partisanship so deeply rooted in tribal animus and an unwillingness to discipline one's own side, is most closely related to our political dysfunction of the moment. It is Trump's legacy, but it is also a subject that the literature has been moving towards for years, though scholars tend to use the term "affective polarization."

That term—polarization, whatever its modifier—has its uses, but it no longer captures the truly deep dysfunction in American politics, and in this sense it does us no service. Americans' partisanship has in some cases become dogmatic to the point of a pathology. And while most Americans see no need to riot in the Capitol, a growing group is unwilling to discipline their own attachments in the way that good government requires. The literature on affective polarization has been moving in this very direction.

3 Polarization and Partisanship in the American Politics Literature

The literature on polarization and partisanship lead to two fairly well-supported conclusions. First, people are better described as affectively polarized than simply polarized in a strong, pervasively ideological sense. Second, but obviously related, it is clear that most people's issue positions are fairly malleable and inconsistent. They are willing to move these positions in many, many cases to align with their party. While it does seem true that there are cases where people place policy above partisanship, it is not yet clear which type of behavior is dominant and at which

time. How the literature reached this state could take up a great deal of space, but this short summary gives the outline necessary for the reflections that follow.

The roots of the modern debate began in the discussion of institutions—specifically Congress. Poole and Rosenthal (1985) laid out the first models of ideology in Congress and showed growing levels of polarization within the institution. Subsequent work largely just confirmed the original thesis as the trend slowly unfolded: America's legislators were increasingly grouped into two polarized camps defined by the parties (Clinton, Jackman, and Rivers 2004). This presented a problem. Very little of the work on American politics suggested a truly ideological public, a view dating back into the 1960s (Converse 1964), but also a perspective that tended to remain by the turn of the 21st century (DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996; Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2004). But if the legislature is expected to be a mirror of the public, why would it not be the case that the polarization began in the public?[6] So controversy ensued (Abramowitz 2012; Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Layman, Carsey, and Horowitz 2006; Levendusky 2009).

Debate on this point remains (Campbell 2016), but the conventional view is that the public tends to be very unconstrained, to use Converse's original terminology (Fiorina 2018; Kinder and Kalmoe 2017), but tends to be quite partisan rather than ideologically consistent. This is sometimes referred to as negative partisanship (Abramowitz and Webster 2016), especially when this research makes its way into the popular press, though the more common way of describing this regularity in the academic literature is "affective polarization" where ideological positions are deemphasized (given the public's lack of apparent ability to meet the requirements) but a deep level of partisan animus is the animating feature (Hopkins and Sides 2015; Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Mason 2015).

Mason (2018b) describes this form of affective polarization in the following terms.

> Social identities generate distinct psychological and behavioral outcomes[:]… when two groups are in a zero-sum competition, they treat each other with bias and even prejudice… [and] a strongly identified partisan will take action to defend the group.

She goes on to note that people feel these emotions so strongly that they interpret attacks on the group as personal assaults. Such is the foundation on which our current party system rests, apparently.

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6 Though it is worth noting that there is a substantial line of research suggesting that polarization of the Congress is *reflected* in the public, even if it was not the root cause (Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013; Hetherington 2009).

In fact, the evidence that people are blindly loyal to their parties—with those malleable positions described above—goes substantially further to show the deep importance of how leaders shape the opinions of partisans. Lenz (2012) shows that party cues are so important that people will almost blindly follow the leader. While there is evidence that there are limits to partisan loyalty (Mummolo, Peterson, and Westwood 2019) and that people sometimes do care about policy (Costa 2021; Fowler 2020; Orr and Huber 2019), the fact remains that party cues are incredibly powerful. Barber and Pope (2019) show that ideological policy cues can push a person's own expressed views dramatically, regardless of the direction of the cue. Views are highly malleable and hardly in a good way.

And this state of affairs seems to be captured by a deep attachment to not just parties, but a kind of "spirit of party" in the way Washington framed it. Affective polarization may be the term that political scientists use to capture this feature of American politics, but it is, in some ways, a bit sterile. For one thing, the term does not exactly roll off the tongue and it is clearly not something that an average person can explain. While this literature is obviously deeply important for our own discipline, it is probably not the best term to use to communicate with the public about these issues. And the fact that it contains the word "polarization" is problematic in another way.

As mentioned above, the frame of "polarization" suggests two sides locked in some kind of conflict (at least in a political context). Is that really the best description of the problem? Is our problem simply that Democrats are different than Republicans? I think most people would say no, it is more than that. Perhaps one reason to use the term polarization is that one side is right and the other wrong (you, the reader, no doubt know which side is which). The discussion of which side is which is voluminous itself, but what I am writing about here is the even deeper problem of the spirit of party. People, particularly at the mass level, are locked into conflict not over concrete, reasoned philosophical positions but over tribal loyalties. *Partisanism* seems to me like a better term for capturing this level of partisan commitment and even dysfunction, where loyalty is so deep that issue positions can be overridden and people apply very different standards to their party than the other party. Most importantly, it now seems ever more difficult to induce people to put any critique of their own side ahead of loyalty.

4 Partisanism

Partisanism—if we use such a term—should mean more than simply being highly attached to one's party and a bit wary of the other party. Indeed, there are, no doubt, strong partisans who still use fairly consistent standards for political

decisions and whose behavior is not simply driven by blind loyalty. For the term to have meaning it must have at least two elements. First, people's actual beliefs and positions should be downplayed in favor of simple party loyalty. It is not that one feels part of a team that expresses one's deepest values. It needs to be that the team affiliation is the overriding factor. Affective partisanship, as currently described in the literature, captures this fairly well.[7] But, second, partisanism should mean that people apply different standards for the two teams. Intellectual consistency is jettisoned in favor of simply supporting the party's leadership. For whatever reason—group loyalty, outgroup hatred, or something else (the mechanism may vary)—people are prepared to hold their own team to one standard and the other team to a different and higher standard. Some of the literature I described above (particularly on leader cues) expresses this, but perhaps a simple empirical demonstration here will help illustrate that partisans use different standards for the opposite party as opposed to their own, as well as the fact that, while it may be hard for citizens to really hold to principles and issues, there is evidence they could do it (if they tried).

Consider a simple model of people's views of the other party. Using the ANES party thermometers (from the 2016 and 2020 Trump-involved elections) I fit a simple predictive model of a person's feeling thermometer about the *opposite* party. The idea is to test whether or not a person's positions on key issues[8] predict their feelings about the other party. More conservative Democrats should evaluate the Republican Party more highly. And more liberal Republicans should do the same for the Democrats. And all of this should be true even controlling for a person's strength of partisanship. A person's level of gender, age, race, income, and education serve as controls in the model.

The results—see Figure 1—are fairly similar for both 2016 and 2020. Democrats are plotted in blue and Republicans are in red. For both parties, the predicted effect of ideology ranges between a quarter and a third of the scale. It is clear that views about the other party vary, and do so systematically by ideological positions. Of course, causality is thorny in situations like this, but it seems quite possible that people are conditioning their view of the opposite party based on their policy beliefs—certainly consistent with some of the literature cited above (Costa 2021; Fowler 2020; Orr and Huber 2019). Does that not suggest that people can get

7 Though I still think that the term seems a bit sterile given the politics of the moment.

8 The issue positions used were health insurance, affirmative action, same-sex weddings, immigration, abortion, welfare spending, and environmental spending. People were coded in a binary fashion, zero for a liberal position and one for a conservative position (while pure neutrality received a score of 0.5), for a scale ranging between 0 and 7.

beyond tribal partisanship? That my concerns over partisanism are just overblown? People can condition their views on policy beliefs.

Well, what about the other party? Are evaluations of one's *own* party similar? Figure 2 displays the predicted values of that model's personal party thermometer rating for 2016 (top) for varying levels of issue positions, similar to the models presented in the previous figure. The models for 2020 are in the bottom panel. The differences between these plots and Figure 1 are stark. Though the intercepts are much higher, presumably because people like their own party, the slopes are quite shallow. Indeed, in the case of the Republicans in 2016 the slope is indistinguishable from zero ($\beta = 0.159$, $\sigma = 0.423$). Issues mattered very little if at all. For Democrats in 2016, the predicted effect of issue positions was somewhat larger. The difference was about 15 points on the 100-point scale between those who took the most liberal and most conservative set of positions on the issues.

Overall, the patterns of mass behavior are largely symmetric across the parties. Though there are certainly other reasons to point to asymmetries across the parties, their memberships are similar in this way: some form of ideology related to issue positions is clearly related (perhaps causally, though this analysis cannot identify that) to how people evaluate the other party. But people do not hold their own party to similar standards. Certainly these results could be read to demonstrate that party matters in the sense that people give their own party a much higher rating than the other party. But they also show that despite using exactly similar standards of issue positions, the actual content of a person's beliefs matter for how they can evaluate the opposite party, but far less so for their own party. Issues matter, but perhaps not very much when criticizing our own team.

These models are simple, and of course do not capture every feature of our current partisan politics. They could point to plenty of possible avenues of research, including issue publics or measurement of ideology. Still, they point to a troubling truth obviously related to motivated reasoning and bias. Americans use fairly inconsistent standards when evaluating parties and are not very willing to turn a critical eye on our own party; one might even call the standards unprincipled. And yet, it is clear that people *can* apply policy standards to their evaluations of the parties; they do so for the opposite party. One prominent claim in the literature is that a lack of cross-cutting cleavages has given us more bundled identities (Mason 2018a), and while that seems well-supported, the data here do show that people can take a more nuanced view of the other party. Why not their own party?

The reason is that this is more than simple polarization. If people's issue positions were simply different within the parties then we might expect differences in party evaluations, but not an unwillingness to use the exact same bundle of issues to evaluate one's own party. These facts put the slopes for the issues on

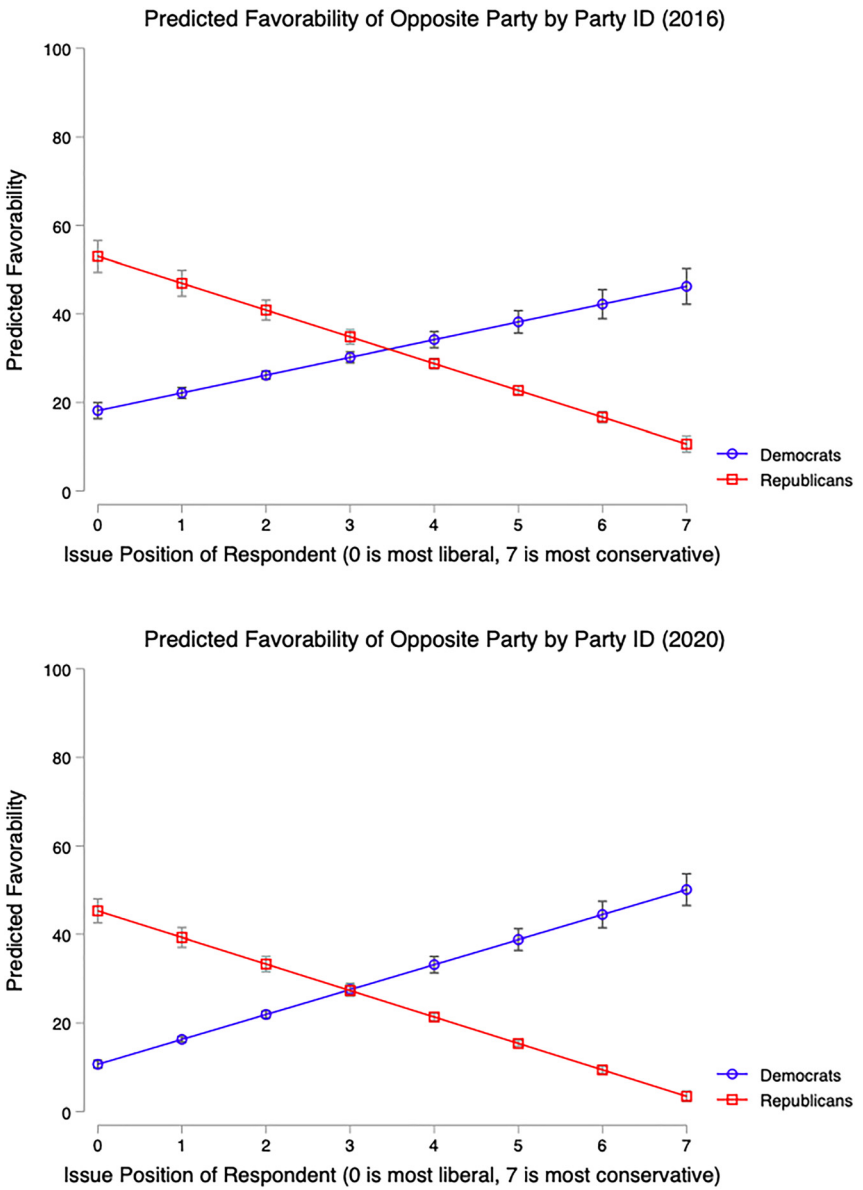

Figure 1: Predicted opposite party thermometer rating by ideological position for both 2016 (top panel) and 2020 respondents (bottom panel).
Models for democrats and republicans are fit separately and include controls for partisanship level, gender, age, race, income, and education.

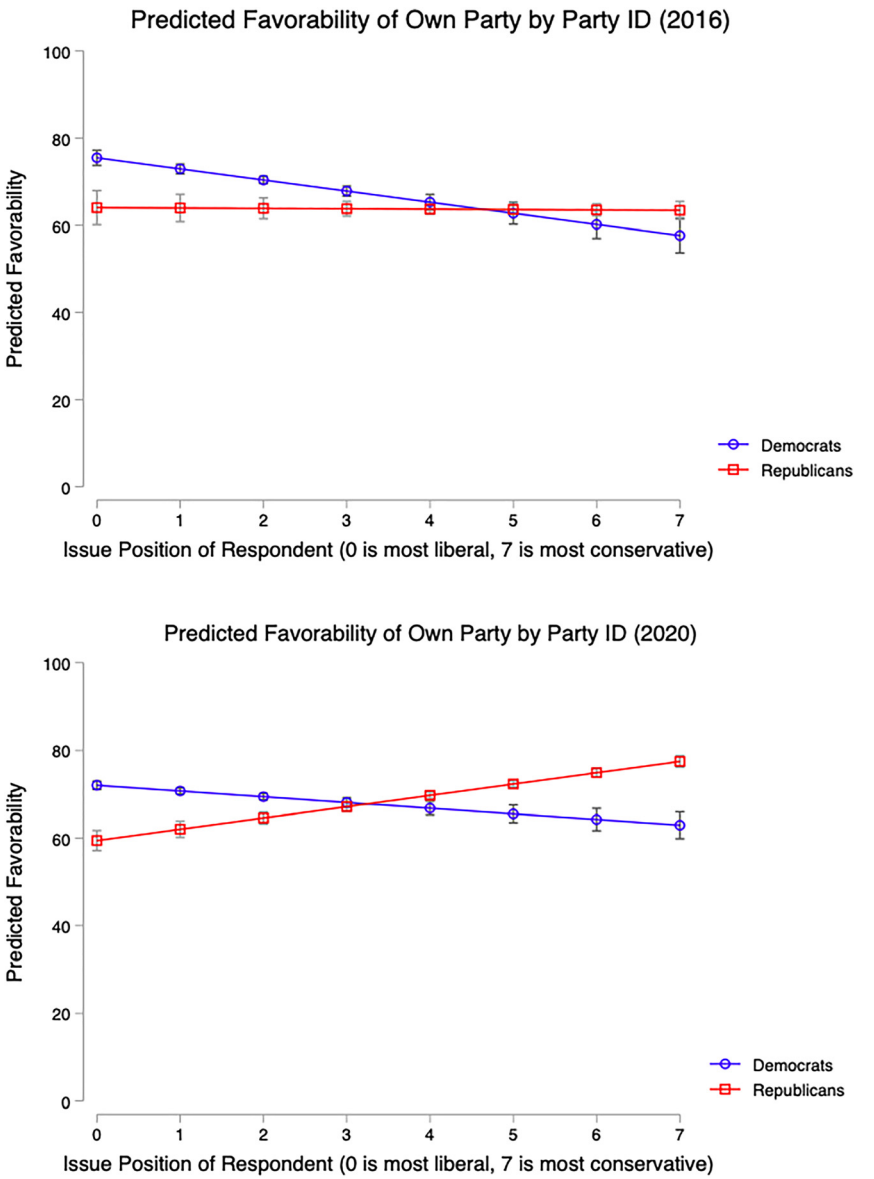

Figure 2: Predicted thermometer rating of one's own party by ideological position for 2016 respondents (top panel) and 2020 respondents (bottom panel).
Models for democrats and republicans are fit separately and include controls for partisanship level, gender, age, race, income, and education.

own-party evaluations into some perspective. First, it is not the case that partisans are incapable of modulating their party beliefs in response to issue positions. But it does appear to be the case that this is only something they are likely to do when evaluating the opposite party. Democrats with conservative positions think relatively highly of Republicans in general. And Republicans with relatively liberal positions think relatively highly of Democrats in general (though the intercept difference is still large), the effect of issue positions on evaluations of one's own party are somewhere between quite muted and non-existent. Justification of one's own party is the order of the day.[9]

A couple of caveats must be kept in mind, though I do not believe they dramatically change the story. Obviously, the key variable remains party membership. Issues do not completely overcome one's partisan biases (regardless of whether or not someone is evaluating the other party), but they do appear to modulate one's view of the other party. Second, someone's views of the other party or even one's own party could be correlated with other unmeasured factors not in the model. Most obviously, perhaps that basket of issues is insufficient for showing variation in how people evaluate parties. Perhaps allegiance to Dr. Seuss or incivility on Twitter or some other factor too esoteric to measure in a survey is what causes people to stay loyal to their own party in some way. But at least for this basket of plausible issues, the correlation appears to be somewhat powerful with respect to views of the other party, but only slightly related (if that) to views on one's own party.

Does this not look like the partisanism which I have suggested we should think about? People seem to be using explicitly different standards for the two parties. The results show—very consistently with the literature discussed above—a view that people do not apply much analytic rigor to their own party, regardless of the issue positions that they take (indeed I take it as being quite similar confirmation of my own work with Michael Barber showing that the ideological direction of the leader cues are less important than the fact the party leader offered the cue).

And this, to me, seems dangerous in a way that simple polarization does not. A short tour of recent history seems rather consistent with the notion that citizens are often unable to critically evaluate their own party's claims and positions. Does that not exactly fit what we have seen in the past few years? Especially (but not

9 As a check on these results I analyzed several subgroups, activists, racial categories, and party strength levels. I also looked at earlier decades though we could not keep the basket of issues completely similar. None of this follow-up analysis suggested any really substantial differences in the overall story. People look at their own party somewhat uncritically with respect to issues, but have more nuanced and context-driven views of the other party.

exclusively) among Trump's most ardent supporters? That seems to me to be the worrying possibility that could become a full-blown trend that gets even worse.

5 Partisanism in Recent History

Perhaps the most troubling thing about recent events is that the pattern is that elites—especially on the Republican side—have been working to motivate and nurture exactly this kind of partisanism. Often, there is not even a clear policy goal, merely a wish for one's own side to retain power, regardless of the arguments for or against the legitimacy of this power.

The first time I felt my own views about people's excessive levels of partisanship really shifting came shortly before the advent of the Trump administration. A colleague had reached out to a relatively high-ranking Republican official (who would go on to serve in the Trump administration) to speak to students from his perspective. The traditional dinner after his comments and visits did not go well. He seemed to take a line that his party could do no wrong. In fact, when pressed he seemed to have truly limitless loyalty to his party—to the point where describing him as a party hack just did not cover the facts. And we did try to find the limits of his partisanship. We asked him the circumstances under which he would not go along with his party. He could think of no such circumstances. We described ever more outlandish government actions that violated civil liberties, traditional norms, and simple common sense. Eventually, we confronted him with a precis of the Pinochet rule in Chile that included descriptions of tyrannical human torture. He was unmoved, though he did not see how it could go that far. I remember the troubling quotation "You always stick with your party." My colleagues and I were amazed at this level of partisanship.

To this point in my life I had a fairly healthy distrust of partisan bias and the excessive loyalty of party hacks. But I must admit that I did not fully understand the depths to which this loyalty could and would go in a conventional American context, particularly among Republicans under Trump.[10] Though a full recounting of his actions and those of his supporters is beyond this paper, most interested readers will remember Trump's willingness to flaunt their cult-like adulation, Trumpian disregard for civility, and the way in which some Republican supporters seemed to cast off principles that they had claimed motivated them in the past. All of this obviously culminated in a January 6 insurrection where Trump's most admiring supporters

10 But after that dinner I was beginning to realize where things were headed. It was not long after this that Michael Barber and I decided to write that cited piece above to see just how far Republicans could be pushed on their issue positions.

whipped themselves into a mob frenzy and stormed the Capitol. Though organization does not appear to have been their strong suit, a willingness to find members of Congress as well as Vice President Pence and dole out consequences was obviously on their minds.

Trump had, of course, encouraged this behavior for weeks by assuring people that they would simply be "stopping the steal" (as did several other Republican officials around the country). Though I have great affection for American political history and some knowledge of the subject, I find it difficult to locate similar levels of delusion in past events. Though Americans have committed much greater evils than the Capitol riot, I'm not sure they have ever done so with so much conscious elite-led deception. And when past political history led to localized violence, it was usually in service of a policy goal such as getting World War I bonuses, a concern for civil rights protections, stopping the war in Vietnam, and, most dangerously (but justifiably) of all, abolishing slavery. No obvious policy goals were in evidence during the Capitol riot—other than Trump retaining power, of course.

All of these events—from private dinners to watching Trump supporters attempt to shred the Constitution—have convinced me that I have not had enough concern over not just partisanship but partisanism. Of course, one might argue that this problem is purely Republican. I would certainly not deny that most of my current concerns are more likely to be about Republicans than they are about Democrats. Put simply, Democrats have not attempted to steal an election and some Republicans seem quite willing to do that if they can (both in the past and, worse, in the future). But this gets directly to the question of what we should call our current problem. If we think that this state of affairs is "polarization," we can simply envision a system of good and bad folks each wearing the respective white and black hats (to use a cowboy metaphor). People will, no doubt, imagine themselves in the white hats—whichever party that represents to them. But if we think that the disease is a kind of partisan bias, then we cannot ignore our own personal biases and prejudices and the way in which the psychology of tribe is playing out in our system.

I think that the evidence and theory of affective polarization suggests that the kind of mob mentality that Republicans produced on January 6 is probably not beyond the Democrats. And the evidence assembled here—particularly the literature discussion—suggests to me that while Democrats may not be the current problem, they are not vaccinated from ever becoming the problem. Indeed, if we simply back up some in political history it is not hard to find evidence of Democrats abandoning principles that they claimed were foundational for political gain (feminists and their association with Bill Clinton comes to mind, as does the

insistence of a majority of Democrats in 2017, including holders of high office, that Russians rigged the vote totals to put Trump in office).

Pointing out such possibilities these days draws the rebuke of 'both sides-ism,' namely the view that by even raising the possibility of Democratic wrongdoing I have minimized Republican sins and distracted from the need to focus on Republican wrongdoing.[11] But whether we are in a world of polarization with two teams doing battle over control of policy or a world of partisanism where political tribes that are not closely tethered to principles—particularly when their own party's interests are at stake—really does matter a great deal. The difference in interpretations is substantial. We can be clear about two things at the same time: partisanism is a deeply problematic feature of all of our politics *and* that it is afflicting Republicans more, and in particularly pernicious ways given their leadership at the moment.

If the world is one of white hats and black hats, "polarization" seems like a very good description. There are two sides. People might disagree about who is on the side of good and who is on the side of evil,[12] but normal political conflict can simply go forward and we can all hope that the forces of light prevail before the credits roll. However, if we are in a world of "partisanism" the problem is far more insidious. While there may be good guys and bad guys in any given skirmish, the temptation to cross lines and give in to the spirit of party lurks in the hearts of everyone. And though I have tried to focus this essay on the public, including the activist class of that public, there is no doubt that the forces of partisanism afflict public officials as well. When asked about the Capitol riots, Senator Ron Johnson (R-WI) responded that he was unconcerned because they were people who love the country and respect law enforcement. In contrast, he said that had "President Trump won the election and those were tens of thousands of Black Lives Matter and Antifa protesters, I might have been a little concerned."[13] What is a better illustration of partisanism than openly admitting that the acts of your own side are acceptable, while if the other side did the same thing you would at least be "concerned"? Content does not matter; labels do matter.

The legacy of the Trump administration that I think should preoccupy political scientists is the depth of partisanism in American citizens. Perhaps I am wrong, and it is only a disease that could ever afflict Republicans. But the literature and the small bit of evidence I offered above suggest to me that it is more likely we live in a

11 Of course Republicans play their own brand of what-about-ism as well.

12 Presumably there were Storm Troopers who really did just want to bring peace and order to the galaxy, a noble goal—from a certain point of view.

13 See https://www.politico.com/news/2021/03/13/ron-johnson-black-lives-matter-antifa-capitol-riot-475727, accessed last on April 3, 2021.

world of partisanism than it is that we live in a simply polarized world where a couple of groups are fighting it out over policy differences.[14]

6 What Should Political Scientists Do?

What should political scientists do in the face of this? The answers, I think, are far from simple, but it is time to think about how we will respond to this era's challenges. We have two types of responsibilities: scholarship (under which I will include public engagement here) and teaching.

6.1 Scholarship

First, I think we should place much more emphasis on the way in which partisanship biases judgments. And I admit that this is a remarkable statement, since rare is the political science piece about American politics that does not display the difference between Republicans and Democrats. But I do wonder if we need a shift in tone to vigorously clarify partisanism and the dark side of partisanship. The basic theory of affective polarization gives us reason to believe that polarization—despite being in the term itself—is perhaps not a strong enough word to describe our motivations. Politics of the type we have seen is about more than polarized sides. It is about a blind loyalty that leads to massive levels of motivated reasoning and a dysfunctional politics.

I have used the word "partisanism" here to describe that kind of politics and distinguish it from what I regard as typical, healthy partisanship. People should give some benefit of the doubt to their team. It would make little sense to encourage people to ignore their alliances, or to constantly berate their coalition partners. But there must be a line of partisan loyalty beyond which we will not go, and we cannot expect others to have a line if we are not modeling that line ourselves. Partisanship, responsibly exercised, needs to become the order of the day and we should eschew partisanism. If we had a research agenda that helped us think through those limits I think it would be good for democracy.

To this end, we probably ought to consider spending more time thinking through our definitions. The work done on affective polarization has undoubtedly

14 My colleague Jessica Preece commented upon reading a draft of this paper that I was really suggesting that the United States was headed for the kind of dysfunction that Italy saw during "the years of lead." I hope that is not the case, but I admit that this is a pretty negative portrayal of the United States, and I fear her intuition might be correct.

moved forward our understanding of politics and people's partisan attachments—and especially how those attachments can get out of hand. But by labeling it just a form of polarization we have tacitly encouraged the notion that there is no difference between polarization and partisanship and this essay has been, in part, an attempt to convince people that the distinction is worth thinking about. Moreover, the greater danger comes from partisanism—a dangerous excess of partisanship.[15]

As part of this research agenda, we need to put more effort into thinking through why our partisan animus is so deep. If we are not polarized in the sense Poole and Rosenthal described Congress, what is the point of being so angry? If we are angry about labels rather than the content of policy, that is a strange state of affairs indeed. The affective partisanship literature has given us many answers to this question, but there are challenges to this paradigm. Clearly citizens can think about content and positions (see Figure 1). Why are we unable to do it when it comes to our partisan affiliations (see Figure 2)? Is this the result of institutions? Is it the result of media? Why?

Finally, we need to engage the public on this question and we need to be unafraid of saying that partisanship is getting out of hand. Of course Republicans are the group that has (lately) been the best example of partisanism. But if we fall back on the notion that the world is simply polarized and we cannot critique the deeper motivation, we may not ever get to the root of the problem. America's political history has had varying levels of partisan animus. To the degree we can, political scientists should try to create the conditions for a world that has more substantive political conflict.

6.2 Teaching

Perhaps our greatest influence as scholars is how we help students (especially undergraduates) think through these issues. They are collectively, after all, our largest audience. Written work in more prominent outlets may get some attention, but it is what we do as teachers that are likely to have the most impact on how people relate to politics in the future. So I close with some reflections on teaching about partisanship to the public.

First, we have to make students aware of the dangers of partisanism and ask them to reflect on that danger in themselves. People whose partisanship goes too far are likely to lose something very precious about themselves on a personal level.

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15 It would be interesting to ask the authors of the famous APSA report what they would make of ideological teams that had inspired not ideological education in the public, but our own brand of partisanism.

And on a societal level, the republic probably cannot survive a future of partisanism. Telling students about our measures of polarization is not enough because of the critical distance from the system that such a frame conveys. People need to understand how the foundations of partisan animus threaten our constitutional system.

Second, we cannot shy away from being clear about patterns and blame. Republicans who have deep allegiances are not going to want to hear about their party's sins. This is probably why so many Republicans invented tales of Antifa as the perpetrators of the insurrection. Professors cannot be afraid to speak truths about the party system such as the lack of evidence for voter fraud, or any other ridiculous theory of what the deep state is doing. But for this project to be successful, truths that bother Republicans cannot be the only truths spoken.

Democrats are, if the partisanism story seen here is correct, not terribly different in their underlying motivations and psychology. They too are susceptible to the danger of partisanism and already show a similar level of unwillingness to critique their side (e.g. carefully weighing how likely it was that Russians manipulated vote totals, etc.). We might wonder if their psychology is just not the same as Republicans, but there is not a lot in this literature to support that idea. And it is not hard to show that Democrats can fall prey to the same biases that lead them to an unwillingness to critique their own side. We must be clear about these roots of the problem.

To be clear, I do not think this means we should aim for assembly line-produced, non-partisan students. That is both undesirable and, more importantly, hopeless. Partisanship does have virtues, though I am writing of its vices here. But even if partisan biases are bad, they are clearly baked into the nature of both student and teacher. Absolutely eradicating them is, quite simply, impossible.

This leads to my final point: we are going to have to model the behavior we wish to elicit—even if our own set of biases create issues. In this vein, I was not necessarily the best teacher. I wanted my students to critique their partisan biases and I did what I could to encourage that. But my own instincts are not terribly partisan to begin with. I obviously have opinions, but I'm not a fire-breather who can truly show what it means to critique his own party. Mitt Romney came to mind and served as an example on occasion—and he is far from the only such politician. Indeed critiques of the parties from all angles are helpful. Both Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Joe Manchin have ideas Democrats should consider in a healthy debate.

One of my most rewarding experiences teaching parties that semester was to have a conversation with a student who had been deeply committed to one party but felt by the end of class that things were not what he had assumed. He found himself unconsciously asking the kind of questions about his party that his cross-partisan classmates were asking about his party. By my own standards that was a

victory. At the beginning of the semester he simply assumed that anyone who said anything he disagreed with was just a troll, but by the end he was the one willing to ask questions about how his own team engaged in troll-like behavior. But how many students can make that transition?

What I hope to see is a future discussion of partisanism that goes beyond the descriptors of the two sides locked in conflict over power. That is of course a true picture of events, but an impoverished view of the process that is unfolding in America. Given what we already know about these processes, students need more than just a discussion of power; they need a discussion of the principles that limit power. They need to encounter the possibility that their party sometimes goes too far. There will be those who argue that this is both-sides-ism because we should stay focused on a relentless message about what our society should look like. My argument is that the process we are watching requires us to look at the psychological and intellectual roots of that conflict and not just its fruits.

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