Partisan Communities and Affective Polarization

Adam H. Smiley[1] and Cheryl R. Kaiser[2]

[1]Department of Psychological Science & Neuroscience, Belmont University

[2]Department of Psychology, University of Washington

Author Note

This project was supported by the National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship Program. Thanks to Rebecca Schachtman for checking our analyses for Study 2. We have no conflicts of interest.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Adam H. Smiley, 1900 Belmont Blvd, 423 McWhorter Hall, Nashville, TN, 37212. Email: adam.smiley@belmont.edu

Abstract

American communities have become increasingly politically homogenous (Bishop & Cushing, 2008), with affective polarization, a form of animosity between political groups, concurrently on the rise (Iyengar et al., 2019). We hypothesized that individuals living in areas with greater proportions of out-partisans would report lower levels of affective polarization. In Study 1, 2016 American National Election Study respondents (N = 3,378) living in counties with more out-partisans averaged lower levels of *party*-directed affective polarization, controlling for partisan, policy, and demographic factors. In Study 2 (N = 362 via Prolific), similar analyses revealed that American partisans with more out-partisans in their counties and precincts reported lower levels of social distance from out-party members and greater cross-party contact, but not significantly lower *voter*-directed affective polarization. Cross-party contact mediated the relationship between the percentage of out-partisans in a community and affective polarization, highlighting the intersection of place and psychology in understanding this societal challenge.

Keywords: affective polarization, intergroup relations, social identity, prejudice

Partisan Communities and Affective Polarization

From states, to counties, to neighborhoods, it is hard not to see the United States as clusters of red and blue. More than half of American partisans live in a neighborhood with less than 33% members from the out-party[1] (Brown & Enos, 2021). In the 2020 US presidential election, 79% of counties were won by 20 percentage points or more (Bishop, 2020), reflecting a sharp increase in geographic sorting since 1976, in which only 36% of counties were won by the same margin in a closely contested presidential election (Bishop & Cushing, 2008).

We examine how geographic homogeneity of political partisans in the United States predicts affective polarization, defined as animosity and social distance between people of different political parties (Iyengar et al., 2019; Mason, 2018b). Specifically, we investigate whether partisans who live among more out-party supporters are less affectively polarized relative to those who live primarily among the political ingroup. Understanding affective polarization is of the utmost importance in an era characterized by political prejudice (Iyengar et al., 2019), government shutdowns, threats to democracy (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2022), and increasing support for political violence (Kalmoe & Mason, 2019, 2022).

Affective Polarization

As geographic sorting of American partisans has increased over the last 50 years, affective polarization has also increased (Iyengar et al., 2019; Mason, 2018b). Across this period, Americans report increasingly negative feelings towards out-partisans (Iyengar et al., 2019), less cross-party friendships (Huber & Malhotra, 2017), and stronger implicit partisan bias (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). Even partisans with moderate political views can harbor extreme levels of political hostility (Mason, 2018a). This heightened affective polarization stems in part because political parties have

[1] We refer to members of an individual's political party as "in-party" and a member of a different political party as "out-party."

become important social identities (Huddy & Bankert, 2017; Greene, 1999; West & Iyengar, 2020; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and often overlap with racial and religious identities (Mason, 2018a, 2018b). For partisans, increased geographic sorting may be reducing the prevalence of an important factor in improving intergroup attitudes: contact.

Intergroup contact reduces prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Contact between partisans is no exception. Individuals with more out-party close relationships report lower levels of affective polarization (Wojcieszak & Warner, 2020; Mutz, 2002). Likewise, cross-party conversations reduce affective polarization (Amsalem et al., 2021; Levendusky & Stecula, 2021; Santoro & Broockman, 2022). According to contact theory, if geographic proximity yields more contact, partisans who reside among more out-partisans should express lower affective polarization. There is reason to suspect more out-partisans in a locality will result in more contact; research in Switzerland shows that a greater proportion of immigrants in a community is associated with greater intergroup contact (Sarrasin et al., 2012). However, individuals sometimes construct their social environments to minimize intergroup contact (Anicich et al., 2021), and this link remains untested within the domain of geography and political partisanship.

If geographic proximity to out-partisans reduces partisan prejudice, this would provide a strong test of contact theory under adverse conditions that might be theorized to exacerbate, rather than reduce, animosity (Barlow et al., 2012). When people live in areas with higher proportion of out-partisans they face the reality of living with norms and policies enacted by out-party representatives and enabled by out-party voters. Sometimes these norms and policies enact direct harm toward out-partisans, such as with laws and policies that restrict rights. While cultural norms usually support prejudice suppression, partisans often view affective polarization as socially desirable (Connors, 2023).

Across two studies, we examine the relationship between geographic proximity to out-partisans and affective polarization. In Study 1, we used a large nationwide dataset to examine the relationship between the percentage of out-partisans in one's county and affective polarization. In Study 2, we surveyed participants to examine the relationship between out-party percentage (at the county and precinct levels) and two different measures of affective polarization. We also explore whether contact mediates the relationship between the proportion of out-partisans in the community and affective polarization. We predict that Americans who live in communities with a higher proportion of out-partisans will have lower levels of affective polarization, even when controlling for factors that tend to predict greater affective polarization such as endorsement of party-line policy views (Lelkes, 2018), strength of party identification (Mason, 2018b), and political knowledge (Suk et al., 2022).

Study 1

Study 1 uses data from the 2016 American National Election Study (ANES; American National Election Studies, 2017) to test whether living in a county with a higher percentage of out-partisans predicts lower levels of affective polarization.

Method

Participants

We analyzed responses from ANES data collected between September 2016 and January 2017 (American National Election Studies, 2017) and associated location data from the restricted-access geocodes (American National Election Studies, 2021). Of the 4,270 respondents, we included only those who identified with the Democratic or Republican parties, or who identified as independent but leaned towards the Democratic or Republican parties (602 excluded). In total, 3,668 participants were included (52.26% women, 46.56% men; M_{Age} = 50.06, SD_{Age} = 17.62).

The sample had 52.86% Democratic party identifiers/leaners and 47.14% Republican party identifiers/leaners. Most were non-Hispanic White (72.27%), while 9.46% were non-Hispanic Black, 9.92% Hispanic, 3.19% Asian/Asian-American, and 4.47% multiracial or another race. Participants came from 1,021 different counties.

In the primary multiple regression model (see Fig. 4), an additional 290 responses were excluded for missing data, resulting in a total sample size of 3,378 for that analysis. Sensitivity analysis conducted using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007) suggests with 3,378 respondents the primary analysis would have 80% power to detect an f^2 increase of .004, a very small effect size.

Measures

Outcome Variable: Affective Polarization (Party-Directed). Affective polarization was assessed with feeling thermometers indicating warmth towards each major political party on a scale of 0 (very cold) to 100 (very warm) (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019). Affective polarization was calculated as each individual's in-party feeling thermometer rating subtracted from their out-party rating.

Primary Predictor Variable of Interest: Percent Out-Party (County). This represents the percentage of voters in the participant's county who voted for the 2016 presidential candidate from the major party (Democrat/Republican) that the participant *does not* identify with. Precinct information is not collected by the ANES, making county the smallest region linked with voting data. Voting data was obtained from the MIT Election Data and Science Lab (2018). Third-party and write-in votes were excluded in this analysis, so that the "total" votes for a given county were the sum of votes for the Democratic party candidate (Hillary Clinton) and the Republican party candidate (Donald Trump). This variable, like all other predictor variables in this analysis, was

rescaled to a 0-1 scale so that 0 represents the smallest value (least exposed participant) and 1 represents the highest value (most exposed participant).

Control Variables.

Democrat. Dummy coded variable with 1 representing Democrats or Independents who lean Democratic and 0 representing Republicans or independents who lean towards Republican.

***Party Strength*.** A value of 0 represents an independent that leans towards a party, .5 represents a moderate partisan, and 1 represents a strong partisan.

Issue Polarization. Issue polarization measured the extent that participants' views on five policies align with the more extreme their own political party. These topics represented a wide range of policies and overlap considerably with those used by Mason's issue position extremity measure (2015). The five topics were: government provided services, government spending on healthcare, citizenship/deportation for illegal immigrants, abortion, and government help to Black-Americans. If the participant selected the most extreme position aligned with their political party, it was scored as a 1. If the participant indicated support for the most extreme position aligned with the opposing political party, this was scored as a 0. Policy positions not at the extremity were spaced evenly between 0 and 1 (there were four to seven options per question). Scores for all five items were averaged into a single score.

Political knowledge. Political knowledge was operationalized as the proportion of four political knowledge questions that were answered correctly, with a maximum score of 1 (all answers correct) and a minimum of 0 (all answers incorrect). The questions concerned the Senate term length, government funding allocations, and party control of the House and Senate.

Education. We assessed level of education, with higher values representing more formal education, from no high school degree (0) to graduate/professional degree (1).

Income. Household income ranged from $5000 or less (0), to $250,000 or more (1).

Church attendance. Higher scores on this variable represent more frequent church attendance, from never (0) to every week (1).

Age. Age ranged from 18 (0) to 90 years of age or older (1).

Male. Participant's sex included male (1) or female (0).

White. White (non-Hispanic) was coded as 1 and any other race/ethnicity as 0.

Black. Black (non-Hispanic) was coded as 1 and any other race/ethnicity as 0.

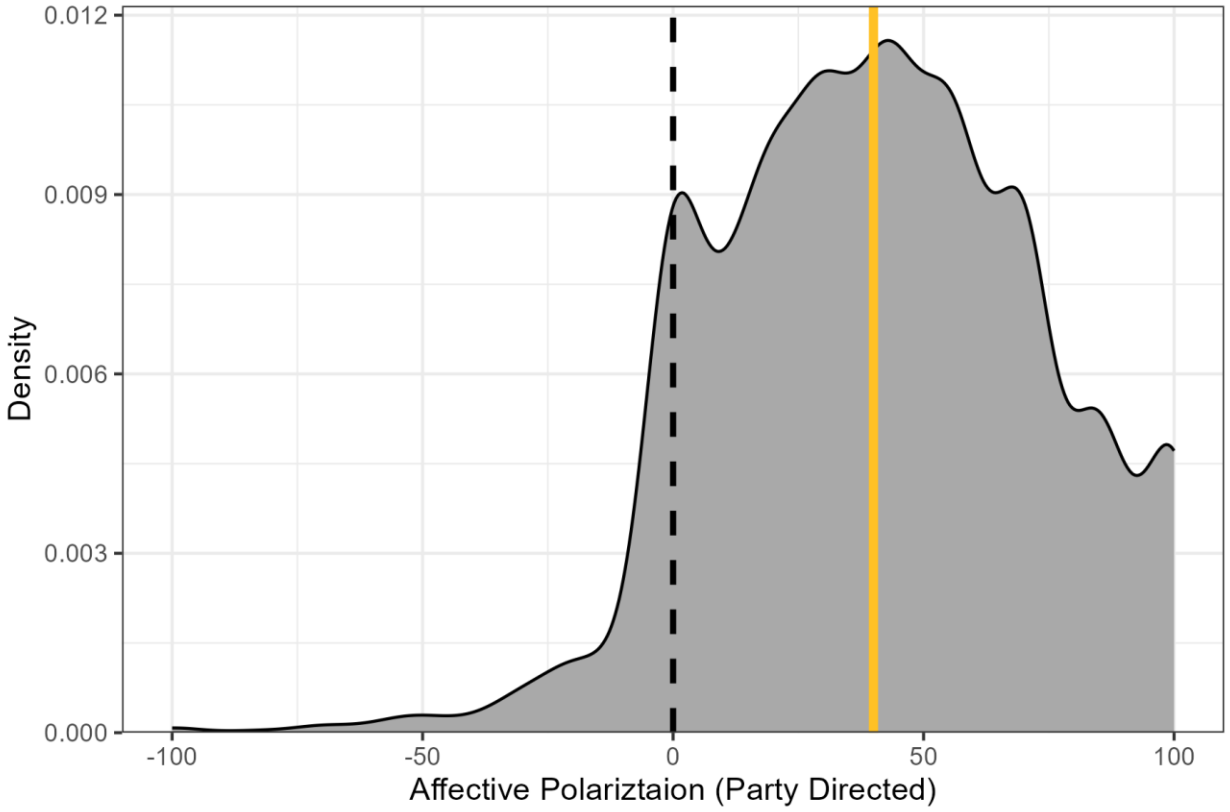
Hispanic. Hispanic was coded as 1 and non-Hispanic coded as 0.

Results

On average, participants reported being affectively polarized (M = 40.88, SD = 32.09; see Fig. 1), reflecting warmer feelings towards the in-party (M = 66.86, SD = 21.44) than the out-party (M = 26.00, SD = 21.63). Affective polarization was higher among Democrats (M = 43.76, SD = 31.96) than Republicans (M = 37.67, SD = 31.94), $t(3566.3) = 5.72$, $p < .001$, $d = .19$, 95% CI = [.13, .25].

Figure 1

Density plot of Party-Directed Affective Polarization in Study 1.

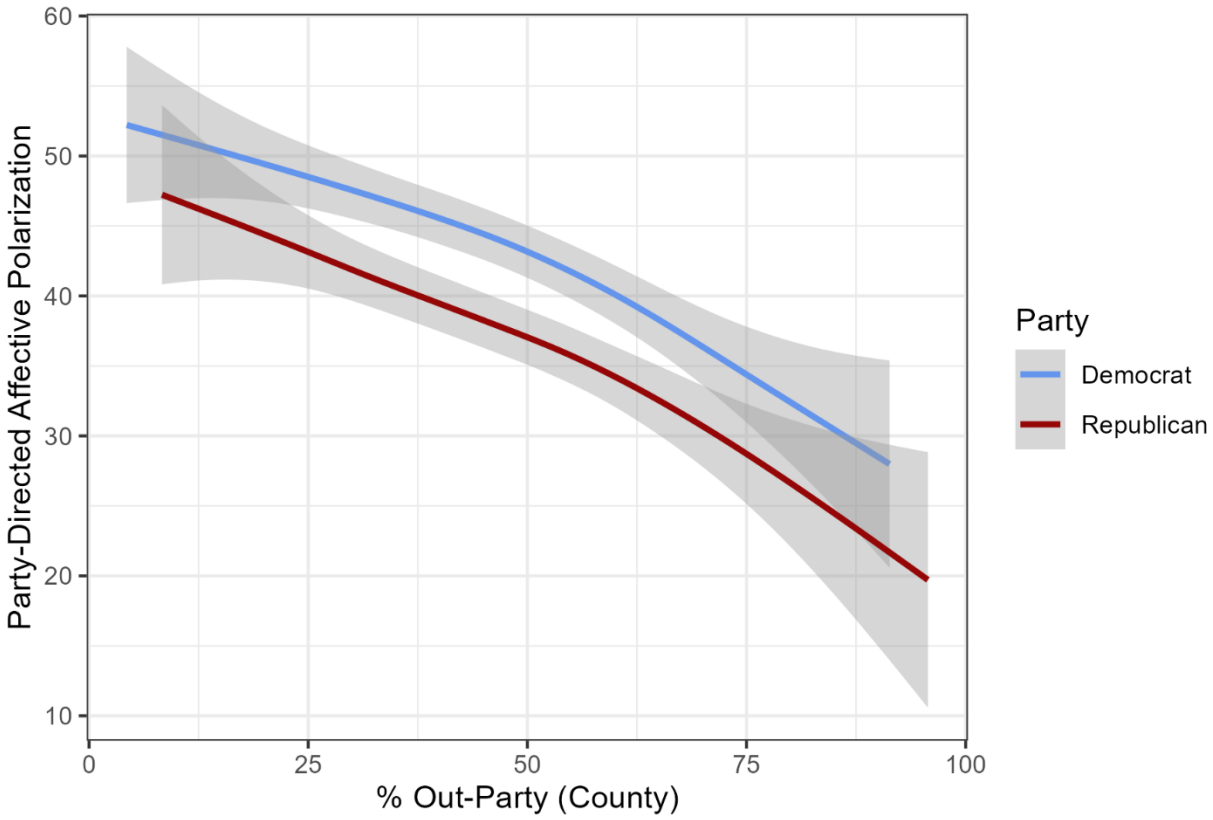


Note. The yellow line represents the median level of affective polarization, the dashed black line represents equal feelings towards in-party and out-party.

Consistent with the hypothesis, without covariates, living with a greater percentage of out-partisans at the county level predicted lower party-directed affective polarization ($r = -.15$, $t(3605) = -9.13$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [−.18, −.12]). This held for both Democrats and Republicans (see Fig. 2).

Figure 2

Relationship Between % Out-Partisans (County) and Party-Directed Affective Polarization in Study 1.



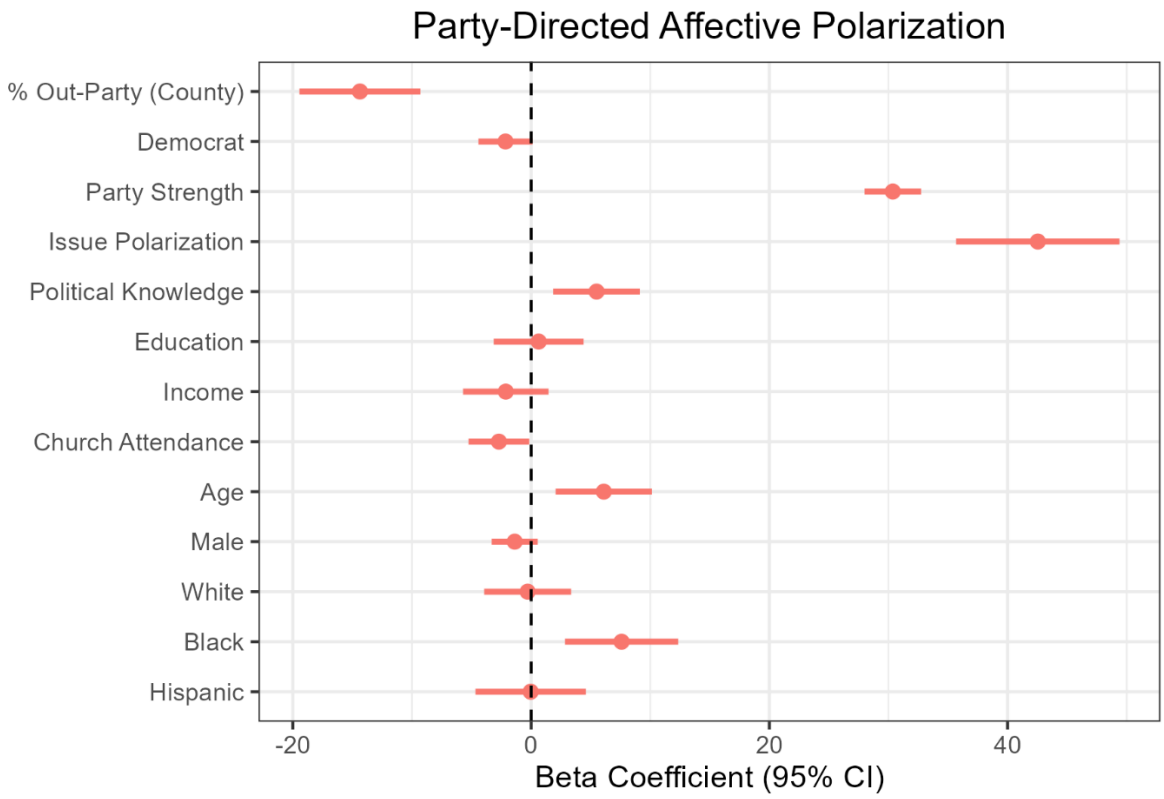
Note. Red and blue lines represent general additive models (GAM) for Republican and Democratic respondents respectively, with no covariates. The shaded area represents 95% CIs.

We next conducted a multiple linear regression predicting party-directed affective polarization from county-level percentage of out-partisans and the covariates described in the full model (see Fig. 3, complete output in Supplemental Materials). Consistent with hypothesis, there was a significant negative relationship between out-party percentage and affective polarization, $\beta = -14.37$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [−19.45, −9.29]. We would expect that respondents with the lowest percentage of out-partisans in their county to be about 14 points more affectively polarized than respondents with the highest percentage of out-partisans, all else equal. This pattern holds despite controlling for strong predictors that account for a large proportion of the variance, notably issue polarization ($\beta = 42.54$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [35.68, 49.39]) and partisan ID strength ($\beta = 30.36$, *p*

< .001, 95% CI = [27.99, 32.73]). A follow-up analysis including an interaction term for Democrat X percent out-party revealed that party does not significantly moderate the relationship between percent out-party and affective polarization (see Supplemental Materials).

Figure 3

Coefficients for a Multiple Linear Regression Predicting Party-Directed Affective Polarization in Study 1.



Note. Dots represent the point estimate for each beta coefficient, while whiskers (lines) represent the 95% CI.

Robustness Checks

Four separate robustness checks were performed: we used FIML for missing data (e.g., Enders & Bandalos, 2001), included random intercepts for county, excluded respondents with negative affective polarization values, and recoded negative affective polarization values to zero. Percent out-party remained a significant predictor in all models (see Supplemental Materials).

Discussion

Consistent with hypotheses, people with more out-partisans in their county had lower levels of party-directed affective polarization, even when controlling for covariates. In Study 2, we include precinct as an additional level of analysis for examining the relationship between out-partisan percentage and affective polarization and include different measures of affective polarization. Additionally, we examine whether cross-party contact mediates this relationship.

Study 2

Study 2 was pre-registered (see pre-registration and supplemental materials, survey questions, raw data, and analytic syntax). We followed our pre-registration for participant recruitment and exclusions, and our pre-registered analyses are in the results section labeled "Pre-Registered Analyses". Study 2 builds upon Study 1 by examining the percentage of out-partisans within precincts in addition to counties. Focusing on a smaller unit of measurement than county is beneficial as partisans can become clustered in small areas such as precincts or even single streets (Brown & Enos, 2021; Kaplan et al., 2022). Additionally, in Study 2 we assess affective polarization with feeling thermometers for *voters* of the two major political parties, rather than the broader parties themselves. We also measure social distance, which reflects the level of comfort individuals have interacting with out-partisans (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Bogardus, 1933). Social distance measures are conceptually different from feeling thermometer ratings as it is

possible to feel coldly towards a group of people but still feel comfortable having interpersonal relationships with them. We hypothesize that greater out-party percentages (at precinct and county levels) will be associated with lower levels of affective polarization and social distance. Furthermore, we conduct an exploratory mediation analysis to examine whether the relationship between out-partisan proximity and out-party attitudes is explained by actual contact with out-partisans.

Method

Participants

We recruited 401 participants through Prolific in May of 2022, and screened for participants who identified as Democrats or Republicans. We excluded seven states from recruitment (AK, AL, ID, KY, LA, MO, and VA) because of a lack of precinct-level voting data in those states. Six participants were excluded for not identifying with the Democratic or Republican party, and 33 were excluded for missing data in our primary models (see Figs. 4-5). All participants passed the attention check. In total, we included responses from 362 participants (46.4% women, 51.6% men, 1.9% non-binary; $M_{\text{Age}} = 41.99$, $SD_{\text{Age}} = 14.75$), with an even number of Democrats and Republicans (181 each). Our sample was 77.9% White, 6.4% Asian/Asian American, 5.2% Hispanic/Latino/a, 5.0% Black, and 5.5% multiracial. Participants lived in 241 different US counties.

We pre-registered a sample size of 400 (200 Democrats and 200 Republicans), and we recruited as many participants as funds allowed. A post-hoc sensitivity analysis conducted using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007) suggests with 362 respondents our primary analyses would have 80% power to detect an f^2 increase of .036, a small effect size. A post-hoc power analysis for the

observed effect size from Study 1 (.009 f^2 increase when including out-party) reveals there would be 42% power with a sample size of 362.

Measures

Main outcome variables in Study 2 were: voter-directed affective polarization (feeling thermometers) and social distance.

Outcome Variables.

Affective Polarization (Voter-Directed). Participants were asked "How warm (or cold) do you feel towards the [Democratic/Republican] Party voters?" for both parties on a scale of 0 (very cold) to 100 (very warm). Affective polarization was calculated as in-party ratings subtracted from out-party ratings.

Social Distance. We asked participants "How comfortable they would be having a _____ who is a [Democrat/Republican]?" with the party specified being the respondent's out-party and the blank filled with each of four different relationships: (1) close friend, (2) romantic partner, (3) neighbor, and (4) a close coworker. They responded on a 1 (extremely uncomfortable) to 7 (very comfortable) scale. Responses were averaged into a combined social distance score for each participant (α = .93). We reverse coded this variable so that a higher score represented greater discomfort (i.e., social distance).

Primary Predictor Variables of Interest.

Percent Out-Party (County). This variable was computed identically as described in Study 1, with the exception that it used the 2020 presidential election data (Trump vs. Biden). Zero represents the smallest percent out-party and 1 represents the highest percent out-party.

Percent Out-Party (Precinct). Participants followed a link to the *New York Times* "Extremely Detailed Map of the 2020 Election" (Park et al., 2021), which shows the vote shares

of each major presidential candidate in each precinct. They were instructed to enter their current address to find results for their precinct, and report the candidate who won and his margin of victory. A percent out-party value was calculated from this information. When participants lived in precincts where their candidate *won*, their percent out-party score was the margin of victory multiplied by −1 (no adjustment was made when their candidate lost). This variable was scaled to a 0 (lowest in-party vote share) to 1 (highest in-party vote share).

Control Variables. The control variables used in our pre-registered models were the same as those used in Study 1, *with the exception of those detailed below* (see full models in Figs. 4 and 5):

Democrat. Participant's political party was dummy-coded, with 1 representing Democrats and 0 representing Republicans.

Party ID Strength. We only recruited partisans and not partisan leaners, so Party ID Strength was dummy coded with 0 representing a self-identified "not very strong" partisan and a 1 representing a "strong" partisan.

Political knowledge. Questions were the same as Study 1, except Study 2 asked about the Chief Justice of the United States rather than which party controlled the senate.

Man. In Study 2, we asked about participants gender rather than sex; man was dummy coded 1 and all other gender identities as 0.

Mediator: Cross-Paty Contact (Exploratory). For exploratory purposes, we asked about participants levels of *cross-party contact* with the question "In your community, do you interact with more Democrats or more Republicans on a regular basis?" The scale ranged from 0 (many more democrats) to 100 (many more Republicans). A higher score was coded to represent more cross-party contact and was scaled between 0 and 1.

Other Exploratory Variables. We asked several questions about participants relationships with in-party and out-party members, including how many "friends and good acquaintances" and family members they had from the two main political parties (none, a few, many, or very many). An attention check instructed participants to select a specific answer choice. See Supplemental Materials for complete question text.

Results

The mean level of voter-directed affective polarization was 44.23 (SD = 31.36), reflecting warmer feelings towards in-party voters (M = 75.47, SD = 18.34) than out-party voters (M = 31.23, SD = 24.98). Voter-directed affective polarization was higher among Democrats (M = 49.69, SD = 30.54) than Republicans (M = 38.78, SD = 31.29), $t(359.79) = 3.35$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.35$, 95% CI = [.17, .57]. The mean level of social distance was 3.43 (SD = 1.76), slightly below the midpoint on the 1 (very comfortable) to 7 (very uncomfortable) scale, indicating that on average, participants did not express discomfort with interpersonal relationships with out-partisans. Social distance was higher for Democrats (M = 4.08, SD = 1.68) than Republicans (M = 2.77, SD = 1.58), $t(358.68) = 7.61$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.80$, 95% CI = [.57, 1.04].

We calculated the zero-order correlation between out-party percentage at the county and precinct level (which were highly correlated; $r = .69$), and voter-directed affective polarization and the social distance measures. Out-party percentage did not significantly predict affective polarization at either the county ($r = -.06$, $p = .23$, 95% CI = [–.16, .04]) or precinct-level ($r = -.09$, $p = .10$, 95% CI = [–.19, .02]), though the patterns were consistent with hypotheses. Out-party percentage did predict social distance at both the county ($r = -.22$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [–.32, –.12]) and precinct levels ($r = -.21$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [–.30, –.11]). This suggests that those who have a greater proportion of out-partisans in their counties and precincts are more comfortable

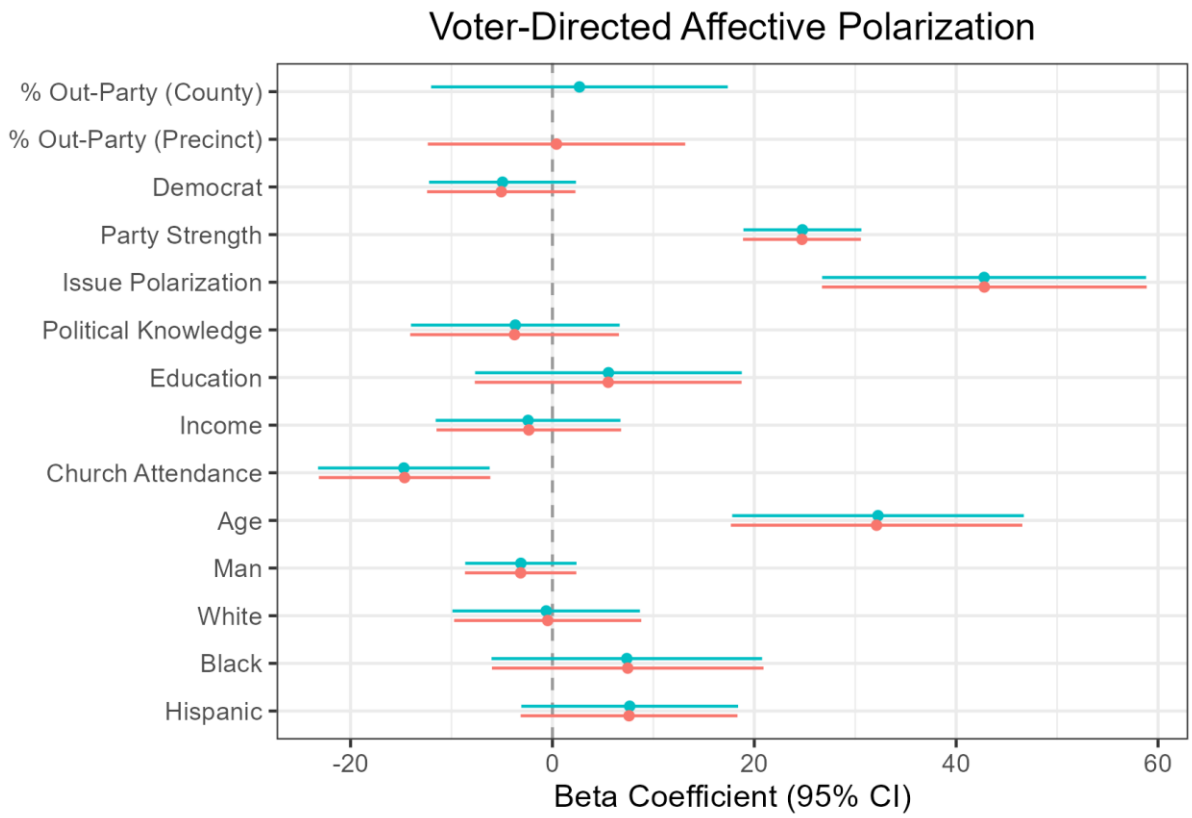
interacting with the out-party, but that they don't harbor more negative feelings toward voters from the out-party relative to in-party.

Pre-Registered Analyses

Following our pre-registered analysis plan, we conducted four multiple linear regression models. First, we examined the relationship between affective polarization on the feeling thermometers and county-level out-party percentage as well as the covariates (see Fig. 4 for full model). Contrary to our hypothesis and the model in Study 1, we found no significant relationship between out-party percentage and voter-directed affective polarization, $\beta = 2.67$, $p = .72$, 95% CI = [−12.02, 17.37]. The same model using precinct-level out-party percentage similarly found no significant relationship between out-party percentage and voter-directed affective polarization, $\beta = 0.40$, $p = .95$, 95% CI = [−12.34, 13.16].

Figure 4

Predicting affective polarization in Study 2.



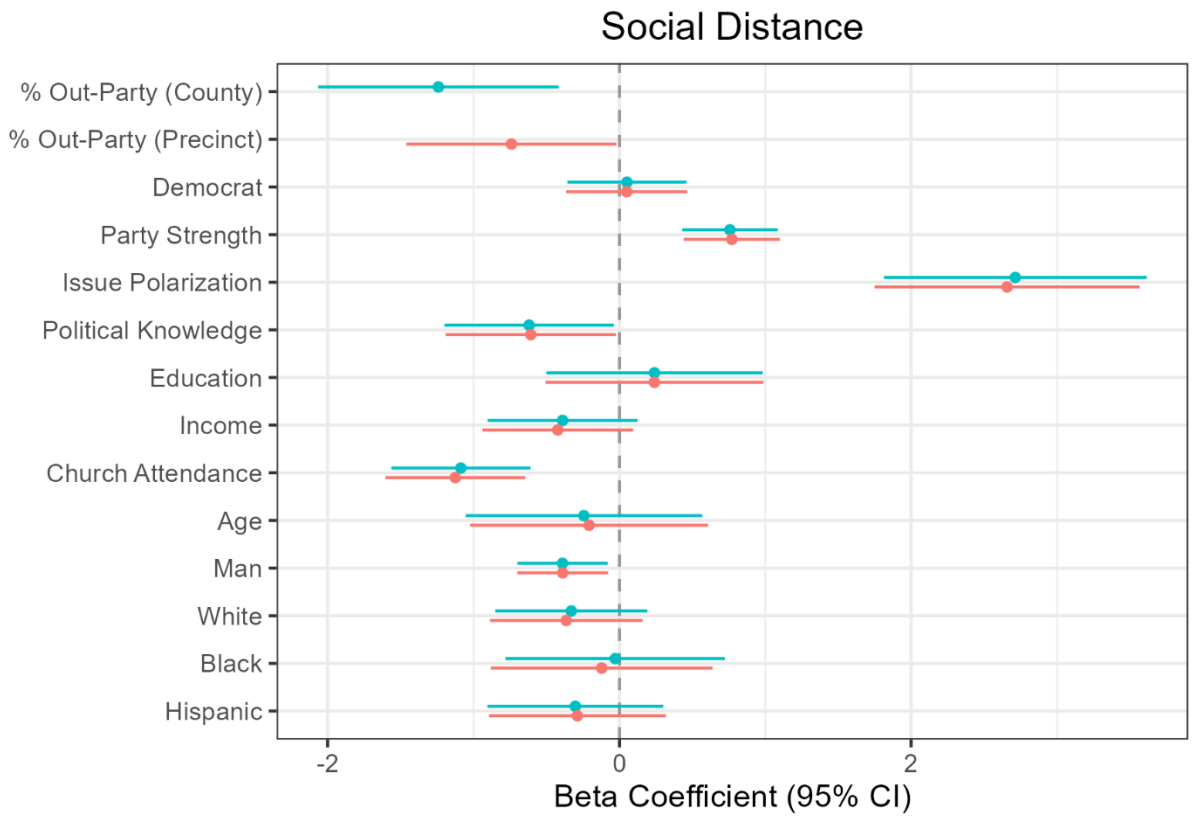
Note. Model with county-level out-party percentage shown in blue, model with precinct-level out-party percentage shown in red. Dots represent the point estimate for each beta coefficient, while whiskers (lines) represent the 95% CI.

Next, we examined whether out-party percentage predicted social distance. Consistent with hypothesis, we found a significant negative relationship between out-party percentage at the *county*-level and social distance, $\beta = -1.24$, $p = .003$, 95% CI = [−2.07, −0.42] (see Fig. 5). Respondents with very low percentages of out-partisans in their county scored more than a full point lower on the seven-point social distance scale than respondents with very high percentages of out-partisans, all else being equal. Likewise, at the precinct level, there was a significant

negative relationship between out-party percentage and social distance, β = −0.74, *p* = .044, 95% CI = [−1.46, −0.02].

Figure 5

Predicting social distance in Study 2.



Note. Model with county-level out-party percentage shown in blue, model with precinct-level out-party percentage shown in red. Dots represent the point estimate for each beta coefficient, while whiskers (lines) represent the 95% CI.

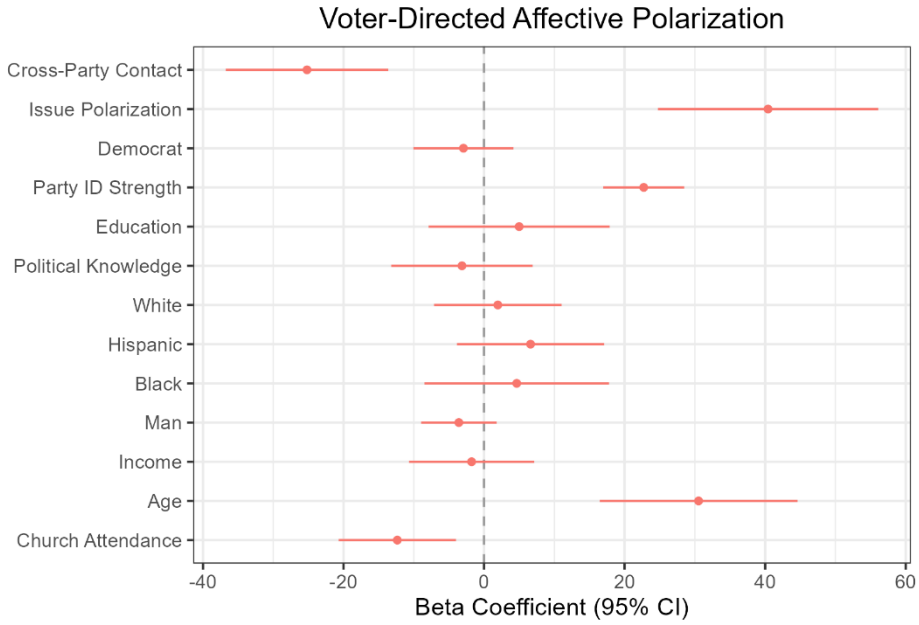
Exploratory Analyses (Not Pre-Registered)

Robustness Checks. A robustness check revealed that including random intercepts for county did not meaningfully alter results (see Supplemental Materials).

Cross-Party Contact. In addition to the percent out-partisans in their community as calculated by voting data, respondents also indicated the proportion of Democrats or Republicans they interacted with in their communities on a regular basis. We examined how contact predicted voter-directed affective polarization and social distance, using the same covariates as in the pre-registered models. Cross-party contact predicted significantly less voter-directed affective polarization ($\beta = -25.20$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [−36.76, −13.64], see Fig. 6) and in a separate model it predicted significantly less social distance ($\beta = -1.68$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [−2.33, −1.03], see Fig. 7).

Figure 6

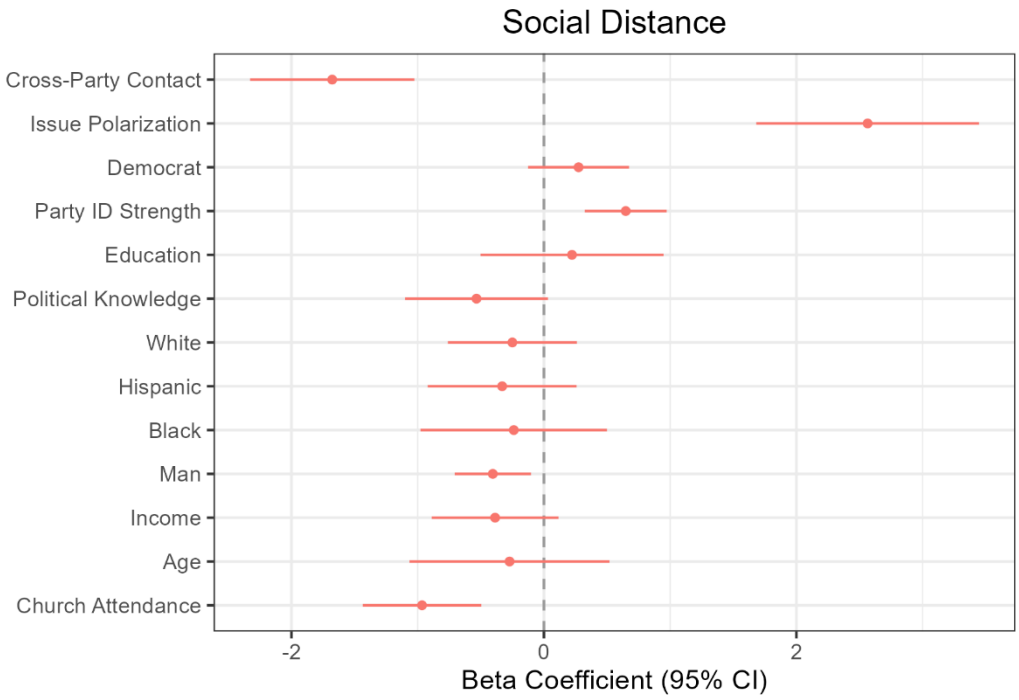
Predicting Voter-Directed Affective Polarization using Cross-Party Contact in Study 2.



Note. Dots represent the point estimate for each beta coefficient, while whiskers (lines) represent the 95% CI.

Figure 7

Predicting Social Distance Using Cross-Party Contact in Study 2.



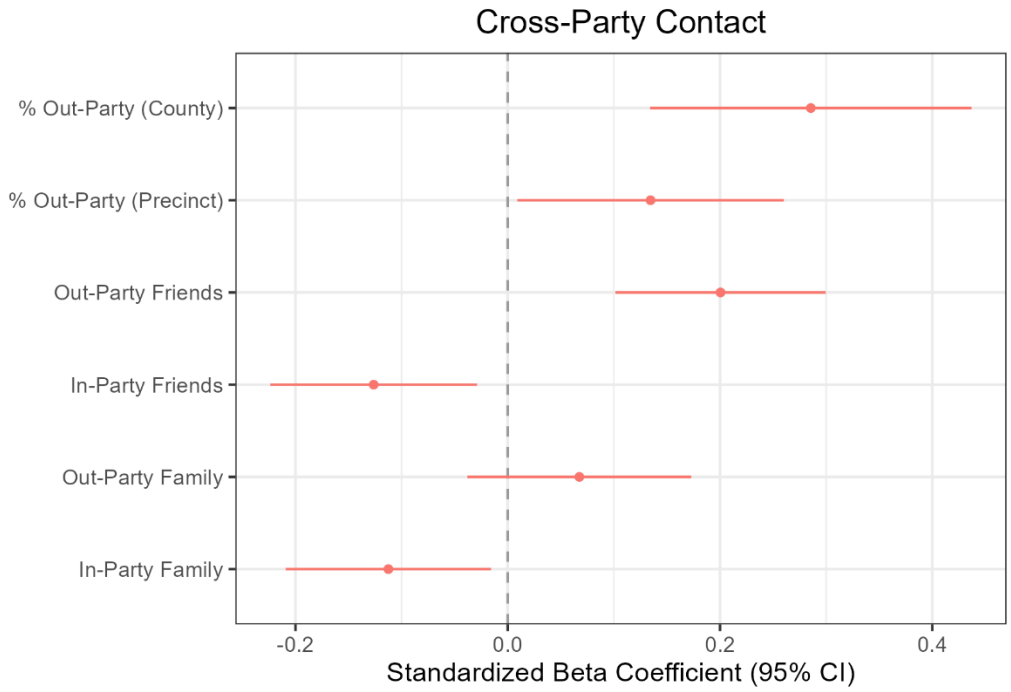
Note. Dots represent the point estimate for each beta coefficient, while whiskers (lines) represent the 95% CI.

Because cross-party contact was a strong predictor of voter-directed affective polarization and social distance we examined how it relates to other measures. We ran a linear regression predicting cross-party contact based on county and precinct level out-party percentage, in-party and out-party friendships, and in-party and out-party family members (see Fig. 8). We found that cross-party contact was significantly predicted by five of the six variables, suggesting that

respondents were likely considering many facets of their lives when evaluating the proportion of Democrats and Republicans they interact with in their everyday lives.

Figure 8

Predictors of cross-party contact in Study 2.



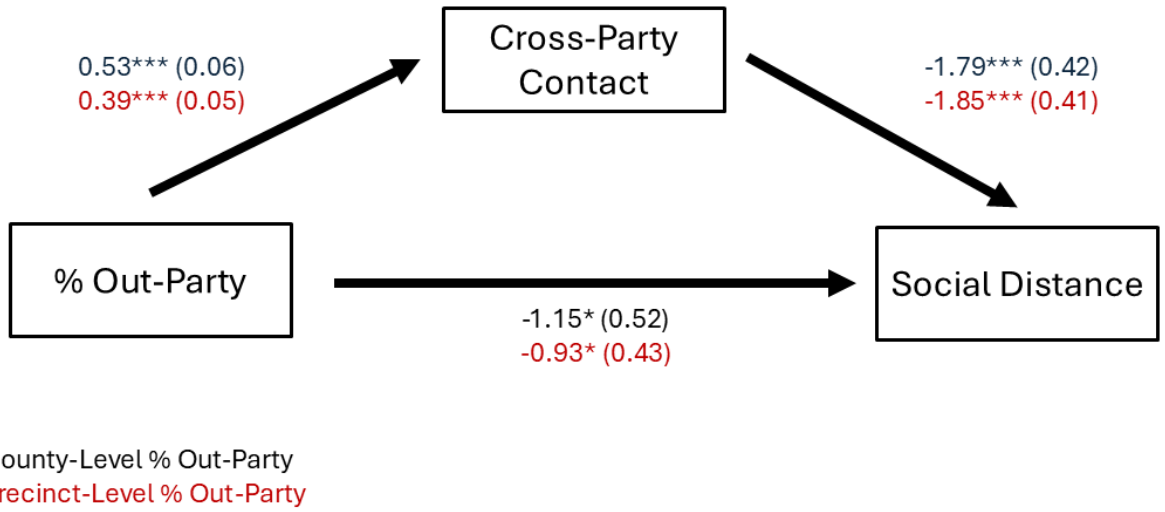
Note. Dots represent the point estimate for each beta coefficient, while whiskers (lines) represent the 95% CI.

Cross-Party Contact as Mediator. Furthermore, we examined whether cross-party contact mediated the relationship between out-party percentage (county and precinct levels) and social distance as well as voter-directed affective polarization. We tested four mediation models using the "Mediation" package in R (Tingsley et al., 2014) with path analyses conducted using "Lavaan" (Rosseel, 2012). This analysis was not pre-registered. We found significant indirect

effects of out-party percentage (county and precinct level) via cross-party contact on both social distance and voter-directed affective polarization (see Table 1). When using social distance as a dependent variable, out-party percentage (both precinct and county level) predicted higher cross-party contact, which predicted lower social distance (see Fig. 9). The direct and total effects were also significant in the mediation models predicting social distance.

Figure 9

Cross-Party Contact Mediates the Relationship between Out-Party Proximity and Social Distance in Study 2.



Note. *$p < .05$. ***$p < .001$. Standard errors appear in parentheses. Blue text represents the model using county-level out-party percentage while red text represents the model using precinct-level out party percentage.

Table 1

Mediation Analyses with Cross-Party Contact as a Mediator in Study 2.

Level of Out-	DV	Indirect Effect (ACME)	Direct Effect (ADE)	Total Effect	Proportion Mediated

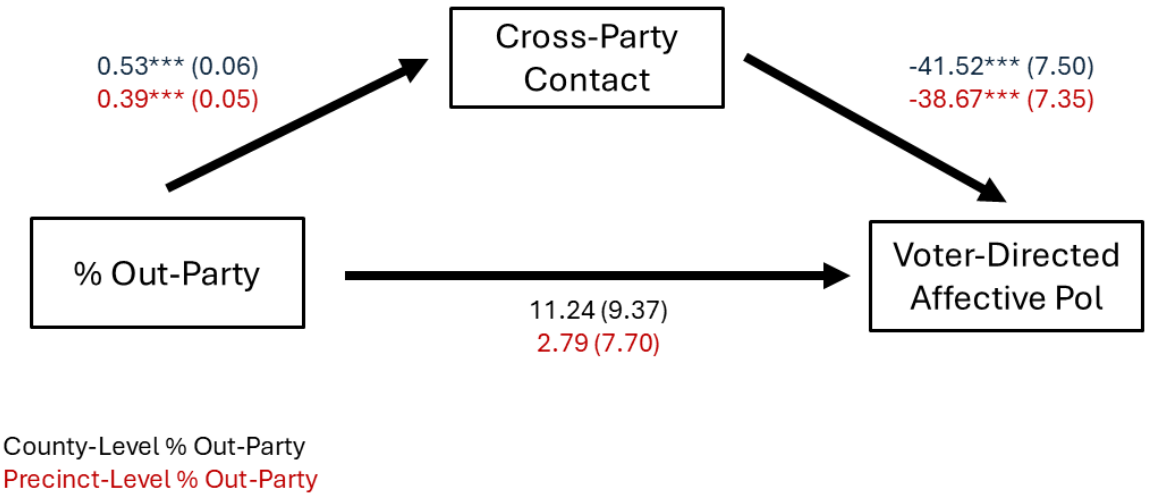
Partisan Percentage (IV)					
County	Social Distance	–0.94*** [–1.38, –0.47]	–1.15* [–2.20, –0.09]	–2.09*** [–3.04, –1.17]	0.45*** [0.19, 0.93]
Precinct	Social Distance	–0.72*** [–1.16, –0.36]	–0.93* [–1.76, –0.09]	–1.65*** [–2.41, –0.91]	0.44*** [0.21, 0.93]
County	Feeling Therm. Diff.	–21.84*** [–31.49, –13.60]	11.24 [–7.77, 29.67]	–10.60 [–28.38, 5.61]	2.06 [–11.15, 27.13]
Precinct	Feeling Therm. Diff.	–15.03*** [–22.13, –8.68]	2.78 [–11.44, 17.15]	–12.26 [–26.78, 1.46]	1.23 [–7.26, 6.48]

Note. Mediation analyses examining the role of cross-party contact on the relationship between out-party percentage and measures of affective polarization. Brackets denote bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals. $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$.

Similarly, when using voter-directed affective polarization as a dependent variable, out-party percentage (both precinct and county level) predicted higher cross-party contact, which predicted lower social distance (see Fig. 10). However, the direct and total effects were non-significant in these mediation models.

Figure 10

Cross-Party Contact Mediates the Relationship between Out-Party Proximity and Voter-Directed Affective Polarization in Study 2.



Note. ***$p < .001$. Standard errors appear in parentheses. Blue text represents the model using county-level out-party percentage while red text represents the model using precinct-level out party percentage.

Discussion

Consistent with hypotheses, both county and precinct-level measures of out-party percentage predicted significantly less affective polarization in the form of social distance. Likewise, cross-party contact was linked with less affective polarization on this measure. These findings suggest that individuals who live in communities with more out-partisans feel more comfortable having interpersonal relationships with members of the opposite party. This pattern emerges even after controlling for the effects of strong predictors of social distance including partisan identity strength and issue polarization.

Inconsistent with hypotheses, out-party percentage did not significantly predict voter-directed affective polarization. This null result held for both county-level and precinct-level measures of out-party percentage, and for both multiple linear regressions and zero-order correlations.

Although out-party percentage did not predict voter-directed affective polarization, we found that more out-party contact was associated with significantly lower levels of voter-directed affective polarization (a finding consistent with an experiment by Santoro & Broockman, 2022). Our measure of cross-party contact appears to capture elements of the partisan makeup of counties and precincts in which respondents live, and also their social circles (family and friends). Further highlighting the importance of contact, exploratory analyses revealed that cross-party contact mediated the relationship between out-party percentage and affective polarization, as well as out-party percentage and social distance. These findings demonstrate that those who live in proximity to larger proportions of out-partisans do in fact report more contact with out-partisans, and this contact is associated with more positive attitudes towards out-partisans.

General Discussion

Across two studies, we used ANES and original data to examine the relationship between the partisan composition of communities and affective polarization. We found that living in areas with more exposure to out-partisans was associated with lower levels of *party-directed* affective polarization. Similarly, more out-partisans in one's community (at the precinct and county level) and more cross-party contact predicted lower levels of social distance from out-partisans. However, contrary to our hypotheses, out-party percentage at the precinct and county levels did not significantly predict *voter*-directed affective polarization. It is unclear if this finding was not significant due to lower statistical power in Study 2 or whether there is a meaningful difference in how contact predicts attitudes towards voters as opposed to the party at large, similar to overall differences in perceptions of "Republicans" and "Democrats" as opposed to their parties as identified by Iyengar et al. (2012). Yet, greater cross-party contact was a significant predictor of voter-directed affective polarization, suggesting that interacting with out-partisans is associated

with lower levels of affective polarization as well. Further, cross-party contact mediated the relationship between the proportion of out-partisans in one's community and affective polarization, suggesting that geography is linked with contact experiences, and that these experiences are related to lower levels of partisan bias.

Communities within the United States have become increasingly politically homogenous (Bishop & Cushing, 2008; Bishop 2020), while affective polarization has also increased (Iyengar et al., 2019). Our research demonstrates that politically homogenous communities are *directly* linked to affective polarization. By examining how the percentage of out-partisans in one's community is related to their evaluations of the out-party and its voters, we show that where people live matters for how they think about political parties. Further, the political makeup of communities matters above and beyond core partisan beliefs and predicts lower animosity despite the normative pressures to express partisan biases.

The findings support contact theory (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Allport, 1954) and experiments demonstrating that cross-party contact reduces polarization (Santoro & Broockman, 2022; Levendusky & Stecula, 2021). Although living under out-party policies, leadership, and cultural norms could lead to hostility against the out-party, we found the opposite pattern. As demonstrated by the mediation analyses in Study 2, the relationship between the proportion of out-partisans in one's community (at the county and precinct levels) and affective polarization/social distance is explained in part by cross-party contact. Consistent with Sarrasin et al. (2012), we find that those who live among more outgroup members do in fact have more frequent contact and that contact is associated with more positive out-group attitudes. However, the correlational nature of these analyses leave open the possibility that affective polarization affects where people choose to live. While previous research casts doubt on this alternative (Mummolo & Nall, 2017; Martin &

Webster, 2020), we cannot make causal claims from the present studies. Future research could examine causal connections by examining how affective polarization levels within communities change as the partisan compositions of those communities change, or by looking at how individuals partisan attitudes change when they move into communities with a different proportion of out-partisans. Additionally, future research should examine how the partisanship of communities brings about different forms of contact, and how these different forms of contact relate to affective polarization. Future research should also assess contextual factors which often play an important role in reducing prejudice such as status in the situation, the need for cooperation, shared goals, and norms (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

Conclusion

Situations exert powerful influence on individuals and politics is no exception. The increasingly politically divided geography of the United States has implications for political attitudes and how people engage across party lines. When people live amongst larger proportions of out-partisans that they tend to have lower levels of party-directed affective polarization and social distance, even when controlling for factors such as party identity strength and policy views. We argue that the ameliorating effect of intergroup contact may explain why individuals who have more out-partisans in their communities generally have more favorable views of the out-party. The United States' increasingly divided geography reduces opportunities for cross-party contact, and without creating opportunities for cross-party interactions, political animosity may continue to grow and hinder partisans from working together to solve problems and strengthen the nation. American partisans living in politically homogenous communities set apart from out-partisans may be the *most* in need of contact with out-partisans.

References

Allport, G. W. (1954). *The Nature of Prejudice.* Perseus Books.

American National Election Studies. (2017). ANES 2016 Time Series Study (ICPSR 36824). Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. doi:10.3886/ICPSR36824.v2

American National Election Studies. (2021). ANES 2016 Time Series Study Geocodes (ICPSR 38087). Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. https://doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR38087.v1

Amsalem, E., Merkley, E., & Loewen, P. J. (2022). Does Talking to the Other Side Reduce Inter-party Hostility? Evidence from Three Studies. *Political Communication*, *39*(1), 61-78.

Anicich, E. M., Jachimowicz, J. M., Osborne, M. R., & Phillips, L. T. (2021). Structuring local environments to avoid racial diversity: Anxiety drives whites' geographical and institutional self-segregation preferences. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *95*, 104117.

Barlow, F. K., Paolini, S., Pedersen, A., Hornsey, M. J., Radke, H. R., Harwood, J., ... & Sibley, C. G. (2012). The contact caveat: Negative contact predicts increased prejudice more than positive contact predicts reduced prejudice. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *38*(12), 1629-1643.

Bishop, B. (2020, December 17). For Most Americans, the Local Presidential Vote Was a Landslide. *Daily Yonder*. Retrieved March 11, 2022, from https://dailyyonder.com/for-most-americans-the-local-presidential-vote-was-a-landslide/2020/12/17/.

Bishop, B., & Cushing, R. G. (2008). *The big sort: Why the clustering of like-minded America is tearing us apart.* Mariner Books.

Bogardus, E. S. (1933). A social distance scale. *Sociology & Social Research*.

Boxell, L., Gentzkow, M., & Shapiro, J. M. (2020). *Cross-country trends in affective polarization* (No. w26669). National Bureau of Economic Research.

Brown, J. R., & Enos, R. D. (2021). The measurement of partisan sorting for 180 million voters. *Nature Human Behaviour*, *5*(8), 998-1008.

Connors, E. C. (2023). Social Desirability and Affective Polarization. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *87*(4), 911-934.

Diehl, M. (1990). The minimal group paradigm: Theoretical explanations and empirical findings. *European Review of Social Psychology*, *1*(1), 263-292.

Druckman, J. N., & Levendusky, M. S. (2019). What do we measure when we measure affective polarization?. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *83*(1), 114-122.

Economist Intelligence Unit (2022). *Democracy Index 2021. The China Challenge.* London: EIU.

Enders, C. K., & Bandalos, D. L. (2001). The relative performance of full information maximum likelihood estimation for missing data in structural equation models. *Structural equation modeling*, *8*(3), 430-457.

Faul, F., Erdfelder, E., Lang, A. G., & Buchner, A. (2007). G* Power 3: A flexible statistical power analysis program for the social, behavioral, and biomedical sciences. *Behavior Research Methods*, *39*(2), 175-191.

Greene, S. (1999). Understanding party identification: A social identity approach. *Political Psychology*, *20*(2), 393-403.

Huber, G. A., & Malhotra, N. (2017). Political homophily in social relationships: Evidence from online dating behavior. *The Journal of Politics*, *79*(1), 269-283.

Huddy, L., & Bankert, A. (2017). Political partisanship as a social identity. In *Oxford research encyclopedia of politics*.

Iyengar, S., Lelkes, Y., Levendusky, M., Malhotra, N., & Westwood, S. J. (2019). The origins and consequences of affective polarization in the United States. *Annual Review of Political Science*, *22*, 129-146.

Iyengar, S., Sood, G., & Lelkes, Y. (2012). Affect, not ideology: A social identity perspective on polarization. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 76*(3), 405-431.

Iyengar, S., & Westwood, S. J. (2015). Fear and loathing across party lines: New evidence on group polarization. *American Journal of Political Science*, *59*(3), 690-707.

Kalmoe, N. P., & Mason, L. (2019, January). Lethal mass partisanship: Prevalence, correlates, and electoral contingencies. In *National Capital Area Political Science Association American Politics Meeting*.

Kalmoe, N. P., & Mason, L. (2022). *Radical American Partisanship: Mapping Violent Hostility, Its Causes, and the Consequences for Democracy*. University of Chicago Press.

Kaplan, E., Spenkuch, J. L., & Sullivan, R. (2022). Partisan spatial sorting in the United States: A theoretical and empirical overview. *Journal of Public Economics*, *211*, 104668.

Lelkes, Y. (2018, April). Affective polarization and ideological sorting: A reciprocal, albeit weak, relationship. In *The Forum* (Vol. 16, No. 1, pp. 67-79). De Gruyter.

Lemyre, L., & Smith, P. M. (1985). Intergroup discrimination and self-esteem in the minimal group paradigm. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *49*(3), 660.

Levendusky, M. S., & Stecula, D. A. (2021). *We Need to Talk: How Cross-Party Dialogue Reduces Affective Polarization*. Cambridge University Press.

Mason, L. (2015). “I disrespectfully agree”: The differential effects of partisan sorting on social and issue polarization. *American Journal of Political Science*, *59*(1), 128-145.

Mason, L. (2018a). Ideologues without issues: The polarizing consequences of ideological identities. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 82(S1), 866-887.

Mason, L. (2018b). *Uncivil agreement: How politics became our identity*. University of Chicago Press.

MIT Election Data and Science Lab. (2018). County presidential election returns 2000-2016. Harvard Dataverse. Retrieved from https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/VOQCHQ

Mummolo, J., & Nall, C. (2017). Why partisans do not sort: The constraints on political segregation. *The Journal of Politics*, *79*(1), 45-59.

Mutz, D. C. (2002). Cross-cutting social networks: Testing democratic theory in practice. American Political Science Review, 96(1), 111-126.

Park, A., Smart, C., Taylor, R., & Watkins, M. (2021). An Extremely Detailed Map of the 2020 Election. *New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/upshot/2020-election-map.html

Pettigrew, T. F., & Tropp, L. R. (2006). A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *90*(5), 751.

Pettigrew, T. F., Tropp, L. R., Wagner, U., & Christ, O. (2011). Recent advances in intergroup contact theory. *International journal of intercultural relations*, *35*(3), 271-280.

Roccas, S., & Brewer, M. B. (2002). Social identity complexity. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *6*(2), 88-106.

Rosseel, Y. (2012). lavaan: An R package for structural equation modeling. *Journal of Statistical Software, 48*, 1-36.

Santoro, E., & Broockman, D. E. (2022). The promise and pitfalls of cross-partisan conversations for reducing affective polarization: Evidence from randomized experiments. *Science Advances*, *8*(25), eabn5515.

Sarrasin, O., Green, E. G., Fasel, N., Christ, O., Staerklé, C., & Clémence, A. (2012). Opposition to antiracism laws across Swiss municipalities: A multilevel analysis. *Political Psychology*, *33*(5), 659-681.

Suk, J., Coppini, D., Muñiz, C., & Rojas, H. (2022). The more you know, the less you like: A comparative study of how news and political conversation shape political knowledge and affective polarization. *Communication and the Public*, *7*(1), 40-56.

Tajfel, H. (1970). Experiments in intergroup discrimination. *Scientific American*, *223*(5), 96-103.

Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 7–66). Monterey: Brooks Cole.

Tingley, D., Yamamoto, T., Hirose, K., Keele, L., & Imai, K. (2014). Mediation: R package for causal mediation analysis.

West, E. A., & Iyengar, S. (2020). Partisanship as a social identity: Implications for polarization. *Political Behavior*, 1-32.

Wojcieszak, M., & Warner, B. R. (2020). Can interparty contact reduce affective polarization? A systematic test of different forms of intergroup contact. *Political Communication*, *37*(6), 789-811.