Affective Polarization and Election Expectations

Maxim Doiron
Princeton University

Kaj Thomsson
Maastricht University

Elias Tsakas
Maastricht University

Alexander Vostroknutov
Maastricht University

The rise in polarization in American politics over recent decades has attracted plenty of interest both in academia and in the broader public discussion. However, the connection between affective polarization and individuals' election expectations is virtually unexplored and poorly understood. Exploring this connection is critical to our understanding of the underlying mechanisms of rising affective polarization; there may, for instance, exist a link between violated election expectations and support for extreme post-election reactions. In October 2020, we asked a set of survey participants to complete positive and negative partisanship scales as well as their probabilistic assessments of the presidential candidates' chances of winning. For both Democrats and Republicans we found a strong positive association between negative partisanship and the likelihood of winning assigned by voters to the presidential candidate of the same party. This indicates that there is a link between affective polarization and election expectations, and that *negative* partisanship may be the most important facet of that relationship.

Introduction

In this paper, we investigate the relationship between affective polarization and election expectations. We find a strong relationship, and we discover that it is primarily driven by negative (rather than overall or positive) partisanship. More specifically, we find that affective polarization, captured empirically by measures of (negative) partisanship, is associated with biased expectations regarding the outcome of the 2020 presidential election in the United States.

Our paper is, to the best of our knowledge, the first investigation of this relationship between affective polarization and political expectations. Uncovering this link moves us towards a better understanding of the political consequences of rising polarization, a heavily discussed but still in many ways poorly understood topic. While plenty of studies have sought to explain the *causes* of affective polarization, these studies have taken for granted that polarization will have a negative *effect* on political functioning, without explicitly analyzing what the mechanisms behind a negative effect might be. The few studies that have investigated the political consequences of affective polarization have found varied and partially conflicting results, leaving the question of whether affective polarization is damaging to democracy, and the mechanisms by which it may be damaging, largely unanswered (Broockman et al. 2022). Our study outlines one possible mechanism through which increasing polarization can affect the functioning of a democratic system.

Understanding the association between affective polarization and election expectations is important for a variety of reasons. Anecdotal evidence suggests that high levels of party-bias in election expectations may lead to partisans on the losing side of an election challenging the legitimacy of the results, as citizens who are negatively (and heavily) surprised by election results are less likely to accept those results. Consequently, violated expectations might –at least partially–

explain recent extreme and violent post-election reactions. Thus, the prospect of growing affective polarization is a concerning issue of importance for the broader functioning of democracy.

As an initial step of our study, we establish that voters have party-biased expectations. This part of our paper does not break new ground; rather, it confirms that basic findings of wishful thinking bias hold also in our context (the 2020 US presidential election). Studies of wishful thinking bias, a form of motivated reasoning, have repeatedly found that people believe their preferred candidate is more likely to win an election than the candidate they do not favor, leading election expectations to be grouped largely along party lines (Granberg and Brent 1983; Miller et al. 2012; Uhlaner and Grofman 1986). And while a moderate-level of election expectation polarization may not be harmful to political functioning, there may exist a threshold beyond which party-bias in election expectations, combined with affective polarization, becomes dangerous. Although, we do not directly study violence-related (or similar) implications for democracy, our findings point to the possibility that polarization in the US might have reached truly dangerous levels.

Affective Polarization: A Social Psychological View of Partisanship

Affective polarization, the focus of our study, is marked by positive feelings for those associated with one's political party and negative feelings for those associated with the opposing party. It is based in social identity theory (SIT) and social comparison theory (SCT) (Turner at. 1979; Billig and Tajfel 1973). Partisans identify with their party and often act more like team members than careful adjudicators of policy, suggesting that affective polarization is a suitable foundation for understanding contemporary American politics (Miller and Conover 2015; Huddy and Bankert 2017; Huddy et al. 2015).

A number of indicators suggest that affective polarization is rising. American National Elections Studies (ANES) feelings thermometer data on in-party and out-party ratings shows that affective polarization has been rising since at least the 1980's, with particular growth in negative partisanship (Iyengar and Krupenkin 2018; Abramowitz and Webster 2016). Using a similar feelings thermometer methodology, Pew researchers found that just between 2016 and 2019 there was a significant increase in the percentage of respondents who felt coldly about the opposing party (Pew Research Center 2019). These findings suggest not only that affective polarization is rising, but also that negative partisanship may be the component of it that is rising most sharply, which we will return to in this study.

Despite the ample evidence that affective polarization is rising, the downstream consequences are still unclear, both because more research is needed, and because the studies that do exist have yielded results with non-obvious implications. Researchers have found that party identity is more strongly associated with stereotyped opinions and anger toward the opposing party than ideological views or issue preferences (Miller and Conover 2015). There is also an association between motivated reasoning on political topics and affective polarization (Peterson and Iyengar 2021; Druckman et al. 2021; Kingzette et al. 2021). Other research has identified a form of polarization referred to as belief polarization, whereby partisans observing similar information come to hold significantly different and party-aligned beliefs (Suhay et al. 2022; Haghtalab et al. 2021). None of these studies draw clean lines between affective polarization and dangerous *behavior*, some researchers even question whether there is a relationship between rising affective polarization and changes in political behavior at all (Broockman et al. 2022). To fully map out the consequences of rising polarization, more research is clearly necessary. We will focus on one specific aspect: the (possible) link between polarization and election expectations.

The Importance of Election Expectations

Election forecasts by experts have been a popular topic in both scholarly and public political discussion, especially in the wake of the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections. However, less attention is paid to the election expectations of *individuals* (rather than aggregated predictions) and the ways in which these expectations affect the appraisals of election outcomes. There does exist some research on this topic, some of it in the context of elections, which suggests that people tend to overestimate the likelihood of events they would favor, and underestimate the likelihood of unwanted events (Granberg and Brent 1983; Miller et al. 2012; Uhlaner and Grofman 1986). That said, although studies have found evidence suggesting the presence of wishful thinking bias, it should not be automatically assumed that this type of bias is always present in electoral contexts, as there is no consensus on the moderators of wishful thinking bias (Miller et al. 2012). Furthermore, considering the unusual nature of the 2020 American elections, one should not be confident that generic findings on wishful thinking bias would apply in this specific context. The 2020 elections occurred in the wake of a shocking 2016 election, the midst of a pandemic, and a potential high point in negative partisanship which would make the presupposition of the presence of wishful thinking bias an unwarranted assumption. Given the existing research on the topic, we still find it reasonable to hypothesize the existence of wishful thinking bias in this election, but it is a hypothesis that needs to be tested rather than simply taken for granted. Hence, our first hypothesis is (in light of previous scholarship) a confirmatory one:

H0. We expect Democrats and Republicans to report significantly different election expectations, in the direction of their party winning.

Moving on towards the core hypotheses of this study, prior research on determinants of outcome satisfaction ranging from product-satisfaction, life-satisfaction, job-satisfaction, and patient-satisfaction suggests that outcome satisfaction is at least partly a product of the discrepancy between outcome and expectation (Oliver 1980; Cardozo 1965). This suggests that election expectations must be a key component explaining the way in which people react to electoral outcomes, which motivates our focus on expectations. In this paper, we do not directly study the way people react to violated expectations, but rather aim to establish whether there is a relationship between (affective) polarization and (election) expectations at the individual level. Assuming we find a party-bias in our participants' election expectations (i.e., assuming we find support for H0), we hypothesize a positive association between affective polarization and party-biased election expectations:

H1. For both Democrats and Republicans, we expect a positive association, at the individual level, between the affective polarization score and the reported expectation that the candidate of the preferred party will win.

Noting that affective polarization is composed of two pieces, negative and positive partisanship, we furthermore investigate whether these forms of partisanship have the same relationships to election expectations when considered separately. Having no reason to assume they do not, we hypothesize that the relationship will be the same:

H2. For both Democrats and Republicans, we expect positive association between both positive and negative partisanship scores on the one hand and reported expectation of one's preferred candidate on the other.

We state hypothesis H2 with some caution. As discussed above, recent research has emphasized the importance of negative partisanship in particular in other settings. We have, ex ante, no way of knowing whether it will be more important than positive partisanship (hence hypothesis H2), but we will evaluate this with a careful eye to the possibility that we might observe differences between positive and negative partisanship.

If our hypotheses are not rejected by the data, the results will suggest that affective polarization and party-biased election expectations are concurrent effects. Our interest in the relationship between these concepts, besides the more theoretical interest in wishful thinking bias and human decision-making, comes from the fact that these effects in conjunction may be dangerous to democratic stability. Individuals who score highly in both domains, i.e. who are both strongly partisan and strongly believe that their "own" candidate will win, are presumably more likely to be shocked and angered by their candidate losing, and might challenge the legitimacy of an election outcome as a consequence (Brandtstädter and Greve 1994).

Method

Participants

This study's sample was composed of 501 participants, 257 were men and 244 were women; they were recruited through the online platform Prolific. They were between the ages of 18 and 76 with the mean age being 34. They were all American. We used a stratified sampling methodology and recruited 250 self-reported Democrats and 251 self-reported Republicans.

Procedure

   We used a between-subjects experimental design where participants were offered $2 for completing the survey and could win up to $5 depending on accuracy of prediction. We filtered our sample so that only Americans and those who identified as either Republicans or Democrats could participate. Participants then filled out the questionnaire.

Measures

   The questionnaire which served as the primary research measure was built using Qualtrics. In the demographic and descriptive questions portion of the questionnaire we asked participants to disclose their sex, age, student-status and political-party affiliation. In the partisanship scales portion of the questionnaire, we asked participants to rate their agreement with a series of statements about their own political party and the opposing political party on a seven-point Likert scale. These scales were based on scales from a study of negative and positive partisanship in the 2016 United States presidential elections (Bankert 2021). The election expectations portion of the questionnaire was composed of one question asking participants to provide a probabilistic assessment of the outcome of the presidential elections. Scores could range from 0% to 100%. A 100% score indicated the belief that Donald Trump had a 100% chance of winning the election and Joe Biden had a 0% chance of winning the election, whereas a 0% score indicated the opposite. All data was analyzed using the statistics software R 4.2.1.

Results

H0. We first ran a Welch independent samples t-test to determine whether Democrats and Republicans had significantly different election expectations. There was a significant effect for party[1], with Democrats[2] providing significantly lower probabilistic election beliefs than

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[1] $t(492) = -13.82$, $p < .001$
[2] Mean = 36.98, Standard Deviation = 21.21

Republicans[3] (see Figure 1). We also ran a linear regression to determine whether party is a predictor of election expectations. Results of this linear regression indicated that there was a significant effect, thus supporting hypothesis H0.[4]

Figure 1. Distributions of election expectations by party
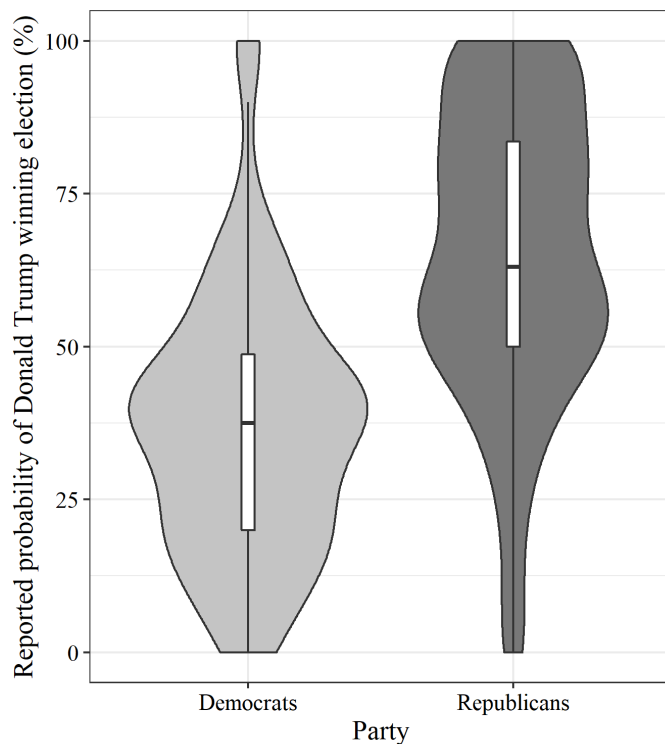
Note: N = 501 (250 Democrats, 251 Republicans)

H1. Proceeding to the first of the key hypotheses of the paper, affective polarization was significantly predictive of election expectations for both Democrats[5] and Republicans[6]. These analyses were run again including the moderators of age, sex and student-status for both Democrats and Republicans. The main result remained the same, but sex was also shown to be a significant

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[3] Mean = 64.90, Standard Deviation = 23.93
[4] $F(1, 499) = 190.91$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .28$
[5] Regression coefficient = -28.69, Standard Error = 9.08, $p = .002$
[6] Regression coefficient = 46.39, Standard Error = 8.30, $p < .001$

predictor of election expectations for Democrats[7] (see Appendix, Tables 1 and 2). These results support hypothesis H1.

H2. Moving on to the second of the two key hypotheses, Negative partisanship was significantly predictive for both Democrats[8] and Republicans[9] (see Figure 2). Positive partisanship was not significantly predictive for Democrats or Republicans. These analyses were run again including the moderators of age, sex and student-status for both Democrats and Republicans. The main result remained the same, but sex was also shown to be a significant predictor for Democrats[10] and Republicans[11] (see Appendix, Tables 3 and 4).

Figure 2. Presidential election expectations regressed on negative polarization for Democrats and Republicans
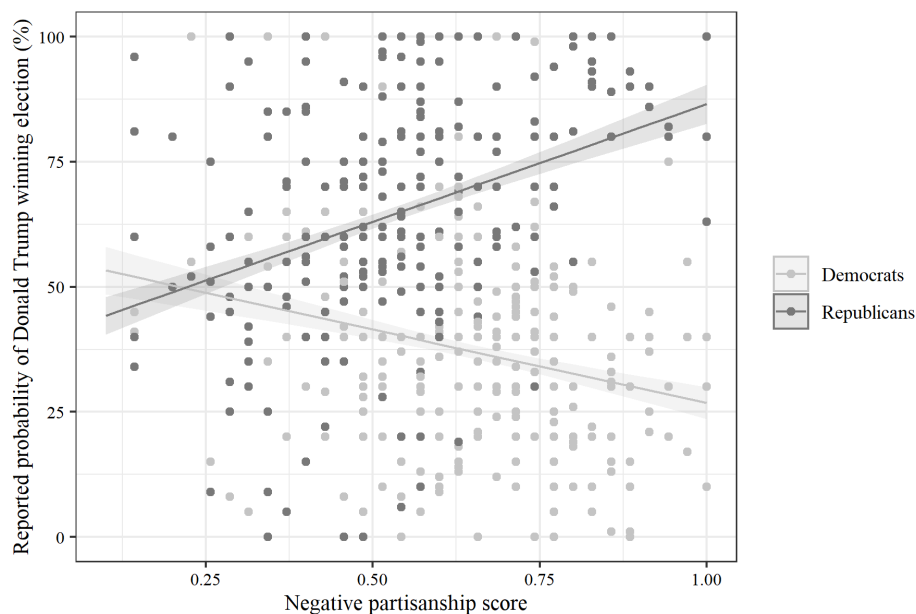
Note: Shaded region represents standard errors

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[7] Regression coefficient = -5.82, Standard Error = 2.71, p = .033
[8] Regression coefficient = -29.64, Standard Error = 9.06, p = .001
[9] Regression coefficient = 37.58, Standard Error = 11.17, p < .001
[10] Regression coefficient = -6.26, Standard Error = 2.70, p = .021
[11] Regression coefficient = -6.41, Standard Error = 3.04, p = .036

The results described above confirm hypotheses H0 and H1: Democrats and Republicans do report significantly different election expectations, in the direction of their respective party winning. Most importantly, affective polarization score is positively associated with party-biased election expectations. Interestingly, hypothesis H2 is only partially confirmed, we find no link between positive partisanship and election expectations, which means that the effect of partisanship on expectations is associated solely by *negative* partisanship.

A Theory of Negative Partisanship as a Proxy for Intergroup Threat

The results necessitate the question: why is only negative partisanship and not positive partisanship predictive of party-biased election expectations? We propose a possible mechanism: negative partisanship may be a proxy for the level of intergroup threat the participant feels during the election, and preference-biased electoral expectations are a result of these increased feelings of intergroup threat.

Intergroup threat theory is a class of models explaining the determinants and consequences of feelings of threat between social groups. It posits that feelings of intergroup threat tend to occur when one group's behaviors or beliefs challenge the goals or self-concept of another group (Riek et al. 2006). There is direct evidence that Americans perceive high levels of intergroup threat during the 2020 election season. A poll conducted between September 30th and October 5th of 2020 found that 89% of Trump supporters and 90% of Biden supporters believed the election of the candidate of the other party would lead to "lasting harm to the U.S." (Pew Research Center 2020)

We propose that in the context of our study, partisans, especially those who are high in negative partisanship, are most likely to feel threatened by the possibility of the opposing party

coming into power (or remaining in power), because they are the ones who dislike the opposing party the most.

Research on reactions to intergroup threat have found that in some circumstances threat from an outgroup leads to more favoritism toward the ingroup, higher appraisals of ingroup cohesiveness, and minimization of the threat the outgroup poses (Karasawa et al. 2004; Rothgerber 1997; Wilder 1984), possibly as a way of managing the disruption of the threat (Brewer et al. 1993; Mullen et al. 1992). Based on this previous scholarship, we find it likely that feelings of (political) intergroup threat, which appear to have increased in the last few years (Pew Research Center 2020), have led to a situation where partisans overestimate the strength of their party due to a historical/evolutionary coping mechanism, and the party-biased election expectations we find in our data are likely to be a product of this overestimated strength. To be clear: we are proposing this as a theory that can make sense of our findings; we are not testing its full causal chain. We hope to see future research which empirically tests this proposed model in a direct way.

Concluding Discussion: Partisanship and Dangers to Democracy

Our results inevitably lead to the question: are extreme party-biased election expectations truly dangerous to democracy? Anecdotal evidence from the aftermath of the 2020 American presidential elections suggests that extreme election expectations played a part in efforts to delegitimize the election results. In post-election speeches President Donald Trump said, "There's no way we lost Georgia. There's no way. That was a rigged election," (Desiderio and Choi 2021) and Senator Tommy Tuberville referring to Trump's defeat stated, "It's impossible, it is impossible what happened," (Terris 2021). These quotes suggest disconfirmed expectations played a role in trying to delegitimize the election.

Research in the field of psychology shows that people react to disconfirming information in ways which protect their expectations, especially when those expectations are important to their self-concept (Brandtstädter and Greve 1994). A conceptual framework known as ViolEx which explains expectation persistence in the face of disconfirming information states that people may question the validity of disconfirming information, known as data-oriented immunization or reframe their expectation so that the disconfirming information no longer disconfirms it, known as concept-oriented immunization (Pinquart et al. 2021). Politics and parties are a way in which people define themselves (Iyengar et al. 2012). When people's expectations become part of their self-concept, they may be more prone to protect it, and more likely to engage in immunization behaviors. This expectation protection behavior may be especially dangerous when the political class and media environment deliberately reinforces false narratives and uses them for political purposes.

In conclusion, the key findings in this study, in particular the finding that negative partisanship is positively associated with party-biased election expectations, offers insights into the impact of (increasing) polarization on the dynamics of American democracy. We hope to see this line of research continued by more work on the role of historical and evolutionary mechanisms suggested by our findings, and we look forward to more work on the implications of (high levels of partisanship) on the functioning and survival of democracy, in America and beyond.

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Appendix (Online)

Section 1. Regression Tables

Table A1. Presidential election expectations regressed on affective polarization, and demographic

variables for Democrats

Table A1.	Model a.			Model b.		
	B	*SE*	*P value*	*B*	*SE*	*P value*
Intercept	54.94 ***	5.84	<.001	63.90 ***	7.81	<.001
Aff. polarization	-28.69 **	9.08	.002	-30.70 ***	9.14	<.001
Age				-0.19	0.13	.131
Sex				-5.82 *	2.71	.033
Student				2.73	3.20	.400
F	$F(1,248)=9.99$ **			$F(4,240)=4.82$ ***		
Multiple R^2	.04			.07		
Adjusted R^2	.03			.06		

Note: *B* = regression coefficient, *SE* = Standard Error, Aff. = Affective

Table A2. Presidential election expectations regressed on affective polarization, and demographic

variables for Republicans

Table A2.	Model a.			Model b.		
	B	*SE*	*P value*	*B*	*SE*	*P value*
Intercept	38.80 ***	4.88	<.001	38.81 ***	7.97	<.001
Aff. polarization	46.39 ***	8.30	<.001	48.22 ***	8.48	<.001
Age				0.06	0.15	.670
Sex				-5.88	3.03	.053
Student				-0.31	4.18	.942
F	$F(1,249)=31.24$ ***			$F(4,237)=8.99$ ***		
Multiple R^2	.11			.13		
Adjusted R^2	.11			.12		

Note: *B* = regression coefficient, *SE* = Standard Error, Aff. = Affective

Table A3. Presidential election expectations regressed on positive partisanship, negative

partisanship, and demographic variables for Democrats

Table A3.	Model a.			Model b.		
	B	*SE*	*P value*	*B*	*SE*	*P value*
Intercept	56.10 ***	5.83	<.001	66.81 ***	7.85	<.001
Negative partisanship	-29.64 **	9.06	.001	-33.08 ***	9.10	<.001

	B	SE	P value	B	SE	P value
Positive partisanship	0.40	8.81	.964	1.57	8.79	.859
Age				-0.23	0.13	.073
Sex				-6.26 *	2.70	.021
Student				2.37	3.18	.456
F	$F(2,247)=6.95$ **			$F(5,239)=4.93$ ***		
Multiple R^2	.05			.09		
Adjusted R^2	.05			.07		

Note: *B* = regression coefficient, *SE* = Standard Error

Table A4. Presidential election expectations regressed on positive partisanship, negative partisanship, and demographic variables for Republicans

Table A4.	Model a.			Model b.		
	B	SE	P value	B	SE	P value
Intercept	37.75 ***	4.93	<.001	38.59 ***	7.95	<.001
Negative partisanship	37.58 ***	11.17	<.001	41.39 ***	11.84	<.001
Positive partisanship	11.72	9.25	.206	10.29	9.81	.295
Age				0.04	0.15	.761
Sex				-6.41 *	3.04	.036
Student				-0.93	4.18	.825
F	$F(2,248)=16.64$ ***			$F(5,236)=7.73$ ***		
Multiple R^2	.12			.14		
Adjusted R^2	.11			.12		

Note: *B* = regression coefficient, *SE* = Standard Error

Section 2. Ethics Statement

We affirm that this research was conducted in line with the APSA's *Principles and Guidance for Human Subjects Research.* All participants of this research provided informed consent for their participation prior to their participation. There was no deception or risk of harm for this project, thereby minimizing risk to participants. Data was collected anonymously in accordance with European GDPR law, and only to be used for research purposes. Participants were fairly compensated for their work being paid $2 for a survey which took no more than 10 minutes.