Seeing the Other Side: How Local Party Images Moderate Affective Polarization

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Abstract

Social sorting, the situation where social groups become strongly interconnected with political parties, has been examined as a contributing factor to affective polarization in American politics. By cultivating party images represented through prominent social identities, this process instills group tensions into party politics. Yet few existing studies takes advantage of local variations of partisan composition to investigate whether the extent to which current political polarization are affected by "parties in our head". This research builds an index for party images for each congressional district using 2016 and 2020 Cooperative Election Studies, and links these local measures with 2020 American Election Studies where detailed indicators of polarization behavior are included. I find that the further the racial images of local partisans deviate from national stereotypes, the lower level of affective polarization is observed among the district's respondents. The deviation of local party images also undermines the influence group feelings have in people's polarization behavior. Heterogeneities by party and racial group are discussed.

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1 Introduction

Their ideological differences aside, the Republican and Democratic Parties in the United States represent two racially divergent faces of the country (Mason 2018; Egan 2020). The passage of prominent civil rights legislation in the 1960s activated a profound realignment, sorting blacks to the Democratic Party and racially conservative whites to the GOP (Carmines and Stimson 1990; Valentino and Sears 2005). This shakeup of the race-party landscape, combined with the overall diversification of the U.S. population in the past half a century (Hajnal and Rivera 2014), resulted in a sharp contrast between the racial makeups of the two major parties: while the Republican Party remains principally white, the Democratic Party embodies a racially diverse America (Mason 2016; Egan 2020; Zhirkov and Valentino 2022).

Such contrast has led scholars to construe the origins and consequences of mass partisanship through a perspective that centers on the role of social identities. Breaking from the instrumental tradition that largely reduces partisanship to a "running tally" of police preferences (Fiorina 1981; Downs 1957), the group-oriented approach to American partisanship views such identification as a expressive product of one's social thinking (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002; Mason 2018; Kane, Mason, and Wronski 2021; Zhirkov and Valentino 2022). It contends that calling the distinct images of Republicans and Democrats to mind, individuals will decide their partisanship based upon which party most closely resembles their own social images (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002; Mason 2018), or the images of those groups they favor (Kane, Mason, and Wronski 2021). In this sense, the political self is primarily an extension of one's other social selves. Scholars taking the groups approach have found that during the last decades, there is an incremental overlap between group affect and partisan affect (Zhirkov and Valentino 2022). Also, a closer match of one's group identities with their party's image is associated with strengthened partisan identity and the escalation of affective polarization between co-partisans and out-partisans (Mason and Wronski 2018; Mason 2016).

As is evident in the groups approach, party images[1], the mental schema that communicates

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[1]This same concept has been called in various terms across studies. For example, whereas Kane, Mason, and Wronski (2021) adopt the phrase "group-party alignment knowledge", Ahler and Sood (2018) and Zhirkov and Valentino (2022) respectively settle on "partisan prototypes" and "race-party schemas". This paper uses "party images",

what the Republican and Democratic Parties look like in terms of social groups (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002; Ahler and Sood 2018; Zhirkov and Valentino 2022), play a pivotal role in connecting group identities to political identification. Though such images are so pervasive and entrenched that party and race are almost "inseparable" in the public mind (Westwood and Peterson 2020), variation of them still exists. To check the extent to which "the parties in our heads" moderate the linkage between group feelings and partisan affect, existing studies have measured and manipulated subjects' perceptions of party images in experimental settings. Researchers find a decline of partisan affective polarization when individuals possess weaker knowledge about what party goes with what groups (Zhirkov and Valentino 2022), or when their prior perceptions of a party's social makeup are challenged (Ahler and Sood 2018). Yet to the best of my knowledge, there has not been any attempt made how the variation of party images that derive from contextual, local conditions may enter into the connection between group affect and political polarization.

With the consistent and structural influence of local context in mind (Campbell, Wong, and Citrin 2006; Hopkins 2009; Newman et al. 2015; Wong 2010), this study advances the group-oriented research of American partisanship by looking into how the variation of party images among congressional districts moderates the connection between group thinking and affective polarization. Pooling the 2016 and 2020 Cooperative Election Study (CES) data, I measure the racialized party images of the Democratic and Republican partisans for every congressional district. I then match this district-level data with respondents in 2020 American National Election Study (ANES) in which affective polarization is recorded for each individual.

I find that party images, expressed in terms of white imagery, does not produce standalone effects on affective polarization. But when put in comparison, the contrast between the racial images of the two parties significantly influences the affective polarization level of a district. Specifically, for the partisans whose group memberships rightly aligns with their party, affective polarization climbs up as the racial images of the two parties diverge further; for those embodying a ambivalent combination of racial and partisan identities, the increase in party image contrast

the term originally developed by Green, Palmquist, and Schickler (2002, 8) in reference to group compositions of Democrats, Republicans, and Independents.

Table 1: Contrast of Party Images Moderates the Effect of White Feelings on Affective Polarization

	Republican FT	Democrat FT	Rep. FT - Dem. FT
White FT	0.188***	0.016	0.168**
	(0.029)	(0.030)	(0.053)
Party Imagery Contrast	0.019	0.195*	-0.183
	(0.081)	(0.093)	(0.150)
White FT × Party Imagery Contrast	0.003**	-0.004**	0.007***
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.002)
Observations	6983	6989	6960
R squared	0.053	0.033	0.046

Note: All respondents in 2020 ANES. FT means the respondent's feeling thermometer score of the group on a 100-point scale, higher values indicating more warmer feelings. The term Party Imagery Contrast refers to the contrast between Republicans and Democrats in terms of their white imagery. Robust standard errors in parentheses. $+ p < 0.1$, $* p < 0.05$, $** p < 0.01$, $*** p < 0.001$

results in a decline in affective polarization. Finally, I show that how much citizens link their racial affect to partisan feelings is moderated by the degree to which Democrats and Republicans in their district look (un)like each other, thereby validating the theoretical role of divergent party images as an essential hinge in current racial-political divides.

2 Party Images and Affective Polarization

3 Empirical Strategy

3.1 Measure District-Level Party Images

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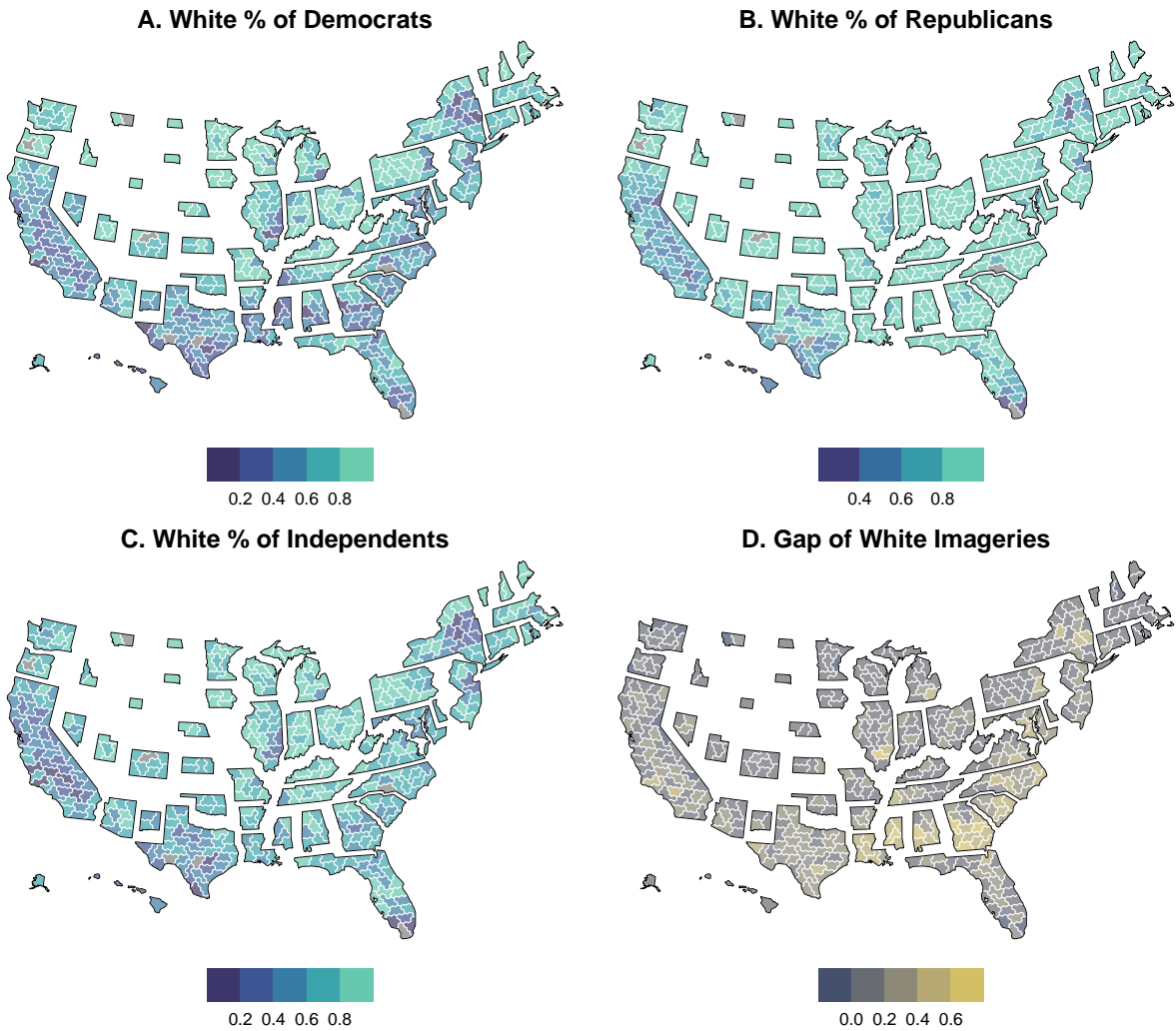
Figure 1: Geograhpic Variation of Party Imageries at the Level of Congressional Districts. States are resized to be in proportion to their population sizes, and districts are located within the states to approximately match their actual locations. This cartogram is created by the Daily Kos team (https://www.dailykos.com).
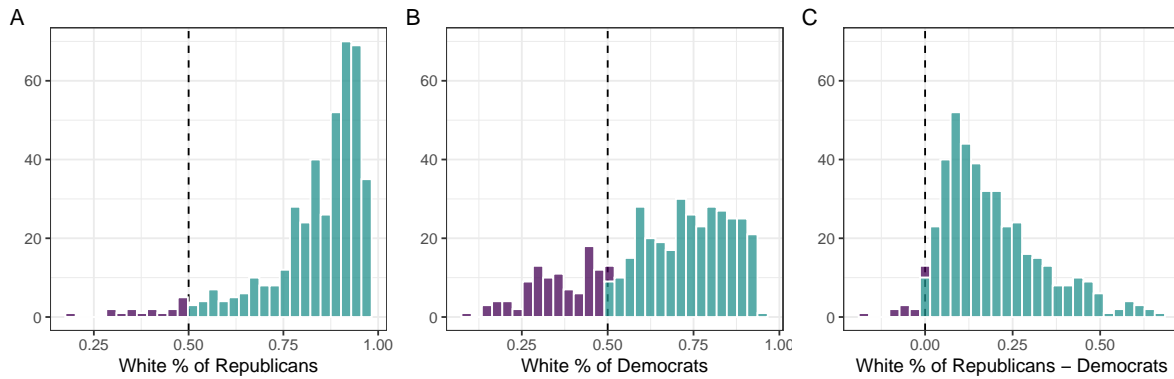
Figure 2: Distribution of Party Imageries and Their Gap among Congressional Districts. The first two panels shows the distribution of the percentages of non-Hispanic whites among the Republican and Democratic partisans in a congressional district. The last panel, capturing the contrast of the white imagery between Republicans and Democrats, shows the distribution of the gap between the two percentages.
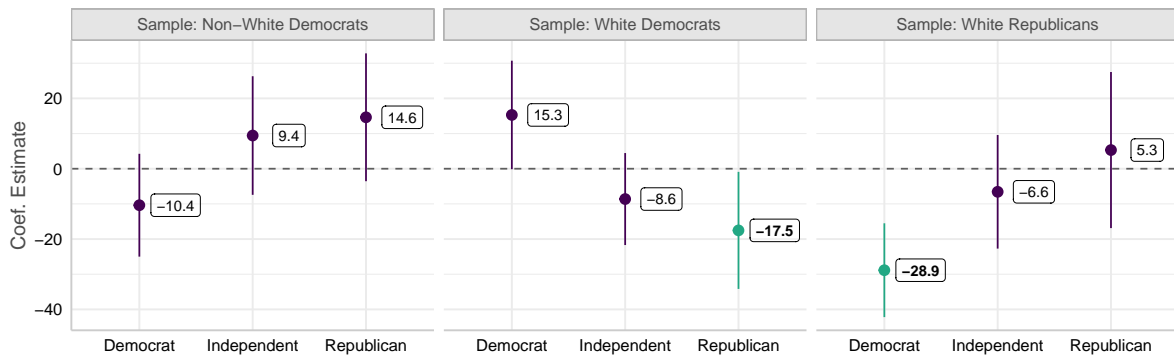

Figure 3: The Estimated Effect of Party Imageries on Affective Polarization by Different Types of Partisans. Panels indicates three subsamples of partisans in 2020 ANES. The labels on the horizontal axis shows the party imagery of what political group is of interest in a regression. A single point represents the estimated effect of the district-level white imagery of a political group on the affective polarization of the partisans in a congressional district, and the range shows its 95% confidence interval. Significant esimtates ($p < 0.05$) are colored in green and marked in bold text. White percentage of a district's population is controlled for.
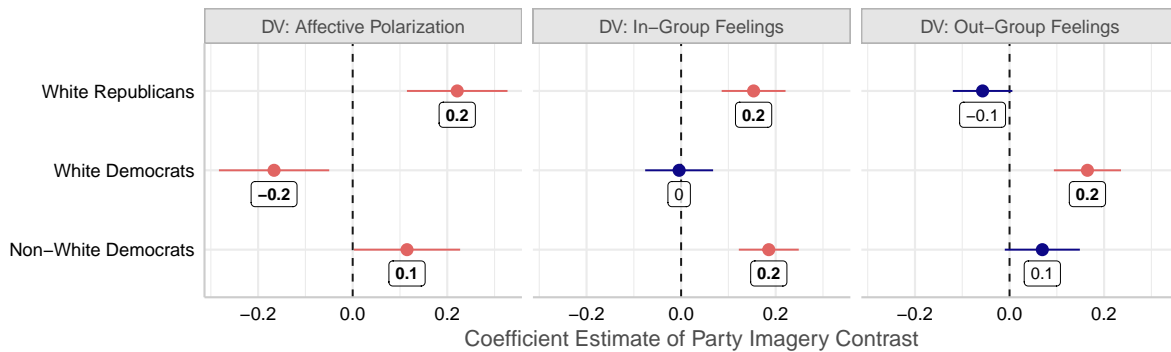
Figure 4: The Estimated Effect of Party Imagery on Affective Polarization, Broken Down by In-Group and Out-Group Feelings. Panels indicates three outcome variables pertaining to affective polarization, and the labels on the vertical axis shows the partisan subsample of 2020 ANES upon whom a regression is based. An individual point represents the estimated effect that district-level contrast of party imagery has on the outcome variable, and the range shows its 95% confidence interval. Significant esimtates (p < 0.05) are colored in red and marked in bold text. White percentage of a district's population is controlled for.
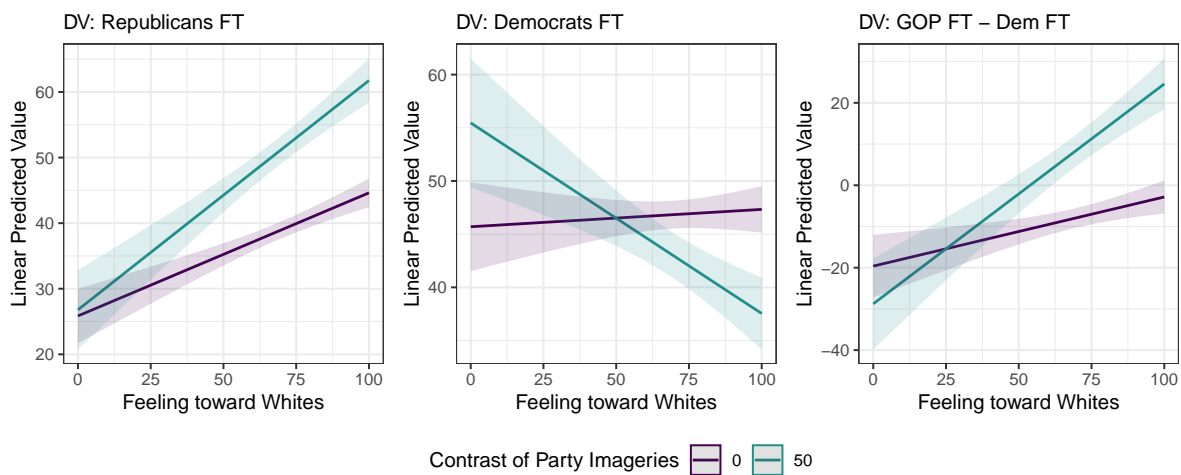
Figure 5: Greater Contrast of Party Images Accentuates the Influence of White Feelings on Voter's Affective Perception of Political Parties. Linear predicted values based upon the previous OLS analyses with interaction terms between white FT and party FT. Panels reponds to the three outcome variables. Within each panel, the two ribbons plot how affective polarization changes as feelings toward whites become warmer at two levels of party imagery contrast. The bands show the 95% confidcence internals.