Candidate and party affective polarization in U.S. presidential elections: The person-negativity bias

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**ABSTRACT**

We investigate the degree of affective polarization in presidential election years toward the two major parties and their nominees. Notwithstanding studies which show that individuating information about an out-group member can generate a *person-positivity bias*, we demonstrate a *person-negativity bias* directed at out-party candidates at least for some. We motivate and test two hypotheses: first, we expect more sophisticated partisans to display a greater difference in their feelings towards specific candidates compared to evaluations of the parties themselves; second, we anticipate sophisticated partisans will exhibit a person-negativity bias toward out-party candidates and a person-positivity bias toward in-party candidates. The results accentuate the conditional nature of the person-positivity bias and shed light on how political sophistication is linked to affective polarization.

Over the past several decades, Democrats and Republicans have come to increasingly dislike the opposing side and view co-partisans more favorably. This phenomenon has been labeled *affective polarization* (Iyengar and Westwood, 2015). One of its defining characteristics is animus and distrust toward the other side and its leaders, referred to as *negative partisanship* (Abramowitz and Webster, 2016). Surveys of voters show declining warmth toward the out-party and its members (Iyengar et al., 2012), an increase in the number of negative traits and explicit dislikes listed toward the opposing party (Levendusky and Malhotra, 2016), and evidence of implicit bias causing Democrats and Republicans to automatically favor in-group versus out-group members (Theodoridis, 2017) consistent with long-standing theories of intergroup conflict (e.g., Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Strong partisans in America have become less likely to report having friends or neighbors from the other party and more likely to choose someone to date or marry based on political similarities (Huber and Malhotra, 2017).

A leading explanation for rising affective polarization centers on how partisanship has become a defining *social identity* for many people in the United States. The parties have adopted clear and distinct positions on salient issues and large social group cleavages exist in the constituencies each party represents (Ahler and Sood, 2018; Mason, 2015, 2016; Robison and Moskowitz, 2019). Many partisans have come to view the opposing party as a stigmatized out-group and harbor resentment toward its leaders (Iyengar and Krupenkin, 2018). Exacerbating these built-in psychological biases, partisan media often provides slanted presentations of news to highly influential and involved segments of the electorate, fueling hostile feelings toward the opposition among the most engaged political audiences (Levendusky, 2013a, 2013b; Levendusky and Malhotra, 2016; Prior, 2013). Polarization and partisan conflict accentuated by media stimulates *partisan motivated reasoning* when partisans process political arguments, form opinions and make decisions (Druckman, 2012; Druckman et al., 2013; Kahan, 2015), resulting in rising uncivil disagreement (Mason, 2018), overestimation of the ideological extremity of the opposing party’s members (Levendusky and Malhotra, 2016), and declining warmth toward the opposing party from members of the opposing political group.

In this paper, we investigate the degree of affective polarization in presidential election years expressed toward the two major political parties and toward each party’s presidential candidate between 1980 and 2016. There is a pressing need to better understand: (1) the underlying mechanisms that drive affective polarization for different individuals (Abramowitz and Webster, 2018); (2) the attitudinal and behavioral consequences of heightened partisan affective polarization (Banda et al., 2020; Iyengar and Krupenkin, 2018; Iyengar et al., 2019);

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1 Druckman and Levendusky (2019) state, “This divisiveness vitiates political trust (Hetherington and Rudolph, 2015), hampers interpersonal relations (Huber and Malhotra, 2017), and hinders economic exchanges (McConnell et al., 2018)” (p. 2).

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and, (3) how the targets of different measures used to demonstrate affective polarization shape our understanding of what different voters are thinking about when they are asked to evaluate the parties in surveys that include feeling thermometer assessments (Druckman and Levendusky, 2019; Klar et al., 2018).

Based on existing research, we motivate and test two primary expectations: first, notwithstanding social-psychological research which shows that individuating information about a member of a perceived out-group generally leads to a person-positivity bias (Iyengar et al., 2013; Sears, 1983), we argue that this is likely not the case with respect to evaluations toward out-party presidential candidates. We argue that one of the most relevant and salient considerations in forming an evaluation toward any presidential candidate is his or her politics and its congruence with the social identity of the voter, which likely overpowers any impact of “individuating information” relative to evaluations of the out-party itself. In fact, evaluations of the party’s leadership may generate a “person-negativity bias”, whereby the candidate is evaluated more negatively than the party itself (Nilsson and Ekehhammer, 1987).

Second, partisan affective polarization is most intense among strong partisans (Iyengar et al., 2019; Klar et al., 2018). These citizens pay greater attention to partisan media and are more likely to engage in motivated reasoning when forming political evaluations (Bolsen et al., 2014; Druckman, 2012; Taber and Lodge, 2006). For many Americans the choice for president, while influenced by a myriad of factors, is ultimately a choice between the specific candidates as the proximate “attitude object” (e.g., Campbell et al. 1960). And, more recent evidence shows that across a variety of measures of partisan affective polarization that “respondents are more negative toward the elites of the other party than they are toward voters” (Druckman and Levendusky, 2019, p. 6).

Consequently, we anticipate that sophistication will be associated with partisan identities, like their racial and religious counterparts, are social and visceral, and they work together with other social identities to drive political judgment (see also, Green et al., 2004; Greene, 1999)” (p. 260).

Third, racial, religious, and ideological groups have become subsumed by a “superordinate partisan identity” that has generated greater in-group attachment and out-group hostility (Mason, 2018; Robison and Moskowitz, 2019). But to what extent do voters harbor greater dislike and resentment toward the parties themselves relative to the party’s presidential candidates?

On one hand, there is clear evidence of a “person-positivity bias” whereby attitude objects are evaluated more favorably when they resemble individual human beings compared to both inanimate objects and aggregated grouped versions of the same individual. For instance, surveys “consistently yield positive evaluations” of individuals [e.g., politicians] “that are much more often favorable than unfavorable”, as compared to evaluations of groups of these same individuals (Sears, 1983, p. 233). The person-positivity bias has been demonstrated in a number of instances including evaluations toward immigrants and non-citizens (Iyengar et al., 2013; LaPiere, 1934), public figures (Lau et al., 1979), and some politicians (Nilsson and Ekehhammer, 1987). Iyengar et al. (2015, p. 643) state, “Mere exposure to individuating information ... weaken(s) the connections between the individual in question and the group(s) she represents (Krueger and Rothbart, 1988; Hilton and Fein, 1989).” However, a “fundamental question is whether this bias toward positive evaluations holds toward almost any attitude object or whether it is specific to people and attitude objects” (Sears, 1983, p. 234). In the case of feeling thermometer ratings toward out-party presidential candidates, for reasons we discuss below, there may be reasons to expect a person-negativity bias, at least for some in the public, when comparing voters’ ratings toward the candidate and the out-party itself.²

1. Empirical expectations

Party identification has long been known to be a primary determinant of most Americans’ political evaluations and voting behavior (Campbell et al., 1960). According to the 2016 ANES, 63% of voters self-identified as a member of the Democratic or Republican party (and this number increases to 86% when leaners are included), and partisanship now has a stronger influence on voting decisions than any time since the 1950s (Abramowitz and Webster, 2018; Brewer, 2005). The increasing negativity in the way supporters of both major parties view the out-party and its leaders has been referred to as the rise of negative partisanship. Ratings of both the opposing party and the opposing party’s presidential candidate have fallen precipitously over time (Abramowitz and Webster, 2018).

A number of factors have contributed to the rise of negative partisanship since the mid-1980s. First, the parties increasingly have come to represent different constituencies based on racial, religious, and cultural divisions. Iyengar et al. (2019) state, “Democrats are increasingly the party of women, non-Whites, professionals and residents of urban areas, while Republican votes are disproportionately older, White men, evangelical Christians, and residents of rural areas” (p. 201–202). Second, partisan identity has become increasingly intertwined with other social group identities and exerts a powerful impact on a host of political and non-political judgments (Mason, 2018; Mason and Wronski, 2018; Robison and Moskowitz, 2019). Mason and Wronski (2018) state, “partisan identities, like their racial and religious counterparts, are social and visceral, and they work together with other social identities to drive political judgment (see also, Green et al., 2004; Greene, 1999)” (p. 260).

2 Sears (1983, p. 245) allows for the possibility that the person-positivity bias either does not exist (and, indeed, in his study finds no such bias toward individual college professors compared to college professors as a group) or reverses. To our knowledge, such examples of a reversal are rare in the literature: Naquin and Tyman (2003) identify a “team halo effect” where teams as a collective are given credit, but failure is attributed to individuals. In a similar vein Moon and Conlon (2002, p. 37) demonstrate there exists a “person sensitivity bias” where individuals were “punished relative to objects when events went poorly” (specifically, they examine how respondents rated groups and individuals in relation to performance of administrators of prisons and factories).
the person-positivity bias has limited generalizability. The general principle underlying this bias is ‘assumed similarity’. When this similarity is based on the personhood dimension, person-positivity is likely to appear. When it is based on some other dimension, there is no reason for expectation of the bias.

Evaluations are always relative and require comparisons that can be formed in fundamentally different ways: they can rely on similarity- or difference-based cognitive differentiation processes that result in positive or negative biases toward in-group versus out-group members (Alves et al., 2017, 2018). Out-groups are generally perceived as novel, which places them at an ‘evaluative disadvantage’ since humans prefer similarity and out-group individuals’ unique attributes are likely to be perceived as negative (Alves et al., 2018, p.14). Taking this argument one step further, presidential candidates become the symbol (or standard bearer) of their party and thus represent all the difference from one’s own party. Thus, “similarity-based comparisons” are more likely to generate favorable evaluations whereas “difference-based comparisons” are more likely to generate unfavorable evaluations (Alves et al., 2017). Voting—by necessity—requires “difference-based comparisons” which will likely produce even more negative evaluations of high-profile politicians such as the opposing party’s presidential candidate (Jacobson, 2006). This difference-based comparison is then coupled with a context that makes it more likely that the difference between the evaluator and (the out-party candidates) are highlighted—the competitive nature of elections may undermine any feelings of a shared identity and “exacerbate our inherent tendency toward in-group favoritism” (Levendusky, 2018, p. 60). The nature of presidential elections is such that partisanship and politics overwhelms—and, in fact, may reverse—the person-positivity bias. And, this may be the case even before politics became as polarized as it is today. With this in mind, as we detail in the following section our empirical strategy allows for sophistication’s role to shift over time.

We stress the role that political sophistication plays in driving affective polarization and the person-positivity bias. For our purposes, we define sophistication broadly to encompass information, interest, and involvement with politics (although as we detail below all our main conclusions are robust to how we conceptualize and operationalize the concept). In doing so, we hope to capture both the cognitive and actual involvement that represents sophistication. It is exactly this sort of involvement that influences how partisans evaluate parties and candidates. In particular, we argue that such involvement reduces the impact of individuating information on out-party candidate evaluations—or alternatively, leads to partisans viewing out-party candidates as exemplars of all that with wrong with the “other side.” In contrast, individuating information about the party’s standard bearer in arguably the most politically charged context may operate quite differently and in line with the person-positivity bias.

Why might this be the case? Interest and involvement in politics are known to increase affective polarization (Banda and Clavuerius, 2018; Rogowski and Sutherland, 2016) and perceptions of partisan polarization (Enders and Armenty, 2019), which is consistent with evidence that sophistication increases identity-based (directional) motivated reasoning (e.g., Bolsen and Palm, 2019; Taber and Lodge, 2006). Partisan affective polarization is most intense among strong partisans (Iyengar et al., 2019; Klar et al., 2018). Strong partisans pay greater attention to partisan media and are more likely to engage in partisan motivated reasoning when forming political evaluations (Bolsen et al., 2014; Druckman, 2012; Kahan, 2015; Prior, 2013; Kim, 2019). Moreover, the presence of partisan polarization generates identity-based motivated reasoning processes that cause partisans to evaluate any information about an attitude object (e.g., presidential candidate) through the lens of partisanship (Druckman et al., 2013). While we anticipate higher levels of partisan affective polarization toward the out-party and its presidential candidates among those with the highest levels of political sophistication, because each party’s presidential candidate is the most salient aspect of the election and most election coverage is candidate rather than party focused, those paying the closest attention will be more focused on the candidates (Zaller, 2004). Thus, we offer the following prediction:

The relationship between sophistication and affective polarization will be larger for candidate ratings than party ratings among partisans (Hypothesis 1).

Related to this prediction, we anticipate highly engaged partisans are most likely to display a person-negativity bias toward out-party presidential candidates, as well as exhibit a greater person-positivity bias toward in-party presidential candidates compared to evaluations of the respective in- or out-party. Therefore, we offer the following predictions:

Partisans with higher levels of political sophistication will exhibit a greater person-positivity bias toward in-party presidential candidates (Hypothesis 2a).

Partisans with higher levels of political sophistication will exhibit a greater person-negativity bias toward out-party presidential candidates (Hypothesis 2b).

2. Data and methods

We rely on data from the ANES from 1980 to 2016. We restrict our attention in all of our analyses to partisans (including partisan leakers). We begin by outlining our measure of sophistication. We measure sophistication using a scale from three variables: interest in politics, political knowledge, and participation, which has appeared in the literature previously (e.g., Enders and Armaly, 2019; Lupton et al., 2015; Redlawsk, 2001, 2002). Interest is self-reported and ranges from zero to three (with higher values indicating more interest). For knowledge, we rely on the ANES interviewer assessment item as it is available in each year, which ranges from one to five (we use the pre-election assessment). Participation ranges from zero to five and is the number of self-reported campaign activities. We create the scale using a graded-response item response model. We include only those respondents for whom we have information for all three items and recode the recovered latent variable to range from zero to one.

While we believe our measure captures the informational and motivational attributes that represent political sophistication, we recognize that there are different operationalizations and conceptualizations of the variable. Some measures focus exclusively on political information and knowledge (e.g., Goren 2013), some combine knowledge with interest in politics and public affairs (e.g., Erikson 1979; Jones, 2019), and other measures include a mix of information and participation.

3. Zaller (1986) finds in an analysis of 27 items that the interviewer’s assessment is the single best predictor of political information. Moreover, it is frequently used in both older (e.g., Luskin, 1987) and more recent work (e.g., Goren, 2013; Jones, 2019; Zingher and Flynn, 2019). Consistent with Zaller’s result, we observe that the interviewer assessment has the highest discrimination parameter of any of the items we include in our scales. A concern with this item is that it necessarily eliminates those who were interviewed using the internet (both the 2012 and 2016 surveys included a portion of surveys conducted online). Of course, there are limitations to objective knowledge measures when comparing online to other samples—in particular, people may use the internet to look up answers inflating the number of correct responses (Clifford and Jerit, 2016) and this extends to an analysis of the 2012 ANES (Liu and Wang, 2014). Reassuringly, as we show in the supplementary material (Appendix A), our results are substantively identical when including the online samples from 2012 to 2016.

4. The scale is somewhat reliable, α = 0.607. The first principal component explains 58% of the shared variance and a scree plot indicates one dimension is appropriate. Details, including the distribution, are presented in the supplementary material (Appendix A).
behavioral items (e.g., Zaller, 2004; Zingher and Flynn, 2019). While the discipline has frequently focused on measures of information, (Federico and Hunt, 2013, p. 91) warn against thinking of sophistication “solely in terms of information.” Indeed, Lupton et al. (2015, p. 372) conclude that an index of involvement “appears to be the single greatest difference among segments of the mass public,” which is consistent with Jennings (1992) who finds that levels of involvement distinguish a sample of political elites from the public as well as stratify the public itself. Similarly, Leighley (1991) concludes that some participatory acts (and political interest) are associated with increased “conceptualization” and Granberg and Holmberg (1996) who demonstrate with panel data that voting is associated with increased attitudinal constraint and stability. Moreover, interest is often combined with items tapping information (e.g., Luskin, 1990; Jones, 2019; Stimson, 1975). For these reasons we feel confident our measure captures various aspects of the concept of sophistication.

Nevertheless, we examine the robustness of our results to alternative measures. First, we estimate all of our primary models using each of the constituent components of our measure; second, given the paramount role that information plays in political scientists’ conceptualization of sophistication, we create a scale of just political information items; finally, we create two different scales that include the three items in our primary scale while adding measures that capture other informational and motivational attributes. All of our results are robust to how sophistication is measured. These results are presented in the supplementary material (Appendix A).

Our first hypothesis is that sophistication will share a stronger relationship with candidate compared to partisan polarization. In this case, our dependent variables are candidate and party affective polarization, measured using feeling thermometers as the difference in rating of one’s own party (and party’s nominee) from the other party (and nominee). For the purpose of comparing the coefficient of sophistication across the two dependent variables, we estimate the models with seemingly unrelated regression (Zellner, 1962). Given our hypothesis, we expect that the coefficient will be larger for the model for candidate evaluations. We provide two tests of this hypothesis, first with a pooled model (with year fixed-effects) and on each of the ten elections from 1980 to 2016. Although we anticipate that our proposed relationship will exist even in years with relatively low polarization, it is reasonable to wonder if the relationship between sophistication and affective polarization has changed as the parties have polarized. For the purpose of examining any changes over time, we estimate multilevel models where we allow for random intercepts as well as random slopes for sophistication by election year.

To test our second hypothesis—that sophistication is related to the person-positivity/negativity biases—we construct two dependent variables based on the candidate and party thermometer ratings. In particular for both the in- and out-party, we subtract the rating of the party from the candidate so that higher values indicate the candidate is rated more favorably compared to the party. Given our hypothesis, we expect that the coefficient for sophistication will be positive for the in-party model indicating a person-positivity bias is associated with higher levels of sophistication; and, we expect the coefficient will be negative for the out-party model indicating that person-negativity bias is greatest among more sophisticated citizens. As before, although we anticipate a general relationship between sophistication and our dependent variables, we acknowledge that increased elite polarization may alter the magnitude of the relationship. As such, we estimate multilevel models where the respondents are embedded in survey years and allow the slope of sophistication to vary by year.

In each model we control for known sources of affective polarization. We include partisan intensity and ideological intensity, where we fold the standard seven-point scales at their midpoints. We include (Mason, 2015) measure of partisan-identity sorting as well as issue extremity (measured as using a series of issue questions) given that strong feelings about specific issues can increase affective polarization (Zeckel, 2019; Webster and Abramowitz, 2017) and partisan acrimony more generally (Orr and Huber, 2020). We also include a series of demographic controls: education using a four-point scale (grade school or less, high school, some college, college degree or higher); race with dummy variables for black, Latina/o, other, with white as the excluded reference category; age measured in years; and, gender with females coded as one.

3. Results

Our first hypothesis is that the relationship between sophistication and affective polarization is greater for candidates than parties. Thus, our key empirical expectation is that the coefficient for sophistication in the model for candidate ratings will be larger than that for party ratings.

<table>
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<th>Table 1</th>
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<td>Candidate and party affective polarization.</td>
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<td>Partisan intensity</td>
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<td>Ideological intensity</td>
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<td>Sorting</td>
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<td>Issue extremity</td>
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<td>Latina/o</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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<td>Age</td>
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<td>Female</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
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χ² test of equality of coefficients for sophistication: χ² = 120.51; p < 0.001
Note: Severely unrelated regression of pooled data, 1980–2016. Includes year-fixed effects.

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5 The measure of political information includes the pre- and post-interviewer assessment of knowledge, a measure of if the respondent correctly identifies which party controls the House, and if the party correctly places the Democrats to the left of the Republicans (α = 0.616); for this measure we include only those respondents for whom we have information for each of the four items. Our third measure includes: interest in the campaign, interest in public affairs, our involvement index, pre- and post-interviewer assessments of political information, knowledge of the House majority, correct left-right placement of the parties, and a measure of if the respondent is registered to vote (α = 0.740); in this case we include all respondents to avoid listwise deletion given question availability. Finally, we include all items except interest in public affairs (which is unavailable after 2008) and post-interviewer assessment (which is unavailable in 1988) (α = 0.698); for this scale we include only those for who we have complete information.

6 We include attitudes about defense spending, spending on services, aid to black Americans, government health insurance, guaranteed jobs, and abortion. To measure extremity, we take code the original variables so the midpoint is zero and then take the absolute value. The scale is marginally reliable (α = 0.584).

7 While our focus is on measures of affective polarization and person-group biases, examining the individual feeling thermometers can also shed light on the process. In the supplementary material (appendix B) we present analyses that indicate sophistication is equally related to candidate ratings of both parties and slightly more related to out-party ratings compared to in-party ratings.
The results of the seemingly unrelated regression for the pooled data are displayed in Table 1, where entries represent coefficient estimates, standard errors, and two-sided p-values. A formal test of the equality of the coefficients indicates the null hypothesis is rejected (p < 0.001). In this regard, sophistication is unique as only its coefficients display this pattern. Indeed, partisan intensity, ideological intensity, and partisan-ideological sorting all share a stronger relationship with partisan affective polarization. Moreover, when examining individual years we find that the estimated coefficient for sophistication on affective polarization is greater for candidates in each case (p < 0.01). To get a sense of the substantive relationship between sophistication and affective polarization, we present predicted values. Moving from one standard deviation below the mean of our sophistication index to one standard deviation above is associated with an increase in affective polarization for parties from 26.6 to 36.2; for candidate ratings the increase is quite larger, from 31.6 to 47.0.

To examine how the relationship between sophistication and affective polarization varies over time, we present results from multilevel models where the coefficient for sophistication can vary by year. We summarize these results in Fig. 1. In this case, for ease of presentation, we recode sophistication by creating an ordered variable where we split sophistication into roughly thirds and present predicted values for low, moderate, and high sophisticates in each year for both ratings of candidates and parties. Three additional conclusions emerge. First, in each year the sophisticated are more affectively polarized than the less sophisticated for both parties and candidates. Second, among the most sophisticated, ratings of candidates are more polarized than that of parties in 9 of 10 elections as compared to 7 of 10 in the moderate group and only in the most recent election for low sophisticates. With that being said, our third observation is that among the moderate group, the gap has increased in recent years although it does not match the highest group.

Our second hypothesis is that sophistication should lead to a larger person-positivity effect for one’s own party and a larger person-negativity bias for the out-party candidate. We present results from a multilevel model for both variables in Table 2. For both models the coefficient for sophistication is correctly signed and statistically significant: greater sophistication is associated with greater person-positivity bias for candidates of one’s own party; for the out-party we observe that greater sophistication is associated with a person-negativity bias.

We present year-specific results in Fig. 2 in the form of predicted values. As in Fig. 1, we split sophistication into thirds. We reiterate that positive values indicate the candidate is rated more favorably than his or her party (and negative values thus indicate the party is rated more favorably). Sophistication is associated with an increased person-positivity bias toward the in-party in each except for 1980. It is associated with a person-negativity bias toward the out-party in 7 of 10 elections (the exceptions being 1996, 2008, and 2016). Further, we see that it is only among the most sophisticated third that we consistently observe both an in-party positivity bias and out-party negativity bias—even in 2016 when many rated their party’s candidate relatively poorly, the most sophisticated rated their party’s candidate more favorably than the party. For the middle third, we consistently observe an out-party negativity bias, but we only observe an in-party positivity bias two of the ten elections (1984 and 2004). The results for the bottom third indicate that there is a negativity bias toward the in-party in five of the ten elections. And only in 2016 do we observe an out-party person-negativity bias for this group (worth noting is that in 2016 perceptions of candidate traits accounted for a portion of these ratings, see Christensen and Weisberg, 2020). Fig. 2 suggests that while the pooled results broadly apply to specific elections, there unsurprisingly exists variation from election to election. Future work might examine how candidate traits as well as the ideological position of the candidates and parties influence the person-negativity bias.

These results speak to the nature of how members of the electorate evaluate parties and candidates. For both the moderate and high sophisticates, we observe that politics “overwhelms” the individualizing information for out-party candidates. And, for those less involved and interested in politics it is not the case that we observe a person-positivity bias for out-party candidates. Interestingly, and in contrast with many indicators of polarization in the public, the person-negativity bias does not appear to be “spreading” to those who are less engaged with politics, consistent with evidence that affective polarization is unequally distributed among partisans (Groenendyk et al., 2010; Klar et al., 2018). Along these same lines, we also emphasize that among less sophisticated members of the electorate, we consistently observe a negativity bias toward in-party candidates in recent years suggesting that elite polarization and the partisan acrimony associated with it may have a deleterious impact on how less engaged partisans feel about their nominees, consistent with Thornton (2013) who finds an increase in ambivalence as the parties have polarized. This suggests, perhaps, that negative partisanship manifests itself differently across different levels of political sophistication.

4. Examining the possibility of reverse causation

Could it be the case that affective polarization is leading to sophistication rather than, as we argue, the other way around? Polarization has led to an increased recognition of the differences between the parties (Hetherington, 2001; Smidt, 2017) suggesting it is possible that an individual who feels strongly about the parties (or the choice between the parties) becomes more interested in and involved with politics. To examine this possibility, we turn to the 1994–1996 ANES panel study to estimate a cross-lagged model of affective polarization toward the parties and sophistication. While this data is older, it contains all of the necessary variables to replicate this portion of the analysis. We cannot look at candidate thermometers (and thus in- and out-party group-person bias) as the nominee of the Republican Party was obviously not known in 1994. Table 3 contains a model where the dependent variables are sophistication and party affective polarization in 1996. We include as covariates lagged values of both as well as the same set of controls as before measured in 1996 (with the exception of issue extremity). In the interest of space, we only report the coefficients of interest (full results are presented in the supplementary material, Appendix E).

We observe, consistent with our theory, that the lagged value of sophistication predicts affective polarization. The reverse however is not the case as the coefficient for the lagged value of affective polarization is not statistically significant. While we do not want to make much of a lack of significance due to the possibility of a Type II error, we note that...
and the standard error is 0.857 in this case the
Note: estimated using multilevel model with random intercept and random slope
Person-group bias.
Table 2
Table 2
Person-group bias.

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>In-Party</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Out-Party</th>
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<td>-7.615</td>
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<td>0.000</td>
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<td>Latina/o</td>
<td>-2.057</td>
<td>0.678</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>0.399</td>
<td>0.746</td>
<td>0.593</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>-2.202</td>
<td>1.027</td>
<td>0.032</td>
<td>1.378</td>
<td>1.128</td>
<td>0.222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.003</td>
<td>0.011</td>
<td>0.784</td>
<td>0.025</td>
<td>0.012</td>
<td>0.046</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>-0.170</td>
<td>0.380</td>
<td>0.654</td>
<td>-1.312</td>
<td>0.417</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>4.846</td>
<td>1.674</td>
<td>0.004</td>
<td>-5.143</td>
<td>2.057</td>
<td>0.012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Var</td>
<td>15.573</td>
<td>11.243</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.961</td>
<td>5.691</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Sophistication)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Var(Constant)</td>
<td>5.335</td>
<td>3.812</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>15.022</td>
<td>7.403</td>
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<td>Log-likelihood</td>
<td>-40.480</td>
<td>965</td>
<td></td>
<td>-41,122</td>
<td>138</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>9377</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of elections</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: estimated using multilevel model with random intercept and random slope for sophistication.

in this case the p-value is 0.634. We find the same evidence when looking at individual components of the scale (that is, lagged values of affective polarization do not predict interest, knowledge, or participation). To be clear, we do not interpret this as definitive evidence that there never exists a reciprocal relationship between sophistication and affective polarization—certainly as the parties have polarized the public has become more engaged by many metrics. Nevertheless, we believe this evidence indicates it does not pose a significant substantial obstacle to our earlier inferences using pooled cross-sectional data.

5. Conclusion

Our analyses sought to explain the relationship between sophistication and how partisans evaluate parties and candidates. We hypothesize that sophistication should consistently demonstrate a stronger connection with how partisans rate candidates compared to parties. We find that even in more polarized years when large swaths of the public are affectively polarized that sophistication still shares a substantial relationship with affective polarization—and consistent with our expectations this relationship is stronger for candidates than parties. Our second hypothesis is that sophistication should be associated with a “person-negativity” effect where the out-party’s candidate is rated even less favorably than his or her party. We find support for this hypothesis, consistent with earlier evidence (Nilsson and Ekehammar, 1987) that seems to have been mostly underappreciated by political scientists.

Our results fit in nicely with, while expanding upon, recent evidence regarding how the public has responded to an increasingly polarized political environment. Partisan polarization has turned many “floating voters”—individuals with weak party attachments who might shift allegiance over time—into loyal partisan supporters (Smidt, 2017). Yet, citizens now hold a greater number of positive and negative considerations toward both political parties (Thornton, 2013). As a result of the parties becoming more ideologically extreme, moderates who identify with one of the parties are increasingly likely to display ambivalence when forming evaluations toward the in- or out-group due to significant overlap in their issue positions (Fiorina et al., 2005). Our results here may reconcile these findings—the impact of elite polarization appears to be greater on ratings of candidates compared to parties. We also note that our results are consistent with growing evidence (e.g., Druckman and Levendusky 2019; Klar et al. 2018) indicating that scholars heed some caution when considering exactly what aspect of affective polarization they are measuring—in particular, our results are more evidence that ratings of political elites might illicit higher levels of affective polarization.

While our results suggest a rather general effect for sophistication, there is also suggestive evidence that the individual candidate or the political climate matters. Most obviously, in 2016 the out-party person-negativity bias is large and unrelated to sophistication. Contrast this with 2008 where there was no such negativity bias and indeed the out-party candidates were rated more favorably than their parties (although sophistication did diminish this). In other words, sophistication’s role in both affective polarization and how candidates are rated relative to parties shifts from election to election. This suggests that candidate traits or strategies may be able to mitigate or even reduce to person-negativity bias. For example, while Hillary Clinton was held in extremely high regard when she was Secretary of State in President Obama’s first term

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14 Given the coding of the variables and rounding in the table, the entries for Party affective polarization 1994 are not informative as both are zero to the third decimal. The coefficient for party affective polarization is $0.408 \times 10^{-4}$ and the standard error is $0.857 \times 10^{-4}$ giving a t-score of 0.480.

15 This suggests the possibility that perhaps ideological intensity and sophistication share an interactive relationship with affective polarization. We examine this in the supplementary material (Appendix F).
and for much of his second term.\textsuperscript{16} It was not until she re-entered politics as a candidate that her ratings among out-partisans dropped to low levels. On the other hand, Joe Biden’s ratings held steady for much of the 2020 campaign. Future work might investigate how campaigns and candidates are able to reach out-partisans (or even lower sophisticated in-partisans) to maintain higher levels of favorability.

Future research might examine how our results extend (or not) to other contexts and domains. For example, our focus is on presidential elections—perhaps within the U.S., analysis of other elections will lead to a different conclusion. One might imagine that a statewide or Congressional candidate could emphasize a shared identity other than partisanship that might lead to counterbalance the effect identified here. It is also worth further probing how the impact of sophistication has changed over time. Moving outside of the U.S. could also be useful: as noted earlier, the observed results may be most likely given the set of characteristics that exist in the U.S.—for example, frequent campaigning and two-party contests. Thus, it is worth considering how these findings do or do not generalize to other democracies. And finally, it is worth further probing the extent to which interest, involvement, and knowledge moderate the person-positivity bias in non-political domains—are politics unique in this regard or would a similar sophistication-effect be observed in other competitor contexts?

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

\textsuperscript{16} For example, according to Real Clear Politics, 63% of the public had a favorable view of Clinton compared to 28% who had a negative view in early 2013—this shifted to 41.8% holding a favorable and 54.4% holding a negative view by election day in 2016.

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Table 3
Cross-lagged panel model of relationship between affective polarization and sophistication.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Party affective polarization\textsubscript{1994}</td>
<td>14.296</td>
<td>5.401</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party affective polarization\textsubscript{1994}</td>
<td>0.067</td>
<td>0.014</td>
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<tr>
<td>Party affective polarization\textsubscript{1994}</td>
<td>0.541</td>
<td>0.034</td>
</tr>
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<td>Party affective polarization\textsubscript{1994}</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>755</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log-likelihood</td>
<td>19,795.377</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Full results (including controls) presented in Appendix E. Data is from the 1992–1996 ANES Panel Study.

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Fig. 2. The difference between candidate ratings and party ratings for in- and out-party candidates conditioned on sophistication. Positive values indicate that the candidate was rated more favorably relative to his or her party. Plotted points are predicted values with 95% confidence intervals.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2021.102293.

References

Levendusky, M., 2018. Americans, not partisans: can priming American national identity


