

# SELECTIVE EXPOSURE AND POLARIZATION

COMM 1a – WEEK 5 (Nov 9-11)

# Outline

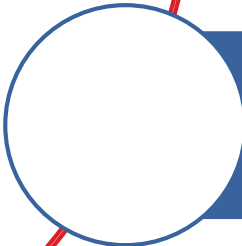
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How do people choose where to get their information? Varieties of selective exposure and implications for political polarization



The polarization debate: why is the political class so extreme when ordinary people are moderates?



Polarization as affect: fear and loathing across party lines.  
Why do partisans dislike each other? Is it because of selective exposure?

# Information Overload

3

## Today

- Most people have access to cable TV - on average consumer can choose from 700 channels
- >1 billion websites, 25K news sites, 150 “A-list” political blogs
- New social media platforms – Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Yik Yak which provide access to all forms of media

## Contrast with 1970

- Then the choice set included:
  - 1-2 local newspapers
  - 6-7 TV channels
  - 10-20 radio stations

Clearly, media consumers have more choice with greater ability to control what information they receive; on what basis do they select?

# Varieties of Selective Exposure

4

## “Attentive Public” Hypothesis

- The rich get richer, gap between the haves and have-nots is widened; people uninterested in politics now avoid it altogether
- Demise of the inadvertent audience

## Partisan Polarization Hypothesis

- People seek out information they expect to agree with (dissonance reduction)

## “Personal Relevance” Hypothesis

- People pay attention only to issues that affect them personally (“issue publics” – environmentalists, farmers, hunters, immigrants, retired people, teachers)

## Social networks hypothesis

- People pay attention to information coming from their “friends”

# Who gets the news?

5

- Clear evidence that motivation matters – more informed, interested and educated more likely to follow hard news (Price & Zaller study on news recall)
- Exposure also correlated with partisan identity – strong partisans more likely to follow news about the campaign
- Evidence that the knowledge gap has increased suggests that exposure to news has declined among the inattentive

# Evidence of Partisan Selectivity

6

## Emergence of Fox News as the top-rated cable channel

- Audience made up primarily of Republicans-Conservatives

## MSNBC as the left-leaning cable outlet

- Countdown with Keith Olbermann often was top-rated cable program
- MSNBC goal to “showcase its nighttime lineup as a welcome haven for viewers of a similar mind” (New York Times,

## Cable audiences are relatively small

- Complete polarization of the blogosphere

# Evidence of Issue-Based Selectivity

7

2000 CD study tracked voters' use of election CD covering multiple issues



Candidates positions on healthcare visited more frequently by people with health-related problems

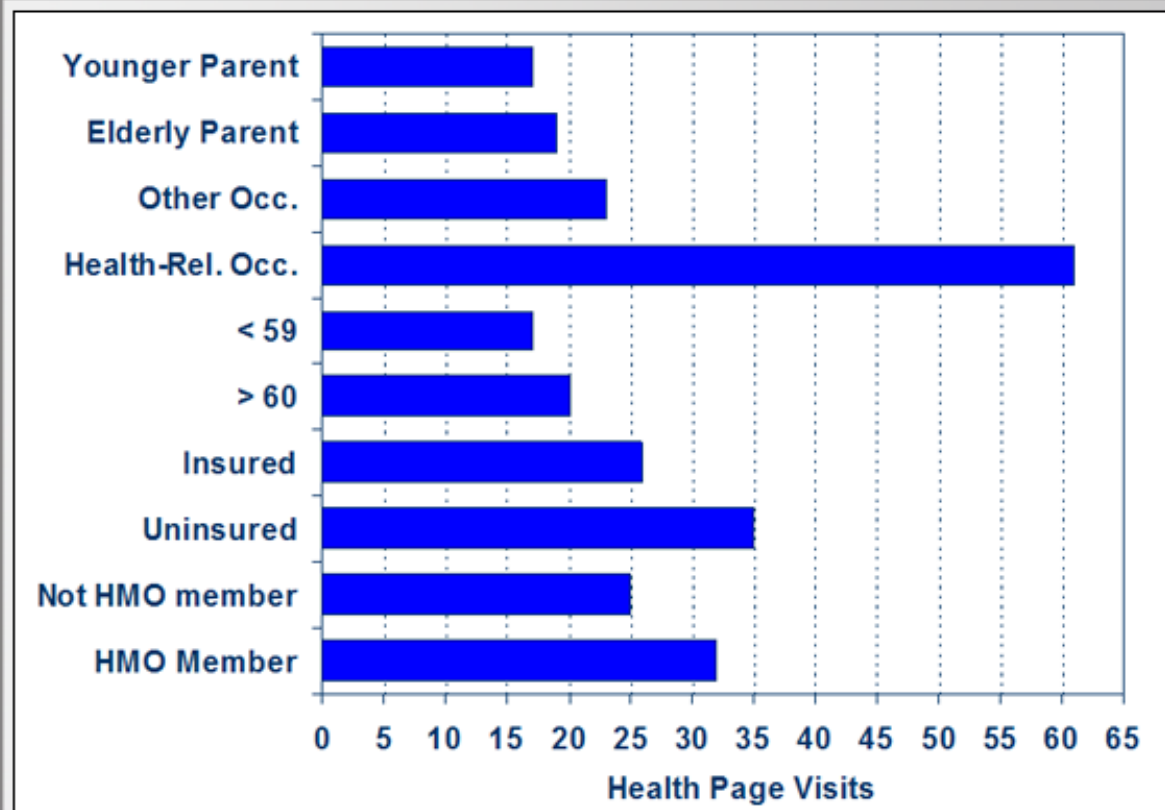
**This study found that issue-based information search > party-based search**

# Who Pays Attention to Healthcare?

8

People personally affected by healthcare issue more attentive

Figure 5.5: Selective Exposure to Healthcare Information





# Experiments on Partisan Selectivity: Iyengar-Hahn Study

9

Headlines randomly assigned to news organizations

Subject matter varied – war in Iraq, national politics, health news, travel destinations, and sports



Baseline control condition encountered same headlines,  
but without news logos



Study run between March 30 and April 17 2006

# Participant Sample

10

Registered voters sampled from the YouGov national research panel

Median age 39

51% women

35% high school only, 22% college graduates

34% Rep, 36% Independent, and 30% Dem

# Politics Condition with Sources

11

Headlines taken from MSNBC daily news feed, then randomly assigned to sources

http://cgi.stanford.edu - Political Communication Lab: Washington Post Research Surveys - ...

political communication lab

PCL.STANFORD.EDU STANFORD UNIVERSITY

Which of the following articles about POLITICS are you most interested in reading?

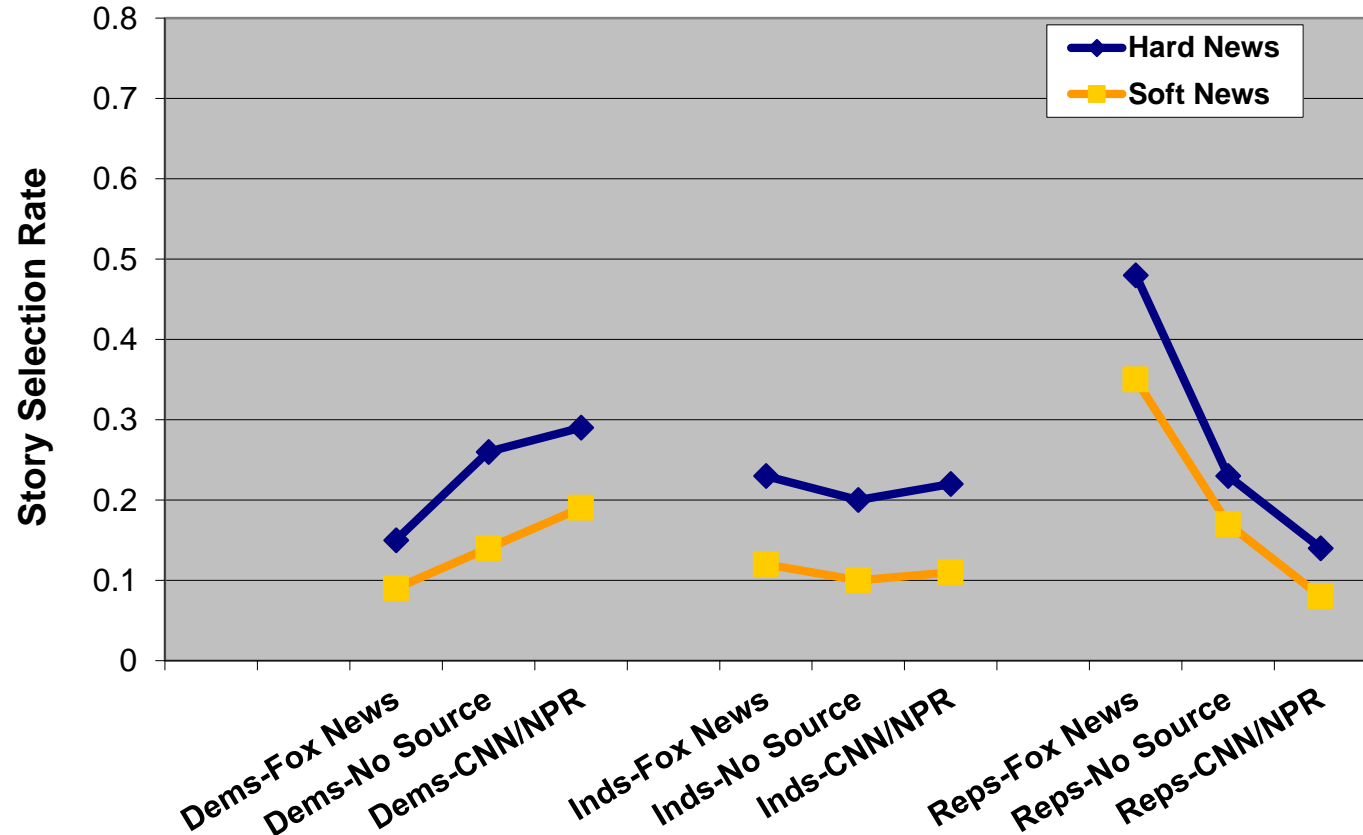
-  **Rumsfeld heckled during speech**  
Protesters repeatedly interrupted Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld during a speech Thursday and a former CIA analyst accused him of lying about Iraq prewar intelligence in an unusual display of anti-war sentiment.
-  **Senate OKs \$109 billion war, Katrina bill**  
The Senate on Thursday passed a \$109 billion bill to pay for the war in Iraq and hurricane aid, but a presidential veto threat imperils many provisions added by lawmakers.
-  **CIA Director Goss resigns**  
CIA Director Porter Goss is resigning, President Bush said Friday.
-  **Republican right abandoning Bush**  
A new Associated Press poll shows that angry conservatives are driving the approval ratings of President Bush and the GOP-led Congress to dismal new lows.
- Can't Say

# Results: Source Effects on Selection

12

Large effects for Republicans, only weak effects for Dems

Figure 4: Effects of Story Label on Story Selection

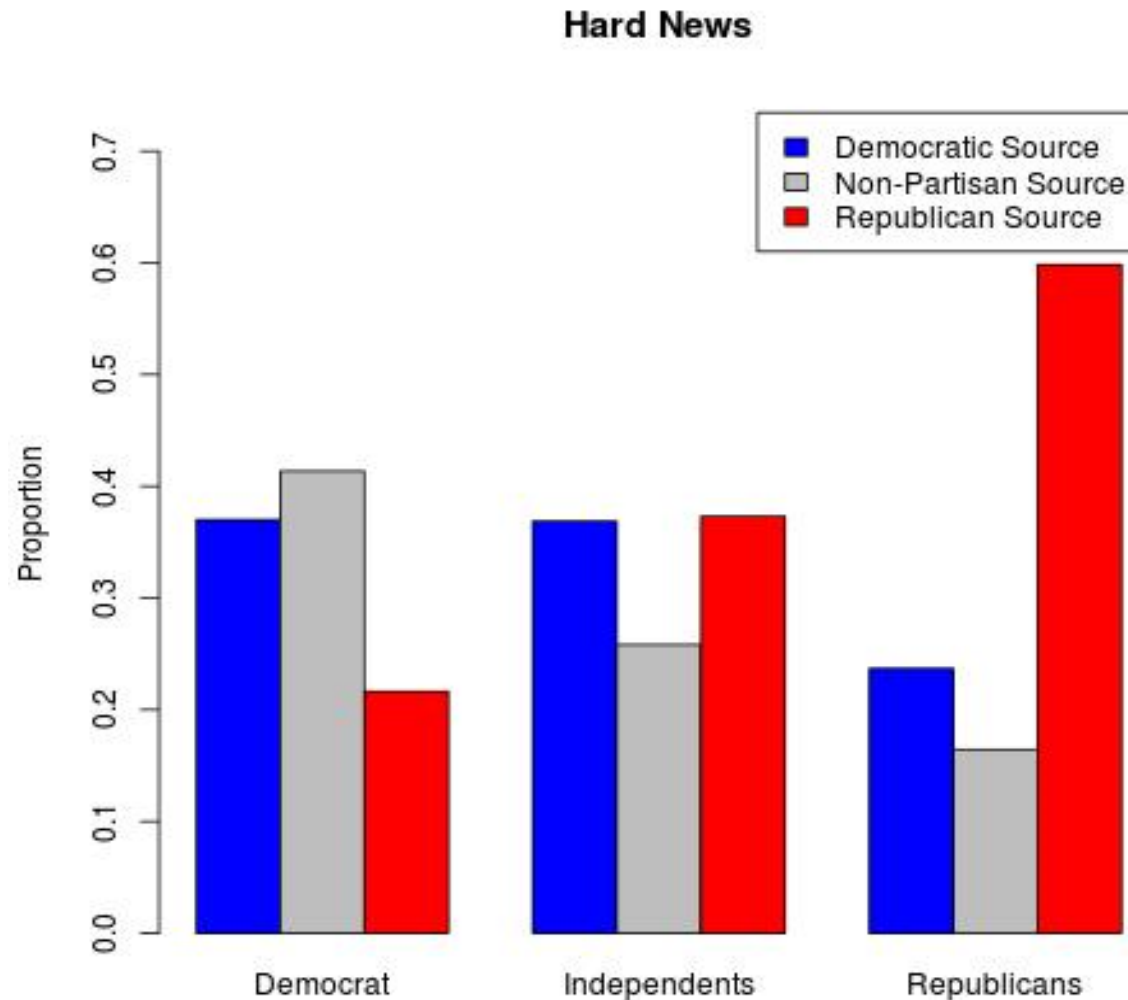


# 2010 Replication of Iyengar-Hahn; Preference for Biased Sources, Hard News

13

Republicans especially likely to favor in-party sources

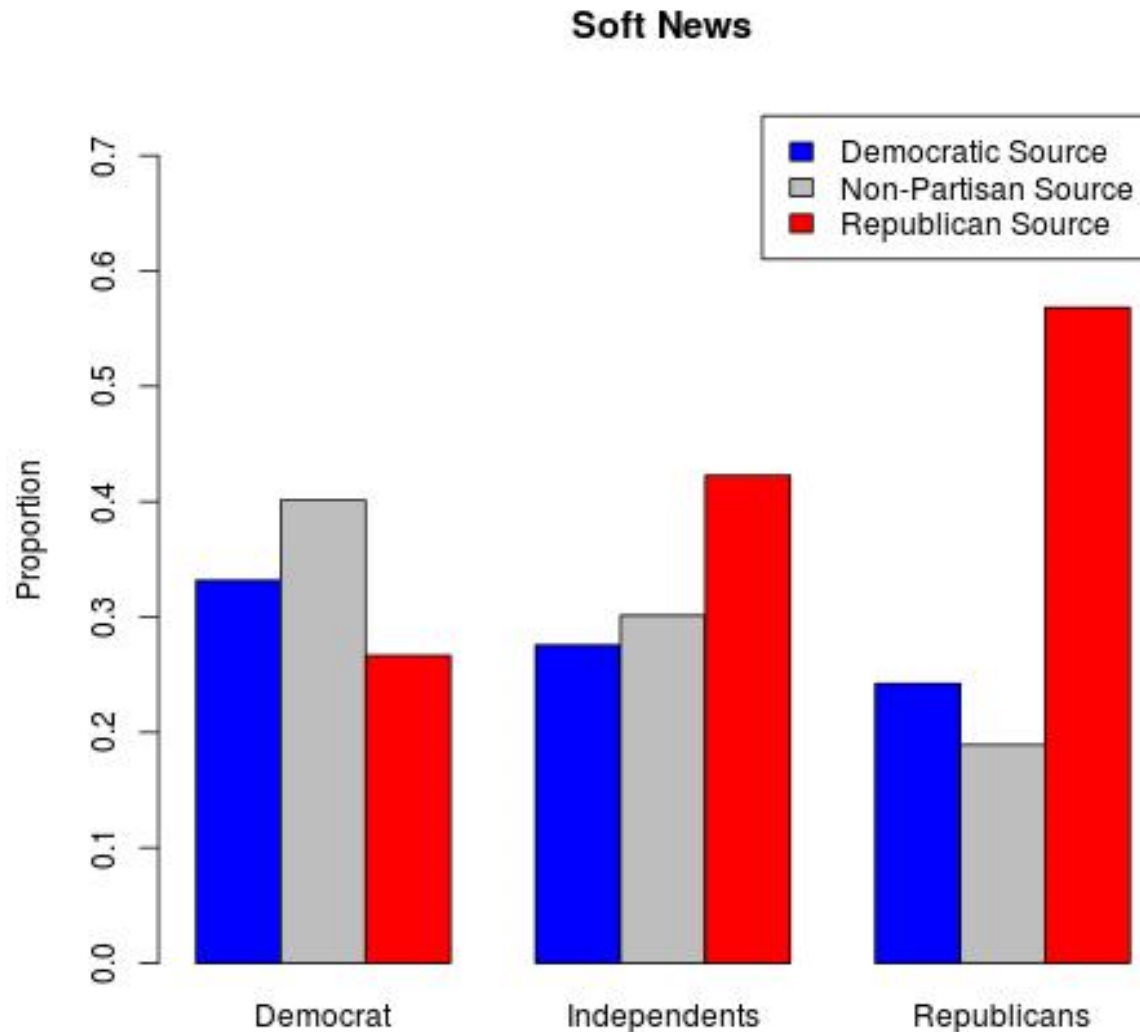
Most Democrats rely on non-partisan sources, while avoiding Fox



# Preference for Biased Sources, Soft News

14

Republicans' preference for in-party source just as great for soft as hard news

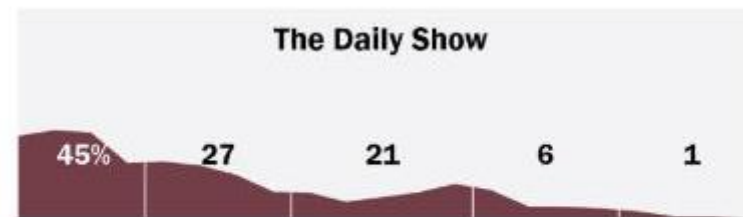
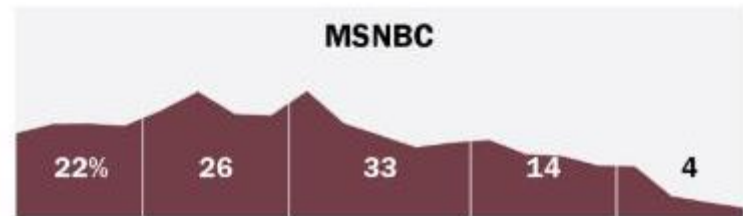
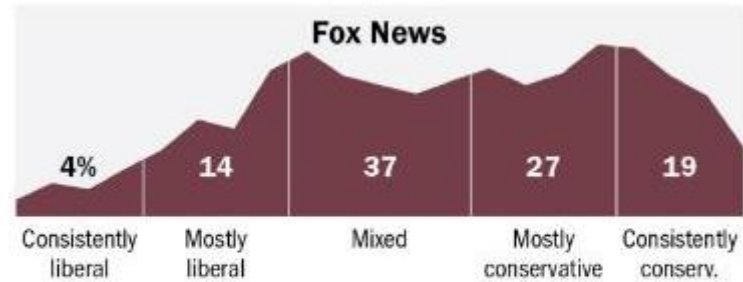


# Real World Evidence of Selective Exposure

15

Pew 2014 survey: self-reported exposure, likely exaggerated

*% of each sources' audience that is...*



# More Limited Evidence in Browsing Behavior

16

- Comscore and other web metrics show only limited “segregation” of news consumers; most people use “mainstream” non-partisan sources
- Goel et al. study of people who click on hard news links shows that partisan selectivity is modest for news, but increases for op eds/commentary
- They also find that traffic to partisan sites is limited to “in partisans” (no Democrats go to Fox News)
- Referrals matter – links received from social media result in more partisan selectivity and segregated audiences



# Polarization Debates

17

Polarization as  
division in policy  
preferences; evidence  
shows elite but not  
mass polarization

Sorting as alternative  
to polarization  
(Fiorina)

Polarization as animus  
(Iyengar &  
Westwood)

# Ideological Polarization

18

Time 1:	33 Libs	34 Mods	34 Cons
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Time 2:	50 Libs	0 Mods	50 Cons
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Time 1:	33 Dems	34 Indeps	33 Reps
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Time 2:	50 Dems	0 Indeps	50 Reps
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# Party Sorting

19

Sorting refers to consistency of party preference and ideological orientation

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	<u>Democrats</u>	<u>Independents</u>	<u>Republicans</u>
<b>Time 1</b>	50 libs 25 mods 25 conservs	50 moderates	25 libs 25 mods 50 conservs
<b>Time 2</b>	75 libs 25 mods	50 moderates	75 conservs 25 mods

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# Elite Polarization

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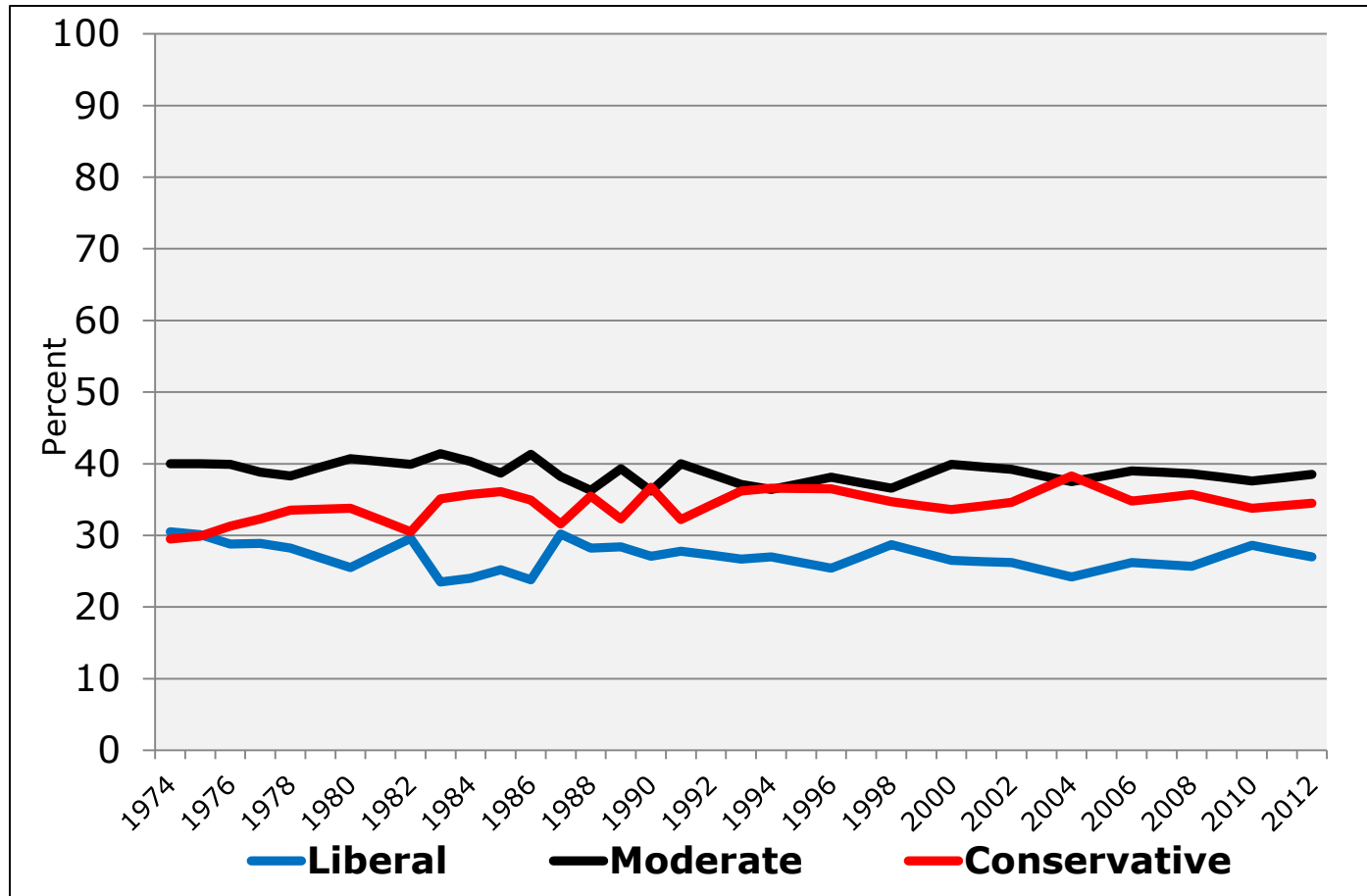
Both parties in Congress now homogeneous  
– Dems as liberal,  
Repubs as conservative

- ❑ Significant increase in ideological distance between the parties in Congress and state legislatures since 1980
- ❑ 1950s – both parties were ideologically diverse  
– conservative Southern Dems, moderate Northeastern Repubs
- ❑ Gradual realignment of the South, adoption of primary elections, dependence of candidates on donors, all created pressures on parties to take more extreme positions
- ❑ Consequences include gridlock, govt shutdowns etc

# Elites are Polarized, Public is not

21

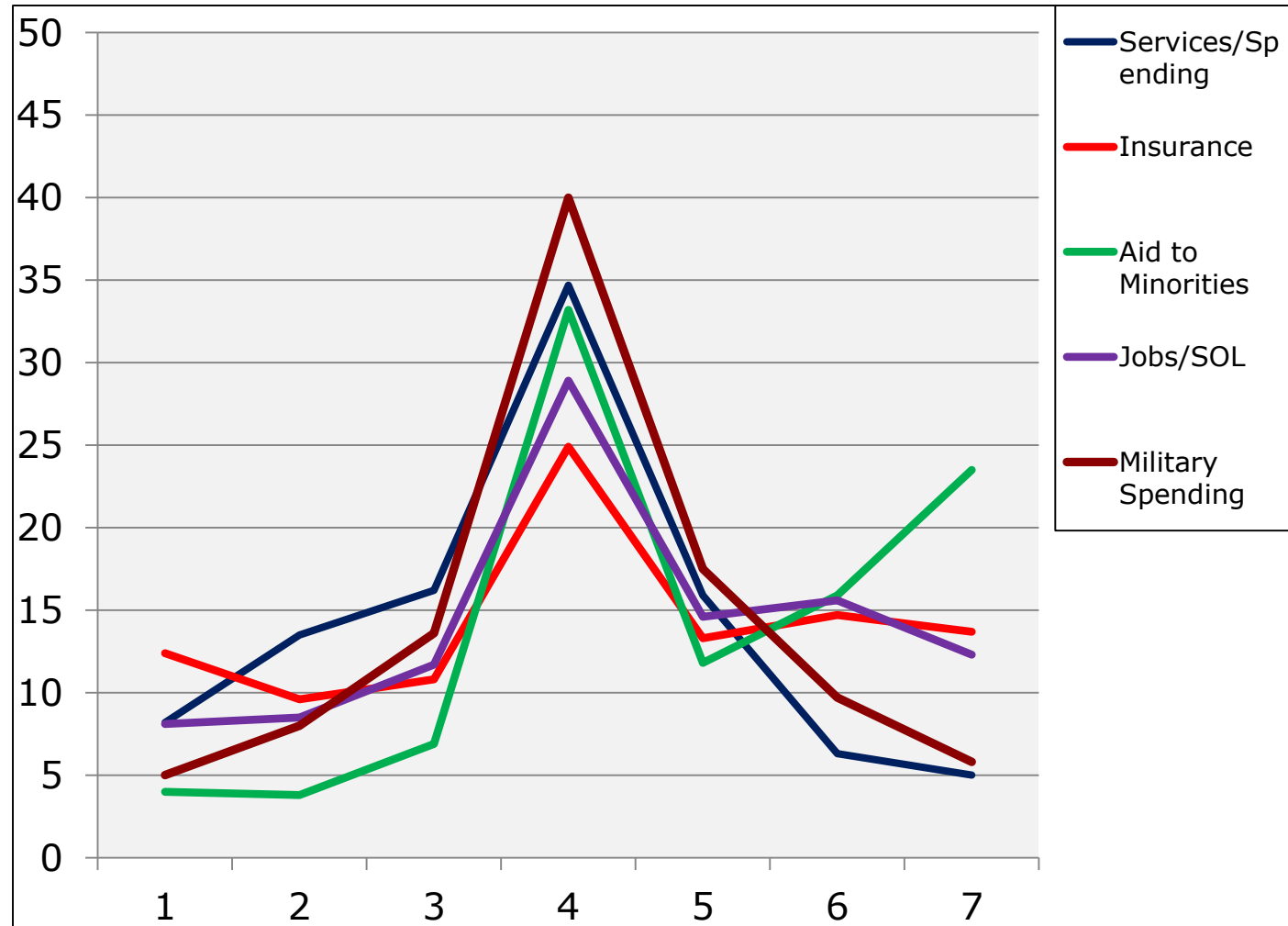
Source:  
GSS  
(national,  
representa  
tive  
samples);  
moderates  
the largest  
group



# Issue Centrists Still Dominate: 2012

22

Source:  
American  
National  
Election  
Surveys

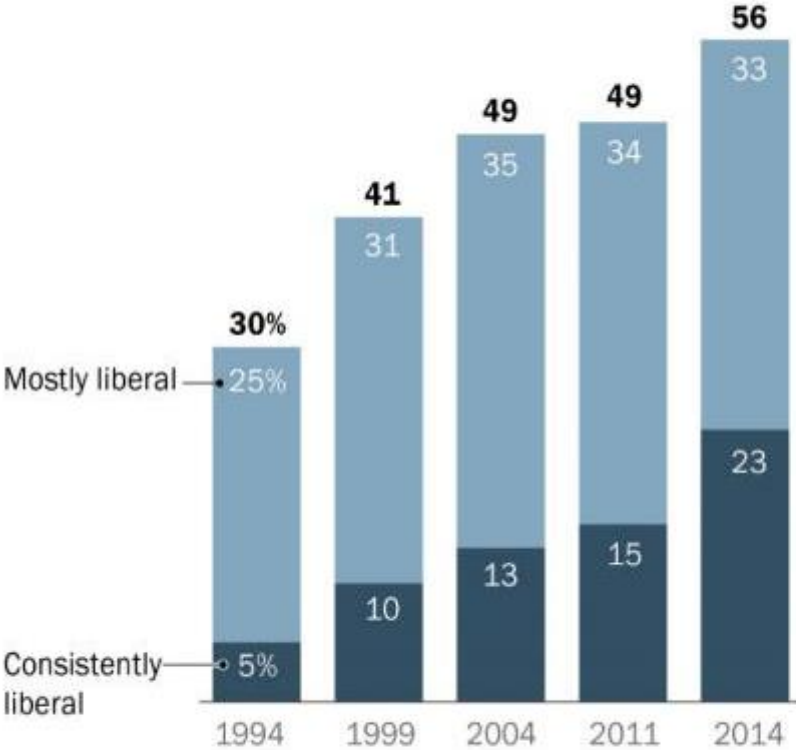


# Sorting has Increased

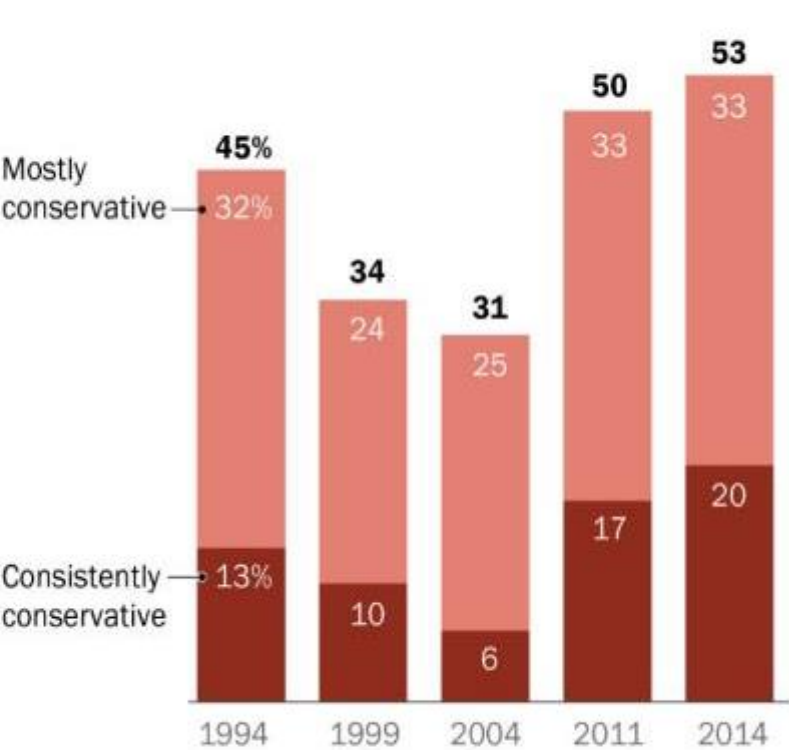
- Consistency of ideology and party much higher today than in the 1960s – evidence on sorted couples (whose issue positions are consistent with their party affiliation): 11 percent in 1965, 80 percent in 2015
  - ▣ Might be due to persuasion effects (exposure to elite rhetoric that is more ideological)
  - ▣ Might be due to introduction of value-laden issues such as abortion, gay rights, same-sex marriage which evoke strong views
  - ▣ Might be due to availability of partisan sources (Dunaway 2015 study suggests that diffusion of web increases sorting among the attentive)

# Increasing, but Limited Ideological Extremism: Pew Surveys

*Percent of Democrats with political values that are...*



*Percent of Republicans with political values that are...*

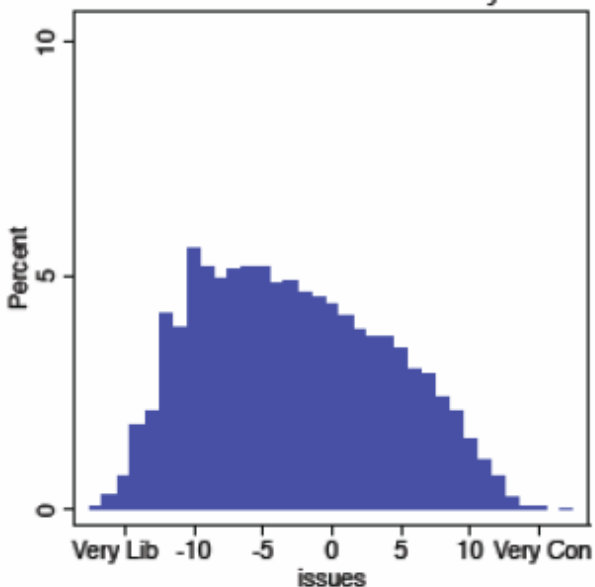




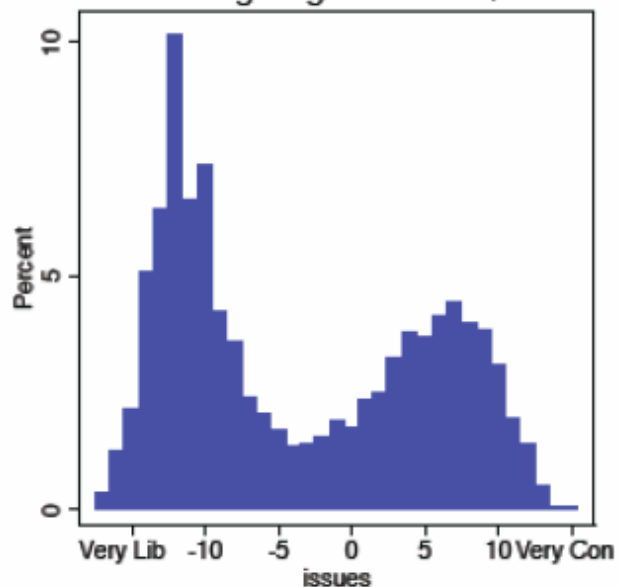
# Ideological Position of Non-Donors v. Donors

25

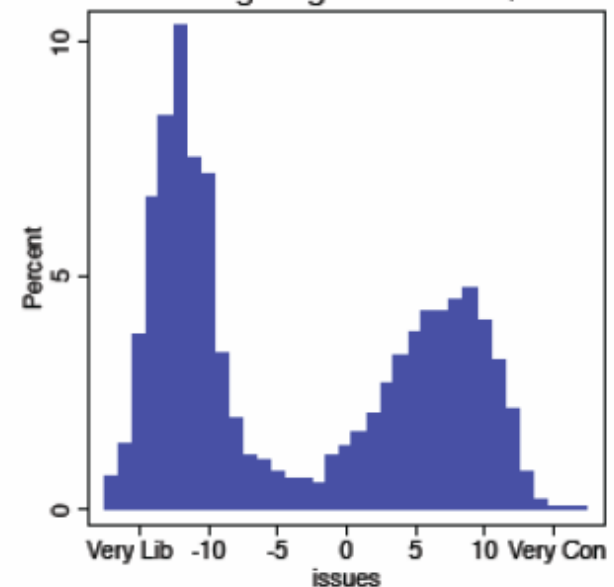
Do Not Donate Money



Donors giving less than \$200



Donors giving more than \$200



Source: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/07/21/want-to-reduce-polarization-give-parties-more-money/>

# But Activists are Hyper-Polarized

26

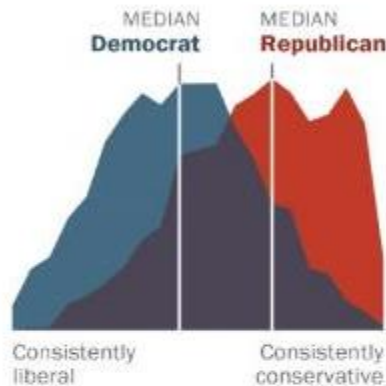
Consistent pattern across multiple studies: polarization heightened among activists

## Polarization Surges Among the Politically Engaged

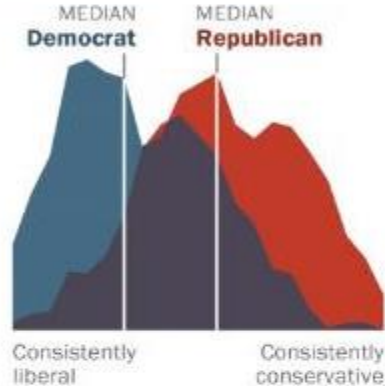
*Distribution of Democrats and Republicans on a 10-item scale of political values, by level of political engagement*

### Among the politically engaged

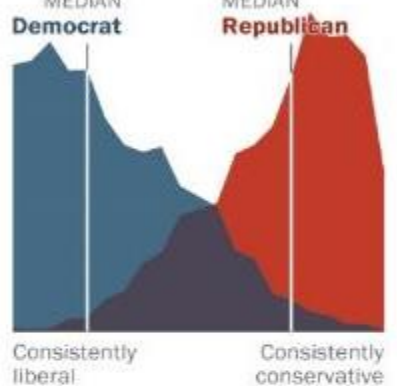
1994



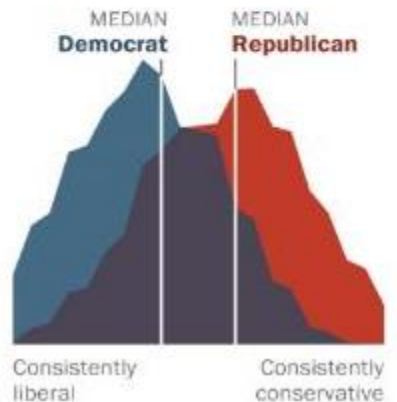
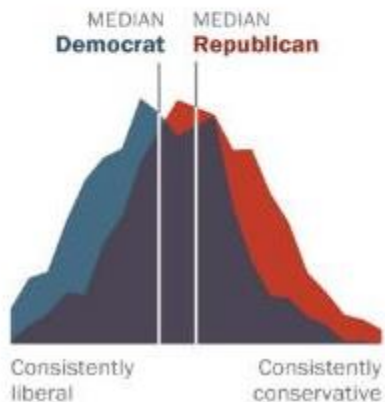
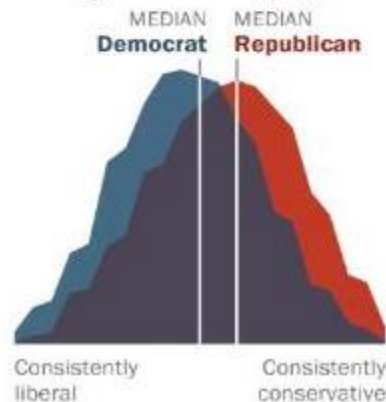
2004



2014



### Among the less engaged



# Polarized Assessments of Presidential Performance

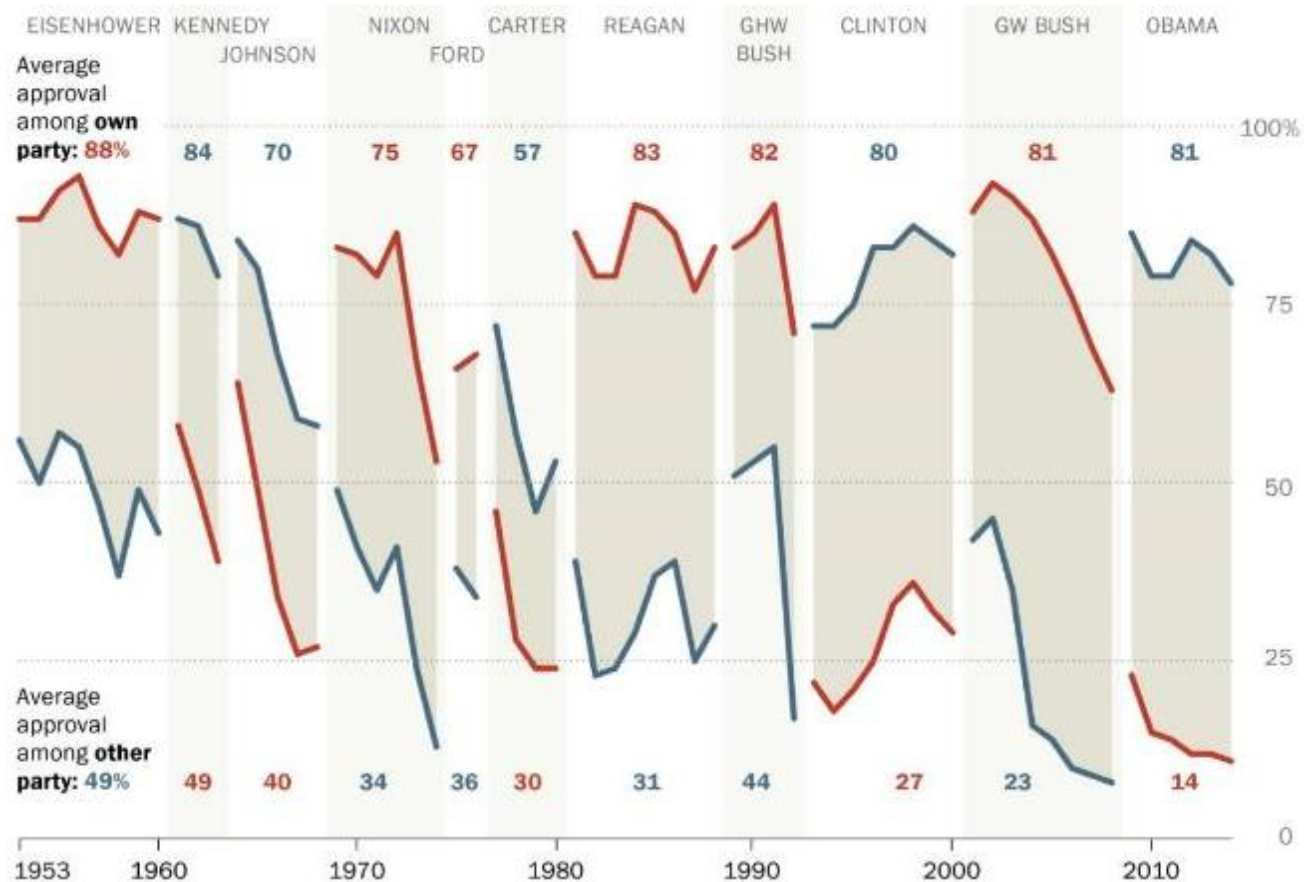
27

Approval of out-party president declines steadily.

Today, Obama's approval among Repubs is <10%, among Dems, nearly 80%

## Polarization and Presidential Approval: Supporters Stay Loyal, Opposition Intensifies

*% approving of president's job performance, by party*



# Polarization as Depth of Cleavages

- Polarized or divided societies are those in which social, economic, racial, or religious divisions are the basis for conflict, often resulting in violence (N. Ireland, Basque Country, Rwanda, separation of Bangladesh from Pakistan)
- When social cleavages reinforce, they are more conflictual (language and region in Bangladesh, region and religion in N. Ireland, race and PID in US); cross-cutting cleavages have the opposite effect, i.e. are less divisive (social class and party in US)

# Polarization as Animus

29

## Social identity theory

Group members instinctively develop positive feelings about in group, negative feelings for out group

Partisans increasingly dislike their opponents and impute negative traits to them

PID has become sufficiently important to influence non-political judgments, e.g. dating and marriage

# Opposing Party Seen as Seriously “Misguided”

30

## Seeing the Other Party as a Threat to Nation

*% saying (Republican/Democratic) Party policies “are so misguided that they threaten the nation’s well-being”*

Share of Democrats  
who see the Republican Party as a  
threat to the nation’s well-being

All Democrats 27

By level of political engagement ...

High 44

Mid 28

Low 18

By level of ideological consistency ...

Consistently liberal 50

Mostly liberal 22

Mixed 18

Share of Republicans  
who see the Democratic Party as a  
threat to the nation’s well-being

All Republicans 36

By level of political engagement ...

High 51

Mid 40

Low 20

By level of ideological consistency ...

Consistently conserv 66

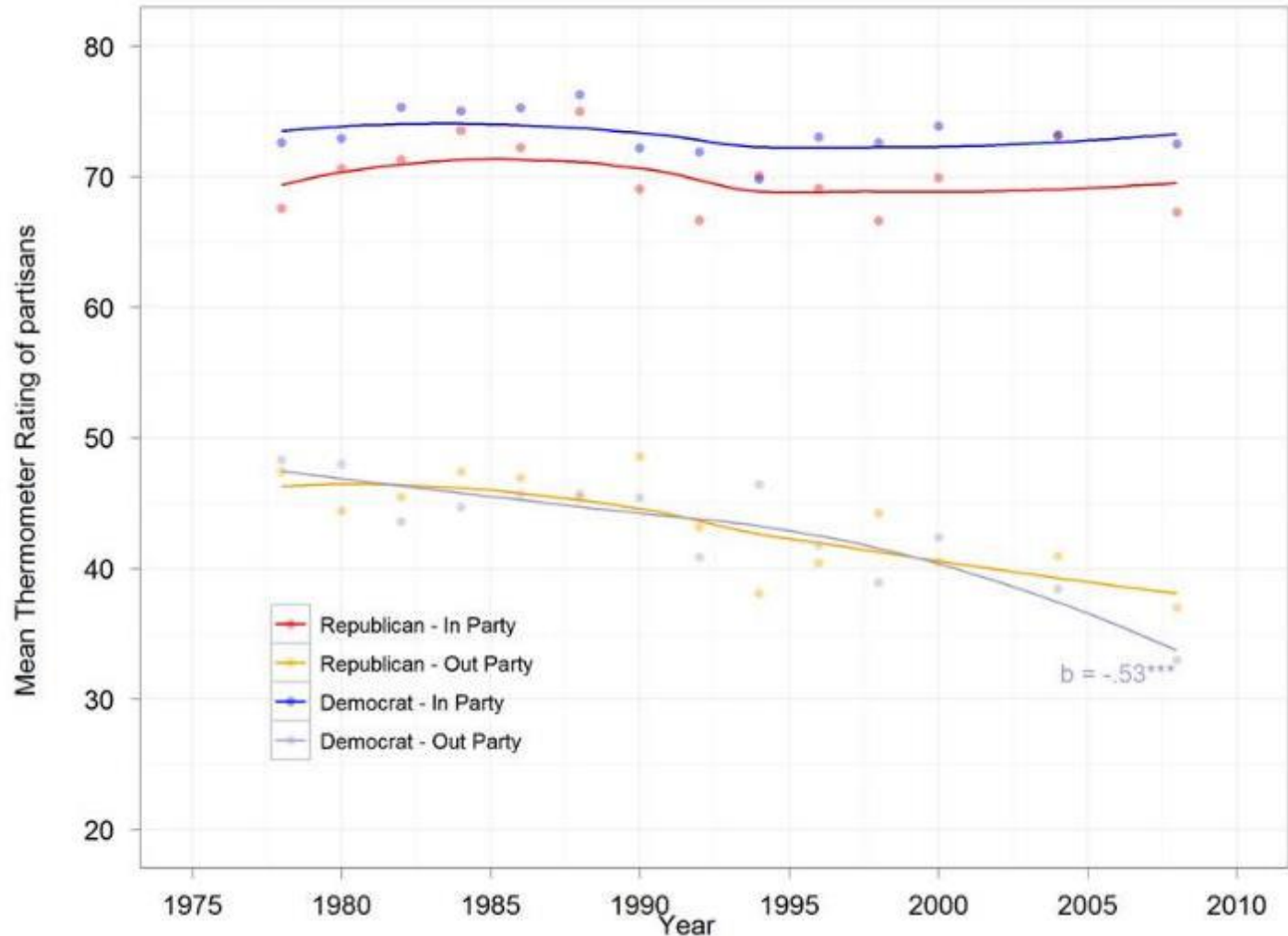
Mostly conserv 46

Mixed 16

# ANES – Party Thermometer Ratings

31

Over time, significant decline in ratings of out party, no change in affect for in party

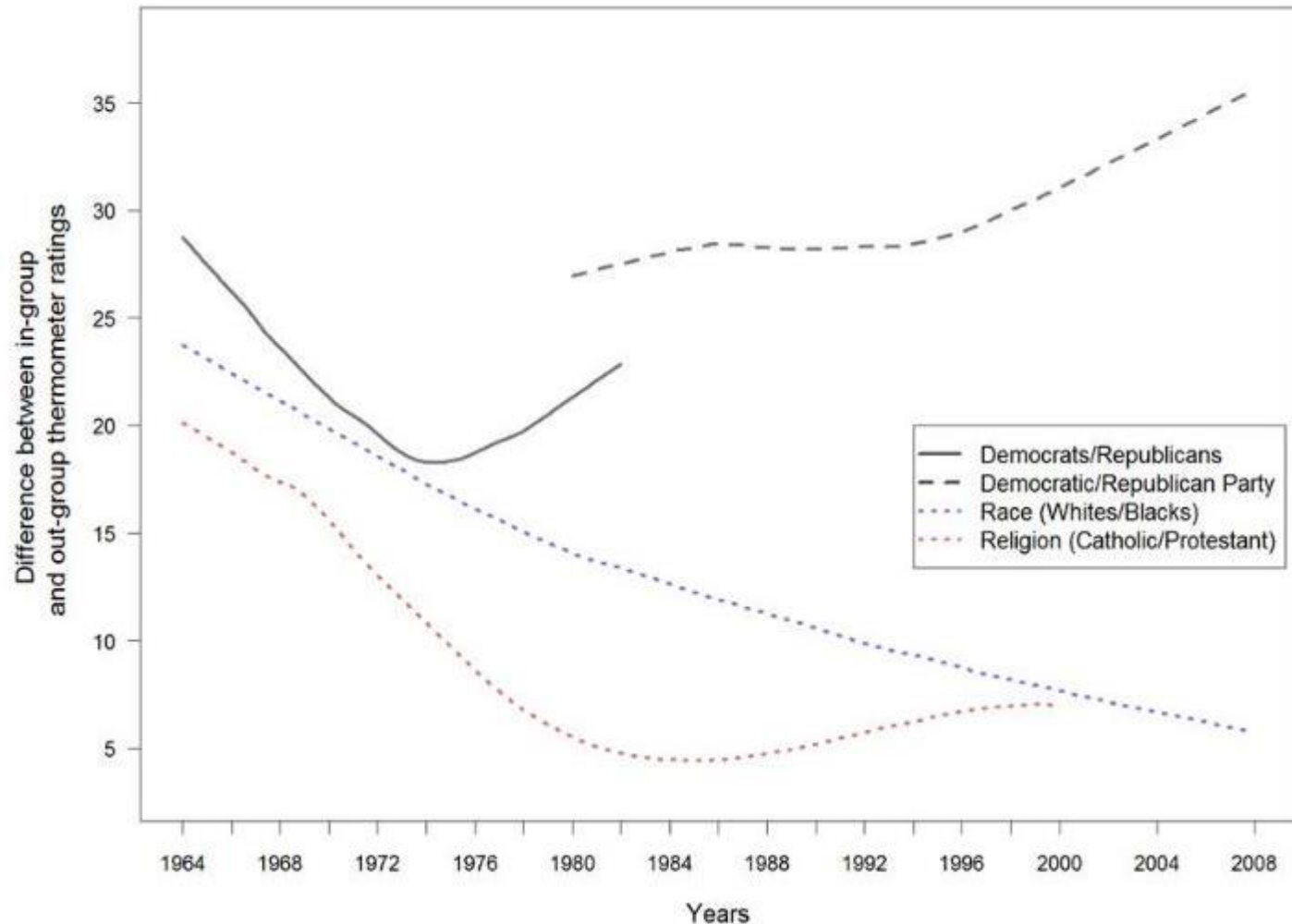


# Party Dominates Other Cleavages

32

Race and religion are weaker divisions than partisanship

It is the party cleavage rather than racial or religious divisions that produces affective polarization





# 2008 ANES: Party vs. Other Divisions

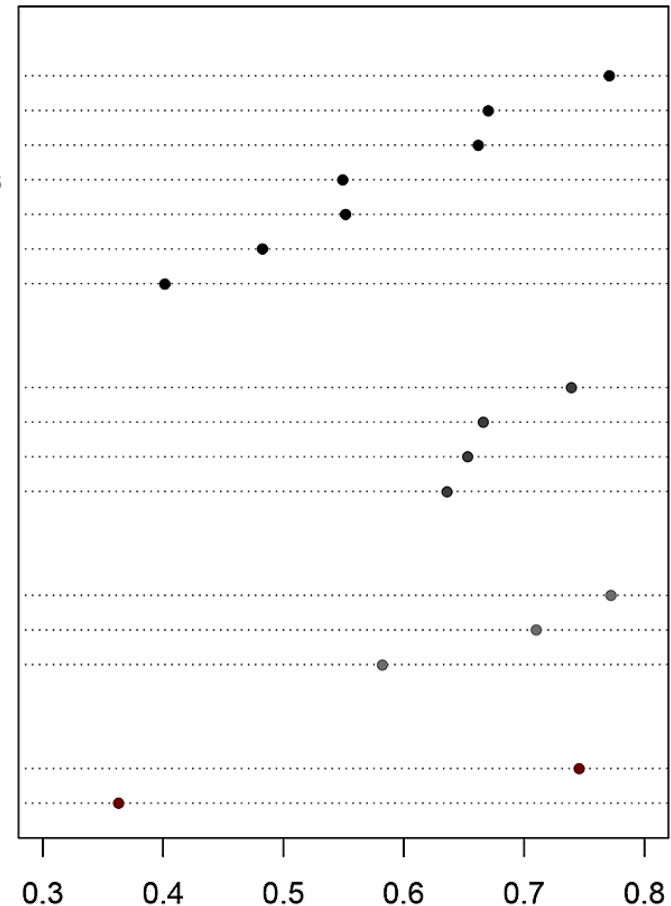
Rating of out party is the lowest thermometer rating in the entire ANES

Christians  
Catholics  
Jews  
Christian Fundamentalists  
Hindus  
Muslims  
Atheists

Whites  
Blacks  
East Asians  
Hispanics

Middle Class  
Poor  
Rich

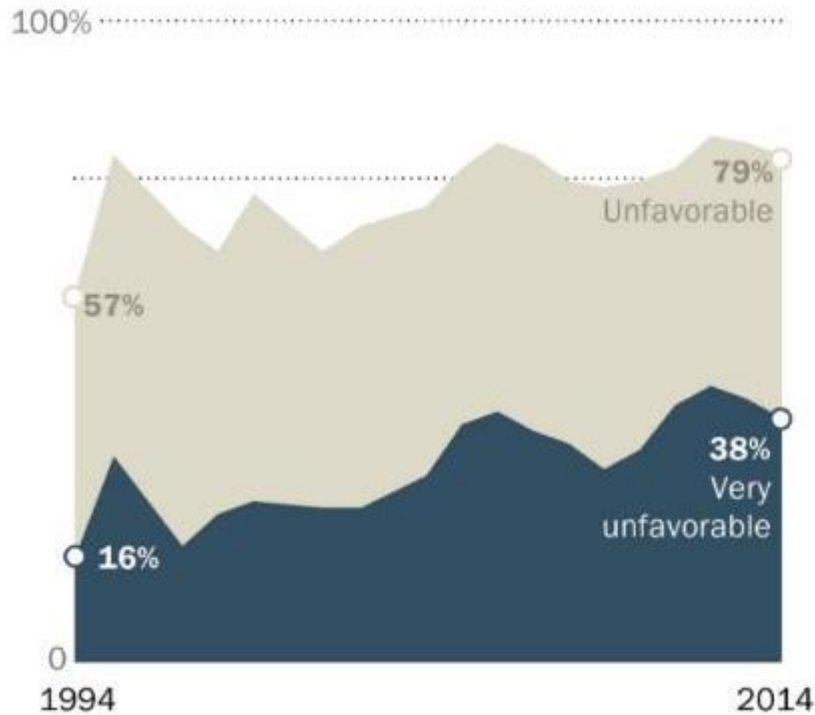
Own Party  
Opposing Party



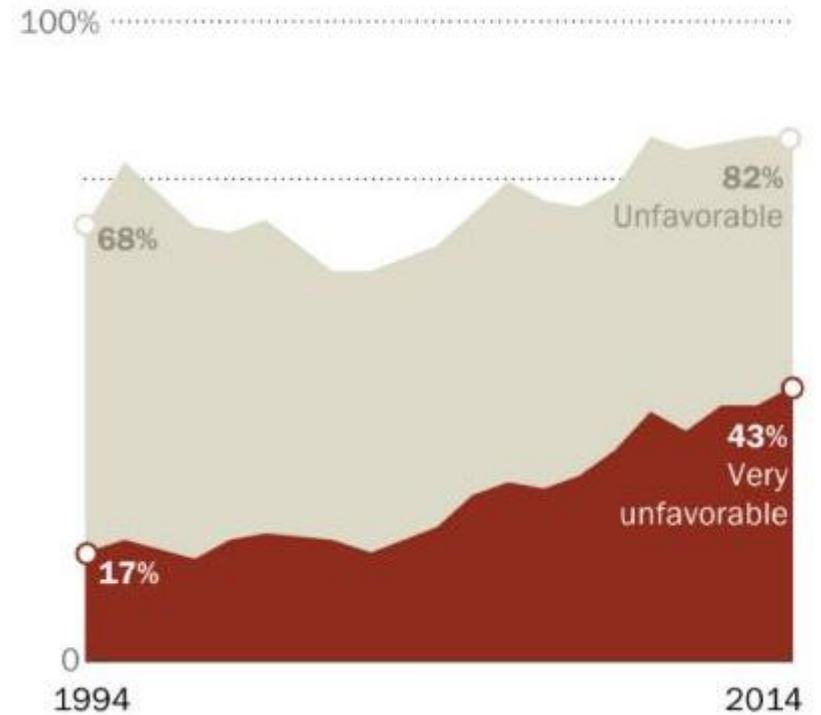
# Pew Data on “Antipathy”

## A Rising Tide of Mutual Antipathy

**Democratic attitudes about the Republican Party**



**Republican attitudes about the Democratic Party**

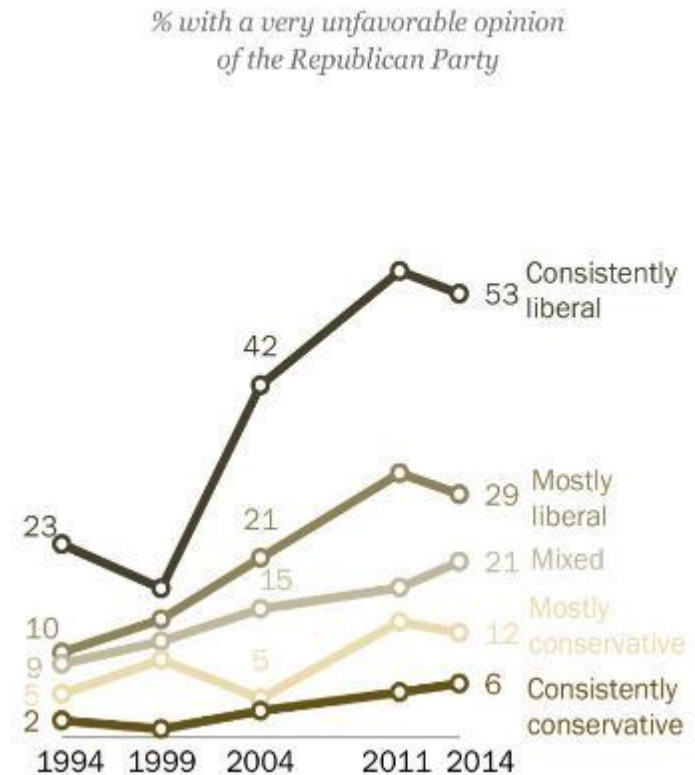
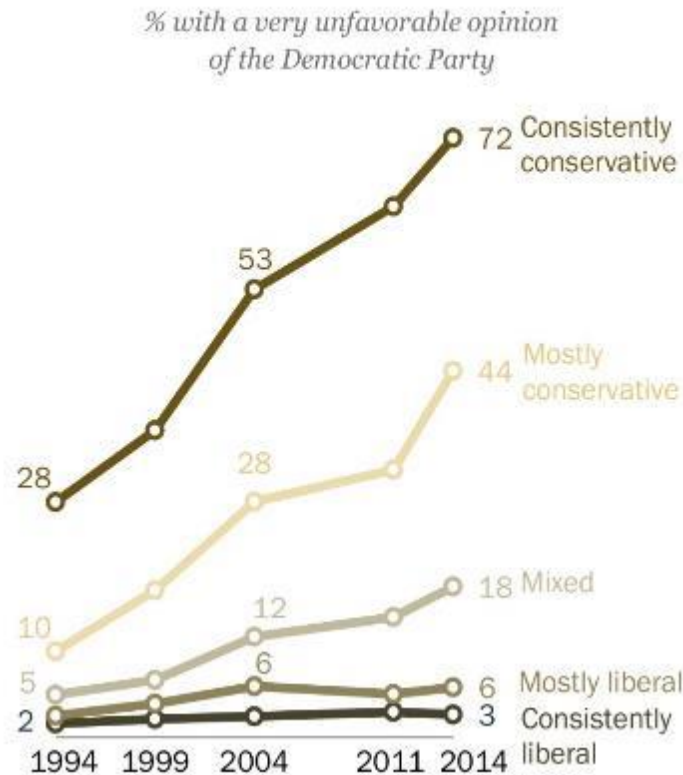


# Antipathy Greater Among Ideologues

35

Note:  
antipathy significantly greater among Republican Ideologues - 72 versus 53 percent

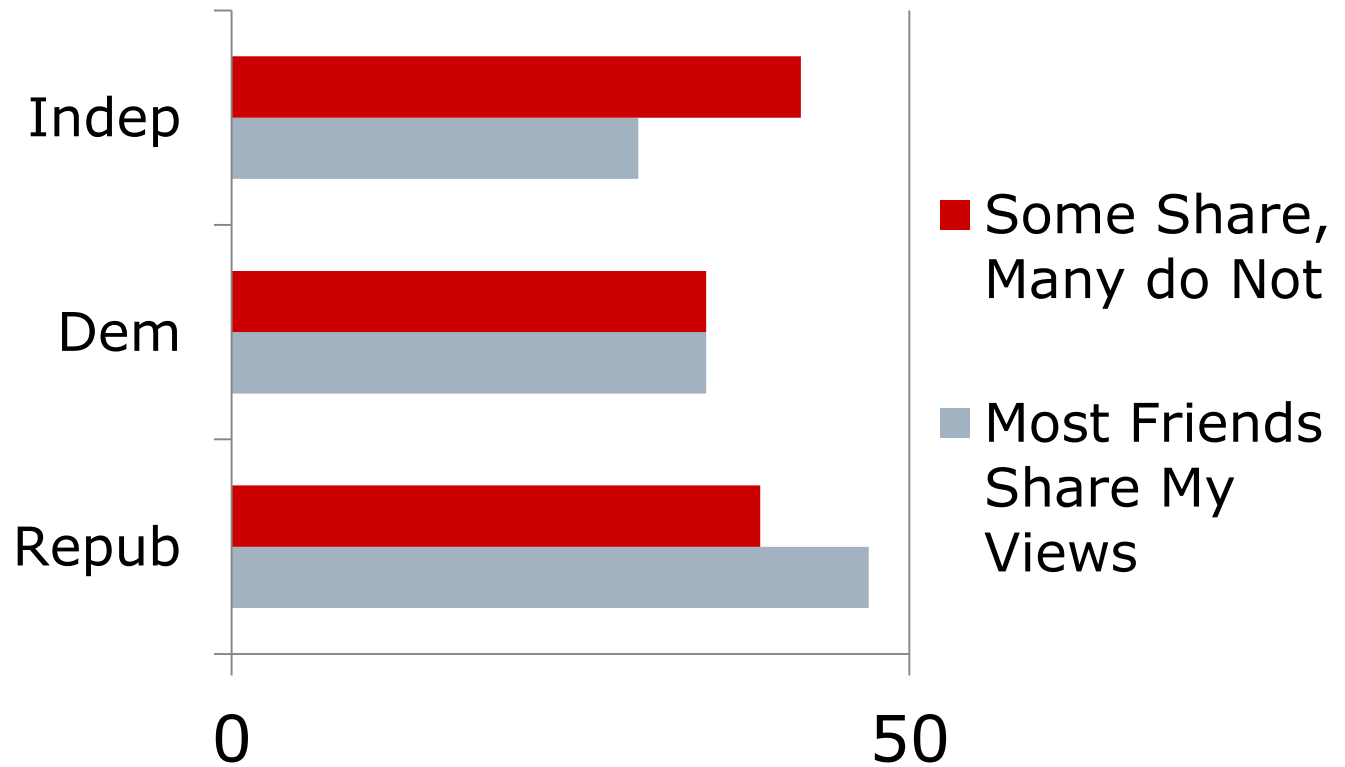
## The Growing Link between Ideology and Partisan Antipathy



# Increased Social Distance

36

Pew Data  
– National  
Survey,  
2014

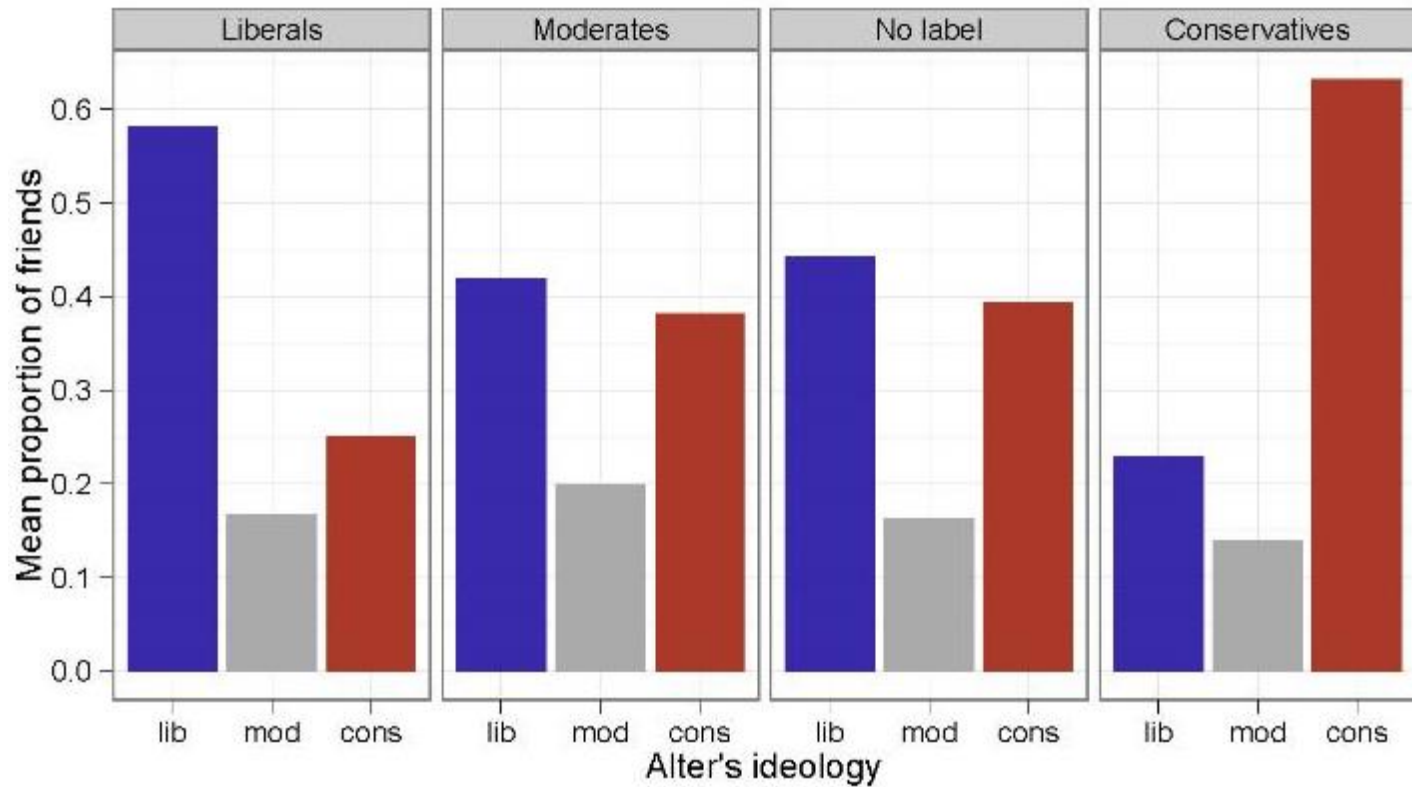


Friendship networks are politically homogeneous

# Online Networks More Polarized

37

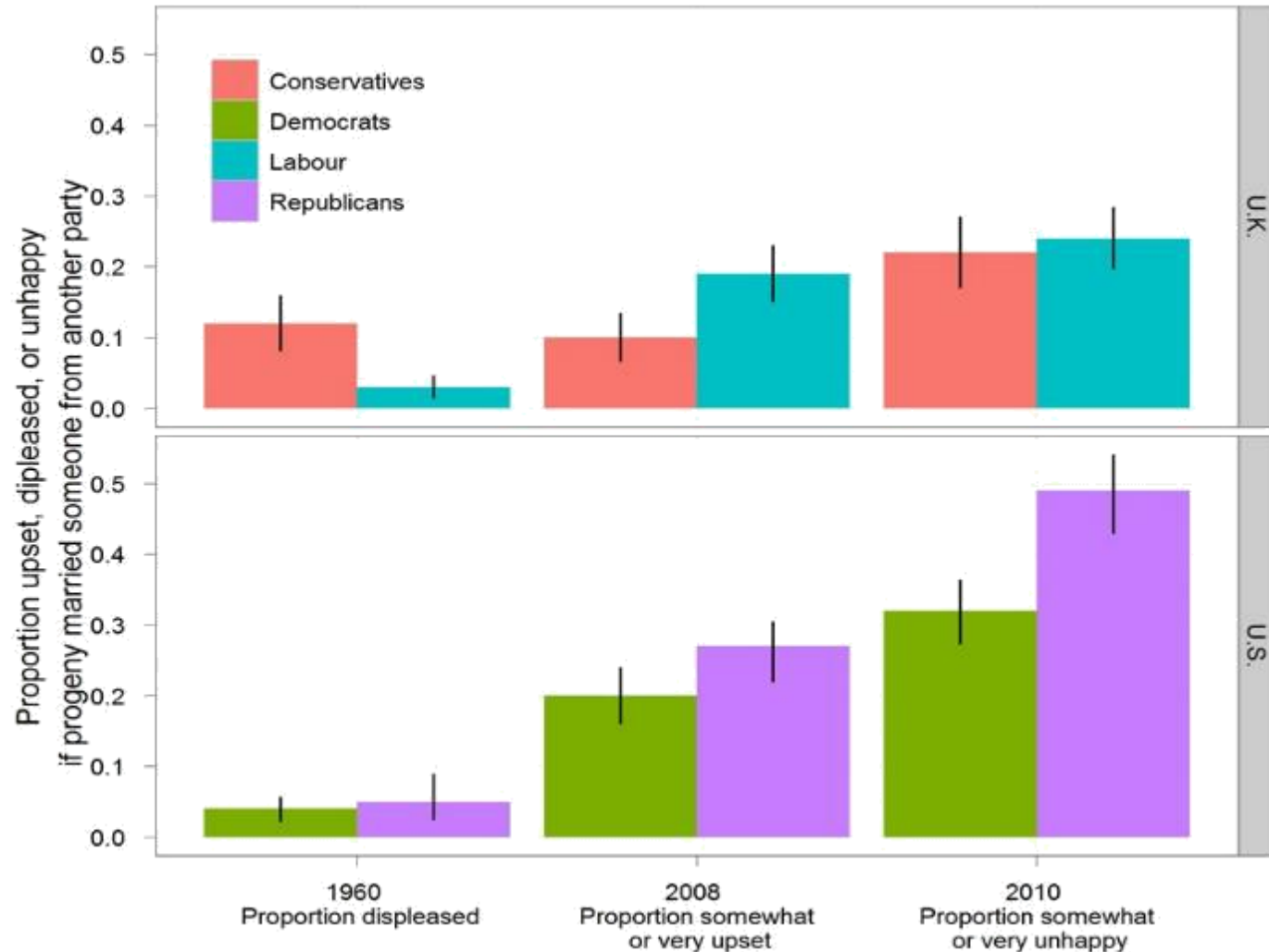
Messing dissertation – shows that Facebook friendship groups are politically homogeneous



# Increased Social Distance between Partisans: US-UK Comparisons

38

Minimal social distance between partisans in 1960; dramatic increases over time in the U.S., but *not* U.K.

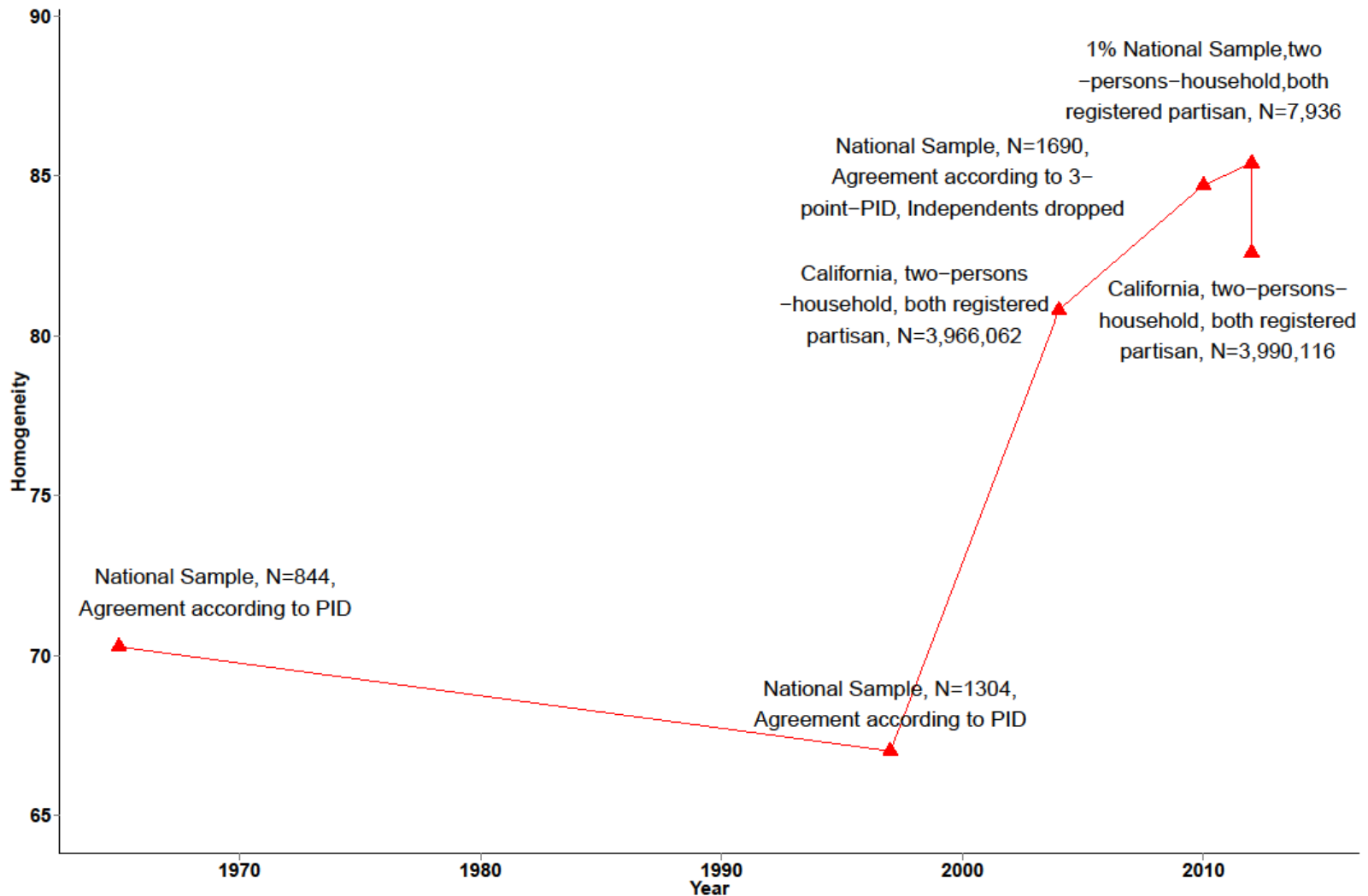


# Party ID now a Relevant Cue in Personal Life

- Spousal selection based on political affinity **exceeds** selection based on physical (e.g. body shape) or personality attributes (Alford et al., 2011)
- Evidence from online dating sites shows that political preferences significantly predict probability of successful matching (Malhotra & Huber, 2011)

# Marital Homogeneity over Time

40





# High school resume study

41

PID now  
sufficiently  
powerful to  
influence  
preferences in  
non-political  
domains

- Study participants asked to select one of two high school students for a college scholarship; resumes manipulated GPA, ethnicity, and political affiliation (extra-curricular activity)
- Political affiliation more important than GPA as “qualification”

# David Brooks Oped

A college student came to me recently with a quandary. He'd spent the summer interning at a conservative think tank. Now he was applying to schools and companies where most people were liberal.

Should he remove the internship from his résumé? I advised him not to. Even if people disagreed with his politics, I argued, they'd still appreciate his public spiritedness. But now I'm thinking that advice was wrong. There's a lot more political discrimination than I thought. In fact, the best recent research suggests that there's more political discrimination than there is racial discrimination.

# Implicit or Unconscious Bias: Party vs. Race

43

Distance between Dems and Reps on the partisan D-score *twice* as large as the distance between whites and African-Americans on the race D score

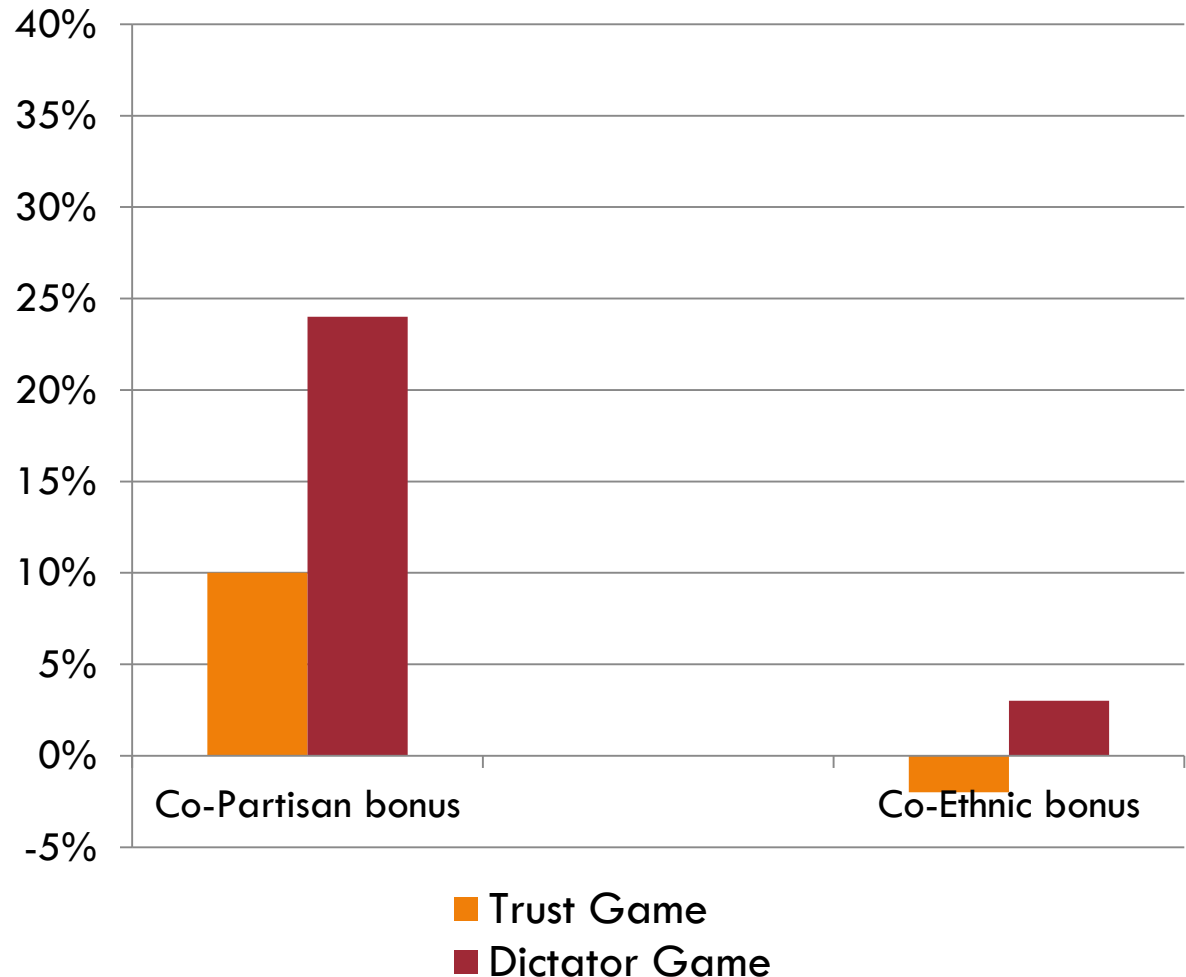
Partisan D-score			
Party	Mean	Standard Error	N
Democrat	-0.23	0.02	844
Republican	0.27	0.02	423
Independent	-0.02	0.02	542
Cohen's $d = .95$			

European American/African American D-score			
Race	Mean	Standard Error	N
White	0.16	0.01	1158
African American	-0.09	0.02	421
Hispanic	0.08	0.02	265
Asian	0.09	0.07	28
Cohen's $d = .61$			

# Cooperation in Games

44

\$10 initial endowment; \$4.17 allocated on average in trust game, \$2.88 in dictator game. Co-partisans received a “bonus” of 41c and 68c.



# Summary

“In the context of other forms of group identity, partisanship elicits by far the most extreme evaluations of in and out groups. Indeed, against the baseline of partisan affect, whites’ feelings toward African-Americans appear relatively benign. This remarkable pattern applies to both explicit and implicit measures of group affect and holds up even when the tests of in-group favoritism are unobtrusive, completely non-political, and partisans are incentivized to treat co-partisans no differently from out-partisans.”

# Has Media Use Contributed to Increased Partisan Affect?

46

Seems more than coincidental that animus has spread simultaneously with the diffusion of IT



40 years ago, virtually all adults got their daily news from one of the three major network newscasts (combined audience of 100 million in 1969)

# Selective Exposure as a Possible Contributor

47

- Revival of the partisan press (in the case of cable TV, talk radio, and the blogosphere news is not easily distinguishable from partisan diatribe)

“What does that make her?” Rush Limbaugh said of Fluke on Wednesday, according to the Washington Post. “It makes her a slut, right? It makes her a prostitute.” “She wants to be paid to have sex,” Limbaugh continued. “She’s having so much sex she can't afford the contraception.”

# Perceptions of Mainstream Media

48

## Bias Perception

Mainstream news organizations typically viewed as biased

“Hostile media” phenomenon - group members view “objective” news as slanted against their point of view

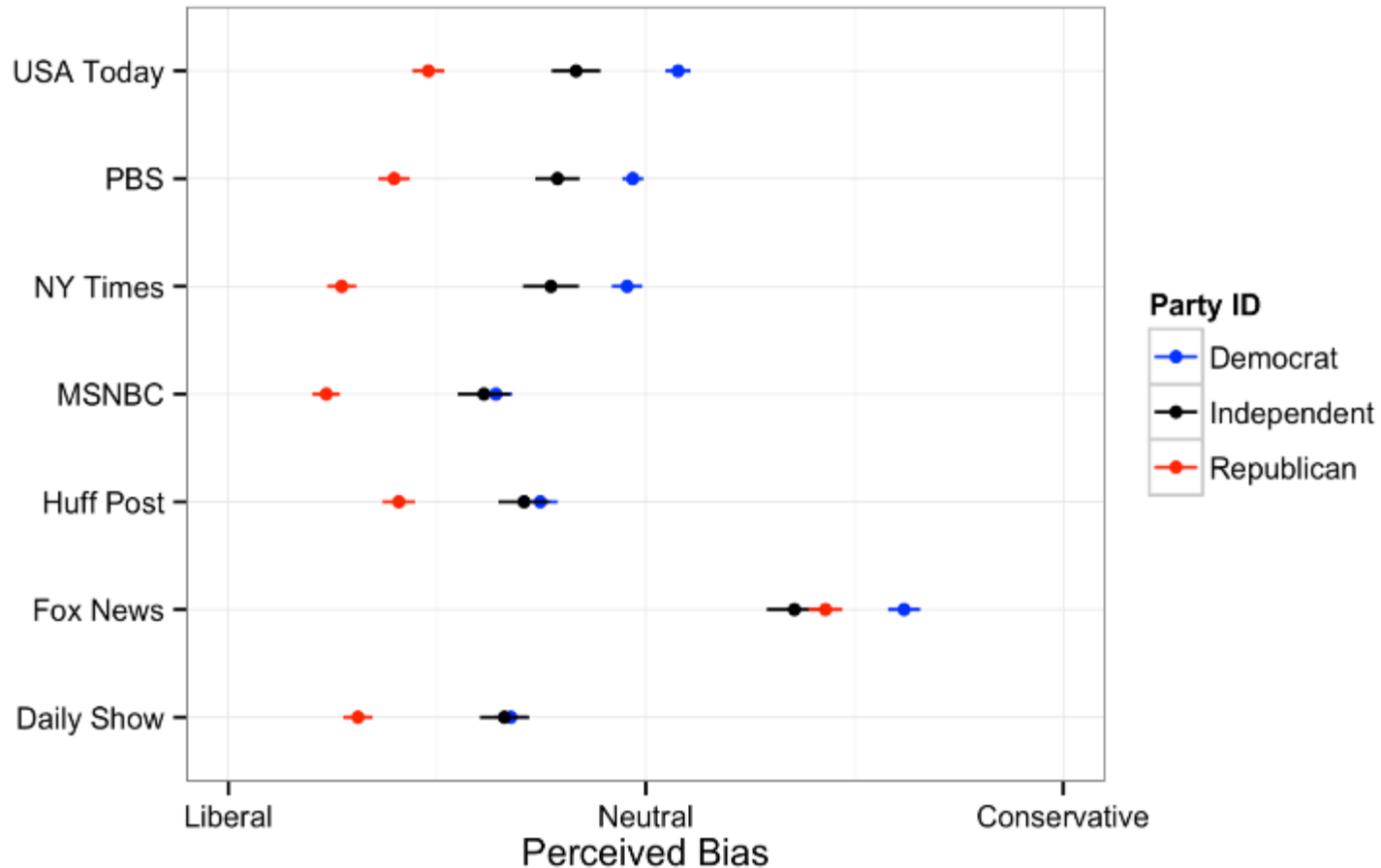
Republicans attribute liberal slant, but Democrats see little bias



# Perceptions of Media Bias

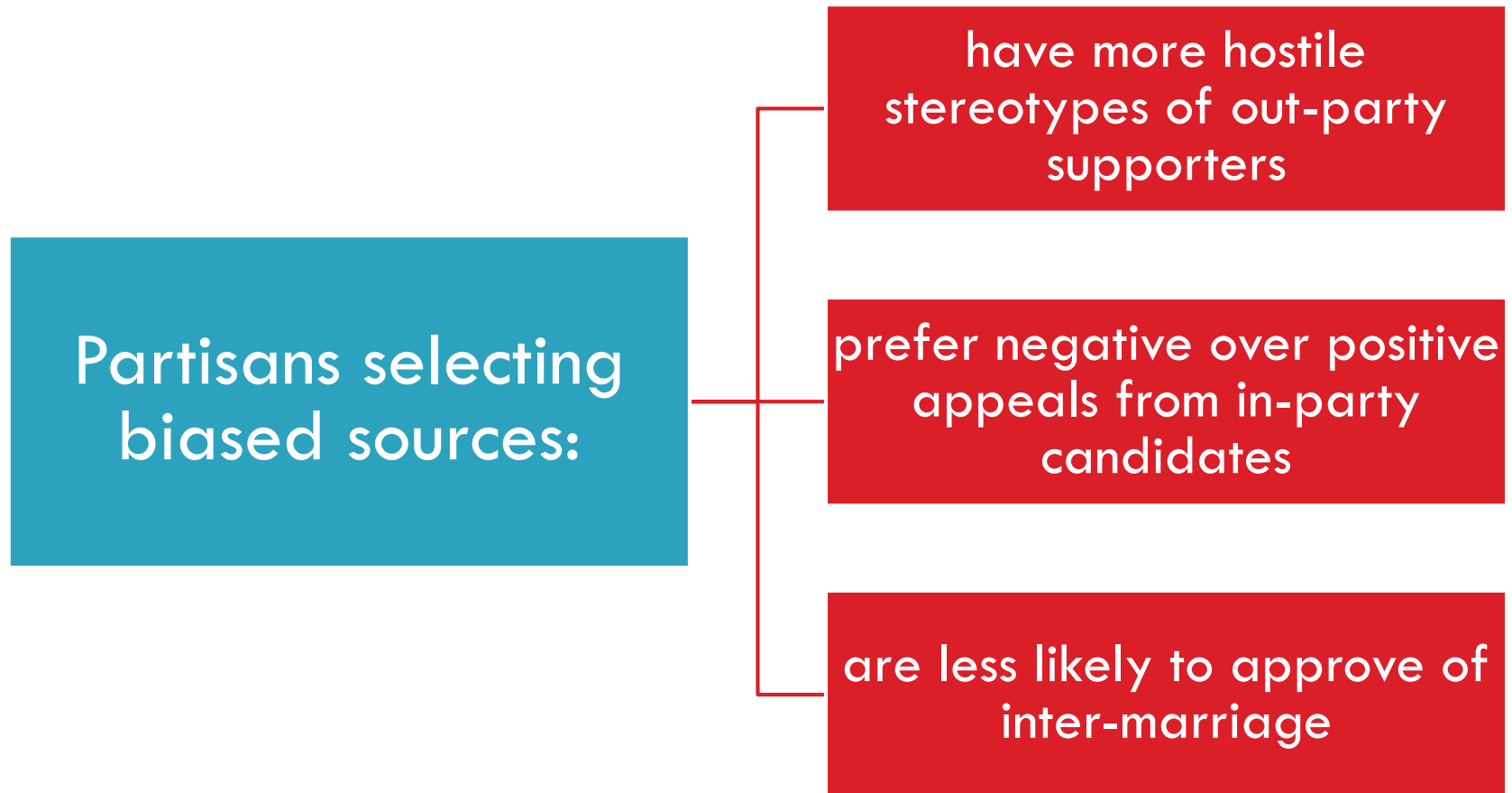
49

In era of political polarization, Republicans consider ALL mainstream media sources as biased



# Evidence of a Selective Exposure – Animosity Link

50



# Possible Underlying Mechanisms

51

## Persuasion

- Partisans who encounter the most polarizing messages become the most polarized.

## Motivated reasoning

- Partisans interpret news, even when provided by scrupulously objective sources, as biased against their side.

## Social identity based processing

- Exposure to congenial sources - and the individuals who appear and speak in these sources are typically co-partisans - strengthens salience of receiver's political identity, thus increasing polarization

# Implications

52

(1)

- Increased polarization, decreased incentives for elites to cooperate

(2)

- Reinforcement of priors or “echo chamber” effect -- the news strengthens existing beliefs and attitudes

(3)

- Financial incentives for news organizations to deliver biased news

(4)

- Potential for opinion manipulation