

## **Who doesn't love a good fight?**

### **Elite polarization energizes strong partisans and alienates independents**

Elite polarization in the U.S. is at its highest since the American Civil War (McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2006; McCarty 2015). Scholars debate the normative implications of this increasing polarization. Some have argued that despite the superficial unpleasantness of partisan disagreement, polarization may increase political engagement, energizing voters and promoting political participation (e.g., Abramowitz 2010; Levendusky 2009, 2010; Luttig 2016).

In contrast, we argue that polarization may actually reduce political interest and participation among some voters. Prior research suggests that elite polarization predicts reduced political interest among independents (Miller, Saunders, Peterson, & McClurg, under review). That said, this evidence is strictly observational; it cannot distinguish the effects of elite polarization from the effects of unmeasured contextual variables that covary with polarization in the natural political environment. We offer an experimental test of the idea that elite polarization impacts partisans and independents differently. We predict that although polarization may inspire more active participation among strong partisans, independents (and perhaps weak partisans) will show the opposite pattern, drifting away from a fight in which their views have no champion.

## **Method**

### **Data**

Our data come from the second wave of a four-wave panel study of political attitudes, fielded by Survey Sampling International (SSI) during the 2016 U.S. election. The panel's initial sample size was planned such that 1,500 respondents would participate in all four-waves, based on SSI's attrition estimates. Ultimately, 1,730 respondents completed all four waves. Our

analyses include the subset of respondents from the panel's second wave who completed all necessary measures ( $N = 973$ ).<sup>1</sup>

### **Manipulation and Measures**

To test the effect of elite polarization on respondents' political engagement, we randomly assigned respondents to a control condition or to one of two treatment conditions. In the treatment conditions, we presented respondents with information experimentally manipulated to suggest either that major-party elites were highly polarized or relatively unpolarized. These respondents were shown a series of stylized histograms (accompanied by verbal summaries) that depicted Republican and Democratic Congressional Members' positions on four political issues (i.e., mining, Medicaid, Affirmative Action, and global warming). In the high polarization condition, the histograms were strongly bimodal, with all Republicans shown to have a conservative stance on every issue and all Democrats shown to have a liberal stance on every issue. In the low polarization condition, the histograms were mostly unimodal, with Republicans and Democrats each taking heterogeneous stances on the issues and some partisans overlapping in their positions. In both conditions, verbal summaries of each histogram told respondents exactly what we wanted them to notice—that the parties either were or were not sharply divided. We adapted these manipulations from stimuli used in prior studies that successfully affected respondents' perceptions of elite polarization (Druckman, Peterson, & Slothuus 2013; Levendusky 2010; Luttig 2016).

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<sup>1</sup> Our analyses use survey weights to approximate a nationally representative sample. The raked weights follow the iterative proportional fitting procedure proposed by DeBell and Krosnick (2009) and adjust observed data to match known population benchmarks for race, ethnicity, gender, education, and income. Weight scores were truncated at 5.0, following best practices. Weighted distributions for demographics were similar to other gold-standard surveys, such as the American National Election Studies.

Respondents completed two measures of political engagement after this manipulation. To assess interest in politics, we asked respondents how interested they were in what was going on in government and politics. Responses ranged from “not at all interested” to “extremely interested” on a 5-point scale. To assess intended turnout, we asked respondents how likely they were to vote in the coming (2016) election. Responses ranged from “not at all likely to turn out” to “extremely likely to turn out” on a 5-point scale. Both outcomes were measured in the panel’s second wave.

We also measured basic demographics as control variables: current age, highest level of education attained, income, race (with a dummy variable indicating whether the respondent identified as White (coded as 0) or not (coded as 1), and gender (with a dummy variable indicating whether the respondent identified as female (coded as 0) or male (coded as 1)). All variables are coded to range from 0-1.

We tested our expectations both with and without basic demographic controls:

### **Results & Discussion**

We used OLS models to test the effects of elite polarization on political engagement. The low-polarization condition serves as the reference group in these models. Estimates—with and without the demographic control variables—are presented in Table 1.

Results were consistent with our predictions. Strong partisans exposed to a more polarized environment reported greater political interest and intention to vote, whereas independents reported less interest and less intention to vote. To illustrate these heterogeneous effects of polarization, we plot predicted interest and intended turnout in Figures 1 and 2 (using the models that included demographic controls).

Thus, perceptions of elite polarization do indeed seem to affect political engagement; however, the nature of this effect depends on the strength of individuals' partisan commitments. In our study, polarization energized strong partisans but alienated independents. This pattern of results suggests that elite polarization may be self-reinforcing, with troubling implications for democratic representation. If elite polarization leads independents and moderates to avoid politics, then elites in a polarized environment who are interested in courting likely voters have more incentive to appeal to strong partisans than to implement policies that would appeal to middle-of-the-road voters. Elites' overtures to strong partisans, in turn, may reinforce the mass public's perceptions of elite polarization. In the long run, this positive feedback loop may exacerbate partisan conflict and leave moderates without representation.

Further research is required to clarify *why* political independents distance themselves from polarized politics. On the one hand, perhaps independent voters are less interested in voting for candidates whose extreme stances on political issues do not resemble their own. On the other hand, perhaps independents dislike the conflict inherent in polarized politics, and disengage from politics in order to avoid uncomfortable disagreements that might disrupt their interpersonal relationships.

### **References**

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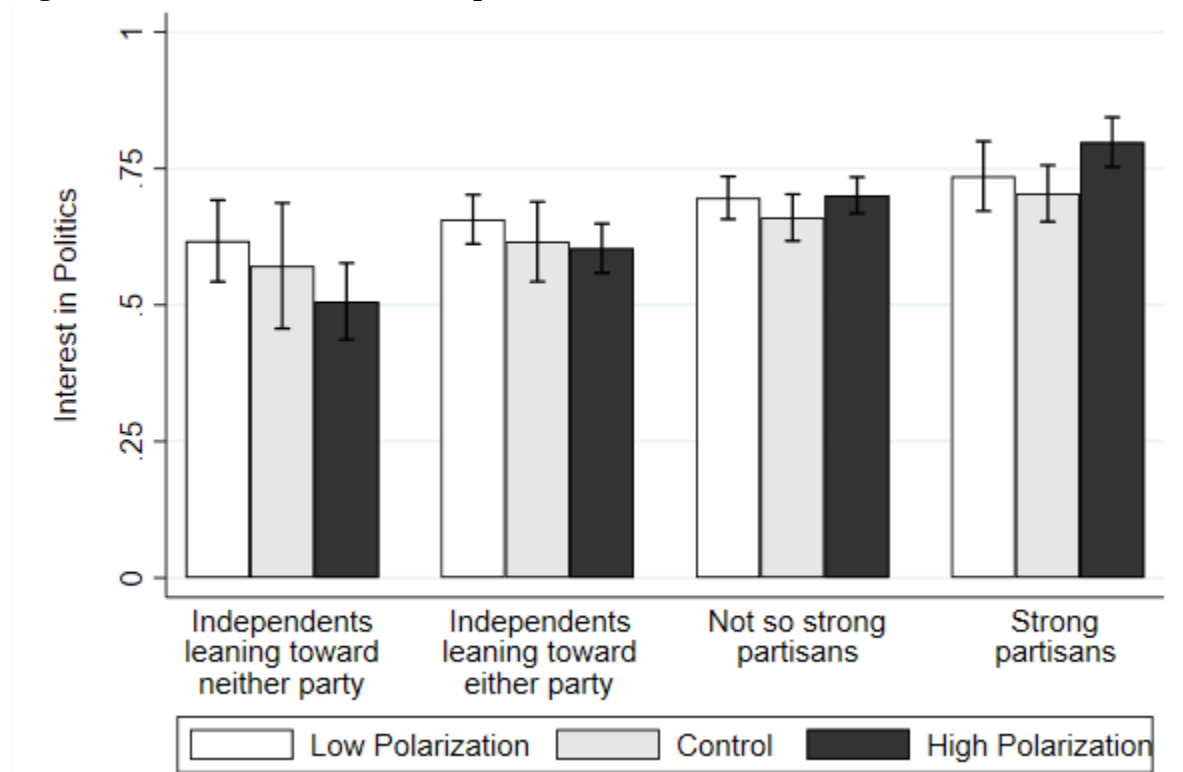
**Table 1. Elite Polarization and Political Engagement Across Partisan Strength**

	Interest in Politics		Turnout Likelihood	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Control	-0.055 (0.070)	-0.046 (0.070)	-0.093 (0.090)	-0.113 (0.096)
High Polarization	-0.072 (0.070)	-0.111* (0.052)	-0.222* (0.098)	-0.196** (0.071)
Partisan Strength	0.135* (0.056)	0.120* (0.060)	0.130+ (0.066)	0.057 (0.070)
Control X Partisan Strength	0.021 (0.090)	0.014 (0.094)	0.075 (0.114)	0.117 (0.121)
High Polarization X Partisan Strength	0.139 (0.086)	0.175* (0.077)	0.266* (0.114)	0.303** (0.093)
Age		0.003*** (0.001)		0.005*** (0.001)
Education		0.097+ (0.051)		0.151* (0.065)
Income		0.122* (0.051)		0.098 (0.077)
Nonwhite		-0.037 (0.033)		0.008 (0.038)
Male		0.046* (0.023)		0.048 (0.032)
Constant	0.614*** (0.040)	0.379*** (0.052)	0.748*** (0.049)	0.396*** (0.074)
<i>N</i>	1007	973	1006	972
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.089	0.199	0.096	0.216

Weighted OLS models. Standard errors in parentheses

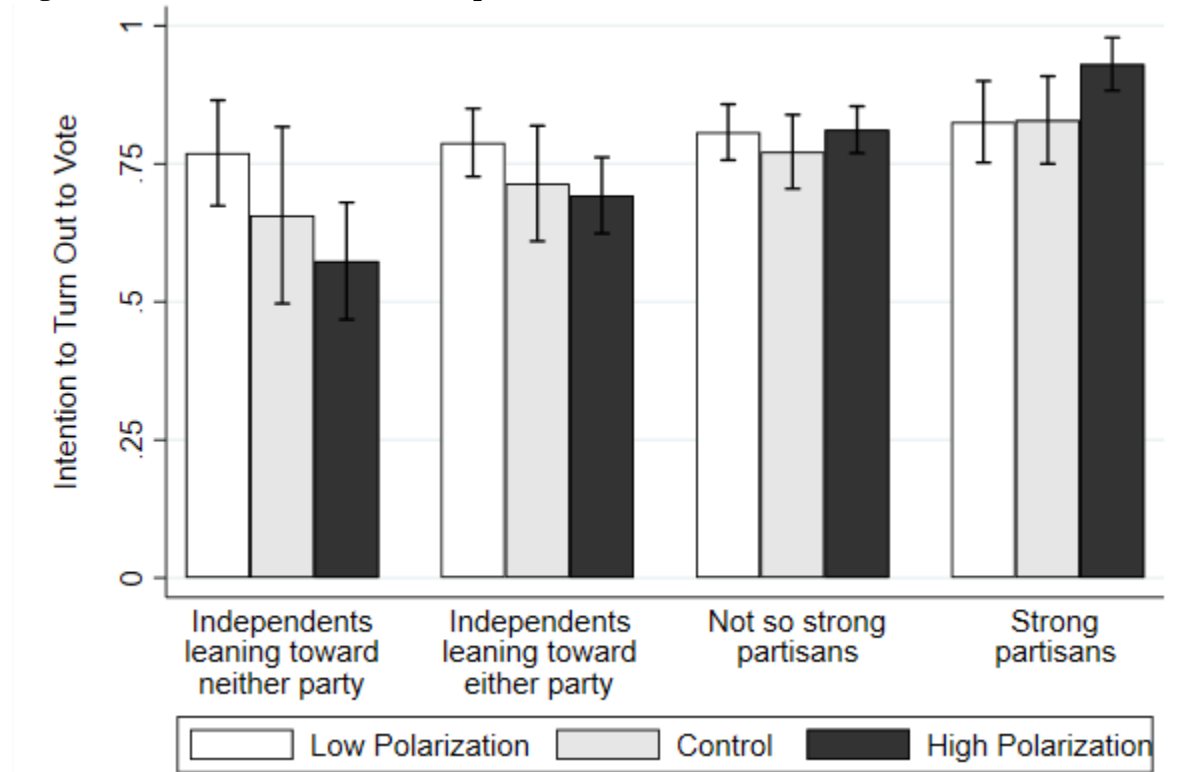
+ p<.10, \* p<.05, \*\* p<.01, \*\*\* p<.001

**Figure 1. Effect of Polarization Manipulation on Interest in Politics**



Bars illustrate predicted values for respondents' interest in politics from Model A in Table 1. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

**Figure 2. Effect of Polarization Manipulation on Turnout Likelihood**



Bars illustrate predicted values for respondents' intended turnout from Model B in Table 1. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.