

## POLARIZATION IN BLACK AND WHITE AN EXAMINATION OF RACIAL DIFFERENCES IN POLARIZATION AND SORTING TRENDS

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**Abstract** While the alignment of partisan and ideological identities—sorting—serves as a primary explanation for the rise in affective polarization, we theorize that this connection does not hold for all Americans, especially racial subgroups with unique political experiences. Using both cross-sectional and panel data, we find that even though Whites have sorted, and differences between the South and elsewhere have diminished over time, Black Americans have not sorted since 1972. However, affective polarization is just as high among Blacks as it is Whites. Thus, sorting does not appear to explain Black affective polarization. Multivariate models provide additional evidence that sorting does not adequately explain affective polarization among Blacks. Instead, we find that group norms and group consciousness (e.g., linked fate) better account for affective polarization among Black Americans. These findings provide important nuance to the sorting thesis and shed light on the relationship between sorting and affective polarization.

Recent decades have witnessed a considerable increase in affective polarization: a divergence in positive feelings toward in-groups and negative feelings toward out-groups (e.g., [Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012](#); [Iyengar et al. 2019](#)). More than just political groups, this phenomenon extends to other social, racial, and religious “others.” Perhaps the most well-evidenced explanation for this phenomenon is partisan-ideological sorting—the increasing

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congruence between partisan and ideological identities. As the party realignment of the 1960s–1970s has seeped into mass political behavior, partisan and ideological identities have subsequently aligned, thereby clarifying the divisions between political in- and out-groups and increasing political rancor.

While the sorting thesis neatly accounts for increases in affective polarization, partisan and ideological identities surely do not operate in a uniform pattern across the mass public. For example, although partisanship is perhaps the most important force behind the widest variety of political attitudes and behaviors, the nature and strength of one's partisan commitments vary considerably with one's political experience—for example, how they were socialized (Jennings and Markus 1984; Erikson and Stoker 2011), the parties' histories of attention to issues impacting them (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Highton and Kam 2011), and acceptance into party coalitions (Tate 2010; Noel 2012). Rich literatures describe the impact of political experience on partisanship for both Black Americans and Whites living in the South. In addition to squarely supporting the Democratic Party because of its attention to the racial issues at the center of the realignment of the 1960s–1970s, ample evidence further shows that Blacks exhibit multidimensional ideological structures (Philpot 2017) and even interpret and employ ideological labels differently than Whites (e.g., Tate 1994; Jefferson forthcoming). As such, partisan-ideological sorting may be different in both nature and level for some groups.

In this manuscript, we expand the literatures on partisan sorting and affective polarization by examining racial differences in these processes over time, focusing on Black and White Americans, and using regional differences among Whites to highlight the impact of political incorporation on political identities. Though some correlational analyses of affective polarization and sorting control for racial group membership or regional differences, these potential sources of heterogeneity have never been a focus of studies of affective polarization and no studies of sorting of which we are aware have focused on race. On the one hand, while we find that, while Southern Whites were less polarized toward presidential candidates in the 1970s, they eventually matched Whites from other regions in their level of both sorting and affective polarization by the 1980s. On the other hand, while Blacks and Whites have exhibited similar levels of affective polarization since the 1980s, Blacks have not sorted whatsoever over time.

This disparity across racial groups suggests that sorting may not be a viable explanation for affective polarization for some elements of the American mass public. Indeed, analysis of the 2008–9 American National Election Studies panel data reveals that past sorting impacts future affective polarization for Whites in the South and elsewhere but is unrelated to future affective polarization among Black Americans. In our final set of analyses, we investigate alternative explanations for affective polarization among Blacks. We

find that group norms and group consciousness—two social processes that impact Black public opinion—help explain affective polarization in the absence of sorting.

These results have a number of implications for research on sorting and affective polarization. Our finding that Black Americans have not sorted over time provides a partial qualification to theories of sorting and should prompt investigations into alternative explanations for increasing partisan and ideological rancor among this subgroup. Furthermore, that affective polarization rates do not vary much by racial group should cause researchers to consider other elements of social identity in deciphering the roots of political hostility (Mason 2018b; Mason and Wronski 2018). If, in fact, American politics is in the grips of a “*culture war*,” aspects of social life that are deeper and perhaps more salient than partisanship and ideology may be exacerbating reactions to out-groups, especially those perceived to be threatening one’s way of life. More generally, our results contribute to a growing body of evidence that theories of public opinion developed using samples of primarily White respondents may not neatly generalize to other groups in American society.

## Sorting and Affective Polarization

The past decade has witnessed a surge of scholarship aimed at disentangling the nature, level, and dynamic of political discord among the mass public. Affective polarization is a particularly attractive explanation: it requires little by way of the ideological sophistication the mass public consistently fails to exhibit (e.g., Lupton, Myers, and Thornton 2015; Kinder and Kalmoe 2017), and it can be impacted by all manner of orientations, from those regarding social and political groups (Mason 2016; Mason and Wronski 2018) to attitudes about salient issues (Rogowski and Sutherland 2016; Webster and Abramowitz 2017). Moreover, because affective polarization is posited to have at least some roots in social identity,<sup>1</sup> sorting has been proposed as one of the primary causal antecedents of affective polarization (Mason 2015; Mason 2016; Lelkes 2018). This makes intuitive sense: those for whom formative political identities are clearly aligned and delineated should better know which political objects they like and dislike and exhibit stronger feelings in both directions. Indeed, Mason (2018a, p. 280) concludes that “identity-based elements of ideology are capable of driving heightened levels of affective polarization against out-group ideologues, even at low levels of policy attitude extremity or constraint.”

While we certainly do not wish to challenge the appeal or basic structure of this account of sorting and its effects, we do note that few analyses have

1. We explicitly note that we are focused on identity sorting, rather than the sorting of issue attitudes—operational ideology—and partisanship.

considered how sorting or affective polarization might differentially unfold among political or social subgroups (for an exception, see [Levendusky 2009](#)). Most analyses focus on the broader public, with multivariate models simply providing controls for potentially relevant subgroups. Yet, partisan and ideological identities—the two core components to sorting—surely have not dynamically aligned in the same way for all Americans.

Of particular interest are Black Americans, for whom partisan and ideological identities have historically not been tightly connected (e.g., [Tate 1994](#)), as well as Whites living in the South, many of whom found their partisan and ideological identities profoundly incompatible as a result of the partisan realignment of the 1960s–1970s. Below, we outline existing evidence regarding the experiences of White Southerners and Blacks to derive expectations about how sorting might operate differently than extant scholarship demonstrates. A comparison of these groups also allows an examination of how trends in sorting and affective polarization have proceeded among one group that has been fully incorporated into the national political system compared to another that, for many years, has remained a marginalized group in American politics.

#### WHITE SORTING AND AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION IN THE SOUTH

Following dramatic policy change that clarified the parties' positions on matters of race in the 1960s, conservative Whites in the South began to migrate away from the Democratic Party (e.g., [Carmines and Stimson 1989](#); [Black and Black 2002](#); [Kuziemko and Washington 2018](#))—initially toward political independence ([Beck 1977](#))—and eventually toward the Republican Party ([Stanley 1988](#)). In addition to race, ideology (e.g., [Abramowitz and Saunders 1998](#); [Hayes and McKee 2008](#)), party strategy ([Black and Black 2002](#); [Hood, Kidd, and Morris 2014](#)), economic changes (e.g., [Brewer and Stonecash 2001](#); [Shafer and Johnston 2001](#); [Nadeau et al. 2004](#)), and core values ([Lupton and McKee 2021](#)) have all been shown to contribute to changes in Southern Whites' partisanship.

Rather than a large-scale movement toward conservatism, this change involved conservative White Southerners aligning their partisanship with their positions on salient political issues ([Carmines and Stanley 1992](#))—partisan identities changed, not ideology. Considerable evidence exists documenting that geographic polarization was a result of sorting ([Lang and Merkowitz 2015](#); [Hill and Tausanovitch 2018](#)). Indeed, ideologically driven change is more common in the South than elsewhere in the 1970s, a pattern that does not emerge in later decades ([Levendusky 2009](#), p. 116). In short, as changes to the party system in the South penetrated mass politics, Southern Whites' political behavior and attitudes came to resemble those exhibited by Whites in other regions.

While we have a firm grasp of how sorting in the South proceeded, the impact of the Southern realignment on affective polarization is less understood. For example, a recent review of the literature on affective polarization does not discuss regional patterns (Iyengar et al. 2019). We also use an examination of changes in sorting and affective polarization among Southern Whites as a benchmark for understanding the impact of political incorporation—a rearrangement of party positions to accommodate a desirable voting bloc—on political identities. Based on the extant literature, our expectation is that we will observe lower levels of sorting and affective polarization among Southern Whites, compared to non-Southern Whites, in the early 1970s. However, by the mid- to late 1970s—and certainly by the 1990s—we expect Whites in the South to be indistinguishable from Whites elsewhere. As politics becomes increasingly national, regional differences should diminish.

#### SORTING AND POLARIZATION AMONG BLACK AMERICANS

There is substantial reason to suspect that the process of partisan-ideological sorting has proceeded differently for Black and White Americans. First, a large body of evidence documents differences in the political socialization process of Blacks compared to Whites and other racial groups. In particular, Black socialization emphasizes the role of race and learning how to deal with discrimination and racial bias (e.g., Demo and Hughes 1990; Hughes 2003; Scott 2003; Brown and Lesane-Brown 2006) and discrimination remains a fact of life for Blacks (e.g., Feagin 1991; Feagin and Sikes 1994). As Sears and Savalei (2006, p. 898) argue, the fact that the “vast majority of today’s African Americans are descendants of those who lived under the slavery and Jim Crow systems” continues to uniquely influence political attitudes.

Second, a long literature and countless empirical findings suggest that partisanship is unlikely to be a first mover in the process of sorting among Black Americans. Simply put, Blacks overwhelmingly identify with the Democratic Party, and have done so since the partisan realignment around racial issues in the 1960s. This is not a forgone conclusion. Black partisanship has ebbed and flowed over American history: Blacks strongly supported the Southern Republican Party for much of the Reconstruction era and were largely disassociated from both major parties from the early 1900s up through (at least) the New Deal era (Dawson 1994). As we would expect of any strategic political behavior, Black partisanship has been determined by the platforms and goals of the major parties, as well as the ability of Blacks to participate in party leadership and decision-making—that is, incorporation into the two-party system (Tate 2010). Recently, it has been argued that Blacks align with the Democratic Party to, in part, increase the likelihood of

influencing the party—that is, to overcome the collective action problem (White and Laird 2020, p. 48).

As an inherently dynamic process whereby partisan and ideological identities increasingly align with one another, sorting requires at least one of these identities to change over time (though it does not need to be the same identity at the individual level for the aggregate process to occur). Since Black partisanship has been relatively stable over the past 60 years or so, we focus on the potential role of ideology in the sorting process. Previous work shows that the average extremity of one's issue attitudes is predictive of sorting (Mason 2015). This operationalization of ideological strength is unlikely to translate well for Black Americans: even though some Blacks, like any other racial group, may exhibit strong attitudes about various issues, Black ideology has been shown to be squarely multidimensional (e.g., Philpot 2017). While extremity of attitudes about economic and social welfare attitudes, for example, may consistently point in the same direction (i.e., left or right) for Whites, Blacks tend to exhibit more liberal attitudes about social welfare issues and more conservative ones about economic issues (e.g., Tate 2010). Moreover, recent evidence indicates that value structures share a weaker relationship with ideological self-identifications for Blacks compared to other racial groups (Ciuk 2017; Defenderfer 2019).

Hence, Philpot (2017) and Jefferson (forthcoming) find that the commonly used seven-point ideological self-identification measure does not accurately distill ideological preferences for Black Americans in the same way it does for Whites. Therefore, partisan-ideological identity sorting among Blacks, at least as it is usually measured, is likely to be quite low—and stably so over time—compared to Whites. On the one hand, we could view this as a consequence of the measurement strategy: Black public opinion is not accurately captured by a unidimensional liberal-conservative continuum. On the other, we could view such an expectation in more substantive terms: the inherent multidimensionality of Black public opinion means that there is not likely to be a clean, clear sorting of partisan (mostly Democratic) and ideological (multidimensional) identities among Black Americans over time. The latter best characterizes our view.<sup>2</sup>

Because partisan-ideological sorting has been advanced as one of the most important explanations for affective polarization (e.g., Mason 2015; Mason 2018b), and since we have ample reason to expect that Blacks have not sorted much over time, one may wonder whether Black Americans have affectively polarized at the same rate as Whites. Even though sorting is unlikely to drive affective polarization, there are orientations unique to Blacks

2. We also show evidence that Blacks have not sorted according to a measure of sorting based on policy preferences (operational ideology) and partisanship in Section B of the Supplementary Material.

that may nevertheless promote affective polarization, in addition to common factors that likely impact all Americans (e.g., elite cueing, attitudes about hot-button issues, and values). In particular, we theorize that linked fate and group norms may play a role in exacerbating Black affective polarization in the absence of sorting. Linked fate, the sense that “one’s own life chances are linked to those of Blacks as a group” (Dawson 1994, p. 75), has been shown to impact many political choices (e.g., Gurin, Hatchett, and Jackson 1990; Dawson 1994; Tate 1994).<sup>3</sup> As Republicans have increasingly relied on racial code words in political messaging to activate their base (Mendelberg 2001), racial resentment has increasingly distinguished the two parties (Enders and Scott 2019), and issues that have no explicit racial component have become racialized (Tesler 2012), we suspect that a sense of linked fate may operate not only to strengthen in-group identification (primarily the Democratic Party), but also to reduce positive affect toward the out-party (primarily the Republican Party)—that is, increase affective polarization.

Rather than group consciousness, White, Laird, and Allen (2014, pp. 784–85) argue “that clear and common understandings of in-group expectations for the political behavior of Blacks—well-established group norms—and of likely social consequences for defection from the group norms place significant constraints on Blacks’ political behavior.” Specifically, they argue that there are “social costs incurred when other Blacks question their commitment to or standing within the group.” Moreover, this effect is largest among those who are ideologically cross-pressured (Wamble et al. 2021). In short, given that there exist expectations of support for the Democratic Party among Black Americans and the possibility of social costs for failing to do so, we should expect high levels of affective polarization among Blacks when it comes to political parties and their candidates.

Altogether, we anticipate that 1) Black Americans will exhibit lower levels of sorting than either Southern or non-Southern Whites and 2) any observed sorting among Black Americans will exhibit a weaker relationship with affective polarization than it does for Whites. However, 3) we do not anticipate lower levels of affective polarization for Black Americans than Whites. What, then, might explain affective polarization among Black Americans? Here, the two frameworks discussed above—linked fate and a negotiation of in-group expectations and social consequences (what we will label “group norms”)—each offer a prediction. First, the argument of group consciousness suggests that measures of linked fate should positively correlate with affective polarization. Second, if it is group norms that lead to support for the

3. We note that a long literature has produced mixed evidence for the role of race consciousness in political evaluations (e.g., Davis and Brown 2002; Gay, Hochschild, and White 2016; Philpot 2017; Tate 1994).

Democratic Party, such norms may similarly lead to higher levels of affective polarization.

## Data and Analytical Strategy

Our analysis unfolds in four steps. First, we demonstrate the presence of asymmetric partisan-ideological sorting. Second, we demonstrate that affective polarization has increased among all groups. Third, using both cross-sectional and panel data from the American National Election Studies (ANES),<sup>4</sup> we examine the relationship between sorting and affective polarization across groups. Finally, we investigate the connection between affective polarization and both linked fate and group norms among Black Americans in an effort to account for affective polarization in the absence of sorting.

### KEY MEASURES

*Sorting:* For examinations of sorting, affective polarization, and the connection between the two, we employ the ANES cumulative file. We operationalize sorting in two different ways, depending on the level of the analysis. When examining aggregate trends, we consider the correlation between the seven-point measures of partisan and ideological identities, a common operationalization of sorting (e.g., [Levendusky 2009](#)). For individual-level analyses, we employ [Mason's \(2015\)](#) operationalization of sorting, which is a measure of the congruence of partisan and ideological identities weighted by the strength of one's partisan and ideological identities.

*Affective polarization:* In the aggregate and pooled analyses presented below, affective polarization is measured using feeling thermometers, the most common operationalization ([Iyengar et al. 2019](#)).<sup>5</sup> More specifically, we subtract individuals' out-group thermometer scores (based on self-identified

4. The response rates for the ANES cross sections we employ are as follows: 77.4% (1968), 75% (1972), 70% (1974), 70.4% (1976), 68.9% (1978), 71.8% (1980), 72.3% (1982), 72.1% (1984), 67.7% (1986), 70.5% (1988), 70.6% (1990), 74% (1992), 72.1% (1994), 59.8% (1996), 63.8% (1998), 60.5% (2000), 66.5% (2002), 66.1% (2004), 63.7% (2008; RR3), 49% (2012; RR3), 50% for face-to-face and 44% for internet (2016, RR1).

5. Measures of affective polarization that target political parties and other elites, as the ANES thermometer items employed here do, likely overstate animosity toward partisans in the public ([Druckman and Levendusky 2019](#)). That said, this bias appears to be relatively small at approximately 5 thermometer points. More importantly, in an analysis of [Druckman and Levendusky's \(2019\)](#) data, we find no heterogeneous treatment effects by race: the bias produced by using measures focused on the parties rather than the electorate are statistically identical for Whites and Blacks. Results are available from the authors upon request.

partisanship for party and candidate thermometers, self-identified ideology for ideological group thermometers) from their in-group scores. In the panel analyses, which employ the 2008–9 ANES panel data, thermometers are not available. Instead, we employ two different operationalizations of affective polarization: party and candidate “like bias.” Party and candidate like bias capture the extent to which one likes the in-party (candidate) versus the out-party (candidate) on seven-point scales ranging from “dislike a great deal” to “like a great deal.” In both the pooled cross-sectional and panel analyses, we include a measure of differential emotional reactions toward the out-party, which we call “emotional bias.” Emotional bias is measured using responses to questions about whether the candidates make respondents feel afraid, angry, hopeful, and proud. First, we separately calculate the difference between 1) the number of positive in-group feelings (hope, pride) and number of negative in-group feelings (anger, fear) and 2) number positive out-group feelings and number of negative in-group feelings. We then calculate the difference between these two quantities, resulting in a measure where greater values represent more positive feelings toward the in-group and negative feelings toward the out-group. The resultant measure ranges from  $-1$  (least inter-party emotional polarization) to  $1$  (most emotional polarization).

*Linked fate and group norms:* Finally, we employ the 2012 and 2016 ANES cross-sectional studies to investigate potential sources of affective polarization among Blacks. Group consciousness is measured with the standard item “Do you think that what happens to BLACK PEOPLE in this country will have something to do with what happens in your life?” Respondents answer this question using a four-point scale ranging from “no” to “a lot.” We operationalize group norms using a three-category variable, with categories that capture whether the respondent was interviewed by a Black interviewer, a White interviewer, or no interviewer at all (i.e., completed the survey online). The logic behind this operationalization of group norms is that Black respondents interviewed by a Black interviewer will feel an expectation to offer greater support for the Democratic Party compared to Black respondents interacting with a White interviewer or even no interviewer at all (White and Laird 2020, pp. 123–25). Analyses involving these variables are restricted to Black Americans only.

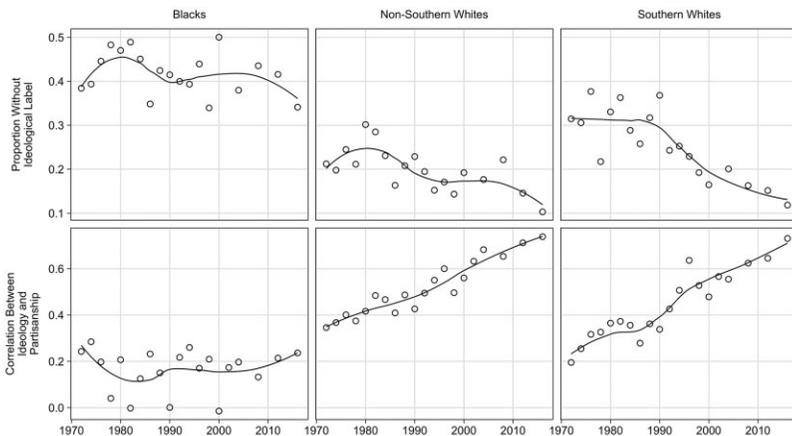
*Controls:* All pooled, cross-sectional analyses include controls for: the strength of partisan and ideological identities, average extremity of issue attitudes, religiosity, self-identification as an evangelical Christian, age, household income, educational attainment, and gender. Question wording and coding for these variables are available in [section A](#) of the [Supplementary Material](#).

## Empirical Results

### ASYMMETRIC SORTING

We begin our analysis with an examination of sorting over time, by race and region. In the pooled ANES data (1972–2016), the correlation between partisan and ideological identities is only 0.18 for Blacks, on average. This value is 0.54 for non-Southern Whites and 0.49 for Southern Whites. In both absolute and relative terms, Blacks do not exhibit a high degree of congruence between partisan and ideological identities, at least as they are measured.

Moreover, unlike for Whites, the relative incongruence between partisan and ideological identities is stable over time. [Figure 1](#) plots two quantities: the correlation between partisan and ideological identities over time, as well as the proportion of respondents who choose to not place themselves on the seven-point ideological scale, which has been declining over recent decades in the aggregate (e.g., [Halliez and Thornton 2020](#)). For Blacks, there appears to be no trend in the correlations over time. In both 1972 and 2016, the correlation between partisan and ideological identities for Blacks was 0.24. Of course, this is not to say that Blacks are not at least somewhat *sorted*, in an absolute sense; a correlation of 0.24 is indicative of some correspondence between partisan and ideological identities. In a dynamic sense, however, Blacks do not seem to be *sorting* over time; this finding is replicated when substituting the ideological self-identification measure with a measure of operational ideology (see [section B](#) of the [Supplementary Material](#) for details).



**Figure 1.** Sorting and the proportion of people failing to identify with an ideological label over time. Black curves represent LOWESS smoothers. ANES Cumulative File, 1972–2016.

We also fail to observe any systematic change in the proportion who identify with an ideological label. Even in the three most recent elections, 35–45 percent of Blacks do not place themselves on the standard seven-point scale, compared to fewer than 20 percent of Whites.

The picture for non-Southern Whites is a now familiar one: more individuals identify with an ideological label today than in previous decades, and these labels are increasingly linked to partisan identities. Southern Whites start the series less sorted than non-Southern Whites but “catch up” by the 1990s. Since the party realignment of the civil rights era, the correlation between partisan and ideological identities has sharply increased. The increase is nearly perfectly linear, with correlations more than doubling across time from 0.29 in 1972 to 0.74 in 2016. Put simply, at the beginning of the series, Whites differ across the regions, but these differences disappear in recent decades. Moreover, the proportion of Southern Whites failing to identify with an ideological label has dropped from more than a third to slightly more than 10 percent. Taken together, aggregate patterns of partisan-ideological sorting simply do not apply to Black Americans as they do to Whites, irrespective of region.

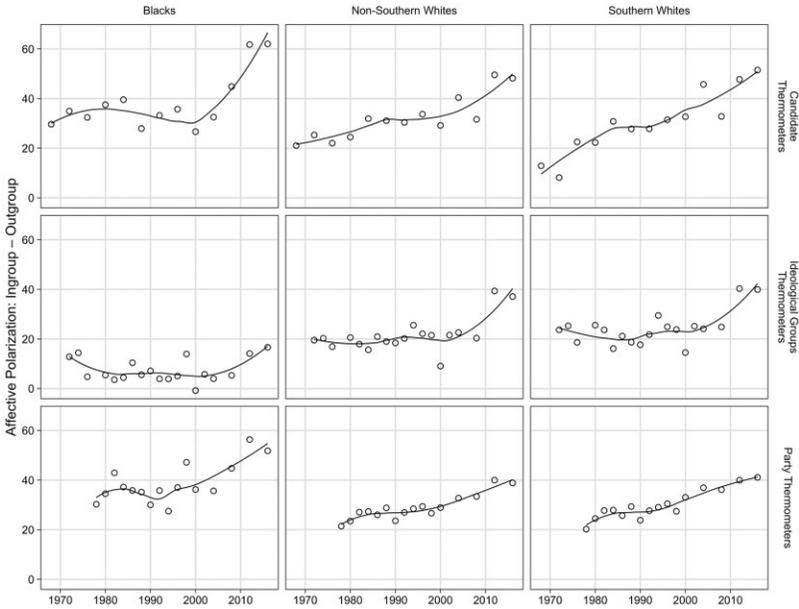
#### SYMMETRIC AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

Next, we consider affective polarization across groups. We might expect, given theories about the psychological antecedents of affective polarization (e.g., [Mason 2015](#); [Mason 2016](#); [Mason and Wronski 2018](#)), that because Black Americans have not sorted over time, they similarly should not have affectively polarized much. This is not to say that identity sorting is determinative, or the sole cause, of affective polarization for any group; however, the literature has converged around sorting as a primary cause of affective polarization.<sup>6</sup>

In-group/out-group thermometer differences among Blacks and Whites over time appear in [figure 2](#). As others have noted ([Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012](#)), affective polarization with respect to ideological labels has not increased much over time, though there appears to be a slight increase among all racial and regional groups moving from 2008 to 2012 and 2016. For ideological labels, then, the only difference between Black and White Americans is one of average level—the dynamic trends are similar.

Trends are different for the parties and their presidential candidates. For both sets of stimuli, there have been marked increases in affective polarization since the turn of the century. There are also some differences in trends across racial groups. When it comes to the parties, Black Americans have

6. Even work challenging this notion finds at least a reciprocal relationship between the two over time ([Lelkes 2018](#))—in other words, there is *some* causal relationship between sorting and affective polarization.



**Figure 2. Affective polarization over time by feelings toward parties, presidential candidates, and ideological groups.** Black curves represent LOWESS smoothers. ANES Cumulative File, 1968–2016.

always been more affectively polarized than Southern and non-Southern Whites (who exhibit substantively identical trends), except in 2004, where there is no statistical difference between racial groups. Though trends are more variable with presidential candidates, Blacks have been more affectively polarized than (non-)Southern Whites since 2008. This may be partially owed to the presence of the nation’s first Black president, though both 2016 major party candidates were White. Regardless, the marked increase in recent years does not diminish the finding of relatively high affective polarization among Blacks compared to Whites from 1976 to 1984.

#### CONNECTING SORTING TO AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

Taken together, our analyses reveal that Blacks have certainly affectively polarized and, in two of three cases, polarized more than Whites. Though Whites have both sorted and affectively polarized, Blacks have only affectively polarized. That Blacks have not sorted but have affectively polarized prompts a question as to whether sorting is a viable explanation for affective polarization, which is an inherently dynamic process, across subgroups. If sorting is not related, or only weakly related, to affective polarization among

Blacks, our theories about the social identity basis of affective polarization require refinement.

In order to investigate this relationship, we regress each measure of affective polarization from [figure 2](#)—plus emotional bias—on sorting, as well as controls for the strength of one’s partisan and ideological identities, the average extremity of one’s issue attitudes, educational attainment, household income, church attendance, age, sex, and evangelicalism.<sup>7</sup> We interact sorting with dummy variables capturing race and region so that we may examine the effect of sorting conditional on these factors. We also cluster standard errors by year, as these models are estimated on the pooled 1972–2016 ANES data.<sup>8</sup> The relevant results of these models appear in [table 1](#); coefficient estimates for controls appear in [section C](#) of the [Supplementary Material](#). In each case we observe that the interaction term between sorting and race is statistically significant and correctly signed.

We present the primary quantities of interest—the marginal effect of sorting by race/region for each dependent variable—in [figure 3](#). In all cases, the marginal effect for sorting is statistically identical for Southern and non-Southern Whites, and statistically smaller for Black Americans than Whites. The connection between sorting and affective polarization is significantly weaker among Blacks compared to Whites.

Although the pattern of conditional effects in [figure 3](#) provides correlational support for our theory that the connection between sorting and affective polarization is weaker among Black Americans than Whites, pooled cross-sectional data is incapable of shedding light on the causal relationship between our key constructs. To provide a more rigorous test of the causal impact of sorting on affective polarization (or lack thereof), we turn to the 2008–9 ANES panel data—the most recent publicly available dataset that contains both an adequate sample of Blacks and the indicators necessary to measure sorting and affective polarization. Of course, panel data cannot definitively prove causality either; our model must be specified correctly to do so, which we can never know for certain. That said, patterns of coefficients similar to those observed in [figure 3](#) would help establish the robustness of previous findings.

[Table 2](#) contains estimates from three panel models, each of which contains one equation per racial/regional group. We regress—via full information maximum likelihood—measures of partisan and candidate like bias, as well as emotional bias, on sorting and controls for educational attainment,

7. All variables were rescaled to range from 0 to 1 for ease of interpretation.

8. Employing year fixed effects, rather than clustering standard errors by years, does not greatly impact substantive results. One difference is that sorting is more strongly related to candidate affective polarization in the South compared to the non-South in the pooled sample, though this difference diminishes over time.

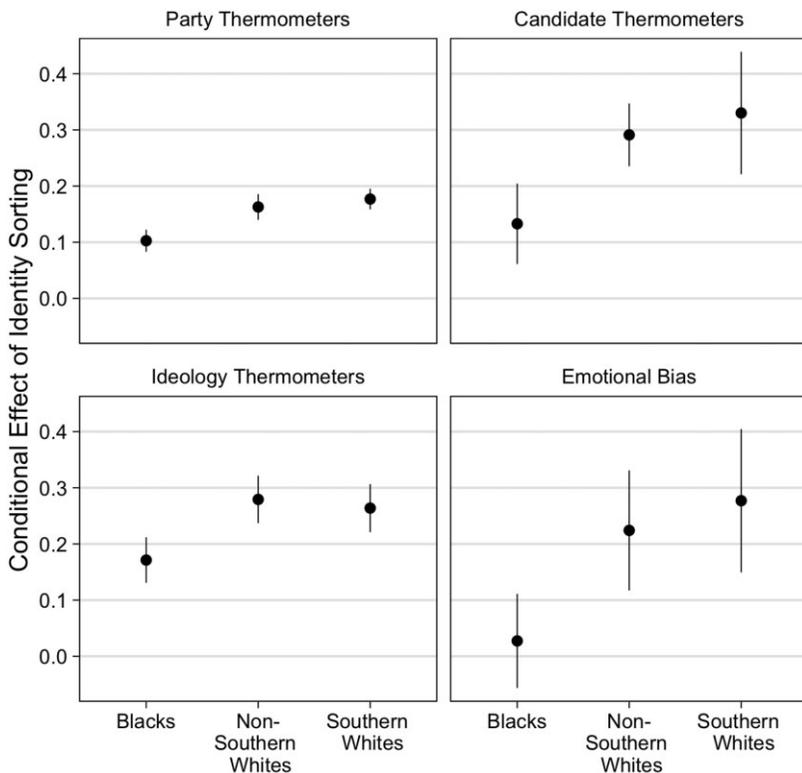
**Table 1. Regressions of affective polarization measures on sorting and controls (pooled 1972–2016 ANES data)**

	Party therms.	Candidate therms.	Ideology therms.	Emotional bias
Sorting	0.164 (0.011) <0.001	0.294 (0.026) <0.001	0.278 (0.020) <0.001	0.559 (0.022) <0.001
Southern White	0.000 (0.004) 0.984	−0.021 (0.015) 0.193	0.021 (0.004) <0.001	−0.005 (0.015) 0.728
Black	0.070 (0.014) <0.001	0.097 (0.024) 0.002	−0.020 (0.005) 0.002	0.199 (0.039) 0.001
Sorting × Southern White	0.015 (0.011) 0.177	0.039 (0.030) 0.212	−0.016 (0.011) 0.185	0.014 (0.043) 0.759
Sorting × Black	−0.060 (0.012) <0.001	−0.161 (0.029) <0.001	−0.107 (0.016) <0.001	−0.340 (0.046) <0.001
Constant	0.498 (0.007) <0.001	0.545 (0.010) <0.001	0.462 (0.008) <0.001	0.119 (0.024) 0.001
$R^2$	0.269	0.190	0.266	0.137
$n$	17,908	14,766	13,884	12,360

NOTE.—OLS coefficients with standard errors in parentheses and  $p$ -values (two-tailed). Full results presented in [Section C](#) of the [Supplementary Material](#).

age, gender, and past measurements of affective polarization. Party and candidate like bias were assessed in waves 6 (June 2008) and 9 (September 2008) of the study, emotional bias in waves 9 (September 2008) and 11 (November 2008). Sorting and all control variables were measured in wave 1 (January 2008).

For each measure of affective polarization at  $t$ , we observe statistically significant associations with sorting at  $t-1$  among Whites, but not among Black Americans. Although we must be careful not to make Type II errors by inferring from null results, we have two reasons to be confident in these findings. First, the number of Southern Whites in the model samples is actually smaller than the number of Blacks (by  $n = 61$ ). Second, the coefficient estimates for sorting at  $t-1$  are smaller for Blacks than (non-)Southern Whites, irrespective of statistical significance. If the estimates were similar in magnitude, but not statistically significant, we may be worried about a null finding



**Figure 3. Conditional effect of sorting on affective polarization, by group.** Vertical lines represent 95% confidence intervals. Pooled 1972–2016 ANES data.

being an artifact of small sample size; however, this is not what we find. Taking time into account, there is no connection between sorting and affective polarization for Blacks.

THE SOCIAL ORIGINS OF AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION AMONG BLACKS

The lack of partisan-ideological sorting among Black Americans still leaves open the important question of what *does* drive the affective polarization we observe. As with White Americans, or any other racial or ethnic group, a confluence of factors—some of which we outlined above—are likely at play. Here, we examine the impact of two explanations for Black affective polarization derived from the broader Black public opinion literature: linked fate and group norms. These concepts are particularly attractive candidates for filling the explanatory void left by sorting because they both involve social identity—affective attachments to social groups.

**Table 2. Panel analyses where affective polarization at  $t$  is regressed on sorting and controls at  $t-1$ . 2008-9 ANES Panel data**

	Party like bias <sub><math>t</math></sub>			Candidate like bias <sub><math>t</math></sub>			Emotional bias <sub><math>t</math></sub>		
	Black	N. White	S. White	Black	N. White	S. White	Black	N. White	S. White
Sorting <sub><math>t-1</math></sub>	0.090 (0.078) <0.001	0.139 (0.030) <0.001	0.166 (0.041) <0.001	0.004 (0.051) 0.930	0.147 (0.026) <0.001	0.178 (0.037) <0.001	-0.045 (0.079) 0.568	0.078 (0.028) 0.005	0.100 (0.047) 0.032
DV <sub><math>t-1</math></sub>	0.786 (0.053) 0.249	0.738 (0.024) <0.001	0.709 (0.032) <0.001	0.917 (0.270) <0.001	0.750 (0.019) <0.001	0.733 (0.028) <0.001	0.573 (0.048) <0.001	0.631 (0.017) <0.001	0.649 (0.034) <0.001
$n$	502	2,928	441	502	2,928	441	502	2,928	441

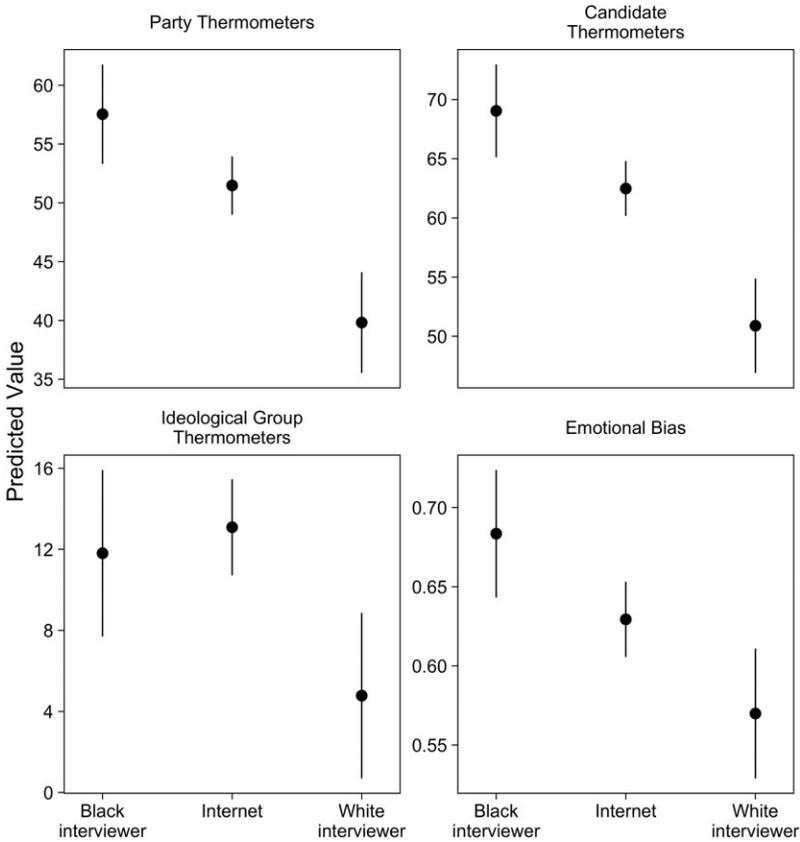
NOTE.—Standardized MLE coefficients with standard errors in parentheses and  $p$ -values (two-tailed). Full results presented in [section C](#) of the [Supplementary Material](#).

We test this possibility using the 2012 and 2016 ANES cross-sectional studies. Given that we have only two survey years with imbalanced sample sizes (due to the ANES oversampling Blacks in 2012), we opt for a simple pooled analysis with a dummy variable to control for year effects. And, because both hypotheses suggest more support for the Democratic Party, we slightly alter our dependent variables: rather than the difference between in-group and out-group ratings, we recode the variables so higher values now represent warmer feelings toward the Democratic Party, Democratic candidate, and liberals. Because our dependent variables now capture both the strength and direction of attitudes, we now control for partisanship, ideological self-identification, and issue attitudes (coded so that greater values represent more liberal responses)—each of which combines direction and strength—rather than the strength of these orientations alone.

We begin with a test of the group norms expectation. To do so, we extend the analysis presented by [White and Laird \(2020, pp. 137–38\)](#), who examine candidate affect in 2012, by also examining three other measures of affective polarization. Per the operationalization outlined above, we do this by including dummy variables that account for White and Black interviewers, which are compared to a “control group” of respondents interviewed on the internet. While we cannot treat these as randomized treatments, we do need to be cautious not to control for variables that have themselves been affected by the race of interviewer or survey mode, similar to post-treatment effects in true experimental settings. In particular, including such variables will bias our estimate of the impact of our variables of interest. Both partisanship ([Wamble et al. 2021](#))—which we normally expect to be very stable (e.g., [Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002](#))—and linked fate are related to interviewer race and survey mode.<sup>9</sup> We do, however, control for those variables that may influence the race of interviewer and survey mode: age, marital status, income, and gender, in addition to year. Our expectation, per the theory outlined above, is that Black respondents with a Black interviewer will express greater levels of affective polarization than those interacting with a White interviewer, or even no interviewer at all (i.e., online).

Full model results appear in [section C](#) of the [Supplementary Material](#). Here, we present predicted values for variables of interest in [figure 4](#). For both candidate and party feeling thermometers, as well as emotional bias, we observe a statistically significant difference in affective polarization between those interviewed by a Black interviewer and those interviewed over the internet. Moreover, we observe that respondents with a White interviewer were less affectively polarized relative to both other groups for all four measures, consistent with [Davis’s \(1997\)](#) argument that Black respondents often seek to appease White interviewers. Many of these differences are quite large—

9. We demonstrate in [section D](#) of the [Supplementary Material](#) that Black respondents identify more strongly with the Democratic Party when interviewed by a Black interviewer.

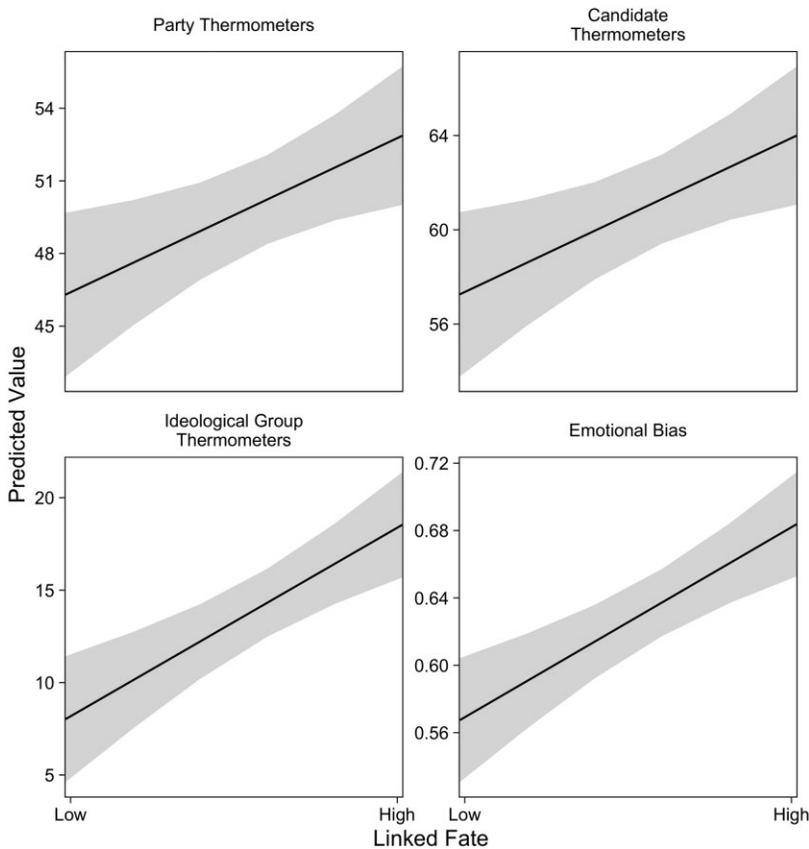


**Figure 4. The relationship between feeling thermometer ratings and race of interviewer and survey mode.** Points represent predicted values. Black respondents only. Vertical lines represent 95% confidence intervals.

there is nearly a 20-point average difference in party and candidate thermometers between Black respondents who interacted with a Black interviewer and those who interacted with a White interviewer.

To examine the relationship between linked fate and affective polarization, we estimate models similar to those in [table 1](#) while adding a measure of linked fate and controlling for race of interviewer and survey mode (the dummy variables for race of interviewer are purely statistical controls in these models, per our earlier discussion about post-treatment bias).<sup>10</sup> We

10. There might be some concern that utilizing a year with Obama on the ballot biases these results in favor of confirmation. In [section D](#) of the [Supplementary Material](#), we extend our analysis to other years and datasets.



**Figure 5.** The relationship between feeling thermometer ratings and linked fate. Black respondents only. Values represent predicted values (including predicted probabilities for anger). Shaded areas represent 95% confidence intervals.

present the result of interest as predicted values in [figure 5](#); full results are presented in [section C](#) of the [Supplementary Material](#). Linked fate is positively and statistically significantly associated with all four measures of positive attitudes toward the Democratic Party. While the relationship is somewhat modest (10–15 thermometer points; an increase of 0.116 in emotional bias), we emphasize that this is only one of many sources of affective polarization among Black Americans. Importantly, it is an explanation that is likely more operational among Black than White Americans, thus providing some explanation for Black affective polarization in the absence of sorting. Our results indicate that both explanations—linked fate and group norms—

appear to partially account for affective polarization among Blacks in the absence of sorting.

## Conclusion

Both the increasing congruence between, and inter-group emotional divisions within, partisan and ideological identities—the psychological foundations of American political behavior—are undoubtedly important processes that have developed over the course of the past half century. However, this process has not unfolded in a uniform fashion across the mass public. We demonstrate not only that Black Americans *have not* sorted over time, but also that they *have* affectively polarized, just as Whites have. In doing so, we highlighted how the correspondence between political identities for a group that was incorporated into a changing political system, Southern Whites, is considerably stronger compared to a group who was not incorporated to the same extent, Black Americans. We also found that, for Blacks, partisan sorting is not as strongly related to affective polarization as it is for Whites, where it is related at all. This is not to say, however, that social identity does not play a role in affective polarization for Black Americans. To the contrary, we find that both group norms and linked fate are related to Black affective polarization.

Our contribution is twofold. First, we demonstrate that partisan-ideological sorting, while an impactful process for some Americans, simply does not apply to all social groups in the same way. The divergent patterns in sorting along racial lines suggest that theories of identity sorting are incomplete. Though previous work has, for instance, examined sorting by region and generational cohorts (Levendusky 2009), “investigation” of racial trends has largely been confined to dummy variable controls for racial groups in regression models. We urge scholars to more carefully consider potentially important sources of heterogeneity in the various flavors of political sorting and polarization, especially when it comes to salient identities such as race.

Second, we show that other, group-specific elements of social identity and the political experience that engenders it are, indeed, related to affective polarization. Thus, even though partisan-ideological sorting does not neatly apply to all Americans, the centrality of social identities to political behavior and public opinion remains (Mason 2018b; Mason and Wronski 2018). That said, if scholars of political behavior are correct in increasingly centering theories of political behavior on social identities, such identities must be more carefully understood and incorporated into models of political opinion and behavior. Although Republicans’ feelings about Democrats and Blacks’ feelings about Whites are surely important, investigations into such phenomena are overly reductionist and coarse in their treatment of identities, including

the interaction between, and relative salience of, the multiple political and social identities that define individuals. Relatedly, a productive avenue for future research might entail an examination of the relative contribution of identity- and issue-based foundations of polarization across different racial and ethnic groups, especially given evidence that affective polarization may partially arise from ideological concerns (e.g., Webster and Abramowitz 2017; Lelkes 2019), although these findings may be “hampered by reliance on measures of policy preferences that strongly correlate with partisanship” (Dias and Lelkes 2021, p. 5).

Our study is not without limitations. Although we attempt to engage with questions of causality, even panel data and our analysis of interviewer race and mode effects have limitations. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that few datasets contain enough information from people of color to conduct even correlational analyses. Consider the inconsistencies regarding the role of group consciousness in the extant literature (e.g., Gay and Tate 1998; Davis and Brown 2002). We suspect that these inconsistencies partially result from relatively small samples, which will inherently lead to noisier estimates. Simply put, quality observational data is crucially important given the inherent difficulty of manipulating constructs such as partisanship and linked fate, and other group norms via experimentation. Moreover, Black Americans are but one of many social groups for which patterns in partisan-ideological sorting and affective polarization may differ. We urge behavior scholars to carefully consider how both theories and operationalizations of key constructs may differentially apply to “the mass public” and to investigate asymmetries among racial and ethnic subgroups, especially.

## Data Availability Statement

REPLICATION DATA AND DOCUMENTATION will be available within 12 months of publication at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/adamenders>.

## Supplementary Material

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL may be found in the online version of this article: <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfac010>.

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