

RESEARCH STATEMENT

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My research agenda focuses on understanding how people come to understand the connection between their various group identities and the political parties in the context of institutional designs that encourage competitive elections. As such, my research interests cover a broad range of topics, including the coalition building function of political parties, electoral rules and design, and the relationship between race, gender, and religious identities with partisan identities.

In my dissertation, I use a combination of experimental and observational approaches to examine how the relationship between partisan sorting and affective polarization is conditioned on the competitiveness of the electoral environment.

Does Competition Effect Partisan Sorting?

The first chapter of my dissertation uses data from the cumulative ANES and Democracy Voter Fund and the theory of partisan sorting pioneered by Liliana Mason to look at how the connection between group identities and partisan identity is potentially conditioned on the electoral environment an individual lives in. Specifically, using Mason & Wronski's concept of objective sorting - an index of the alignment between partisan, ideological, racial, and religious identities - I look at how the relationship between sorting and out-party negativity is moderated by whether or not the in-party wins the election. I find that the relationship gradually weakens as the partisan's in-party margin of victory increases, but that barely winning a competitive election is associated with the same level of out-party negativity as losing. Furthermore, the lack of an effect using state level data and the Democracy Voter Fund suggest reinforces recent work that argues that politics has become increasingly nationalized.

I am currently in progress of adding additional analyses that look for a potential mediation effect in which sorting influences perceptions of the legitimacy of elections through its effect on affective polarization. In addition, there are several other potential future projects inspired by this work. I am particularly interested in the potential for life-cycle effects on the relationship as some supplementary analyses find that relationship between sorting and partisan attitudes has steadily increased over time. As younger cohorts are increasingly exposed to more polarized environments, they are likely to be socialized to view politics as inherently competitive and highly sorted, leading to a cycle of increasing affective polarization over time. I am also interested in working with someone with more familiarity with comparative work to investigate how differences in electoral rules (for example, winner-take-all vs proportional) might influence this relationship as well.

Out-Party Coalition Composition and Electoral Threat

The second empirical chapter dissertation uses a survey experiment to investigate how perceptions of the composition of the out-party's electoral coalition impacts the sense of out-group threat and how that threat may be conditional on the perception of the electoral strength of the out-group. Drawing inspiration from the partisan stereotype literature, I manipulate threat by stating whether the out-party is nominating candidates that reinforce the in-group negative stereotypes of the

opposing party (ex: Republicans reading about Democrats nominating liberal minorities) or are breaking stereotypes in a way that cross-pressures the in-group partisan identity (ex: Republicans nominating pro-immigration Latina candidates). Results of this and additional survey experiments find, however, no effect. Analyses of the manipulation checks discover this is likely because strong partisans did not believe the manipulations that suggested that their party were likely to lose upcoming elections. While this does not provide experimental evidence for my theory, this chapter does provide some insight on potential difficulties in experimental research on elections and partisanship, especially for strong partisans.

Future work following this line of thought would focus on attempting to look at possible identities that can introduce ambivalence towards the partisan identity. One identity I am particularly interested in that has been getting some recent attention is that of a “parent” identity. This has mostly been getting attention in the gun rights debate, where groups like Moms Demand have embraced the identity as a means of encouraging support for gun control. I am interested in how the parental identity could be extended to other issues, such as healthcare, education, etc. but also recognize that there are likely important gender and racial dynamics as well that provides opportunities to collaborate with researchers who could contribute their expertise on those topics to this idea.

Strategic Use of Partisan Identity in Campaign Ads

In this final chapter, I switch focus from voters to candidates to look at the how electoral competitiveness and ideological heterogeneity within a district impact candidate use of explicit partisan appeals. An implication of the polarization literature suggests candidates facing tough races in polarized districts might be tempted to “rally the base” through such appeals. Traditional Downsian logic, however, suggests downplaying such appeals in that race so as to try and remain as close to the median voter as possible. I find that candidates are still following traditional Downsian logic as candidates from competitive districts are less likely to use explicit partisan appeals. I also investigate partisan asymmetry in ad usage, but beyond a higher baseline use of ideological labels by Republicans, I find no evidence that the underlying strategic relationship differs between parties. These results suggest, that competition might mitigate polarization at the elite level even if, as the previous results suggested, it might be exacerbating it at the voter level. This work has is currently under review at *Political Communications*.

Future research on this topic would go in two directions. First, I would be interested in looking at how identity appeals work in a primary election. Absent party cues, candidates may feel the need paint themselves as the most representative candidate of the in-group through usage of identity appeals in order to win the primary. Second, I would be interested in collaborating with colleagues with more expertise in content analysis techniques to develop measures of implicit identity content in advertisements in order to look at the strategic usage of “dog-whistle” appeals, particularly regarding racial identity appeals.

Other Work and Interests

Outside of affective polarization, I’ve engaged in multiple other projects covering topics in representation and political behavior. I recently coauthored an article with Michael Peress that was

published in *Public Choice*. We used Project Vote Smart's National Political Awareness Test to improve dynamic estimations of congressional candidate ideology to better account for change across time than traditional methods such as DW-NOMINATE, resulting in evidence that Democratic members of Congress become more liberal over their time in Congress while Republicans replaced by more conservative members. We also use these estimates to find candidates are somewhat responsive to elections, but that selection effects are primarily the reason for congruence between candidates and the district.

I've also coauthored a second, unpublished paper with Michael Peress that investigates voter placement of candidate ideology. Using CCES roll call vote data, we were able to place candidates, voters, and voter perceptions of candidates on the same ideological scale. Using these estimates, we explored what factors influence people's perceptions of candidate ideology and how that translates into vote choice. We found that low-information voters will project their own positions onto candidates while high-information voters, while somewhat more accurate, also tend to assume their candidates are moderate while the opposing party's candidates are extreme. The actual positions of House candidates, however, have minimal effects on vote choice, with some evidence provided to suggest people may instead rely on cues from the party's higher office candidates as a source of information.

In addition to the potential future projects discussed earlier, I have several additional interests that provides opportunities to collaborate with other researchers. Racial and religious identities are particularly powerful at encouraging people to sort into parties, and the recent increase in the political mobilization of women suggests a potential for more sorting across gender identity and feminist attitudes. While I have not yet embarked on a research project devoted to these topics, I have begun to incorporate some of this research into my teaching. For example, in my American Ideology course I include work on black conservatism and African-American politics to discuss why African-Americans vote for the Democratic Party at such high rates. I am eager to work with others with more expertise in these fields on how these identities are mobilized for political action.

Overall, my research interests cover a wide range of topics but ultimately centers around an interest in how people understand the relationship between themselves and political parties. My main research agenda focuses on how this relationship is affected by competition, which sets a foundation for bridging the behavioral and psychology literature with institutional design research. The myriad of potential branching off points – particularly those dealing with more specialized identities such as race, religion, and gender - also provides many opportunities to collaborate with my potential future colleagues. Through investigating these relationships, I aim to better understand the impact of groups on American politics and to potentially develop ways to reduce the negative affect prevalent in polarized politics.