

# **The Effect of Learning on Affective Polarization**

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## Abstract

*In a difficult era of American politics, it is important to understand why tensions are so high and if anything can be done to reduce the vitriol felt in politics today. A major factor contributing to this phenomenon is known as affective polarization, or the increasingly negative feelings or antipathy partisans feel towards each other or towards the opposite group (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012). The increasing effects of affective polarization are so high that dislike felt between political parties is even greater than that felt between racial or religious groups in the United States (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012). This study seeks to find a long-lasting solution to reduce these effects through education. By education partisans on the topic of affective polarization, it is hypothesized that the effects of affective polarization will be reduced and that partisans will retain the information learned. Through a panel design consisting of one survey taken both before and after a lecture regarding affective polarization, it was found that one session of education taught partisans about affective polarization but did not decrease their affect. A more representative sample size, more education sessions, and more influential contact with the opposite group might help to improve results in future studies.*

## Intro

The United State is experiencing increasingly high political tensions in seemingly every echelon of politics—among both politicians and the general public. It’s a rare occurrence to avoid news headlines depicting the impassable chasm of bipartisanship or a political debate on your Facebook newsfeed. It’s a time of high stakes and high opinions.

While scholars don’t agree on every aspect of this growing disparity, they do agree that a major contributing factor is affective polarization (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008, Fiorina et. al. 2005, Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012, Mason 2018). Affective polarization is the increasingly negative feelings partisans feel towards each other is, and it is increasing over time (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012). This phenomenon, surprisingly, exists independent of ideology, or what partisans think about particular issues or policy (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012, Mason 2018). In fact, scholars do not even agree on whether or not the American public is polarized along lines of issue position, otherwise known as ideological polarization (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008, Fiorina et. al. 2005). And yet the two major American political parties continue to function with

sports team-like bases who celebrate party wins and losses as if they were personal wins and losses (Mason 2018).

Part of the effects felt from affective polarization are due to the fact that humans, not just political partisans, naturally favor the group and members of the group that they are a part of over the opposing group (Turner, Brown, & Tajfel 1979). It can be difficult to change someone's opinion or reduce their negative feelings towards the outgroup because this is largely part of human nature (Turner, Brown, & Tajfel 1979). Even though it's difficult, it does not mean it cannot be done, and this study attempts to find a means to accomplish a form of affective polarization reduction.

Research shows that educating people on a topic can help increase positive attitudinal changes on that topic (Pangiotou et. al 2008, Rillotta et. al. 2007). In order to help reduce the effects of affective polarization, this research used a panel study to survey participants both before and after educating them on the overall topic of affective polarization and its effects to measure whether or not the information had been retained and if attitudes had improved. While the results ultimately showed an increase in knowledge, no significant change in attitudes was demonstrated. Although these results did not fully validate the hypothesis, the study still shows promising means for achieving these results in future research.

## **Literature Review**

### **Polarization**

The topic of polarization and its various forms are contentious issues among scholars, largely due to the fact that opposing sides of this vast body of research greatly contradict each other. While this can make it difficult to fully grasp the ideas, it somehow seems fitting.

Polarization is broken up into two categories: ideological and affective polarization (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008, Fiorina et. al. 2005, Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012, Mason 2018). Ideological polarization is the idea that people (Americans, the political elite, etc.) are polarized on issue positions (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008, Fiorina et. al. 2005). In the American system, this is typically illustrated by opposing positions that Democrats and Republicans take on most issues. While scholars disagree on the polarization of the American public, one aspect they agree upon is the idea that Congress is ideologically polarized (McCarty and Rosenthal 1987, McCarty et. al. 2006). McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (1987) identify and describe the ideological polarization present in Congress which characterizes trends that have fundamentally changed America politics in recent years. Their research shows that Congress is polarized along ideological lines and those divisions tend to align with the Republican and Democratic parties, with increasingly less overlap between the parties (McCarty et. al. 2006). Because congressional representatives run on party platforms and therefore typically vote in favor of the party's position on those issues—particularly with roll call voting—it is clear to see why scholars agree that Congress is ideologically polarized (McCarty et. al. 2006).

However, while that may be the consensus regarding Congress, two main groups of researchers disagree on whether or not the American public is ideologically polarized. Abramowitz and Saunders (2008) believe that the American public—and specifically the well-educated and politically engaged segments—is ideologically polarized and has been increasingly so since the 1980s. Fiorina, Abrams and Pope (2005, 2008, 2008) on the other hand believe that ideological polarization is not occurring among the mass American public, rather it can only be seen among the political elite and activists. Ultimately, the opposing claims these groups of

researchers make demonstrate a divide among political scientists regarding ideological polarization.

While ideological polarization is a very contentious issue with no clear consensus, it is generally agreed that another form of polarization is occurring in the mass public: affective polarization (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012). Affective polarization is the negative feelings or antipathy a partisan has towards the opposing party, and it is increasing over time (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012). These are the feelings that makes it difficult to engage meaningfully and positively with the opposite party—often times, a partisan has negative feelings or holds negative opinions towards the opposite party or partisans who belong to that party simply because they belong to the out-party. Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes (2012) examined American National Election Studies (ANES) data from 1975 to 2008 and found that, while partisans have continued to rate their own party at an average of 70 on a 0-100 feeling thermometer scale (where a 0 is a cold, negative feeling and 100 is a warm, positive feeling) over the time period, they are steadily rating the opposing party lower and lower. Additionally, the political party polarization cleavage has grown even greater than either racial or religious cleavages in the United States over the last three decades (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012). The negative feelings that partisans feel towards each other are growing while racial and religious tensions are subsiding (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012). They also contrasted affective polarization in America to that in the United Kingdom and found that social distances felt between American partisans far exceeds those felt among British partisans, further demonstrating that this level of affective polarization is a fairly unique American occurrence (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012).

Mason (2018) expands upon this phenomenon by discussing social polarization as an extension of affective polarization. Affective polarization does not, however, directly correlate

with ideology or ideological polarization—these types of polarization deal more with the feelings associated with political identity. However, affective and social polarization are increasing more quickly than disagreement over policy (Mason 2018). Because social polarization is defined as “the prejudice, anger, and activism on behalf of that prejudice and anger,” it seems as though partisans disagree more than they actually do when looking at policy opinions (Mason 2018, p. 4). It is arguably affective polarization, more so than ideological polarization, that drives partisans apart and makes it difficult to talk about politics in the current American climate. If there is an inherent negative feeling towards a group that is not a partisan’s own, it is difficult to overcome those feelings and produce political compromise.

While it may seem logical to say that differing ideologies would push partisans apart and spur negative feelings, there is no consensus amongst researchers that this is occurring, and it would seem as though affective polarization is the driving force. The additional effects of social polarization are enough to create such affect between partisans that the growing feelings of negativity towards each other are widening the chasm between parties.

### **Group Identity**

Identifying with a group, in this case a political party, and the favoritism that comes with that identification contributes significantly to the existence and effects of affective polarization. Social identity theory suggests that part of our individual self-concept is derived from our association with a group, and that association tends to result in ingroup favoritism or bias (Turner, Brown, & Tajfel 1979). Not only is identifying with the ingroup an essential component of social identity theory, but so is favoring the ingroup over the outgroup in “behavior, attitudes, preferences or perceptions” in ways that are potentially “unfair or unjustifiable” (Turner, Brown, & Tajfel 1979). Ultimately, the ingroup is simply defined as the group that one feels a sense of

belonging to while the outgroup is the opposite, and people favor their ingroup over the outgroup (Turner, Brown, & Tajfel 1979).

A prime example in support of social identity theory is the Robbers Cave Experiment conducted in 1954 (Sherif 1988). Researchers recruited 22 fifth-grade boys who were all white, Protestant, and middle class and divided them into two teams, the Eagles and the Rattlers, who stayed at separate campsites for the three-week duration of the experiment (Sherif 1988). Over the course of the experiment, the two groups demonstrated increasingly negative feelings towards each other (Sherif 1988). The Eagles and the Rattlers performed in ways completely partial to their assigned groups, even though there was empirically no difference between the makeup of the groups and no participant had previously known any other participant (Sherif 1988). Both the Eagles and the Rattlers privileged their ingroup in every instance possible, simply because they belonged to that group. Only by presenting the groups with tasks that they had to work together to accomplish could the researchers lessen the warlike feelings enough for the boys to agree to ride home on the same bus together (Sherif 1988). This experiment was one of the first to conduct an in-depth examination of the causes and effects of group membership and intergroup conflict, and these results parallel those seen in terms of the growing affective polarization between American partisans.

Tajfel's famous minimal groups experiment also demonstrates the effects of social identity theory (1980). In this experiment, when participants were asked to allocate money to members of their randomly assigned ingroup and outgroup, they favored their ingroup, even though it was comprised of people they had never and would never meet (Brown, Turner, & Tajfel 1980). In fact, "under certain circumstances, the *mere perception* of belonging to one of two distinct groups is sufficient for ingroup bias in the distribution of monetary rewards



(emphasis mine)” (Turner, Brown, & Tajfel 1979, p. 188). This idea can also be applied to the Eagles and the Rattlers, albeit on a somewhat larger stage. While the participants in Tajfel’s (1980) study had only been assigned to groups minutes before they were to decide how to allocate money, the Eagles and the Rattlers had much more time to form cohesive groups, allowing for stronger group identities to mature (Sherif 1988).

However, because ingroup bias resulting from either strong or minimal group membership is “very deeply rooted in human psychological function,” its effects are difficult to overcome (Mason 2018, p. 11). Humans want to belong to groups, and they want to belong to groups that appear to be like them on the whole, so it would be impossible to ever completely eradicate the existence and effects of ingroups and outgroups. Not only that, but individuals tend to distance themselves from the outgroup by establishing “positively valued differences (positively discrepant comparisons)” between the ingroup and the outgroup (Turner, Brown, & Tajfel 1979, p.190). In searching for these positively valued differences, individuals seek to achieve a positive social identity in line with their ingroup that can also lead to “biases in behavior, evaluations and perceptions” toward the outgroup (Turner, Brown, & Tajfel 1979, p.190). Not only are ingroups created on a psychological level, but they are also established and retained to improve a social identity.

Tajfel (1979) has defined four necessary conditions for ingroup bias to be expressed, which speak to the ingroup bias that is seen between political parties. These conditions necessitate that individuals must identify themselves within the in-group, and it must be used to define their sense of self (Turner, Brown, & Tajfel 1979). Additionally, intergroup comparison must be relevant in a given situation, the groups must perceive each other as relevant comparison groups, and the actual dimensions of comparison must be somewhat ambiguous (Turner, Brown,

& Tajfel 1979). This idea also applies to partisans in that they take on their ingroup identity (ex. Republican or Democrat) to also define themselves and their social identity (Turner, Brown, & Tajfel 1979, Mason 2018).

Mason argues that social polarization, or “an increasing social distance between Democrats and Republicans,” is made up of three phenomena: “increased partisan bias, increased emotional reactivity, and increased activism,” which is also contributing to affective polarization (2018, p. 17). In other words, this type of polarization—which feeds into social sorting and partisanship—is due to a partisan’s ingroup bias or “partisan prejudice,” the sense that the party’s wins and losses are felt like personal wins and losses or “emotional reactivity,” and that strong partisans are those who tend to be most active, but also those who cannot be convinced to change their minds or “political action” (Mason 2018, p. 17, 23). Ultimately, the stronger a partisan’s identity is with the ingroup, the stronger these other phenomena occur.

A significant component of social polarization that Mason argues is what is known as “sorting,” which allows for the phenomena mentioned above to occur (2018). Social sorting, and specifically socially sorted parties, occurs when a large portion of the members of one group are also members of another group, and those separate identities become aligned (Mason 2018). “When multiple identities align [in this manner]...people are less tolerant, more biased, and feel angrier at the people in their outgroups” (Mason 2018, p. 61). While we’ve always had partisans with cross-cutting identities, their disappearance has transformed the US into ANES, Mason describes the identities that firmly align among Democrats to be “liberal, secular, urban, low-income, Hispanic, and black” while “Republicans are now solidly conservative, middle class or wealthy, rural, churchgoing, and white” (2018, p. 26). Partisans are now so sorted that identities affiliated with one party are extremely unlikely to be affiliated with the other party, meaning that

partisanship can now be thought of as a “mega-identity” rather than just a political one, including religious values, social class, and the like (Mason 2018). These types of strongly sorted partisans are greatly increasing, and partisans with cross-cutting identities (people whose identities come from those aligned both with Democrats and Republicans) are almost nonexistent in America today (Mason 2018, Abramowitz and Saunders 2008, Boven and Judd 2012). This is unfortunate because strong partisans who are also strongly sorted are typically those who take the most political action but cannot be convinced to change their minds and are therefore less open-minded than partisans with cross-cutting cleavages (Mason 2018).

In today’s political climate, those with open minds who are willing to compromise are necessary for bridging the gap between parties. Unfortunately, those types of partisans are nearly nonexistent. The existence of socially sorted parties is also evidence that social or party identity and policy preference can be separated which contributes to why American partisans have become “more biased, intolerant, angry, and politically active than their policy disagreement can explain” (Mason 2018, p. 22). For example, just because a partisan identifies as a Democrat (his social identity), it does not mean that he always agrees with policy positions that the Democratic party typically champions. This could also help explain why researches cannot agree on whether or not the American public is ideologically polarized.

The existence of ingroup and outgroup identities, socially sorted parties, and partisanship are all contributing factors to affective polarization. Once a partisan’s identities align with a party, they are more likely to become a highly sorted partisan which then results in ingroup bias with that party. That partisan is much more angered or upset over party defeats than policy defeats (Mason 2018). A partisan with strong ingroup bias roots for his or her party as one would for a sports team and as partisanship increases with an increased ingroup bias, so does that

partisan's affective polarization. Due to this ingroup bias, the partisan then has an increasing sense of dislike for the opposing party, simply because it is the outgroup, not because of policy or ideological differences. Ultimately, partisans identify more with a party due to these social cleavages, rather than ideology, which results in ingroup bias and subsequent affective polarization towards the other party. The engrained nature of group identity into the psychology of humans makes the task of reducing affective polarization seem daunting. However, not only has this been previously attempted, but research shows that this idea does not seem impossible.

### **Affective Polarization Reduction**

As stated, the ultimate goal of this research is to find a long-lasting means of reducing affective polarization and it should come as no surprise that reducing affective polarization has been attempted before. However, while many studies resulted in positive outcomes in polarization reduction, it is unclear whether or not any changes observed had a lasting impact on participants once the study was finished. A comprehensive list of the scholarship already exists, and they work to reduce the effects of ingroups and outgroups by mitigating biases (Iyengar, et. al. 2018) Additionally, some approaches have attempted to make “partisan identities less salient” or “other identities more salient” (Iyengar, et. al. 2018, p.19).

An approach by Ahler and Sood (Forthcoming) attempted to correct misperceptions and stereotypes about the composition of an opposing party in order to reduce animus. Ultimately, the study found that animus is lessened when partisans realize that the outgroup is more similar to themselves or the ingroup than they had previously thought (Ahler and Sood, Forthcoming). Part of the reason that partisans dislike the outgroup is that they incorrectly view the two groups to be significantly different from one another, when that is not actually the case (Ahler and Sood, Forthcoming). This can be explained by Allport's Social Contact Theory, which

states that group members “easily exaggerate the degree of difference between groups, and readily misunderstand the grounds for it” ([1954] 1979, p. 19). This notion of separation often leads to both genuine and imagined conflicts, which then has the potential to increase the dislike or animosity between the groups (Allport [1954] 1979). In reducing this ingroup bias, researchers were able to reduce affective polarization.

Levendusky (2018) took a different approach in attempting to reach across the aisle and heighten both Democrats’ and Republicans’ identity as one group—Americans—in order to lessen the negative feelings associated with a disliked partisan out-group. When subjects had their American identity primed, they were “25% less likely to rate the other party at 0 degrees on a feeling thermometer scale, and 35% more likely to rate the other party at 50 degrees or higher” (Iyengar, et. al. 2018, p.20, Levendusky 2018). Ultimately, by uniting Democrats and Republicans under one identity rather than emphasizing the identities that divide them, partisan animus subsided (Levendusky 2018).

While these studies are promising, they are limited in their takeaways. Showing that it is, in fact, possible to reduce affective polarization “within the confines of a survey experiment” is certainly an important contribution to polarization reduction, it is even more important for future research to demonstrate that these effects can be generalized and long-lasting. (Iyengar, et. al. 2018, p.22). So how can affective polarization be truly reduced in a generalized manner? Can that reduction have a lasting effect?

### **Intergroup Contact Theory and Education**

The ultimate question for this research is whether or not educating partisans on the topic of affective polarization can reduce the effects of it long-term, and intergroup contact theory plays a large role in determining whether or not that is possible. However, while intergroup

contact theory is important to the literature on educating participants to change an attitude or opinion, the current study is more concerned with learning in general. Although a large body of this research comes from topics regarding educating school children on students with disabilities to improve their opinions on being in classes with those students, the outcomes and processes by which these studies were conducted can be applied to the notion of affective polarization.

In 1954, Allport described the Intergroup Contact Theory which asserts that certain types of social contact can reduce prejudice between groups. Allport defines prejudice as a hostile attitude or feeling towards a person solely because he or she belongs to a group to which one has assigned objectionable qualities; and as a judgement which resists all facts and ignores truth and honesty (1954). Ultimately, prejudice can give an individual a false sense of worth (Allport 1954). The increasing prejudice among partisans certainly contributes to affective polarization, which can also be described as a hostile attitude or feeling a person has towards someone in the outgroup (Iyengar and Westwood 2015). Intergroup contact is certainly a useful tool in helping to reduce bias, but this study focused more on the following studies regarding education to help mitigate the effects of affective polarization.

Pangiotou et. al (2008) and Rillotta et. al (2007) both conducted studies regarding educating non-disabled children about their disabled classmates in order to improve the former group's opinions about sharing a classroom with disabled students. The results of these studies were overwhelmingly positive in showing that educating participants on a topic can reduce their negative feelings on that topic. Pangiotou et.al's research focused on providing non-disabled children with eight classes of a Paralympic Education Program to see if their opinions regarding mixed physical education classes with both disabled and non-disabled children would improve (2008). At the very beginning of the experiment, before any of the classes were held and directly

after the experiment was completed (about two weeks apart), the children were surveyed about their attitudes towards disabled children (Pangiotou et. al 2008). While there was no significant difference in the control group's responses pre- and post-test (the control group was not given the classes), inclusive education to non-disabled students about disabled students increased awareness and empathy and helped students to improve attitudes towards disabled students (Pangiotou et. al 2008). Ultimately, the results were only significant on a general attitude level, rather than on specific questions, and there was a small but significant attitude change, meaning there were increased positive attitudes towards disabled children by non-disabled children after the education (Pangiotou et. al 2008). These findings are encouraging in hypothesizing that education, and ideally repeated education, regarding affective polarization to partisans might result in similar outcomes.

A similar study by Rillotta and Nettelbeck, also regarding educating non-disabled students about disabled students, provides further insights on the topic (2007). They state that "[i]nclusive education has the potential to improve societal attitudes towards people with disabilities and to increase interaction between those with and without disabilities" which further supports the findings from Pangiotou et. al (Rillotta et. al 2007, p. 1). Additionally, "[l]ong-term attitudinal and behavioral change can be accomplished *through education and increased contact*, so more contact between students with and without a disability should result in recognition of shared similarities and therefore more social acceptance (emphasis mine)," meaning that, not only should education on a topic be able to change attitudes, but it also has the potential for long-term effects, which is an important factor for this research (Rillotta et. al 2007, p. 1). However, this second statement, translated into the topic of affective polarization, would suggest that improved attitude changes also requires increased contact with partisans of the opposite party, which is not

something that can be enforced on a day-to-day basis upon research participants in this case, or even during the study. While the takeaway from Rillotta is that repeated education and contact with a member of the opposite party is useful for improving opinions, this research was only able to focus on the learning component.

Ultimately, these studies suggest that education on a topic can improve attitudes, and that repeated education is more effective than a one-time occurrence (Pangiotou et. al 2008, Rillotta et. al. 2007, McKay 2018). Additionally, Intergroup Contact Theory suggests that the ideal scenario is one in which participants receive both repeated contact with a member of the opposite political party and repeated contact with the information, but there was limited focus on these aspects in this study (Allport 1954, Zajonc 2001). Due to this precedent, it can be hypothesized that a similar arrangement for educating partisans on affective polarization can improve their attitudes towards the opposite party. However, a point of possible contention is that the current American political climate is particularly tense and emotional since the 2016 presidential election. Because political tensions are so high, it might be a more difficult time to change attitudes and opinions. Conversely, if the hypothesis bears out under such tense times, then it stands to reason that education of affective polarization could improve attitudes under more moderate circumstances.

**Hypothesis 1:** Educating partisans about the existence and nature of affective polarization will reduce the effects of affective polarization and increase their understanding of affective polarization.

## **Method**

Although the research regarding disabled and non-disabled students suggests that repeated education can improve participants' opinions on a subject matter, this study was limited



to a panel survey with one education session. Participants were asked to answer a survey prior to attending a 45-minute lecture in which affective polarization and its causes and effects were discussed and were asked to answer the exact same survey a week after the first survey.

The survey asked for participants' email address, age, gender, and whether or not they are a student at the College of Charleston, where the research was conducted. This study was performed anonymously, and the collection of email addresses was not considered in the evaluation of the data; they were simply collected so that participants could receive the survey a second time seven days after they'd completed it the first time, as well as be assigned a randomized ID so that their results could be anonymously matched up. Participants were also asked for their party identification [*Strong Democrat, Weak Democrat, Independent, Weak Republican, Strong Republican*] and if they answered "Independent," they were then asked if they identify closer to the Republican or Democratic Party. In order to assess participants' perceptions of both parties, they were asked to rate each party on a feeling thermometer from 0-100 with 0 being a negative feeling and 100 being a positive feeling. To further assess these feelings, participants were asked whether or not they'd marry someone from a different political party and whether or not they'd ever be roommates with someone from a different political party, as well as which positive and negative adjectives from a list they would assign each party [*Lazy, Immoral, Moral, Dishonest, Unintelligent, Hard-working, Closed-minded, Honest, Intelligent, Open-minded, or None of the above*].

Because this study centers around affective polarization, and the lecture addressed this topic, it was important to assess participants' knowledge of the topic before receiving any education, as well as after to determine whether or not they had retained the information they had learned. In order to do this, participants were asked whether or not they'd ever heard of the terms

“affective polarization” and “ideological polarization,” and what the difference between the two terms is [A) *Affective polarization is about peoples’ issue positions becoming more extreme over time, while ideological polarization is the negative feelings or antipathy a partisan has towards the opposing party increasing over time.*; B) *Affective polarization is the negative feelings or antipathy a partisan has towards the opposing party increasing over time while ideological polarization is about people's issue positions becoming more extreme over time.*; C) *Ideological polarization means that Democrats and Republicans are growing farther apart in their issue positions, while affective polarization means that people increasingly care less about politics.*; D) *Unsure, with B being the correct answer*].

After having completed the survey, participants were asked to attend a 45-minute lecture entitled “Polarization and the State of Partisan Hostility in America” given by College of Charleston Assistant Professor of Political Science Dr. Karyn Amira, where the overarching trends and findings of affective polarization were discussed, predominantly from Iyengar, Sook and Lelkes’ previously mentioned 2012 study “Affect, Not Ideology.” Participants then received an email with the exact same survey and were asked to complete it a second time after having attended the lecture. Participants were predominantly recruited through various departments at College of Charleston including the Political Science Department, and some professors offered students extra credit points to participate in the three parts of this study. The data collected was then analyzed among each participant to see if there had been any change in their survey answers after having attended the lecture.

## **Findings**

Out of the 85 first round survey responses received, 41 participants both attended the lecture and took the survey a second time. For the purpose of this research, only the responses of

the 41 participants who took the survey a second time are noteworthy because the differences between responses had to be measured. The majority of respondents were College of Charleston students (only one said s/he was not a CofC student). The average age of participants was 22.5, and the gender breakdown was as follows: 39% male, 58.6% female, and 2.4% identifying as other.

Respondents overwhelmingly identified as Democrat (71%) over Republican (29%). While most participants' political identity remained the same between survey responses as shown in Table 1, four respondents' identities varied. One participant originally identified as a Strong Democrat in the first survey but identified as a Weak Democrat in the second; one participant originally identified as a Weak Republican and changed to identifying as a Strong Republican in the second survey; and two participants identified as Strong Democrats originally but identified as Independents who more closely identify with Democrats in the second survey. Because their answers were not consistent, their identities were not included in the breakdown shown in Table 1. While it's possible these inconsistencies are due to the lecture, it's more likely that they are simply the result of human error.

Identifier	Number of Respondents
Strong Democrat	13
Weak Democrat	7
Independent (Democrat)	6
Independent (Republican)	6
Weak Republican	3
Strong Republican	2

**Table 1. Respondents' Political Identity**

Perhaps the most important part of this research was whether or not participants could accurately identify the difference between affective and ideological polarization in the second survey after they had attended the lecture. Of the 41 participants, 29% correctly identified the difference in both surveys, 22% did not know the difference after having attended the lecture, and 49% who did not previously know the difference between affective and ideological polarization, or said they knew but chose the wrong answer in the first survey answered the question correctly in second. 49% of respondents correctly learned the difference between affective and ideological polarization and for another 29%, the information was reinforcement about an already known topic.

Those 20 participants who properly learned the difference between affective and ideological polarization between the two surveys are the most important data points to analyze. Because the data demonstrates that they learned the intended message of the lecture, it was also hypothesized that the effects of affective polarization would be lessened. According to the ANES data, the average in-party rating on a feeling thermometer scale of 0-100 is 70 (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012). While both Democrats and Republicans in this study averaged around 70 on the feeling thermometer, Democrats' answers decreased an average of 4.9 points between the two surveys and Republicans' answers decreased an average of 3.8 points as shown in Table 2. Additionally, Democrats' out-party rating increased an average of 1.9 points between the two surveys, and Republicans' out-party rating increased an average of 4.5 points. While we cannot say whether or not these results are a direct cause of the education, nor that participants' affect was definitively decreased, they are hopeful results in that opinions towards both the in-party and the out-party have the potential to change.

	<b>Democrats: In-Party</b>	<b>Democrats: Out-Party</b>	<b>Republicans: In-Party</b>	<b>Republicans: Out-Party</b>
<b>Survey 1</b>	79.5	32.9	63.4	45.3
<b>Survey 2</b>	74.6	34.8	59.2	49.8
<b>Difference</b>	4.9 Decrease	1.9 Increase	3.8 Decrease	4.5 Increase

**Table 2. Average feeling thermometer ratings**

The additional questions used in the survey of whether or not a partisan would marry or be roommates with someone from the opposite party are often used to gauge affect. However, these results saw almost no change between the surveys. There is very minimal change in answers seen in both questions among both groups measured. If affect were truly decreased, it would be expected to see respondents who originally answered “probably not” or “unsure” to change their answers to “probably” during the second survey.

<b>Roommate Question</b>	<b>All 41 participants</b>		<b>20 participants who learned difference</b>	
	<b>Survey 1</b>	<b>Survey 2</b>	<b>Survey 1</b>	<b>Survey 2</b>
<b>Probably</b>	59%	59%	65%	70%
<b>Probably Not</b>	34%	32%	20%	20%
<b>Unsure</b>	7%	9%	15%	10%

**Table 4. Breakdown of answers to question between both surveys: Would you ever be roommates with someone from a different political party?**

<b>Marriage Question</b>	<b>All 41 participants</b>		<b>20 participants who learned difference</b>	
	<b>Survey 1</b>	<b>Survey 2</b>	<b>Survey 1</b>	<b>Survey 2</b>
<b>Probably</b>	80%	80%	55%	55%
<b>Probably Not</b>	17%	15%	35%	35%
<b>Unsure</b>	3%	5%	10%	10%

**Table 5. Breakdown of answers to question between both surveys: Would you ever marry someone from a different political party?**

The last question asked participants to assign adjectives from a list to each party [*Lazy, Immoral, Moral, Dishonest, Unintelligent, Hard-working, Closed-minded, Honest, Intelligent, Open-minded, or None of the above*]. Overwhelmingly participants' answers stayed the same between the two surveys. If specific adjective choices changed, the overall positivity or negativity to the adjectives chosen remained constant. To show a significant decrease in affect, participants would have had to choose more positive or neutral adjectives to describe the opposing party during the second survey, compared with more negative adjectives chosen in the first survey. This was not the case, so the difference in adjective choice did not demonstrate an improvement of opinion among participants. As shown in Table 6, the percentage of negative traits assigned to Republicans by Democrats stayed fairly consistent, and while the percentage of negative traits assigned to Democrats by Republicans was 8% lower, the actual number of traits increased. Participants often stayed consistent in assigning either positive or negative traits as a whole but were not always consistent with exactly the same traits between the two surveys. Overall, the second survey did not show a decrease in affect but did show an increased understanding about the nature of affective polarization.

	<b>Democrats: Out-Party</b>	<b>Democrats: Out-Party</b>	<b>Republicans: Out-Party</b>	<b>Republicans: Out-Party</b>
	<b>Survey 1</b>	<b>Survey 2</b>	<b>Survey 1</b>	<b>Survey 2</b>
<b>Number of Positive Traits Assigned</b>	20	17	5	9
<b>Number of Negative Traits Assigned</b>	50	43	13	16
<b>Percentage of Negative Traits Assigned Out of Total Number of Traits</b>	71%	72%	72%	64%

**Table 6. Assessment of positive and negative traits assigned from a list to the out-party.**

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

This study helped to validate one part of the stated hypothesis, but not the other. Educating partisans on the topic of affective polarization increased their knowledge about the topic but did not necessarily indicate a decrease in the effects of affective polarization. 78% of participants accurately identified the difference between affective and ideological polarization after having attended the lecture. Only 22% of respondents did not correctly learn the difference. However, there was no significant positive change in questions measuring affect to determine that the effects of affective polarization were decreased. Although the out-party feeling thermometer ratings increased slightly, the other measures of affect did not show a decrease in affect. There are many possible reasons why this could be true.

First, the sample size of this study was not representative of the American population. Of the 41 participants who completed each aspect of the study, only one did not identify as a College of Charleston student, and the average age was 22.5. Additionally, 71% of participants identified as Democrats. Overall, the sample size was not well varied, and a future version of this study should seek to find a sample representative of the American public.

Another potential problem with the sample size is self-selection bias. Participants had to choose whether or not to participate in three different activities, and it could be hypothesized that those types of participants are more likely to be certain types of partisans, i.e. strong partisans. This could have also affected the outcome of the surveys because strong partisans are those who are less willing to change their minds and are potentially more affectively polarized. While this was not specifically tested or measured, this self-selection bias could have contributed to the lack of decreased affect.

A different challenge that could have hindered positive results is the current American political climate. The 2016 presidential election and the period since has been one of high political tension and emotion, and this heightened time of emotion could have also contributed to partisans retaining their affect. However, the difficulties surrounding sample size and the current political climate aren't the only aspects that could have contributed to the results of this study.

An important factor for the research concerned with improving opinions through learning found its best results through repeated sessions of education. Unfortunately, this study was limited to only one education session, and it is hypothesized that multiple lectures would likely show improved results. Additionally, there was no specific partisan-to-partisan interaction to aid the lessening of affect. Both the education research and Contact Theory suggest that social contact can lessen prejudice between groups (Allport 1954). If partisans were to have interacted with each other in meaningful ways, this could also have had the potential to decrease affect.

In order for a similar study to produce results most congruous with the hypothesis, a number of politically varied participants in a much larger sample should be identified. Ideally, those participants would identify as strong Democrats and Republicans because these types of partisans tend to be the most affectively polarized. The survey should remain the same and be administered both before and after partisans have received education on the topic, but there should be multiple education sessions. In the study regarding disabled and non-disabled children, students received eight education sessions which produced positive results, so a similar model could be taken in this instance (Pangiotou et. al 2008). There should be a mixed group of participants identifying as Democrats and Republicans with the educator's political affiliation remaining anonymous. Partisans would then not only be receiving education, but they would also be coming into social contact with the out-group, which is an important component.



While there have been positive results from affective polarization reduction studies, none of them have tested whether the results are long-lasting. Reducing affective polarization is critical in the current American political climate and implementing a study such as the one suggested here has the potential to both educate partisans on affective polarization and reduce its effects on the long-term. Although this study failed to reduce the effects of affective polarization, a strong majority of participants had learned of its existence, and that is a hopeful and positive result.

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