# Demonization

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# I. Introduction

The average American voter has increasingly come to see one of the two parties as ideologically extreme and socially distant. Many of these perceptions are clearly wrong, but they nevertheless provoke hostility and anger (Ahler and Sood 2018). At the same time, voters have not necessarily come to feel closer to the party that they perceive to be more proximate—an asymmetry that is sometimes referred to as "negative partisanship" (Abramowitz and Webster 2016).

What explains the dramatic rise of perceived polarization in party platforms, and the accompanying rise in hostility? Much of the existing literature on partisan polarization focuses largely on the notion that American politics can be understood as increasingly organized around a single dimension of political conflict. Issues can and do arise—like abortion, immigration, and gun control—that were once orthogonal to the main partisan dimension of conflict. But the prevailing political science literature argues that once elites push parties to take positions on new issues, they are quickly absorbed into the overarching left-right divide, as cross-pressured individuals who care about the new issues either "sort" themselves into the appropriate party, or if the issue is less salient, change their beliefs on the issue in order to comport with their party identification (Carsey and Layman 2006).

As a result of this process, there is an increasing consonance between ideological preferences, partisan identities, and racial and religious identities. Partisanship then becomes a strong social identity around which in-group out-group hostility is easily provoked (Mason 2014). In this story, voters *correctly* perceive that the parties are becoming increasingly ideologically and socially homogeneous, and cross-pressured voters—those with, for instance, conservative views on economic policy but center-left views on economic policy—become rarer over time.

This paper takes a very different perspective. We argue that as a theoretical matter, it is simply not plausible that the parties have become more homogeneous as they have staked out divergent positions on issues like race, abortion, and guns. And as an empirical matter, the parties have indeed become more heterogeneous during the era of rapid polarization—almost to the point of rupture—and large numbers of voters are still cross-pressured.

In fact, the parties' key challenge is to manage the multi-dimensional nature of voters' preferences, and find ways of putting together a winning coalition when many of the voters they

would like to attract will necessarily disagree with them on several issues. We develop a model in which voters have multi-dimensional preferences and social identities, but the salience of each issue and identity varies across individuals, as does the information voters have about the parties' platforms and attributes. The key actors in our model are party elites, who make strategic decisions about how to invest in informing voters about party platforms and attributes.

We show that it is often optimal to put few resources into informing voters about the platforms and attributes of one's own party, but rather, to invest in exposing those of the opposite party. In fact, the best strategy in this environment is to send targeted information about the opposing party on an issue-by-issue basis, attempting to inform voters whose preferences are especially far from the opposing party on a specific issue, and whose preferences are especially strong on that issue. This strategy is most attractive when parties are internally heterogeneous and factionalized, such that party message-makers can portray the platform of the most extreme faction in the out-party as the party's overall platform.

We refer to this practice of party messaging as "demonization." An important implication of this practice is that voters come to form their overall views of the more distant of the two parties based on a biased sample of platforms. When survey researchers ask respondents to place the political parties, and themselves, on a one-dimensional 7-point ideological scale, they are asking voters to collapse the multi-dimensional space into one dimension, and different voters will inevitably inform their assessments based on the issues they know about and care about, and these will vary from one voter to another. Those assessments are in turn colored by the parties' targeted messaging investments. With effective investments, a party might be able to adopt an increasingly extreme platform, even while convincing its supporters that the *other* party has become more extreme. We argue that this dynamic helps explain the rather striking rise in so-called affective polarization and negative partisanship in the United States. It also helps explain why affective polarization goes hand in hand not with increasing homogenization of the parties, as implied by much of the existing literature, but by increasing within-party discord.

We argue that the conditions giving rise to demonization tactics are especially pronounced in the United States. Demonization is an attractive strategy in a two-party system, where none of a party's demonization investments can be enjoyed by other competitors, and where coalition-building is unnecessary. And presidential democracy generates factionalized, heterogeneous parties that, in our model, facilitate extreme portrayals of the opposite party.

The conditions that give rise to demonization have also increased substantially in recent decades. First, the demand (or motive) for demonization has grown as Democratic dominance of Congress has faded and the fight for partisan control has become a constant concern since 1994. Second, the means of demonization have been afforded by the growth of the racial divide in American voting behavior, the politicization of new issues over time, and the increasing heterogeneity of opinion within the parties.

Finally, a crucial factor in the rise of demonization—and corresponding perceptions of out-party ideological and social distance—is the increasing availability of targeted messaging technologies for parties, including partisan cable news outlets, direct mail, and perhaps most importantly, internet and social media. Our model is related to a growing literature on the so-called "Fox News effect," which provides evidence of a causal impact of Fox News viewership on Republican voting (Della Vigna and Kaplan 2007; Hopkins and Ladd 2014; Martin and Yurukoglu 2017). We demonstrate that relative to other types of news, partisan cable news tends to pay disproportionate attention to elites with extreme issue positions. And using data from 2000, when the national rollout of Fox News was underway, we demonstrate that Republicans with access to Fox News viewed the Democratic presidential candidate, Albert Gore, as more liberal than those without Fox News access, while Fox News had no clear effect on their views of the Republican candidate. Moreover, consistent with Lelkes, Sood, and Iyengar (2015), those with internet access viewed Gore as more liberal, and Bush as more conservative, than those without.

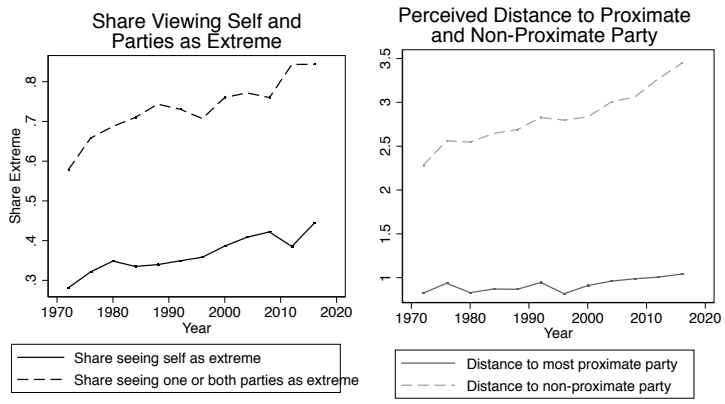
## II. Puzzles of Polarization

Compared with those of parties in other advanced industrial democracies, the objective platforms of the Democrats and Republicans—as measured by the comparative manifestos project—are not especially far apart (Rodden 2014). And when it comes to preferences on social and economic issues, as measured by the World Values Survey, Democratic and Republican respondents are not notably far apart relative to voters in other countries (Rodden 2014). However, in the Comparative Study of Electoral systems, when asked to place the parties on a one-dimensional ideological scale, Americans reveal that they *perceive* their parties as further apart than voters in any other advanced industrial democracy (Rodden 2019).

American partisans have come to view the opposite party's platform, and the beliefs of its supporters, as increasingly extreme, and increasingly distant from themselves. This pattern shows up clearly in time series analysis of the American National Election Study. Respondents are asked to place the parties on a 7-point scale, where 1 corresponds to "extremely liberal," 2 is "liberal," 3 is "slightly liberal," 4 is "moderate," 5 is "slightly conservative," 6 is "conservative," and 7 is "extremely conservative." Let us first examine the share of voters in each year who view themselves as falling at the extreme ends of the scale, identifying themselves as either 1 or 2 on the left, or 6 or 7 on the right. And let us also examine the share of voters who see either one party or both parties falling into those categories.

On the left-hand side of Figure 1, we can see that when forced to place themselves on a single ideological scale, most respondents choose one of the three "moderate" options. The share seeing themselves as relatively extreme has clearly increased, but these self-described ideologues still make up well under half of the population. However, respondents are now far more likely to view one or both of the parties as extreme. In 2016, 84 percent of respondents saw one or both parties in this way.

**Figure 1: Growing Perceptions of Party Extremity, 1972-2016 ANES**



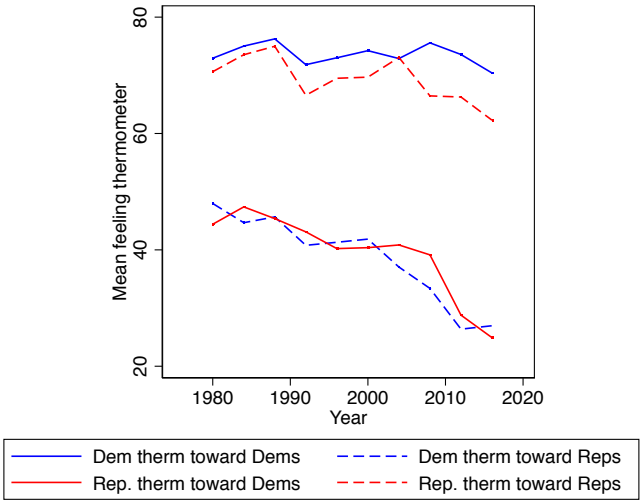

Extreme = 1-2 or 6-7 on 7-point scale

Moreover, voters now perceive a much greater ideological distance between themselves and the parties. The graph on the right-hand side of Figure 1 plots the average perceived ideological distance of each respondent to the most proximate party in each election year, as well as the perceived distance to the more distant of the two parties. The perceived distance to the non-proximate party has grown dramatically. But interestingly, the average perceived distance

to the most *proximate* party has not shrunk: rather, it has grown slightly, especially since 1996. On average, voters feel further from *both* parties than in the past.

This perception of increased ideological distance corresponds to increasing negative affect toward the out-party. Figure 2 displays yearly averages of "feeling thermometers" (from zero to 100) of self-described Democrats and Republicans (including "leaners") toward the two parties. Democrats and Republicans have both come to have extremely negative perceptions of the out-party. But the warmth expressed by Democrats toward their own party has been flat, while for Republicans, it has *decreased* substantially since the Reagan era.

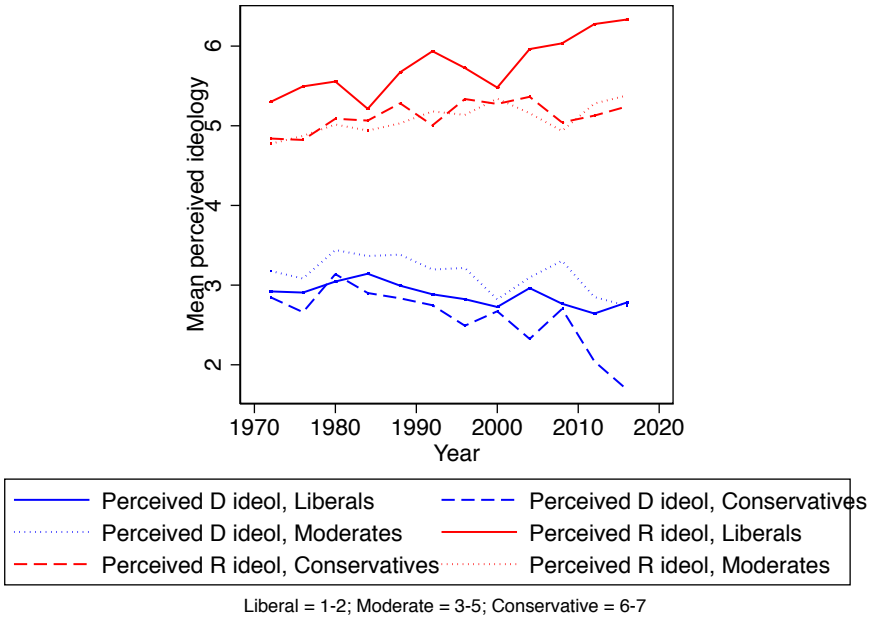
**Figure 2: Growing Negative Feelings Toward Out-Party, 1972-2016 ANES**




These perceptions of increased party extremity, and corresponding feelings of hostility, have not taken hold among all Americans. Rather, this phenomenon is limited largely to those who view themselves as relatively ideologically extreme. Figure 3 displays mean perceptions of the parties' ideology, broken down by extreme liberals (1 or 2), moderates (3-5), and extreme conservatives (6-7).

Moderates in 2016 do not see the parties very differently than did moderates in 1972. Conservatives look very similar to moderates in that their views of the Republican Party have changed very little over time. Likewise for Liberals, who do not view the Democrats as much further left than in the past. Perceptions of platform polarization are driven primarily by extremists, who believe that the out-party has become far more extreme. The same pattern can be observed with feeling thermometers: hostility toward the out-party is driven by those on the ideological extremes.

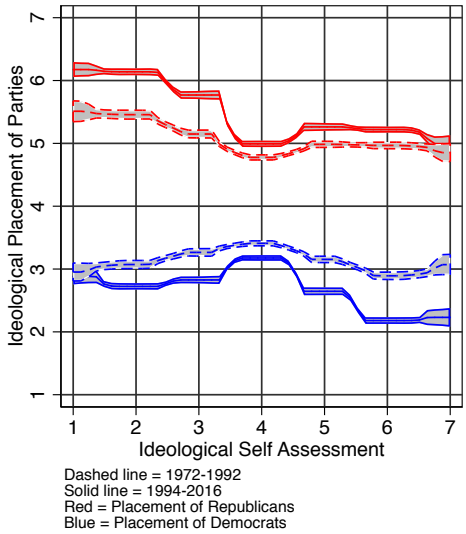
**Figure 3: Perceptions of Platform Polarization, by Ideology, 1972-2016 ANES**




Another way to view this phenomenon is provided by Figure 4, which divides the ANES studies into two periods: 1972-1992, and 1994-2016, and uses a local polynomial to show the relationship between self-assessed ideology and the perceived ideology of the two parties, separately for both period. It shows that extreme liberals do not see the Democratic Party as having changed at all, and they see it as far more moderate than themselves. And Conservatives assess the Republican Party today the same as in the past; that is, they continue to see it as far more moderate than themselves. Moderates do not see the parties as having become much more extreme. The perception of platform divergence is driven by the extremists, who now see the out-parties as extremely far from themselves, even while viewing their own party as (far too) moderate.

Liberals and conservatives cannot both be correct in their assessments of out-party ideology. Why have they come to perceive the out-party as quite extreme, while viewing their in-party as moderate? And why have they grown to feel more distant, and more hostile, toward the out-party while feeling no closer, and no warmer, to their in-party? The answer, it seems, must lie in some form of systematic misperception.

**Figure 4: Self-Assessed Ideology and Perceived Ideology of the Parties, 1972-1992 and 1994-2016**




## III. Building Blocks for a Theory of Perceived Platform Polarization

Most existing theories of polarization in the American political science literature argue that polarization is driven by elites, especially among Republicans, who have pushed the parties' platforms ever-further from the center in a single dimension of conflict. As explained by Barber and McCarty, an "important aspect of the increase in party polarization is the pronounced reduction in the dimensionality of political conflict" (2015, p. 22). In this consensus view, parties were once internally divided by issues related to race, religion, and region, but they have become increasingly homogeneous, as conservatives have sorted into the Republican Party, and liberals into the Democratic Party. To be sure, new issues have been politicized: elites have pushed the two parties to adopt opposing positions on issues like civil rights, gay rights, abortion, guns, and support for science. However, in the consensus view, with each new issue dimension that is politicized, cross-pressured voters resolve cognitive dissonance in one of two ways: either they sort into the appropriate party on the newly politicized dimension—especially if it is highly salient to the individual—or they simply change their views to bring them into alignment with their partisan identification if it is less salient (Carsey and Layman 2006). In this way, instead of cross-cutting cleavages, American politics comes to be characterized by a set of reinforcing cleavages that overlap with party.

As partisan identity and this increasingly one-dimensional ideology come into alignment, partisan identities only become stronger, and they overlap to a greater extent with racial and religious identities, which generates affect and anger (Mason 2014). Over time, the parties only become more homogeneous, as the "cooler heads inspired by cross-cutting identities are likely to be taking up a smaller portion of the electorate" (Mason 2016, page 351). The end result is a situation in which Democrats and Republicans look askance at one another as potential neighbors or in-laws (Iyengar et al 2019).

It is unclear, however, how this consensus view might explain the misperceptions described above. Why don't centrists also perceive the radicalization brought on by party elites? Why do extremists have such vastly different perceptions of the parties' platforms? Why is there no increased positive affect for, or perception of ideological proximity to, the in-party among extremists, who we might expect to be leading or at least cheering their parties' moves to the extremes?

A basic problem with the consensus view is that it is inconsistent with what mathematicians and statisticians refer to as the "curse of dimensionality." As parties have taken newly distinctive positions on new issue dimensions, unless voters' preferences are perfectly correlated with the main dimension of conflict, or unless cross-pressured voters immediately and costlessly change their views on less salient issues, on average, we should observe that the parties are becoming more *diverse* over time as new issues are politicized.

For instance, when socially conservative New Deal Democrats sorted into the Republican Party after it adopted conservative social platforms, or when working-class union members in the Midwest responded to the protectionist appeals of Donald Trump, the party's supporters became more heterogeneous on the economic dimension. As wealthy suburban knowledge economy workers have joined the Democratic Party, it too has become more heterogeneous.

In fact, we construct scales for social and economic preferences in the time series files for the ANES or the GSS, and note that the parties have become more heterogeneous on both dimensions over time (see Appendix). And a number of studies focusing on economic and social issues have shown that a large share of voters are "cross-pressured" in that they retain

preferences that are to the right of the national median on one dimension but to the left on the other (Treier and Hillygus 2009; Baldassarri and Goldberg 2014; Krasa and Polborn 2014).[1] Ahler and Broockman (2018) have shown that many voters are even extremists in opposite directions on different issue dimensions.

These observations are linked to a recent body of public opinion research counseling skepticism about the notion that voters have uniformly stable preferences and knowledge of the parties' platforms. Voters often do not provide the same answers to the same questions in multiple waves of a panel survey. It appears that there is a great deal of heterogeneity across voters such that different voters have stable preferences on different issues, and some have stable preferences on more issues than others. Preference stability is likely an indicator of issue salience. Moreover, it is clear that voters often do not even know the parties' platforms in various issue areas (Carsey and Layman 2006). Not surprisingly, voters are more likely to know the parties' platforms in the issues areas for which they have the most stable preferences (Freeder, Lenz, and Turney 2019). In all likelihood, these are the issues about which the voter cares the most.

We use these observations in the behavior literature as a starting point for our analysis. We consider politics to consist of multiple issue dimensions, and we formulate a model in which voters care more about some issues than others, and are broadly uninformed about the parties' platforms. The basic problem facing party elites is that the party has become increasingly heterogeneous as new issue dimensions have been politicized. As a matter of course, some of the voters they hope to attract and retain are closer to them on some issues but relatively far on others. Thus the challenge to party elites is one of optimal information revelation—or party messaging. The goal of party messaging is to generate among supporters the misperception that the cacophonous and heterogeneous out-party is, in fact, homogeneous and distant.

We argue that decades of successful messaging—enhanced by new targeting technologies—have created long-term misperceptions of the out-party, especially among the "base" of each respective party.

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[1] Treier and Hillygus (2009) estimate that between 35 and 40 percent of voters are cross-pressured. Baldassarri and Goldberg (2014) put that figure at 41 percent, while Feldman and Johnston (2014) bound it between 23 and 60 percent.

# IV. Electoral Competition over Voters' Information

Standard one-dimensional spatial models of electoral competition assume that voters costlessly learn all parties' issue positions. The parties bear no communication costs; and the voters bear no learning or attention costs. This much is true in both the Downsian (Downs 1957) and citizen-candidate (Osborne and Slivinski 1996; Besley and Coate 1997) modeling traditions.

Here, we consider a model in which voters are initially ignorant of the parties' positions and remain so unless some party bears the cost of informing them. Parties can target individual voters and inform them about either the party's own, or an opponent's, position on any issue. However, costs are convex increasing in the number of messages sent. What will parties' optimal strategies be?

We explore conditions under which the parties will prioritize providing voters with information about their opponent's most extreme issue positions, rather than clarifying their own. The model extends to the parties' ascriptive characteristics, such as their racial composition. Here, the conclusion is that informing voters that the other party has characteristics they disfavor trumps informing them of one's own favored characteristics.

Extant models of strategic issue emphasis (e.g., Dragu and Fan 2016; Ash et al. *) focus on parties' efforts to get voters to pay attention to particular issues, while holding fixed voters' knowledge of where the parties are located. Similarly, extant models of attitude priming (e.g., *) focus on parties' efforts to get voters to pay attention to particular ascriptive characteristics, while holding fixed voters' knowledge of those characteristics. In contrast, our model allows parties to inform voters about where the parties are located, or what the parties' ascriptive characteristics are, while holding fixed the weights that voters attach to different issues and characteristics. Depending on the size of the parties' messaging budgets, voters in our model can end up with a biased sample of information about the other party, and relatively little information about their own, prompting significant distaste for the other without a warm embrace of their own.

*The sequence of play*

We initially develop the model for the case of two parties, L (left) and R (right), competing in an n-dimensional policy space $[-1,1]^n$, for $n \geq 1$. The most extreme leftist position possible on any issue is normalized to -1, while the most extreme rightist position possible is

normalized to +1. The parties are exogenously endowed with positions $\mathbf{x_L} = (x_{L1},\ldots,x_{Ln})$ and $\mathbf{x_R} = (x_{R1},\ldots,x_{Rn})$, respectively.[2] Vectors will be given in **bold font**, scalars in regular font.

The parties can send messages to individual voters, informing them either of the sending party's position, or its opponent's position, on a given issue. We assume that messages must be truthful; and are sent simultaneously. Let $m_{PjQi} = 0$ if party $P \in \{L,R\}$ sends no message to voter j about the position of party $Q \in \{L,R\}$ on issue i, and $m_{PjQi} = 1$ if P sends such a message. Voters receiving a message from either party about Q's position on issue i become informed of that position. Let $\mathbf{m_P} = \{m_{PjQi}\}$ be the full set of message decisions that P makes, and let $N(\mathbf{m_P}) = \sum_j \sum_{Q\in\{L,R\}} \sum_i m_{PjQi}$ be the total number of messages sent by P.

We initially analyze optimal constrained messaging. Party P chooses $\mathbf{m_P}$ in order to maximize its probability of winning control of government, $\Pi_P(\mathbf{m_P},\mathbf{m_{-P}})$, subject to a budget constraint that it can send at most $T_P$ messages. In other words, $N(\mathbf{m_P}) \leq T_P$. We return later to examine how each party sets its budget constraint, which will depend on the cost of sending $T_P$ messages; how much the optimal messages will affect $\Pi_P(\mathbf{m_P},\mathbf{m_{-P}})$; and the value of winning control, B.

*Voters*

As in standard Downsian models, voters are not strategic actors in our account. Rather, they respond behaviorally to the parties' messages. We nonetheless describe voters' preferences in some detail, since the parties' anticipations of their behavior drives the model.
Voter j (for j = 1,…,J) has an ideal point $\mathbf{x_j} = (x_{j1},\ldots,x_{jn})$; and attaches a weight $\lambda_{ji} \geq 0$ to issue i. The weights sum to unity across issues and represent how much each voter cares about each issue. Voter j's utility from a given policy $\mathbf{x} = (x_1,\ldots,x_n)$ is $U_j(\mathbf{x}) = \sum_{i=1}^{n} \lambda_{ji} U_{ji}(x_i)$, where $U_{ji}(x_i) = -(x_i - x_{ji})^2$. In other words, voters have standard spatial utility functions on each issue and their overall utility is a weighted average of their issue-specific utilities.

[2] We leave platform choice outside our model, but it is fruitful to think of these platforms in the multi-dimensional space as having emerged from a dynamic something like that laid out by Miller and Schofield (year), where parties take new positions on additional issue dimensions in order to gain campaign contributions from elites with strong preferences on the previously un-politicized dimension.

We focus on the case in which all voters are either *leftists* ($x_{ji} < 0$ for all i) or *rightists* ($x_{ji} > 0$ for all i). We shall say that the leftist voters constitute party L's base, while the rightist voters constitute R's base; and let $Base_P > 0$ denote the number of voters in party P's base. (We consider cross-pressured voters in the extensions.) We say that j is a *single-issue* voter if $\lambda_{ji} \approx 1$ for some i. We say that a voter is a left-wing (resp., right-wing) *extremist* on issue i if $x_{ji} = -1$ (resp., $x_{ji} = 1$).

Let voter j's type, $t_j$, represent the probability that j knows any given party's position on any given issue. Standard spatial models assume $t_j = 1$ for all j; voters know all parties' positions. We shall consider the polar opposite case, in which $t_j = 0$ for all j; voters remain ignorant of all parties' positions unless informed by a party.

Voter j's utility for party P depends on which of P's issue positions s/he knows. If s/he does not know P's position on issue i, then s/he views P's position as a random draw from the population distribution. Let G denote the joint cumulative distribution function of the population ideal points across all issues. We assume that the marginal distribution for issue i, $G_i$, is symmetric and centered on $\mu_i$, the population median for issue i. We set the location of the median voter on each dimension to zero ($\mu_i = 0$ for all i); and assume that the parties are located symmetrically around the median on all issues ($x_{Ri} = -x_{Li} \in [0,1]$ for all i). Finally, we assume independence: voters' uncertainty about issue i does not depend on what they know about other issues ($G(\mathbf{x}) = \prod_{i=1}^{n} G_i(x_i)$). (We consider relaxing the symmetry and independence assumptions later, showing that they are not crucial for our main results.)

We assume that voters are risk neutral. Thus, letting $X_{Gi}$ denote a random variable corresponding to one draw from the distribution $G_i$, $EU_{ji}(X_{Gi}) = U_{ji}(\mu_i)$. In other words, the expected utility of the lottery $X_{Gi}$ on issue i equals the payoff from the certain outcome $\mu_i$ corresponding to the lottery's expected value.

Let $R_{jPi}(\mathbf{m_P},\mathbf{m_{-P}}) = 1$ if at least one party informs j of party P's position on issue i ($m_{LjPi} + m_{RjPi} > 0$), and let $R_{jPi}(\mathbf{m_P},\mathbf{m_{-P}}) = 0$ otherwise ($m_{LjPi} + m_{RjPi} = 0$). Then j's utility for party P's platform, $\mathbf{x_P}$, given the parties' messages, is

$$U_j[\mathbf{x_P},\mathbf{m_P},\mathbf{m_{-P}}] = \sum_{i=1}^{n} \lambda_{ji}[R_{jPi}(\boldsymbol{m_P},\boldsymbol{m_{-P}})U_{ji}(x_{Pi}) + (1 - R_{jPi}(\boldsymbol{m_P},\boldsymbol{m_{-P}}))U_{ji}(\mu_i)] \qquad (1)$$

In other words, j's overall utility for P is a weighted average of P's issue-by-issue positions, either known (when $R_{jPi}(\mathbf{m_P},\mathbf{m_{-P}}) = 1$) or inferred to be at the median (otherwise).

To describe j's voting behavior, let $\Delta_j(\mathbf{m_P},\mathbf{m_{-P}}) = U_j[\mathbf{x_L},\mathbf{m_P},\mathbf{m_{-P}}] - U_j[\mathbf{x_R},\mathbf{m_P},\mathbf{m_{-P}}]$ denote how much greater j's payoff from L's policies is than j's payoff from R's policies, given the parties' messages. Voter j votes for party L if $\Delta_j(\mathbf{m_P},\mathbf{m_{-P}}) + \varepsilon > c_j$, for party R if $\Delta_j(\mathbf{m_P},\mathbf{m_{-P}}) + \varepsilon < -c_j$, and abstains otherwise. Here, ε is a symmetric mean-zero shock with variance $\sigma_\varepsilon^2$; and $c_j > 0$ is a parameter reflecting j's relative cost of participation. Thus, in expectation voter j will vote for L if and only if the utility differential is large enough ($\Delta_j > c_j > 0$).[3]

*The parties' messaging strategies*

Having described voters' payoffs, we now consider parties' messaging strategies. Neither party has any incentive to contact voters in the other party's base. Were P to inform such a voter of either its own position, or -P's position, on any issue, the voter would like P less relative to -P. Thus, we can focus on P's incentives to contact a voter j in its own base.

Because j is initially uninformed, if neither party informs him/her, then s/he will view both parties as equivalent lotteries. Hence, the utility differential will be zero ($\Delta_j(\mathbf{0},\mathbf{0}) = 0$). Let $\Delta_{jPi}$ denote the increase in j's utility differential, due to j learning party P's position on issue i (while remaining ignorant about all other issue positions). Table 1 displays $\Delta_{jRi}$ and $\Delta_{jDi}$. (Details of the derivation of these formulas are given in the appendix.

Table 1: The effect of informing one leftist voter about one party's position on one issue

| How much $\Delta_j$ increases after j learns… | |
|---|---|
| R's position on issue i | L's position on issue i |
| $\Delta_{jRi} = 2\lambda_{ji}x_{Ri}\left(\frac{x_{Ri}}{2} - x_{ji}\right) > 0$ | $\Delta_{jLi} = -2\lambda_{ji}x_{Di}\left(\frac{x_{Li}}{2} - x_{ji}\right)\begin{cases} < 0 \; if \; x_{ji} > x_{Li}/2 \\ = 0 \; if \; x_{ji} = x_{Li}/2 \\ > 0 \; if \; x_{ji} < x_{Li}/2 \end{cases}$ |

From the formulas in Table 1, it follows that

[3] Different models of voter behavior yield different values of $c_j$. For example, the pivotal voter model famously yields an extremely large $c_j$ (due to dividing the direct cost of voting by the tiny probability of being pivotal), thus implying a very low turnout rate (Palfrey and Rosenthal *). This particular implication disappears in models of strategic mobilization (e.g., Shachar and Nalebuff *; Cox et al. *) or ethical voting (e.g., *). We assume that $c_j$ is an independent draw from a distribution with support on $[c,\infty)$ for some $c > 0$.

**Proposition 1**: L is always better off exposing R's position than clarifying its own, when communicating about any given issue to any voter in its base.

Proof: Given that $x_{Ri} = -x_{Li} > 0$, it follows that $2\lambda_{ji}x_{Ri} = -2\lambda_{ji}x_{Li}$ and, hence, $\Delta_{jRi} - \Delta_{jLi} \geq (x_{Ri} - x_{Li})/2 > 0$ for all ji such that j is leftist. QED.

The intuition for this result is that each voter suffers convex increasing losses as a party's position on a given issue diverges more from that voter's issue-specific ideal point. Thus, since leftist voters are always further from R than from D, it pays to inform them of R's position first. All told, the model predicts that L will adopt one of three messaging strategies vis-à-vis voter j and issue i: tell j nothing about i; tell j only about R's position on i; or tell j about both R's and L's position on i.

A corollary to Proposition 1 follows with some additional notation. Let the minimum number of messages that would suffice to induce j to vote for L be $N_{jL}$. This "message cost" determines the order in which party L will contact voters. Let $N^1_{jL} = \min_j N_{jL}$ be the lowest message cost, $N^2_{jL} = \min_j \{N_{jL} : N_{jL} > N^1_{jL}\}$ be the second-lowest message cost, and so forth. Let the set of voters with the $h^{th}$-lowest message cost be $N^h_{jL}$. If a voter in $N^h_{jL}$ is contacted (in an optimal strategy), they will receive $N^h_{jL}$ messages, which can be partitioned into $N^h_{jL}(L)$ messages about L's positions on selected issues, and $N^h_{jL}(R)$ messages about R's positions on a possibly different set of issues.

**Corollary 1**: The share of L's messages that expose R's positions, $E_L$, weakly exceeds 0.5.

Proof: Proposition 1 implies that, if L sends a message to voter j about its own position on issue i, then it will also send a message to voter j about R's position on issue i. Thus, $N^h_{jL}(L) \leq N^h_{jL}(R)$ for all j $\in N^h_{jL}$; and $E_L = \dfrac{\sum_h \sum_{j \in N^h_{jL}} N^h_{jL}(R)}{\sum_h \sum_{j \in N^h_{jL}} N^h_{jL}(L) + \sum_h \sum_{j \in N^h_{jL}} N^h_{jL}(R)} \geq 0.5$. QED.

We can also characterize the issues about which L communicates to j:

**Proposition 2**: Suppose it is optimal for L to inform j of m issue positions adopted by R. Renumber the issues so that 1 = $\arg\max_i \lambda_{ji} x_{Ri}\left(\frac{x_{Ri}}{2} - x_{ji}\right)$, 2 = $\arg\max_{i>1} \lambda_{ji} x_{Ri}\left(\frac{x_{Ri}}{2} - x_{ji}\right)$, and so forth. Then L will inform j of R's first m positions.

Proof: Direct from Table 1.

In other words, when sending messages about party R's positions, L gets the biggest response by informing j of the issue on which the product $\lambda_{ji}x_{Ri}\left(\frac{x_{Ri}}{2} - x_{ji}\right)$, reflecting j's distaste for R's position, is the largest. L seeks to tell j about issues that j cares deeply about ($\lambda_{ji}$ is large) and on which R's position is both far from zero ($x_{Ri}$ is large) and far from j's position ( $\left(\frac{x_{Ri}}{2} - x_{ji}\right)$ is large). Voter j thus ends up knowing the m positions of R with which s/he disagrees the most strongly. Unless m = n, this sample causes j to believe that R's platform ($\mathbf{x_R}$) is further from j's ideal point than s/he would were s/he to learn a representative sample of size m of R's positions.[4]

*Non-spatial issues*

The model extends straightforwardly to some non-spatial issues. For example, suppose that voter j cares about the perceived collective interests of white people, and thus cares about the proportion of a party's Members of Congress who are white. We can then include each party's racial composition as another "issue" on which the voter evaluates them. Assuming j suffers convex increasing utility loss, as a particular party's share of whites diverges from the voter's ideal, then the same notation can be used and the same results follow. Parties will tell their base more about the other party's racial composition than about their own; and they will target their messages to those in their base who hold the most extreme and intense views.

[4] Of course, this conclusion relies on voters not working out parties' strategies and making inferences from them. Rational ignorance provides some justification for this assumption.

[Next draft: Analysis of additional issue dimensions, and extension to cross-pressured voters goes here. When parties' platforms diverge on a new issue dimension, demonization increases. Basic logic also applies to cross-pressured voters under some conditions].

*Summary*

We have shown conditions under which political parties will prioritize "demonizing" their opponents—exposing their most extreme policy positions and their most disliked ascriptive characteristics—over clarifying their own positions. While we have made several strong simplifying assumptions to exposit the model, relaxing them does not destroy, but may mitigate, incentives to demonize. In the next section, we consider the structural conditions that render demonization an attractive strategy in the contemporary US.

## V. Trends in American Demonization

Why did America's political parties engage in relatively little demonization until the last generation or so? Under what conditions will the incentives analyzed above lead to a heavier use of demonization? In this section, we explore parties' motives, means and opportunities to engage in demonization, arguing that structural changes in our politics have provided a perfect storm. We contend that the institutional structure of American democracy encourages demonization, and that this phenomenon has increased over time in the United States because of both an increased demand for it among the parties, and increased supply of technologies that allow them to achieve it more efficiently.

*Message costs and benefits*

If messages are costly, then parties will send them only when the stakes are high enough. Party P's goal is to get the best chance of winning control of government at the least cost. Formally, P seeks to solve the following maximization problem:

$$\max_{\boldsymbol{m_P}} \Pi_P(\boldsymbol{m_P}, \boldsymbol{m_{-P}})B - c(N(\boldsymbol{m_P})),$$

where $c(N(\boldsymbol{m_P})$ is the cost of sending $N(\boldsymbol{m_P})$ messages. If the majority pivot probability, here defined as the probability that the optimal $N(\boldsymbol{m_P})$ messages will snatch victory from the jaws of

defeat, is negligible, then the benefit of demonizing messages is not worth the cost. Thus, a pre-condition for nasty politics is that the majority pivot probability be high enough.

A sea-change in this pivot probability occurred in 1994, when the Republicans ended a forty-year period in the minority and captured the US House. In the generation prior to 1994, the minimum uniform swing in the vote share that the Republicans would have needed in order to secure a majority was about 0.08, which was nearly three times the standard deviation of the two-party vote share in that period (Bonica and Cox 2017, p. 211). Since 1994, in contrast, competition for control of the House has been consistently closer than it was during the period of Democratic hegemony (Lee 2017; Bonica and Cox 2017), with changes in party control occurring in 2006, 2010, and 2018. Our model suggests that the return of close competition for majority status in the US House should have sparked (1) an increase in the parties' messaging budgets; and (2) a more intense use of demonization tactics. Let's consider each of these in turn.

We know that the two parties invested heavily in messaging infrastructure in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Evans, 2001, pp. 219–220). Immediately after the Republicans' historic victory, the parties significantly increased staff support for their leaders. Trendless 1981-1994, leadership staff levels jumped roughly 25% (or three standard deviations) in both 1995 and 1996, as the two parties' competing message operations girded for battle (Lee, 2017, Figure 6.2b). Since 1994, the parties have implemented centralized strategies of public communication (Sinclair 2006). Perhaps the most dramatic illustration of this is Gentzkow *et al*.'s (2019, p. 17) demonstration that partisanship in the use of language in congressional debates "was low and relatively constant until the early 1990s, then exploded, reaching unprecedented heights in recent years." The increasingly disciplined use of phrases and slogans by each party's congresspersons in and after 1994 coincided with a sharp shift toward party-centered voting in congressional elections (Bonica and Cox 2017).

Did increasing competition for unified control of the federal government also lead to increasing demonization? Yes, for two main reasons. First, demonizing the other party's positions or personnel is a relatively ineffective strategy if voters are candidate-centered. Prior to 1994, when "all politics was local," a local candidate could less easily be tarred with the national party's sins. After 1994's sharp shift toward party-centered voting—from roughly 25% party-centered before to 75% party-centered after (Bonica and Cox 2017)—demonizing one's opponent paid dividends across the country. Second, as noted above, the central leaderships'

messaging budgets increased in size after 1994. Given our model, this should have led to a more intense use of demonizing messages.

*Message targetability*

Another factor influencing the use of demonization tactics is the technology of messaging. Cheaper and more targetable messaging should encourage the use of attacks on the other party and make it more effective. Lowering the cost is similar to increasing the benefit of messaging. Improving targetability allows parties to inform only those they wish to receive the message, avoiding voters for whom the information would be counter-productive.

There is substantial evidence that communication technology changed in the 1980s and 1990s so as to lower costs and improve targetability. [Add citations].

[Next draft: formalize the main intuition with a model of "broadcast" versus "targeted" media.]

*The racial divide*

We have argued that after 1994, the parties had increased motive and means for demonization. In this and the next section, we discuss opportunity: two latent factors of American politics provided raw material that was ripe for exploitation.

America's racial divide was given an entirely new meaning by the Voting Rights Act and Civil Rights Act, both enacted in 1965. These enactments propelled a major realignment of American politics, beginning with Nixon's "southern strategy" and capped by the emergence of the solid Republican south in 1994 (cites *). Over time, high proportions of African-Americans affiliated with the Democratic party, while white southerners abandoned their traditional party for the Republicans (cites *). As the parties polarized in terms of racial composition, racial priming became increasingly available as a tactic.

It made less sense to send voters messages about the racial composition of the out-party at a time when both parties were racially heterogeneous. However, the asymmetry that has emerged in recent years—a racially homogeneous Republican party and a racially heterogeneous Democratic Party with a strong base of minorities—has created strong incentives for Republican elites to develop messaging strategies informing their voters about the influence of minorities on the Democratic Party. Of course Republicans are far from homogeneous in their attitudes about

race. However, better targeting technology makes it possible to target messages to those who might be most receptive to racial appeals.

*Internal divisions within the parties*

Another latent factor of American politics that the two parties had the opportunity to exploit in the post-1994 era was the internal division of the parties. Unlike parliamentary democracies, where the threat of a no-confidence vote enforces greater party discipline and clearer party platforms, presidential democracy allows diverse factions to thrive within parties. Some candidates in the United States, for instance, explicitly reject their party's platform and attempt to undercut party leaders. Political geography plays an important role. As progressives have become increasingly concentrated in cities, and conservatives in rural areas, the ideology of the constituents represented by urban Democrats in the House of Representatives is quite different from that represented by Democrats competing in pivotal suburban or mixed districts, and each attempts to craft their own version of the party platform. We have already discussed internal divisions associated with the rise of multiple issue dimensions, but here we consider within-party divisions on specific issues. To illustrate this point, suppose that parties are coalitions of factions, each of which may stake out its own position. Let $\sigma^2_{Pi}$ denote the variance of *publicly visible* views within party P on issue i. Considering the case in which the variance is the same across all issues and parties (i.e., $\sigma^2_{Pi} = \sigma^2$ for all Pi), we shall argue that the incentives to "expose" the other party, rather than clarify one's own policies, become even more pronounced as the within-party variance in visible policy preferences ($\sigma^2$) increases.

We maintain two of the baseline model's assumptions—that each party's leadership is a unitary actor controlling the party's messaging operation; and that they are constrained to be consistent across voters. They can send only a single message about what the party's own, or the other party's, position is on a given issue—not different messages to different voters.

As regards messages about R's position, the L leaders have a natural strategy. On any given issue, they should identify the most extreme position held by any R and inform leftist voters of that position. This provides truthful and consistent, but selective, information. The larger is $\sigma^2$, the more extreme is the most extreme R position (on any issue), and the more the L leadership will benefit by informing its base of that position.

As regards messages about their own party's positions, diversity of views does not help. Since the party has articulated a position on issue i, namely $x_{Di}$, the only message that satisfies the consistency constraint informs voters of that position. In other words, when it comes to the party's own positions, increasing $\sigma^2$ affords the L leadership no new messaging options.

All told, increasing $\sigma^2$ increases the payoff to exposing the other party's positions, while leaving the payoff to clarifying one's own positions unchanged. Thus, increasing internal division (represented by $\sigma^2$) increases the parties' incentives to expose each other's positions, rather than clarify their own policies. And since they can highlight the most radical among their opponents' positions, factionalization also contributes to voters' misperceptions about the out-party's platform.

*Summary: A perfect storm*

American politics since 1994 has provided the two parties with the motive, means and opportunity to demonize each other. The motive stemmed from the resumption of close competition for unified control of the US government and its component branches. The means were available thanks partly to the parties' decisions to invest in communication infrastructure and partly to new communication technologies that enable increasingly targeted messages to be sent. The opportunity existed thanks to America's racial divide and the internal divisions of parties that naturally arise in presidential systems.

*A case in point: The Squad*

To illustrate the sort of politics that the perfect storm has produced, consider President Trump's series of tweets attacking four freshman House Democrats, all women of color on the progressive wing of the party. This particular attack had the advantage of simultaneously communicating to the Republican base that the Democrats were "too non-white," "too urban," "too progressive," and "insufficiently supportive of Israel." On the non-white front, the tweet used language (suggesting that the women "go back" to the "places from which they came") that Democrats would foreseeably view as racist, thereby guaranteeing a huge audience for the tweet and priming racial resentment within the Republican base. At the same time, Republicans could,

if it better suited their personal or electoral needs, claim that the real target of the tweets was the extreme "socialist" views of the women (as, for example, Liz Cheney and Kevin McCarthy did).

## VI. The Rise of Polarized Platform Perceptions

Above all, our model provides an explanation for the puzzling phenomenon, illustrated above, whereby ideologues view the out-party as increasingly extreme while continuing to view their own party as moderate. Parties face strong incentives to invest in targeted messaging aimed at convincing their most likely allies of the opposite party's extremity. These targeted messages are conveyed in a variety of ways, but without a doubt, the rise of partisan media over the last two decades is the primary means of demonization. Scholars have paid special attention to the rise of Fox News (Della Vigna and Kaplan 2007; Hopkins and Ladd 2014; Martin and Yurukoglu 2017). The key claim in this literature is that on a single dimension of ideological conflict, Fox News convinces its viewers to become more conservative, thus increasing their likelihood of voting for Republicans. The central empirical effort has been to document that Fox News has a causal impact on Republican voting.

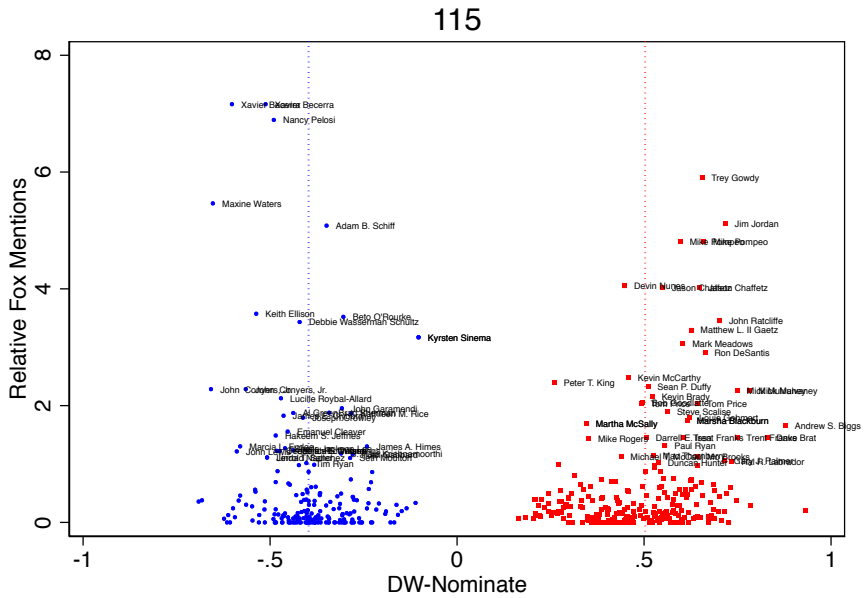
Our model implies a different, perhaps complementary role for partisan media—demonization of the out-party. We first briefly examine the content of partisan cable news, and then examine its impact on perceptions of platform polarization.

### *Content of Partisan Cable News*

It takes only a few minutes watching Fox News to ascertain that an important objective of its programming is to portray Democrats as extreme. [We have conducted Nexis-Lexis searches for the name of each member of Congress for each Congress, summing up all mentions on Fox, MSNBC, and in all news sources collected by Nexis-Lexis. We calculate an index of relative mentions on partisan media relative to other forms of media. We are still working on the empirical analysis, but it appears that these news sources pay more attention to extremists. For instance, the coverage of "the squad" on Fox News is extraordinary. Fox also appears to pay disproportionate attention to African American members of Congress. The

Figure below provides some feel for the data.]

**Figure 5: Content of Fox News: Coverage of House Members**




*Impact of Partisan Cable News*

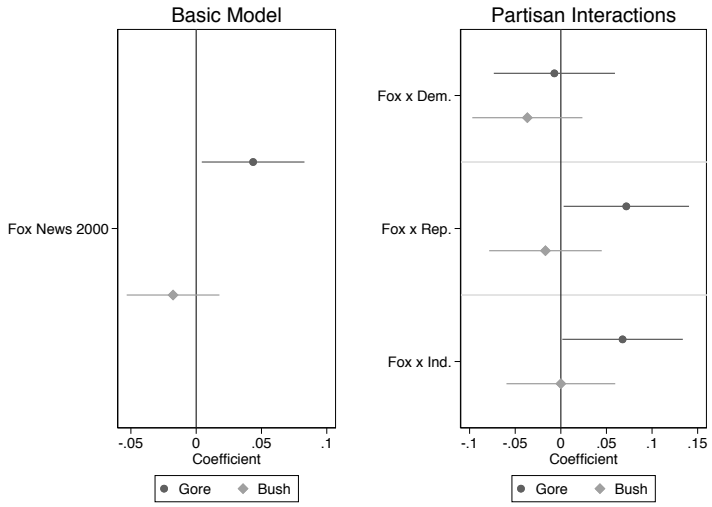
Next, we examine the impact of the rollout of Fox News on voters' perceptions. Della Vigna and Kaplan (2007) collected town-level data on the availability of Fox News on local Cable systems in 2000 for a large part of the United States—a time when Fox was only available in some locales and not others. Hopkins and Ladd (2014) linked this geographic information with the 2000 National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES). [Include a sentence here on what these authors found about balance, correlates of Fox availability, etc. Maybe a long footnote. Also need to talk about Martin's claims that there are inaccuracies]. We obtained the data on Fox News availability from Hopkins and Ladd (2014), and instead of analyzing vote intention, we examine perceptions of the ideology of the presidential candidates.

Respondents were asked to place George W. Bush and Albert Gore on a 5-point scale: 1 (very conservative), 2 (conservative), 3 (moderate), 4 (liberal), and 5 (very liberal). Our expectation is that since a large part of Fox programming is dedicated to convincing the viewer that Democrats are extremely liberal, respondents in areas where Fox News was available will have reported a more liberal perception of Gore. Moreover, since these messages are largely targeted at Republicans and independents, we expect that any such effect will be driven by those groups. First, we simply regress the perceptions of the two candidates on Fox News availability,

partisanship, ideological self-identification on the same five-point scale, as well as a typical host of control variables, including gender, age, race, Hispanic identification, church attendance, urban or rural residence, union membership, and state fixed effects. Second, we estimate a similar model, interacting the Fox News indicator with dummy variables for Democrats, Republicans, and independents.

The coefficients are displayed in Figure 6, and the full results are presented in the appendix. The results indicate that those who lived in an area where Fox News was available were no different in their assessment of Bush's ideology than those who lived in places where it was not yet available. However, there was a small but statistically significant difference in their assessment of Gore's ideology. Gore was viewed as more liberal by a little over .04 of 1 point on the five-point scale. Next, the model with partisan interactions reveals that this effect was driven by the likely targets of demonization efforts—independents and especially Republicans—but not Democrats.

**Figure 6: Coefficient Plots, 2000 NAES Regressions of Ideological Assessments of Presidential Candidates on Fox News Availability**



An alternative approach to using the continuous scale is to generate a dummy variable for whether or not the respondent viewed Gore as "very liberal." With this approach, there is no difference between those with and without Fox News availability among Democrats and independents, but Republicans were more likely to view Gore as an extreme liberal. The share of Republicans who viewed Gore as an extreme liberal was around 22.7 percent in areas without access to Fox News, but 25.1 percent in areas with Fox News access.

[Another possible empirical analysis here is to use IV approach to broadband expansion, and show that broadband expansion is associated with increasing perceptions of platform polarization. We can already see an effect like this with self-reported online access in the 2000 NAES, when only around half of the respondents reported having access.]

## VII. Conclusions

One of the most puzzling features of American-style polarization is that increasing hostility between affiliates of the two parties has gone hand in hand with increasing discord *within* the parties, and flat or declining identification with the in-party. Existing theories of polarization focus on a single dimension of conflict that evokes increasing emotion and hostility as additional issues and identities come to reinforce it. Instead, we have offered a theory about how voters, in a multi-dimensional issue space, come to adopt biased notions of the out-party's ideology and characteristics because of investments by the in-party in a steady diet of targeted messages about the out-party's most extreme positions in issue areas that each voter cares most about. This type of messaging has become more prevalent, and more efficient, in the era of cable news, internet, and social media.

We have provided preliminary evidence about the impact of partisan cable news on voters' perceptions that the out-party is extreme. Our model also yields testable claims about the types of voters parties try to reach with their demonization efforts, and about who knows what about the parties' platforms. For instance, we suspect that strong and passionate advocates of gun rights who also weakly prefer higher taxes on the wealthy are likely to have good information about the most extreme positions on gun control taken in the Democratic Party, but less information about Republican platforms on that issue, and little information about either party's positions on taxation.

Finally, future work might build further insights about the electoral institutions and party systems that facilitate demonization. Heavy investments in information revelation about one's most extreme enemies make most sense in a two-party system. In a multi-party system, demonization of one set of opponents could have benefits for other ideologically proximate opponents, and demonization of one's proximate opponents could undermine efforts to build governing coalitions. Thus we anticipate that parties are less likely to invest in demonization in multi-party systems, and voters are likely to have better information about the parties' platforms, and perhaps warmer feelings toward the in-party, as the number of parties increases, and as the parties take a wider range of positions in the multi-dimensional issue space. In a related matter, demonization is most attractive as a strategy when the parties are diverse, heterogeneous, and internally factionalized, which is most likely to be the case in a presidential system with a small number of weak, undisciplined parties.

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## Appendix

Table A1: Regression Results, NAES, Bush and Gore Ideological Assessment

| | Gore | Bush |
|---|---|---|
| Fox News 2000 | 0.044 | -0.018 |
| | (0.020)** | (0.018) |
| Democrat | -0.149 | -0.077 |
| | (0.021)*** | (0.019)*** |
| Republican | 0.357 | -0.073 |
| | (0.022)*** | (0.019)*** |
| Own ideology | -0.096 | -0.012 |
| | (0.010)*** | (0.009) |
| Male | 0.139 | -0.014 |
| | (0.017)*** | (0.015) |
| Age | 0.001 | -0.000 |
| | (0.001)** | (0.000) |
| Black | -0.159 | 0.117 |
| | (0.035)*** | (0.032)*** |
| Hispanic | -0.210 | 0.056 |
| | (0.050)*** | (0.045) |
| Education | 0.074 | -0.074 |
| | (0.004)*** | (0.003)*** |
| Church | -0.027 | -0.010 |
| | (0.007)*** | (0.006) |
| Urban | -0.008 | -0.016 |
| | (0.022) | (0.020) |
| Rural | -0.055 | 0.031 |
| | (0.023)** | (0.021) |
| Union | -0.039 | 0.000 |
| | (0.021)* | (0.019) |
| Constant | 3.664 | 2.936 |
| | (0.648)*** | (0.586)*** |
| $R^2$ | 0.13 | 0.05 |
| *N* | 12,032 | 12,219 |

* $p<0.1$; ** $p<0.05$; *** $p<0.01$

Note, the dependent variable is a five-point scale for which higher numbers indicate that the respondent believes the candidate to be more *liberal*. State fixed effects not displayed.

Table A2: Regression Results, NAES, Bush and Gore Ideological Assessment, Interactions with Partisanship

| | Gore | Bush |
|---|---|---|
| Fox x Dem. | -0.007 | -0.037 |
| | (0.034) | (0.031) |
| Fox x Rep. | 0.072 | -0.017 |
| | (0.035)** | (0.031) |
| Fox x Ind. | 0.068 | 0.000 |
| | (0.034)** | (0.030) |
| Democrat | -0.132 | -0.069 |
| | (0.024)*** | (0.021)*** |
| Republican | 0.356 | -0.069 |
| | (0.025)*** | (0.022)*** |
| Own ideology | -0.096 | -0.012 |
| | (0.010)*** | (0.009) |
| Male | 0.139 | -0.014 |
| | (0.017)*** | (0.015) |
| Age | 0.001 | -0.000 |
| | (0.001)** | (0.000) |
| Black | -0.157 | 0.117 |
| | (0.035)*** | (0.032)*** |
| Hispanic | -0.209 | 0.056 |
| | (0.050)*** | (0.045) |
| Education | 0.074 | -0.074 |
| | (0.004)*** | (0.003)*** |
| Church | -0.027 | -0.010 |
| | (0.007)*** | (0.006) |
| Urban | -0.008 | -0.016 |
| | (0.022) | (0.020) |
| Rural | -0.054 | 0.031 |
| | (0.023)** | (0.021) |
| Union | -0.039 | 0.000 |
| | (0.021)* | (0.019) |
| Constant | 3.697 | 2.946 |
| | (0.648)*** | (0.586)*** |
| $R^2$ | 0.13 | 0.05 |
| *N* | 12,032 | 12,219 |

* $p<0.1$; ** $p<0.05$; *** $p<0.01$

Note, the dependent variable is a five-point scale for which higher numbers indicate that the respondent believes the candidate to be more *liberal*. State fixed effects not displayed.