Peak Polarization?
The Rise of Partisan-Ideological Consistency and its Consequences

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demonize the political opposition by portraying Democrats as dangerous radicals seeking to undermine traditional American values and impose socialism on the nation (Strahan and Palazzolo 2004; Zelizer 2020). The rise of the Gingrich Republicans coincided with another key development—the growth of partisan and ideological media outlets that made it easy for Americans to find news and information aligned with their personal preferences (Levendusky 2013; Smith and Searles 2014). Republicans, especially, have become heavily dependent on one such outlet: Fox News (Jurkowitz et al., 2020).

Democrats and Republicans were deeply divided long before 2016. However, Donald Trump's candidacy and presidency raised the intensity of partisan conflict in Washington and the nation to a new level (Jacobson 2016). Dislike and mistrust of the opposing party and its leaders set new records during Trump's presidency. So did voter turnout in the 2018 midterm election and the 2020 presidential election. Voters on both sides of the partisan divide sensed that the stakes in these contests were enormous (Nuzzo 2018; Galston 2020).

Despite Trump's defeat and banishment from social media and the efforts of his successor, Joe Biden, to tamp down the intensity of partisan conflict, the divide between Democrats and Republicans in Washington and the nation appears to be as deep as ever in 2021. The former president and many of his fellow Republicans have persisted in questioning the legitimacy of Biden's election—an effort that led to a violent insurrection in the nation's capital on January 6th of 2021 and an unsuccessful effort by a large number of congressional Republicans to block the [illegible] (Yourish, Buchanan and Lu 2021).

disagreement as an important driver of polarization within the electorate.[1] Many scholars continue to view ideological thinking as largely confined to political elites and perhaps a small minority of activists much as Converse found in his research (Bishop 2004; Kinder 2006; Fiorina, Abrams and Pope 2010; Kinder and Kalmoe 2017). Indeed, some have argued that policy disagreement has little or nothing to do with growing dislike of the opposing party. Instead, these ideology skeptics view growing partisan polarization as one aspect of the rise of identity politics—a tendency of Americans to views their partisan identity as connected to a larger set of social identities such as race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, social class and region. According to this social identity theory, a growing association between overlapping social identities and partisanship has led Americans to view the political world as divided into teams consisting of those on our side and those on the opposing side (Green, Palmquist and Schickler 2002; Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012; Iyengar and Westwood 2014; Mason 2014, 2018; West and Iyengar 2020)

In this paper, I present evidence from American National Election Studies surveys showing that correlations among ideological identification, issue positions and party identification have increased dramatically within the electorate over the past half century. As a result, the divide between Democratic and Republican identifiers on the ideological identification scale has widened considerably. Then, using the extensive battery of issue questions included in the 2020 ANES survey, I show that a single underlying liberal-conservative dimension largely explains the policy preferences of ordinary Americans across a wide range of issues including the size and scope of the welfare state, abortion, gay and transgender rights, race relations, immigration, gun contr

conservative issue scale is highly polarized with Democratic identifiers and leaners located overwhelmingly on the left, Republican identifiers and leaners located overwhelmingly on the right and little overlap between the two distributions. Finally, I show that location on the liberal-conservative issue scale strongly influences affective evaluations of the presidential candidates and political parties in 2020 and is a powerful predictor of voter decision-making. Ideologically consistent respondents are far more likely to have polarized evaluations of presidential

Democratic Party leaders and conservative positions as those adopted by the large majority of Republican Party leaders. Thus, I identify support for abortion rights and opposition to building a wall along the U.S. border with Mexico as liberal positions and opposition to abortion rights and support for building a wall on the border as conservative positions because those are now the positions supported by the vast majority of Democratic and Republican elected officials and party leaders. Issues such as trade agreements and tariffs on which there are not clear differences between party positions are therefore not included in my measure of liberal vs. conservative ideology.

Partisan-ideological consistency is important because it is a key component of partisan conflict. The greater the number of issues on which partisans disagree, the more intense that disagreement is likely to be and the more likely it is to affect other opinions and behavior. When partisans agree with their own party's position on some issues while agreeing with the opposing party on others, they should be less likely to hold extremely negative opinions of the opposing party and to view its leaders as enemies who must be defeated at all costs. In contrast, when partisans agree with their own party on almost all issues and disagree with the opposing party on almost all issues, they should be more likely to hold extremely negative views of the opposing party and to view its leaders as enemies who must be defeated at all costs.

Of course, issue disagreement is not the only reason for dislike and mistrust of the opposing party. In the United States, supporters of the two major parties differ in terms of characteristics such as race, ethnicity, social class, religion, region and urbanism. Overlapping differences in social background characteristics can contribute to perceptions of those on the other side of the party divide as different, strange or even threatening (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012; Iyengar and Westwood 2014; Mason 2014; 2018). However, partisan-ideological

polarization theory leads me to expect ideological disagreement to be the most important source of negative opinions of the opposing party and its leaders and therefore to exert a strong influence on voter attitudes and decision-making.

The Rise of Partisan-Ideological Consistency

The rise of partisan-ideological consistency within the American electorate is readily observable in American National Election Studies surveys conducted between 1972, the first year that a question measuring ideological identification was included in the survey, and 2020. Table 1 displays Pearson product-moment correlations among party identification, ideological identification and four issue questions—government aid to Blacks, government responsibility for health insurance, government responsibility for jobs and incomes and abortion rights—at 12-year intervals between 1972 and 2020. The first three questions were added to the ANES survey starting in 1972. However, the abortion question was not added until 1980.[2]

[Table 1 goes here]

The results displayed in Table 1 show that there has been a dramatic increase in partisan ideological consistency since 1972. As recently as 1984, during Ronald Reagan's presidency, the correlation between party and ideological identification was a rather modest .36 while the correlations of both party and ideological identification with preferences on social welfare issues involving the size and role of government were far weaker, ranging from .14 to .24. Moreover, despite the fact that the Republican Party added a plank opposing abortion rights to its national

[2] In order to avoid having a large share of respondents with missing data, I analyzed responses on all ANES 7-point scales that include a screening question allowing respondents to opt out of placing themselves on the scale by indicating that they "haven't thought about" the issue. These include the 7-point ideological identification scale as well as the questions on government aid to Blacks, government responsibility for health insurance and government responsibility for jobs and living standards. Respondents indicating that they "haven't thought about" an issue were assigned to the middle position (4) on the 7-point scale. I chose this approach because simply excluding these respondents from the analysis would have biased the results in favor of finding greater partisan-ideological consistency. I use the same approach in later analyses of data from the 2020 ANES survey that includes a larger number of 7-point issue scales with an opt-out screening question.

platform in 1980, the relationships of both party and ideological identification to opinions on legalized abortion were very weak. Abortion was not yet a partisan issue in 1984.

The picture with regard to partisan and ideological consistency was very different in 2020. First, the correlation between party and ideological identification was a very strong .68. In terms of shared variance, the relationship was almost five times stronger in 2020 as in 1984. Likewise, the relationships between both party and ideological identification and preferences on social welfare issues were far stronger in 2020 than in 1984, with correlations ranging from .52 to .56. In terms of shared variance, these relationships were at least five times stronger in 2020 than in 1984. Finally, in 2020 we see a much closer connection between both party and ideological identification and opinions on abortion than in 1984. In terms of shared variance, these relationships were more than five times stronger in 2020 than in 1984. Abortion was clearly an important partisan issue in 2020, dividing Democrats from Republicans and liberals from conservatives.

[Figure 1 goes here]

The dramatic increase in the strength of the relationship between party and ideological identification between 1972 and 2020 indicates that there was a growing ideological divide between supporters of the two parties over those 48 years, at least in terms of liberal-conservative identification. This trend is very evident in Figure 1, which displays the mean locations of Democratic and Republican identifiers, including independents leaning toward a party, on the 7-point liberal-conservative scale. Between 1972 and 2020, the gap between the mean locations of Democratic and Republican identifiers more than tripled, going from a modest 0.6 points in 1972 to 2.1 points in 2020, which was the largest divide in the entire series

2020 data show that opinions across these six policy domains were also closely connected. There was a high degree of consistency in opinions on social welfare issues, racial issues, climate change, cultural issues, immigration and gun control. Respondents with liberal views in one policy area tended to have liberal views in each of the other areas while those with conservative views in one policy area tended to have conservative views in each of the other areas. Opinions on issues in all of these domains as well as ideological self-identification can be mapped onto a liberal-conservative issue scale with Democratic identifiers located overwhelmingly on the liberal side of the scale and Republican identifiers located

racial justice issues and opinions on social welfare issues. In addition, there were strong correlations between ideological identification and opinions in all of these domains. Those correlations ranged from .49 with opinions on gun control to .72 with opinions on social welfare issues. These results indicate that ideological identification is much more than a symbolic identity. It is closely connected with preferences across a wide range of policy issues.

Previous research has identified two distinct dimensions of ideology within the American public—a social welfare dimension and a cultural dimension (Feldman and Johnson 2014). However, t

of ten. Figure 2 displays the distributions of Democratic and Republican identifiers, including leaning independents, on this scale.

[Figure 2 goes here]

There are a couple of striking features of the distribution of Democratic and Republican identifiers on this liberal-conservative issues scale. The most obvious and clearly the most important is that supporters of the two parties have sharply divided ideological preferences. Even though these results include non-voters as well as voters, there is very little overlap between the two distributions. Eighty-five percent of Democratic identifiers are located to the left of center while 86 percent of Republican identifiers are located to the right of center. The

of the far left on the Democratic Party. We will see that this contrast is even greater when we focus on the most politically active supporters of each party.

Among all respondents in the 2020 ANES survey, the correlation between party identification and the liberal-conservative issues scale is a very strong .76. This correlation provides a striking indication of the high level of partisan-ideological polarization in the overall electorate. However, the extent of partisan-ideological polarization within the electorate should vary depending on a variety of characteristics that are associated with awareness of ideological differences between parties. Three factors, in particular, would be expected to be associated with ideological awareness among the public: education, political interest and political activism. In general, more educated, interested and active citizens tend to be more aware of ideological differences between parties than less educated, less interested and less active citizens.

[Table 3 goes here]

Table 3 displays correlations between party identification and the liberal-conservative issues scale depending on level of education, interest in politics and political activism. The findings are consistent with our expectations based on previous research on ideological awareness in the public. Partisan-ideological consistency was greatest among those with more years of education, more interest in politics and higher levels of political activism. What is somewhat surprising, though, is how high the levels of partisan-ideological polarization are even among the least educated, least interested and least active members of the public. For example, the correlation of party identification with the liberal-conservative issues scale is a very robust .66 among respondents who did not complete high school and .70 among those with only a high school degree. Likewise, the correlation between party identification and the liberal-conservative issues is a very strong .69 among classified as low on political activism, a group

73 percent were located at least one standard deviation to the right of center, 42 percent were located at least 1.5 standard deviations to the right of center and 15 percent were located at least two standard deviations to the right of center. These findings indicate that politically active partisans are even more deeply divided in their policy preferences than ordinary voters are fact that cer

almost entirely due to increasingly negative ratings of the opposing party and candidate. Ratings of one's own party and candidate have fluctuated within a rather narrow range, between 65 and 75 degrees, except for a brief dip in ratings of one's own candidate in 2016—a year in which both Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton received subpar ratings from their own party's supporters. In contrast, ratings of the opposing party and candidate have fallen from the mid- to upper-forties between 1972 and 2000 to below 20 degrees in 2020. Clearly, what is driving the growing divide in affective ratings of the parties and candidates is growing dislike of the opposing party and its candidates (Abramowitz and Webster 2016).

[Table 4 goes here]

The gap between partisans' feeling thermometer ratings of their own party and candidate and the opposing party and candidate has widened considerably in the 21st century. Not coincidentally, during these years, the relationship between these feeling thermometer ratings and ideology has become much stronger. This trend is clearly evident in Table 4, which displays the trend in the correlations between ideological identification and relative feeling thermometer ratings of the presidential candidates and parties since 1972. Between 2000 and 2020, the correlation between ideological identification and relative feeling thermometer ratings of the Republican and Democratic presidential candidates increased from .45 to .67 while the correlation between ideological identification and relative feeling thermometer ratings of the Democratic and Republican parties increased from .44 to .67. In terms of shared variance, these relationships were about twice as strong in 2020 as in 2000.

[Figure 4 goes here]

Of course, ideological identification is an imperfect measure of ideological orientations. It has the advantage that it has been included in every ANES survey since 1972. For the 2020

election, however, we have a measure of ideology, the liberal-conservative issues scale, based on a wide variety of issue positions along with ideological identification. Figure 4 displays the relationship between location on this liberal-conservative issues scale and relative feeling thermometer ratings of the two major parties and their presidential candidates. The results show that there is a very strong relationship between feelings toward the parties and candidates and ideology—considerably stronger than the relationship with ideological identification alone. The correlation between ideology and feelings toward the parties is .80 while the correlation between ideology and feelings toward the candidates is a slightly stronger .82.

The results displayed in Figure 4 show that members of the public with scores close to either extreme of the liberal-conservative issues scale had the most divided feelings toward the parties and candidates—rating their own party and candidate far higher than the opposing party and candidate on the feeling thermometer scale. At the far right end of the scale, in fact, the average difference between ratings of Trump and Biden was close to the maximum of 100 degrees. Extreme conservatives tended to rate Trump at 100 degrees and Biden at zero degrees. On the far left, the difference was very large but not close to 100 degrees. While the average rating of Trump by extreme liberals

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Trump while moderate conservatives generally rated Trump only slightly higher than Biden. These patterns

of just over 27 degrees in relative feeling thermometer ratings of the candidates. No other predictor had nearly as strong an impact although a few others were highly significant including ratings of the national economy.

The results in Table 5B show that party identification had the strongest influence on feelings toward the political parties of any predictor. However, ideology also had a powerful impact on these ratings. A change of one standard deviation on the party identification scale was associated with a change of more than 32 degrees in relative feeling thermometer ratingDC /TT0 1 Tf

three groups of roughly equal size based on their locations on the liberal-conservative issues scale: those located at least .5 standard deviations to the left of center, those located between .5 standard deviations to the left of center and .5 standard deviations to the right of center and those located at least .5 standard deviations to the right of center. Table 6 compares the mean ratings of Trump on the feeling thermometer scale based on ideology and politically salient group memberships.

The results in Table 6 show that group memberships mainly affected feelings toward Donald Trump indirectly—through ideology. Thus, the reason why White college graduates rated Trump considerably lower than Whites without college degrees was largely because White college graduates were much more liberal, on average, than Whites without a college degree: 48 percent of Whites with a degree were located to the left of center compared with only 23 percent of Whites without a degree. After controlling for ideology, there was little difference in feelings toward Trump among Whites with an

liberal Republicans and moderate-to-conservative Democrats were far more likely to defect in at least one of these contests. Although moderates and conservatives made up only 28 percent of all Democratic identifiers, they made up 68 percent of Democrats who defected in at least one contest. Likewise, although moderates and liberals made up only 21 percent of all Republican identifiers, they made up 57 percent of Republicans who defected in at least one contest.

This pattern is even clearer when we examine voter decision-making in the presidential election by itself. According to the 2020 ANES survey, ideologically conflicted partisans made up 30 percent of Democratic identifiers and 25 percent of Republican identifiers who voted for a presidential candidate. However, they made up 91 percent of Democratic identifiers who voted for Donald Trump and 89 percent of Republican identifiers who voted for Joe Biden. Evidence from the 2020 ANES survey suggests that Biden received a disproportionate share of the votes from these ideologically conflicted partisans. Only 11.5 percent of ideologically conflicted Democrats voted for Trump. In contrast, 40.5 percent of ideologically conflicted Republicans voted for Biden. While the ANES survey, like many surveys of the 2020 electorate, substantially overestimated Biden's victory margin, these results suggest that that his appeal to moderate voters was a key factor in his decisive popular vote victory over Trump whose hard-conservative positions appear to have alienated many moderate voters in both parties.

elections. Crossing party lines, even to vote for an incumbent officeholder, has become much less common than in the recent past because partisans view any politician on the other side as a threat to their way of life and an enemy to be defeated at all cost.

In this paper, I show that one of the most important factors in the rise of affective polarization and party loyalty in the American electorate has been growing partisan-ideological consistency. The reason so many Americans intensely dislike those on the other side of the partisan divide is that they consistently disagree with those on the other side of the partisan divide on a wide range of issues. Americans' preferences on issues as diverse as government responsibility for health care, gay and transgender rights, police reform, climate change, immigration and regulation of firearms are now strongly correlated with each other and with their partisan and ideological identities. On a liberal-conservative issues scale that combines ideological identification with preferences across all of these issues, the overwhelming majority of Democratic identifiers are found on the left while the overwhelming majority of Republican identifiers are found on the right.

When it comes to feelings toward political leaders and parties, ideology dominates membership in social groups. Liberals, regardless of their group identities, tend to view the Democratic Party and Democratic leaders positively and the Republican Party and Republican leaders negatively. Conservatives, regardless of their group identities, tend to view the Republican Party and Republican leaders positively and the Democratic Party and Democratic leaders negatively.

Intense mistrust and dislike of the opposing party and its leaders help to explain another

reflect ideological conflict. The reason so many Democrats and Republicans are unwilling to cross party lines in elections is that they disagree with almost everything that the opposing party stands for. However, a minority of ideologically conflicted Republicans and Democrats display much lower levels of party loyalty. In closely contested elections, this relatively small group of center-right Democrats and center-left Republicans can play a crucial role in deciding the outcome. Along with "pure independents," they make up a large share of the true swing voters in American politics and their votes appear to have been a key factor in Joe Biden's decisive popular vote victory in the 2020 presidential election.

The findings presented in this paper indicate that partisan-ideological polarization is not confined to members of the political elite and a small sliver of activists. It is deeply embedded in the American public. Moreover, while polarization has led some Americans to believe lies and wild conspiracy theories promoted by political leaders, especially former President Trump, it has a rational foundation. Hostility toward the opposing party and its leaders reflects strong disagreement with the policies of the opposing party and its leaders. As long as the parties remain on the opposite sides of almost all of the major issues facing the country, feelings of mistrust and animosity are unlikely to diminish regardless of Donald Trump's role in the Republican Party.

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Table 1. Correlations among Party Identification, Ideological Identification and Issue Positions by Year

Correlation Between	1972	1984	1996	2008	2020
Party ID x Ideological ID	.28	.36	.50	.56	.68
Party ID x Aid to Blacks	.13	.22	.28	.34	.55
Ideological ID x Aid to Blacks	.32	.21	.29	.29	.55
Party ID x Health Insurance	.17	.18	.35	.38	.52
Ideological ID x Health Insurance	.24	.14	.33	.38	.56
Party ID x Jobs/Incomes	.18	.26	.32	.42	.52
Ideological ID x Jobs/Incomes	.26	.24	.29	.34	.53
Party ID x Abortion		.06	.14	.22	.45
Ideological ID x Abortion		.17	.27	.34	.51

Sources: American National Election Studies Cumulative File and 2020 American National Election Study

Figure 2. Distribution of Democratic and Republican Identifiers on Left

Table 3. Partisan-Ideological Polarization by Education, Political Engagement and Political Activism

	Correlation of Issue Scale x Party ID	N of Cases
All Respondents	.755	6525
Education		
Some HS	.656	518
HS Grad	.698	1775
Some College	.773	1880
College Grad	.802	1457
Post-College	.792	814
Pol Interest/Attention		
Very Low	.608	1500
Low	1500	

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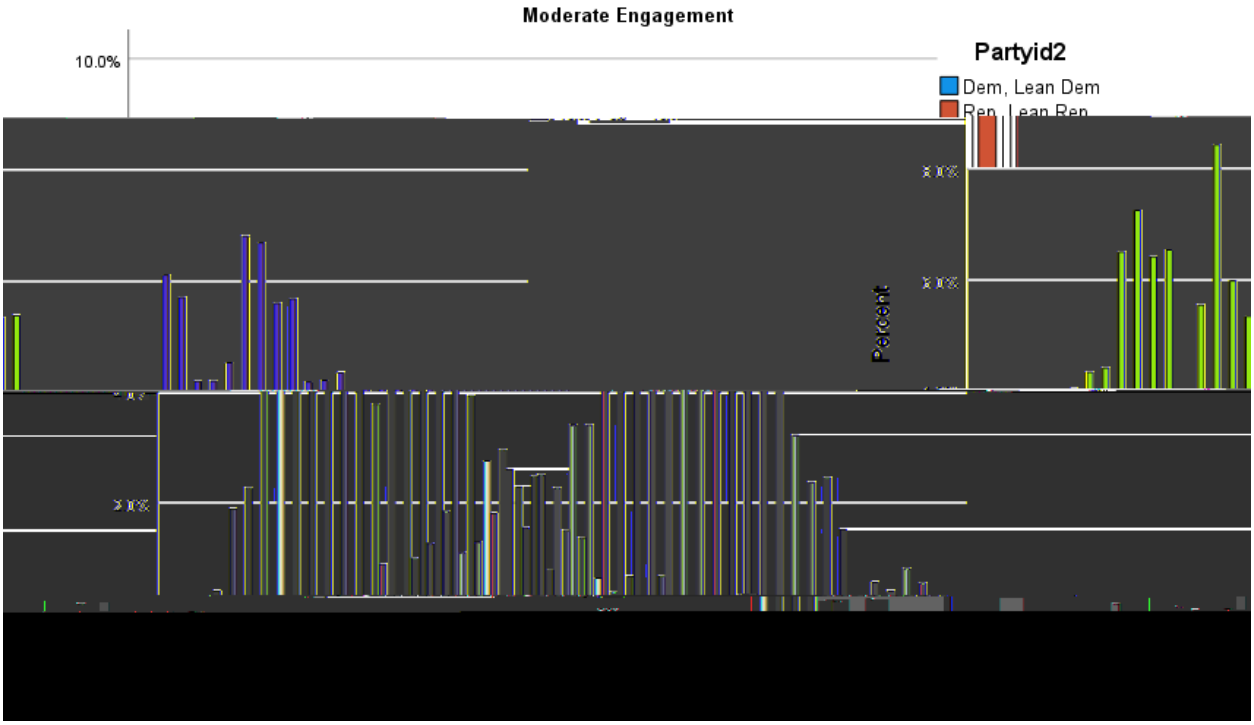
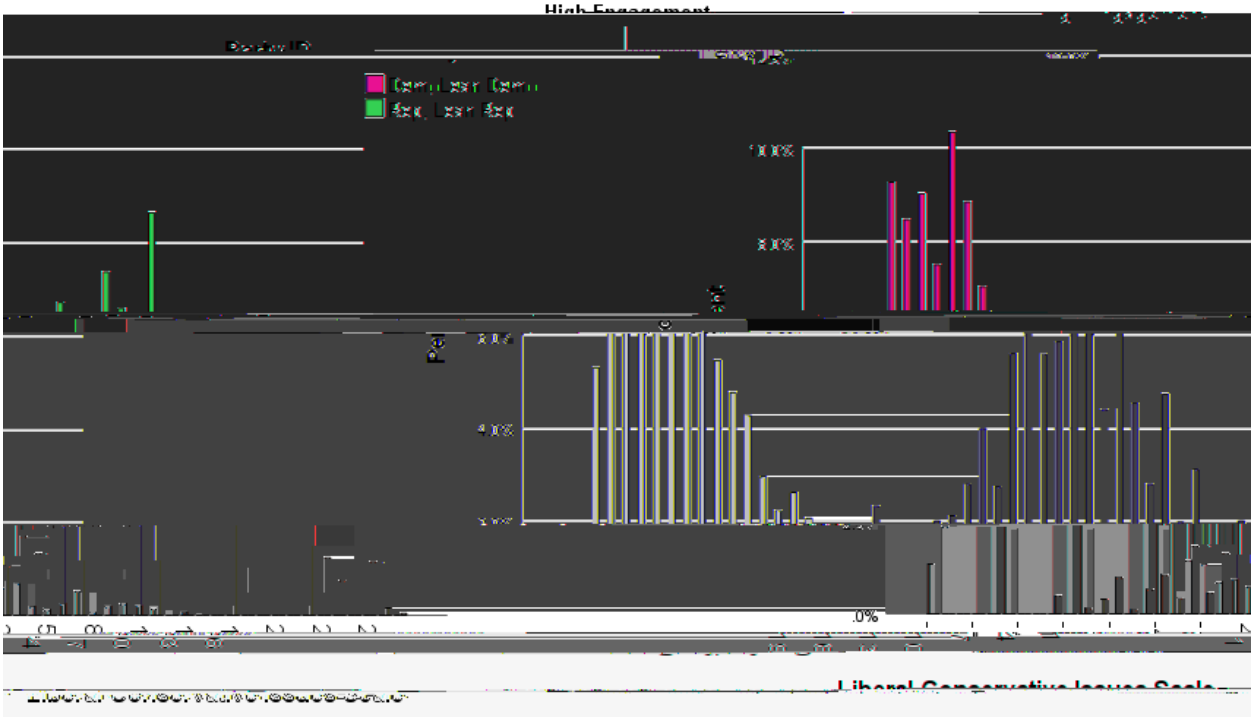
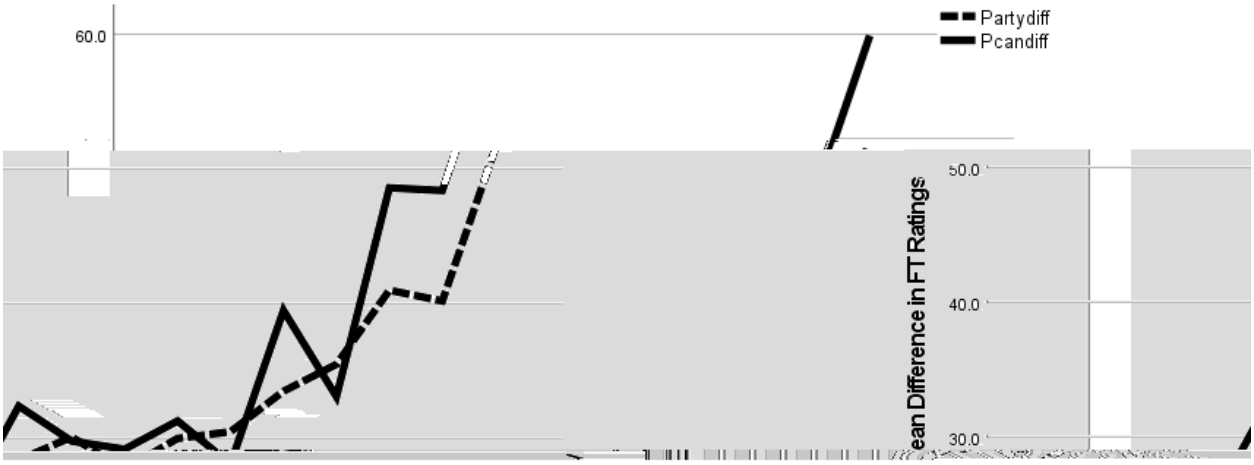
Figure 3. Distribution of Democratic and Republican Identifiers on Liberal-Conservative Issues Scale by Political Engagement





Source: 2020 American National Election Study

Figure 3. Average Difference in Ratings of Own and Opposing Presidential Candidates and Parties on Feeling Thermometer Scale, 1968-2020



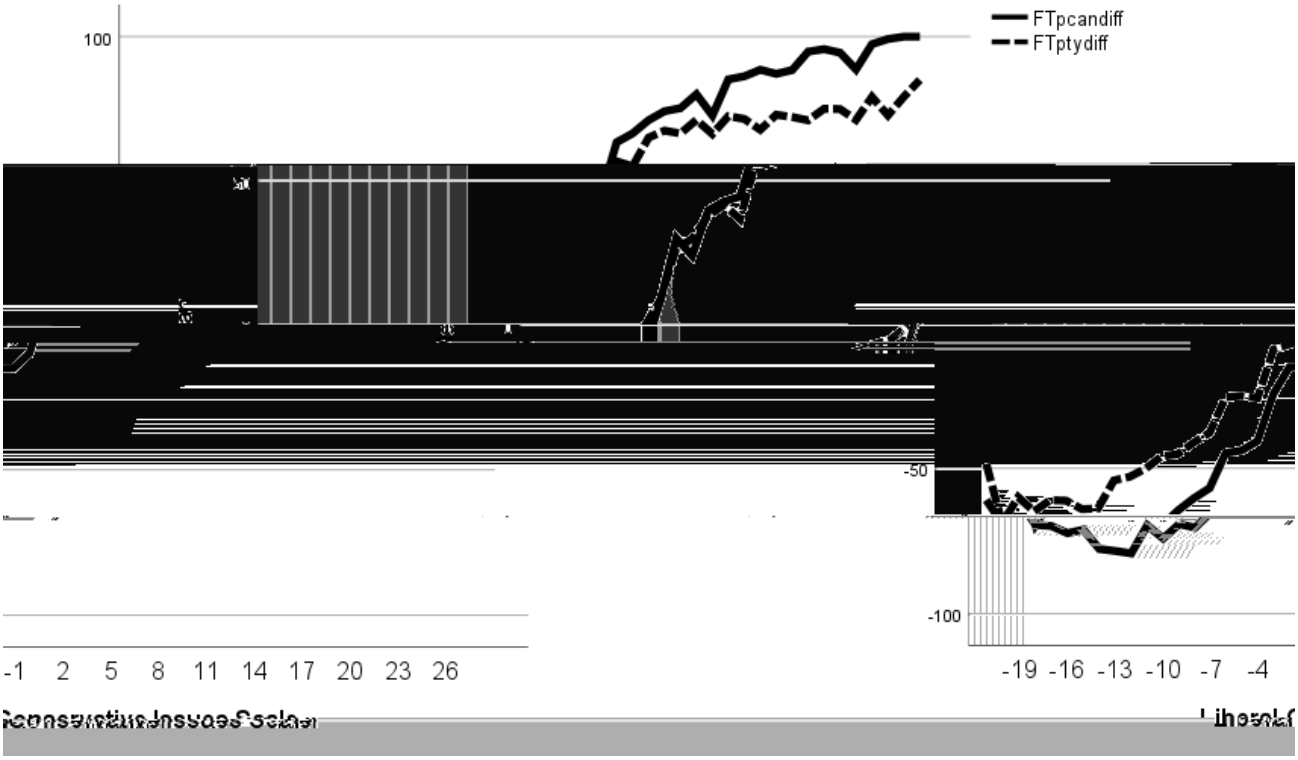
Sources: American National Election Studies Cumulative File and 2020 American National Election Study

Table 4. Correlation of Liberal-Conservative Identification with Relative Feeling Thermometer Evaluations of Presidential Candidates and Parties, 1980-2020

Year	Presidential Candidates	Parties
1972	.41	X
1976	.34	X
1980	.33	.33
1984	.40	.38
1988	.38	.36
1992	.43	.42
1996	.50	.50
2000	.45	.44
2004	.50	.52
2008	.54	.54
2012	.61	.61
2016	.60	.63
2020	.67	.67

Sources: American National Election Studies Cumulative File and 2020 American National Election Study

Figure 4. Average Difference (R-D) in Feeling Thermometer Ratings of Parties and Presidential Candidates by Location on Left-Right Issues Scale in 2020



Source: 2020 American National Election Study

Table 5. Regression Analyses of Relative Feeling Thermometer Ratings of Presidential Candidates and Parties

A. Trump FT – Biden FT

B. Republican Party FT – Democratic Party FT

Independent Variable	B	Std. Error	t-ratio	Sig.
Constant	-1.86			
Age	-1.52	.36	-4.26	.001
Black	-3.17	.37	-8.52	.001
Latino	-1.21	.35	-3.41	.001
Other Race	-0.52	.35	-1.50	N.S.
Sex/Female	1.39	.34	4.06	.001
Christian	-0.08	.37	-0.21	N.S.
Evangelical	-0.35	.36	-0.97	N.S.
Non-College	-0.09	.36	0.26	N.S.
National Economy	-4.94	.40	-12.21	.001
Personal Finances	-1.17	.36	-3.24	.001
Party Identification	32.06	.54	59.97	.001
Issues Scale	19.13	.57	33.60	.001

R^2 = .794

Source: 2020 American National Election Study

Table 6. Average Feeling Thermometer Ratings of Donald Trump by Ideological Orientation and Group Memberships

	Ideological Orientation		
	Left of Center	Center	Right of Center
All Respondents	4.5	34.2	81.9
Race			
White	3.3	39.0	84.3
Black	5.1	17.1	45.1)
Latino	7.0	34.4	76.1
Asian	6.3	35.5	78.7
White			
College Grad	2.3	33.6	79.8
Non-College	4.6	42.1	85.7
Evangelical	4.2	41.2	88.2
Non-Evangelical	3.2	38.5	81.9
LGBT	4.6	34.9	78.7
Straight	3.1	39.4	84.3
Dem, Lean Dem	2.3	21.5	62.4
Rep, Lean Rep	19.9	55.9	86.6

Source: 2020 American National Election Study

Table 7. Percentage Voting for Own Party for President, House and Senate in 2020 by Party Identification and Ideological Orientation

	Ideological Orientation		
	Left of Center	Center	Right of Center
Dem, Lean Dem	93	66	32
Rep, Lean Rep	18	42	88

Source: 2020 American National Election Study

Appendix A: Questions Included in Issue Scales and Factor Loadings of Questions on Scales

Scale	Question	Factor Loading
Social Welfare Scale	Business/environment tradeoff	.771
	Government aid to blacks	.780
	Health insurance	.796
	Jobs/living standards	.819
	Spending and services	-.767
Gun Control Scale	Ban on assault rifles	.810
	Mandatory buyback	.816
	Background checks	.655
	Stricter federal gun laws	.797
Immigration Scale	Birthright citizenship	.655
	Children brought illegally	.672
	Path to citizenship	-.616
	Illegal immigrants cause crime	.715
	Illegal immigrants take jobs	.668
	Immigration levels	-.687
	Return to native country	.803
	Separating children	.561
	Policy toward unauthorized	.680
	Wall on Mexican border	.801
Racial Justice Scale	Police use of force	-.672
	Police treat blacks/whites better	.816
	Protestors violent/peaceful	-.766
	How to deal with unrest	.840
Cultural Issues Scale	Abortion	-.698
	Same sex marriage	.795
	Same sex couple adoption	.729
	LGBT job discrimination	.607
	Businesses serve LGBT	-.694
	Transgender bathroom use	-.745
	Transgender military service	.725
Climate Change Scale	Regulate greenhouse gases	-.832
	Importance of climate change	.916
	Climate change affects weather	.918

Source; 2020 American National Election Study

Appendix B: Factor Loadings of Ideological Identification and Individual Issue Scales on Liberal-Conservative Issues Scale

Question/Scale	Factor Loading
Ideological Identification	.825
Social Welfare Scale	.890
Cultural Issues Scale	.772
Racial Justice Scale	.849
Gun Control Scale	.722
Climate Change Scale	-.820
Immigration Scale	.837

Source; 2020 American National Election Study