

RESEARCH NOTE

Perceived Opposition to Racially Progressive Policies and Negative Affect toward the Republican Party among Democrats

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Abstract

The American public is increasingly affectively polarized. A growing body of research has associated affective polarization with two key phenomena: ideological polarization and social group sorting. Although there is ample evidence that social group sorting, particularly along racial and ethnic lines, is driving Republicans' affect toward the Democratic Party, it is not clear how it shapes Democrats', particularly White Democrats', feelings toward the predominantly White Republican Party. We propose a third model that bridges these two theoretical approaches, a racial ideology model that helps explain Democrats' feelings toward the Republican Party. Specifically, we argue that Democrats increasingly dislike Republicans because Republicans are seen as standing in opposition to racially progressive policies. Using a preregistered conjoint experiment, we find that Americans across party lines see Republicans as opposing efforts to reduce racial inequality and that this perception is associated with negative affect toward the Republican Party among both White and non-White Democrats.

Keywords: affective polarization; social group sorting; racial ideology; conjoint experiment

A consistent finding in recent research on American political behavior is that Americans are politically divided. An area of particular concern is the increasing tendency of ordinary Americans to view opposing partisans as a stigmatized outgroup. Researchers refer to this phenomenon as affective polarization, and it has been shown to have deleterious social, economic, and political effects (Iyengar et al. 2019).

Although the origins of affective polarization are numerous, two theoretical approaches predominate: the ideology model and the group sorting model. The ideology model proposes that the policy differences between the two parties drive affective polarization. The group sorting model, by contrast, suggests that the compositions of partisan coalitions, particularly the racial compositions, are

central factors. The group sorting model helps to explain Republicans' affect towards the Democratic Party, which is increasingly racial and ethnically diverse (Abrajano and Hajnal 2015). At the same time, it does not fully explain Democrats'—and especially White Democrats'—negative affect toward the predominantly White Republican Party.

In this research note, we argue that a third approach, a racial ideology model, could bridge these two competing theories and explain negative affect toward the Republican Party among Democrats. Specifically, we argue that Democrats increasingly dislike the Republican Party not necessarily because Republicans are seen as overwhelmingly White, but because they are seen as opposing policies intended to reduce racial inequality. Democrats now perceive supporting such policies as a part of their party's identity: during her 2016 campaign, Hillary Clinton claimed that “ending racial inequality” would be “the mission of her presidency.”¹ Clinton's comment was indicative of coming trends in the Democratic Party. From 2016 to 2024, the Democratic Party drastically and visibly increased its commitment to fighting racial inequality in both rhetoric and policy platforms (Sides, Tausanovitch, and Vavreck 2022; Sides, Tesler, and Griffin 2024). More recently during the 2024 presidential election, Kamala Harris spoke of people “trying to destroy access to opportunity for those who have been left out” in a thinly-veiled reference to Republican politicians.² In response, White Democratic voters' racial attitudes and voting behavior have largely followed the same elite trends (Engelhardt 2021; Mikkelsen 2025).

Using a preregistered conjoint survey experiment with a large sample of American adults, we find evidence for a racial ideology model of affective polarization.³ Not only is perceived racial ideology a strong dimension of perceptions about contemporary Republicans but these perceptions are also consistently associated with negative affect toward the Republican Party among both White and non-White Democrats.

Race, Ideology, or Racial Ideology?

Existing literature offers two central pathways to affective polarization in the mass public. The first model, an ideology model, suggests that ideological and policy-based differences between the two major parties in the United States—on issues like abortion or size of government—explain affective polarization (Fowler *et al.* 2024; Rogowski and Sutherland 2016; Myers 2023). An alternative model, a social group sorting model, suggests that animosity toward social—and particularly racial and ethnic—groups that make up modern partisan coalitions is a central driver of affective polarization (Mason 2018; Westwood and Peterson 2022; Zhirkov and Valentino 2022). As the Democratic Party becomes increasingly non-White, attitudes toward groups seen as parts of the Democratic coalition, like Black Americans and Latinos, spill over into affective evaluations of the party itself.

We propose a third pathway that bridges these two theoretical camps and might explain anti-Republican affect among Democrats: a racial ideology model. There is ample evidence of increasing polarization in the United States along the lines of racial ideology. President Obama's election, subsequent two terms in office, and positioning on issues of race, ethnicity, immigration, and policing increased the

salience of race in American politics (Tesler 2016). The image of an increasingly racially progressive Democratic Party and racially conservative Republican Party was brought into even brighter contrast during the 2016 election campaign. Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton took starkly diverging positions on issues of race, ethnicity, and American identity. Trump has used a “racial bullhorn” in ways not seen in contemporary politics (Valentino, Neuner, and Vandenbroek 2018; Reny, Valenzuela, and Collingwood 2019), whereas the Democratic Party has adopted one of the most racially progressive platform in the Democratic Party’s history (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2019).

We argue that this increasingly stark divide in the racial ideologies of the two parties—operationalized here as views on the government’s role in addressing racial disparities—is contributing to affective polarization and helps explain Democrats’ negative views of the Republican Party. More specifically, we hypothesize that racial conservatism should be a central component of stereotypes about the Republican Party above and beyond economic conservatism (H1) and that stereotypes of Republicans as racially conservative should be associated with negative affect toward the Republican Party among Democrats (H2). Similar to some existing studies on stereotypes about partisans in the United States (Barber and Pope 2022; Ogura, Miwa, and Iida 2022), we test these hypotheses in a conjoint survey experiment that allows us to disentangle racial conservatism from economic conservatism and racial identity.

Data and Methods

Between June 19 and June 22 of 2023, we fielded an original preregistered conjoint survey experiment using participants from CloudResearch’s Prime Panels.⁴ While Prime Panels is an opt-in online survey vendor much like Amazon MTurk, the respondents are screened in various ways for quality and have more diverse demographics (Chandler et al. 2019; Douglas, Ewell, and Brauer 2023). The final sample size was 3,109.⁵ Our sample is relatively well matched with the national population on the key demographics: the percentages of females (60%), people aged 65 or above (17%), non-Hispanic Whites (68%), college graduates (40%), and Democrats (46%) are similar to the 2023 benchmarks (U.S. Census and the American National Election Studies of 51%, 18%, 58%, 34%, and 47%, respectively). Full comparisons can be found in Table A1 in Online Appendix.

Before the conjoint task, respondents were asked about their affect toward the Republican Party with answers ranging from 0 = “Strongly dislike” to 10 = “Strongly like.” This measure is used as an outcome in our selection-on-observables analysis following the conjoint analysis. The two measures of racial attitudes used as moderators were also measured before the conjoint. These measures include the racial resentment battery (Kinder and Sanders 1996) and the antiracism battery (LaCosse et al. 2023).

In the conjoint experiment, we presented respondents with hypothetical profiles of rank-and-file supporters of the Republican Party and ask respondents to rate the typicality of each profile: “On a scale 0 to 10, with 0 being extremely nontypical and 10 being extremely typical, how much do you think this person is like a typical Republican?” The typicality formulation has been validated in a recent conjoint study on stereotypes about welfare recipients (Myers, Zhirkov, and Lunz Trujillo

Table 1. Conjoint attributes and values

Attributes	Values
Age	<i>Old:</i> 40–59
	<i>Young:</i> 20–39
Gender	Male
	Female
Race	White
	<i>Non-White:</i> Black, Hispanic
Education	<i>No College:</i> High School, Some College
	<i>College:</i> 4-Year College Degree, Graduate Degree
Religiosity	<i>Religious:</i> Attends Church Regularly
	<i>Non-Religious:</i> Doesn't Attend Church
Social Class	Upper Class
	<i>Middle/Working Class:</i> Middle Class, Working Class
Views on Government Size (<i>Economic Ideology</i>)	<i>Economically Conservative:</i> Government Should Provide Fewer Services
	<i>Economically Liberal:</i> Government Should Provide More Services
Views on Racial Equality (<i>Racial Ideology</i>)	<i>Racially Conservative:</i> Blacks Should Help Themselves
	<i>Racially Liberal:</i> Government Should Help Blacks
Personal Traits	<i>Negative Traits:</i> Dishonest, Ignorant, Close-Minded, Lazy, Selfish, Unpatriotic
	<i>Positive Traits:</i> Honest, Smart, Open-Minded, Hardworking, Caring, Patriotic

Note: Age selected from the specified intervals.

2024). Each respondent was asked to rate a total of 20 profiles. The profiles were described in terms of nine attributes: age, gender, race, education, social class, religiosity, views on the size of government (economic liberalism vs. conservatism), views on racial equality (racial liberalism vs. conservatism), and personal traits. The two attributes of particular interest—views on the size of government and views on racial equality—were both derived from questions asked in the American National Election Study (ANES) and have been frequently used for decades by political scientists as measures of economic ideology and racial ideology, respectively. The list of personality traits was borrowed from a recent conjoint-experimental study on stereotypes about Democrats and Republicans (Myers 2023). See Table 1 for all attributes and value labels.

Values for all attributes were fully and independently randomized with uniform distributions (all values of an attribute have equal probabilities of being presented). The two exceptions were race (White with probability 50% and Black and Hispanic each with probability 25%) and social class (Upper Class with probability 50% and

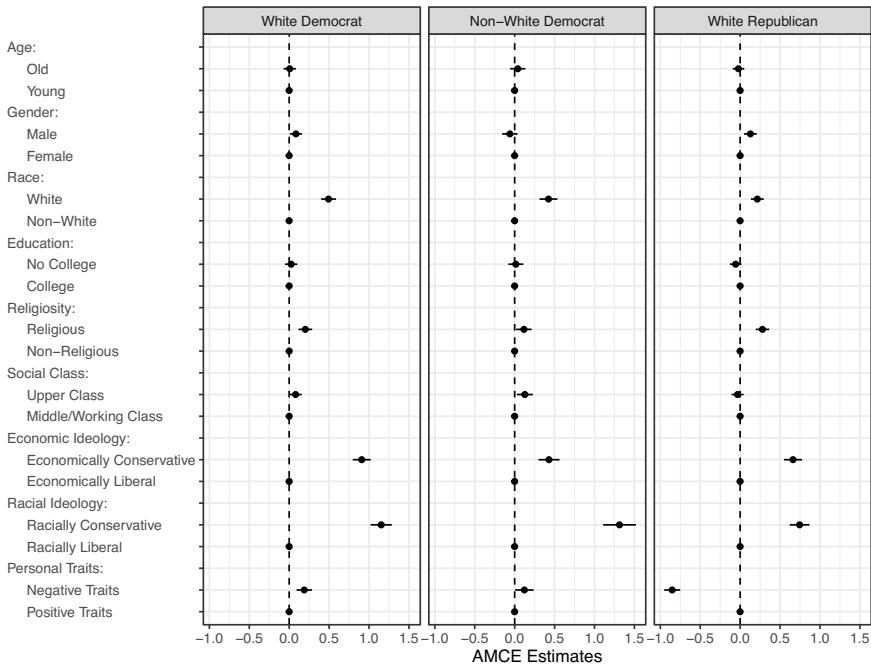


Figure 1. The effects of attribute values on Republican profiles' typicality ratings.

Note: Coefficients estimated by OLS regressions with standard errors clustered at respondent and 95% confidence intervals.

Middle Class and Working Class each with probability 25%). The order of attributes was randomized between respondents. See Figure A1 in Online Appendix for an example of a conjoint profile as seen by respondents.

Results

We begin by exploring the contents of beliefs about supporters of the Republican Party by estimating conditional average marginal component effects (AMCEs) by race and partisanship using OLS regressions with standard errors clustered by respondent.⁶ The results are presented in Figure 1.⁷

We find that White Democrats (left panel), non-White Democrats (central panel), and White Republicans (right panel) all have perceptions of a typical Republican Party supporter as being White, religious, and economically conservative.⁸ At the same time, and central to our theory, the perceived opposition to policies aimed at reducing racial inequality, our measure of racial conservatism, is stronger than the effects of all other profile attributes among Democrats, particularly non-White Democrats. Focusing on the comparisons between racial and economic ideology, the difference in the two coefficients is relatively small but statistically significant among White Democrats ($\Delta\beta = 0.24$, $p < .01$), while it is large and highly significant among non-White Democrats ($\Delta\beta = 0.88$, $p < .001$).

The same difference is not significant among White Republicans ($\Delta\beta = 0.08$, $p = .34$). The strong perception of non-White Democrats about Republicans' racial conservatism is shared by both Black Democrats and Democrats belonging to other non-White groups (see Figure A6 in Online Appendix). Even among White Republicans, it is as important an attribute as economic ideology.

Analysis by racial attitudes shows similar patterns (see Figures A7 and A8 in Online Appendix). All respondents agree that a typical Republican is White, religious, economically conservative, and racially conservative—but the perception of racial conservatism is stronger among those who are lower in racial resentment or higher in our measure of antiracism. The pattern of stronger perceptions about Republicans' racial conservatism holds when we break down the results by racial attitudes within each of the three subgroups displayed in Figure 1 (see Figures A9 and A10 in Online Appendix).

These results show initial support for the racial ideology model. While existing research emphasizes the role of social groups, issue positions, and personality traits in partisan stereotypes, we show that *racial ideology* may be particularly important. Racial conservatism is a very strong component of stereotypes about supporters of the Republican Party that rivals or exceeds economic conservatism across all groups in our sample, including Republicans themselves. In short, Americans of all stripes see conservative racial ideology as central to being a Republican.

So far we have shown that racial ideology is an important component of stereotypes about supporters of the Republican Party in the minds of Americans. We find this effect to be particularly pronounced among non-White Democrats but also present among White Democrats, White Republicans, and those lower in racial prejudice. However, these analyses do not assess the degree to which different dimensions of beliefs about Republicans contribute to affective polarization. To do so, we turn to a selection-on-observables approach where we predict affect toward the Republican Party with perceptions about typical Republicans measured via individual marginal component effects (IMCEs; Zhirkov 2022) extracted from our conjoint experiment.

Figure 2 presents the results of OLS regression models with and without controls (age, gender, education, income, and ideology) across the same subsets as before.⁹ For White Democrats (left panel), perceptions about both economic and racial conservatism among Republicans predict negative affect toward the Republican Party. For non-White Democrats (central panel), a perception that Republicans are racially conservative is the *only* statistically significant predictor of negative affect toward the Republican Party. Finally, for White Republicans (right panel), viewing co-partisans as economically conservative and/or having negative personal traits are associated with negative affect (but racial conservatism is not). The latter finding may explain Republican rank-and-file support for President Trump's sometimes heterodox views regarding government spending. While nearly all groups associate Republicans with racial conservatism, this association predicts negative affect toward the Republican Party only among Democrats, potentially fueling affective polarization.¹⁰

Analysis by racial attitudes, again, replicates the same patterns (see Figures A15 and A16 in Online Appendix). Perception of Republicans as racially conservative is

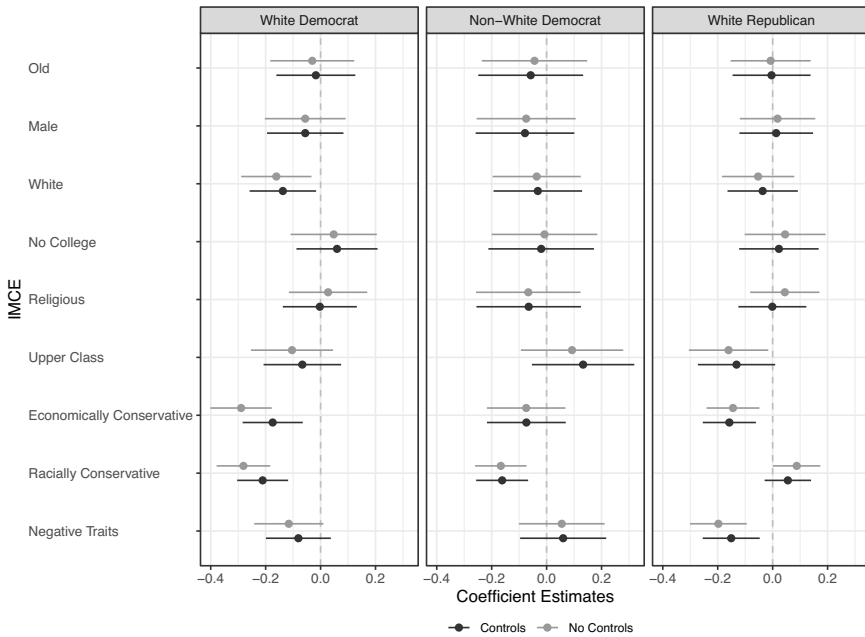


Figure 2. Beliefs about typical Republicans and affect toward the Republican Party.

Note: Coefficients estimated by OLS regression with 95% confidence intervals. Control variables are age, gender, education, income, and ideology.

associated with negative affect toward the Republican Party only among those who are lower on racial resentment and/or higher on antiracism. For those who hold conservative racial attitudes themselves, these perceptions are inconsequential.

Conclusion

Americans are increasingly affectively polarized across party lines, and animosity toward racial and ethnic groups usually associated with the Democratic Party likely explains some of Republicans' negative affect toward Democrats. But what drives negative affect toward the Republican Party among Democrats, especially White Democrats? Combining insights from two popular theories of affective polarization—the ideology model and the group sorting model—we advance an argument that bridges these existing approaches. Specifically, we argue that Democrats increasingly dislike the Republican Party not because they see Republicans as overwhelmingly White. Instead, this antipathy is fueled by Democrats' perception of Republicans as opposing policies aimed at reducing racial inequality.

We test this argument in an original preregistered conjoint survey experiment on a large sample of Americans. We find consistent evidence that Americans indeed perceive typical Republicans as opposing policies aimed at reducing racial inequality. We also show that this perception contributes to negative affect toward the Republican Party among both White and non-White Democrats.

In agreement with the ideology model, we find that ideological stereotypes about the Republican Party (economic and racial conservatism) are generally stronger than group-based ones (being White and religious). Ideological stereotypes are also more strongly associated with affect toward the Republican Party. At the same time, we find interesting differences in the effects of stereotypes across racial (economic vs. racial conservatism) and party (ideology vs. personal traits) lines.

The present study is not without limitations. Our findings strongly suggest that perceptions about Republicans' racial conservatism among Democrats play a role in fueling affective polarization. At the same time, we cannot test the extent to which these perceptions have changed over time or whether they might have become more important in recent years with Donald Trump at the helm of the Republican Party. We similarly only test a single operationalization of racial conservatism using language from the racial resentment scale. Other salient dimensions of racial conservatism—like the debates around diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives or border control and immigration enforcement—have become prominent in U.S. politics in recent years. We encourage scholars to test the robustness of our results using alternative operationalizations of racial conservatism. Finally, our study is not designed to test the extent to which partisan stereotypes vary by racial or ethnic groups, or the consequences of such divergence for intergroup solidarity between different minoritized groups in the United States (Geiger and Reny 2024; Perez 2023), though these debates become increasingly important in the rapidly diversifying American polity. Future studies could include larger and more diverse samples and measures of intergroup solidarity (e.g., people of color identity) to better test these questions.

Overall, this research note makes an important contribution to the literature by proposing and testing a racial ideology model of partisan affect that bridges existing works on the ideological or identity-based origins of affective polarization. Our findings also have important practical implications for American politics. The ongoing divergence on the issues of race will likely continue to exacerbate partisan affective polarization and thus have dire consequences for both political and non-political domains of American life.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/rep.2025.10011>

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Competing interests. The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Notes

- 1 <https://www.cnn.com/2016/02/16/politics/hillary-clinton-civil-rights-groups-leaders-harlem/index.html>.
- 2 <https://americanjournalnews.com/vice-president-kamala-harris-naacp-convention-boston-republicans-affirmative-action-diversity-inclusion/>.
- 3 Data and code to replicate all analyses in this manuscript can be found at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/ROBZ2W>.

- 4 The preregistration can be found online at: <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/7WPTU>.
- 5 This number excludes 116 respondents who straight-lined responses to the conjoint profiles, in accordance with our preanalysis plan, and 2 respondents whose conjoint values are not captured due to a system error.
- 6 For the results in the full sample, see Figure A2 in Online Appendix. For the results by race and partisanship, see Figures A3 and A4 in Online Appendix.
- 7 The regression table can be found in Table A2 in Online Appendix.
- 8 Our sample included only 182 non-White Republicans. Those results are not included in the main analysis due to low statistical power. They can be found in Figure A5 in Online Appendix. The only attribute associated with a typical supporter of the Republican Party among non-White Republicans is personality traits.
- 9 The regression table can be found in Table A3 in Online Appendix.
- 10 We present the results of the same regression model estimated in the full sample (Figure A11), with racial resentment and antiracism as additional controls (Figure A12), and by race (Figure A13) and partisanship (Figure A14) separately in Online Appendix. The results are substantively similar regardless of controls. Subgroup analyses reveal that perceived racial conservatism predicts negative affect toward the Republican Party only among Democrats. For independents and Republicans, pooled across race, perceived racial conservatism is not associated with greater levels of negative affect.

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