

# How Substantive Policy Outcomes Affect Partisan Animosity

Chano Arreguin\*

March 31, 2026

Out-partisan animosity in the United States has grown, yet its root causes remain challenging to disentangle even with experimental designs. One perspective argues for a model where partisan identity and loyalty are the dominant force driving animosity. An alternative view suggests that such evidence could be observationally equivalent to a model where what truly matters is policy and substance. Here, I draw on a novel framework to design an experiment that isolates a unique effect of substance on animosity. Using a vignette-style design adapted from prior studies, I measure levels of animosity toward individuals whose partisanship and policy stances vary. I test whether animosity increases in conditions where elected officials are shown to have greater control over policy outcomes, compared to conditions of less control. The results indicate that policy disagreement in contexts of greater control results in a unique increase in interpersonal animosity, an effect solely attributable to substance.

**Word Count:** 4325

---

\*Visiting Professor in the Department of Government at Wesleyan University. Email: [carreguin@wesleyan.edu](mailto:carreguin@wesleyan.edu)

# 1 Introduction

Prior work has shown that disentangling the causes of affective polarization is complicated even with careful experimental designs. The designs employed follow a vignette-style format where hypothetical individuals with manipulated characteristics are presented to respondents who then indicate their feelings toward them. In one study, authors concluded that receiving information about a hypothetical person’s policy stances mitigated the effect of partisanship on interpersonal affect (Orr and Huber, 2020). This suggests that the partisan animosity we see and measure where party identification is presented in isolation, is in part due to the inferences people draw about the substantive stances others may have. A follow up study argued that issues can be party-branded or non-party-branded, and showed that party-branded issues have a greater effect on interpersonal affect (Dias and Lelkes, 2022). They conclude that “policy preferences only erase the effect of partisanship on interpersonal affect when preferences... signal partisan identity” (Dias and Lelkes, 2022, p. 787). This perspective argues that interpersonal animosity stems from a sense of loyalty to one’s party, with party-branded policy stances serving as clear indicators of one’s loyalty or betrayal rather than policy disagreement.

Still, a key difficulty in drawing the conclusion that animosity is primarily rooted in identity and one’s group loyalty versus the substance of one’s policy stances is the fact that it is complicated to enumerate all the stances on issues an individual can hold in survey instruments. As authors of another study put it “Because it is impossible to experimentally inform a subject about every issue they care about, the estimated importance of policy from one issue position is likely a lower bound for the total importance of substantive conflict” (Orr, Fowler and Huber, 2023, p. 951). Thus, isolating the effect of policy disagreement on interpersonal affect, even when a few issues are outlined, does not account for the inferences subjects may make about an individual’s positions on other policy issues. This inability to manipulate one without affecting inferences about the other thus makes it complicated to identify the unique effects of partisan identity or policy disagreement on affective polarization.

Here, I consider a theoretical advancement that posits how both substantive and identity-based political motivations operate to design an experiment that allows me to identify a unique effect of policy substance on interpersonal animosity. By incorporating in *the extent to which politicians have control over policy outcomes* (Arreguin, 2025), I create an experiment that could generate an effect that can only be attributable to substantive outcome concerns. That is, given some level of policy disagreement, if interpersonal animosity is greater in the “low-noise” condition—where elected officials have greater control over outcomes—compared to the “high-noise” condition, then the additional animosity must be solely attributed to substantive concerns. The key difference across conditions is thus the potential for deliberate changes to outcomes as indicated

by the incumbent’s level of control. The expected effect across these treatment conditions would strongly suggest that the prospect for changes to outcomes of importance in the world, play a unique role in driving affective polarization. I run a pre-registered survey experiment that tests if greater control contexts uniquely increase animosity given the extent of substantive disagreement, and find evidence for the argument.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, I challenge the arguments that an effect from party identity on animosity is devoid of substance and that issue stance reversals necessarily contradict substantively motivated voters. First, I argue that party competition in political contexts is inextricably tied to substantive ends to the extent that parties are vehicles for prospective changes to the real-world in distinct directions. Therefore, party-branded issues driving interpersonal animosity is not evidence for a lack of substance, rather, party-branded issues are integral to the outcomes individuals belonging to those parties want to see achieved by their respective party. Party-branded issues can also serve as central objects of common knowledge that help rally partisan movements across cleavages of political knowledge and sophistication. Second, a voter changing their view on a small set of issues when learning an elite of their party holds certain stances or continuing their support despite different stances does not exclude the possibility of a substantive trade-off. That is, a voter could be considering the outcomes across the broader set of other issues the elite is pushing for. For example, a liberal Democrat voter could learn that a Democrat candidate holds more conservative views on federal spending, which might influence their own view on spending or the voter continues to support them despite differing views. This could be a partisan who is unconstrained by substance merely following elite cues, or it could be an individual who infers that the other stances the candidate holds still makes them worthy of being supported. The motivation being the prospects of electoral victory and greater chance of pursuing the broader set of substantive ends, or preventing the substantive ends being pursued by the opposition (Abramowitz and Webster, 2018).

Before outlining a model of political affect, I provide a brief overview of the literature on emotions and politics. A key takeaway from this work is the bidirectional and context-dependent nature of emotions and political action, which sets the stage for the model of political affect that follows.

## 2 Emotions and Politics

It is widely understood and accepted in political science that emotions, or affect more broadly, are an intrinsic component of politics (Webster and Albertson, 2022; Gadarian and Brader, 2023). One popular theory posits that individuals possess psychological mechanisms that enable them to form *affective impressions*,

---

<sup>1</sup>The pre-registration document is available at [https://osf.io/hsybg/?view\\_only=672dac59fa284e8189b97020ebee9bec](https://osf.io/hsybg/?view_only=672dac59fa284e8189b97020ebee9bec). See Supplemental Information F for information about the correspondence between the manuscript and the pre-registration document.

which result in a “running tally” of emotions for things such as candidate evaluations (Lodge, McGraw and Stroh, 1989). The broader theory of *hot cognition*, thus views judgments or choices as the products of automatic and unconscious reactions to environmental stimuli (Lodge and Taber, 2013). When such a process is matched with a particular goal or desired end, this theory can give way to *motivated reasoning*, where individuals use these affect-laden impressions (or beliefs) to reach congruent conclusions about political objects more generally (Erisen, Lodge and Taber, 2014; Redlawsk, 2002; Little, Schnakenberg and Turner, 2022). Other work has systematized emotions by proposing a model of affect with two dimensions: arousal (activation–deactivation) and valence (negative–positive) (Russell, 1980). Adapting this general framework to political science, researchers have tested some core implications. For example, Bakker, Schumacher and Rooduijn (2021) find that individuals with extreme attitudes have stronger arousal responses (measured by skin conductance) when exposed to political rhetoric and that incongruent information results in negative affect, which was measured by electromyographic signals of specific muscles in the face.

Another foundational approach is Affective Intelligence Theory, which posits that behavioral responses to stimuli largely depend on whether the *dispositional system* or the *surveillance system* becomes activated (Marcus, Neuman and MacKuen, 2000). That is, when a given event or situation is considered to be favorable, one relies on habitual thought processes and baseline behavioral dispositions. In contrast, when encountering an unfavorable or novel situation, the surveillance system activates, compelling individuals to learn, reassess, or prepare responses to perceived threats or opportunities. The underlying logic is that emotional responses are context-dependent, preparing individuals to act in either a habitual (e.g., enthusiasm-based) or reactive (e.g., anxiety-based) manner.

Other studies have examined specific emotions, such as anger, and their role in politics. For example, Valentino, Wayne and Ocen (2018) find evidence that anger was crucial in mobilizing sexist factions within the Republican Party, which may explain increased support for Trump in the 2016 election. Anger is also found to be a core factor driving people’s trust in government. Webster (2020) concludes that “higher levels of trait-based anger shape public opinion by lowering individuals’ trust in the national government” (p. 72). Another study on anger found that racial minorities expressed less political anger compared to whites, which in turn contributed to lower levels of political participation among minority groups (Phoenix, 2019). Lastly, research has even examined changes in vocal pitch in U.S. congressional floor speeches and found that female MCs spoke with greater emotional intensity when addressing women’s issues compared to both their male counterparts and their own speech on other topics (Dietrich, Hayes and O’Brien, 2019).

One takeaway from this review is that these studies illustrate the bidirectional and conditional nature of emotions and political behavior. On the one hand, emotions compel action, as predicted by Affective Intelligence Theory. For example, this theory expects individuals to engage in information-seeking when ex-

periencing certain emotional states (e.g., anxiety). While this pursuit of information can be biased (Gadarian and Albertson, 2014), it nonetheless shows a clear pathway for emotions to influence political action. On the other hand, the hot cognition and circumplex models show how political stimuli generate affective responses, whether expressed in evaluations or physiological reactions. Finally, both pathways illustrate the dependent nature of the response on internal and external contexts (e.g., one’s existing attitudes; favorable v. unfavorable situations). Therefore, I expect that one’s affective responses are influenced by political stimuli, but as the model outlined in the next section will demonstrate, specific contextual features modify one’s affective responses.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, I show how one’s affective evaluation of others is influenced by partisanship and policy disagreement given the extent of politician control.

### 3 A Model of Political Affect

The following presents a simple model where both policy disagreement and party identity influence one’s feelings toward others, but where disagreements in “low-noise” (greater control) contexts increase negative affect. Let  $A_i$  represent the animosity (or negative affect) a respondent holds toward individual  $i$ , which is impacted by their shared ( $P_i = 1$ ) or not shared ( $P_i = 0$ ) partisanship and the respondent’s partisan intensity or attachment ( $\beta \in \{1, 2\}$ ). Let  $\gamma_j \in \{0, 1\}$  represent a respondent’s policy stance on issue  $j$  and  $x_{ij} \in \{0, 1\}$  represent person  $i$ ’s stance on issue  $j$ . Policy disagreements are summed across the set of  $n$  relevant issues, weighted by their ranked importance to the respondent ( $\alpha_j = \frac{1}{r_j}$ ,  $r_j \in \{1, 2, \dots, n\}$ ).

$$A_i = -\beta P_i + \left( \sum_{j=1}^n \alpha_j |\gamma_j - x_{ij}| \times (1 + C_i) \right) \quad (1)$$

The component  $(1 + C_i)$  represents the control context where the respondent has to evaluate how they feel toward person  $i$ . Let  $C_i = 1$  in “low-noise” contexts when elected officials have greater control, and  $C_i = 0$  in “high-noise” contexts when they have less control. Thus, according to equation (1), greater control contexts ( $C_i = 1$ ) are expected to result in greater animosity toward person  $i$  given the substantive conflict (i.e.,  $\sum_{j=1}^n \alpha_j |\gamma_j - x_{ij}|$ ) because of the prospect of more deliberately distinct outcomes in the world. On the contrary, if the outcomes (given the extent of issue disagreement) are determined more by random factors, i.e., high-noise context, then one should be less angry as the prospect for changes to outcomes by a deliberate opposition are more limited. The term  $(-\beta P_i)$  reflects the reduction in negative affect when the respondent shares a party with person  $i$  scaled by the intensity of their partisan identity (See Supplemental Information A for a balanced version of the model).

---

<sup>2</sup>Self-reported emotional responses as unbiased measures of affective outcomes have limitations, and future studies would benefit from incorporating physiological measures (Bakker and Schumacher, 2023).

## 4 Research Design

I run a survey experiment to test the effect of policy outcome noise (i.e., incumbent’s level of control over outcomes) on interpersonal animosity given the extent of substantive disagreement. Following prior designs, I have participants express how favorable/warmly they feel toward hypothetical individuals whose partisanship and policy stances vary. The dependent variable of interest is the feeling thermometer measure which ranges from 0 (unfavorable/very cold) to 100 (favorable/very warm) which is reverse coded in the analysis to directly represent animosity. Prior to making these evaluations, participants will have indicated whether their stance is closer to the liberal or conservative view on three issue areas, which are the same issue areas the hypothetical individuals will take stances on. Each participant views a total of four profiles, with each profile representing a person who holds a combination of liberal and/or conservative stances on the three issue areas of top importance to the respondent. The randomization is setup to guarantee Republican profiles are more likely have at least one conservative stance, and for Democrats to be more likely to have at least one liberal stance, while the stances uniformly vary across the remaining two issue areas.<sup>3</sup> The three issues are chosen from the participant’s selected top issues from a set of ten.<sup>4</sup> Increasing the number of issues to three in the profiles, from two in prior designs, marginally reduces the set of potential issues not presented that may be inferred by the participants. That said, I also explicitly ask participants to assume that the person in the profile has moderate views on all other issues not presented (See Supplemental Information B for more survey details).

It is important to note that while the research design does not explicitly specify whether the individual is an elite or non-elite, the directional expectation would not change for either specification. That is, even if animosity might be greater toward elites for implementing undesirable policy outcomes in a low-noise context, the argument extends to non-elites as they are ultimately responsible for supporting such elites.

The treatments aim to influence participants’ perceptions of elected officials’ control over outcomes. Participants assigned to the “Low-Noise” (more control;  $D_{treatment} = 1$ ) condition are presented two cases of executive orders by the previous administrations to indicate how incumbents can have a significant level of control over outcomes like employment. Specifically, I used Trump’s EO 14222 and Biden’s EO 13990 and highlighted their immediate impact on layoffs and job opportunities (Table 1).<sup>5</sup> Those randomly assigned to the “High-Noise” (less control;  $D_{treatment} = 0$ ) condition are presented with a short paragraph, a link, and

---

<sup>3</sup>This approach helps minimize the presence of highly unrealistic profiles. Additionally, in the analysis, we still observe many cases where respondents have zero stance alignment with profiles, allowing us to explore the effects for the all levels of policy disagreement. See Supplemental Information C for complete issue stances.

<sup>4</sup>The ten issues were selected from a Pew Study which had pinned these as the most salient issues for the 2024 election. The original set did not include immigration, but I included it given the rise of its salience.

<sup>5</sup>See Supplemental Information E for the design of a smaller pre-registered pilot study.

a screenshot of a published peer-reviewed article whose conclusion is that objective performance outcomes appear to be outside the immediate control of incumbent elected officials (Dynes and Holbein, 2020) (Table 2). It’s important to note that those in the “High-Noise” condition are also exposed to Trump’s and Biden’s names to isolate any effects of the low-noise condition to control itself, and not their names. I use OLS to estimate the coefficients of the following model:

$$A_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1(P_i) \tag{2}$$

$$+ \beta_2 \left( \sum_{j=1}^3 |\gamma_j - x_{ij}| \right) \tag{3}$$

$$+ \beta_3 (D_{treatment}) \tag{4}$$

$$+ \beta_4 \left( \sum_{j=1}^3 |\gamma_j - x_{ij}| \times D_{treatment} \right) + \epsilon_i \tag{5}$$

Table 1: Vignette - Low Noise Treatment Condition

<b>The following illustrates how <i>elected officials have significant control over outcomes.</i></b>
<b>Executive Orders</b> have become more common in modern politics. In particular, presidents increasingly use unilateral executive orders that have immediate effects on important outcomes, such as employment.
<b>CASE 1:</b> In 2021, president <b>Joseph Biden</b> signed an executive order which revoked the permit for the Keystone XL pipeline that ran from Canada to the United States. The immediate consequences were layoffs of workers that were employed by contracted companies and preventing the creation of future employment opportunities. To read, click the link: <a href="#">Executive Order 13990</a>
<b>CASE 2:</b> Another example is current president <b>Donald Trump</b> , who passed an executive order this February which aims to implement the goals of the Department of Government Efficiency. One of the immediate consequences was hiring freezes and massive layoffs of workers across multiple federal agencies. To read, click the link: <a href="#">Executive Order 14222</a>

As indicated above, the expectations are for the effect of shared partisanship to be negative on animosity (H1:  $\hat{\beta}_1 < 0$ ), and for the effect of policy disagreement to be positive on animosity (H2:  $\hat{\beta}_2 > 0$ ). The novel theoretical expectation is for the interaction between policy disagreement and low-noise to be independently positive (H3:  $\hat{\beta}_4 > 0$ ). This would indicate a unique effect of substance on interpersonal animosity when policy disagreement occurs under conditions where officials have greater prospects of deliberately imposing changes to outcomes. Finally, an exploratory analysis investigates whether participants perceive the issues they consider most important (the three they selected) as more controllable than those they deem less important (H4).

Table 2: Vignette - High Noise Treatment Condition



A research team found that in many areas, measures of outcomes showed little to no change when new parties took office. They conclude that **factors beyond the control of elected officials**, such as market forces, global events, local conditions, and other random factors **are often the primary drivers of these outcomes**. This suggests that, in many areas, **elected officials have limited influence over outcomes**.


These findings provide evidence that presidents, including **Joseph Biden** and **Donald Trump**, may have less control over outcomes than commonly assumed.

Link to study: Noisy Retrospection

## Noisy Retrospection: The Effect of Party Control on Policy Outcomes

Published online by Cambridge University Press: 04 November 2019

ADAM M. DYNES  and JOHN B. HOLBEIN 

[Show author details](#) 

**Article** [Figures](#) [Supplementary materials](#) [Comments](#) [Metrics](#)

 Save PDF  Share  Cite  Rights & Permissions

### Abstract

Retrospective voting is vital for democracy. But, are the objective performance metrics widely thought to be relevant for retrospection—such as the performance of the economy, criminal justice system, and schools, to name a few—valid criteria for evaluating government performance? That is, do political coalitions actually have the power to influence the performance metrics used for retrospection on the timeline introduced by elections? Using difference-in-difference and regression discontinuity techniques, we find that US states governed by Democrats and those by Republicans perform equally well on economic, education, crime, family, social, environmental, and health outcomes on the timeline introduced by elections (2–4 years downstream). **Our results suggest that voters may struggle to truly hold government coalitions accountable, as objective performance metrics appear to be largely out of the immediate control of political coalitions.**

## 5 Results

The experiment was launched on CloudResearch Connect with a sample of 895 participants. Each respondent evaluated four profiles of hypothetical individuals, resulting in 3,580 total observations. Approximately 33% of participants identified as non-white and the gender distribution was about 48% female, 51% male, and 1% other. The average age of participants was 39.05 years ( $SD = 12.07$ ).

### 5.1 Main Theoretical Hypotheses

As shown in Table 3, we find support for the main theoretical hypotheses. First, sharing a partisan identity with the hypothetical individual decreases animosity toward that individual (H1) by about 9 points. Policy disagreement—which ranges from 0 to 3, indicating the number of issues of disagreement with the given profile—has a stronger effect on animosity (H2), increasing it by about 15 points. For the key theoretical interaction between substantive disagreement and the control context, we observe a statistically significant effect across two specifications ( $\hat{\beta}_4 = 2.656, SE = 0.797, p < .01$ ;  $\hat{\beta}_{4'} = 3.240, SE = 0.881, p < .01$ ). As noted above, including both Joseph Biden and Donald Trump in the high-noise condition allows us to conclude that it is their demonstrated control over outcomes—not their names—that drives the additional increase in animosity.

While not pre-registered, I also run an additional set of models. First, I control for trait-based anger and find that the interaction between substantive conflict and low-noise remains positive and statistically significant ( $\hat{\beta}_4 = 2.687, SE = 0.798, p < .01$ ), while anger itself has an independent positive effect on animosity ( $\hat{\beta}_{anger} = 1.058, SE = 0.348, p < .01$ ). I also run the main model excluding observations for which the treatment did not have its intended effect, i.e., their belief of politician control increased in high-noise condition or belief of control decreased in low-noise condition, which resulted in an increased effect ( $\hat{\beta}_4 = 3.031, SE = 0.836, p < .01$ ). Finally, I run a model that interacts an out-party indicator with the low-noise treatment to rule out the possibility that a more “powerful party” context (i.e., greater control) drives additional animosity and find no effect ( $\hat{\beta}_{out\ party \times low\ noise} = -1.501, SE = 1.343, p = .28$ ; See Supplemental Information D for all estimates of the additional models).

### 5.2 Exploratory Hypothesis

In addition to finding support for the main theoretical expectations, I explore whether participants view the issues they consider to be the most important as more controllable than issues of less stated importance. More specifically, participants were asked to indicate how much control they believe elected officials have over issues of importance to them, which ranged from “0 - No control” to “6 - Complete control.” They

Table 3: Main Interaction Models

	<i>Dependent variable: Animosity</i>	
	<b>(Model 1)</b>	<b>(Model 2)</b>
	<i>Democrats &amp; Republicans</i>	<i>All Respondents</i>
	(1)	(2)
Shared Party	-10.738*** (0.815)	-8.848*** (0.710)
Policy Disagreement	15.354*** (0.689)	15.600*** (0.607)
Low Noise	-4.361*** (1.397)	-5.001*** (1.273)
Policy Disagreement × Low Noise	3.240*** (0.881)	2.656*** (0.797)
Constant	30.143*** (1.322)	28.597*** (1.125)
Observations	2,736	3,580
R <sup>2</sup>	0.429	0.389
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.429	0.389

*Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses.*

\*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

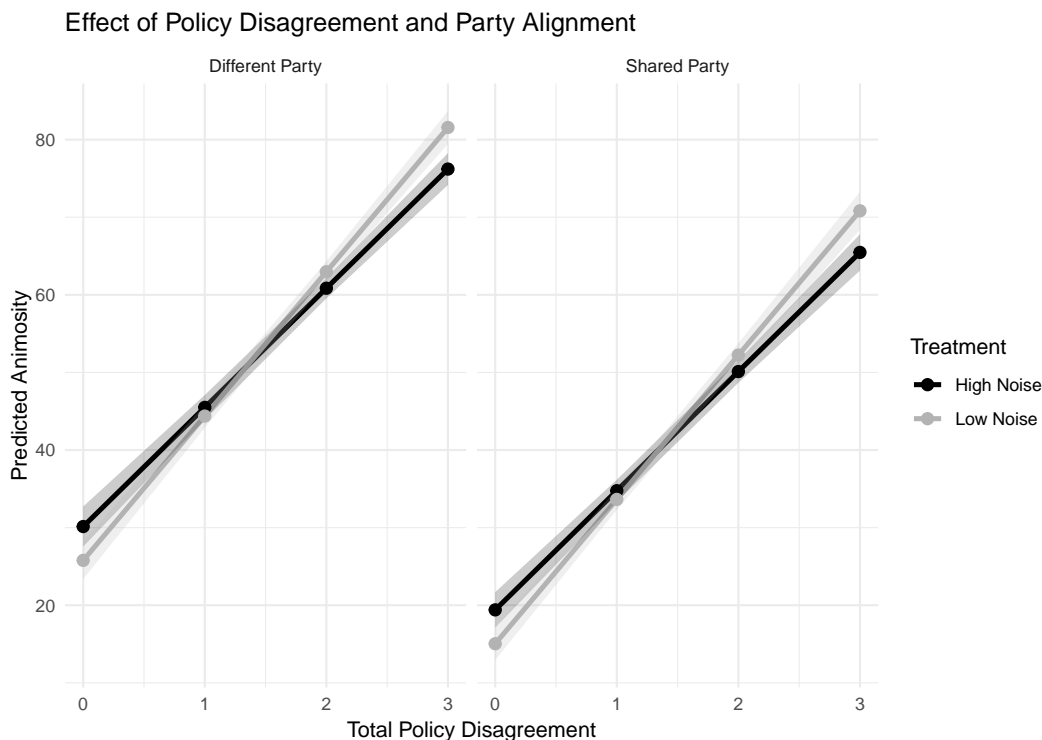


Figure 1: Marginal Effects Plot (Model 1)

were then asked the same question about one randomly selected issue that they did not indicate as being in their top three most important. I conducted paired and independent sample t-tests as shown in Table 5. The mean level of control for issues of importance to respondents was 4.14 and for issues of less importance, the mean level of control was 3.67. These results indicate that individuals believe that issues they deem as more important are more controllable by elected officials, which is an important finding for future work that builds on these results.

Table 4: Results of t-tests for Belief in Incumbent Control of Important vs. Less-Important Issues

	<b>t-test type</b>	<b>t-statistic</b>	<b>p-value</b>	<b>diff lower bound</b>	<b>diff upper bound</b>
$(df = 3579)$	Paired Sample	17.75	<0.001	0.41	0.52
$(df = 6681.8)$	Two Sample	14.79	<0.001	0.40	0.53

Along with the main findings, these results contribute to the ongoing and important discussion about the roots of partisan animosity in American politics. By leveraging the theoretical arguments about the role of incumbent control over policy outcomes, I show that greater control is a meaningful driver of additional animosity toward individuals given substantive disagreement. In other words, the prospect for elected officials to more directly influence important outcomes fuels political animosity toward people with whom one disagrees with on substance. This finding supports the view that animosity is firmly rooted in substantive

disagreements over policy given the prospects for the deliberate realization of those outcomes. Some may interpret this as a more pessimistic account of polarization—substantive differences are often perceived as more difficult to reconcile than identity or symbolic divides, especially because creating new shared identities is sometimes seen as more feasible (Dias and Lelkes, 2022, p. 788). However, this interpretation risks drawing too sharp a distinction between identity and substance. As I will argue below, partisan identities can be inextricably linked to substantive concerns or a broader world-view (i.e. materially distinct ends) that people want their respective elites to pursue if elected.

## 6 Do “Expressive” Motivations Matter For Substantive Ends?

Orr, Fowler and Huber (2023) use an analogy to illustrate their formal argument that substantive concerns can drive what might appear to be expressive or identity-based behavior. They describe a rabbit hunter (Elmer Fudd) that does not inherently care whether others wear hunting caps (expressive motivation) but instead cares if others actually hunt and eat rabbit (substantive motivations). According to this analogy, if the hunter sees someone wearing a hunting cap, they might infer that person is a hunter and thus view them favorably. However, given the starting assumption, the hunter’s feelings are ultimately determined by whether the other person actually hunts and eats rabbit (if that information becomes available) regardless of the hunting cap. Their point is that substantive motives could matter far more than expressive motives even if favorability appears to be driven by the latter (p. 953).

Dias and Lelkes (2022) might rebuttal that wearing a hunting cap is itself an important end, as it signals belonging to a specific group. That is, this expressive behavior—dressing or appearing a certain way—has the function of defining who is and is not conforming to the in-group, which is important in its own right. That said, I contend that if dressing a certain way serves an additional substantive purpose, then it cannot be categorized as lacking substance. That is, we should consider whether “appearing to be the part” might be substantively meaningful. This circumvents the issue of having to assume the hunter only cares about hunting/eating rabbits (substance) or only cares about following in-group loyalty markers (identity), when evaluating how they feel toward others. My argument is that in many contexts, expressive behavior (e.g., wearing hunting caps) can have a substantive purpose beyond symbolic in-group signaling. To extend the analogy above, consider a situation where a group of people are actively hunting where hunting gear is critically important. Showing up in inappropriate gear would likely negatively impact one’s ability to hunt rabbits and/or affect others’ ability to do so. Thus, what might seem expressive in one context, such as wearing hunting gear in completely unrelated contexts, serves a clear substantive function in another (e.g., when hunting or preparing for a hunt). This however, is not the argument made by Dias and Lelkes regarding

identity-based motivations and behavior as far as I can discern.

Setting the analogy aside, they argue that “citizens care about whether others conform to their parties’ policy stances, regardless of the content of those stances” (Dias and Lelkes, 2022, p. 788). My interpretation of this view is that feelings toward others are therefore primarily driven by alignment with in-group markers—such as pro-party stances—*regardless* of any substantive content and therefore purpose behind those markers. In contrast, I contend that what might appear to be merely expressive behavior can have a substantive purpose, especially in political contexts where such markers are key for political coordination in partisan movements or campaigns. Therefore, to appropriately evaluate what drives individuals’ feelings toward others, we must situate these expressive behaviors within specific choice settings. The question becomes: to what extent are surveys employed by political scientists inherently political contexts?<sup>6</sup>

Thus, expressive behaviors, such as flipping on an issue to align with an elite of one’s party, may reflect commitment to the party’s broader substantive goals (i.e., their vision for society) by facilitating cohesion and action, rather than serving as a blindly pro-partisan action. In other words, we must consider the broader purpose and aims of the party, and to the extent that parties have distinct substantive goals, we cannot conclude a lack of substantive motivations from pro-party behavior.

Table 5: Summary of Arguments

<b>Author(s)</b>	<b>Key Points</b>
Dias & Lelkes	<p>Citizens care about whether others conform to their party’s policy stances regardless of the content of those stances.</p> <p>Feelings are driven by alignment with symbolic in-group markers.</p>
Orr, Fowler, & Huber	<p>Substantive motives can be primary, even if initial observations suggest expressive drivers.</p> <p>Must consider the broader set of potential issues that matter to people.</p>
This Manuscript	<p>“Expressive” partisan behavior may reflect alignment with a group’s substantive goals by facilitating action, rather than being purely symbolic markers of belonging.</p> <p>One can conclude purely symbolic motives if such behaviors serve no clear substantive end.</p> <p>Must consider broader set of issues aligned with a given party, i.e., each party’s vision for society.</p>

<sup>6</sup>This argument does not require that participants be extensively politically knowledgeable, or engaged, only that the average participant is not as politically innocent as previously thought. For an extensive overview of recent work showing evidence that the general public is not as ideologically innocent as prior work indicated see Simas (2023).

## 7 Conclusion

The results of this study provide evidence for the conclusion that one’s feelings are largely driven by substance when making affective evaluations of others. By leveraging the extent to which incumbents have control over outcomes, I created a condition of greater control (low-noise) which generated an additional increase in animosity given some level of policy disagreement which can only be attributed to substance. That said, I find that sharing a partisan identity with a given profile decreases animosity, though to a lesser extent than not aligning on an additional policy issue increases it. Additional models indicate that this effect is independent of trait-based anger and offer evidence against the argument that party identity interacts with the greater control condition to influence animosity. Lastly, issues of greater stated importance are perceived to be under greater control than issues of less stated importance. The key takeaway from these results is the importance of politicians’ control over real-world outcomes in influencing animosity. Irrespective of resolving any debate, the central findings should compel scholars to consider this key aspect in their approaches to studying voter motivations.

Another takeaway comes from the discussion in the previous section where I make the case that partisan identity effects cannot be devoid of substance in political contexts. Expressive behaviors may reflect alignment with a group’s substantive goals by facilitating action (e.g., enabling cohesion in a campaign), rather than being purely symbolic markers of belonging. As argued by others (Orr, Fowler and Huber, 2023), one must consider the broader set of issues, and I extend that here to consider the extent each party may be in pursuit of a particular *vision for society*, which would make pro-party behavior based in substance. Therefore, to the extent that Democrats and Republicans have specific aims with intentions to shape the real-world, both (seemingly) expressive and substantive behaviors reflect a commitment to achieving those outcomes. Thus, the influence partisan elites may have on followers over a small subset of contradicting issues does not necessarily indicate substance-less citizens, if a broader vision for society by that party can be identified.

## References

- Abramowitz, Alan I. and Steven W. Webster. 2018. "Negative Partisanship: Why Americans Dislike Parties But Behave Like Rabid Partisans." *Political Psychology* 39(S1):119–135. \_eprint: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/pops.12479>.  
**URL:** <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/pops.12479>
- Arreguin, Chano. 2025. "The Conditionally Competent Voter: When Instrumental versus Expressive Motivations Influence Political Decision-Making." *SocArXiv* .  
**URL:** [https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/5b2my\\_v1](https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/5b2my_v1)
- Bakker, Bert and Gijs Schumacher. 2023. "Using measures of psychophysiological and neural activity to advance understanding of psychological processes in politics."  
**URL:** [https://osf.io/dcpt8\\_v1](https://osf.io/dcpt8_v1)
- Bakker, Bert N., Gijs Schumacher and Matthijs Rooduijn. 2021. "Hot Politics? Affective Responses to Political Rhetoric." *American Political Science Review* 115(1):150–164.  
**URL:** <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-political-science-review/article/hot-politics-affective-responses-to-political-rhetoric/DD2E00B93E17141F6A5198509C2CB794>
- Dias, Nicholas and Yphtach Lelkes. 2022. "The Nature of Affective Polarization: Disentangling Policy Disagreement from Partisan Identity." *American Journal of Political Science* 66(3):775–790. \_eprint: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/ajps.12628>.  
**URL:** <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/ajps.12628>
- Dietrich, Bryce J., Matthew Hayes and Diana Z. O'brien. 2019. "Pitch Perfect: Vocal Pitch and the Emotional Intensity of Congressional Speech." *American Political Science Review* 113(4):941–962.  
**URL:** <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-political-science-review/article/pitch-perfect-vocal-pitch-and-the-emotional-intensity-of-congressional-speech/868A227A2C57A7053742CF9CF3B6C419>
- Dynes, Adam M. and John B. Holbein. 2020. "Noisy Retrospection: The Effect of Party Control on Policy Outcomes." *American Political Science Review* 114(1):237–257.  
**URL:** <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-political-science-review/article/abs/noisy-retrospection-the-effect-of-party-control-on-policy-outcomes/A87D42DD1778755E71DC65B1825B64D5>
- Erisen, Cengiz, Milton Lodge and Charles S. Taber. 2014. "Affective Contagion in Effortful Political Thinking." *Political Psychology* 35(2):187–206. Publisher: [International Society of Political Psychology, Wiley].  
**URL:** <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43785846>
- Gadarian, Shana Kushner and Bethany Albertson. 2014. "Anxiety, Immigration, and the Search for Information." *Political Psychology* 35(2):133–164. \_eprint: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/pops.12034>.  
**URL:** <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/pops.12034>
- Gadarian, Shana Kushner and Ted Brader. 2023. Emotion and political psychology. In *The Oxford handbook of political psychology, 3rd ed.* New York, NY, US: Oxford University Press pp. 191–247.
- Little, Andrew T., Keith E. Schnakenberg and Ian R. Turner. 2022. "Motivated Reasoning and Democratic Accountability." *American Political Science Review* 116(2):751–767.  
**URL:** <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-political-science-review/article/motivated-reasoning-and-democratic-accountability/A5FDC6F7175255BDE8AA6AC054CD9176>
- Lodge, Milton and Charles S. Taber. 2013. *The Rationalizing Voter*. Cambridge Studies in Public Opinion and Political Psychology Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.  
**URL:** <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/rationalizing-voter/9E4E27965B612D5DDB1091BD907DF492>

- Lodge, Milton, Kathleen M. McGraw and Patrick Stroh. 1989. “An Impression-Driven Model of Candidate Evaluation.” *American Political Science Review* 83(2):399–419.  
**URL:** <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-political-science-review/article/abs/an-impressiondriven-model-of-candidate-evaluation/C6DF2D53F1D65EBAA10EE4378D106458>
- Marcus, George E., W. Russell Neuman and Michael MacKuen. 2000. *Affective Intelligence and Political Judgment*. University of Chicago Press. Google-Books-ID: XkyjBNvIMKQC.
- Orr, Lilla V., Anthony Fowler and Gregory A. Huber. 2023. “Is Affective Polarization Driven by Identity, Loyalty, or Substance?” *American Journal of Political Science* 67(4):948–962. eprint: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/ajps.12796>.  
**URL:** <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/ajps.12796>
- Orr, Lilla V. and Gregory A. Huber. 2020. “The Policy Basis of Measured Partisan Animosity in the United States.” *American Journal of Political Science* 64(3):569–586. eprint: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/ajps.12498>.  
**URL:** <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/ajps.12498>
- Phoenix, Davin L. 2019. *The Anger Gap: How Race Shapes Emotion in Politics*. Cambridge University Press. Google-Books-ID: wm3CDwAAQBAJ.
- Redlawsk, David P. 2002. “Hot cognition or cool consideration? Testing the effects of motivated reasoning on political decision making.” *The Journal of Politics* 64(4):1021–1044. Place: United Kingdom Publisher: Blackwell Publishing.
- Russell, James A. 1980. “A circumplex model of affect.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 39(6):1161–1178. Place: US Publisher: American Psychological Association.
- Simas, Elizabeth N. 2023. “In Defense of Ideology: Reexamining the Role of Ideology in the American Electorate.” *Elements in Political Psychology*. ISBN: 9781009228169 9781009228176 Publisher: Cambridge University Press.  
**URL:** <https://www.cambridge.org/core/elements/in-defense-of-ideology/A2C8121D268BB34ED86C30A47368D4DE>
- Valentino, Nicholas A, Carly Wayne and Marzia Ocen. 2018. “Mobilizing Sexism: The Interaction of Emotion and Gender Attitudes in the 2016 US Presidential Election.” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 82(S1):799–821.  
**URL:** <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfy003>
- Webster, Steven W. 2020. *American Rage: How Anger Shapes Our Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.  
**URL:** <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/american-rage/EE2BAF959B773D58529F148782E58CF2>
- Webster, Steven W. and Bethany Albertson. 2022. “Emotion and Politics: Noncognitive Psychological Biases in Public Opinion.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 25(Volume 25, 2022):401–418. Publisher: Annual Reviews.  
**URL:** <https://www.annualreviews.org/content/journals/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051120-105353>