

Paper 205: Government and Politics of the U.S.A.
Lecture 9

Elections and voting

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Introduction

- How do US elections work?
- The classic “critical realignments” view
- More recent elite/mass polarisation
- Affective polarisation, partisanship, and partisan behaviour beyond elections

Critical Realignments I

Walter Dean Burnham 1970, Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics

- focus on critical (sudden) rather than secular (gradual) shifts in the relationships between parties and their underlying social coalitions: *“a basic and measurable transformation in the shape of that voting universe”*
- *“realignments ... arise from emergent tensions in society which, not adequately controlled by the organization or outputs of party politics as usual, escalate to a flash point”* often involving third party *“proto-realignment phenomena”*
- parties then adapt, *“short, sharp reorganization of the mass coalitional bases of the major parties”*
- a new settlement, a new basis for public policy, and a period of stability...

Critical Realignments II

- Realignments occur “once a generation” (~30 years)
- eg 1800 (Jefferson > Federalists); 1828 (Jacksonian democracy); 1860 (Lincoln + civil war); 1896 (McKinley v Bryan); 1932 (FDR & New Deal)
- Realigning elections show intense interest, partisan turmoil, wrestling with 3rd party movements when compared to (much more common) non-realigning elections
- Politics is structured by these intense moments of realignment that then dominate the much quieter periods in between
- Not quite the same as “political time”

Against Critical Realignments I

see eg David Mayhew (2002) *Electoral Realignments: A Critique of An American Genre*

- ... no alleged realignment after 1932 (1968? ...?)
- the periodicity seems dubious; eg New Deal is genuinely an epochal change but quantitative *and* qualitative attempts to distinguish critical from noncritical elections don't clearly show two separate types, and sometimes it's not clear what the actual *change* election is (1928? 1936?)
- for example, while the 1896 election is often regarded as critical, it might be less of a wholesale change than the 1874 House/1876 Presidential election (end of Reconstruction)

Against Critical Realignments II

see eg David Mayhew (2002) *Electoral Realignments: A Critique of An American Genre*

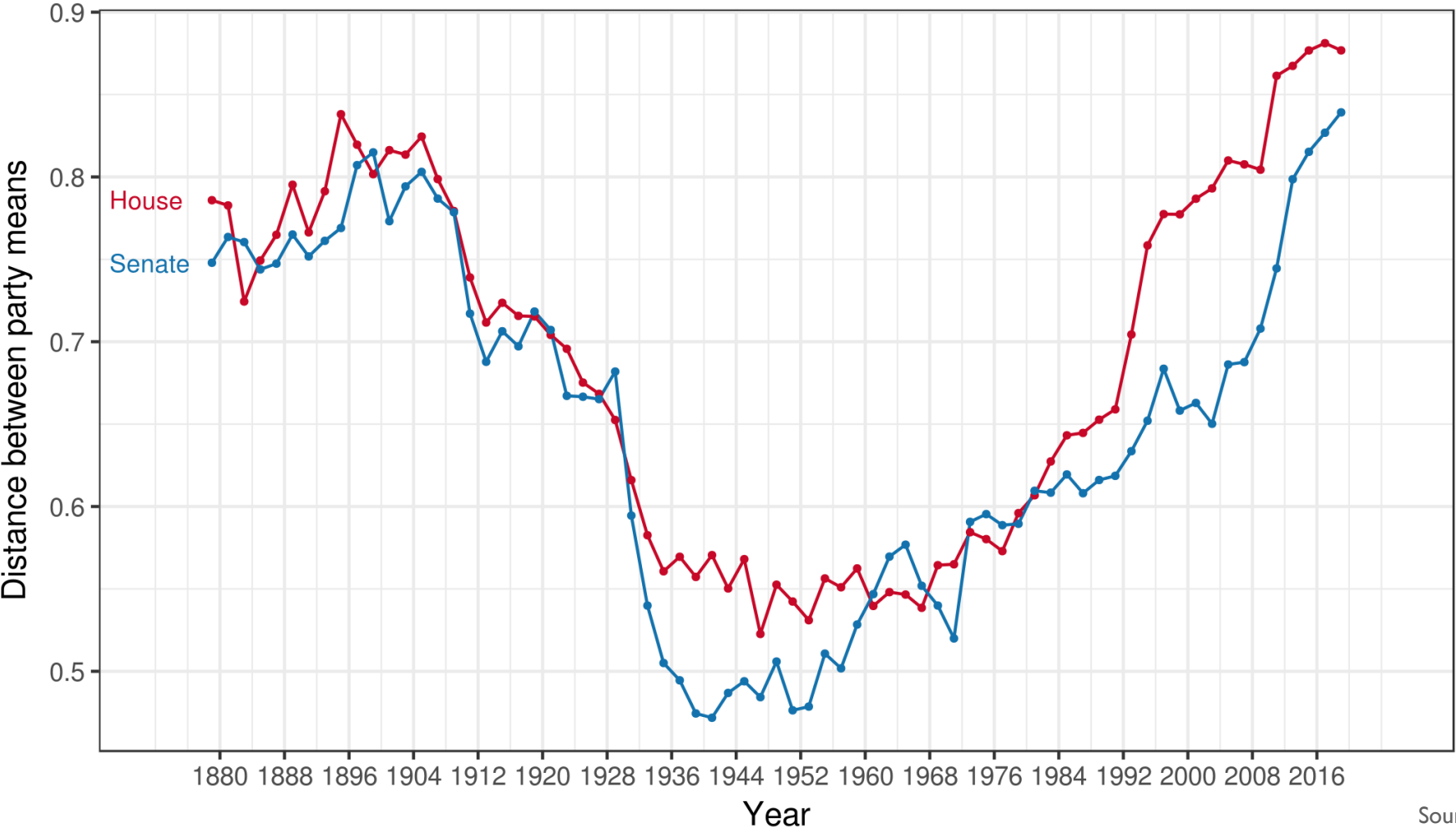
- eg compared to the “realignment” view that overwhelming Republican victory in 1896 was the beginning of 36 years in which politics protected business...
- Republicans lost out in 1910, 1912 & Progressive Democrats were popular and successful (ie Wilson)
- Republicans recovered in the aftermath of Democratic leadership in WWI, not as inexorable law of the alignment, Democrats suffered huge defeat again in 1920
- implies a role for contingency (war!)

Against Critical Realignments III

see eg David Mayhew (2002) *Electoral Realignments: A Critique of An American Genre*

- Mayhew suggests importance of contingency (“events”); short-term partisan strategy, valence issues (eg economic performance) in electoral and political outcomes
- some elections change a lot (1932) but so do others (1948 and the dawn of civil rights, 1964 and Civil Rights Act, Voting Rights Act, Great Society...)
- traditional narratives of realigning elections focus on the politics of business interests versus (white) mass publics - but what about race, war and statebuilding, economic growth? (qv emphasis on 1896 versus 1876, or 1932 versus 1948/64/etc)
- Especially after Mayhew, the realignments argument is less persuasive nowadays *but* it remains an important part of popular thinking about elections. & coalitions do matter!

Polarisation among elites: DW-nominate scores in Congress



Source: voteview.com

But have electorates polarised?

- Fiorina et al: not really? (against Abramowitz arguing for electoral polarisation)
 - polarisation is ideological: voters polarise when more of them identify as more conservative/liberal and less as centrist, and more of them hold conservative/liberal policy preferences rather than more centrist ones
 - but (up through the early 2000s) little change in ideological self-identity; on policy preferences, little change in distribution or increased bimodality, though particular items shift left or right (eg up to 2004 = shift “right” on military spending support)
 - but voters may respond to polarised *politicians* in ways that seem more polarised
 - Fiorina thinks this is bad electoral representation, but qv Ahler & Broockman 2018

The partisan sort I

- Levendusky (2009): what has happened is party *sorting*: conservatives more likely to be Republicans, liberals more likely to be Democrats
- Mass partisan sort is driven by elite partisan polarisation:
 - political elites take distinct partisan positions
 - voters are now sent much clearer signals about what Republicans and Democrats are, ideologically
 - so they “sort” into parties: without changing population distribution of the ideologies in the electorate, we see conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats but many fewer liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats

The partisan sort II

- But how has this happened?
 - *New* voters enter the electorate ready-sorted (replacement effect)
 - *Existing* voters align their partisan and ideological attachments
- Two possible routes:
 - ideologically driven (conservative Democrats become Republicans, liberal Republicans become Democrats)
 - party driven (conservative Democrats become liberals, liberal Republicans become conservatives)

The partisan sort III

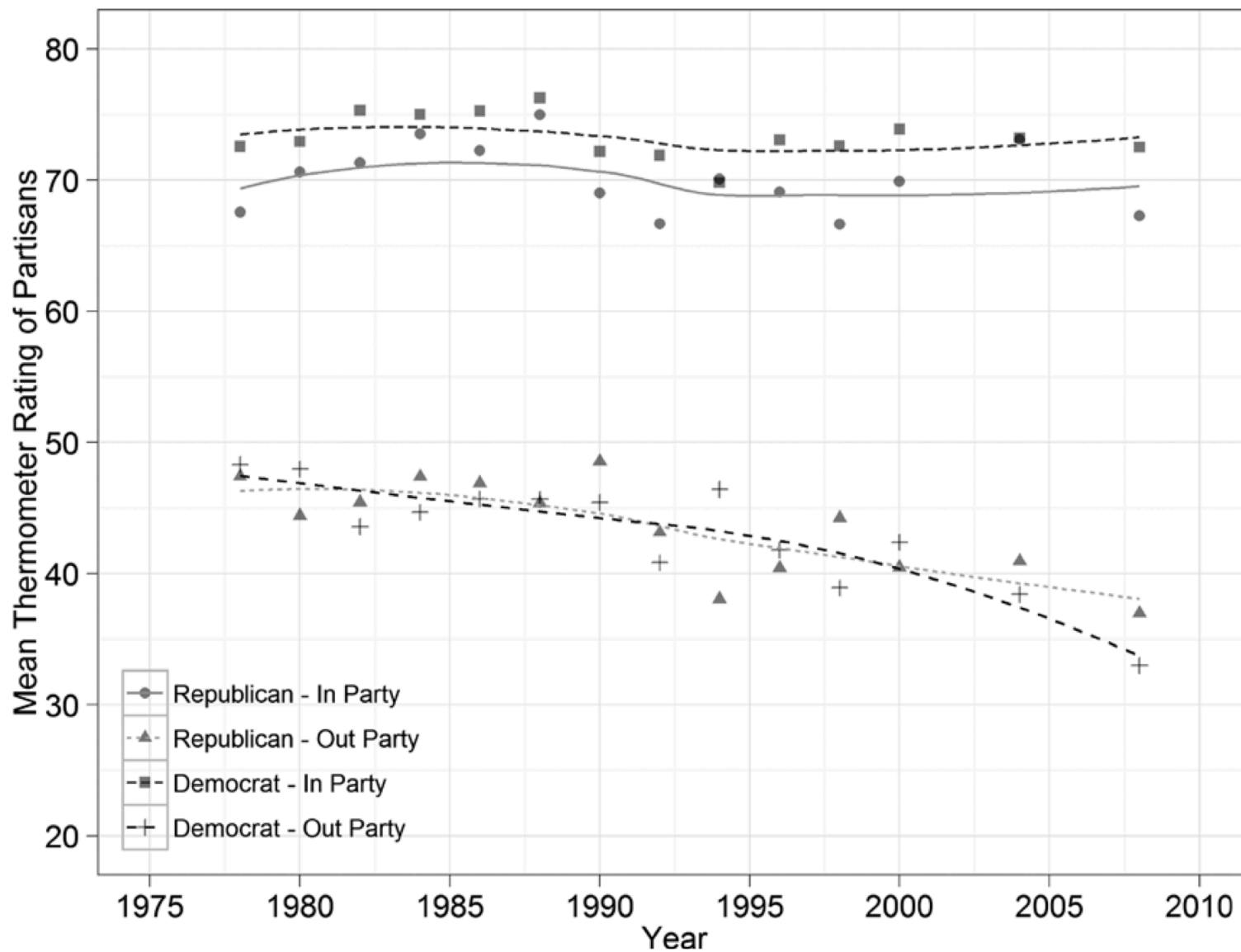
- Levendusky's evidence suggests (with caveats) that the party driven approach represents ~ twice as much of the sorting as ideology driven (53% vs 28%)
- ie mostly voters update their ideological stance to better match the cues they receive from a party they remain loyal to (!)
- Exceptions:
 - abortion issue
 - “politically sophisticated” voters ie those who are more likely to hold stable and coherent political beliefs;
 - 1970s/80s partisan realignment among white Southern voters (conservative Dems becoming Republicans) but later Southern sorting is not distinctive

Affective partisanship I

- Levendusky: if sorting anchors voters more strongly to their parties, party perceptions will polarize - stronger positive feelings about their own party and/or negative feelings about the other
- this is *affective* partisanship and *affective* polarisation:
 - members of each party have more distinct *feelings* about their own and the other party
 - no need for underlying ideological change/ideological polarisation - in fact, partisans tend to overstate ideological extremism esp. of the other side (qv Levendusky & Malhotra 2016)
 - intuitively it's *teams* (eg in sports) - not necessarily any more content than that

Affective partisanship II

- Iyengar et al (2012): this is a case of group dynamics, specifically about in-group vs out-group - “group-based affect is an ingrained human response”
- Can use survey data to assess feeling thermometer ratings for identifiers with both parties over time
- Also raises other issues: other social consequences (eg preferences about cross-party marriage); stereotyping; strength of group affect for party versus other identities (eg race, religion)
- start with feelings

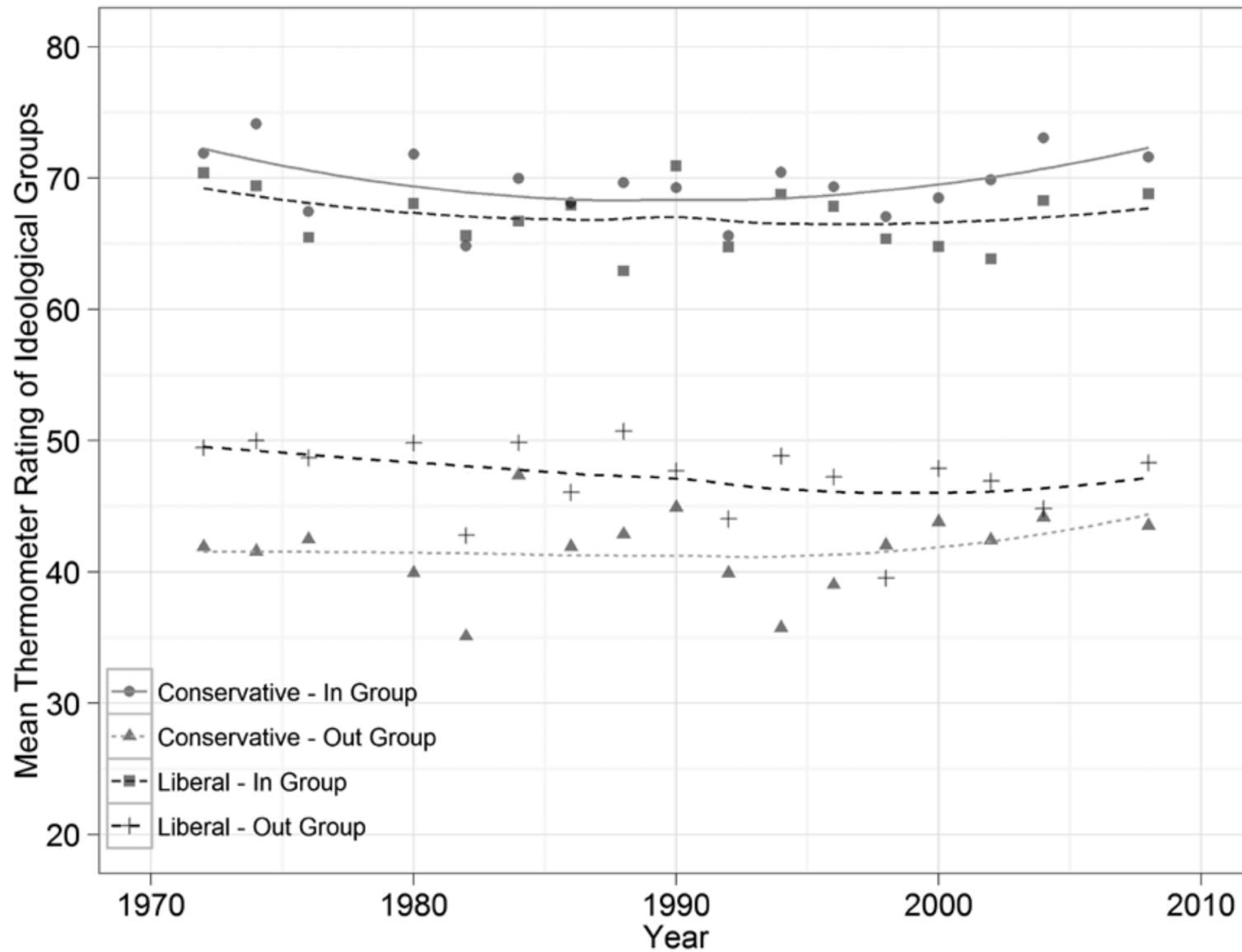


**from
Iyengar
et al
(2012)**

- what does this mean about voters' in-party evaluation?
- what does this mean about voters' out-party evaluation?

Affective partisanship III

- 2008 average out-party rating is 30
- qv
 - Protestant feeling about Catholics 66
 - Democrats about Big Business 51
 - Republicans about people on welfare 50
 - Republicans about gay men and lesbians 42
- but what about ideology?



**from
Iyengar
et al
(2012)**

- no obvious trends
- in-group ratings comparable to partisanship
- outgroup ratings somewhat higher than partisanship

Affective partisanship IV

- in-group vs out-group marriage:
 - in 1960 poll, 5% of Rs and 4% of Ds “displeased” if their child married someone from the out-party
 - in 2008 poll, 27% of Rs and 20% of Ds “somewhat upset” or “very upset” if their child married someone from the out-party
 - in 2010 poll, 49% of Rs and 33% of Ds “somewhat unhappy” or “very unhappy” if their child married someone from the out-party
- polling questions are different! but seem indicative of substantial change towards partisan out-group disapproval in marriage over ca 50 years)

Affective partisanship V

- This does not seem to reflect a general trend towards out-group marriage disapproval; qv race and marriage
 - Pew surveys shows non-Black opposition to a close relative marrying someone who is Black fell from 63% in 1990 to 14% in 2016;
 - Gallup surveys over similar period show approval of “marriage between blacks and whites” rose from 4% in 1958 to 87% in 2013

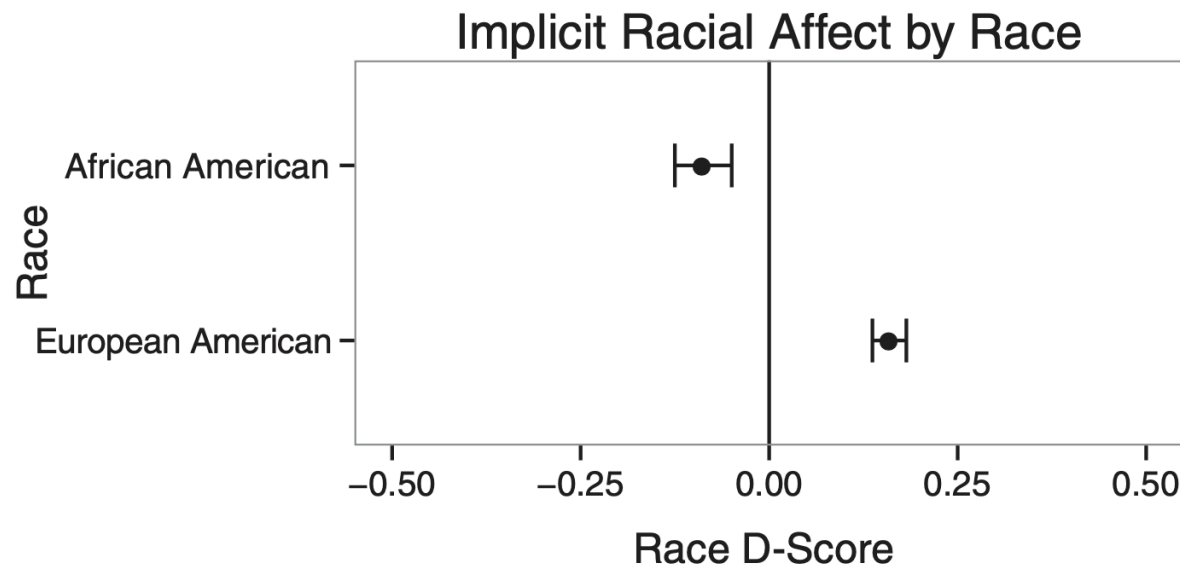
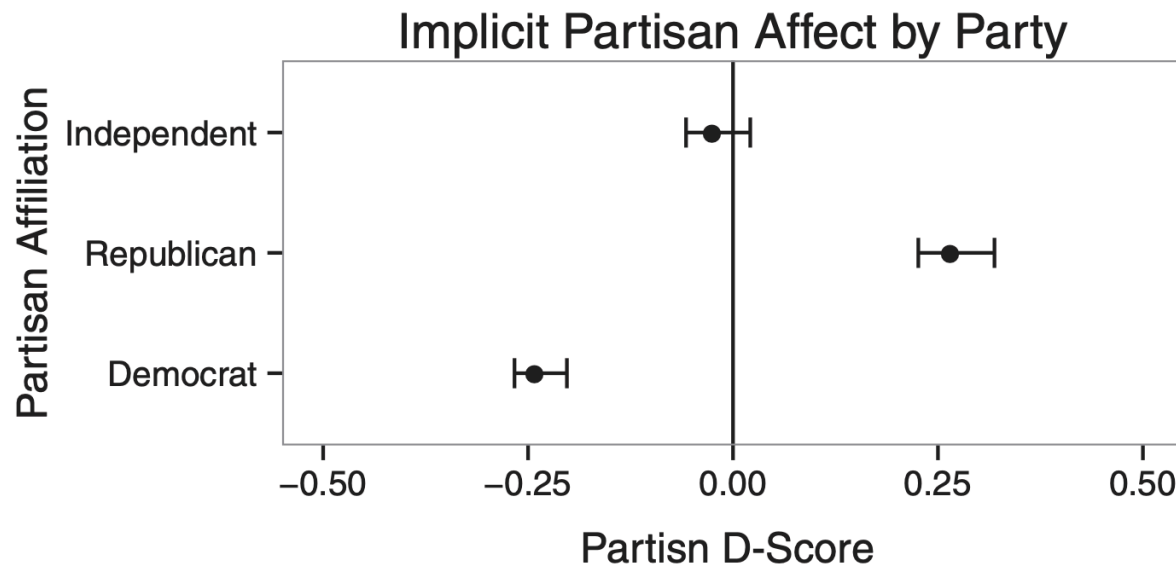
Affective partisanship VI

- Iyengar et al find some evidence that the levels of affective polarisation are increased by exposure to negative political advertising and by being in a battleground state (presumably through greater exposure to political information/communication in general)
- This experience reinforces in-party identity (and positive feelings) and negative stereotypes about the out-party
- Notably, the trends Iyengar et al identify are not visible in comparable data from the UK

Affective partisanship VII

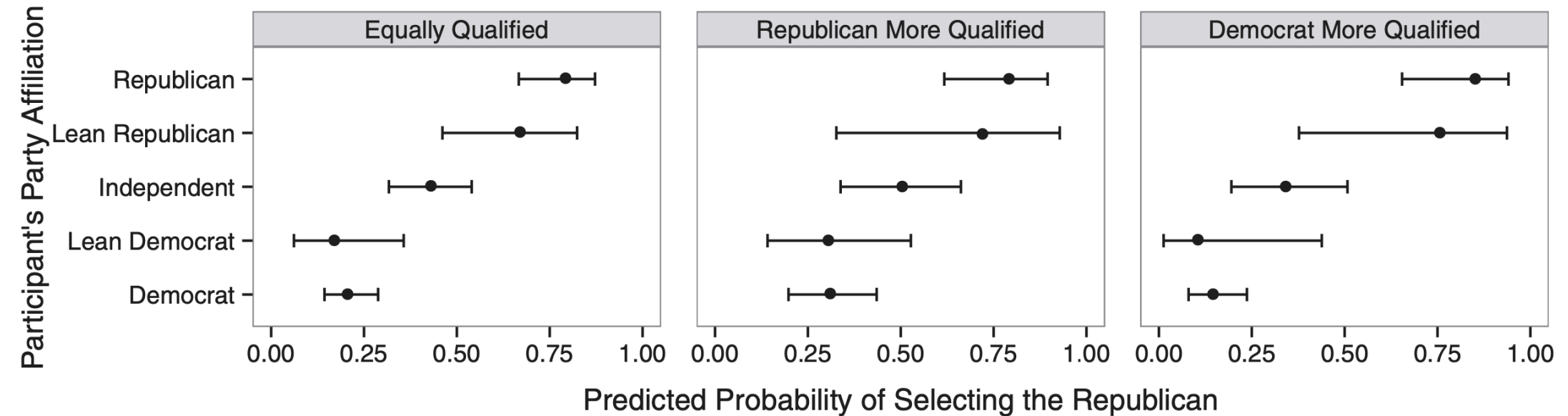
- increasing evidence that this affective partisanship has spillover consequences significantly beyond elections
- Gift & Gift (2015 article in *Political Behavior*) conducted an audit study in a very Republican county (near DFW) and a very Democratic county (near San Francisco), sending out explicitly liberal/Democrat, conservative/Republican, and non-partisan job applications
- to get a callback, the Democrat needed to make 39.2% more applications than the Republican in the Republican county (31.3% when affiliations reversed)
- How does partisan affect compare to e.g. race, which we might expect to be very strong

**from
Iyengar
et al
(2015)**



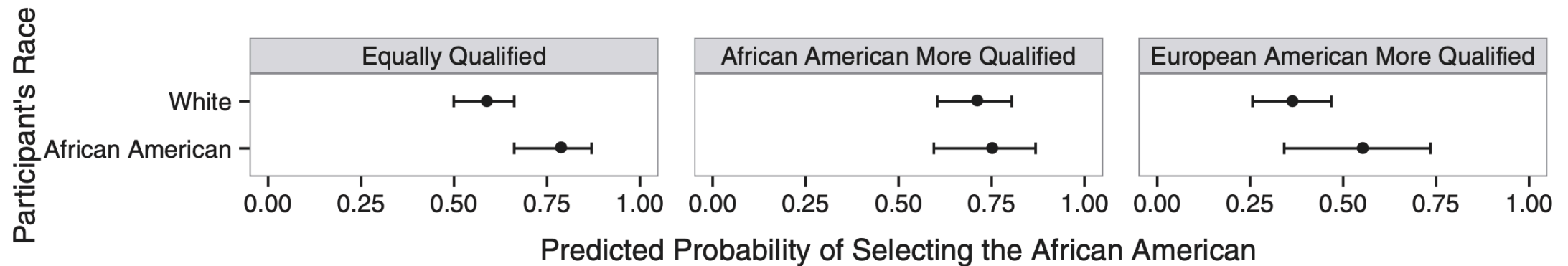
- implicit partisan affect gap > implicit racial affect gap
- this work uses implicit attitude tests (now more controversial?) but the results are striking

from Iyengar et al (2015)



- experiment: participants make allocation decisions about a scholarship with varying candidate qualifications (as an objective measure) and cues about political identity

from Iyengar et al (2015)



- now with cue for candidate race rather than party identity
- weaker effects of race than party
- racially cued decisions somewhat mediated by qualification but
 - “we found no evidence that partisans took academic merit into account”

Affective partisanship and behaviour

- Miller & Conover 2015:

in the context of elections, the behavior of partisans resembles that of sports team members acting to preserve the status of their teams rather than thoughtful citizens participating in the political process for the broader good

- (qv Fowler 2020 against “partisan intoxication” - it may be difficult to disentangle partisanship from policy preference, but see Levendusky on which is primary in the partisan sort...)

- Iyengar et al. 2015:

“Unlike race, gender, and other social divides where group-related attitudes and behaviors are constrained by social norms ..., there are no corresponding pressures to temper disapproval of political opponents. If anything, the rhetoric and actions of political leaders demonstrate that hostility directed at the opposition is acceptable, even appropriate. Partisans therefore feel free to express animus and engage in discriminatory behavior toward opposing partisans.

A changed politics



Conclusions

- The traditional view of critical realignments - still influential in public thinking - but evidence is somewhat shaky
- Not to say that change over time in party coalitions is not important!
- Considerable evidence of mass polarisation in at least the partisan sort sense
- & associated intense increase in affective polarisation
- Potential for challenge to democratic stability?