

Chapter 5: An Inoculation Against Polarization

From Book Manuscript *An Interest in Democracy: How Interest Groups Engage the Public and Support Democratic Norms in the Process*

Amy D. Meli

University of Virginia, Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy

Abstract: In repeated studies, political scientists have found that as involvement increases, so do levels of affective polarization. I find that, when it comes to involvement in interest groups, the opposite happens. As levels of involvement in nonpartisan interest groups increase, levels of affective polarization go down. In an era marked by intense polarization, political practitioners and scholars alike are searching for ways to bring down the temperature in our political environment. The findings from this chapter provide a way to do that, which is why this third thematic chapter will be of interest to a wide range of both scholars and political practitioners. I use a variety of methods, including interviews with interest group leaders and members, survey experiments, and a survey of professionals to understand the link between interest group involvement and affective polarization. I find that exposure to bipartisan messaging, interaction with interest group members with different party affiliations, and interaction with policymakers from both political parties all contribute to these lower levels of polarization. I also discuss how these findings relate to members' support for bipartisan public policy strategies.

Chapter 5: An Inoculation Against Polarization

Q: *What's the difference between a University of Michigan fan and a carp?*

A: *One is a bottom-feeding, scum sucker, and the other is a fish.*

- Joke from an Ohio State fan website

As Muzafer Sherif (1961) illustrated in his Robbers Cave experiment, prejudice towards people in out-groups has its origins in a person's social identity. We can see examples of out-group bias clearly in sports rivalries - especially ones in which members of the opposing teams have strong identities. A recent ESPN commercial encapsulates the way die-hard college football fans exhibit bias toward the out-group. In the ad, a woman and man are driving on their way to a blind date. Both are enjoying themselves - they're smiling and joking - when the man asks the woman where she's from. The woman answers, "Michigan, go Blue!" The man abruptly turns and jumps out of the moving car. As the car drives away, the man, who has rolled down a hill, jumps up and yells "Go Buckeyes!"

We see similar sentiments expressed by members of political parties towards members of the opposite party. Sports rivalries and partisan animosity are so similar, in fact, that one common measure of partisan animosity involves a survey question about dating. Since the 1960s, political scientists have asked survey respondents whether a parent would be pleased or displeased if their child were to marry a member of the opposite party to measure their levels of affective polarization - a term academics often use to describe partisan animosity. In September 2020, a survey by *YouGov* and *The Economist* found that 38% of Republicans and Democrats would be either very

upset or somewhat upset if their child married someone from the opposite party.¹ Compared to the mid-20th Century, responses to this question reflect a much higher level of affective polarization in the current political environment. These responses are in line with both conventional wisdom and survey research - levels of polarization are currently higher than they have ever been at any other time in the modern era.

We can see the effects of partisan animosity in stories about the current political climate. Candidates for office leverage partisan animosity in their political advertisements - commonly calling out The Squad and other high-profile members of the out-party to mobilize voters. While he was Attorney General of Texas, Gov. Gregg Abbott talked about suing Democrats “for fun” even though the cases had no chance of winning. On the more lighthearted side, staffers from the Clinton administration took the Ws off of White House staff computers - making it very difficult for employees of the incoming George W. Bush administration to write their boss’s name. Sometimes, affective polarization takes a darker turn - during the protests after George Floyd’s murder in 2020, the Trump administration used the military as a partisan flex against Democrats. All of these examples illustrate how finding ways to work together to solve common problems is made more difficult during times of high affective polarization.

The Causes of Affective Polarization

After Sherif’s study of out-group bias and social identity, social psychologists continued to study the causes and effects of the phenomenon. Henri Tajfel - a Polish social psychologist who survived the Holocaust and had an intense interest in the root causes of prejudice - found that for a group identity to form, there must be an internal characteristic held by all group members (Tajfel et al. 1971). The scholars called this concept the minimal group paradigm because the group

1. Political scientists have questioned whether this aversion is due to out-group bias or a simple distaste for partisanship in general, see Klar, Krupnikov, and Ryan (2018).

identity can be based on a characteristic with little to no inherent meaning (Tajfel and Turner 1979). For example, in one experiment, Tajfel and his colleagues found that if people are assigned to a group based on their tendency to over or underestimate the number of dots in a drawing, survey participants would favor their in-group and have bias against their out-group. Once this group identity is in place, group members seek to punish members of the out-group, even if it means that their own group suffers as a consequence (Tajfel et al. 1971). When given a choice about how to divide up a reward in the dot-estimating experiment, group members were more likely to penalize members of the out-group even when it meant their own group members would also receive a smaller reward. This tendency to punish the out-group even when such punishment also disadvantages the in-group makes it difficult to broker compromise in times when levels of affective polarization are high.

More recently, social psychologists have discovered that what they call “concentric loyalties” - meaning a shared identity that is more powerful than the identity that is creating out-group bias - can help with decreasing out-group hostility - a concept pioneered by social psychologist Marilyn Brewer (1999). This means that, in theory, a shared American identity could alleviate partisan polarization. Political scientist Steven Levendusky (2018) found just that. In a survey experiment, Levendusky discovered that a national identity prime, leads to decreases in partisan animosity. He also finds that these changes occur naturally during times when American identity is salient - around the July 4th holiday and during the Olympic games, for example. However, given that political leaders have taken to accusing their opposition of being “un-American,” it is questionable whether a shared American identity will have as much power during and after the Trump era. While it is questionable whether a shared American identity has enough power to decrease polarization levels, I present evidence here that a shared interest group identity is another factor that leads to decreases in polarization levels among partisan interest group members.

Membership in nonpartisan interest groups can create a superordinate identity that joins Democratic and Republican members of the group in a united cause. For example, Republican and Democratic members of the American Medical Association both identify as physicians, which is an identity superordinate to party affiliation (Heaney 2012).

Given that levels of affective polarization have been on the rise in recent years, people who study political behavior have been working to explain the increase. Collectively, they have come to several conclusions. First, Americans are increasingly living, working, and spending their free time with people of the same party affiliation. In her 2018 book *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*, political scientist Lilliana Mason (2018) found that partisan sorting, which happens when people have fewer cross-cutting ties in their social networks, has contributed to increases in animosity towards people in the opposite party. In other words, as the political parties have become more socially and demographically homogenous, affective polarization has intensified. Using feeling thermometers - a common method for measuring partisan animosity that asks respondents to rate the political parties and partisan political figures on a “temperature” scale from 0-100 - Mason finds that people with more homogenous social networks have more negative feelings towards people in the opposite party (Mason 2018). Mason’s research suggests that exposure to nonpartisan interest groups - which promote cross cutting ties by working across the aisle to accomplish policy goals and are composed of members of people from all political affiliations - may help to depolarize their members. For many partisans, membership in a nonpartisan interest group is the only place where they will hear messages about the benefits of working across party lines or have an opportunity to interact with people from the opposite party. Here, I examine how this type of involvement influences polarization levels.

Other researchers provide evidence that elites can influence levels of affective polarization, and the logic in these studies are also relevant to interest groups. Robison and Mullinix (2016)

find that media criticism of polarization leads people to more positively evaluate members of the opposite party. Similarly, Kalmoe and Mason (2022) find that elites can encourage or discourage political violence because followers use cues from leadership to understand how to behave in the political system. Druckman et al. (2018) find that people who are more informed about politics can spread polarizing messages they learn from partisan media to their less-informed friends and family. Interest groups can produce these types of effects by, on the one hand, using less polarizing language and focusing on working with elected officials on both sides of the aisle, or conversely by leaning on partisan cues and conflict-oriented language to encourage political action.

Scholars have discussed interest groups' role in polarization, but the studies in this area tend to focus on groups as components of party coalitions. Masket (2009) finds that informal party organizations, which include interest groups, drive elite polarization since candidates adopt extreme positions to appeal to partisan groups in their efforts to win primary elections. Karol (2015) suggests that the incorporation of interest groups into party coalitions has led to greater levels of polarization in the American political system. While these theories accurately reflect the effect that partisan interest groups have in the political system, they do not consider how nonpartisan and partisan groups act differently. Here, I explore how groups that deliberately choose not to affiliate with a party can help alleviate affective polarization among members.

How Interest Groups Can Alleviate Affective Polarization

Given that interest groups provide a way for partisans to interact with people from the other party and a way to form a shared identity that crosses partisan boundaries, members of nonpartisan interest groups, trade associations, and professional associations will have lower levels of affective polarization than people who are not members of an interest group. These differences in polarization across differing levels of involvement are because individuals who regularly attend events that feature nonpartisan political messages are more likely to be exposed to nonpartisan and

depolarizing messages and are more likely to spend time with people from the out-party. Several groups, including NAR and the American Dental Association (ADA) have intentionally cultivated a nonpartisan group identity intended to encourage political activity among members. This identity can act as a superordinate identity that can counteract out-group bias (Brewer and Pierce 2005). In groups that do not cultivate a strong identity, the absence of party cues and repeated exposure to messaging about cooperation and instrumental goals can have an effect on members' attitudes. Consequently, I expect highly involved individuals to display lower levels of polarization than those with nominal membership in nonpartisan groups.

Traditionally, studying the effects of interest groups on the political opinions of their members has been difficult because interest group audiences are difficult to access for public opinion surveys. The methods I use in this chapter allow me to uncover phenomena that were, before now, unseen. I rely on a variety of different methods to test these expectations. In addition to the interest group leader interviews referenced in prior chapters, I share my findings from interviews with highly involved interest group members to learn how some of the most involved members view politics and how they came to adopt these views. I conducted these interviews at the Congressional fly-ins of four different interest groups - a patient advocacy group, an agricultural trade association, a labor union, and a nonprofit that advocates for foreign aid funding. Attendees at these meetings tend to be among the most involved members of an interest group, which allows me to observe reactions from those who receive the most training, have the most mediated interactions with government, and have more opportunities to interact with people from other political parties, compared to people who are less involved in their interest groups. Interviews allow me to focus on how interest groups influence actual interest group members.

While interviews provide a glimpse into the minds of interest group members, they do not tell the full story. To understand how involvement in an interest group influences a broader

sample of individuals, I conduct a survey on a sample of professionals who are eligible to join their professional association. This survey helps illuminate whether there are statistical differences between interest group members and non-members and to observe differences between highly involved interest group members and those who are less involved in their interest groups. Finally, I conduct a survey experiment on a random sample of the public to better understand the directionality of the relationship between polarization and interest group membership. By randomizing the messaging respondents receive, I am able to identify the effect of the interest group's messaging itself while controlling for other factors, including baseline levels of polarization.

Interest Group Member Interviews: “There’s always more to the story”²

From summer 2023 through fall of 2024, I attended Washington, DC-based fly-ins hosted by four different interest groups. Fly-ins are an excellent venue for understand the effects an interest group has on its most highly involved members. During these events, members receive training, interact with fellow members, and meet with their elected officials, which means that interactions with the group, its members, and public officials are fresh in the minds of the participants. My conversations with interest group members were semi-structured. I used a set list of questions as a guide for the conversation, but allowed for impromptu questions to follow up on insights shared by interviewees and get additional detail in the responses interviewees provided³.

An Inoculation Against Polarization

During the interviews, interest group members shared their thoughts about how involvement in their interest group shaped the way they see our political system and the government. During these responses, an interesting theme arose - through the civic training they

2. Interview with member number 3 from trade association 3.

3. Additional information about interview methodology and interest group member demographics is available in the Methodological Appendix.

received from their interest group and by experiencing the political system firsthand, members were better able to contextualize the information they received about politics from traditional and social media once they returned to everyday lives. These effects appeared to be particularly strong for those who had the most experience interacting with government and attending interest group events. One group member - a farmer who was a member of the agricultural trade association, shared:

When you see headlines on social media or whatever, they're meant to attract the reader. Sometimes they are kind of exaggerated or, you know... there's always more to the story. That's not right. There's a part of the story that wasn't covered or didn't get two sides to every coin basically.

Another member of the same organization mentioned similar ideas in their interview:

I think the news is always, it's just a snapshot of what's going on. And of course, they're going to try to capture the snapshot that's going to gather the most eyes for their network, I believe, so their business too. And so, if you let yourself just be in that bubble, of only relying on the nightly news or the mainstream news, it's gonna sway your idea and your point of view of the government into thinking that nothing good happens here, it's all negative. But when you do actually get here and do your part in seeking out more of what is going on here you'll find that actually there's a lot of bipartisan things that get taken care of. There's a lot of good bill and policy that gets done.

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These types of reactions were not confined to the trade association. A member of the labor union shared his experience working with people from both political parties:

Amy Meli: So thinking back to before you got involved... Do you think that this experience changed the way you think about government?

Member: Yeah, I do. I mean, you see [members of Congress] on the news and, you know, they get interviewed, and they sometimes rant on, and I guess they're going to say their piece, but when you confront them its different. They're human beings, and they have feelings too, and I hope, and I would think that they want to do the best for everyone you know, although that's not always true, yeah.

Amy Meli: So that wouldn't be as obvious to you if you hadn't never done this?

Member: Yeah, I don't think it would, because, you know, the news spins everything that way. Yeah, it's always one sided, I think. And can't get much from, you know, a one way conversation than talking on TV, right, right when you have interaction.

All three of these interest group members shared that they are better able to interpret what they see on social media or in the news through the training they received and the experiences they've had through involvement in their interest group. This sentiment is something I observed in interviews with members of all four interest groups - through their training and hands-on experiences, interest group members are more critical of media coverage that paints issues in black and white. Interviewees told me that they were able to detect when information was missing from news coverage because they'd been in the room during issue discussions and know that policymaking is full of nuance and compromise. These experiences help decrease the polarizing effects of partisan media - and of horse race style or conflict-based coverage in nonpartisan media.

Developing a Superordinate Identity

As social psychologist Marilyn Brewer (1999) predicts through her theories about superordinate identities, some interest group members have developed an identity with their interest group that supersedes party identification and helps them bridge the partisan divide with fellow interest group members. These sentiments were expressed by interviewees from all four interest groups in the study. One member of the labor union shared his feelings of camaraderie with his fellow union members. When asked if he knew the party affiliations of fellow labor union members, he answered:

When it comes to doing the work, we just do the work, right? So I do know most of the time [their party identification], and usually they align with me, and sometimes they don't. We don't talk about it. We just do the work that we're assigned to do, because it's for the labor movement. Some of the best people I've worked with are on the other side of the political fence, and it's some of our best work.

When asked about whether he ever discusses partisanship with his fellow members, a member of the agricultural trade association shared a similar sentiment:

We really try to not go there with each other. That is one thing that I do appreciate about this organization is its commitment to being nonpartisan that we know that, as an industry, a large industry made up of a few people, relatively speaking. We need help from whoever, wherever we can

get it. So I think that's that has led to this organization, being as small as it is relative to other associations, has played a huge part and the respect that's been gained and retained in this town... punching above its weight.

Social psychologist Marilyn Brewer predicted that people who have superordinate identities experience less conflict with out-group members who share that same superordinate identity. Consequently, people who share a strong identity with their interest group but that are members of two different political parties are less likely to experience negative feelings about their fellow group members from the out-party. In a time when Americans have limited opportunities to interact with out-party members - especially in a political context while working together to accomplish public policy goals - these types of relationships are significant and can be a driver of lower affective polarizations levels that runs counter to other trends in our culture.

Cross-Cutting Ties with Policymakers and Other Interest Group Members

Even if an interest group member lacks a strong identity with their interest group as described above, it is still possible for interest group members to be exposed to stimuli that can decrease affective polarization levels. As political scientist Lilliana Mason (2018) argues, individuals with cross-cutting ties are less likely to experience high levels of affective polarization. As Sherif discovered in his Robbers Cave experiment, giving rival groups an opportunity to work towards a shared goal can alleviate out-group bias. However, in the current culture, Mason points out that there are fewer opportunities to develop cross-cutting ties with people from the opposite party. Interviews with interest group members reveal that working towards shared goals has an impact on members. When sharing their impressions of meeting with members of Congress from both parties, one member of the agricultural trade association shared:

It's not so much a Democrat or Republican thing. It's more how big agriculture's [presence] is in that member's district. Yeah, that's a that's a bigger issue than whether it's a Democrat or Republican. For those that are very urban, you tend to get a very cold reception most of the time. Sometimes if there's something that they're looking to, but need the help of the other side, or just other members you get a little warmer reception.

This member is describing a shared goal - an interest in agriculture - that transcends political party and enables the group member to have productive interactions with policymakers from both sides of the aisle. Another interest group member from the patient advocacy group shared that she is often able to work with members of Congress from the opposite political party because they have a shared interest in finding a cure for the disease. She shared, "I've always been impressed by the way in which those differences kind of go to the wayside. And we're all just focused on our issues."

Another member of the patient advocacy group, when asked if she worked with people outside of her party on advocacy issues, shared that, although she is a strong Democrat, she works alongside a Republican from another part of the state on advocacy meetings. The two volunteers have never had any issues even though they hold different views on issues outside of the issues involving their disease: "This is a bipartisan thing and you want to do because it affects people across party lines. So really there is no line to draw."

Sometimes, these commonalities can lead interest group members to have conversations about the other issues about which they disagree. One volunteer from the issue advocacy group advocating for foreign affairs funding shared a story about an exchange he had with another group member:

It's made me appreciate other people's views. Last night, I had a conversation with people who were on the other side [on abortion]. We had a healthy conversation, and I walked away feeling like I understood why they felt like they did. I'm okay with it. I mean, yeah, I wasn't at the same spot they were, yeah, but there was healthy communication. And so, yes, I would say it's changed where I understand the other view better, and it doesn't have to be my way. I would also say how much go down this rabbit trail, but in the south, the south is very pro-life, and let me even clarify that where it's anti-abortion, and it's also helped me see that, okay, you say you're pro-life, but then you're anti [the issue the two advocates have a shared interest in], where is pro-life? It's a way bigger thing than just [being] anti-abortion. Tell me you're anti-abortion, and now I know where you stand. But if you say you're pro-life, then you're about saving life from conception to death. I mean, it's the whole gamut. And so now you want to build a wall bigger, but, but you're pro-life? I mean, building the wall is not rhetoric that should come out of people's mouths that want to say they're pro-life. I mean, it does, does help me see some issues. Maybe that's not the politics aspect so much, but it helps me see some issues in a different light.

This volunteer is strongly pro-life and will not change his views on abortion. But because of the relationships he has built with fellow advocates, he is able to not only have productive conversations with people about highly emotionally resonant issues, he is able to question his own party's stances on other issues because of the values he shares with fellow coalition members.

These are the types of conversations that can't happen when a person interacts solely with people from their own political party, and interest groups are one of the few places where people are able to form these types of relationships.

The interviews illuminate three mechanisms that may lead to lower levels of polarization among interest group members that are involved in their group's public policy advocacy. Since these volunteers have hands-on experience working in the policymaking process, they are less susceptible to media accounts that can lead to higher levels of polarization. Their exposure to and relationships with people from both political parties create a type of cross cutting relationships that we don't see in other venues. And some interest group members have developed a superseding identity, which helps to decrease feelings of animosity towards members of their group who are in the out party. But do these experiences extend to people who are not able to attend an organization's fly-in? And do people who participate in interest groups have lower levels of affective polarization to begin with? To answer these lingering questions, interviews are insufficient.

Interest Group Member Survey

To better understand whether polarization levels decrease among interest group members and those who are more involved in their interest group, I conduct a survey of individuals who have an option - but are not required - to join an interest group. I conducted a

survey in partnership with the Civic Health Institutions Project⁴, which administers regular surveys with very large samples of Americans. From these large samples, which tend to be around 25,000 people, I identified a portion of the respondents who worked in one of 18 professions that maintain strong and politically active professional associations. After identifying the people who worked in one of the 18 professions, these respondents answered questions about their level of involvement in the professional association, their trust in government, opinions about responsive government, and feelings about the out-party. I use responses about trust in government and responsive government in Chapter 6. I use responses about feelings about the out-party to measure affective polarization levels. Using data from this survey allows me to assess polarization levels among interest group members and non-members. This method also allows me to differentiate between members who are nominally involved in their interest group - perhaps they simply pay their dues and never attend a meeting - and those with higher levels of involvement.

I chose professionals who are eligible to join one or more professional societies as the focus of this study. Professional societies provide an excellent way to study nonpartisan interest groups for several reasons. First, as I established in Chapter 2, professional societies - along with trade associations - are the most likely types of interest groups to maintain distance from both political parties, allowing me to focus on the effects of nonpartisan organizations. Secondly, professional societies offer individual memberships - meaning that people pay their dues directly to the association as opposed to having a membership through their employer, as with most trade associations. This setup provides the highest likelihood that respondents will know that they are a member of a professional association, as opposed to having to guess whether their employer is a member of a trade association. Third, most professional societies are voluntary, which means that

4. The Civic Health and Institutions Project, a 50 States Survey (CHIP50), NSF Grants SES-2241884, SES-2241885, and SES224-1886, Matthew Baum, James Druckman, David Lazer, and Katherine Ognyanova, Principal Investigators. Additional information about the survey is available in the Methodological Appendix.

there will be a good mix in the sample of people who choose to join their association and people who choose not to join. Finally, many professional societies have robust civic engagement programs, which means that members are likely to be exposed to civic engagement training, nonpartisan messaging, and opportunities to get involved in the policymaking process.

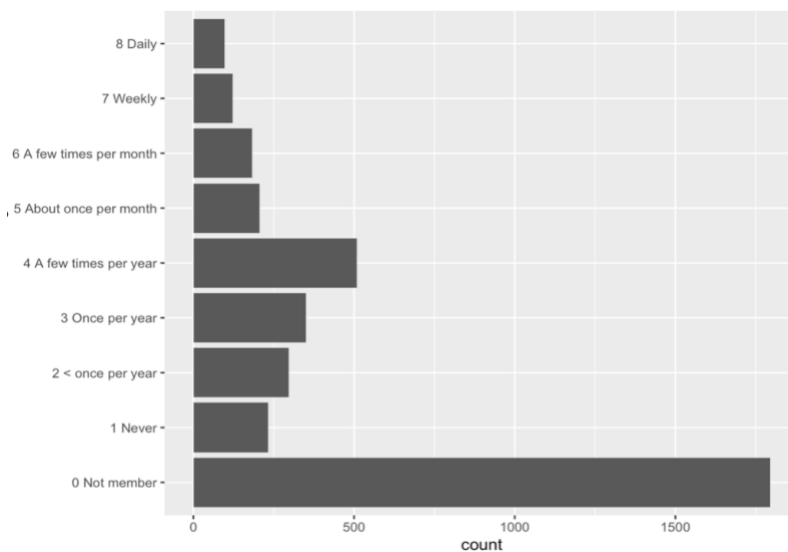
Table 5.1: Rates of Participation in Professional Association by Profession

Profession	# in Profession	# of Assn Members	% in Professional Assn
Accountant	454	190	41.85%
Architect	86	55	63.95%
Attorney	112	77	68.75%
Dentist	64	50	78.13%
Dietitian	48	35	72.92%
Doctor	123	86	69.92%
Engineer	640	294	45.94%
Occupational Therapist	38	30	78.95%
Pharmacist	82	57	69.51%
Physical Therapist	66	37	56.06%
Physician Associate	66	39	59.09%
Psychologist	65	46	70.77%
Real Estate Agent	191	153	80.10%
Registered Nurse	423	279	65.96%
Social Worker	291	150	51.55%
Teacher	978	438	44.79%
Veterinarian	62	32	51.61%

The survey included individuals who are in one of 18 different professions. The most common were teachers (25.82%), engineers (16.90%), accountants (12.00%), and registered nurses (11.14%). The large sample survey had a total of 24,151 respondents. Analysis here involves the 3,788 respondents from the 18 professions. Respondents across the professions who report belonging to their professional association indicated a varying level of involvement in their professional associations. Of respondents in the 18 professions, 2,048 (54.07%) respondents indicated that they are members of their professional association. A detailed breakout of each

profession, the number of respondents in that profession, and the rate of association participation in the profession is provided in Table 5.1. When asked how often they participate in activities hosted by their professional society, the most common response was “non-member,” with 1,795 (47.39 percent) indicating that they are not a member of their professional society⁵ Among other respondents, around 12 percent of members never participate in activities, 17 percent participate once per year or less, 25 percent participate a few times per year, and around 30 percent participate once per month or more. Full details on interest group participation levels are available in Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1: Professionals by Level of Involvement in Professional Association



To test whether involvement in an interest group is associated with lower levels of affective polarization, I create two ordinary least squares models - one for Democrats and the other for Republicans⁶ - that predict levels of affective polarization based on an individual's membership in an interest group and their relative involvement in the interest group. To

5. Some respondents did not answer this question, so totals do not add up to 3,788.

6. Since independents have no party affiliation and are therefore not included in the affective polarization expectations, they are omitted from models that test affective polarization levels.

measure levels of affective polarization, I use a question that partisans answered about the warmth of their feelings about the out-party on a 0-100 scale. Partisans with the coolest feelings towards the other party answered 0, those with the warmest feelings towards the out-party answered 100, and those who do not feel particularly warmly or coldly towards the out party answered 50. For Republicans, I use respondents' responses to a feeling thermometer question about the Democratic party (mean = 25.34, sd = 24.19); for Democrats, I use respondents' to a feeling thermometer question about the Republican party (mean = 25.71, sd = 24.86). Both are continuous variables on a 0-100 scale. As we would expect from recent political science research, both Democrats and Republicans, on average, have relatively cold feelings towards the out-party.

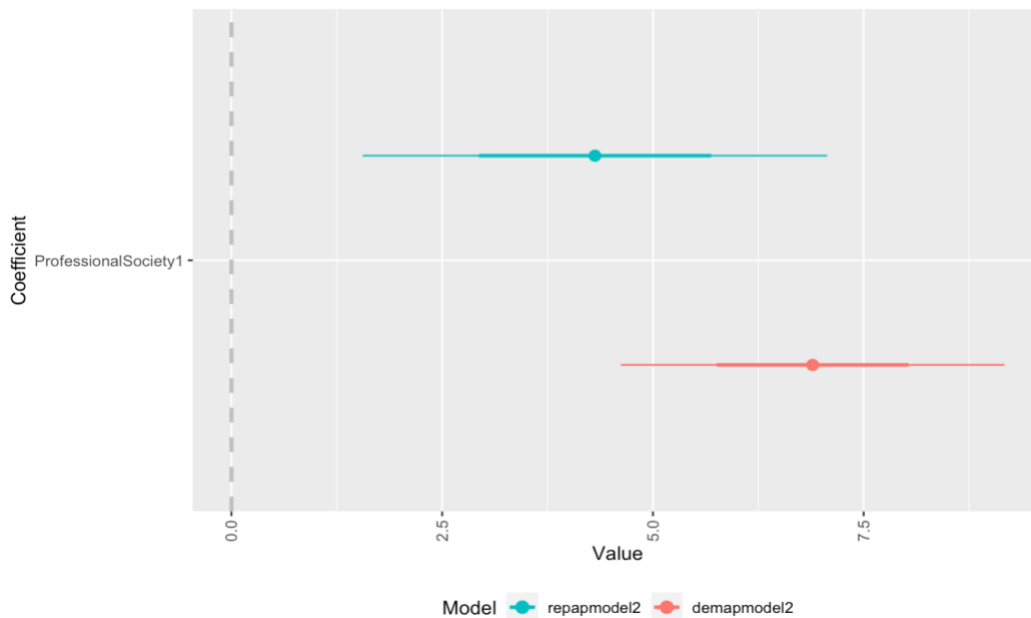
In the models I use to test polarization - and in tests conducted in future chapters using these data - I control for age and education. The mean age of respondents is 42 years old (sd = 16.63). Nearly 30 percent have advanced degrees, another half are college graduates, and the remainder have some college or less. The level of education is higher than in a typical random sample because many of the professions included in this study require at least a bachelor's degree, and several require postgraduate study. I also control for professions in all models. Since prior research has shown that affective polarization tends to increase along with partisan strength, I also control for strength of partisanship in all models. Of the 1,883 Democrats, 371 (19.70 percent) of them lean Democrat, 642 (34.09 percent) are weak Democrats, and 870 (46.20 percent) are strong Democrats. Of the 1,217 Republicans, 260 (21.36 percent) lean Republican, 412 (33.85 percent) are weak Republicans, and 545 (44.78 percent) are strong Republicans.

In the first set of models, I test for whether membership in a professional society is associated with lower levels of affective polarization. Model results⁷ indicate that for both

7. A full table of model results is available in T3 of the Tables Appendix.

Democrats and Republicans, members of professional societies have warmer feelings towards the other party than non-members ($p < 0.05$). This means that, after controlling for strength of party affiliation, age, and educational attainment, people who join their professional association have warmer feelings towards the out-party compared to professionals who choose not to join their professional society. We can observe these effects in Figure 5.2, which illustrates levels of affective polarization among Republicans and Democrats who are members of their professional association compared to people who are not members of their professional association.

Figure 5.2: Membership in a Professional Association and Levels of Affective Polarization

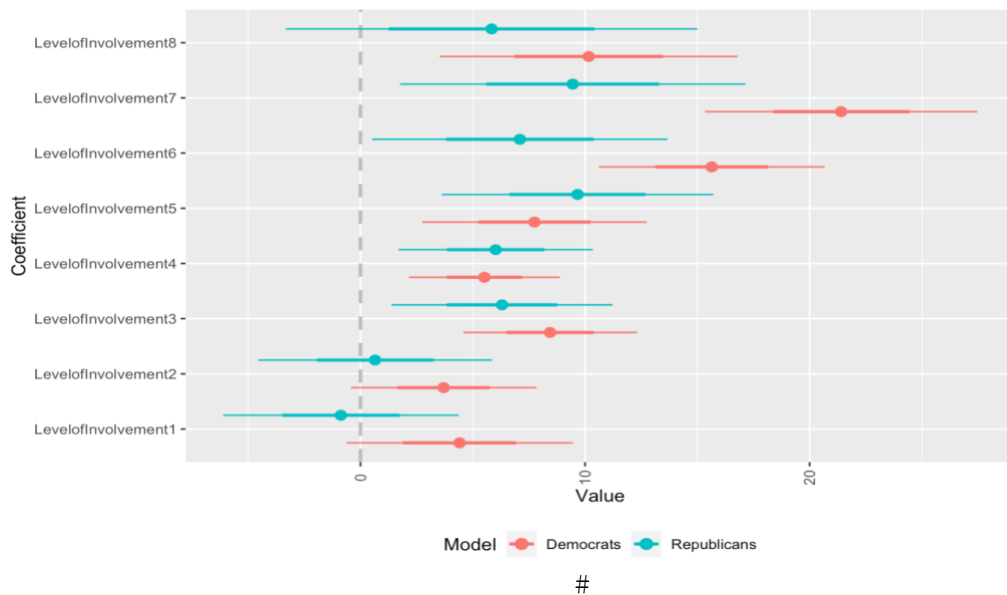


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The data presented here provides evidence that people who choose to join their professional society have lower levels of partisan animosity compared to people who do not join their professional society. But how does involvement in a professional society influence affective polarization? I create two additional models to understand this relationship. The dependent variables in these ordinary least squares models are the same as in the membership models described above, but instead of an indicator variable for membership, I use levels of involvement as

the dependent variable. Results of both models provide evidence that increased involvement in a professional association is associated with lower levels of affective polarization ($p < 0.05$). In both the Democrat and Republican models, most respondent groups who participate in their professional society at least once per year (which corresponds with Level of Involvement 3 and above in Figure 5.3) are likely to have warmer feelings for the out-party compared to those who are not involved at all or who are not members of their professional society (Level of Involvement 1 and 2 in Figure 5.3) ($p < 0.05$). For Democrats, the members with lowest levels of affective polarization are those who are involved in their professional society weekly (displayed in Figure 5.3 as Level of Involvement 7). Involvement in a professional society appears to have a weaker - but still statistically significant - effect on Republicans, with members who are involved at least once per year having lower levels of affective polarization compared to those who are not involved at all or who participate less than once per year.

Figure 5.3: Level of Association Involvement and Levels of Affective Polarization



There are some notable differences in the results of the level of involvement models⁸. Baseline levels of affective polarization are different among the two groups. While the overall mean values of out-party feeling are similar (25.71 for Democrats and 25.33 for Republicans), the baseline levels in the models are quite different due to demographic differences in the populations like age, with baseline level Democrats having significantly warmer feelings for Republicans than baseline Republicans have for Democrats. Secondly, while the effect of low levels of involvement appear to be similar when comparing Democrats and Republicans, very high levels of participation in professional societies appear to have a stronger effect on Democrats than Republicans. This may be due to the way that the parties have polarized asymmetrically (Grossmann and Hopkins 2015). Democrats who participate weekly have feelings about Republicans that 86% of a standard deviation higher than the baseline, while Republicans have feelings about democrats that are 39% of a standard deviation higher than the baseline. Interestingly, those most involved in their professional society have fewer differences than those with slightly lower levels of involvement. While Democrats who are involved in their professional association daily have warmer feelings for Republicans compared to the baseline group ($p < 0.05$), the differences are much more muted than those who participate weekly or a few times per month. Republicans who are involved in their professional society daily have no differences in warmth of feelings about Democrats compared to the baseline group ($p < 0.05$).

The results of the survey indicate that membership in a professional association and increased involvement in a professional association are both associated with lower levels of animosity towards those in the opposite party. However, it is impossible to identify the cause of these differences using observational data. Are less polarized people simply more likely to join their professional association? Or does the act of becoming involved in the professional association lead

8. Full model results are available in the T4 of the Tables Appendix.

to lower levels of affective polarization? To understand the direction of this relationship, observational data is not sufficient. To address these lingering questions, I conduct a survey experiment to understand how different types of messages that interest groups send to their members influence levels of partisan animus among members of the general public. By using a random sample of Americans who are randomly assigned to a control group or treatment groups, I can understand the way different interest group messaging influences perceptions of politics holding all else constant - including baseline levels of affective polarization.

Interest Group Email Experiment

In Chapter 4, I established that interest groups are likely to send different types of messages depending upon their partisanship and their group type. Partisan interest groups, electoral organizations, and issue advocacy groups are more likely to use conflict-oriented language and partisan compared to nonpartisan groups, professional associations, and trade associations. I also find that trade and professional associations are more likely to use policy-oriented language, especially if the group is nonpartisan. Recall as well that nonpartisan interest groups and associations spend time and resources educating their members about the policymaking process, the values of bipartisanship, and the ways that policymakers incorporate constituent comments into their decision-making process.

This experiment focuses on written communication from interest groups. I test the types of communications that I observed in interest group emails when conducting analysis for Chapter 2. I also noted the types of messages interest group leaders described in interviews when designing this experiment. In the experiment, individuals are divided into three treatment groups and a control group. The treatment groups each read a message sent from an unnamed interest group then answer questions about their perceptions of politics. The control group did not read a vignette and instead went straight to answering questions about their perceptions of politics. The

first treatment group read a message with partisan and conflict cues, which in Chapter 3 I found to be more prevalent in partisan groups, electoral organizations, and issue advocacy nonprofits. The partisan vignette used in the experiment in this chapter was directly adapted from action alerts sent by partisan interest groups and accurately reflects the type of messaging that some groups use.

The second treatment group received a message with pragmatic language – messages designed to help interest group members understand the ways policymakers use feedback from constituents in their policy decision-making process. This type of communication is common in many interest group communications, as evidenced by groups’ use of research conducted by the Congressional Management Foundation (CMF). The language in the pragmatic message vignette was adapted from actual training materials used by interest groups in member training programs, which was built on the CMF research referenced in Chapter 4.

The third treatment group read a message with bipartisan language, which discuss the value of a bipartisan approach to policy advocacy. One theme that emerged from my interviews with interest group leaders involved the time and effort groups spend defending their bipartisan approach to skeptical interest group members. Interest groups train their members on the value of bipartisanship and even hire outside consultants as third-party validators to explain this approach to their members. The language in the bipartisan vignette used in this chapter’s study was adapted from presentations used by interest groups during public policy events with their members.

Given the evidence from interviews and the interest group survey, I expect that groups using bipartisan or pragmatic messages will have a depolarizing effect on members. As discussed above, interest groups often use pragmatic language in their messages to interest group members. These messages, which focus on how constituent contact influences policymaker decision making, are designed to boost response rates and help interest group members understand their roles as constituents who can pressure lawmakers to take their preferred position on issues. Since these

messages de-emphasize partisanship and instead place importance on a member of Congress's responsiveness to constituents, I expect individuals who read these types of messages to have lower levels of affective polarization compared to those who receive no prompt at all.

Similarly, groups that use bipartisan strategies spend time and resources explaining their bipartisan approach to policy advocacy. These messages emphasize the value of working with both parties and focus on the importance of moving towards legislative goals ahead of political one-upmanship. These bipartisan messages are likely to prime positive attitudes about bipartisan compromise that are already held by large majorities of the U.S. public (Anderson, Butler, and Harbridge -Yong 2020). As a result, I expect that since these strategies emphasize the importance of working with both parties and de-emphasize and out-group conflict, they will have a depolarizing effect on interest group members.

Given differences in the perceptions of the out-party across different levels of partisanship (Mason 2015), I expect that these strategies will have different effects on individuals depending upon their strength of partisanship. I expect strong partisans, who have higher baseline levels of affective polarization and lower opinions of the other party, to be more skeptical of messages encouraging bipartisanship. Weaker partisans and independent leaners, on the other hand, will be more open to a bipartisan approach (Anderson, Butler, and Harbridge -Yong 2020). Therefore, I expect there to be some variation in the effects of the partisan, bipartisan, and pragmatic messages when comparing the reactions of strong partisans to those of other respondents.

To test these expectations, I conduct a survey experiment among 4,933 respondents in October 2023. Respondents consisted of a random sample of U.S. adults acquired from Lucid. In the experiment, respondents read a vignette and responded to a series of questions. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of four groups: control, partisan, pragmatic, and bipartisan. Respondents in the control group did not read a vignette and proceeded directly to the survey

questions. Respondents in the treatment groups read the appropriate vignette, which are provided in Table 5.2. For the partisan vignette, Democrats read a statement about Republicans and Republicans read a statement about Democrats. Independents in the partisan treatment group were randomly assigned to read either the Democrat or Republican vignette.

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Table 5.2: Vignettes Included in Survey Experiment
<p>Partisan treatment viewed by Democrats It's time to fight back against extremist Republicans! Trump and his allies have been hard at work getting harmful legislation passed. That's why it's so vital that we mobilize and fight back! Extremist Republicans want to strip us of our freedom. It's up to us to show them we're not backing down.</p>
<p>Partisan treatment viewed by Republicans It's time to fight back against woke Democrats! Biden and his allies have been hard at work getting harmful legislation passed. That's why it's so vital that we mobilize and fight back! Woke Democrats want to take away our rights. It's up to us to show them we're not backing down.</p>
<p>Policy treatment viewed by all parties Did you know that legislators rely on feedback from their constituents when making decisions on public policy? A recent study by the Congressional Management Foundation finds that the most effective way to influence legislators is through contact from constituents in their district. That's why it's so important for you to get involved!</p>
<p>Bipartisan treatment viewed by all parties A bipartisan approach to policymaking is the most effective way to accomplish legislative goals in today's political environment. Since it's impossible to predict which party will hold control of Congress when our bill will be considered, it's essential that we maintain relationships with both sides of the aisle. This is why we need your help today to contact your legislators - regardless of their party affiliation - about our issues.</p>

After reading the vignette, respondents answered a series of questions. Questions related to affective polarization included feeling thermometers for the Democratic and Republican parties and a question related to how they would feel if their child married someone from the other party. The respondent's experimental condition, which indicates whether the respondent was in the control group and did not read a vignette or read either the partisan, pragmatic, or bipartisan vignette, is the primary independent variable in the models I use to test whether the message

influences levels of affective polarization. In some cases, I expect there to be variation on the way messages influence polarization levels based on the respondent's strength of partisanship. To create this variable, respondents answered questions about their partisan identification using a standard 7-point scale. I place strong Republicans and Democrats in the Strong Partisan category (2,062 respondents, 40.81%) weak Republicans and weak Democrats in the Weak Partisan category (1,310 respondents, 26.56%), Independents that lean Republican and Democrat in the Lean Partisan category (784 respondents, 15.89%), and true Independents in the Independent category (777 respondents, 15.75%). In models where I expect strong partisans to behave differently from other respondent groups, I use an indicator variable in which strong partisans are coded 1 and other respondents are coded 0 (2,062 strong partisans in the sample, which comprise 49.62% of partisans and 41.80% of all respondents).

To measure affective polarization, I use the Feeling Thermometer Difference as the dependent variable. To create this variable, I subtract the respondent's feeling thermometer score for the opposite party from their feeling thermometer score for their own party (mean = 50.93, sd = 36.93). Smaller values for this variable represent individuals with lower levels of affective polarization since there is less distance between the respondent's feelings about their own party and the out party. For instance, a Republican respondent who reports a thermometer score of 85 for their own Republican party and a temperature of 55 for the Democratic party would have a feeling thermometer difference of 30 points, revealing a relatively modest level of affective polarization. I included strong partisans, weak partisans, and independent leaners in this analysis since independents who lean towards one of the parties behave more like partisans than like independents (Theodoridis 2017). I do not include independents in this test since affective polarization is related to partisans' perceptions of the out party.

I control for level of education because education is correlated with political efficacy (Finkel 1985). I create this variable from a question about educational attainment with the response options less than high school (1), high school graduate or GED (2), some college but no degree (3), associate's or two year college degree (4), bachelor's or four year college degree (5), and graduate degree (6). Education is coded as a continuous variable (mean = 3.61, sd = 1.41). It is also important to control for age due to that characteristic's relationship with partisan sorting and affective polarization (Mason 2015, 2018). I control for age by years. I also control for gender because I expect there to be some differences in levels of efficacy across different gender groups. To control for gender, I include an indicator variable for males, who are coded 1. All other respondents are coded 0 (2,338 males in the sample, 47.48%).

I estimate an OLS model with Feeling Thermometer Difference as the dependent variable and experimental condition as the primary independent variable. The model results⁹ support my hypothesis that individuals in the bipartisan condition will have lower levels of affective polarization compared to the control group ($p < 0.05$). The model also predicts that respondents in the pragmatic condition will have a mean feeling thermometer difference score that is 4.38 points lower than those in the control condition. The substantive effect here is modest – this change is equivalent to around 12% of a standard deviation decrease in the affective polarization measure. However, given that there is great interest in strategies that can alleviate affective polarization (J. Druckman and Levy 2021; Levendusky 2021; Simonsson, Narayanan, and Marks 2022), it is notable that a conservative test like a vignette on an online survey has an effect on this phenomenon.

There is also some evidence that bipartisan messaging has a statistically significant relationship with lower levels of affective polarization ($p < 0.10$). Substantively, however, this

9. Full model results are available in T5 in the Tables Appendix.

relationship is not as strong as the one between pragmatic messaging and affective polarization.

The model predicts that respondents who viewed the bipartisan message will have affective polarization levels that are 2.72 points lower than the control group, which represents a change of 7.36% of a standard deviation change. This smaller substantive effect combined with the fact that the statistical relationship falls short of a 0.05 test means that the relationship is not strong enough to provide full support for the hypothesis.

One interesting and unexpected finding from this model is that individuals in the partisan condition also have lower levels of affective polarization compared to the control group ($p < 0.05$). Although the effect is smaller than the effect of the pragmatic message, the effect is stronger than the effect on those in the bipartisan condition. It is puzzling that Republicans who read a message about “woke Democrats” will have warmer feelings towards Democrats than those who read no message about Democrats at all.

While solving this puzzle will require additional testing and study, there are several possible drivers behind this finding. First, levels of affective polarization are already very high among strong partisans – the mean difference in feelings between the in party and out party for strong partisans is 64.18, which represents a sizable gap. It is possible that there is a ceiling effect with strong partisans, which means that baseline scores are so high that it is not possible for levels of affective polarization to go higher, leading to small decreases in affective polarization for all treatments. Another possibility is that strong partisans get pleasure from a rival group’s failures, which derives from a psychological principle called the Disposition of Mirth (Havard et al. 2014; Zillmann and Cantor 1976). This phenomenon happens often in sports rivalries – imagine how Michigan fans feel when Ohio State loses a big game – and could be happening here as well. It is possible that strong partisans derive joy when an interest group insults the out party, as happens in the partisan treatment. However, if this were the case, the partisan’s appraisal of both parties would go up,

leading to no change in the feeling thermometer difference measure. Finally, political scientists have found that extreme polarized rhetoric against the out-party can lead to decreases in levels of affective polarization (J. N. Druckman et al. 2019). It is possible that the message I use is simply too negative about the out party and leads to a similar backfire effect. While the effect of partisan messaging is not the focus of this project, these unanswered questions are worth noting as the field seeks to understand more fully how messages can polarize and depolarize the public.

Given what we know about polarization and strength of partisanship, we can expect that the response to experimental conditions will be conditional on whether or not the respondent is a strong partisan. To test this expectation, I re-estimate the model with the addition of an interaction term between strong partisanship and the partisan condition. I control for gender, education, and age. The model results¹⁰ find a statistically significant interaction between strength of partisanship and the partisan condition ($p < 0.05$). This means that strong partisans have different reactions to the interest group messages compared to independents and weak partisans, providing evidence to support H1a that strong partisans will have different reactions to a partisan message. Viewing Figure 5.5, we see that strong partisans in the partisan condition have levels of affective polarization that are lower than those in the control group. In other words, after a strong Republican or Democrat reads a message that contains partisan and conflict-oriented language about the out-party, their levels of affective polarization go down compared to when strong partisans see no interest group message at all.

Figure 5.5: Predicted Values of Affective Polarization Conditional on Experimental Condition and Strength of Partisanship

10. Full model results are available in T5 of the Tables Appendix

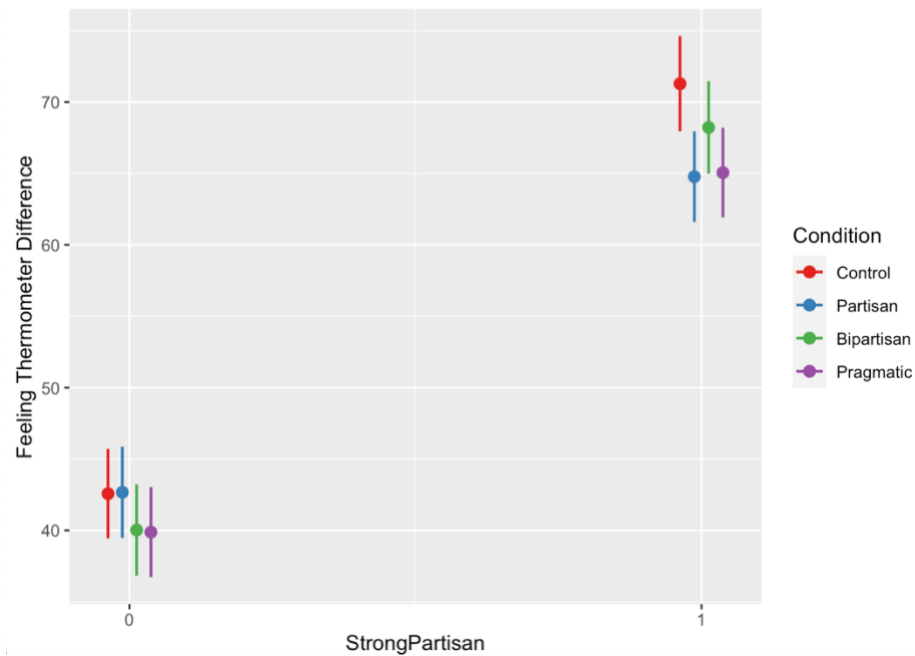


Figure 5.5 also provides some intuition about what is happening in the initial model results. We can see that among strong partisans, the difference in their affect towards their own party and the other party is smaller, meaning that they are less likely to see their own party very favorably and the other party very negatively, in the partisan and pragmatic conditions. Affective polarization also decreases slightly in the bipartisan condition, but the difference is slight and not statistically significant. For weak partisans and independent leaners, levels of affective polarization decrease slightly in the pragmatic and bipartisan conditions and do not change in the partisan condition. Although the effects among weak partisans and independent leaners are not strong enough to provide evidence for a hypothesis test, we can see the pattern that led to the statistically significant relationship between affective polarization and partisan condition.

What Does All of This Tell Us About Interest Groups and Affective Polarization?

Taken together, the evidence provided here suggests a strong relationship between membership in an interest group and levels of affective polarization. Through interviews, we see examples of the ways that interaction with people from the other party, the creation of a

superseding identity, and civic training lead people to have lower levels of animosity towards people in the out party. The interest group survey shows strong evidence that those who are members of their professional association are significantly less affectively polarized compared to people who are not members or who are not involved in their professional association. And in a conservative test in a survey experiment, we find that, when holding all else constant, the messages that nonpartisan interest groups use can depolarize members of the public - especially if they are not strong partisans.

The findings here are significant and provide a potential pathway towards a less polarized citizenry. When interest groups consider the value of their member engagement programs - especially on public policy issues - they should consider not only the ways that mobilizations can help the group achieve its policy goals, but also the greater effects these efforts have on democracy. Less polarization can potentially alleviate partisan gridlock, which can indirectly help all interest groups achieve their goals. Further, the group also has an opportunity through its engagement programs to strengthen support for our system of government - a crucial finding in our present environment in which the future of democracy is uncertain. More broadly, groups interested in alleviating affective polarization among the general public will be able to use these findings to create programs for those who are unable to participate in an interest group's public policy activities. In the next chapter, I examine how interest group mobilizations influence a related concept - individuals' belief in responsive government. Taken together, these effects can help inform how both interest groups and the wider civic engagement community can address concerns about democratic norms.

Tables Appendix

Table T3: Relationship Between Affective Polarization and Membership in Professional Societies among Democrats and Republicans

	Democrats	Republicans
Professional Society Member	8.24* (1.21)	6.49* (1.51)
Age	-0.26* (0.04)	-0.27* (0.05)
Education	-2.22* (0.67)	0.00 (0.81)
Strong Partisan	-5.02* (1.57)	-9.38* (1.86)
Weak Partisan	3.15* (1.63)	4.50* (1.97)
Constant	42.64* (3.34)	38.21* (4.11)
N	1,883	1,217
Adj. R-Square	0.11	0.12

Note: * < 0.05, two-tailed. ^ < 0.10, two-tailed. Baseline groups are Independents who lean toward the appropriate party.

Table T4: The Effect of Level of Participation on Trust in Government, Efficacy, and Support for Bipartisan Compromise

	Trust Model	Internal Efficacy	External Efficacy	Compromise Model
Never (1)	-0.02 (0.06)	-0.18 (0.11)	-0.15 (0.11)	0.22* (0.10)
< Once Per Year (2)	0.09^ (0.05)	0.16 (0.10)	0.19* (0.10)	-0.04 (0.09)
Once Per Year (3)	0.14* (0.05)	0.36* (0.10)	0.36* (0.09)	0.23* (0.08)
A Few Times Per Year (4)	0.23* (0.04)	0.38* (0.08)	0.32* (0.08)	0.21* (0.07)
Once Per Month (5)	0.32* (0.06)	0.67* (0.12)	0.55* (0.11)	0.44* (0.11)
A few Times Per Month (6)	0.41* (0.07)	0.71* (0.13)	0.77* (0.12)	0.41* (0.11)
Weekly (7)	0.51* (0.08)	1.14* (0.15)	1.01* (0.14)	0.96* (0.14)
Daily (8)	0.59* (0.09)	1.24* (0.17)	1.20* (0.16)	0.67* (0.15)
Age	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.01* (0.00)
Education	0.01 (0.02)	0.05^ (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)	-0.12* (0.03)
Party Strength	0.04* (0.01)	0.14* (0.01)	0.12* (0.01)	-0.07* (0.01)
Constant	2.14* (0.08)	2.72* (0.15)	3.28* (0.14)	5.34* (0.13)
N	3,778	3,778	3,778	3,778
Adj. R-Square	0.06	0.09	0.08	0.08

Note: * < 0.05, two-tailed. ^ < 0.10, two-tailed. Baseline group is comprised of strong Republicans who are not members of their professional association.

Table T5: Predictors of Affective Polarization

	Model 1	Model 2
Partisan Condition	-3.17* (1.53)	0.10 (2.14)
Pragmatic Condition	-4.38* (1.52)	-2.69 (2.13)
Bipartisan Condition	-2.72^ (1.54)	-2.54 (2.14)
Strong Partisan	26.00* (1.08)	28.71 (2.19)
Age	0.32* (0.03)	0.32* (0.05)
Is Male	-6.10* (1.08)	-6.01* (1.08)
Education	-0.65^ (0.38)	-0.65^ (0.38)
Strong Partisan x Partisan Condition		-6.61* (3.06)
Strong Partisan x Pragmatic Condition		-3.53 (3.05)
Strong Partisan x Bipartisan Condition		0.52 (3.07)
Constant	31.16* (2.57)	29.62* (2.55)
N	3,972	3,972
Adj. R-Square	0.16	0.16

Note: * < 0.05, two-tailed. Dependent variable is Feeling Thermometer Difference.

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