

**The Fundamentals and Affective Polarization:
How Long-Term Attitudes Shape Affect***

by

John H. Aldrich and

Suhyen Bae

Department of Political Science

Duke University

*Prepared for delivery at the 2024 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Philadelphia, PA, September 5 – 8, 2024.

Abstract

The Fundamentals and Vote Choice: How Long-Term Attitudes Shape Affect

Many recent advances in our understanding of voter behavior have emphasized affective responses, such as Iyengar et al.'s affective polarization (e.g., 2019). Such bases of partisan identity have been termed “tribal” often implying that a lot of emotion but relatively little substantive politics shapes partisanship. In this paper, we build on work we did with Sanders (Aldrich et al., 2024) by asking the question whether there is a substantive base helping to shape these emotional responses. We argue that ideology and recurring issues are long-term, or as we call them “fundamental,” forces helping orient the voter to electoral politics. These terms are drawn directly from Campbell et al. (1960)'s account of how party identification, as the only commonly employed long-term force in the 1950s, helped orient the voter to the Eisenhower era and beyond. Here we argue that increased and at least minimally accurate information about ideology and issues as long-term or fundamental forces shape short-term attitudes, such as affective responses to the parties and candidates. We test this set of claims using data from the 2016-2020 ANES panel. We find that increased satisfaction of Campbell et al.'s criteria for casting an issue-based vote, which they equated with a large portion of what they meant by ideology as a long-term attitude, on ideology and recurring issues measure in 2016 are significantly related to responses of increased affective polarization in the 2020 panel wave. This result continues to hold across a variety of methodological tests. These results support the inference that the increasing satisfaction of the ideological and issue voting criteria that began to rise sharply in the 1980s underlie, in part, the decreasing affection for the opposition party and its candidates that began to drop mostly in and after 2000.

Introduction

Contemporary politics has led to dramatic advances in the assessment of the role of affect in electoral politics. Lilliana Mason has played one of the key roles in developing this line of argument, particularly in her book *Uncivil Agreement* (2018), a line that she continues to develop (e.g., Mason, et al., 2021). In this portion of her work, she argues that partisanship has become akin to a “tribal” identity, in which the opposition, especially, is seen negatively, and the focus is on affect rather than any particular substantive content. Iyengar and his colleagues, at about the same time, were developing their account of “affective partisanship” (e.g., Iyengar, et al., 2019). Like Mason, the focus is on affective evaluations, and its central argument is that, in this century, partisanship has become increasingly dominated by affect, the affect is mostly negative, and this is a core part of what partisan polarization looks like in the public. Together these complementary arguments, and those of others, have been picked up outside of the academy. Major media figures and opinion writers have taken up the negativity and tribalism themes regardless of their own stances and the orientation of their outlets.

As we will discuss below, we are in close agreement that affective evaluations are increasingly important in shaping electoral behavior. We believe, however, that the story is more complicated. In particular, we believe that there is a greater role for the substance of politics in shaping voter beliefs, attitudes, and choices. Along with Bailey Sanders, we argue (Aldrich, et al., 2024), first, that what the authors of *The American Voter* (Campbell et al., 1960) called long-term forces which, when they wrote, boiled down for the great majority of the electorate, to partisan identification and no more than that, has over the last six decades become a much richer mixture of factors. We propose that there are, in the current era, five such long-term attitudes, which we call the “fundamentals.” These include the original partisanship, of course,

but also ideology, recurring issues, racial orientations, and economic evaluations. No one person need have developed orientations on all five of them, but all are potent long-term forces empirically, and collectively they add up to including a great amount of the political substance of contemporary campaigns and government policy-making into the underlying context of electoral decision making. Second, as the “newer” forces became increasingly relevant in the 1980s and thereafter, they also began to align more closely. In the 1950s and 1960s, for instance, there were pro-civil rights liberals in positions of influence in both political parties, and there were prominent leaders on the other side of these concerns in both parties as well. The parties, that is, were divided internally. By the 1990s, however, the Democratic Party became the home of civil rights liberals and the Republican Party the home of civil rights conservatives. As a second example, there was a “bipartisan consensus” on Cold War politics in the 1950s and 1960s, which changed over the war in Vietnam, dividing the two parties, one being mostly dovish, the other primarily hawkish. Such “sorting” along partisan lines among partisan elites began to be mirrored in the electorate. Note that this view of sorting (of the Fiorina, et al., account, e.g. Fiorina 2017; Fiorina, et al., 2006) is silent about whether polarization involves increasing extremism in views (as, for example, the Abramowitz et al., account goes, e.g., Abramowitz and Sanders, 2008; Abramowitz, 2013). In fact, we believe that the elites have taken more extreme positions along with also becoming increasingly sorted by party. The public, we find, is only modestly more extreme in its positioning, but it is becoming nearly as sorted as the partisan officeholders.

The final step concerns affect. Our position, like that of Fiorina et al., is that the electorate remains at least mostly moderate (or more moderate than the political elite presents themselves) on what they want the government to do, but they have become increasingly

emotionally involved with partisan politics. Iyengar's affective polarization is quite like our position: They are increasingly polarized on affective evaluations, and they are particularly polarized in evaluating the opposition negatively. We suspect that sorting and negative affective polarization go hand-in-hand. At one time, Republicans were likely to find that there were many Democratic elites (and partisan in the public) with whom they agreed about a good number of important political concerns. It may well have been that, on balance, their partisan views favored their party's candidates so they regularly voted for their party, but they agreed with the opposition often, just not as often. Neither party was always right nor always wrong.

Sorting has meant that, for an increasingly large number of voters, they may not agree with their own party about everything, but everywhere they look, the opposition party is on the wrong side. They are simply wrong about everything. And the opposition party leaders are proclaiming so every more passionately and in stronger and more derisive language, as elite partisan polarization involves increasing extremity of position and increasing extremity of outrage. Voters might not like their party much more than before (in fact, the affective evaluations of one's own party seem to have at least marginally decreased). But it is the increasingly negative evaluations of the always-wrong opposition that has led to increasingly robust affective polarization – polarization in the sense of extreme reactions, seemingly led by negative emotion rather than cognitive assessments.

The last sentence includes the words “has led to...” and that reads like a causal claim. It is hard enough to sort out causality in the cross-sectional interview, but essentially impossible to do so over a long period of time, which involves secondary analyses of surveys not designed to test causal hypotheses on the secondary analysts' point. Our position, even more, is that causation is not a particularly relevant consideration, even if the perfect research design were

possible to implement. Rather, these are almost certainly interactive, each reinforcing the other over time. While we might feel that it takes some understanding of the substance of politics to change one's views – the movement from southern Democrats leading the way on conservative civil rights positions in the 1950s and 1960s to their congressional delegation becoming Republican in or about the 1990s and thus becoming the home of the greatest number of civil rights conservatives (and liberal Republican districts on civil rights becoming Democratic) – before one can come to more negative evaluations of the opposition. But, perhaps, for others, it was the realization that one's increasingly negative evaluations of the opposition leadership that led them to look to see if it was true that these dastardly opponents really did hold to the wrong positions on so much of politics. In these ways, we suspect that the truth is that it is likely that affect helps shape cognition, just as cognition helps to shape affect, and it is a fool's errand to commit to trying to sort out what is likely non-sort-able causal direction, because it is bidirectional

Still, we look here at the following research design: panel analysis. In particular, we can use the ANES 2016-2020 to examine how great an influence the fundamental forces are on subsequent affective evaluations and vice versa. Perhaps surprisingly, these data yield clues as to the erstwhile intertwined dynamics of fundamental political forces and emotive evaluations.

In sum, our theory is that substance and affect are intertwined and both are becoming more central to understanding voter decision making and choice. Both are indispensable parts of what Campbell et al. orienting the voter politically (the role that party identification played in their account as the unique long-term attitude, in their wording). We will seek to show that a measure we develop about the extent of information the public holds and a simple and low bar (but a bar nonetheless) of accuracy in their responses provides a way to show that political

substance is an important component of affect in choice (and, while not found empirically in these particular tests, likely vice versa).

Hypotheses and Measures

Our hypotheses are based on the context of using panel data (specifically the 2016-2020 ANES “times series” panel). Aldrich, Bae, and Sanders (2024) showed that the five long-term forces they called the “fundamentals” are increasing in numbers from just partisanship in Campbell et al. to the five they studied; party identification, ideology, issues, economic assessments, and race (racial resentment in particular). Second, they showed that these five have grown increasingly correlated over time. Third, they demonstrated that the fundamentals collectively were increasingly aligned with presidential and with congressional vote choice. Finally, they found that the fundamentals were increasingly strongly correlated with affective partisanship, which in turn was closely related to the vote.

It is really the last point we want to follow here. For purposes of this paper we accept Iyengar et al.’s claim that the thermometer differences of their measure of affective polarization are heavily endowed with affect.¹ The fundamental forces are, we believe, about the substance rather than just the affect of politics, or at the very least they are heavily substantive in terms of their political content. That does not mean they are clean measures of cognitive considerations. But, as Aldrich et al. showed, in the few places such a showing could be made, that they clearly are related to exogenous changes in real world conditions. Thus, thermometer scores of

¹ Party and candidate thermometer ratings directly ask for thermometer scores of “feelings” toward the object being rated. It is also true, however, that these thermometers are very strongly related to all kinds of variables, including those purporting to measure affect and those purporting to measure cognition or “political substance.” The resulting anticipated high degrees of comingling of emotion and substance are, first, also true of the fundamentals and, second, exactly our point about chasing causation being a fool’s errand.

presidential candidates and measures related to these fundamental forces are the basis of our empirical analyses.

The ANES conducted a panel study using the 2016 and 2020 time series instruments.² We test our hypotheses using these data. Details on the data are provided in the Data section. As noted above, we take the difference in candidate thermometer ratings as our primary affect-heavy endogenous variable (or “AP” for affective polarization). Because these measure responses about the two particular nominees in the current election, these are the quintessential “short-term attitudes” immediately relevant for the election and “close” (in time and content) to the vote itself, that long-term attitudes help shape as they orient the voter to electoral politics.

In addition to affective polarization, we also test our hypotheses on the polarization of candidate traits and the long-term attitudes. Aldrich et al. propose that candidate traits occupy an intermediary space between fundamental factors and vote choice, serving as a mediating influence that captures long-term ideological and issue-based preferences, which subsequently shape candidate evaluations and voting decisions. The trait measures are drawn from social psychology literature imbuing the affective character of candidate quality, such as perceptions of candidate honesty and whether they seem to care about people. However, the traits are also evaluations for someone expected to hold a presidential office, which adds a cognitive aspect of traits necessitated by the political institution giving it its intermediary nature (Aldrich et al. 2024). Historically, traits have been seen as highly variable across elections and closely tied to vote choice. By systematically measuring how citizens assess presidential candidates using the ANES trait measures that have been included consistently, we delve into how these short-term trait evaluations are influenced by underlying ideological and issue orientations. This analysis

² The ANES is adding the 2024 election survey as a third time point in the panel, and we look forward to extending our analysis to include the much greater methodological options available in a three-wave than in a two-wave panel.

enhances our understanding of how the electorate approaches learning about candidates with both affective evaluations and trait-based evaluations in tandem with the long-term forces.

The question then is what to do about the more substantive and cognitively oriented measures? Here, what we seek to pull out is an aspect of the “fundamentals” that carries a good bit of cognitive content and provides at least a minimal degree of alignment with real-world politics. Campbell et al. concluded that ideology – and for them, recurring issues were a central component of ideology – was their candidate for a second possible long-term force to go along with partisanship. The differences between the partisanship and ideology in the 1952 and 1956 data on which their book was based were stark. Very large proportions of respondents seemed to be able to assess and use party identification in their electoral considerations. While ideology was a logical candidate for a long-term force, far too few were able to relate to ideology and even fewer to be able to use it meaningfully in those considerations to be worth considering ideology as a long-term orientating force in politics. They used a variety of analyses to demonstrate the veracity of their conclusions.

In part for reasons similar to those examined in this paper, ideology became its own potential long-term force and even the longest running issues have become separate considerations (or at least typically are considered separately). For example, Conover and Feldman (1981) examined the 7-point scale of ideology that had become its go-to measure of ideology, focusing on the affective component in that scale of ideology.³

One of the important ways that Campbell et al. were able to show that ideology/issues was or were not candidate(s) for a long-term force for shaping political orientations was that very

³ The ideology 7-point scale was first included in a presidential election survey in 1972, along with a number of new 7-point policy scales, including three of the five we employ here. The other two issue scales entered into the standard repertoire of recurring issue measurements in the 1980s.

small percentages of the public (typically one between one in three to one in five) could meet what Campbell et al. claimed to be the criteria for casting a vote based on issues (see their Table 8-3, p. 182). Those arguing that the public had relatively low levels of political sophistication, or even political content, to their views often pointed to the low level of compliance with these criteria as one of the major empirical findings supporting those views – not much had changed since Campbell et al. wrote, they often claimed.

Beginning with their study of the 1980 elections, Abramson et al. (1983), translated the original issue voting criteria to mesh with the new 7-point scale method for measuring policy concerns (see their Table 6-3, p. 130). Campbell et al. had three criteria, which Abramson et al., measured, first, by the ability to place oneself on the issue scale as evidence that the respondent “cognized the issue in some form” to paraphrase Campbell et al. The second criterion of being able to assess the options, Abramson et al., measured by the ability to place both candidates on the scale. Their third condition, in direct application of Campbell et al., was whether the respondent placed the candidates at different points on the scale (“see a difference”). Abramson, et al, added a fourth measure the 7-point scales made possible which was to see if the respondent at least put the candidates in the right order (the Democrat to the left of the Republican). Campbell et al. had noted that criterion but, given the data they were using, they could not measure it. The virtue of this criterion is that it sets a standard (low though that might be) of “accuracy” in the information base being assessed by the issue voting criteria.

We believe that the use of the degree to which respondents satisfy the issue voting criteria is an apt measure of having some substantive political content in the information base that informs their views. Issues or (qua Conover and Feldman) ideology might have a great deal of emotion attached to them, as, for instance, abortion has in the wake of the Supreme Court’s

decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022, hereinafter “*Dobbs*”). But as intense as a voter’s preferences might be, if they don’t have a position, if they don’t know where the candidates stand, if they do but see no difference between the two candidates, or if they can’t put the candidates even in the correct order on the scale, then they don’t have sufficient information to use that issue in rendering their choice.⁴ In short, we believe that measuring of the issue voting criteria is, like Campbell et al., argued, a measure of the degree to which the voter is sufficiently informed to use an issue or ideology in their deliberations and choices.

Following Aldrich et al., we distinguish between ideology and issues as long-term or, that is, fundamental forces. Thus, we have measures in 2016 and 2020 of whether the individual satisfied the criteria on ideology, which we will denote IVC, for ideology voting criteria. Aldrich et al. point out that there are five issues of public policy that have been asked consistently since the 1980s and therefore are, in their and our view, candidates for “long-running issues” and thus are at least some of the concerns that are the basis for a policy fundamental.⁵ Thus, there are up to five chances for respondents to meet the issue voting criteria (or PVC for policy voting criteria), and scores on that scale can therefore vary from 0 to 5. Our main measure of ideology and policy fundamentals follow Campbell et al. by combining the ideology scale with the five issue scales. To do so, we rescaled the issue voting criteria to a 0-1

⁴ Or, it is a choice based on apparently false information, such as a liberal Republican these days seen as opposing a conservative Democrat for president. There may well be times and places in which a small minority of voters have meaningful arguments for why they believe the candidates are taking the opposite positions than the great majority of voters, but we doubt these apply to Trump or to Clinton/Biden in 2016 and 2020. Also, as Abramson et al. documented (1983), voters might be correctly perceiving that the two candidates are taking more or less identical positions, as was a common perception in 1976, featuring Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford.

⁵ Three go back to 1972, the first presidential election survey using a number of 7-point issue scales, all have appeared in some form in ANES surveys for a long time, including back to the 1950s. And as Aldrich et al., note, if the ANES regularly uses valuable survey time to measure an issue year after year, in some form or another, what better measure is there of “long-running” issue relevance?

scale and added it to the ideology measure. This combined scale (IPVC), therefore, runs from 0 to 2.

Our claim, therefore, is that short-term affective and candidate trait evaluations and the long-term ideology and policy voting criteria (IPVC) are inter-related and the 2016-2020 panel might help sort out the nature of their influence on one another. Does affective polarization in 2016 influence the amount of information the voter can bring to bear on issues in 2020, or, vice versa, does knowing about ideology sufficient to employ it in choice in 2016 affect how affectively polarized the voter is in 2020?

Data and Methods

As noted, this study utilizes the ANES 2016-2020 Panel Merged File dataset that combines panel cases from the ANES 2016 Time Series Study and ANES 2020 Time Series Study. The ANES 2016-2020 Panel Sample consists of the ANES 2016 web and face-to-face post-election respondents yielding 2,839 respondents for the 2020 pre-election wave and 2,670 respondents for the 2020 post-election wave.⁶

The dependent variable measured using the feeling thermometer ratings of the Democratic presidential candidate and the Republican presidential candidate.⁷ We operationalize these emotive evaluations by taking the difference of the feeling thermometer ratings for the in-

⁶ The ANES 2016 waves were conducted between September 7 and November 7, 2016, for the pre-election wave and November 9, 2016 to January 8, 2017, for the post-election wave. The ANES 2020 waves were conducted on the web from August 18 to November 3, 2020 for the pre-election wave and November 8, 2020 to January 4, 2021 for the post-election wave.

⁷The wording is: "I'd like to get your feelings toward some of our political leaders and other people who are in the news these days. I'll read the name of a person and I'd like you to rate that person using something we call the feeling thermometer. Ratings between 50 degrees and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorable and warm toward the person. Ratings between 0 degrees and 50 degrees mean that you don't feel favorable toward the person and that you don't care too much for that person. You would rate the person at the 50 degree mark if you don't feel particularly warm or cold toward the person. If we come to a person whose name you don't recognize, you don't need to rate that person. Just tell me and we'll move on to the next one.: How would you rate [candidate]?"

party (i.e., the respondent's own party's) presidential candidate and the out-party presidential candidate (AP for "Affective Polarization").

For candidate trait evaluations, we operationalize the polarizing view towards evaluations of in-party and out-party presidential candidates' traits⁸ on four qualities: providing strong leadership, caring about people, being knowledgeable, and being honest. We first sum the responses to the in-party and out-party presidential candidates creating a candidate trait score. Then we take the difference of responses for the in-party presidential candidate and the out-party presidential candidate, thus capturing the polarization of perceptions toward candidate traits based on party, which ranges from -16 to 16.

The main independent variable we use for the analyses is the combined measure on satisfying the ideology and policy voting criteria. In its operationalization, we rescaled the issue voting (PVC) criteria to a 0-1 scale and added it to the ideology measure (IVC). This combined scale (IPVC), therefore, runs from 0 to 2, which is then rescaled from 0 to 1, normalized for the statistical models. To elaborate, the "substantive understanding of ideology" is a binary variable marked "1" if the respondent satisfied all four of the Abramson et al. measurement of the Campbell et al. issue voting criteria, applied to the 7-point ideology scale. For the "substantive understanding of policy," we operationalize the variable using the same technique as the ideology variable for each of the five policy attitudes; on government spending, defense

⁸The wording for the four candidate traits questions are: (1) "Think about [the presidential candidate]. In your opinion, does the phrase 'he provides strong leadership' describe [the presidential candidate] extremely well, very well, moderately well, slightly well, or not well at all?" (2) What about 'really cares about people like you'? Does this phrase describe [the presidential candidate] extremely well, very well, moderately well, slightly well, or not well at all? (3) What about 'is knowledgeable'? Does this phrase describe [the presidential candidate] extremely well, very well, moderately well, slightly well, or not well at all? (4) What about 'is honest'? Does this phrase describe [the presidential candidate] extremely well, very well, moderately well, slightly well, or not well at all? Responses to the questions are provided on a 1 to 5 scale with 1 being "Extremely well" and 5 being "Not well at all." In the analyses, the higher score was given to a positive assessment of the presidential candidate. These questions referred to Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump in the 2016 wave, and Joe Biden and Donald Trump in the 2020 wave.

spending, health insurance, provision of jobs and a good standard of living, and aid to blacks and other minorities. We take the sum of the binary results of satisfying the four issue voting criteria on each issue scale to create the overall “substantive understanding of policy” scale that ranges from 0 to 5 (denoted PVC), which is rescaled for the final combined measure for IPVC.

Leveraging the panel data structure, we utilize fixed effects models. Fixed effects models are widely used to mitigate selection bias when estimating causal effects in observational studies, as they remove variation that may be influenced by time-invariant confounding factors. This approach allows us to estimate the effect of an independent variable by focusing solely on the variation within each unit over time (Mummolo & Peterson 2018). We employ individual unit fixed effects for the first set of results, which eliminate all between-unit differences, thereby providing an estimate of a variable’s average effect within units across time (Allison 2009; Wooldridge 2010). The second set of results extends this approach by incorporating two-way fixed effects, which additionally accounts for fixed effects by survey wave. In these models, we control for time-varying sociodemographic factors, such as highest level of educational attainment, household income, employment status, and age. Covariates included in the model are normalized from 0-1, whereas the dependent variables are in their original scale (affective polarization from -100 to 100 and candidate quality from -16 to 16).

We also seek to assuage concerns of “reverse causality” by utilizing cross-lagged structural equation models. While cross-lagged models are not a perfect solution (Bellemare et al. 2017), they are useful in illustrating the directional relationship between substance in politics and affective evaluations. We demonstrate results using cross-lagged models with and without covariates. The full cross-lagged models control for age, gender, income, employment, level of education, and race as measured in the 2016 wave. For the cross-lagged models, all variables are

normalized from a scale of 0-1, including the dependent variables of affective polarization and the ideology and policy voting criteria. All models in the fixed effects and cross-lagged analyses are also weighted accounting for the survey design.

Descriptive Analysis

The focus so far in this paper has been on the ideology and issues fundamental(s) and how we can use survey responses to measure perceptions (including the low bar of correctly perceiving the Democratic candidate to the left of the Republican candidate). That is not the only fundamental where such a measure of “accuracy” is available.

The economic fundamental in Aldrich, et al., is measured by the responses to the question of economic conditions compared to a year ago. Average responses to that question can, of course, be compared to change in the actual economy over the preceding year. Aldrich et al. are able to report this comparison for the period in which that question was included in the ANES (starting in 1980 through 2020). We show their data below in Figure 1 (2024, p. 37).⁹ The Figure demonstrates that there is a strong (but of course imperfect) relationship between perceived and actual economic conditions in the nation.

Further, while we focus on ideology and issue perceptions in 2016 and 2020, Aldrich et al. (2024) point out that changes over this shorter period reflect longer term changes. They demonstrate, for example, that growth over time in the proportions saying they perceive differences between the two parties (asked in the ANES since 1952) very closely mirror changes

⁹ They were not the first to do so, of course. Achen and Bartels (2016) in what is generally perceived as an indictment of the public’s failure to live up to the standards of a textbook “civics voter,” use those data themselves. Noting that the public generally gets at least the direction and extent of change right, they argue this does not sufficiently impinge on non-civics style processes. Aldrich et al., conversely, argue that it pairs with their other findings in the increasingly strong partisan cleavage.

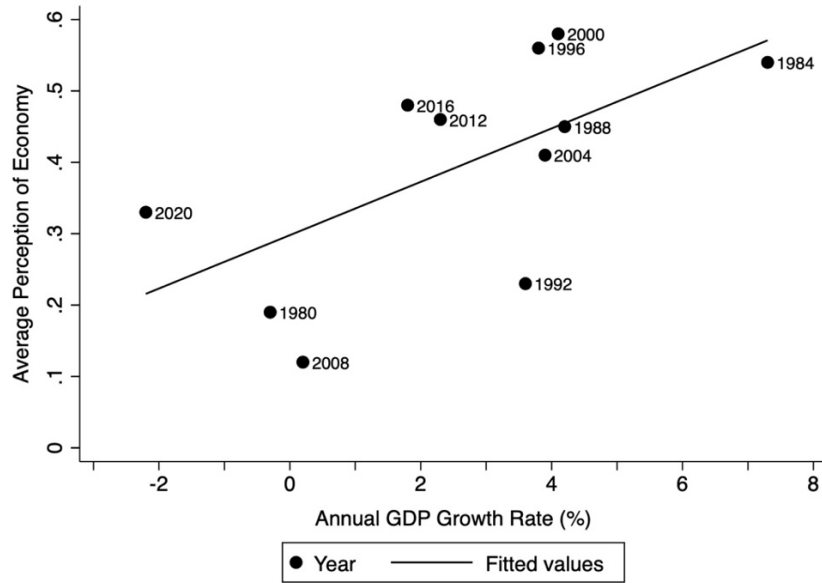
in the degree to which the two parties in the U.S. House vote differently according to the Poole-Rosenthal measure of partisan polarization in Congress (2024, figure 4-4, p.68). This perception of partisan polarization is also reflected in the growth in the Abramson et al., measures of satisfaction of issue and ideological voting criteria (reported in Aldrich et al., 2024, figure 3-1, p. 43) from 1972 to 2020.¹⁰ The Abramson et al. measure of issue voting (e.g., 1983) was especially low in 1976, at just over one-in-four satisfying the criteria, which is quite close to the findings of Campbell et al. for data from the 1952 and 1956 ANES. The 1976 result, however, did include putting the candidates in the correct order. In fact, they report, the 1976 low was due to the fact that many more than usual failed to see a difference between the two contenders, which also seems to reflect reality, as Ford and Carter were both among the most moderate members of their respective parties. By 2020, both sets of voting criteria had increased dramatically to just under three in four.

The increase in satisfaction of these criteria is observed even over the short term of 2016 to 2020. The data in Figure 2 demonstrate that there has been a long-term, secular increase in the proportion satisfying the four IVC conditions, which is reflected even in the smaller (but statistically significant) increase between 2016 and 2020, as seen in Figure 3. Much the same can be seen in the changes over time in PVC (as illustrated on a somewhat different set of issues in Aldrich et al, 2024). Because Campbell et al. discussed recurring issues as a part of ideology, we can create an index of issues and ideology together. To do so, we renormalized PVC to range from 0 to 1 and added it to IVC to create a combined index that runs from 0 to 2. It likewise shows a very similar time path to IVC in Figure 2 (available upon request).

¹⁰ Abramson, et al., use the full set of 7-point issue scales with candidate placements in each survey, which differs from the only-recurring scales used here. The differences in growth in satisfaction of the criteria, however, seem slight.

At the same time, affective partisan polarization increased a great deal, as well, and in both years, there is a clear and strong relationship between satisfaction of the criteria and affective polarization as reported by the panel respondents. These relationships are reported in Figure 4. On the one hand, some increase in satisfaction of the criteria might be expected as, especially Trump goes from a largely unknown political quantity (although of course a well-known figure outside of politics), but the changing levels of affective polarization are perhaps unusually large, given the pairs of candidates. Aldrich et al. (2024, Figure 5-9, p. 104) are just one of the more recent reports of changing thermometer scores over time. In their figure they included ANES responses to the two candidates and the two parties' thermometer scores from 1980 to 2020, and the dramatic decrease in opposite party/candidate scores is truly dramatic, especially beginning in 2000, as reflected therefore in Figure 3.

Figure 1:
Perceived Change in Economy and Annual GDP Growth Rate, 1980-2020



Source: Aldrich et al., (2024) Figure 2-3, p. 37.

Figure 2:
Percent of Respondents' Satisfying the Ideology Voting Criteria, 1972-2020



Figure 3:

Mean of Ideology and Policy Voting Criteria in 2016 and 2020

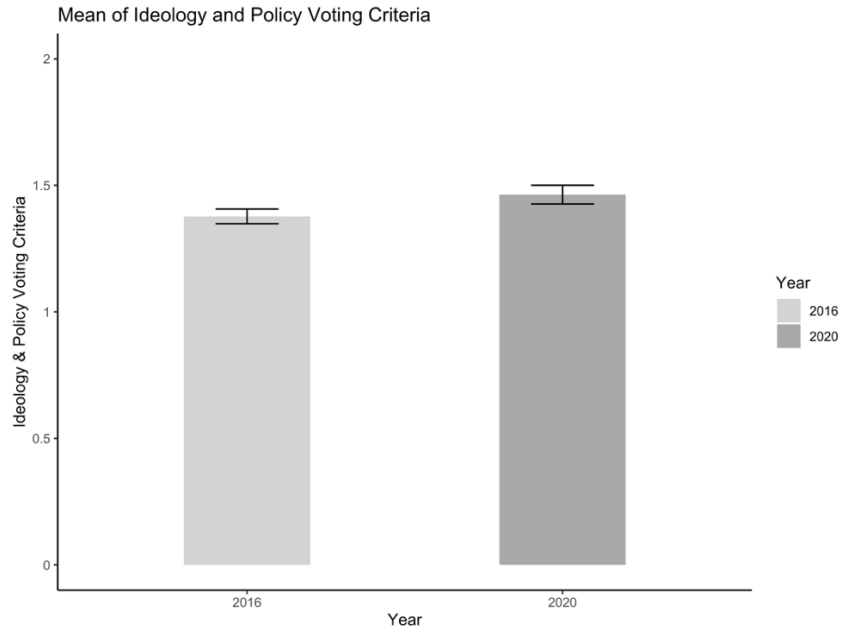
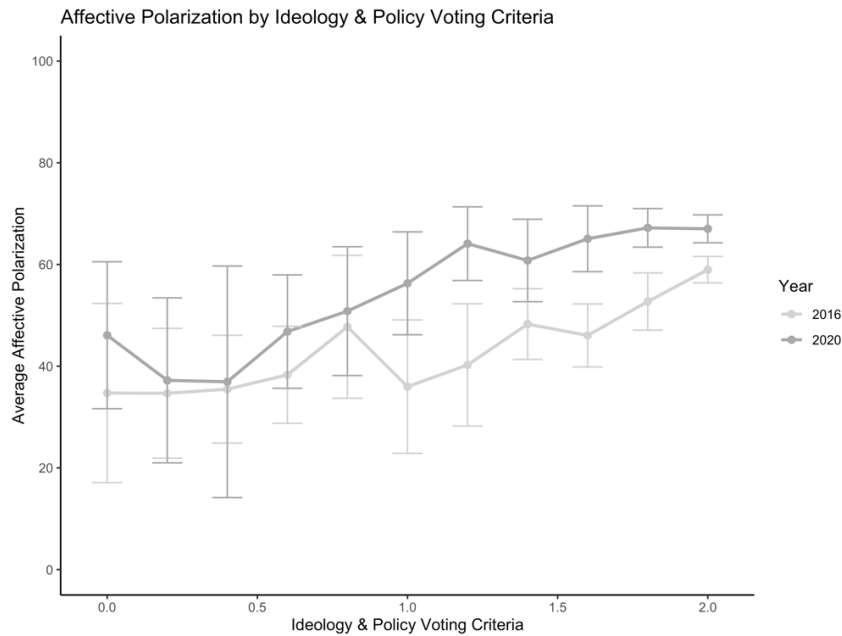


Figure 4:

Average Affective Polarization by Satisfaction of Ideology and Policy Voting Criteria in 2016 and 2020



Panel Data Estimation Results

In this section, we demonstrate the relationship between short-term affective polarization and candidate trait measures and the substantive understanding of ideological and recurring policy issue fundamentals from fixed effects models. The models were estimated using a within-individual fixed effects approach, which controls for all time-invariant characteristics of the individuals in the sample, thereby isolating the effects of changes within individuals over time. Additionally, we report the results from two-way fixed effects models, which control for both individual-specific and time-specific unobserved factors accounting for unmeasured factors also across broader temporal trends. The fixed effects models account for survey weights and control for time-varying variables, including highest educational attainment, household income, employment status, and age.

Table 1 presents the results from two fixed effects models estimating the relationship between the ideology and policy voting criteria and affective polarization. Both models show that satisfying the ideology and policy voting criteria has a positive and significant relationship ($p < 0.01$) with affective polarization. In the individual fixed effects model (model 1), a one-unit increase in ideology and policy voting criteria, meaning fully satisfying both the ideological and policy voting criteria, is associated with a 21.49 unit increase in affective polarization, on average by individual. The coefficient magnitude slightly decreases for the two-way fixed effects model (model 2), with a one-unit increase in ideology and policy voting criteria is associated with an 18.55 unit increase in affective polarization in the two-way fixed effects model (model 2). The ideology and policy voting criteria is associated with a change that represents 9.3% of the affective polarization variable, which range is from -100 to 100, indicating a substantial magnitude. More so, the results show that the coefficient for the

ideology and policy voting criteria remains substantially larger than those for education, income, and employment status.

Table 1:
Fixed Effects Models for Affective Polarization

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Affective Polarization	
	(1)	(2)
Ideology & Policy VC	21.49*** (5.264)	18.55*** (5.193)
Education	0.788 (9.226)	-2.943 (9.203)
Income	2.065 (4.941)	1.679 (4.947)
Employed	6.266** (3.098)	5.990* (3.166)
Age	96.78*** (20.21)	38.31 (30.53)
Individual FE	Y	Y
Wave FE	N	Y
Observations	4,547	4,547
R ²	0.071	0.090
Within R ²	0.0713	0.0904
Number of Individuals	2,594	2,594

Note:

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

Table 2 displays the findings for affective polarization of candidate trait and the ideology and policy voting criteria, where we find comparable results in terms of direction and magnitude. Similarly, both models consistently demonstrate that meeting the ideology and policy voting criteria significantly is associated with greater polarizing views towards in-party and out-party presidential candidates ($p < 0.01$). Fully satisfying both the ideological and policy criteria results in a 3.28 unit increase in polarized perceptions of candidate trait. This corresponds to approximately 10.3% of the total range from -16 to 16. Likewise, the two-way fixed effects model (Model 2) indicates that a one-unit increase in ideology and policy voting criteria is linked to a 2.82 unit rise in polarized views of candidate trait.

This significant positive relationship indicates that as an individual becomes more ideologically or policy driven in their voting decisions over time, their level of polarization of affect and candidate trait evaluations is likely to increase. In other words, when substantive understanding of ideological or policy increase from one wave to the next, it is accompanied by a notable rise in affective polarization. Further, the results show that the coefficient for the ideology and policy voting criteria remains substantially larger than those for education, income, and employment status. This comparison underscores the relatively stronger relationship between understanding the substance of ideology and policy on short-term attitudes compared to socioeconomic factors.

Table 2:
Fixed Effects Models for Affective Polarization of Candidate Trait

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Candidate Trait	
	(1)	(2)
Ideology & Policy VC	3.277*** (0.738)	2.819*** (0.732)
Education	-1.496 (1.329)	-2.163 (1.326)
Income	-0.148 (0.701)	-0.183 (0.699)
Employed	0.427 (0.416)	0.388 (0.432)
Age	21.28*** (2.627)	10.67*** (3.644)
Individual FE	Y	Y
Wave FE	N	Y
Observations	4,638	4,638
R ²	0.110	0.137
Within R ²	0.110	0.137
Number of Individuals	2,601	2,601
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	

In the next section, we present results from cross-lagged models. Fixed effects models provide a rigorous method to test the relationship between affective polarization and the ideology and policy vote criteria. To further test endogeneity or reverse causality of the relationship, we

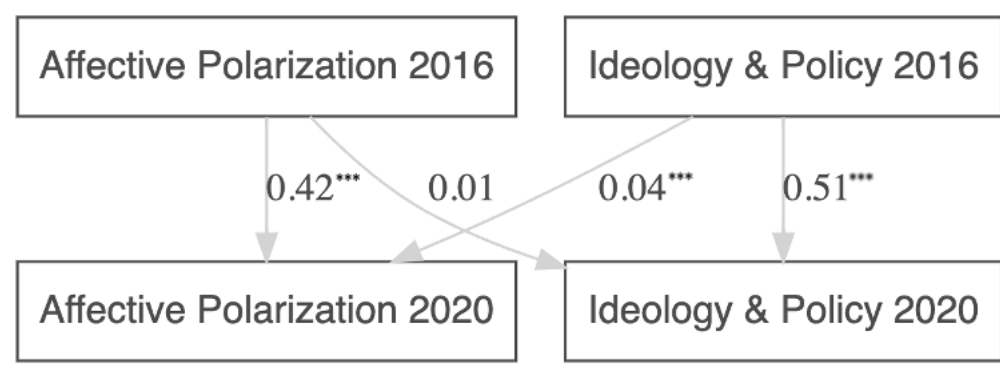
also employ cross-lagged models to determine whether ideology and policy vote criteria drives affective polarization or whether the reverse is true.

Figure 5 presents the results of the cross-lagged structural equation model for affective polarization and the ideology and policy voting criteria. The figure shows that the ideology and policy voting criteria in 2016 significantly predicts affective polarization in 2020 ($\beta = 0.04$, $p < 0.01$), holding affective polarization in 2016 constant. On the contrary, affective polarization in 2016 does not predict the ideology and policy voting criteria in 2020 ($\beta = 0.01$, $p = 0.186$), holding respondents' prior ideology and policy voting criteria in 2016 constant.

The results are robust to the inclusion of sociodemographic covariates as illustrated in Table 3. The first column shows that ideology and policy voting criteria in 2016 significantly predicts affective polarization in 2020 ($\beta = 0.056$, $p < 0.01$), holding affective polarization in 2016 other covariates constant. In contrast, the second column shows that affective polarization in 2016 has a statistically insignificant relationship with the ideology and policy voting criteria in 2020 ($\beta = 0.047$, $p = 0.186$). In terms of the magnitude of the ideology and policy coefficient, since the affective polarization measure is normalized on a 0-1 scale in the models, a coefficient of 0.056 corresponds to 11.2 points on the original affective polarization scale, which ranges from -100 to 100. While the coefficient for affective polarization increased from 0.01 to 0.047 in the full structural equation model with covariates, since the ideology and policy measure range from 0-1, a one-unit change in affective polarization is associated with a 0.047 unit increase in satisfying the ideology and policy voting criteria, which is also not substantively significant. In sum, the cross-lagged structural equation models demonstrate that respondents who satisfied the ideology and policy voting criteria in 2016 tend to be more affectively polarized in 2020, controlling for prior levels of affective polarization and other covariates. Conversely, the effect

of affective polarization on later adherence to ideology and policy voting criteria is statistically insignificant and substantively smaller.

Figure 5:
Cross-Lagged Structural Equation Model with
Affective Polarization and Ideology & Policy Voting Criteria



Note: Models include 2,289 observations. The R^2 for the Affective Polarization 2020 model is 0.240, and for the Ideology & Policy 2020 model, it is 0.318. Models present standardized coefficients and are weighted to reflect survey-design. All variables are normalized on a 0-1 scale. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

Table 3:**Cross-Lagged Structural Equation Model with Covariates**

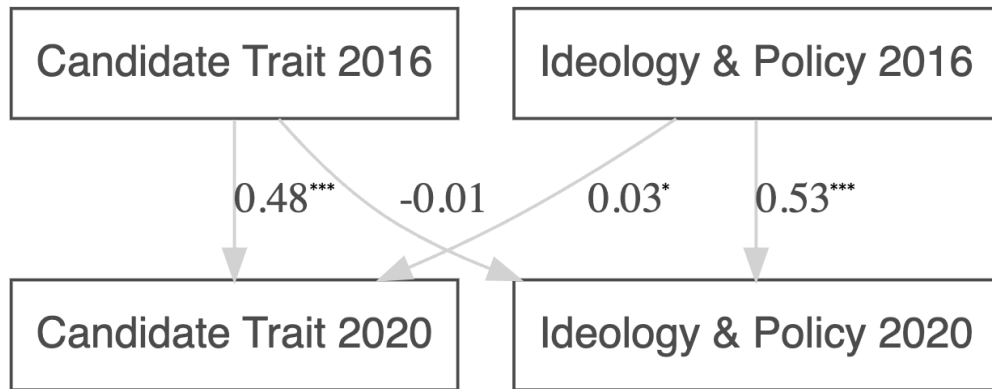
	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Affective Polarization 2020	Ideology & Policy VC 2020
	(1)	(2)
Ideology & Policy VC 2016	0.056*** (0.021)	0.428*** (0.029)
Affective Polarization 2016	0.389*** (0.036)	0.047 (0.036)
Education	-0.037** (0.016)	0.050** (0.021)
Income	-0.005 (0.018)	0.123*** (0.024)
Employed	0.005 (0.011)	0.009 (0.027)
Age	0.042** (0.020)	-0.014 (0.027)
Female	0.019** (0.010)	-0.013 (0.013)
Black	0.024 (0.016)	-0.093*** (0.026)
Other Race	-0.016 (0.015)	-0.057*** (0.019)
Observations	2,059	2,059
R ²	0.210	0.297
Model Fit Indices		
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	0.819	
Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI)	0.294	
SRMR	0.077	
Chi-Square (χ^2)	544.923	
Degrees of Freedom (df)	14	
Chi-Square P-value	< 0.001	

Note: Models present standardized coefficients and are weighted to reflect survey-design. All variables are normalized on a 0-1 scale. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Figure 6 presents the results of the cross-lagged structural equation model for polarizing views of candidate traits and the ideology and policy voting criteria. On the one hand, similar to affective polarization, polarization of candidate trait has no meaningful association with the ideology and policy voting criteria in 2020 ($\beta = -0.01$, $p = 0.794$). On the other hand, we observe that the ideology and policy voting criteria in 2016 has a marginally significant relationship with polarization of candidate trait in 2020 ($\beta = 0.035$, $p = 0.056$).

Figure 6:

Cross-Lagged Structural Equation Model with Candidate Trait and Ideology & Policy Voting Criteria



Note: Models include 2,289 observations. The R^2 for the Candidate Quality 2020 model is 0.240, and for the Ideology & Policy 2020 model, it is 0.318. Models present standardized coefficients and are weighted to reflect survey-design. All variables are normalized on a 0-1 scale. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

The results in Table 4 showing the models with covariates further strengthen the findings as the ideology and policy voting criteria in 2016 has a much stronger relationship with polarizing view of candidate traits in 2020 ($\beta = 0.051$, $p < 0.01$), holding prior candidate trait and sociodemographic controls constant. Polarizing evaluations of candidate traits in 2016 does not significantly predict the ideology and policy voting criteria in 2020 ($\beta = 0.040$, $p = 0.281$). The results suggests that respondents who satisfy the ideology and policy voting criteria in 2016 are more likely to have polarizing views of candidate traits in 2020, whereas prior candidate assessments do not meaningfully predict the satisfaction of the ideology and policy voting criteria in 2020 reflecting results from the affective polarization models.

Table 4:**Cross-Lagged Structural Equation Model with Covariates**

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Candidate Trait 2020 (1)	Ideology & Policy VC 2020 (2)
Ideology & Policy VC 2016	0.051*** (0.020)	0.435*** (0.029)
Candidate Trait 2016	0.456*** (0.036)	0.040 (0.037)
Education	-0.027* (0.015)	0.059*** (0.022)
Income	-0.011 (0.018)	0.127*** (0.015)
Employed	0.007 (0.011)	0.012 (0.015)
Age	0.061*** (0.019)	-0.023 (0.026)
Female	0.016* (0.010)	-0.011 (0.013)
Black	0.023 (0.015)	-0.098*** (0.026)
Other Race	-0.019 (0.015)	-0.060*** (0.019)
Observations	2,149	2,149
R ²	0.239	0.301
Model Fit Indices		
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)		0.827
Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI)		0.321
SRMR		0.077
Chi-Square (χ^2)		562.080
Degrees of Freedom (df)		14
Chi-Square P-value		p < 0.01

Note: Models present standardized coefficients and are weighted to reflect survey-design. All variables are normalized on a 0-1 scale. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Conclusion

This study examined the intertwined nature of long-term ideological and policy orientations and short-term evaluations of both affective polarization and candidate traits. We find that satisfying Campbell et al.'s criteria for ideological and issue voting is significantly related to affective polarization across multiple methodological tests. That is, individuals who are more likely to have a substantive understanding of ideology and policy issues are also more likely to develop stronger polarizing views over time. Conversely, affective polarization and candidate trait evaluations in earlier periods do not serve as significant predictors of satisfying the ideological and policy voting criteria in subsequent years.

Further, our analysis reveals that the long-term ideological and policy attitudes extend beyond affective polarization, impacting the way voters perceive and evaluate short-term candidate traits. This finding corroborates the mediating role of candidate traits in-between the fundamentals and vote choice as investigated in Aldrich et al. As voters become more entrenched in their ideological and policy beliefs, their views on candidate traits also become increasingly polarized, reflecting a deeper alignment between their long-term political orientations and their short-term evaluative processes.

Our findings imply that the substance of voters' long-term ideological and issue orientations are critical drivers of the more short-term attitudes including affective polarization and candidate trait evaluations. The observed directional influence highlights the enduring role that substantive ideological and policy considerations play in shaping affect over time, rather than the reverse. These results emphasize the need to consider both the cognitive and affective dimensions of political behavior in understanding the roots of contemporary polarization, as they collectively shape the electorate's engagement with political candidates and issues.

References

- Abramowitz, Alan I. 2013. *The Polarized Public? Why American Government Is So Dysfunctional*. Pearson.
- Abramowitz, Alan I., and Kyle L. Saunders. 2008. "Is Polarization a Myth?" *Journal of Politics* 70 (2): 542–555.
- Abramson, Paul R., John H. Aldrich and David W. Rohde. 1983. *Change and Continuity in the 1980 Elections*, rev. ed. Washington: Congressional Quarterly Press.
- Achen, Christopher, and Larry Bartels. 2017. *Democracy for realists: Why elections do not produce responsive government*. Princeton University Press.
- Aldrich, John H., Suhyen Bae, and Bailey K. Sanders. 2024. *The Fundamental Voter: American Electoral Democracy, 1952-2020*. Oxford University Press.
- Allison, Paul D. 2009. *Fixed Effects Regression Models*. London: Sage.
- Bellemare, Marc F., Takaaki Masaki, and Thomas B. Pepinsky. 2017. "Lagged explanatory variables and the estimation of causal effect." *Journal of Politics* 79 (3): 949-963.
- Campbell, Angus, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes. 1960. *The American Voter*. New York: Wiley.
- Conover, Pamela Johnston, and Stanley Feldman. 1981. "The Origins and Meaning of Liberal/Conservative Self-Identifications." *American Journal of Political Science*: 617–645.
- Fiorina, Morris P. 2017. *Unstable Majorities: Polarization, Party Sorting, and Political Stalemate*. Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press.
- Fiorina, Morris P., Samuel J. Abrams, and Jeremy Pope. 2006. *Culture War? The Myth of a*

Polarized America. Longman Publishing.

Iyengar, Shanto, Yphtach Lelkes, Matthew Levendusky, Neil Malhotra, and Sean J. Westwood.

2019. “The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 22:129–146.

Mason, Lilliana, Julie Wronski, and John V. Kane. 2021. “Activating Animus: The Uniquely Social Roots of Trump Support.” *American Political Science Review* 115 (4): 1508–16.

Mason, Lilliana. 2018. *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Mummolo, Jonathan, and Erik Peterson. 2018. “Improving the interpretation of fixed effects regression results.” *Political Science Research and Methods* 6 (4): 829-835.

Wooldridge, Jeffrey M. 2010. *Econometric Analysis of Cross Section and Panel Data*. Cambridge: MIT Press.