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Reducing Affective Polarization: Warm Group Relations or Policy Compromise?

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Hostility between rival political partisans, referred to as affective polarization, has increased in the United States over the last several decades generating considerable interest in its reduction. The current study examines two distinct sets of factors that potentially reduce affective polarization, drawn respectively from a group-based and a policy-based model of its origins. Specifically, we contrast the degree to which warm social relations and policy compromise reduce affective polarization. In two experimental studies (N = 937), respondents read a mock news story about an observed interaction between Chuck Schumer, Senate minority leader, and Mitch McConnell, Senate majority leader. The leaders either interact in a warm or hostile manner and independently compromise, or fail to compromise, on immigration matters. In both studies, warm leader relations reduced affective polarization whereas policy compromise did not. We consider the implications of these findings for the study of affective polarization and its reduction.

KEY WORDS: affective polarization, partisanship, experiment, leader relations, issue compromise

Hostility between rival political partisans, commonly referred to as affective polarization, has increased substantially in the United States over the last several decades. Democrats and Republicans now hold a more negative view of their partisan rivals than they did 50 years ago as manifested in colder feelings, more negative trait attributions, and greater social distance (e.g., Iyengar, Lelkes, Levendusky, Malhotra, & Westwood, 2019; Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012). Not surprisingly, affective polarization among the public is a focus of keen research interest because of its presumed negative consequences, including uncivil online discourse, fewer social interactions between rival partisans, lack of willingness to compromise, and a hardening of party lines that reduces the opportunity for dispassionate cross-party discussion (e.g., Iyengar et al., 2019; Levendusky, 2018). In tandem, research is underway on factors that mitigate partisan hostility, decrease partisan defensiveness, and foster open political dialogue. The current study contributes to that line of research by testing between two rival explanations for the mitigation of affective polarization.

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Policy and Group-Based Models of Affective Polarization

To identify factors that decrease affective polarization, it is important to understand its origins. Since first documented by Iyengar and colleagues (2012), numerous explanations have been advanced for the emergence and intensification of affective polarization. These explanations can be sorted into two broad categories (see also Lelkes, 2019; Orr & Huber, 2020). First, several researchers point to growing ideological divergence among elites and possibly the public on a range of policy views. According to this *policy-based model*, partisans' ideological stances and policy preferences on key policies, such as welfare, have become more consistent and coherent over the last several decades, generating affective polarization (e.g., Bougher, 2017; Lelkes, 2019).

Bougher (2017) fleshes out the psychology underlying the policy model. Drawing on "belief congruence theory," she argues that out-party hostility is "based on the assumption of dissimilarity in beliefs between oneself and members of outgroups" (p. 733; see also Enders & Lupton, 2020). She then presents evidence suggesting that greater in-party issue alignment and increased distance from the out-party's issue stances is a key explanation for affective polarization. Rogowski and Sutherland (2016) also argue that increased ideological differences between rival politicians increases affective polarization because it increases partisans' "psychological investment in the choice between candidates" (p. 489; see also Lelkes, 2019; Webster & Abramowitz, 2017).

Second, other researchers point to increased social and group-based differentiation between followers of the two major parties as a central cause of affective polarization. According to the *group-based model* (Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2002; Huddy, Mason, & Aarøe, 2015) grounded in social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981), affective polarization is less a response to policy disagreements between rival partisans and more a consequence of increased social dissimilarity between Democrats and Republicans along lines of geography, race, religion, and gender. Of most relevance to the current project, this increase in partisan dissimilarity has intensified hostility towards the out-party because rival partisans are very different from each other in terms of group allegiances, lifestyle choice, nonsocial values, and basic worldview.

As an outcome of social sorting, partisans are now more distinct from each other demographically than in the past, with fewer cross-cutting identities to stabilize interparty relations (Mason, 2016, 2018; Mason & Wronski, 2018). Growing partisan social dissimilarity has exacerbated an "us versus them" mentality resulting in greater negative affect toward partisan rivals whose disputes are not just partisan but also extend to related claims concerning group respect and status (Mason, 2015, 2018; see also Ahler & Sood, 2018; Rothschild, Keefer, & Hauri, 2020). From this perspective, identity threats are a key ingredient in the development of affective polarization. An out-partisan's disparaging comments about members of one's various social groups, partisan name calling, and the barbs traded by rival partisan leaders contribute to a climate of interparty hostility that fuels affective polarization as in any intergroup conflict (e.g., Gervais, 2019; Skytte, 2020; Suhay, Bello-pardo, & Maurer, 2018).

The jury is still out on whether the policy or group model best accounts for affective polarization in part because empirical studies do not always cleanly test between the two models, a point made forcefully by Skytte (2020). For example, exposure to partisan media increases affective polarization, but the explanation for this is less clear because partisan news outlets vary in both level of hostility directed at the out-party and information about differences in partisan ideology and policy positions (Levendusky, 2013a). Exposure to partisan media might enhance partisan ideological differences by moving someone closer to their party and further from the other party on major issues. Or it might convey partisan enmity and enhance negative party stereotypes independently of ideology (e.g., Garrett et al., 2014; Levendusky, 2013b). Similarly, heightened affective polarization linked to negative political campaigns (Iyengar et al., 2012) could be caused either by an emphasis on partisan policy differences or defamatory comments about rival partisans.

It is fruitful to draw on the policy- and group-based models for insight into factors that promote affective polarization and, perhaps just as importantly, decrease it. The models suggest different routes to the amelioration of affective polarization and point to different factors that promote partisan amity. For example, if an us-them mentality drives affective polarization, decreased hostility between rival partisans may be more important than decreased policy disagreements to its reduction. As Arceneaux and Vander Wielen (2017, p. 135) note "the rise in partisan incivility tracks with increasing levels of polarization in Congress" (see also Gervais, 2019; Skytte, 2020). If affective polarization is driven by ideological differences, however, the parties may need to compromise on policy to reduce partisan hostilities. Recent trends suggest that the two forces are empirically distinct. Partisan animosity has increased in the absence of any comparable increase in the intensity with which partisans support their party's policy agenda or oppose those of their partisan rivals (Mason, 2015).

Reducing Affective Polarization

There is a burgeoning literature on the reduction of affective polarization, but it has been difficult to identify whether policy- or group-based factors drive this. In Levendusky and Malhotra's (2016) study on the effects of media coverage of partisan polarization, affective polarization is reduced by exposure to an article in which the public is portrayed as politically moderate (compared to an extreme or a control condition). The moderate condition conveys information about the public's moderate ideology consistent with the policy-based model. But this condition also contains information about the existence of respectful partisan social relations that make it difficult to rule out the group-based model. In related studies, researchers find that ideologically moderate out-party politicians are rated more warmly than their ideologically extreme counterparts (Lelkes, 2019; Webster & Abramowitz, 2017). But exposure to moderate out-party politicians may decrease the perceived policy distance between the parties or alternatively reduce partisan hostility because moderate out-party politicians are viewed as more respectful towards the in-party.

Ahler and Sood (2018) provide clearer evidence in support of a group-based model of affective polarization reduction. In their study, affective polarization is reduced by correcting common misperceptions about the degree to which rival partisans are socially sorted. Democrats are told that Republicans are reasonably heterogeneous in terms of age, southern residence, evangelical belief, or income, and Republicans discover that Democrats are not exclusively Black, LGB, or atheist, boosting positive ratings of both out-parties. Telling partisans that they have a lot in common with out-partisans likely reduces social threat and perceived hostility across partisan lines. Yet information about social commonality may also imply that in- and out-partisans are not that far apart ideologically (relatedly, see Orr & Huber, 2020).

Levendusky (2018) also provides evidence in support of the group-based model. He enhances American identity and thus indirectly decreases the salience of partisan identity by priming a common American identity among Democrats and Republicans. This reduces hostility toward out-partisans, although it is unclear if it also boosts perceived policy commonality. Additional support for the group-based model comes from recent studies documenting the effects of real, vicarious, or imagined warm interpartisan contact on the reduction of partisan affective polarization (Levendusky, 2019; Wojcieszak & Warner, 2020).

Druckman and colleagues (2019) demonstrate most convincingly that polarization can be reduced through the manipulation of positive and negative social cues independently of policy information. In their research, policy content was held constant in a news segment by focusing on coverage of a single issue: Republican efforts to revive the Keystone XL and Dakota Access Pipelines. Respondents were randomly assigned to a segment aired on an in-party or out-party news source (FOX or MSNBC) that independently varied the civility expressed toward the out-party. In this study, civility from an out-party source towards the in-party reduced polarization, whereas incivility increased it, suggesting

that positive social relations between parties can reduce polarization regardless of partisan policy differences. Unfortunately, the Druckman, Gubitz, Levendusky, and Lloyd (2019) study lacks a control condition to determine whether the effects of positive and/or negative social cues differ from standing levels of polarization.

Skytte (2020) employs an even stronger design to study the reduction of affective polarization. He independently manipulates partisan civility and issue agreement (privatizing air traffic control and off-shore oil and gas drilling) among members of Congress. In this study, civility reduces partisan polarization independently of issue agreement, providing support for group-based factors,[1] and issue agreement also reduces polarization independently of civility, suggesting that both group and policy factors play a role.

In the current study, we experimentally contrast the effects of interparty warmth and decreased policy distance on affective polarization. Our goal is to assess their distinct ability to reduce partisan polarization.

Partisan Social Relations

According to social identity theory, intergroup hostility such as affective polarization emerges when one group threatens the other's identity, status, and positive distinctiveness. Elections pose this type of identity threat to partisans by enhancing or diminishing partisan status and power (Huddy et al., 2015). Out-party insults, invectives, and uncivil behavior also serve as a strong form of partisan identity threat that generate out-party animosity and dislike (e.g., Suhay et al., 2018).

Leaders play an especially important role in creating group norms, defining the meaning of group membership, and setting the tone of interparty relations (Hogg & van Knippenberg, 2003). From Hogg's perspective, group leaders are identity entrepreneurs who define the group through their verbal and nonverbal communication. Hogg and colleagues (Hogg, 2015; Rast, Hogg, & van Knippenberg, 2018) have recently extended the influence of group leaders to include the creation of relational identities. Through both their rhetoric and the tenor of their relations with outgroup leaders, ingroup leaders establish positive, or exacerbate negative, intergroup relations. A leader's creation of a positive relational identity has been shown to reduce ingroup members' hostility toward a threatening outgroup (Rast et al., 2018). Outgroup leaders also contribute to the nature of relational identities by sending friendly or threatening signals that alter the tone of intergroup relations.

In the context of affective polarization, Hogg and colleagues' research suggests that partisan leaders can improve or worsen partisan animosity. Negative rhetoric, insults, threats, and hostile actions between leaders of rival parties very likely intensify affective polarization, whereas polite rhetoric and warm relations can reduce it. This is not just about incivility among individual politicians but rather concerns interparty disrespect and identity threat. Hogg and colleagues (2012) argue that leaders are especially effective in establishing the tone of intergroup relations because they have the authority to act on behalf of their group. In that sense, the creation of positive relations between leaders is a form of extended contact. Party supporters develop warmer feelings towards an out-party because they witness warm relations among, and mutual respect between, party leaders who serve as "good representatives (prototypes) for their respective groups" (Mazziotta, Mummendey, & Wright, 2011, p. 268).

[1]We interpret Skytte's civility manipulation as a group-based factor because it differentially reduces negativity towards the out-party, and thus polarization, rather than lowering ratings of both parties, as might be expected of incivility which would be maintaining polarization.

Partisan Issue Compromise

In contrast, the policy-based model of affective polarization implies that ideological conflict is responsible for increasing affective polarization. There is some disagreement over the degree to which partisans are polarized on policy matters (e.g., Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope, 2005). Nonetheless, there is evidence that partisans have become more internally aligned and ideologically coherent on a range of issues, resulting in greater perceived ideological distance from the out-party. This is linked, in turn, to hostility and negative affect toward partisan rivals, who are perceived as supporting extreme and dangerous policies that are "very harmful to the overall well-being of the nation" (Webster & Abramowitz, 2017, p. 627). As Klar and Krupnikov (2016) demonstrate, there has been an increase in recent years in the number of newspaper stories conveying information about party differences on a broad range of issues.

From this policy-based vantage point, out-party animosity arises because party followers assume their beliefs differ broadly from those of out-partisans. Bougher (2017) finds, for example, that partisan issue alignment (holding the same position as one's party on six key issues) has increased over time in the ANES and that it helps to explain affective polarization. Similarly, Lelkes (2019) finds that ratings of a hypothetical male candidate are driven more strongly by information about the ideological extremity of his views than his in- or out-party affiliation. The candidate is rated more negatively the more his ideological stances differ from that of the respondent regardless of his political party affiliation.

If partisan policy differences drive affective polarization, policy compromise should reduce it because the out-party moves closer to the in-party and the positions of individual in-party supporters. In the words of Orr and Huber (2020), "if issue conflict is at the heart of [partisan] animosity, emphasizing… areas of common policy agreement may reduce animosity" (p. 571). In this study, we contrast warm leader relations with leader policy compromise and define compromise as a proposal that moves policy closer, but not all the way, to one's desired policy (Harbridge, Malhotra, & Harrison, 2014). Leaders should be most effective in conveying information about the party's ideological position because they craft and enact legislation and credibly convey the party's issue agenda (relatedly, see Banda & Cluverius, 2018; Skytte, 2020). When an in-party leader compromises on a key policy, moving closer to the position of an out-party leader, it signals reduced ideological distance between the parties. Compromise should thus reduce polarization according to the policy-based model. The power of party elites to shape the views of partisan followers is implicit within the widely accepted elite influence model of public opinion (e.g., Zaller, 1992).

Research Strategy

To better understand factors that reduce affective polarization, we focus separately on the ratings of the in-party and the out-party. Some researchers measure affective polarization as the difference in positive ratings of one's own and the out-party (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). Others focus, however, on out-party ratings since hostility towards the out-party is largely responsible for the recent increase in affective polarization (Ahler & Sood, 2018; Iyengar et al., 2019). Ahler and Sood (2018) note that "rising out-party hostility—not in-party affinity—is the primary driver of the rise in affective polarization" (p. 974). In-party ratings have remained far more stable in recent years and are, thus, unlikely to drive affective polarization (Ahler & Sood, 2018; Iyengar & Krupenkin, 2018).

In addition, we focus on relations between partisan leaders not ordinary party members because leaders serve as prototypical party members who have the power to shape and change views of the party. In contrast, an individual partisan who holds atypical beliefs or engages in unexpected cross-partisan friendship can readily be dismissed as an outlier, leaving partisan stereotypes intact (e.g., Weber & Crocker, 1983). Several recent affective polarization studies have varied the

partisanship and policy views of an individual partisan—an individual candidate (Lelkes, 2019) or an ordinary person (Orr & Huber, 2020). In these studies, an out-party individual described as holding views that are closer to the in-party is rated more positively than a typical out-partisan, demonstrating variation in ratings of individual out-partisans. That is an important finding. But learning about the existence of an atypical partisan is unlikely to change negative feelings and judgments about the out-party as an entity. To most effectively change impressions of any group including a political party, it is important to alter the attributes or behaviors of individuals who are its undisputed exemplars or prototypes (Brown & Hewstone, 2005).

Hypotheses

We contrast the effects of positive partisan relations and partisan policy compromise on out-party ratings, testing two key hypotheses. The *social warmth* hypothesis, grounded in a group-based model of affective polarization, posits that warm relations between partisan leaders will reduce identity threat and out-party negativity. The *issue compromise* hypothesis, derived from a policy-based model of affective polarization, predicts that issue compromise, especially by an out-party leader, will reduce policy distance and out-party negativity. Our design maximizes the ability to contrast the group and policy-based models of affective polarization by independently manipulating social warmth and issue compromise.

A total of 937 partisans participated in two experimental studies. In Study 1, the effects of positive and negative social contact and issue compromise or its absence were varied independently. Both factors included control conditions in which there was no reference to either social relations or compromise. In Study 2, the control conditions were excluded and new conditions added to differentiate issue compromise initiated by the in-party from that initiated by the out-party.

STUDY 1

Sample

Partisan respondents were MTurk workers recruited via quotas to obtain roughly equal numbers of Democrats and Republicans; pure independents were screened out. In both studies, only MTurkers with a U.S.-based IP address and a HIT approval rate of 95% or more could take the survey. Three hundred and seven participants completed the survey and were paid $1.25 on completion. Seventeen of these respondents were dropped to result in a final sample of 290 respondents (135 Republicans, 155 Democrats).[2] The sample was reasonably diverse, although reflected biases common in online samples: average age was 36.5 (SD = 10.9); 44% were female, a majority had a college degree (52%); and the sample skewed liberal (50%) (see Table S1.1 in the online supporting information). The survey was fielded between November 1 and 8, 2017.

Experimental Design

Respondents answered questions regarding their partisanship and support for various policy issues and then read a mock news story about an observed encounter between Senators Schumer and McConnell in a Washington D.C. restaurant. They were randomly assigned to one of nine conditions, in a 3 (*social relations*: warm, hostile, control) × 3 (*issue compromise*: issue compromise, no-issue compromise, control) fully crossed factorial design. Following the experimental manipulation, respondents answered a series of questions and were then debriefed.

[2]These respondents were dropped because they cheated (e.g., they entered the survey as a Democrat, were screened out due to quotas, and re-entered as a Republican).

In the *warm relations* condition, Schumer and McConnell were described as having a pleasant encounter in which they seemed happy and were seen laughing and hugging. In the *hostile relations* condition, they were described as using obscenities and arguing loudly. The *control* condition omitted any information about the warmth/hostility of their encounter.

This was followed by the *issue compromise* conditions which described a discussion between the two leaders on funding for President Trump's border wall and the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy. These issues were chosen for their salience and potential for partisan compromise at the time of the survey.[3] In the *issue compromise* condition, the leaders were described as willing to compromise by accepting the other party's demands on both DACA and the border wall, bringing the two parties closer together. In the *no-issue compromise* condition, the leaders were described as unwilling to compromise. In the *control* condition, the issue information was omitted. See Appendix S2 in the online supporting information for full wording.

This experimental design has two main advantages. First, the presence of a control condition provides a baseline level of out-party animosity to which the effects of a warm or hostile encounter and issue compromise or no compromise can be compared. Second, the fully crossed experimental design allows for an independent assessment of the effects of social relations and issue compromise on out-party negativity. This design thus reduces potential endogeneity between the two factors.

Measures

In-Party and Out-Party Affect

After reading the story, respondents answered questions used in past research to tap affective polarization (e.g., Iyengar et al., 2012, 2019) (see Appendix S3 in the online supporting information-for item wording). They rated their feelings toward Republicans and Democrats, using a 0 (*coldest*) to 10 (*warmest*) thermometer scale to create a measure of positive in-party and out-party affect. As expected, partisans had significantly warmer feelings toward the in-party ($M = .69$) than the out-party ($M = .31$) ($t(289) = 20.39$; $p < .001$) (all mean differences are assessed using a paired comparison *t*-test; two-tailed tests throughout). Unless stated otherwise, all scales and analytic variables are recoded to vary between 0 and 1 with higher values denoting more positive ratings.

In-Party and Out-Party Traits

Respondents were asked to rate most Republicans and Democrats on three trait scales that varied from 1 to 10: (1) close-minded/open-minded; (2) moderate/extremist; and (3) moral/immoral. The items were combined to create an overall out-party ($\alpha = .60$) and in-party ($\alpha = .45$) scale. Partisans ascribed significantly more positive traits to the in-party ($M = .62$) than the out-party ($M = .34$) ($t(289) = 17.58$; $p < .001$).

In-Party and Out-Party Social Distance

Respondents were asked four social distance questions: how happy they would feel if a member of their immediate family told them they were going to marry (1) a Democrat and (2) a Republican, and how happy they would feel if they found out that a person with whom they worked closely was (3) a Democrat and (4) a Republican. Variables were created for in-party and out-party marital and

[3]After a meeting in September 2017 between President Trump and Democratic leaders, the latter suggested Trump was willing to protect "dreamers" in exchange for increased border security. They also declared they had reached a deal that would protect "dreamers" without providing funds for the wall, although Trump said the next day that no such deal was made (Haberman & Alcindor, 2017).

coworker social distance. Once again partisans exhibited significantly greater happiness with in-party than out-party marriage (M = .65 vs. M = .43) ($t(289) = 11.77$; $p < .001$) and an in-party than out-party coworker (M = .63 vs. M = .46) ($t(289) = 10.02$; $p < .001$).

In-Party and Out-Party Summary Rating Scale

The four out-party measures (affect, traits, marriage, and coworker) were averaged to create a summary out-party rating scale. The same four items were combined for the in-party. The four out-party items created a reliable scale ($\alpha = .76$); the in-party scale items scaled somewhat less well together ($\alpha = .59$). There is an ongoing dispute over whether social-distance measures assess affective polarization (e.g., Druckman & Levendusky, 2019). In our studies, the social-distance items scaled well with other subscales and were combined. The in-party rating scale (M = .65) is significantly more positive than the out-party scale (M = .38) ($t(289) = 19.13$; $p < .001$).

Data are analyzed in a series of regression analyses. The dependent variables are regressed onto dummy variables for each experimental condition (the double control condition is the omitted category). We tested the interaction between conditions and in 19/20 tests there was no significant interaction between the social-relations and issue-compromise conditions (see Table S4.1 in the online supporting information); interaction terms are thus omitted from the main analyses. Admittedly effect sizes are small and may require a larger sample to identity significant interaction effects. Major analyses were repeated separately among Republicans and Democrats. We note in the text any instance of significant partisan asymmetry. Respondents evaluated both the in-party and out-party following the experimental news story, although, as in previous affective polarization reduction papers (Ahler & Sood, 2018; Levendusky, 2018), we primarily focus on evaluations of the out-party. The experimental manipulations had virtually no influence on in-party evaluations as expected.

Results

We first examine our two key hypotheses. Regression analyses in Table 1 provide strong support for the social warmth hypothesis but do not support the issue-compromise hypothesis. As shown in

Table 1. Determinants of Out-Party Ratings, Study 1

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Dependent Variable	Warm Affect	Positive Traits	Family Member Marry	Work with	Positive Rating Scale
Warm	0.08 (.03)*	0.04 (.03)	0.08 (.03)**	0.03 (.03)	0.06 (.02)**
Hostile	0.02 (.04)	–0.03 (.03)	–0.04 (.03)	–0.02 (.03)	–0.02 (.02)
Issue compromise	0.02 (.03)	–0.02 (.03)	0.04 (.03)	0.00 (.03)	0.01 (.02)
No-issue compromise	0.02 (.04)	–0.00 (.03)	0.05 (.03)$^{+}$	0.01 (.03)	0.02 (.02)
Constant	0.26 (.03)**	0.35 (.02)**	0.38 (.03)**	0.44 (.02)**	0.36 (.02)**
Coefficient equality F-tests (p-value)					
Warm = Hostile	.096^{+}	.005**	.0001**	.025*	.0007**
Observations	290	290	290	290	290
R^2	0.02	0.03	0.06	0.02	0.05

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. The no-content control condition was the omitted experimental condition for group-relations and issue-compromise factors. In Model 1, the dependent variable is Feeling Thermometer (warm feeling) toward the out-party; in Model 2, the dependent variable is positive traits of out-party followers; in Models 3–4, the dependent variables are a (positive) feeling toward a family member marrying and working with someone from the out-party; and in Model 5, the dependent variable is a summary scale of all four positive attitudes toward the out-party. All variables are scaled to vary between 0 and 1.

**$p < .01$, *$p < .05$, $^{+}p < .1$ (two-tailed test).

Table 1, warm social relations between party leaders significantly increase positive ratings of the out-party on the combined rating scale; the coefficient for each of the four component items is positive and reaches significance for out-party warmth and support for out-party marriage. A coefficient equality test indicates significantly stronger effects of warm than hostile social relations between Schumer and McConnell on the out-party rating scale and its component measures (see Table 1). In contrast, the issue-compromise condition does not significantly increase the out-party rating scale or the individual items.

The increase in positive ratings of the out-party are modest and comparable in size to those found in other similar studies (e.g., Ahler & Sood, 2018; Levendusky, 2018; Skytte, 2020). Positive ratings of the out-party increased by 0.06 points on the 0–1 scale for the *warm* condition compared to the control condition and by 0.08 compared to the *Hostile* condition, representing a change of 37% (or 49% for the *Hostile* comparison) of a standard deviation. These effects can be also seen in Figure 1, which depicts estimated out-party ratings (the combined scale) for all nine experimental conditions (based on Model 5, Table S4.1 in the online supporting information): The out-party is rated most positively when Schumer and McConnell are warmly engaged regardless of whether they compromise or not on immigration matters. Out-party ratings are virtually the same when the leaders exhibit mutual warmth and fail to compromise (.45) or compromise (.42). Similar evidence exists for hostility. When the two leaders are hostile towards each other, out-party ratings are lower than in the warm condition, comparable to the control condition, and little affected by issue compromise. Notably, out-party ratings are lowest when the two leaders are hostile and do not compromise, but this interaction is not significant (Table S4.1).

Warm social relations do not increase out-party ratings simply because social information came first in the news story. Even when social information is omitted (control condition), out-party ratings vary little with issue compromise or its absence.

The effects of warm social relations on positive out-party ratings are significant for Republicans, and in the right direction, but weaker and nonsignificant for Democrats (Table S4.2 in the online supporting information). When the coefficient for warm and hostile conditions are compared, however, both Democrats and Republicans were significantly less positive toward interparty marriage and rated the out-party more negatively on the combined rating scale in the hostile than warm condition.

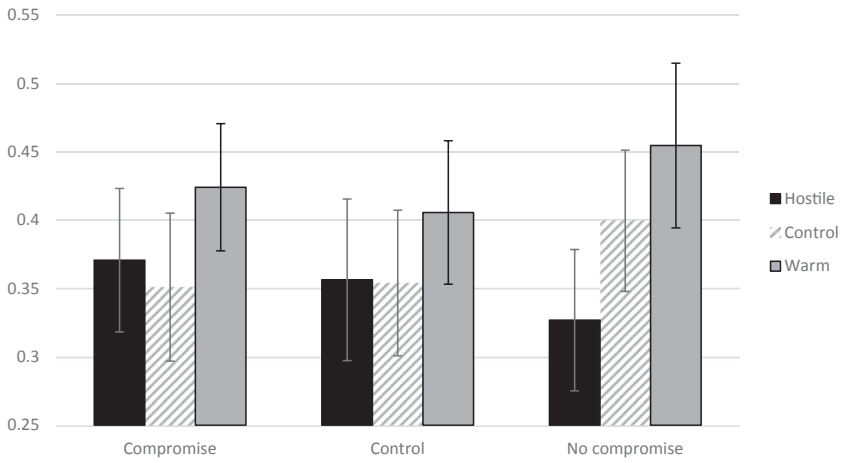

Figure 1. Positive out-party rating by experimental conditions, Study 1. Whiskers denote 95% confidence intervals. Estimated values based on Model 5, Table S4.1 in the online supporting information.

Experimental Moderators

We tested several potential moderators of the experimental factors. First, we examined whether partisan identity strength (Huddy et al., 2015) moderated the effects of group-based relations. Strong partisans rated the out-party more negatively after learning of the hostile encounter between Schumer and McConnell (Model 1, Table S4.3 in the online supporting information). But they did not rate the out-party more positively in the warm condition, indicating that warm social relations boosted positive ratings of the out-party among both weak and strong partisans. We also tested whether those who agreed most fully with their party's stance on immigration rated the out-party more positively when the two leaders compromised. There is no support for this proposition (Model 2, Table S4.3).

Finally, we note that the experimental news story had no effect on ratings of the in-party (Table S4.4 in the online supporting information). In-party ratings were unmoved by warm or hostile relations between Schumer and McConnell or by the leaders' willingness to compromise on immigration issues.

In sum, the results of Study 1 provide support for the social relations hypothesis, while providing no support for the issue-compromise hypothesis. Study 1 has two important limitations, however. First, it did not include manipulation checks that could verify the success of the experimental conditions. It is possible, for example, that respondents viewed compromise as a strategic move that did not involve a real shift in the parties' positions on immigration. Or they could have regarded partisan warmth positively even if it did not reduce perceived partisan hostility. Second, compromise in this study involved movement by both party leaders, but movement by the out-party toward the in-party's current position would provide a better test of reduced policy distance, especially given that partisans seem "to equate a bipartisan compromise with the opposite party winning" (Paris, 2017, p. 474). In Study 2, we thus implemented manipulation checks to verify the effectiveness of the manipulations and disaggregated out-party and in-party compromise.

STUDY 2

Study 2 involves a two-wave panel in which political attitudes, including potential experimental moderators, were asked in wave 1 and the experimental news story was included in wave 2, reducing the concern that partisanship is primed prior to the experimental vignette. Wave 1 was fielded between June 7 and 10, 2018, and Wave 2 some 6 weeks later, between July 17 and 25, 2018.

Sample

Respondents were recruited from MTurk via quotas to obtain roughly equal numbers of Republicans and Democrats. Respondents received $0.75 for completing Wave 1 and $1 for completing Wave 2; 1040 respondents completed Wave 1; 52 were dropped leaving 988 (468 Republicans, 520 Democrats).[4] Of those 988 respondents, 764 completed the survey in Wave 2 (77% retention rate). An additional 117 respondents were dropped resulting in a final sample of 647 who completed both waves (281 Republicans, 366 Democrats).[5] Again, the sample is reasonably demographically diverse, although it contains biases common to online samples (M_{age} = 41.0; 57% female; 58% college educated; 51% liberals. See Table S1.1 in the online supporting information).

[4]Twenty-five respondents cheated and 27 failed to correctly enter their MTurk or the survey code.

[5]Following Kennedy, Clifford, Burleigh, Jewell, and Waggoner (2018), we dropped 103 respondents with a non-US IP address, a blocked IP address, or a suspicious geo-location; 10 were dropped because their MTurk code differed between waves; 4 were dropped because they questioned the veracity of the news article.

Experimental Design

Respondents read a slightly altered version of the mock news story included in Study 1. They were assigned to one of eight conditions in a 2 (*social relations*: warm, hostile) × 4 (*issue compromise*: both parties compromise, in-party compromise, out-party compromise, no compromise) fully crossed factorial design. Respondents then rated the parties on various measures, answered several manipulation checks, and were debriefed. As in wave 1, the news story involved compromise on immigration. Notably, during the period in which wave 2 data was collected, immigration became, for the first time in the millennium, America's most important problem (Newport, 2018). The issue compromise described in the study is thus politically relevant and important.

Measures

In-Party and Out-Party Ratings

In-party and out-party affect, traits, and social distance were measured with the same items as in Study 1 with one exception: The in- and out-party coworker social distance measure was dropped because of weak scale reliability in Study 1. As in Study 1, partisans expressed significantly more positive *in-party* than *out-party affect* ($M = .67$ vs. $M = .25$; $t(646) = 29.23$; $p < .001$), rated in-party traits more positively than out-party traits ($M = .65$ vs. $M = .44$; $t(646) = 21.70$; $p < .001$), and were more favorable toward in-party than out-party marriage ($M = .60$ vs. $M = .33$; $t(646) = 15.29$; $p < .001$). Respondents were also asked how much they trusted the in-party and out-party to do what is right for the country (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019). Partisans were more trusting of the in-party than the out-party ($M = .54$ vs. $M = .25$; $t(646) = 23.74$; $p < .001$). The in-party and out-party items (affect, traits, social distance, trust) were combined to create an overall in-party ($\alpha = 77$) and out-party rating scale ($\alpha = .82$) which was more positive for the in-party than the out-party ($M = .61$ vs. $M = .32$; $t(646) = 27.20$; $p < .001$).

Manipulation Checks

Several manipulation checks were added to Study 2 and asked in both waves to assess change across waves in response to the news story. This provides an especially strong test of the treatment. In waves 1 and 2, respondents were asked several questions about Democrats and Republicans' feelings towards the in-party and out-party to gauge whether warm partisan relations reduced the level of identity threat. They were asked to evaluate (1) the level of respect and (2) warmth Republicans (Democrats) have for Democrats (Republicans); and how Republicans (Democrats) rate Democrats (Republicans) on a (3) moral/immoral, and (4) ignorant/knowledgeable scale (see Appendix S3 in the online supporting information for scale creation). Respondents were also asked in both waves about where Republicans and Democrats stand on support for building a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border and ending DACA to assess whether in-party and out-party compromise lead to more moderate assessments of each party's stance on the two issues. These are closer to a check on the psychological *mechanism* by which the treatments work than a simple manipulation check such as whether Schumer and McConnell (dis)agreed. We expect modestly sized effects in tandem with modest treatment effect sizes in Study 1.

The experimental conditions worked modestly in the expected direction (Table S4.5 in the online supporting information). Respondents who read about a warm contact between Schumer and McConnell rated the out-party as significantly more positive toward the in-party in wave 2 than wave 1, generating small but precise effects that are comparable in size to the experimental effects

observed in Study 1. The reduction in perceived out-party hostility in the warm condition is especially impressive given the brief restaurant encounter described in the experimental vignette. As expected, respondents in the warm condition did not report any change in their view of the out-party's stance on either the wall or DACA. Moreover, the warmth condition did not change perceptions of how the in-party rated the out-party.

Perceptions of the parties' stance on immigration were affected by issue compromise, although effects were more consistent and precise on the wall than DACA. Four effects are expected: joint and out-party compromise should moderate views of the out-party's issue stance and joint and in-party compromise should moderate ratings of the in-party's position. For the wall, three of the four effects reached significance. When the out-party compromised on immigration (singularly or jointly), respondents rated the out-party's position on the wall as more moderate in wave 2 than wave 1 (Model 3, Table S4.5 in the online supporting information). The in-party's position was rated as significantly more moderate in wave 2 when the in-party leader compromised but insignificantly so when both compromised (Model 4, Table S4.5).

Effects were sizeable and in the right direction for DACA but less precise. The out-party's stance on DACA was rated as more moderate in all compromise conditions whereas the in-party's position was rated as more moderate when both compromised, although none of the coefficients reach significance. It may have been difficult to move perceptions of the parties' stance on DACA because a sizeable minority of respondents incorrectly stated the party's position in wave 1. Only 59% of respondents correctly placed the in-party and out-party on DACA compared to 84% on building the wall. A weak understanding of a party's issue stances raises obvious questions about whether issue distance drives polarization to which we return in the discussion. The parties' stance on the wall was of higher salience, better understood, and ultimately easier to experimentally alter than their position on DACA.

The manipulation checks generated one unexpected effect of mutual compromise. As expected, the out-party was perceived as more moderate on the wall in this condition. But mutual compromise also reduced perceived animosity from the in-party to out-party and vice versa (Models 1 & 2, Table S4.5 in the online supporting information), conveying information about both reduced policy distance and potentially decreased identity threat. This complicates the interpretation of mutual compromise as conveying information about partisan ideological distance.

Data are analyzed in a series of regression analyses in Table 2. The dependent variables are regressed on dummy variables for each experimental condition (no compromise is the omitted category for issue compromise).

Results

Findings reported in Table 2 provide additional support for the social warmth but not the issue-compromise hypothesis. Warm relations between rival partisan leaders significantly boosted positive ratings of the out-party for the four component variables and the overall rating scale.[6] In contrast, the issue-compromise conditions exerted no significant effect on the overall out-party rating scale or its four component measures. We thus conclude that out-party compromise on immigration does not improve respondents' attitudes toward the out-party.

The difference in positive out-party rating in the *warm* and *hostile* conditions is 0.04 points on the 0–1 scale. This represents a change of 24% of a standard deviation. Effect sizes are thus small and comparable in size to findings in Study 1, manipulation checks in Study 2, and findings in other polarization studies. The effects of warm relations between leaders on positive out-party ratings are depicted in Figure 2 which plots predicted values for each of the eight experimental conditions based

[6]In Models 2 and 3, the *Warm* coefficient is significant at $p = .058$ and $p = .084$, respectively.

Table 2. Determinants of Out-Party Ratings, Study 2

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Dependent Variable	Warm Feelings	Positive Traits	Family Member Marry	Trust	Positive Scale
Warm	0.05 (.02)**	0.03 (.02)$^{+}$	0.03 (.02)$^{+}$	0.05 (.02)**	0.04 (.01)**
Both politicians compromised	0.04 (.02)	0.01 (.02)	0.01 (.02)	0.03 (.02)	0.02 (.02)
In-party politician compromised	0.01 (.03)	0.01 (.02)	−0.00 (.02)	0.00 (.02)	0.00 (.02)
Out-party politician compromised	0.00 (.03)	0.00 (.02)	−0.02 (.03)	−0.00 (.03)	−0.00 (.02)
Constant	0.21 (.02)**	0.31 (.02)**	0.43 (.02)**	0.21 (.02)**	0.29 (.02)**
Observations	647	647	647	647	647
R^2	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.02

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. The Hostile condition was the omitted experimental condition for contact, and no compromise was the omitted condition for the compromise factor. Dependent variables are warm feeling toward out-party (Model 1), positive traits of out-party followers (Model 2); positive feelings toward a family member marrying someone from the out-party (Model 3); trust in the out-party (model 4), and a summary scale of all four positive attitudes toward the out-party (Model 5). All variables are scaled to vary between 0 and 1.
$^{**}p < .01$, $^{+}p < .1$ (two-tailed test).

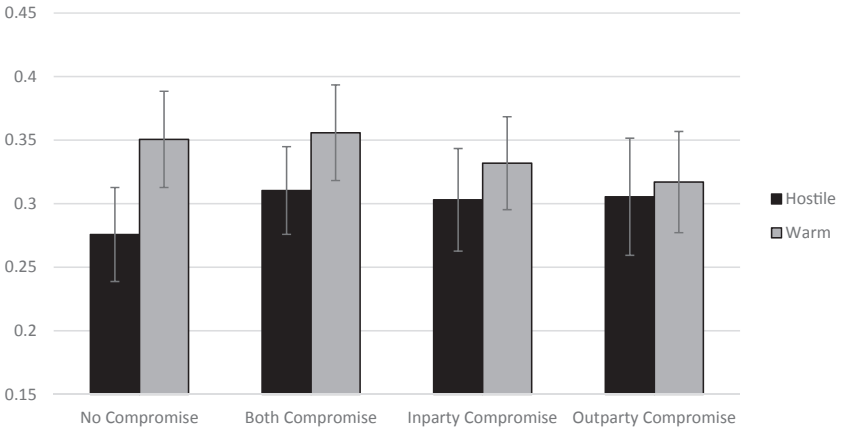

Figure 2. Positive out-party rating scale by experimental conditions, Study 2. Whiskers denote 95% confidence intervals. Estimated values based on Model 5, Table S4.6 in the online supporting information.

on analyses in Model 5, Table S4.6 in the online supporting information. Ratings of the out-party are always more positive in the warm social relations condition regardless of issue compromise or its absence. The out-party is rated more positively in the warm than hostile relations condition in the no compromise and each of the three compromise conditions. Interestingly, the effect of the *warm* manipulation is reduced when there is a compromise of any sort, yet these interactions, while being underpowered, are not significant.[7]

[7]To further test the interaction between issue compromise and warmth, we combined data from both studies (N = 937) by collapsing compromise conditions in Study 2 and reran the analysis in Table S4.1 in the online supporting information (in analyses not shown here). There was one marginally significant interaction out of 20: for the hostile/no-compromise condition in predicting out-party traits. It is possible that interaction effects might be evident in studies based on even larger samples.

In the no-compromise condition—arguably the current status quo in American politics—the out-party is rated at roughly .28 in the hostile condition and .35 in the warm condition, a sizeable increase. The difference in out-party rating between the warm and hostile conditions is smaller when one or another leader compromises but still results in more positive ratings.

Of note, results in Study 2 were very similar among Republican and Democrats respondents (Table S4.7 in the online supporting information). And as in Study 1, the experimental treatments had little effect on ratings of the in-party (Table S4.8 in the online supporting information). In sum, Study 2 bolsters support for the social warmth hypothesis while providing little support for the issue-compromise hypothesis despite the success of the issue-compromise condition in moderating the out-party's perceived position on the wall.

Experimental Moderators

As in Study 1, the experimental effects were largely unmoderated by potential moderators. The strength of partisan identity did not moderate the effect of social relations, although the interaction was negative, suggesting weaker effects among the strongest partisans, as observed in Study 1 (Model 1, Table S4.9 in the online supporting information). There was also no evidence that an out-party leader who compromised on DACA or the wall boosted out-party ratings among those who most strongly supported their party's stance on these issues, although the coefficient is positive (Model 2, Table S4.9). In additional analyses we investigated whether those who are most averse to conflict boosted their ratings of the out-party when the two leaders interacted warmly or compromised on the issues (Druckman et al., 2019). None of these interactions are significant (Table S4.10 in the online supporting information).

Discussion

In this research, we advance an understanding of affective polarization by directly comparing the effects of factors derived from group- and policy-based models on the reduction of affective polarization. We demonstrate that ratings of the out-party are consistently improved by warm and respectful relations between Senate leaders. Manipulation checks conducted as part of Study 2 demonstrated that warm relations between party leaders reduced out-party identity threat. Our findings are consistent with the group-based model of affective polarization in which the desire to maintain in-party positive distinctiveness is key to understanding much partisan behavior (e.g., Huddy et al., 2015).

In contrast, elite compromise or a lack of compromise on immigration issues did little or nothing to reduce affective polarization. Results of the manipulation checks in Study 2 show that the treatments had sensible effects, with compromise leading to a more moderate view of the out-party's perceived position especially on the border wall. Treatment and manipulation effects are small in line with other published studies on the reduction of affective polarization. Thus, respondents modestly updated their beliefs regarding the out-party stances and felt more positive when both leaders compromised on immigration issues but did not translate that into improved ratings of the out-party.

Our results convey potentially good news for American democracy turning on its head Mason's (2018) "uncivil agreement" involving partisan hostility in the context of policy agreement. We document the potential existence of respectful disagreement on policy matters. In this study, warm relations across party lines reduced out-party dislike even as Democrats and Republicans disagreed on key policy issues. Warm relations between Democratic and Republican elites have existed in the past and continue in American politics and are covered by the news media.[8] But arguably, they have become less visible. The public might be surprised to learn of cross-party friendships such as that

[8]Appendix S5 in the online supporting information provides a list containing recent examples of such cross-party friendship.

between the late Supreme Court Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Antonin Scalia, former Democratic Senator Al Franken and Republican Senator Rand Paul, or former Democratic Rep. Beta O'Rourke and former Republican Rep. Will Hurd. Making such ties more visible, even if inconsistent with the current political zeitgeist, could help to reduce affective polarization.

Our research also provides a way to disentangle rival *group-based* and *policy-based* models as explanations for affective polarization, something that is difficult to achieve in observational studies. To date, most experimental studies aimed at reducing affective polarization have focused on a single factor or failed to disentangle factors drawn from the two competing models. In our study, we directly pit one model against the other, allowing for a direct comparison (see Lelkes, 2019; Orr & Huber, 2020; Skytte, 2020 for a similar approach). This design is valuable for researchers who focus on the causes and mitigation of affective polarization. In our research, and consistent with Druckman et al. (2019), social factors linked to interparty respect and warm leader relations more effectively reduced negative ratings of the out-party than issue compromise.

We take a decidedly top-down approach to affective polarization, focusing on the power of party leaders to change the tone of interparty relations. That may seem at odds with the work of Mason (2018) who argues that polarization is a form of tribal conflict grounded in the differing racial, ethnic, religious, and ideological identities of Democrats and Republicans. The two approaches are not incompatible, however. The link between a party and a social group is not devoid of politics. The partisan sorting documented by Mason has occurred over time in tandem with changing party platforms concerning race, religion, immigration, and other cultural matters. The Democratic Party has become increasingly associated with the advancement of minority interests, whereas the Republican Party has protected the interest of evangelical Christians. Such signals are only partly focused on policy. They also involve respect for group members and acknowledgment of group grievances. In that way, leaders signal their concern for one group or animosity toward another, altering the nature of partisan sorting over time.

This article is not without limitations. First, both studies rely upon unrepresentative MTurk samples. Recent studies have shown, however, that MTurk is a suitable platform to conduct studies related to politics and ideology (Clifford, Jewell, & Waggoner, 2015) and generates similar experimental results to those observed in representative samples (e.g., Coppock, 2019). Furthermore, two recent affective polarization studies successfully replicated their experimental results based on nationally diverse or nationally representative samples (Levendusky, 2018 and Skytte, 2020, respectively) using MTurk samples, allaying concerns that MTurkers react differently to stimuli concerning affective polarization.

Second, we may have failed to fully test the policy-based model. We manipulated compromise on immigration which failed to improve ratings of the out-party. Immigration was a highly salient issue in the 2016 presidential election and has remained so (Newport, 2018). But it is just one issue. Skytte (2020) was more successful in reducing affective polarization by portraying Congressional Democrats and Republicans as in agreement on two issues: offshore oil and gas drilling and the privatization of air traffic control. We also manipulated issue compromise which may not be the same thing as policy change, although manipulation checks in Study 2 suggest that our treatments moved perceptions of the parties' stances on the wall. Nonetheless, some of our findings raise more fundamental questions about how well Americans' grasp the political parties' stance on major policy issues. A bare majority of respondents in Study 2 could accurately place the parties on DACA, a moderately salient issue at that time. This is consistent with pervasive evidence that Americans have difficulty placing the parties on many policy issues (Achen & Bartels, 2016).

The best test of the policy model may ultimately involve manipulating the parties' stance on highly salient issues, central values, or group interests with which Americans are familiar. But this is far from easy. It is difficult to convincingly manipulate party ideology and unrealistic, for example, to suggest that the Democratic or Republican leadership had switched ideological positions on

divisive policy issues such as abortion or climate change, issues on which partisan disagreements could not doubt increase affective polarization, in line with the *policy-based* model. In that sense, it is far easier to manipulate the issue preferences or ideological extremity of an individual (e.g., Lelkes, 2019; Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016) than an entire party. This study was designed to adjudicate between the policy- and group-based roots of affective polarization. We find evidence consistent with its group-based origins but concede that additional research is needed to fully disentangle the two models.

Third, we did not find significant interactions between the two experimental factors or between the factors on a series of moderators, but effect sizes in polarization studies are small. Larger sample sizes may be needed to fully disentangle the ways in which the tone of partisan relations and partisan policy disagreements interact to enhance or diminish partisan polarization. Small effect sizes also raise concerns about a possible file-drawer problem in which studies that fail to reduce polarization remain unpublished. A meta-analysis that includes nonpublished research would help to assess the accurate effect size of specific interventions.

If we are right, and warm relations between partisan leaders can help to defuse partisan hostility, there may be practical ways to tamp down partisan hostility. Other solutions that have been advanced to reduce affective polarization, such as increasing the salience of national identity (Levendusky, 2018), providing information to the American public about demographic overlap between the parties (Ahler & Sood, 2018), or improving the civility of cable television news segments (Druckman et al., 2019) might be difficult to put into practice. News segments featuring the existence of warm friendships between partisan opponents, civic programs that bring partisan leaders together to dine regularly, or positive public statements about rival partisan politicians provide an easily understood and potentially visible signal to the public about the tone of interparty relations (see also Skytte, 2020). This may sound naïve in the current political context, but there is not much to lose, and American democracy might just benefit if such information was more widely available.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's web site:

Appendix S1. Sample Characteristics

Table S1.1. Sample Characteristics, Studies 1 and 2

Appendix S2. Wording of News Story, Study 1 & 2

Appendix S3. Item Wording, Study 1 & 2

Appendix S4. Additional Analyses

Table S4.1. Study 1—Determinants of Outparty Ratings—Interactions between the Two Experimental Factors