Demonization as an Electoral Strategy

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Abstract: In recent decades, Americans who identify with a political party have grown more disdainful of the out-party, but have gained no fondness for their in-party, while an increasing share of Americans identifies with neither party. Inspired by these facts, we present a model in which voters become informed of party platforms on multiple issue dimensions only via strategic investments of party message-makers, who face incentives to say little about the in-party, while selectively informing certain voters about the most extreme platforms associated with the out-party, ultimately leaving voters with a biased sample of the parties' platforms. We explain how both the incentives and the means to pursue this strategy, which we call "demonization," have grown over time in the United States. Empirically, we demonstrate how partisan media and direct outreach to individual voters generate growing perceptions—especially among ideological extremists—that the out-party is ideologically extreme. We also present evidence consistent with the notion that demonization strategies have generated growing turnout bias in favor of ideological extremists.

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The average American voter increasingly views one of the two major parties as ideologically extreme and socially distant. While many voters' perceptions about the opposite party are wrong, they nevertheless provoke hostility and anger (Ahler and Sood 2018). At the same time, voters have not necessarily come to feel closer to the party that they perceive to be more proximate—an asymmetry sometimes referred to as "negative partisanship" (Abramowitz and Webster 2016).

We investigate the emergence of negative partisanship at three levels of analysis, asking when parties (and their media allies) have incentives to demonize the opposite party; how parties (and their media allies) implement strategies of demonization; and how their strategies affect voter perceptions and behavior in equilibrium. Our investigation begins at the second level, with a model of two parties each of which can (truthfully) inform selected voters of either their own or their opponent's positions on a range of issue dimensions.

We identify conditions under which a party's optimal strategy invests little in telling voters about its own positions and much in exposing the most extreme positions of its opponent. When feasible, parties micro-target individual voters whom they have identified as possessing strong issue preferences far from the opposing party's. Such tactics are especially attractive when parties are internally heterogeneous, so that message-makers can portray the platform of the most extreme faction in the out-party as the party's overall platform.

We refer to party messaging that selectively highlights the most extreme positions of the other party, while ignoring its more moderate positions or members, as "demonization." We show that a similar tactic can be used when voters use ascriptive characteristics, such as the racial composition of the other party, to make inferences about policy (or when they directly value such features). An important consequence of demonizing tactics is that voters form their views of the other party based on a biased sample of issue positions and demographic characteristics. Meanwhile, the more each party spends on demonizing its opponent, the less it can spend on explaining the merits of its own policies and accomplishments.

At the voter level, demonization results in a syndrome of effects. Party supporters—especially ideological extremists—increasingly dislike the other party and its supporters, without a correspondingly strong increase in liking for their own party and co-partisans. Moreover, party supporters increasingly view the other party and its supporters as extremists, without necessarily viewing their own party and co-partisans as moderate. Finally, cross-pressured voters and

independents receive mostly negative information about both parties, leaving them alienated from both and thus less likely to vote.

Having noted the party-level implementation and voter-level consequences of demonization, we consider when parties' incentives to demonize will be high. A key micro-level condition is that, as a policy diverges from a given voter's ideal point, they suffer utility losses at an increasing rate—as in the standard spatial model with quadratic utility functions. Even if utility functions are linear, however, we show that negativity bias implies quadratic loss in *expected* utility. Thus, one can view our model as elucidating how parties exploit voters' negativity biases.

At the macro level, we argue that the key motive for US parties to demonize is winning unified control of the federal government. When demonization has little chance of affecting which party controls the Presidency, Senate or House, neither party has much incentive to demonize in order to capture those "big prizes." Nor do parties have much incentive to demonize in order to compete for individual seats—where it makes more sense to attack the other party's nominee personally. Thus, during periods of one-party dominance, neither party has much incentive to demonize the other. In contrast, in the rare periods of US history when unified control has been consistently in play, demonizing the other party becomes electorally profitable.

Of course, parties need not only the motive to demonize but also the means and opportunity. The means have come in the form of partisan mass media as well as technologies that allow fine targeting of messages to supporters. The opportunities have come in the form of political cleavages—such as class (McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2016), race (Glazer, Grofman, and Owen 1998), and religion (Layman 2001)—that can potentially be exploited.

The two periods of post-bellum US history in which close competition for unified control persisted for a generation or more were the post-reconstruction era (1876-1896) and the post-1994 era (1994-present). Both periods were characterized by hyper-partisan mass media, increasingly party-centered voting, and demonizing attacks. Here, we focus on the post-1994 era, providing party-level (and ally-level) evidence of demonizing tactics, as well as voter-level evidence of behavioral consequences.

We begin, in the next section, by analyzing how parties would demonize, if they had the incentive to do so. We then consider the conditions under which they have such incentives,

arguing that all conditions have been met post-1994. Finally, we provide both party-level and voter-level evidence consistent with our model of demonization.

I. Electoral Competition over Voters' Information

Standard one-dimensional spatial models of electoral competition assume that voters costlessly learn all parties' issue positions. The parties bear no communication costs; and the voters bear no learning or attention costs. This much is true in both the Downsian (Downs 1957) and citizen-candidate (Osborne and Slivinski 1996; Besley and Coate 1997) modeling traditions.

Here, we consider a model in which voters are initially ignorant of the parties' positions and remain so unless some party bears the cost of informing them. Parties can target individual voters and (truthfully) inform them about either the party's own, or their opponent's, position on any issue. However, costs are convex increasing in the number of messages sent. What will parties' optimal strategies be?

We explore conditions under which the parties will prioritize providing voters with information about their opponent's most extreme issue positions, rather than clarifying their own. The model extends to the parties' ascriptive characteristics, such as their racial composition. Here, the conclusion is that informing voters that the other party has characteristics they disfavor trumps informing them of one's own favored characteristics. The model also extends to situations in which the parties cannot micro-target individuals but can target subsets of voters based, for example, on their ideological leanings or demographic characteristics.

Related Literature

Glaeser's (2005) analysis of hatred complements ours: he considers false messages (lies of commission) whereas we consider true but incomplete messages (lies of omission). Our analyses differ in that he focuses on the demonization of minority groups, whereas we focus on the demonization of parties. However, when minority groups are clearly associated with particular parties, the two tactics overlap substantially.

Our model also complements extant models of strategic issue emphasis (e.g., Dragu and Fan 2016; Ash et al. 2017; Schipper and Woo 2019). These models focus on parties' efforts to get voters to pay attention to particular issues, while holding fixed voters' knowledge of where the parties are located. Similarly, extant models of attitude priming (e.g., Druckman et al. 2004)

focus on parties' efforts to get voters to pay attention to particular ascriptive characteristics, while holding fixed voters' knowledge of those characteristics. In contrast, our model assumes that voters lack information about party platforms (Carsey and Layman 2006; Freeder, Lenz, and Turney 2019) and allows the parties (and their media allies) to selectively inform voters about each party's policies and ascriptive characteristics, while holding fixed the weights that voters attach to different issues and characteristics. Depending on the size of the parties' messaging budgets, voters in our model can end up with a biased sample of information about the other party, and relatively little information about their own, prompting significant distaste for the other without a warm embrace of the own.

The sequence of play

We develop the model for the case of two parties, L (left) and R (right), competing in an n-dimensional policy space $[-1,1]^n$, for $n \geq 1$. The most extreme leftist position possible on any issue is normalized to -1, while the most extreme rightist position possible is normalized to +1. The parties are exogenously endowed with positions $\mathbf{x_L} = (x_{L1},\ldots,x_{Ln})$ and $\mathbf{x_R} = (x_{R1},\ldots,x_{Rn})$, respectively.[1] Vectors will be given in **bold font**, scalars in regular font.

The parties can send messages to individual voters, informing them either of the sending party's position, or its opponent's position, on a given issue. We assume that messages must be truthful; and are sent simultaneously. Let $m_{PjQi} = 0$ if party $P \in \{L,R\}$ sends no message to voter j about the position of party $Q \in \{L,R\}$ on issue i, and $m_{PjQi} = 1$ if P sends such a message. Voters receiving a message from either party about Q's position on issue i become informed of that position. Let $\mathbf{m_P} = \{m_{PjQi}\}$ be the full set of message decisions that P makes, and let $N(\mathbf{m_P})$ = $\sum_j \sum_{Q\in\{L,R\}} \sum_i m_{PjQi}$ be the total number of messages sent by P.

We initially analyze optimal constrained messaging. Party P chooses $\mathbf{m_P}$ in order to maximize its probability of winning control of government, $\Pi_P(\mathbf{m_P},\mathbf{m_{-P}})$, subject to a budget constraint that it can send at most T_P messages. In other words, $N(\mathbf{m_P}) \leq T_P$. We return later to examine how each party sets its budget constraint, which will depend on the cost of sending T_P

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[1] We leave platform choice outside our model, but it is fruitful to think of these platforms in the multi-dimensional space as having emerged from a dynamic something like that laid out by Miller and Schofield (2003), where parties take new positions on additional issue dimensions in order to gain campaign contributions from elites with strong preferences on the previously un-politicized dimension.

messages; how much the optimal messages will affect $\Pi_P(\mathbf{m_P},\mathbf{m_{-P}})$; and the value of winning control, B.

Voters

As in standard Downsian models, voters are not strategic actors in our account. Rather, they respond behaviorally to the parties' messages. We nonetheless describe voters' preferences in some detail, since the parties' anticipations of their behavior drives the model.

Voter j (for j = 1,…,J) has an ideal point $\mathbf{x_j} = (x_{j1},…,x_{jn})$; and attaches a weight $\lambda_{ji} \geq 0$ to issue i. The weights sum to unity across issues and represent how much each voter cares about each issue. Voter j's utility from a given policy $\mathbf{x} = (x_1,…,x_n)$ is $U_j(\mathbf{x}) = \sum_{i=1}^{n} \lambda_{ji} U_{ji}(x_i)$, where

$U_{ji}(x_i) = -(x_i - x_{ji})^2$. In other words, voters have standard spatial utility functions on each issue and their overall utility is a weighted average of their issue-specific utilities. One can interpret the quadratic losses that voters suffer either as directly reflecting how polices affect them or, as we show below, as reflecting negativity bias.

Voters are either *leftists* ($x_{ji} <$ median$\{x_{1i},…x_{ni})$ for all i), *rightists* ($x_{ji} >$ median$\{x_{1i},…x_{ni})$ for all i), or *cross-pressured* (when they have left-of-median ideal points on some issues and right-of-median ideal points on others). We shall say that the leftist voters constitute party L's base, while the rightist voters constitute R's base.

Standard spatial models assume that all voters know all parties' positions. We consider the polar opposite case, in which voters remain ignorant of all parties' positions unless informed by a party. Voter j's utility for party P thus depends on which of P's issue positions s/he knows. If s/he does not know P's position on issue i, then s/he views P's position as a random draw from a distribution G_{Pi}. That said, voters know that L is weakly to the left of R in the sense that either $G_{Li} = G_{Ri}$, or G_{Ri} stochastically dominates G_{Li}.

We make three empirically plausible "no updating" assumptions to facilitate our analysis. These assumptions characterize how the parties think the voters will react. First, voters do not update their beliefs about P's position on issue i after learning P's position on some other issue k $\neq$ i. If G_{Pi} is independent of G_{Pk} for all i $\neq$ k, this assumption obviously holds. An alternative justification would be that the benefit of updating (casting a more informed vote that has a vanishingly small chance of being pivotal) is never worth the cost (in time and cognitive effort).

Thus, rational voters do not invest in making cross-issue inferences. Second, voters do not update their beliefs about any of -P's positions after learning one of P's. Again, one can assume G_{Li} and G_{Rh} are independent for all i and h or appeal to the cognitive costs of updating. Third, voters do not update their beliefs about party P's position on issue i based on not receiving a message from P about P's own position on issue i. Here, we assume that the cognitive costs exceed the expected value of the information.

Letting X_{Pi} denote a random variable corresponding to one draw from the distribution G_{Pi}, let g_{jPi} be j's certainty equivalent, defined implicitly by the equation $EU_{ji}(X_{Pi}) = U_{ji}(g_{jPi})$. On non-partisan issues, $g_{jLi} = g_{jRi}$ for all voters j, while on partisan issues, $g_{jLi} < g_{jRi}$ for all voters j.

Let $R_{jPi}(\mathbf{m_P},\mathbf{m_{-P}}) = 1$ if at least one party informs j of party P's position on issue i ($m_{LjPi} + m_{RjPi} > 0$), and let $R_{jPi}(\mathbf{m_P},\mathbf{m_{-P}}) = 0$ otherwise ($m_{LjPi} + m_{RjPi} = 0$). Then j's utility for party P's platform, $\mathbf{x_P}$, given the parties' messages, is

$$U_j[\mathbf{x_P},\mathbf{m_P},\mathbf{m_{-P}}] = \sum_{i=1}^{n} \lambda_{ji}[R_{jPi}(\mathbf{m_P},\mathbf{m_{-P}})U_{ji}(x_{Pi}) + (1 - R_{jPi}(\mathbf{m_P},\mathbf{m_{-P}}))U_{ji}(g_{jPi})] \qquad (1)$$

In other words, j's overall utility for P is a weighted average of P's issue-by-issue positions, either known (when $R_{jPi}(\mathbf{m_P},\mathbf{m_{-P}}) = 1$) or inferred to be at the certainty equivalent (otherwise).

Negativity Bias

Given the assumptions made thus far, voters suffer convex increasing utility losses as a given party's position diverges more from their ideal points. To illustrate, Figure 1 displays a leftist voter's utility at her own ideal point (green), at her certainty equivalent (red), and at the two parties' positions. This particular voter has priors $G_{Li} = G_{Ri}$, so that she views the parties as equivalent lotteries (prior to receiving any message). Her positive utility update for being informed about the position of the L party is smaller than her negative utility update from being informed about the policy of the R party.

Figure 1: Asymmetric Utility Updates
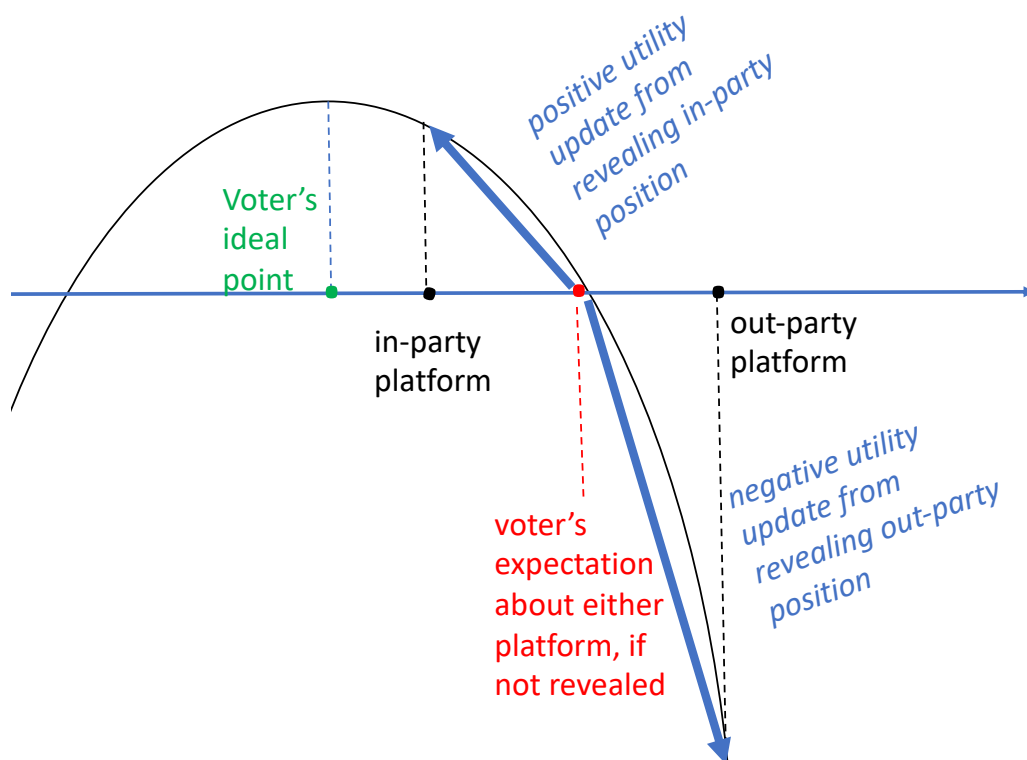
One interpretation of why voters experience quadratic utility losses, as candidates become more distant from them, is negativity bias—the inherent tendency for people to pay more attention to negative than to positive information (Jordan 1965, Kahneman and Tversky 1979, Ashton and Munis 2020). As regards policy positions, negativity bias would imply that voters are more likely to remember a candidate's policy position when it is more unpleasant (further from their ideal point). This feature of memory induces quadratic losses in *expected* utility.

To see why, consider an example. Suppose that voter Sue has ideal point 0; and candidate Joe is located at $x \in [-1,1]$. Once informed of Joe's position, the probability that Sue remembers it is $p(x) = |x|$: she is more likely to remember more disagreeable policies. If Sue remembers Joe's position, her utility is $u(x) = -|x|$. That is, she suffers *linear*, not quadratic, utility losses. If Sue does *not* remember Joe's position, then she views him as a draw from some

distribution G reflecting Joe's group affiliations (e.g., political party, ethnicity, religion). Let Sue's certainty equivalent for the distribution G be denoted by $g \in [-1,1]$. Thus, her payoff is $u(g) = -|g|$.

Sue's *expected* utility from Joe, given that he locates at x and Sue remembers his position with probability p(x), is $E[u(x)] = p(x)(-|x|) + (1-p(x))(-|g|) = -x^2 - |g| + |x||g|$. Since $|g|$ is just a non-negative constant, $E[u(x)]$ is a quadratic function of x. In other words, linear utility loss plus better memory of distasteful policies yields expected utility that exhibits quadratic loss.

The conclusion that negativity bias promotes quadratic losses in expected utility generalizes to cases in which memory is more complex (e.g., $p(x) = a + b|x|$ for $a \in [0,1)$ and $b = 1 - a > 0$) and to cases in which voters' underlying utility functions already exhibit steeper-than-linear losses with distance. For present purposes, the lessons we draw are two. First, our model is compatible with the assumption that voters exhibit negativity bias. Second, to the extent that negativity bias is prevalent among voters, the reason that parties demonize their opponents is not just that demons are odious but also that their odiousness renders them memorable.

The parties' messaging strategies

Having described voters' payoffs, we now consider parties' messaging strategies. In particular, we characterize when L will focus on exposing R's positions, rather than clarifying its own.

Proposition 1: Consider an issue i and a voter j satisfying the following conditions: (1) L's position on i is to the left of R's ($x_{Li} < x_{Ri}$); (2) L is weakly less extreme than R on issue i, in the sense that $(g_{jLi} - x_{Li}) \leq (x_{Ri} - g_{jRi})$; and (3) j's certainty equivalent for R is to the left of R's actual position on issue i ($g_{jRi} \leq x_{Ri}$). On any such issue-voter pair, L is better off exposing R's position than clarifying its own.

Proof: See appendix.

The intuition for this result is as follows. When L informs voter j about R's position, j "moves" R from g_{jRi} to x_{Ri}. If $x_{Ri} > g_{jRi}$ and $x_{ji} < (x_{Ri} + g_{jRi})/2$, then L benefits from informing j about R's position; and the benefit is convex increasing as R's true position diverges more from voter j's issue-specific ideal point. Meanwhile, if L informs j about L's own position, then j "moves" L from g_{jLi} to x_{Li}. This can be harmful, if L and j are on opposite sides of $(x_{Li} + g_{jLi})/2$.

Otherwise, L benefits by informing j of its own position. For any voter j whose certainty equivalent for R is to the left of R's actual position, a sufficient condition for L to benefit more from telling j about R's position is that L is no more extreme than R, relative to their respective certainty equivalents.

Note that, under the conditions of Proposition 1, L will adopt one of three messaging strategies vis-à-vis voter j and issue i: tell j nothing about i; tell j only about R's position on i; or tell j about both R's and L's position on i. However, if L's position is more extreme than R's, then L may benefit by informing its extremist supporters of its position more than it benefits by telling them about R's. For example, suppose that R is moderate on issue i, so that leftists learning R's true position like R more; while L is extreme on issue i, so that many leftists learning L's true position like L more. In this case, L should either say nothing to a leftist voter j; or inform j of its own position and say nothing about R's.

A corollary to Proposition 1 follows with some additional notation. Let the minimum number of messages that would suffice to induce j to vote for L be N_{jL}. This "message cost" determines the order in which party L will contact voters. Let $N_{jL}^1 = \min_j N_{jL}$ be the lowest message cost, $N_{jL}^2 = \min_j \{N_{jL} : N_{jL} > N_{jL}^1\}$ be the second-lowest message cost, and so forth. Let the set of voters with the h$^{\text{th}}$-lowest message cost be $\mathcal{N}_{jL}^h$. If a voter in $\mathcal{N}_{jL}^h$ is contacted (in an optimal strategy), they will receive N_{jL}^h messages, which can be partitioned into $N_{jL}^h(L)$ messages about L's positions on selected issues, and $N_{jL}^h(R)$ messages about R's positions on a possibly different set of issues.

Corollary 1: Consider an issue i and a voter j satisfying the following conditions: (1) L's position on i is to the left of R's; (2) L is weakly less extreme than R on issue i; and (3) j's certainty equivalent for R is to the left of R's actual position on issue i. Across all such issue-voter pairs, the share of L's messages that expose R's positions, E_L, weakly exceeds 0.5.

Proof: Proposition 1 implies that, if L sends a message to voter j about its own position on issue i, then it will also send a message to voter j about R's position on issue i. Thus, $N_{jL}^h(L) \leq$

$$N_{jL}^h(R) \text{ for all } j \in \mathcal{N}_{jL}^h; \text{ and } E_L = \frac{\sum_h \sum_{j \in \mathcal{N}_{jL}^h} N_{jL}^h(R)}{\sum_h \sum_{j \in \mathcal{N}_{jL}^h} N_{jL}^h(L) + \sum_h \sum_{j \in \mathcal{N}_{jL}^h} N_{jL}^h(R)} \geq 0.5. \text{ QED.}$$

We can also characterize the issues about which L communicates to j:

Proposition 2: Suppose it is optimal for L to inform j of m issue positions adopted by R.

Renumber the issues so that $1 = \arg\max_i \lambda_{ji}(x_{Ri} - g_{jRi})\left(\dfrac{x_{Ri} + g_{jRi}}{2} - x_{ji}\right)$, $2 =$

$\arg\max\limits_{i>1} \lambda_{ji}(x_{Ri} - g_{jRi})\left(\dfrac{x_{Ri} + g_{jRi}}{2} - x_{ji}\right)$, and so forth. Then L will inform j of R's first m

positions.

Proof: Direct from Table A1 in the appendix.

As appendix Table A1 shows, when sending messages about party R's positions, L gets

the biggest response by informing j of the issue on which the product $\lambda_{ji}(x_{Ri} - g_{jRi})$

$\left(\dfrac{x_{Ri} + g_{jRi}}{2} - x_{ji}\right)$ is the largest. In other words, L seeks to tell j about issues that j cares deeply

about (λ_{ji} is large) and on which R's position is both more extreme ($(x_{Ri} - g_{jRi})$ is larger) and

farther from j's position ($\left(\dfrac{x_{Ri} + g_{jRi}}{2} - x_{ji}\right)$ is larger). Voter j thus ends up knowing the m

positions of R with which s/he disagrees the most strongly. Unless m = n, this sample causes j to

believe that R's platform ($\mathbf{x_R}$) is further from j's ideal point than s/he would were s/he to learn a

representative sample of size m of R's positions.[2]

A corollary of Proposition 2 is that increasing the number of issues increases the bias in

the sample of information that voters receive. More precisely, suppose that one issue is added to

the issue space, with all previous issues remaining as they were before; and the number of

messages L sends remains m < n. If the new issue's "score" is not in the top m, then nothing will

change. Otherwise, the new issue will replace the former issue m, meaning that voter j views R

as even more extreme than previously.

Cross-pressured voters

Propositions 1 and 2 suggest that cross-pressured voters are likely to receive negative

information about L from R and negative information about R from L, with little positive

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[2] Of course, this conclusion relies on voters not working out parties' strategies and making inferences from them. As noted above, we assume rational ignorance justifies this assumption.

information about either. Thus, such voters should view both parties' policy positions as distant from their own (and they may be relatively indifferent between them to boot). Consistent with the notion that alienation and indifference drive turnout (Brody and Page 1973), our model implies that cross-pressured voters should be less likely to turn out.

Imperfect targeting

What if party L cannot micro-target individuals but can target its messages to a subset C ⊆ {1,…,J} of voters? We shall consider the case in which C = {j: j is a leftist}. In other words, L can target messages to its leftist base.

In this case, it is always better for L to expose one of R's positions than to clarify its own, when broadcasting to its base about any issue on which L is strictly to the left of R and L is weakly less extreme than R. The reason is that, for any leftist voter j, $g_{jRi} < x_{Ri}$ for all i. Thus, Proposition 1 holds for all voters in C, implying that it holds for the aggregate as well.

A version of Proposition 2 also holds in the case of "base targeting." Let I_L denote the set of all issues on which L is strictly to the left of R and L is weakly less extreme than R. We know that informing the leftist base of R's position on any of these issues will increase the probability that each leftist voter will support L. If it is optimal for L to inform its base of $m \leq |I_L|$ of these issues, then intuitively L will pick the issues on which R's position is the most extreme relative to the largest number of base supporters' preferences. Thus, whereas in the case of micro-targeting L could order the issues separately for each voter, in the case of base targeting L must consider how many voters are offended how much by each of R's positions. The value of focusing on R's most extreme positions remains, however, all else equal.

Non-spatial issues

The model extends straightforwardly to some non-spatial issues. For example, suppose that voter j cares about the perceived collective interests of white people, and thus cares about the proportion of a party's Members of Congress who are white. We can then include each party's racial composition as another "issue" on which the voter evaluates them. Assuming j suffers convex increasing utility loss, as a particular party's share of whites diverges from the voter's ideal, then the same notation can be used and the same results follow. Parties will tell

their base more about the other party's racial composition than about their own; and they will target their messages to those in their base who hold the most extreme and intense views.

Summary

We have shown conditions under which political parties will prioritize "demonizing" their opponents—exposing their most extreme policy positions and their most disliked ascriptive characteristics—over clarifying their own positions. While we have made several strong simplifying assumptions to exposit the model, relaxing them does not destroy, but may mitigate, incentives to demonize. In the next section, we consider the structural conditions that render demonization an attractive strategy in the contemporary US.

II.   Trends in American Demonization

Why did America's political parties engage in relatively little demonization until the last generation or so? In this section, we explore parties' motives, means and opportunities to engage in demonization, arguing that structural changes in American politics have provided a perfect storm.

Motive

If messages are costly, then parties will send them only when the stakes are high enough. Party P's goal is to get the best chance of winning control of government at the least cost. Formally, P seeks to solve the following maximization problem:

$$\max_{m_P} \Pi_P(m_P, m_{-P})B - c(N(m_P)),$$

where $c(N(m_P))$ is the cost of sending $N(m_P)$ messages. If the majority pivot probability, here defined as the probability that the optimal $N(m_P)$ messages will snatch victory from the jaws of defeat, is negligible, then the benefit of demonizing messages is not worth the cost. Thus, a pre-condition for nasty politics is that the majority pivot probability be high enough.[3]

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[3] To elaborate on this point, suppose that demonization can pay off for party P either in the form of a higher probability of winning control of government, or in a higher expected seat share in Congress. When one party has a firm grip on power, the first incentive to demonize is negligible. But party-level demonization is inefficient as a tactic to win individual seats. First, it affects all districts, regardless of whether they are competitive or not. Second,

A sea-change in this pivot probability occurred in 1994, when the Republicans ended a forty-year period in the minority and captured the US House. In the generation prior to 1994, the minimum uniform swing in the vote share that the Republicans would have needed in order to secure a majority was about 0.08, which was nearly three times the standard deviation of the two-party vote share in that period (Bonica and Cox 2017, p. 211). Since 1994, in contrast, competition for control of the House has been consistently closer than it was during the period of Democratic hegemony (Lee 2017; Bonica and Cox 2017), with changes in party control occurring in 2006, 2010, and 2018. Our model suggests that the return of close competition for majority status in the US House should have sparked (1) an increase in the parties' messaging budgets; and (2) a more intense use of demonization tactics. Let's consider each of these in turn.

We know that the two parties invested heavily in messaging infrastructure in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Evans, 2001, pp. 219–220). Immediately after the Republicans' historic victory, the parties significantly increased staff support for their leaders. Trendless 1981-1994, leadership staff levels jumped roughly 25% (or three standard deviations) in both 1995 and 1996, as the two parties' competing message operations girded for battle (Lee, 2017, Figure 6.2b). Since 1994, the parties have implemented centralized strategies of public communication (Sinclair 2006). Perhaps the most dramatic illustration of this is Gentzkow *et al.*'s (2019, p. 17) demonstration that partisanship in the use of language in congressional debates "was low and relatively constant until the early 1990s, then exploded, reaching unprecedented heights in recent years." The increasingly disciplined use of phrases and slogans by each party's congresspersons in and after 1994 coincided with a sharp shift toward party-centered voting in congressional elections (Bonica and Cox 2017).

Did increasing competition for unified control of the federal government also lead to increasing demonization? Yes, for two main reasons. First, demonizing the other party's positions or personnel is a relatively ineffective strategy if voters are candidate-centered. Prior to 1994, when "all politics was local," a local candidate could less easily be tarred with the national party's sins. After 1994's sharp shift toward party-centered voting—from roughly 25%

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its impact in any given district is proportional to the share of voters who are party-centered. But, when the parties' competition for control of government is scant, voters will not pay much attention to parties and will instead be candidate-centered. So, demonization has a small effect on winning seats and that small effect is inefficiently spread throughout all districts. All told, it is only when the majority pivot probability is high—meaning that sending additional messages can appreciably affect a party's chances of winning congressional majorities—that the parties may view demonization of the other party as a profitable electoral strategy.

party-centered before to 75% party-centered after (Bonica and Cox 2017)—demonizing one's opponent paid dividends across the country. Second, as noted above, the central leaderships' messaging budgets increased in size after 1994. Given our model, this should have led to a more intense use of demonizing messages.

Means

Cheaper and more targetable messaging should encourage attacks on the other party and make them more effective. Lowering the cost is similar to increasing the benefit of messaging. Improving targetability allows parties to inform only those they wish to receive the message, avoiding voters for whom the information would be counter-productive. There is substantial evidence that communication technology changed in the 1980s and 1990s so as to lower costs and improve targetability. Innovations included direct mail, household-level commercial data, and more recently, social media (Hillygus and Shields 2008).

Opportunity: The racial divide

We have argued that after 1994, the parties had increased motive and means for demonization. In this and the next section, we discuss opportunity: two latent factors of American politics provided raw material that was ripe for exploitation.

America's racial divide was given an entirely new meaning by the Voting Rights Act and Civil Rights Act, both enacted in 1965. These enactments propelled a major realignment of American politics, beginning with Nixon's "southern strategy" and capped by the emergence of the solid Republican south in 1994. Over time, high proportions of African-Americans affiliated with the Democratic party, while white southerners abandoned their traditional party for the Republicans. As the parties polarized in terms of racial composition, racial priming became increasingly available as a tactic.

It made less sense to send voters messages about the racial composition of the out-party at a time when both parties were racially heterogeneous. However, the asymmetry that has emerged in recent years—a racially homogeneous Republican party and a racially heterogeneous Democratic Party with a strong base of minorities—has created strong incentives for Republican elites to develop messaging strategies informing their voters about the influence of minorities on the Democratic Party. Of course, Republicans are far from homogeneous in their attitudes about

race. However, better targeting technology makes it possible to target messages to those who might be most receptive to racial appeals.

Opportunity: Internal divisions within the parties

Another latent factor of American politics that the two parties had the opportunity to exploit in the post-1994 era was the internal division of the parties. Unlike parliamentary democracies, where the threat of a no-confidence vote enforces greater party discipline and clearer party platforms, presidential democracy allows diverse factions to thrive within parties. Some candidates in the United States, for instance, explicitly reject their party's platform and attempt to undercut party leaders. Political geography plays an important role. As progressives have become increasingly concentrated in cities, and conservatives in rural areas, the ideology of the constituents represented by urban Democrats in the House of Representatives is quite different from that represented by Democrats competing in pivotal suburban or mixed districts, and each attempts to craft their own version of the party platform. We have already discussed internal divisions associated with the rise of multiple issue dimensions, but here we consider within-party divisions on specific issues. To illustrate this point, suppose that parties are coalitions of factions, each of which may stake out its own position. Let σ^2_{Pi} denote the variance of *publicly visible* views within party P on issue i. Considering the case in which the variance is the same across all issues and parties (i.e., $\sigma^2_{Pi} = \sigma^2$ for all Pi), we shall argue that the incentives to "expose" the other party, rather than clarify one's own policies, become even more pronounced as the within-party variance in visible policy preferences (σ^2) increases.

We maintain two of the baseline model's assumptions—that each party's leadership is a unitary actor controlling the party's messaging operation; and that they are constrained to be consistent across voters. They can send only a single message about what the party's own, or the other party's, position is on a given issue—not different messages to different voters.

As regards messages about R's position, the L leaders have a natural strategy. On any given issue, they should identify the most extreme position held by any R and inform leftist voters of that position. This provides truthful and consistent, but selective, information. The larger is σ^2, the more extreme is the most extreme R position (on any issue), and the more the L leadership will benefit by informing its base of that position.

As regards messages about their own party's positions, diversity of views does not help. Since the party has articulated a position on issue i, namely x_{Di}, the only message that satisfies the consistency constraint informs voters of that position. In other words, when it comes to the party's own positions, increasing σ^2 affords the L leadership no new messaging options.

All told, increasing σ^2 increases the payoff to exposing the other party's positions, while leaving the payoff to clarifying one's own positions unchanged. Thus, increasing internal division (represented by σ^2) increases the parties' incentives to expose each other's positions, rather than clarify their own policies. And since they can highlight the most radical among their opponents' positions, factionalization also contributes to voters' misperceptions about the out-party's platform.

Summary: A perfect storm

American politics since 1994 has provided the two parties with the motive, means and opportunity to demonize each other. The motive stemmed from the resumption of close competition for unified control of the US government and its component branches. The means were available thanks partly to the parties' decisions to invest in communication infrastructure and partly to new communication technologies that enabled increasingly targeted messages to be sent. The opportunity existed thanks to America's racial, income and urban-rural cleavages, as well as the internal divisions of parties that naturally arise in presidential systems.

In the following sections, we provide two types of evidence supporting our account. First, we provide evidence that the major parties and especially their media allies selectively emphasize the opposing parties' most extreme members and positions, and we provide evidence that exposure to these messages has an impact on voters' perceptions of party positions. Second, we document several changes in voter behavior over time, consistent with the hypothesis that they have been increasingly exposed to the targeted demonizing attacks during campaigns that our model illuminates.

III.   Evidence: Selective emphasis and its effects on perceptions

Evidence of Selective Emphasis vis Partisan Media

It is not difficult to find anecdotal evidence of demonization via selective characterizations of the out-party in recent U.S. politics. In the 2020 election campaign, many candidates provided little information about their proposed policies, instead highlighting the most extreme candidates and positions of the opposite party. Democratic candidates attempted to link even the most moderate suburban Republican candidates with white supremacy and authoritarianism, while Republicans focused on characterizing even the most conservative rural Democrats as Marxists. In perhaps the apogee of the phenomenon addressed in this paper, the Republican Party in 2020 declined to formulate any platform at all, while orchestrating a party convention and then a campaign based overwhelmingly on demonization of Democrats.

As a case study of selective emphasis, consider President Trump's series of tweets in July of 2019 attacking four freshman House Democrats—"the squad"— all women of color on the progressive wing of the party. This particular attack had the advantage of simultaneously communicating to the Republican base that the Democrats were "too non-white," "too urban," "too progressive," and "insufficiently supportive of Israel." On the non-white front, the tweet used language (suggesting that the women "go back" to the "places from which they came") that Democrats would foreseeably view as racist, thereby guaranteeing a huge audience for the tweet and priming racial resentment within the Republican base. At the same time, Republicans could, if it better suited their personal or electoral needs, claim that the real target of the tweets was the extreme "socialist" views of the women (as, for example, Liz Cheney and Kevin McCarthy did).

Beyond presidential tweets, partisan cable news has also become an important part of the effort to mobilize electoral support by providing selective characterizations of the out-party's platforms. Indeed, a great deal of programming on Fox News focuses not on detailing Republicans' policy proposals but, rather, on characterizing Democrats' proposals as extreme. Between January 1, 2000 and January 1, 2021, according to a Lexis-Nexis search, 402 segments on Fox News contained the words "Democrat" and "Socialism," while only 83 MSNBC

segments during the same period contained those words.[4] For "Marxism" and "Democrat," the comparison was 120 to 12.

Something similar can be seen with discussions of specific policies during that same period. Fox News was far more likely than MSNBC to run segments on "Democrats" and "Medicare for All" (268 to 116). Fox ran a large number of segments discussing the "Green New Deal" (362) but it was rarely mentioned on MSNBC (44). Likewise, "Defund" was associated with "Democrats" in 514 Fox News stories, but only in 128 MSNBC stories. On the other hand, "voting rights" were mentioned in stories about Republicans in 317 MSNBC segments, but only 88 Fox segments.

A more systematic way to comprehend the networks' selective emphasis is to examine their mentions of specific members of Congress. Using Lexis-Nexis, we count the number of mentions of each member on Fox News and MSNBC in each Congress since the 110th. During the 116th Congress, (2019 to 2020), Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) and the other members of "the squad" were clearly the stars of Fox News, where AOC accounted for 12.4 percent of all mentions of House members—second only to Speaker Pelosi. She was far less popular on MSNBC, where she accounted for around 5 percent of such mentions. On Fox, the next most-mentioned House members were Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib, each of whom received more attention than the most-mentioned Republican: Devin Nunes. Together, "the squad" accounted for one quarter of all mentions of House members on Fox News, compared to 11 percent on MSNBC.

According to the ideological estimates of members of Congress produced by the generalized graded unfolding model (GGUM) of Duck-Mayr and Montgomery (2020), the "squad" members are among the most consistently progressive in Congress. In the left-hand plot in Figure 2, we plot these ideological estimates on the horizontal axis. On the vertical axis, we display the share of all mentions of Democratic House members on Fox News during the 116th Congress. The plot on the right takes the same approach to MSNBC mentions of Republicans. Both networks clearly focus their attention on a selection of the out-party's most extreme

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[4] The vast majority of the Fox News stories characterized specific policies or candidates as Socialists, while the MSNBC stories often either characterized Republican policies as "socialism for the rich" or criticized Republicans for their characterizations of Democrats.

members. Moderates like Brian Fitzpatrick and Elissa Slotkin are essentially invisible on partisan cable news, while the likes of Jim Jordan, Steve King, and "the squad" dominate the airtime.

Figure 2: Mentions of Members of Congress on Fox and MSNBC by Roll-Call Vote-Based Ideology Score, 116th Congress
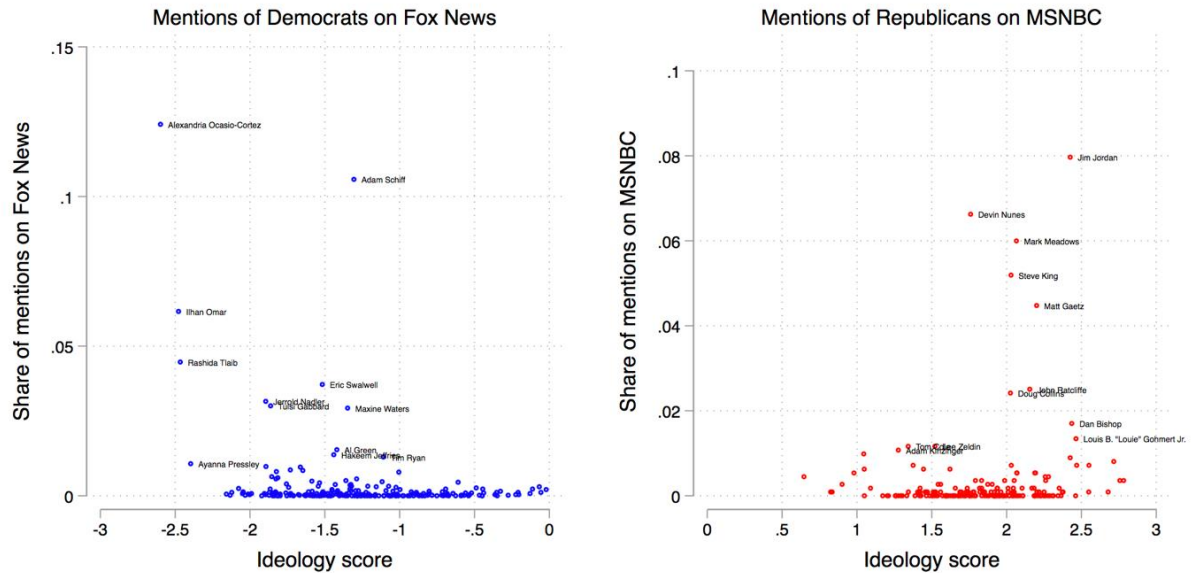
These ideologically extreme House members receive disproportionate attention on partisan cable news in part because they seek media attention to promote their ideological projects and careers, which leads them to have a larger presence on other media sources as well. Indeed, these same members of Congress are more frequently mentioned on all of the media sources available in the Lexis-Nexis database. However, in the appendix, we show that they are *disproportionately* favored by Fox News and MSNBC relative to other media outlets, and this is true over time, controlling for leadership positions, time in office, and year fixed effects.

Impact of Selective Emphasis via Partisan Media

Next, we demonstrate that exposure to this type of selective emphasis via cable news affects voters' perceptions of party platforms. Della Vigna and Kaplan (2007) collected town-

level data on the availability of Fox News on local Cable systems in 2000 for a large part of the United States—a time when Fox was only available in some locales and not others. Hopkins and Ladd (2014) linked this geographic information with the 2000 National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES). We obtained the data on Fox News availability from Hopkins and Ladd (2014), and instead of analyzing vote intention, we examine perceptions of the ideology of the presidential candidates.

Respondents were asked to place George W. Bush and Albert Gore on a 5-point scale: 1 (very conservative), 2 (conservative), 3 (moderate), 4 (liberal), and 5 (very liberal). Our expectation is that since a large part of Fox programming is dedicated to convincing the viewer that Democrats are extremely liberal, respondents in areas where Fox News was available will have reported a more liberal perception of Gore. Moreover, since these messages are largely targeted at Republicans and independents, we expect that any such effect will be driven by those groups. First, we simply regress the perceptions of the two candidates on Fox News availability, partisanship, ideological self-identification on the same five-point scale, as well as a typical host of control variables (including gender, age, race, Hispanic identification, church attendance, urban or rural residence, union membership, and state fixed effects). Second, we estimate a similar model, interacting the Fox News indicator with dummy variables for Democrats, Republicans, and independents.

The coefficients are displayed in Figure 3, and the full results are presented in the appendix. The results indicate that those who lived in an area where Fox News was available were no different in their assessment of Bush's ideology than those who lived in places where it was not yet available. This is consistent with our model, in which there are weak incentives for party message-makers to provide information about the in-party's platform. However, there was a small but statistically significant difference in their assessment of Gore's ideology. Gore was viewed as more liberal by a little over .04 of 1 point on the five-point scale. Next, the model with partisan interactions reveals that this effect was driven by the likely targets of demonization efforts—independents and especially Republicans—but not Democrats.

Figure 3: Coefficient Plots, 2000 NAES Regressions of Ideological Assessments of Presidential Candidates on Fox News Availability
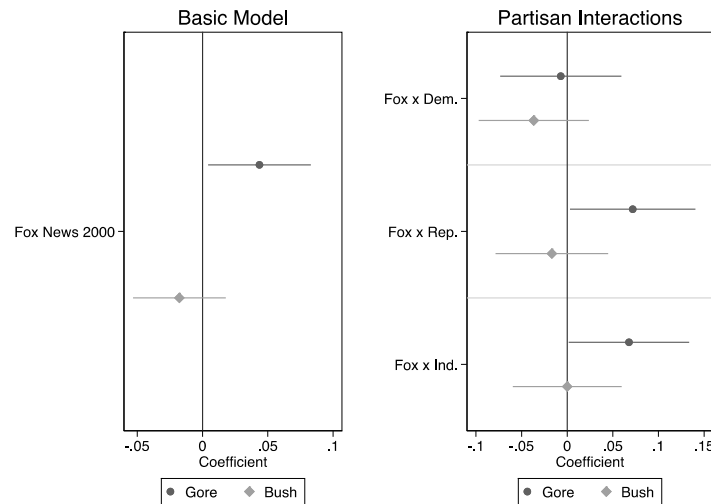
An alternative approach to using the continuous scale is to generate a dummy variable for whether or not the respondent viewed Gore as "very liberal." With this approach, there is no difference between those with and without Fox News availability among Democrats and independents, but Republicans were more likely to view Gore as an extreme liberal if they had Fox News access. The share of Republicans who viewed Gore as an extreme liberal was around 22.7 percent in areas without access to Fox News, but 25.1 percent in areas with Fox News access.

Our research on Fox News access is ongoing. We are in the process of obtaining geocodes from the ANES for the full time series data set in order to examine whether the rollout of Fox News is associated with changes not only in perceptions of platforms of the Democratic Party, but also a nudge toward higher turnout among extremists.

Evidence of Targeted Messaging

We examine partisan cable news in part because it allows us an empirical entry point for the study of selective demonization, but we note that while they are easier to study, technologies like tweets and cable news cannot be targeted to individuals according to their preferences and salience on specific policy dimensions. We can examine the parties' more targeted efforts to send messages to in-party extremists about the out-party's platform by focusing on ANES

questions in which respondents were asked to report whether they had been contacted by either party. In Figure 4, we plot shares of self-reported liberals (1 or 2 on the 7-point scale), moderates (3, 4, or 5), and conservatives (6 or 7) who reported being contacted by the parties.

Figure 4: Self-Reported Contact from Parties, by Self-Reported Ideology, ANES
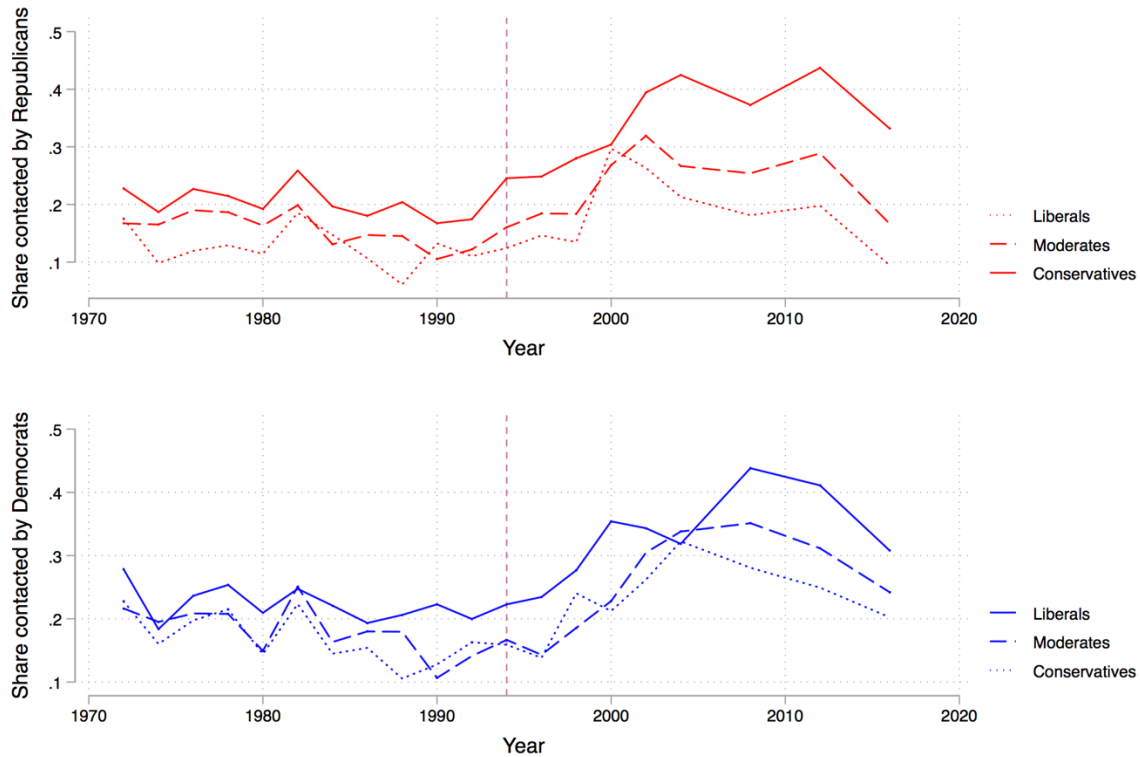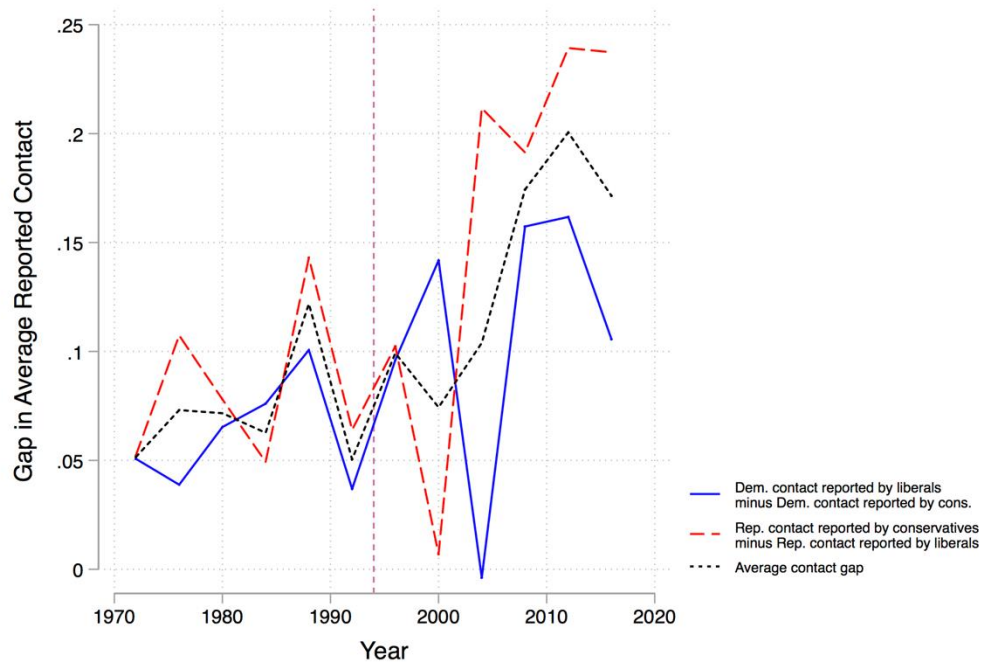
Figure 5: Gap Between Liberals and Conservatives in Self-Reported Contact from Parties, ANES

Not surprisingly, Republicans have always been more likely to contact conservatives than liberals, and the opposite is true for Democrats. As evidenced by a dramatic increase in the share of respondents reporting party contact, we can see that after 1994, as described above, both parties significantly increased their individual outreach to voters. However, as implied by our model, the parties—especially the Republicans—also substantially enhanced their targeting to extremists. To demonstrate this more clearly, Figure 5 displays the gap in reported contact between liberals and conservatives for each party. It shows that the Republican Party has become especially adept at targeting conservative extremists over the last two decades.

Impact of Targeted Messaging

This subsection is still in progress. We have estimated models in which the dependent variable is the perceived distance between the respondent and the out-party, and the independent variables are self-reported contact indicators and interactions with self-reported ideology. As with the spread of Fox News, controlling for a variety of demographic factors, we find that contact from the in-party leads to increased perceptions of out-party extremity, driven primarily by ideological extremists.

# IV.   Evidence: Long-Term Trends in Voter Behavior

We have argued that due to changes in motives, means, and opportunities, strategic messages about the out-party aimed at those with extreme preferences have increased in recent decades. Our account leads to clear predictions about changes in voter behavior, some of which have already been identified in recent empirical literature, others of which are new.

Platform Perceptions and Affect

Ahler and Sood (2018) document the large biases in voters' perceptions about the out-party that are predicted by our model. Rodden (2021) uses data from the ANES since 1972 to show that when asked to place themselves and the two parties on a seven-point one-dimensional ideological scale, Americans have come to see the distance between themselves and the less proximate of the two parties as increasingly large, especially over the last two decades, but on average, they have not come to see the more proximate of the two parties as growing any closer. Likewise, the growing literature on affective polarization shows that negative affect of party identifiers toward the out-party has grown substantially—again with a clear acceleration in the trend after the mid 1990s—but there has been no corresponding increase in positive affect toward the in-party (Iyengar et al. 2019; Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro 2020). All of this is consistent with our account, in which parties and their allies have invested heavily in seeking out ideological extremists and mobilizing them with messages about the out-party's extremism, while investing less in clarifying their own platform or reaching out to moderates.

Moving beyond existing literature, our model also generates sharper predictions about the type of voters that are driving these trends. According to our account, growing perceptions of platform extremity, and growing negative affect toward the out-party, should be driven disproportionately by ideological extremists who, in our model, are more likely to be targeted by party messaging. Moreover, cross-pressured voters—who are more likely to be targeted with extreme characterizations about both parties in different policy areas—should come to view *both* parties as more distasteful.

Figure 6: Platform Perception, Affect, and Self-Placement, Pre- and Post- 1994
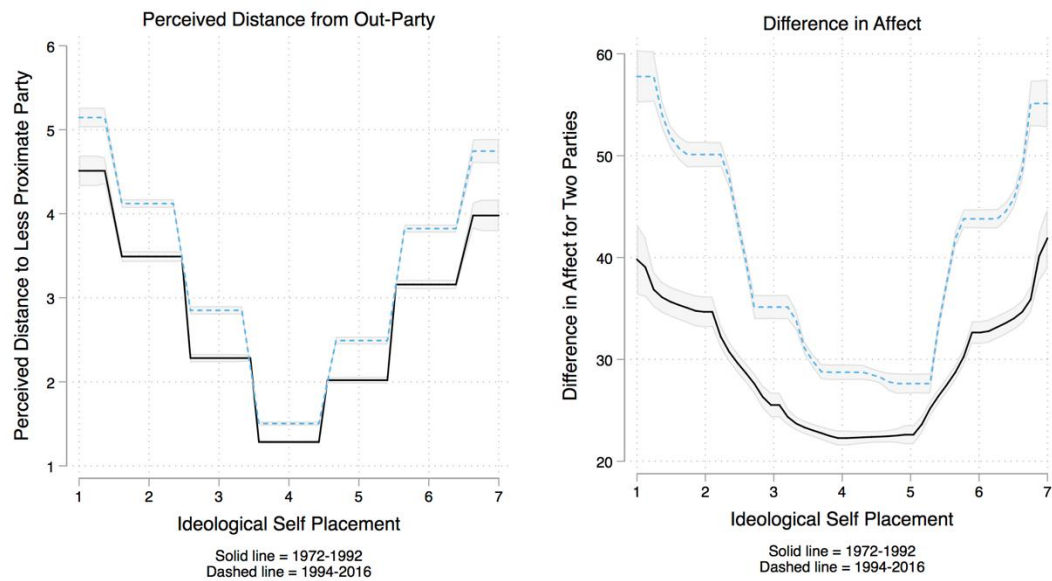

We can explore these claims by using time-series ANES data in two ways. First, we examine changes in perceptions and affect according to self-reported ideology on the simple seven-point scale. Figure 6 divides the ANES studies into two periods: 1972-1992, and 1994-2016. The left-hand panel uses a local polynomial with 95 percent confidence intervals to show the relationship between self-assessed 7-point ideology and the respondent's perceived distance to the non-proximate party. For respondents who classify themselves as 1 through 3, this is the Republican Party, and for those who classify themselves as 5 through 7, it is the Democratic Party. For those who classify themselves as 4, we take the average of the two. In the right-hand panel, the vertical axis is the absolute difference between the respondent's affect for Democrats and that for Republicans, as measured by the feeling thermometer. The left-hand panel shows that voters across the ideological spectrum have come to view the out-party as further away since 1994, but this movement has been driven most clearly by self-described ideological extremists. In the right-hand panel, we can see that affective polarization has been driven disproportionately by self-described extremists.

It is likely that voter ideology is considerably more complex than what can be captured with a simple seven-point self-assessment. It is possible, for instance, that one voter attaches a very high weight (λ_{ji}) to economic issues, and thinks only about those issues when placing

herself on the 7-point scale, another voter thinks primarily about social issues, and a third voter places equal weight on both issues. Some voters might have non-centrist positions in opposite directions on both issues, but classify themselves as moderates when forced by the survey question to consider a single 7-point dimension. Thus, it is useful to assess voters' preferences by generating issue scales from survey responses to a bundle of recurring questions about economic issues like taxation, regulation, and public spending, and a second bundle of questions about "social" or "moral" issues like abortion and the role of religion. We were able to produce these scores for each ANES survey from 1984 to 2016. Details about our issue scales are provided in the appendix. Both are normalized to have a mean of zero and standard deviation of 1.

Our goal is to examine whether growing perceptions of overall party extremity, and growing negative affect for the out-party, are driven by the ideological extremists on one or both issue dimensions. In order to achieve this, in each survey year, we have divided the two issue scales into quintiles, so that voters fall into one of 25 bins in the two-dimensional ideological space each year. For the period prior to 1994, we calculate the average self-assessed 7-point ideology score for each bin, and the average assessment of the ideology of the Democratic Party, and then calculate the differences between these averages. This tells us how far away, on average, voters in each bin perceive the Democratic Party to be. We do the same for the post-1994 period. Next, we calculate the difference between these pre- and post-1994 ideological distances for each bin. We do the same for perceptions of the Republican Party.

Figure 7: Changes in Perceived Ideological Distance to the Two Parties, Pre- and Post 1994, by Issue Preferences

Change in Perceived Ideological Distance to Democratic Party

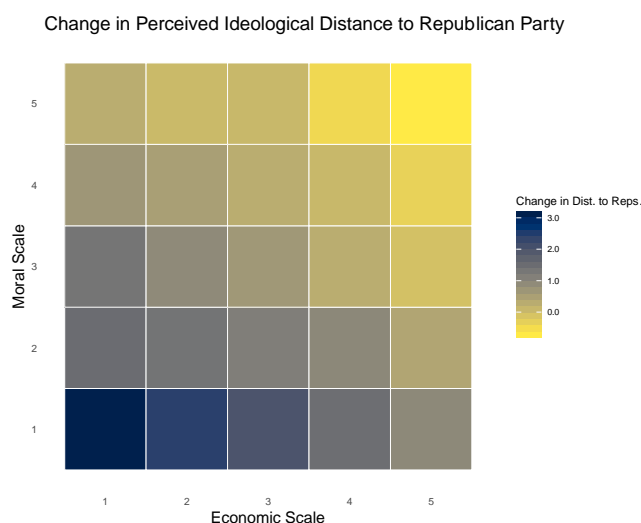Change in Perceived Ideological Distance to Republican Party
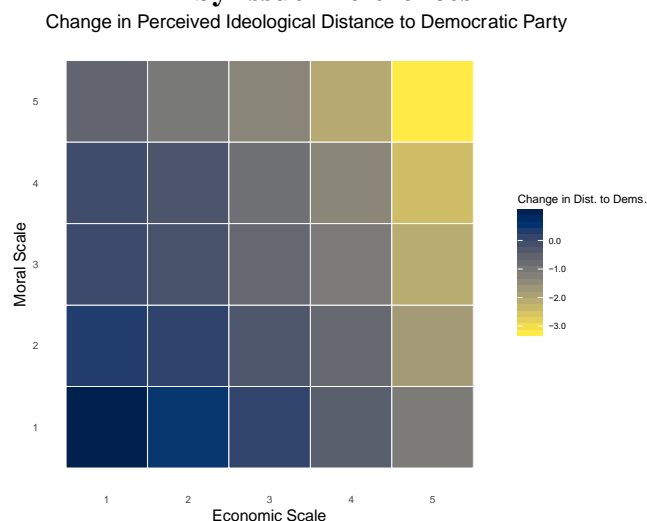
Figure 7 uses colors that move from blue to yellow to help identify the places in the two-dimensional space where respondents view the parties as moving furthest away from them. Changes in perceived distance to the Democratic Party are portrayed in the top panel, and to the Republican Party in the bottom panel. In the top panel, respondents in the lower left-hand corner—where preferences are far to the left on both dimension—have been relatively stable in their perceived distance to the Democratic Party. However, in the upper right-hand corner—where preferences are far to the right on both dimensions—respondents have come to see the Democrats as much further away: on average, more than two points on the 7-point scale. The story is the same for perceptions of Republicans: growing perceptions of extremity are driven by left-wing extremists (in the lower left-hand corner). Figure 7 also reveals that significant changes in perceptions have occurred even among voters who are extreme on only a single dimension but moderate on the other. This is consistent with our model, in which parties try to provide information about the out-party's extremity to in-party extremists on an issue-by-issue basis, and extreme preferences on a single dimension are sufficient to make one a target for such messaging. Even if the individual is moderate on one dimension, she is likely to be targeted with demonizing messages about the dimension on which her preferences are more extreme.

Next, we conduct the same exercise for partisan affect. We calculate the feeling thermometer score for the Democrats in each of the 25 bins for the entire period from 1984 to 1994, and again for the post-1994 period, and calculate the difference for each bin, so that a *higher* number indicates *colder* affect. We do the same for the Republicans. In this way, we can identify the types of respondents who are more hostile to the parties in the era of heightened

demonization than in the past. Figure 8 displays these differences in average affect, using shades of blue to capture affect that has grown colder over time.

Again, as predicted by our model, the largest increases in negative affect are in the on-diagonal corners, where extremely conservative preferences on both dimensions (the upper right-hand corner in both panels) correspond to increasingly cold affect toward the Democratic Party (upper panel) while remaining constant in their affect toward the Republican Party (lower panel). And those with extremely liberal preferences in both dimensions (lower left corners) have grown more hostile toward the Republicans while remaining constant in their affect toward the Democratic Party. These are the voters who, according to our model, are most likely to have received a steady stream of consistent messages about the out-party's extremity in both dimensions.

Figure 8: Changes in Affect Toward the Two Parties, Pre- and Post 1994

Change in Affect for Democratic Party

Change in Affect for Republican Party
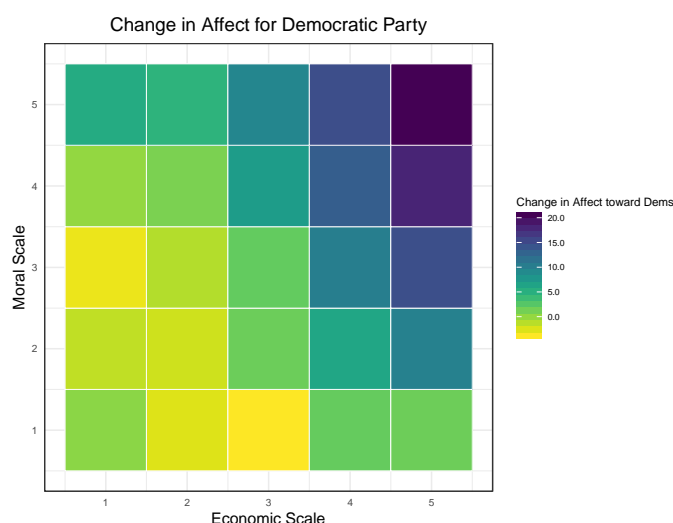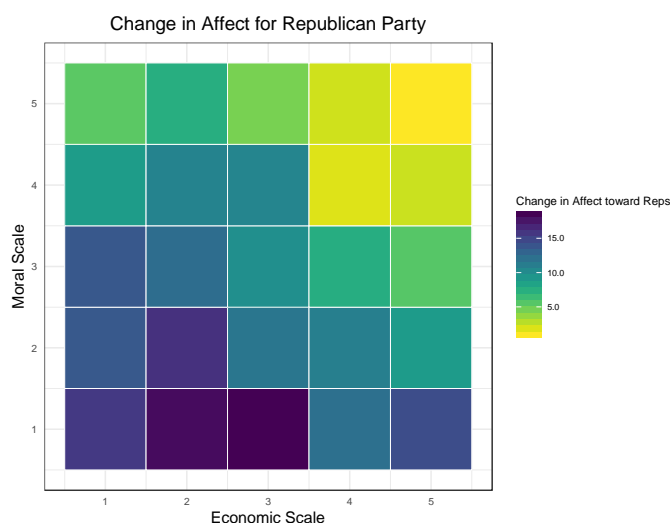
Again, Figure 8 also reveals that dramatic change in affect has occurred even among voters who are extreme on only a single dimension but moderate on the other. Moral moderates who are economically conservative have become considerably colder toward the Democratic Party. The same is true for economic moderates who are morally conservative. Perhaps the most striking growth in negative affect is among moral liberals, who have grown dramatically colder toward the Republican Party regardless of their economic preferences.

Finally, as predicted by our model, cross-pressured voters—those in the off-diagonals of these graphs—have grown substantially colder in their affect toward *both* parties. In Figure 7, these voters have also come to see both parties as ideologically more distant. These are the voters who are most likely to be receiving conflicting messages about the extremity of both parties.

Turnout

Ours is a model of mobilization. Parties provide messages about the out-party's platforms in order to induce turnout by those who find those platforms distasteful. As control of Congress has become more hotly contested, this type of messaging has increased, and turnout along with it. However, our model anticipates a specific pattern to these turnout gains. Demonization-based mobilization is targeted at those with extreme preferences, and as a result, if this mobilization is successful, the voting population should become increasingly skewed toward extremists. Again, we proceed by first examining the traditional 7-point ideological scale, and then by relying on our two-dimensional economic and moral scales.

Figure 9: Self-Reported Turnout: Moderates versus Extremists, 7-Point Ideological Scale, ANES

Moderates defined as self-reported 3, 4, or 5 on 7-point scale.
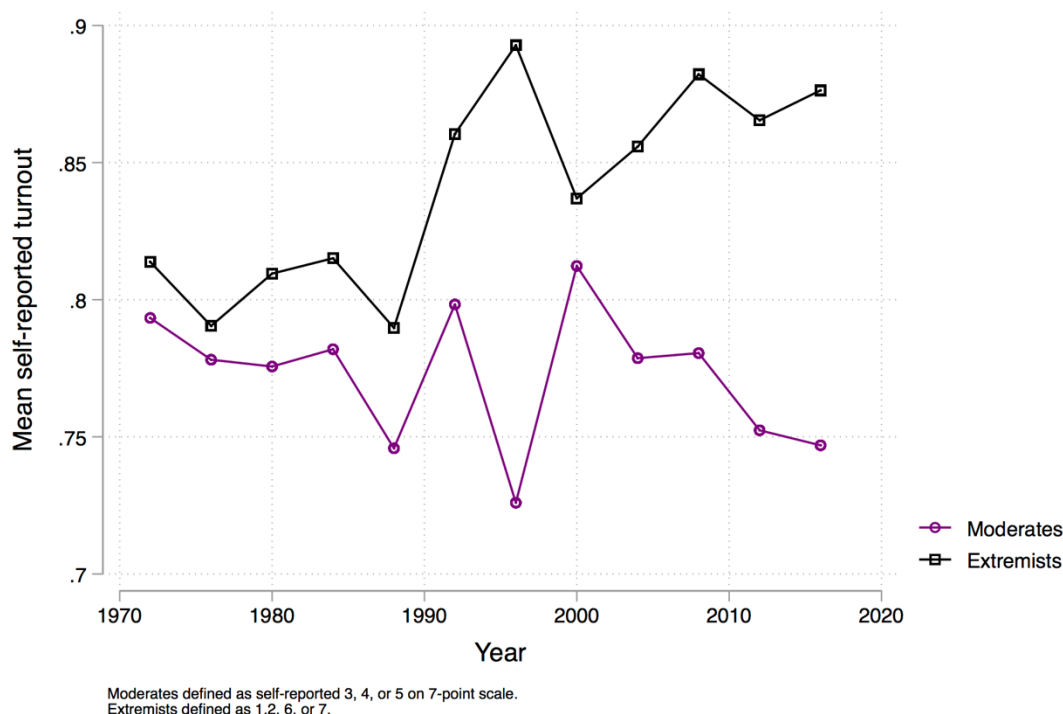Extremists defined as 1,2, 6, or 7.

Figure 9 plots mean self-reported turnout for self-declared moderates—those placing themselves as a 3, 4, or 5 on the 7-point scale, as well as for extremists—those placing themselves as either 1 or 2 on the left, or 6 or 7 on the right. Self-reported turnout among moderates has been relatively stable and even declining in recent years, while that of extremists has been growing. Turnout is notoriously over-reported, but it is not clear why extremists would be more likely to over-report turnout than moderates. Figure 9 suggests that as demonization efforts have stepped up in recent decades, those with relatively extreme ideological preferences have come to take up a larger share of the electorate, especially after the early 1990s.

Next, we can use our issue scales to divide respondents into a different set of groups. We consider voters to be moderates if they are within one half of a standard deviation of the median in both directions on both issue dimensions in a particular year. These respondents are near the middle of the two-dimensional graphs above. A second group of voters we call consistent ideologues. These voters are more than one half of a standard deviation away from the median in the same direction on both issue dimensions. These are the voters in the on-diagonals in the two-dimensional graphs above—voters who are either consistently liberal or consistently

conservative on both dimensions. A third group of respondents are the cross-pressured individuals in the off-diagonals: they are more than one half a standard deviation from the median in the conservative direction on one issue dimension, and in the liberal direction on the other.

Figure 10 reveals that self-reported turnout has been relatively flat for moderates and cross-pressured respondents, but has increased notably for consistent ideologues. This is consistent with the notion that moderates and cross-pressured individuals have either been ignored or subjected to competing messages about the extremity of the parties, while consistent ideologues have been targeted by the parties' mobilization efforts.

Figure 10: Self-Reported Turnout: Moderates, Consistent Ideologues, and Cross-Pressured Respondents, ANES

Moderates are those with issue score within .5 SD of the survey mean on both dimensions.
Consistent ideologues are those with issue score more than .5 SD from the mean in the same direction on both dimensions.
Cross-pressured respondents are those with an issue score more than .5 SD from the mean on opposite sides of the two dimensions.

Summary

In sum, the trends toward increased perception of the out-party as extreme, and increased negative affect toward the out-party, have been driven primarily by individuals who see themselves as falling on one side of the ideological spectrum, and by those whose stated issue preferences most clearly place them on one side on at least one issue dimension. These relatively ideological individuals also report higher turnout, and the turnout bias in their favor has grown over time. Our model of selective messaging by parties provides a good explanation for this set of facts. We recognize, however, that these facts might also be explained by alternative theories, and we have not demonstrated a causal role for party messaging. For instance, it is possible that the parties' platforms have simply moved further apart in one or more issue areas, and individuals with more extreme issue preferences have more to lose, and hence greater incentives to learn about the platforms on their own and vote, even without a role for messaging. Future studies might exploit individual-level panel data and experiments to isolate the impact of messaging about the out-party's platform for different types of respondents, and make efforts to measure the weight attached by voters to each issue dimension.

V. Discussion and Conclusion

We have offered a model in which parties and their media allies are able to exploit voter ignorance about party platforms in ways that lead voters to base their assessments of the out-party on a biased set of information. As the prevalence of this strategy has increased, many voters have come to view the out-party—or in some cases both parties—as increasingly extreme and repugnant, and voters with relatively extreme preferences have come to make up a larger share of those who vote.

We have chosen a rather pejorative term for this mobilization strategy: demonization. However, one might argue that this term is too harsh. Lawyers acting on behalf of clients routinely employ the tactics of selective emphasis that we highlight. For example, they do all they can to undermine the credibility of their opponent's key witnesses, and they portray the motivations of the opposite side in the most unfavorable possible terms. Lawyers can be defended as "doing their jobs," and it is the job of opposing counsel to expose their selectivity to the jury. From this perspective, one might prefer to think of our model as one of "advocacy" by party messengers and cable news personalities.

However, lawyers face at least two constraints that political demonizers do not. First, the jury is required to listen to both sides. Second, both sides must meet basic standards of evidence. They cannot bring hearsay evidence into court, for example. Because the market for ideas in elections is so much less regulated than the market for ideas in the courtroom, the same basic incentives lead to worse behavior and outcomes in the realm of elections. From this perspective, one might complain that our model's assumptions are too sanguine, since we restrict party messengers and their media allies to selective truth-telling. We ignore the many ways in which they cross the line from lies of omission and lies of commission. It is clearly the case that in recent years, American party leaders and their media allies have entered the realm of scare-mongering, conspiracy theorizing, and falsehood. One could extend our model to allow increasingly fictional claims to be made by the parties and their allies. At least some cost of lying must exist, or each party would characterize the other as infinitely bad. But if the cost of lying is small enough, then the parties will no longer limit themselves to truth-telling. Convenient enough lies will be told. We suspect that a "limited lying" model would ultimately be quite similar to our "truth-telling" model. Instead of predicting selective emphasis on the other party's most extreme positions, one would predict selection from the universe of possible lies about the other party those that are 1) most effective in alarming one's base and 2) difficult to expose as a lie.

Finally, it is worthwhile to consider reforms that might reduce incentives or opportunities for demonization. The most obvious reform would be Australian-style compulsory voting, which would eliminate the parties' malign incentives to facilitate turnout among extremists. Another possibility might be some type of media reform aimed at enforcement of "equal time" for both parties. Third, reforms to Congressional elections, including some types of run-offs or ranked-choice voting schemes might change incentives, as would the adoption of proportional representation.   Inspired by the U.S. case, our model focuses on a two-party system. Another possible extension of our model is to multiple parties. The expected returns to demonizing a specific out-party might be substantially lower if there is a risk that the electoral gains will be enjoyed by other competitors. As a result, the incentives to demonize might be strongest in two-party systems like the United States, and largely absent in multi-party systems like those in Europe.

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Appendix A: Additional Details of Formal Model

Describing voters' behavior

To describe voter j's voting behavior, let $\Delta_j(\mathbf{m_P,m_{\text{-}P}}) = U_j[\mathbf{x_L,m_P,m_{\text{-}P}}] - U_j[\mathbf{x_R,m_P,m_{\text{-}P}}]$ denote how much greater j's payoff from L's policies is than j's payoff from R's policies, given the parties' messages. Voter j votes for party L if $\Delta_j(\mathbf{m_P,m_{\text{-}P}}) + \varepsilon > c_j$, for party R if $\Delta_j(\mathbf{m_P,m_{\text{-}P}}) + \varepsilon < -c_j$, and abstains otherwise. Here, ε is a symmetric mean-zero shock with variance σ_ε^2; and $c_j > 0$ is a parameter reflecting j's relative cost of participation. Thus, in expectation voter j will vote for L if and only if the utility differential is large enough ($\Delta_j > c_j > 0$).[5]

We focus on an issue i on which L adopts a position to the left of R ($x_{Li} < x_{Ri}$) and a voter j who is "leftist" on issue i in the sense that $x_{ji} < \dfrac{x_{Ri} + g_{jRi}}{2}$. Let Δ_{jPi} denote the increase in j's expected utility differential, due to j learning party P's position on issue i (while remaining ignorant about all other issue positions). Table 1 displays Δ_{jRi} and Δ_{jDi}.

Table A1: The effect of informing leftist voter j about one party's position on issue i

If j learns…	then Δ_j increases by…
R's position on issue i	$\Delta_{jRi} = \lambda_{ji}(x_{Ri} - g_{jRi})\left(\dfrac{x_{Ri} + g_{jRi}}{2} - x_{ji}\right)$
L's position on issue i	$\Delta_{jLi} = \lambda_{ji}(g_{jLi} - x_{Li})\left(\dfrac{x_{Li} + g_{jLi}}{2} - x_{ji}\right)$

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[5] Different models of voter behavior yield different values of c_j. For example, the pivotal voter model famously yields an extremely large c_j (due to dividing the direct cost of voting by the tiny probability of being pivotal), thus implying a very low turnout rate (Palfrey and Rosenthal 1985). This particular implication disappears in models of strategic mobilization (e.g., Shachar and Nalebuff 1999; Cox et al. 2016) or ethical voting (e.g., Feddersen and Sandroni 2006). We assume that c_j is an independent draw from a distribution with support on $[c, \infty)$ for some $c > 0$.

Now consider the difference $\Delta_{jRi} - \Delta_{jLi} = \lambda_{ji}[\,(x_{Ri} - g_{jRi})\left(\dfrac{x_{Ri} + g_{jRi}}{2} - x_{ji}\right) - (g_{jLi} - x_{Li})$

$\left(\dfrac{x_{Li} + g_{jLi}}{2} - x_{ji}\right)]$. For a "leftist" voter who attaches positive weight to issue i ($\lambda_{ji} > 0$), this

difference is positive if and only if

$$(x_{Ri} - g_{jRi}) > (g_{jLi} - x_{Li})\,\frac{\left(\dfrac{x_{Li} + g_{jLi}}{2} - x_{ji}\right)}{\left(\dfrac{x_{Ri} + g_{jRi}}{2} - x_{ji}\right)}, \tag{1}$$

When inequality (1) is satisfied, L benefits more when voter j learns R's position than when j

learns L's position.

Proof of Proposition 1

Since $x_{ji} < \dfrac{x_{Ri} + g_{jRi}}{2}$ by assumption, it follows that $\left(\dfrac{x_{Ri} + g_{jRi}}{2} - x_{ji}\right) > 0$. By assumption, $g_{jLi} \leq$

g_{jRi} for all ji. Since $x_{Li} < x_{Ri}$ by assumption, it follows that $\left(\dfrac{x_{Ri} + g_{jRi}}{2} - x_{ji}\right) > \left(\dfrac{x_{Li} + g_{jLi}}{2} - x_{ji}\right)$

for all j. Thus, the ratio on the right-hand side of inequality (1) is strictly less than 1. A

sufficient condition for L to benefit more from exposing R's position than elucidating its own is

that L is "weakly less extreme" than R, in the sense that $(g_{jLi} - x_{Li}) \leq (x_{Ri} - g_{jRi})$; and R is

positioned to the right of j's certainty equivalent ($x_{Ri} \geq g_{jRi}$). QED.

Appendix B: Empirical Analysis

Analysis of Partisan Cable News Mentions

In the main text, we demonstrated that in the 116th Congress, ideologically extreme Democrats were far more likely to be mentioned on Fox News than moderates, and extreme Republicans were more likely to be mentioned on MSNBC. Here, we expand the analysis to each Congress since the 110th (beginning in January of 2007, when full cable transcripts became available), and examine the mentions of House members on partisan cable news relative to their mentions on all media sources, in order to examine whether partisan cable news disproportionately focuses on extremists. For Fox News, our dependent variable is the following:

Relative media mentions =

$$\frac{\text{Fox mentions of member } m \text{ of party } p \text{ in chamber } c}{\text{Total Fox mentions of all members of party } p \text{ in chamber } c} \Bigg/ \frac{\text{All media mentions of member } m \text{ of party } p \text{ in chamber } c}{\text{Total media mentions of members of party } p \text{ in chamber } c}$$

We also include a control variable for whether the member holds a leadership position (majority leader, minority leader, speaker, majority whip, minority whip), and for the number of years the member has been in office, as well as fixed effects for each individual Congress.

Table A2: Partisan Cable News Relative Mentions of Members of Congress as Function of Member Ideology, Congresses 110-116

VARIABLES	(1) Fox mentions of Dems	(2) MSNBC mentions of Reps
GGUM ideology score	-0.185***	0.254***
	(0.0312)	(0.0370)
Leadership position	3.263***	2.354***
	(0.214)	(0.203)
Years in office	0.0109***	0.00715***
	(0.00181)	(0.00200)
Constant	0.207***	0.163***
	(0.0482)	(0.0584)

Observations	2,355	2,368
R-squared	0.136	0.083

Standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1
Note: models include Congress fixed effects.

The results, presented in Table A2, indicate that even relative to other media sources, Fox News and MSNBC are more likely to give attention to relatively extreme members of Congress. We have also used the first dimension of DW-NOMINATE as an alternative measure of member ideology (correlated in our sample with the GGUM estimates at .95), and the result is identical.

Analysis of Fox News Availability and Platform Perceptions

Here, we provide full results of regressions reported in the main text.

Table A3: Regression Results, NAES, Bush and Gore Ideological Assessment

	Gore	Bush
Fox News 2000	0.044	-0.018
	(0.020)**	(0.018)
Democrat	-0.149	-0.077
	(0.021)***	(0.019)***
Republican	0.357	-0.073
	(0.022)***	(0.019)***
Own ideology	-0.096	-0.012
	(0.010)***	(0.009)
Male	0.139	-0.014
	(0.017)***	(0.015)
Age	0.001	-0.000
	(0.001)**	(0.000)
Black	-0.159	0.117
	(0.035)***	(0.032)***
Hispanic	-0.210	0.056
	(0.050)***	(0.045)
Education	0.074	-0.074
	(0.004)***	(0.003)***
Church	-0.027	-0.010
	(0.007)***	(0.006)
Urban	-0.008	-0.016
	(0.022)	(0.020)
Rural	-0.055	0.031
	(0.023)**	(0.021)
Union	-0.039	0.000

	(0.021)*	(0.019)
Constant	3.664	2.936
	(0.648)***	(0.586)***
R^2	0.13	0.05
N	12,032	12,219

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

Note, the dependent variable is a five-point scale for which higher numbers indicate that the respondent believes the candidate to be more *liberal*. State fixed effects not displayed.

Table A4: Regression Results, NAES, Bush and Gore Ideological Assessment, Interactions with Partisanship

	Gore	Bush
Fox x Dem.	-0.007	-0.037
	(0.034)	(0.031)
Fox x Rep.	0.072	-0.017
	(0.035)**	(0.031)
Fox x Ind.	0.068	0.000
	(0.034)**	(0.030)
Democrat	-0.132	-0.069
	(0.024)***	(0.021)***
Republican	0.356	-0.069
	(0.025)***	(0.022)***
Own ideology	-0.096	-0.012
	(0.010)***	(0.009)
Male	0.139	-0.014
	(0.017)***	(0.015)
Age	0.001	-0.000
	(0.001)**	(0.000)
Black	-0.157	0.117
	(0.035)***	(0.032)***
Hispanic	-0.209	0.056
	(0.050)***	(0.045)
Education	0.074	-0.074
	(0.004)***	(0.003)***
Church	-0.027	-0.010
	(0.007)***	(0.006)
Urban	-0.008	-0.016
	(0.022)	(0.020)
Rural	-0.054	0.031
	(0.023)**	(0.021)
Union	-0.039	0.000
	(0.021)*	(0.019)
Constant	3.697	2.946
	(0.648)***	(0.586)***
R^2	0.13	0.05
N	12,032	12,219

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

Note, the dependent variable is a five-point scale for which higher numbers indicate that the respondent believes the candidate to be more *liberal*. State fixed effects not displayed.

Analysis of Platform Perceptions and Contact from Parties

To be written

Construction of Issue Scales

We use cumulative cvile of the American National Election Study to generate issue scales from 1984 to 2016. We exclude prior years because the number of identical questions declines dramatically before 1984, casting doubt on the validity of longitudinal comparisons. The variables included in the economic and moral issue scales are items that have been asked in most of the period (at least seven out of the nine waves) and that have at least moderate correlations with the other issues.[6]

Items included in the economic issue scale (reliability coefficient is 0.76):
- VCF0806: Governmental or private health insurance plan (7-point scale)
- VCF0809: Guaranteed jobs and income (7-point scale)
- VCF0839: Government Services and Spending (7-point scale)
- VCF0886: Federal Spending: Poor people (3-point scale)
- VCF0887: Federal Spending: Child care (3-point scale)
- VCF0890: Federal Spending: Public schools (3-point scale)
- VCF0894: Federal Spending: Welfare programs (3-point scale)
- VCF9049: Federal Spending: Social Security (3-point scale)

Items included in the moral issue scale (reliability coefficient is 0.76):
- VCF0834: Women should have an equal role (7-point scale)
- VCF0838: Abortion (4-point scale)
- VCF0876a: Law against homosexual discrimination (4-point scale)
- VCF0877a: Gays in the military (4-point scale)
- VCF0878: Should Gays/Lesbians be able to adopt children (2-point scale)
- VCF0851: Newer lifestyles contribute to society breakdown (5-point scale)
- VCF0852: One should adjust moral views to changes (5-point scale)
- VCF0853: More emphasis on traditional values (5-point scale)
- VCF0854: Tolerance of different moral standards (5-point scale)

We extract the scores of the latent variables from the indicators using a standard structural equation measurement model for latent traits. The correlations with the scores obtained when using other latent variable extraction techniques range from 0.97 to 0.99. This approach is preferable to IRT because many of the indicators are continuous while IRT is most commonly used and best suited for dichotomous or other categorical variables.

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[6] For instance, we exclude questions on spending on crime and science because they show very low correlations with other items.

We exclude a small number of cases with missing values for all of the items included in one of the issue scales. The model imputes the missing data based on the observed correlations between the items.