Factional Affect and Identity in American Politics

Scholars have recently noted an increase in affective polarization between members of the two major parties in American politics (e.g., Iyengar et al., 2019). Evidence shows that identity-based affect has important behavioral consequences: partisans are willing to discriminate against the opposing party in dating (Huber and Malhotra, 2017), scholarship decisions (Iyengar and Westwood, 2015), and hiring decisions (Gift and Gift, 2015).

Yet conflict in American politics is not limited to inter-party conflict—intra-party conflict is rising as well. The number of contested primaries has increased since 2014 (Ballotpedia, 2022). Fractional struggles have extended beyond ideology to encompass derogatory and sometimes violent rhetoric and action. Leading up to the 2022 elections, Republican Senate candidate Eric Greitens released an ad that pictured him bursting into a home with a shotgun accompanied by a SWAT team. His mission in the ad was “RINO hunting”—hunting Republicans not part of his faction (Feuer, 2022). Prominent Republican opponents of Donald Trump regularly receive death threats from members of the public identifying with the Trump faction (Balevic, 2022). Rep. Mike Rogers (R-AL) nearly came to blows with hard-right Rep. Matt Gaetz (R-FL) on the floor of the House of Representatives over a factional disagreement about the House Speakership (Kane and Wells, 2023). Recently, two factions of the Pennsylvania Republican Party got into a “scuffle” over control of the party apparatus—fractional conflict those involved admitted was not ideological (Homans, 2023).

Despite the increasing prominence of intra-party factional conflict in the United States, little is known about the prevalence, extent, and causes of factional conflict. In this proposed project, I study intra-party factional identities and affect. As threats of factional violence increase, particularly among Republicans, it is critical to understand the roots and extent of factional conflict. Is factional strife purely based on policy disagreements, or are factions a social identity, akin to party (e.g., Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, 2012)? I will study this question in the context of the Polarization Research Lab’s tracking poll. By asking Democratic and Republican respondents for their factional identity as well as for feeling thermometer ratings of each major faction within their party, I will be able to explore the factional identities of Americans. Specifically, I will establish the proportion of partisans identifying with a faction and the intensity of inter-factional conflict, measured using factional feeling thermometers. I will also compare the extremity of factional feeling thermometer ratings to party feeling thermometers. Next, I will examine the correlates of factional identification, including demographic characteristics and social identities. Given the content of conflict among Republican factions, I hypothesize that factional identities and affect are less related to policy than they are to adherence to democratic norms, support for violence, and trust—a hypothesis I will test in the context of the Polarization Research Lab’s battery of questions in each of these areas.

Understanding intra-party conflict is timely and significant as factional violence becomes more common. My proposed study will contribute to this understanding by establishing the extent and extremity of factional identity and affect. This project will lay the groundwork for a research agenda which seeks to understand the causes of factional identity and affect, offering relevant mechanisms to prevent future escalations of this conflict.
References

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