



Polarization and Democracy in Peril

Jenna Bednar

University of Michigan

Political Science & Public Policy

Liz Cheney tells Colorado graduates to 'stand in truth,' warns democracy is in peril

May 29, 2023 · 5:11 PM ET

 Deepta Shivaram



Insight > News & Events : News > Seven in ten Americans say the country is in crisis, at risk of failing
enshot

Seven in ten Americans say the country is in crisis, at risk of failing

New NPR/Ipsos poll finds a year after January 6th, Americans remain divided on interpretation of the event

3 January 2022 Politics / Polling

The New York Times

See more from our live coverage: [Midterm Elections Daily](#)

Voters See Democracy in Peril, but Saving It Isn't a Priority

A New York Times/Siena College poll found that other problems have seized voters' focus — even as many do not trust this year's election results and are open to anti-democratic candidates.

ot **The Daily Article**

Donald Trump to be arraigned today: Is democracy "in danger of collapse"?

JUNE 13, 2023 - JIM DENISON, PHD

The Washington Post
Democracy Dies in Darkness

National Security Foreign Policy Intelligence Justice Immigration Military

Trump's indictment plus candidacy could endanger democracy and the rule of law

The collision of former president Donald Trump's criminal indictment with the presidential campaign could further undermine confidence in democratic principles and institutions of government, experts say

Analysis by [Dan Balz](#), [Ann E. Marimow](#) and [Perry Stein](#)
June 17, 2023 at 11:43 a.m. EDT

The Media's Diagnosis: US Democracy is in Peril. What should we do?

Today's Arc

- Evidence: downgrading democratic index
- Diagnosis:
 - Decaying Norms
 - Polarization
 - Ideological
 - Affective
- Prognosis, using complexity science:
 - Democratic Robustness
 - Polarization's dynamics
- Remedy: Institutions to restore diversity
 - Electoral system: RCV
 - Gerrymandering reform
 - Federalism
- Democracy in peril?
- BLUF: US Democracy is made stronger through decentralization and diversification, not centralization

Is the U.S. democracy in
peril? How would we
know, and what can we do
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Step 1: Gathering the evidence

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Global Democratic Shift

Closed autocracy: citizens do not have the right to choose either the chief executive of the government or the legislature through multi-party elections

Electoral autocracy: citizens have the right to choose the chief executive and the legislature through multi-party elections; but they lack some freedoms, such as the freedoms of association or expression that make the elections meaningful, free, and fair

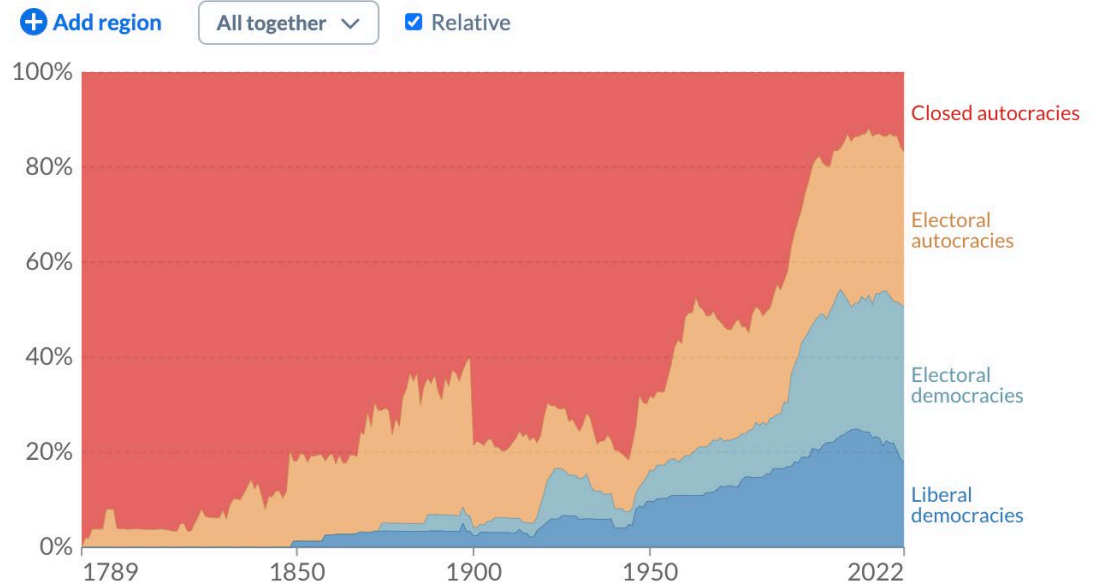
Electoral democracy: citizens have the right to choose the chief executive and the legislature in meaningful, free and fair, and multi-party elections

Liberal democracy: electoral democracy and citizens enjoy individual and minority rights, are equal before the law, and the actions of the executive are constrained by the legislative and the courts

Countries that are democracies and autocracies, World

Our World
in Data

Political regimes based on the criteria of the classification by Lührmann et al. (2018) and the assessment by V-Dem's experts.



Source: OWID based on Lührmann et al. (2018); V-Dem (v13)

OurWorldInData.org/democracy • CC BY

Note: The share of closed autocracies increases a lot in 1900 because V-Dem covers many more countries since then, often colonies.

▶ 1789 2022

The State of Democracy

Global Democracy Index rates, by country/territory (2021)*

Full democracies

- 9.00-10.00
- 8.00-8.99

Flawed democracies

- 7.00-7.99
- 6.00-6.99

Hybrid regimes

- 5.00-5.99
- 4.00-4.99

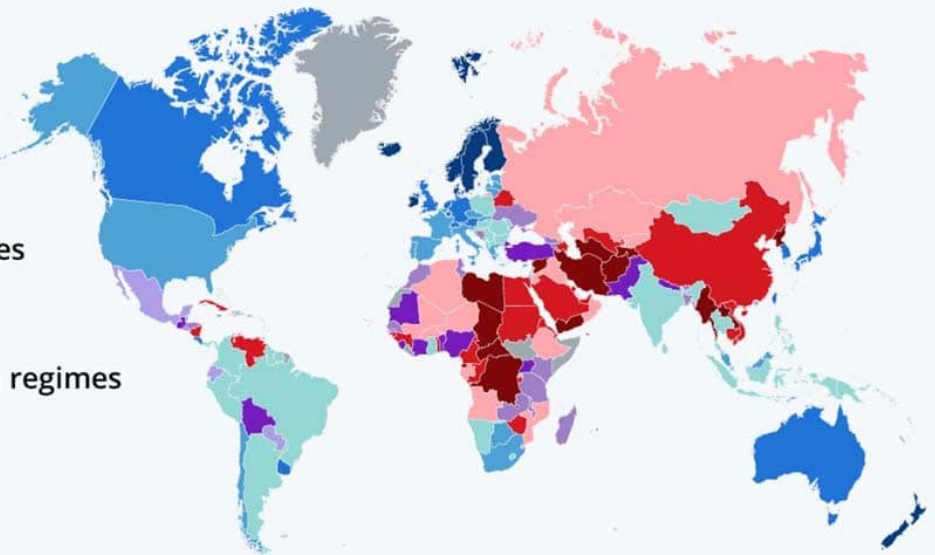
Authoritarian regimes

- 3.00-3.99
- 2.00-2.99
- 0-1.99

No data

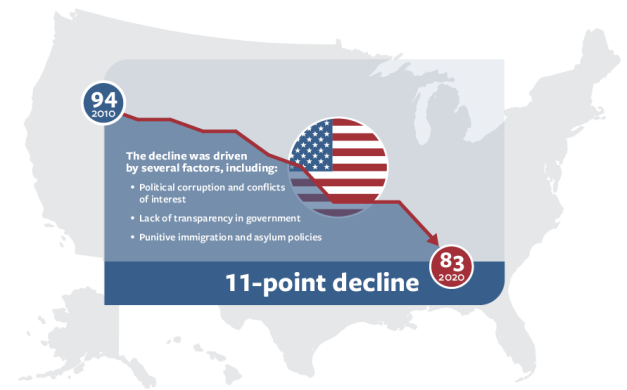
* takes into account electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, the functioning of government, political participation and political culture

Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit



statista

United States in Decline
Over the past 10 years, the United States' aggregate *Freedom in the World* score has declined by 11 points, placing it among the 25 countries that have suffered the largest declines in this period.



Freedom House

Note: The US reached a score of 94 in the 2010 edition of *Freedom in the World*. Covering the events of 2010, it reached a score of 83 in the 2021 edition, covering 2020. All scores are on a scale of 0 to 100. For more information on the methodology, visit freedomhouse.org.

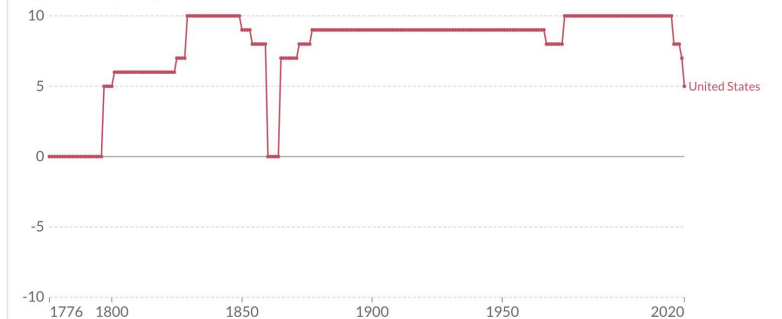
This infographic is from the *Freedom in the World* year report by Freedom House.

Democracy, 1776 to 2020

Based on the assessments and index by *Polity 5* (2021). It captures the extent to which open, multi-party, and competitive elections choose a chief executive who faces comprehensive institutional constraints, and political participation is competitive. It ranges from -10 to 10 (fully democratic).

Our World In Data

+ Add country or region



Source: Polity 5 (2021)

OurWorldInData.org/democracy • CC BY

▶ 1776 ◯ 2020

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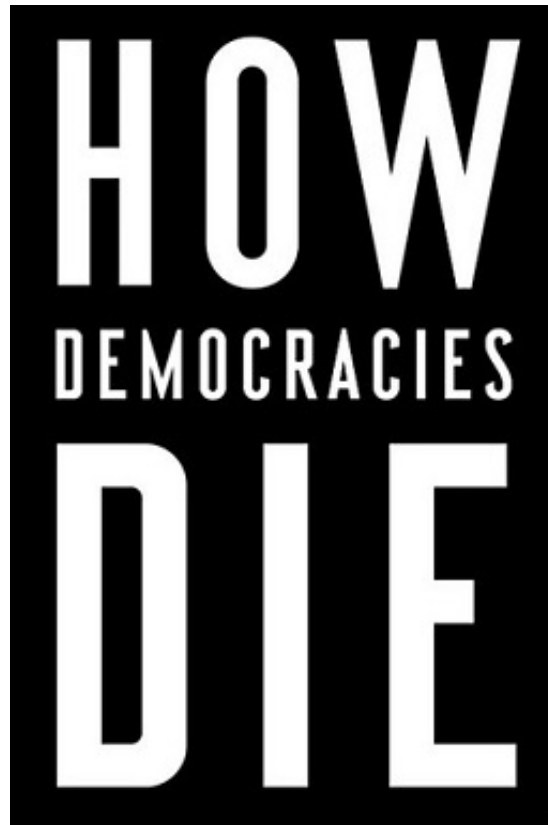
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Diagnosis: two (intertwined) hypotheses

- Norm decay
- Polarization

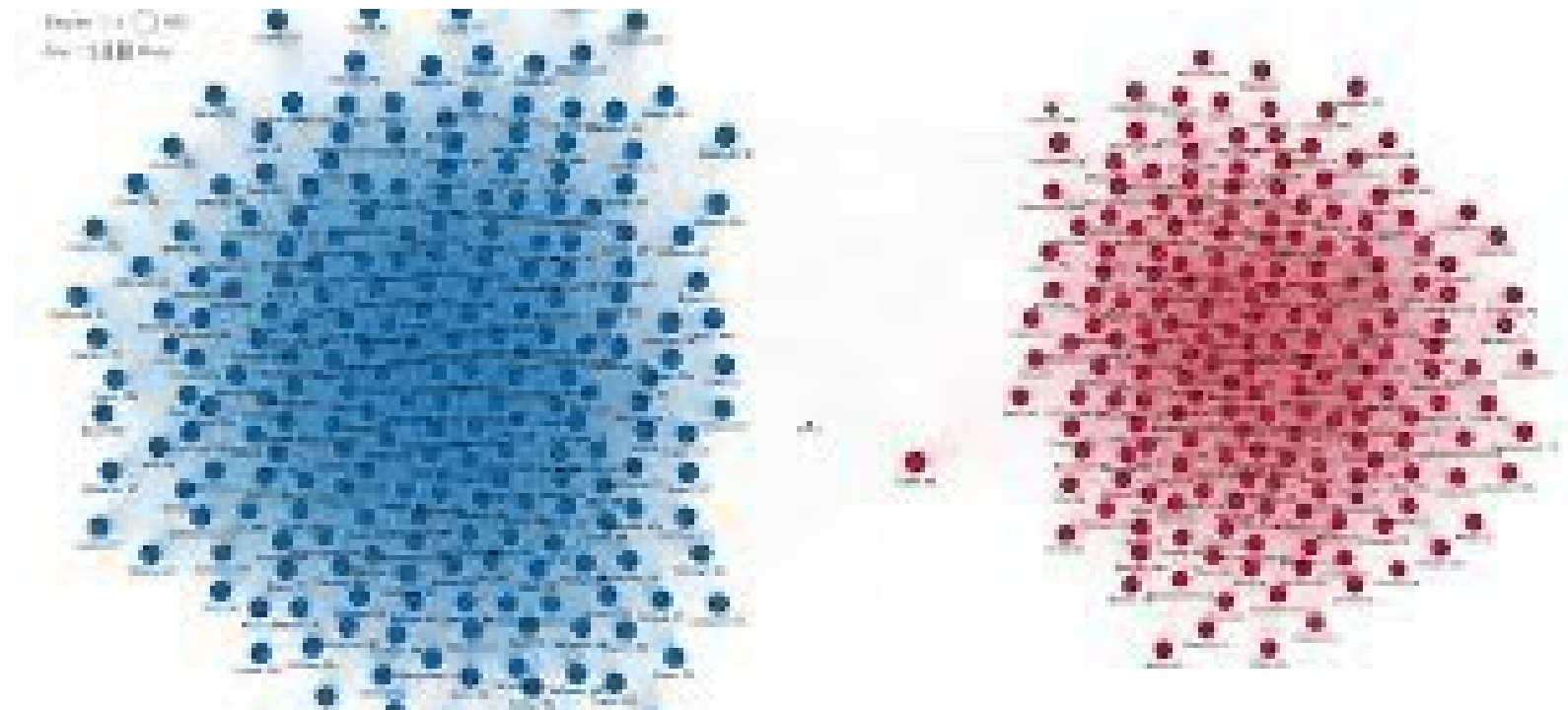
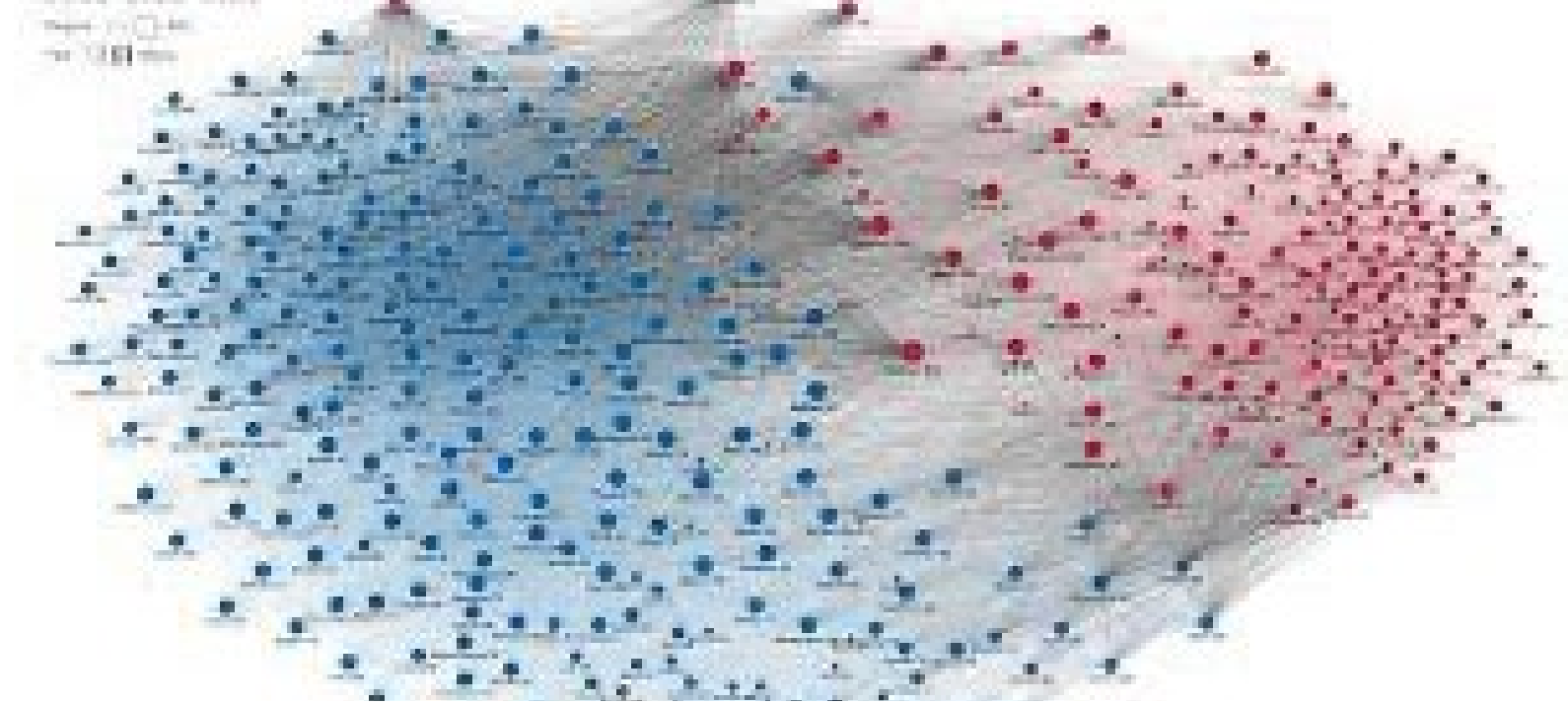
Levitsky & Ziblatt



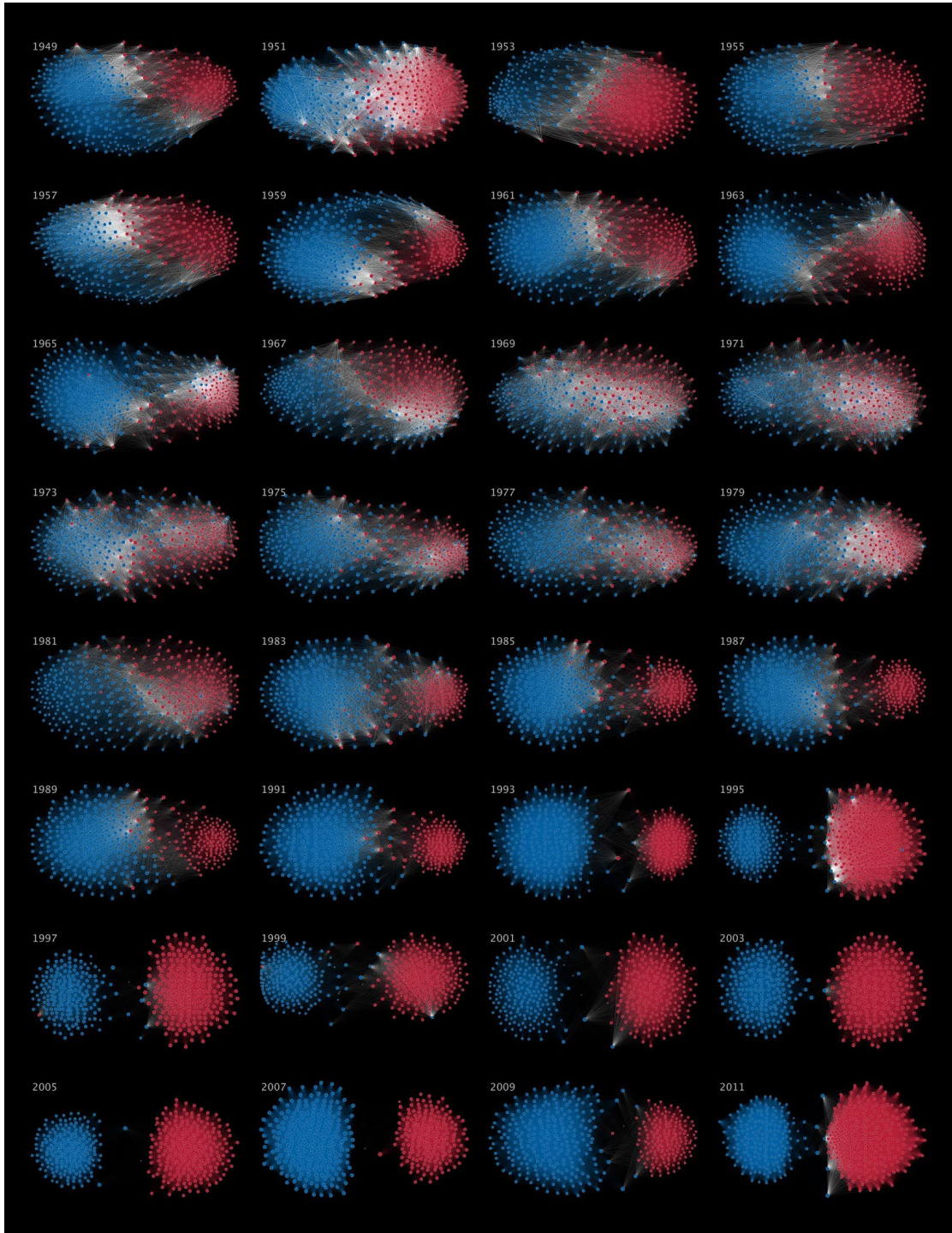
- Leaders subvert democratic process
- Norms sustain democracy:
 - Mutual toleration: opposition is legit
 - Forebearance: self-restraint
- These norms are decaying
- Contributing factors
 - Willingness to engage in extreme/self-aggrandizing behavior
 - Lack of institutional will to constrain or punish
 - Polarization

Polarization in Congress

- Lines are pairs who voted together
- Gray lines are bipartisan pairs



Partisanship in Congress:
1949-2011

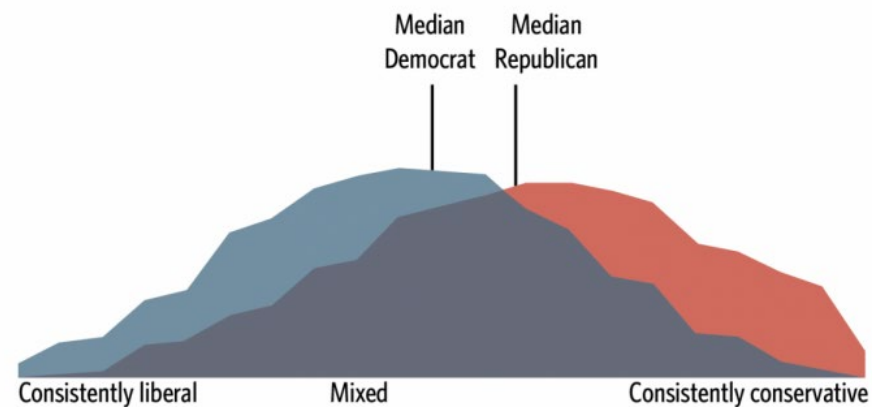


And among the public

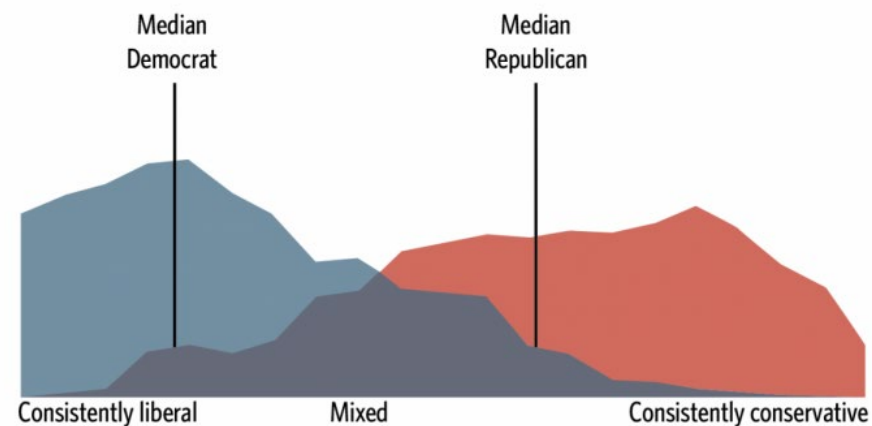
Political polarization in 1994 and 2017

The viewpoints of the median Democrat and median Republican in 2017 have moved further apart since 1994.

1994



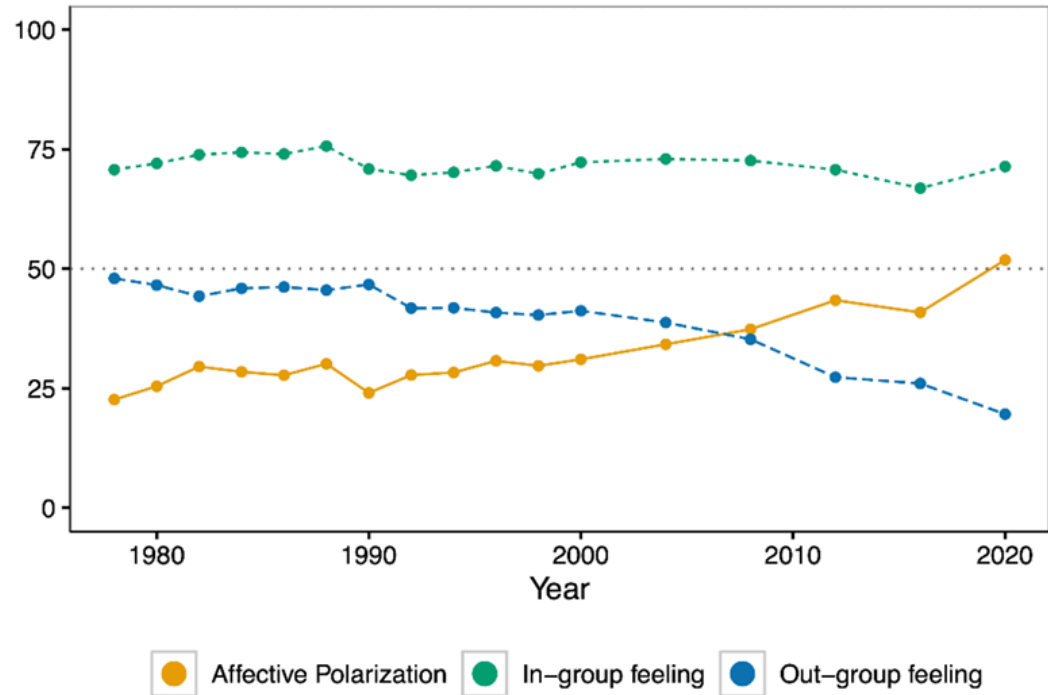
2017



Affect more powerful than ideology

- Affect = social distance; fear and loathing of partisan others and viewing copartisans positively
- Partisan gaps are driven by people with high levels of affective polarization
- Affect is what shapes political discourse

Figure 1: Affective Polarization Over-Time



Polarization and Norms Intertwined

- May 2017 special election candidate (Repub) assaulted a reporter on the eve of election
- Color is whether norm enforcement activated
- Length of vector is effect of assault
- Key finding: R districts rewarded media assault instead of punishing it

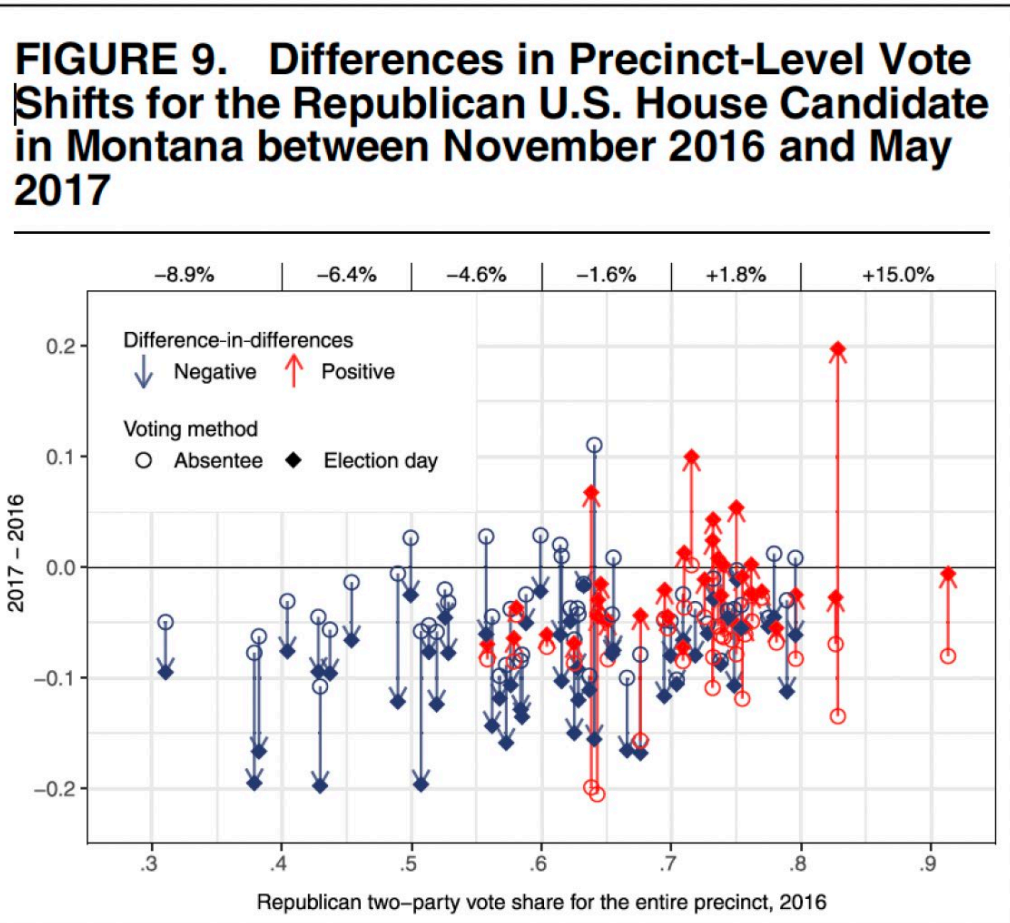
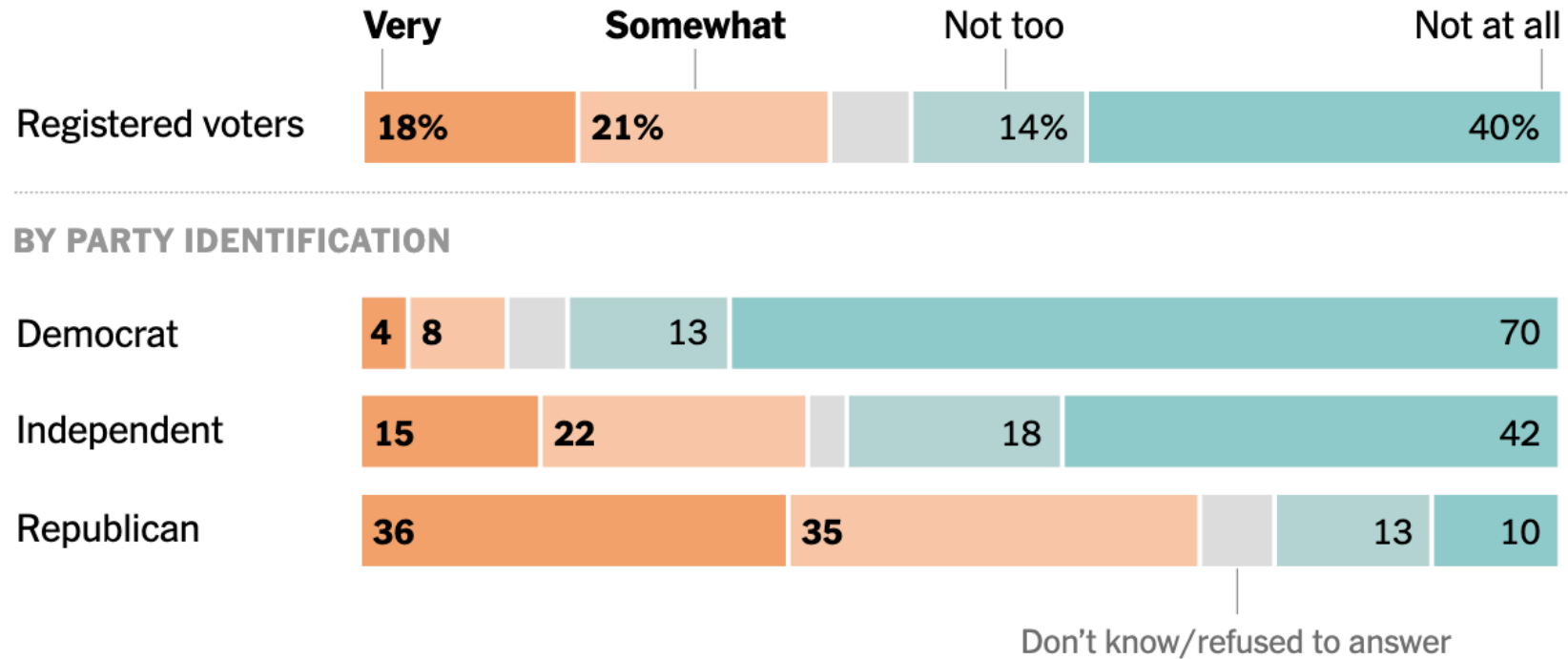


Figure 6: Source: Graham and Svulik 2020, "Democracy in America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States," *American Political Science Review* 114(2):392-409. [doi:10.1017/S0003055420000052](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055420000052)

Voters who are open to candidates who reject 2020 election results

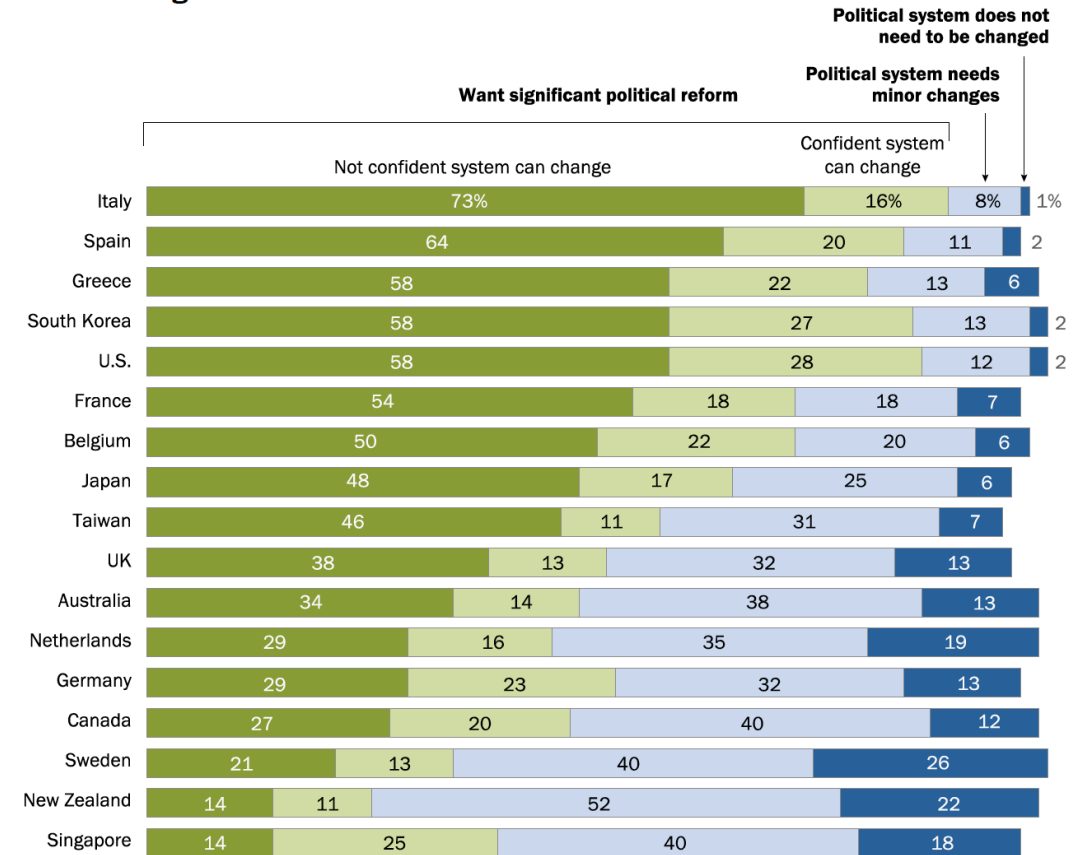
Thinking about a candidate for political office who you agree with on most positions, how comfortable would you be voting for that candidate if they say they think the 2020 election was stolen?



Based on a New York Times/Siena College poll of 792 registered voters nationwide from Oct. 9 to 12, 2022. Party identification is self-identified and does not include voters who lean toward one party; independents include only self-identified independents. • By Ashley Wu

Giving up hope?

Those who want changes to their political system are not confident political system can be changed



Note: Those who did not answer not shown. Confidence that the political system can be changed only shown for people who say their political system needs major changes or complete reform. Percentages based on total sample. The total share who say they want significant political reform may differ slightly from previous charts due to rounding.

Source: Spring 2021 Global Attitudes Survey. Q13c & Q14.

"Citizens in Advanced Economies Want Significant Changes to Their Political Systems"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

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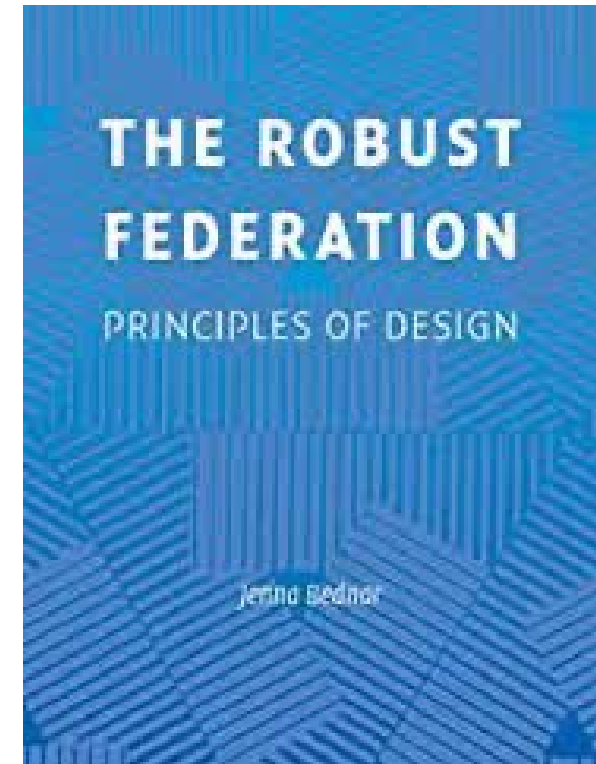
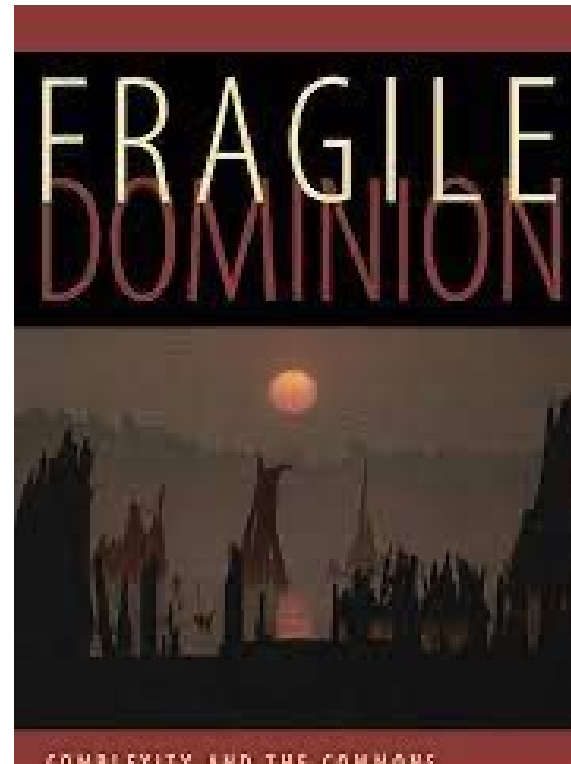
Forecasting requires

- Observations
- Models
- Existing studies offer observations; models are... linear projections? Why?
- Opportunity for complexity science
 - Robustness theory
 - Polarization dynamics



Safeguarding Democratic Robustness

- Robustness (not stability): adaptive, maintain functionality
- Robust system design: redundancy, modularity, diversity
- Democratic system of safeguards:
 - Redundancy from overlapping instits, ie sep of powers, bicameralism, staggered elections, etc
 - Diversity from different aggregations of voters, sequential elections
 - Modularity from state and local authority
- Fragility: if the safeguards become overly aligned; ie highly dependent on diversity

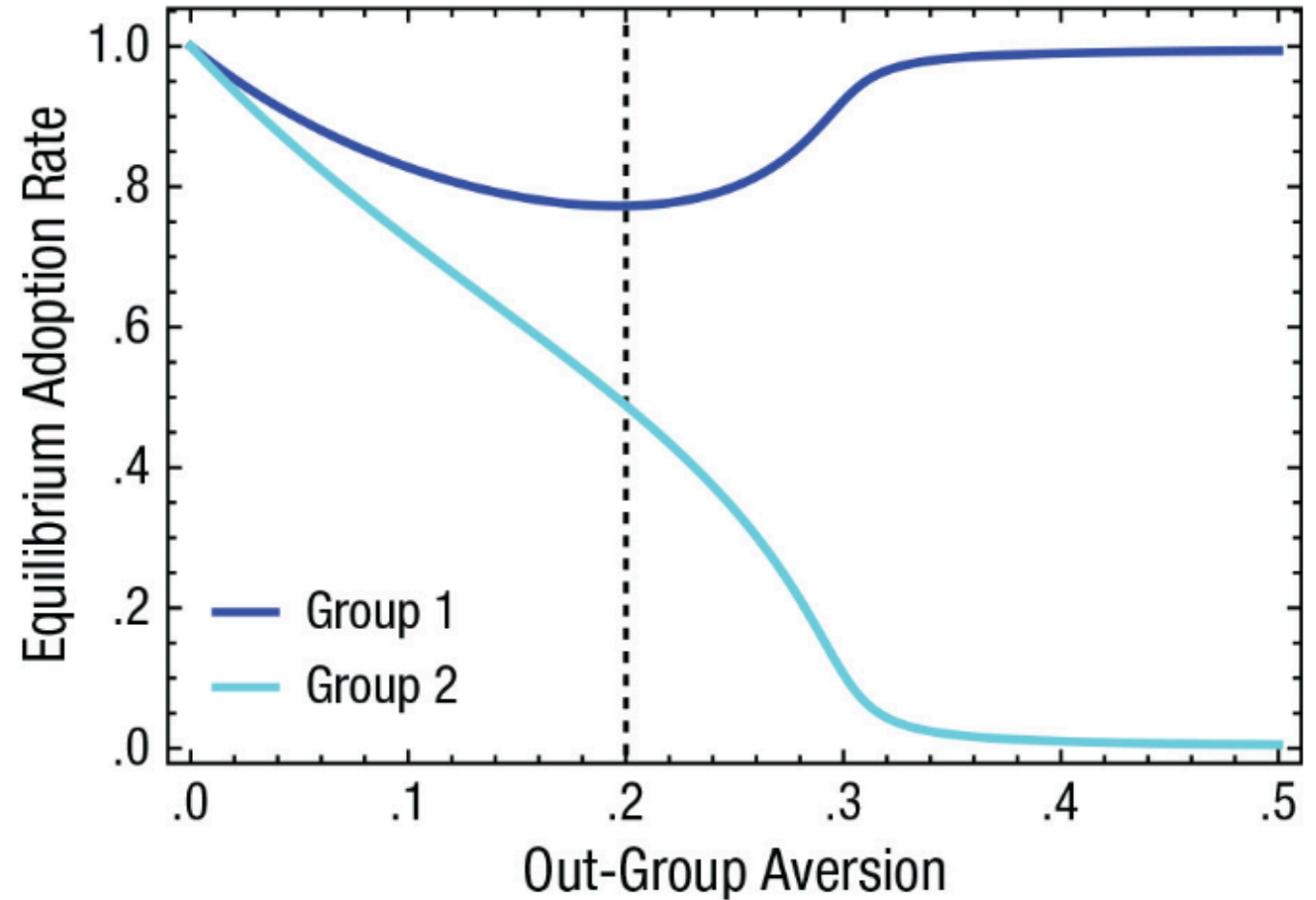


The U.S. federation is designed according to robustness principles. Can we pinpoint the threat from polarization?

Effect 1: Homophily and Aversion lead to Bimodality

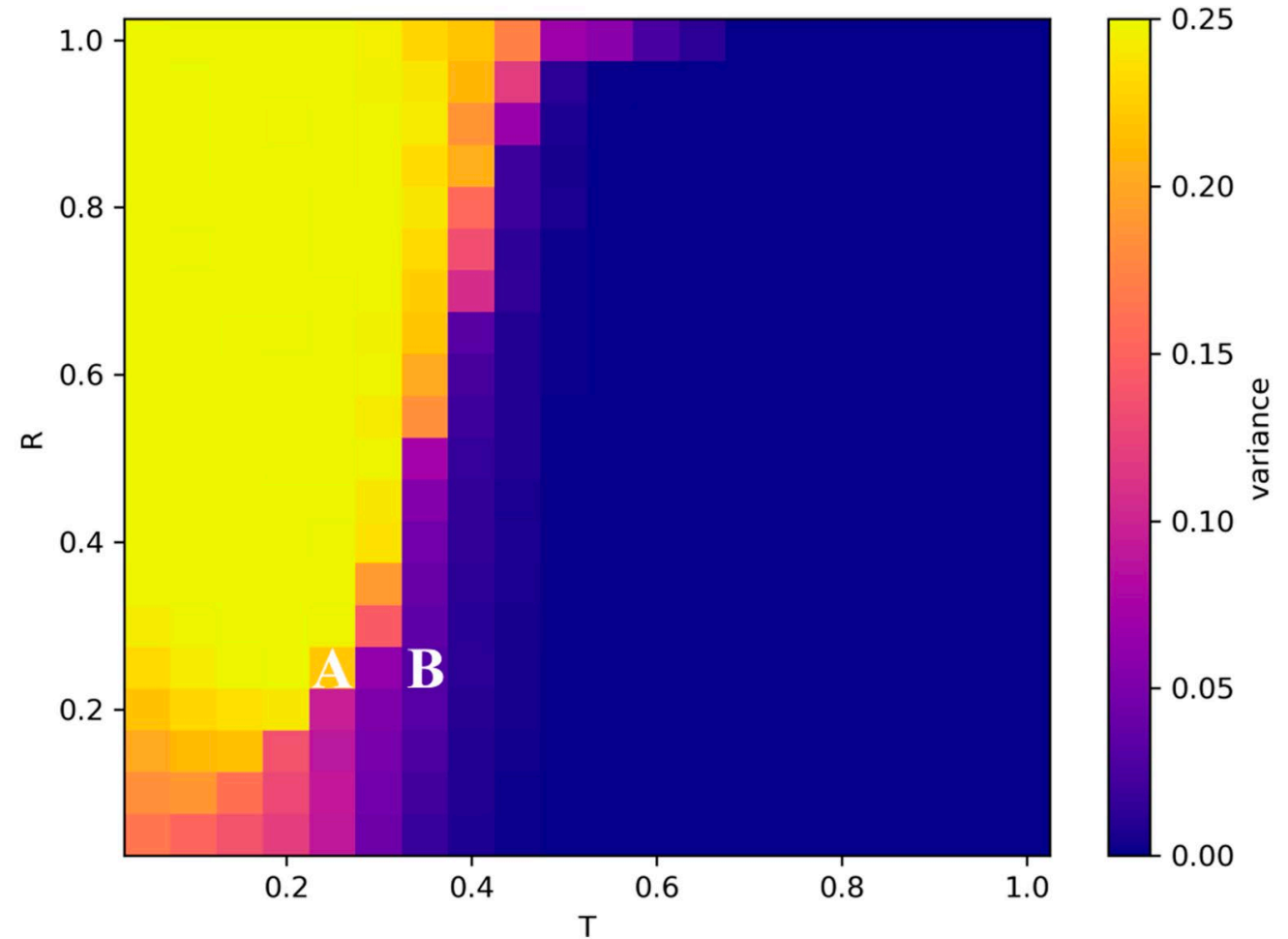
- Attraction – Repulsion Models
- Homophily: ingroup preferences “pull”
- Outgroup aversion: distaste for others “push”
- (source: Smaldino et al; underadoption of beneficial products / policies due to outgroup aversion)

a



Effect 2: Elites Lose Control of Polarization

- Might want to manipulate for electoral gain
- Most effective manipulation through fear instead of admiration, ie through outgroup aversion instead of homophily
- Attract/repulsion models suggest that control loss has to do with how responsive R public is and their tolerance T of difference
- Lower tolerance and more responsive = harder to control
- (Source: Axelrod, Daymude, and Forrest 2021)

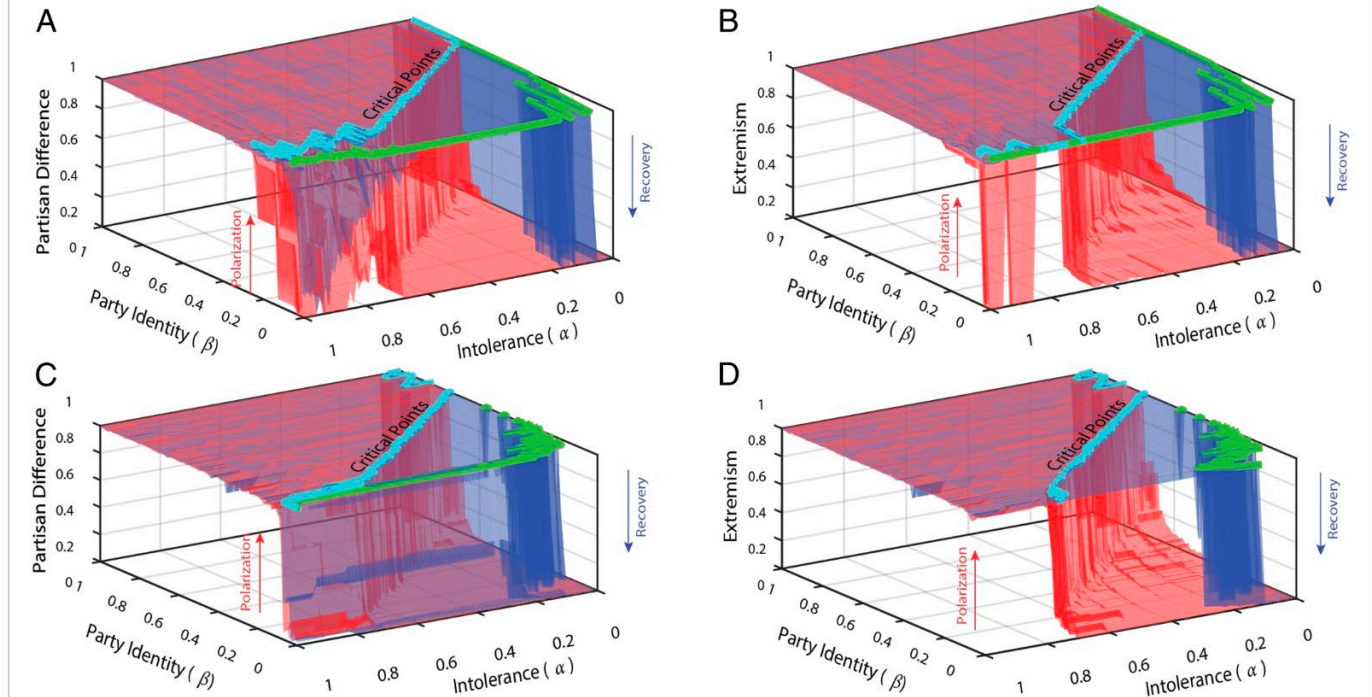


The effects of responsiveness (R) as a function of tolerance (T). Average polarization of the population's ideological positions after 1,000,000 steps, averaged over 20 iterations for each (T, R) pair. T and R are both varied over the range 0.05, 0.10, ..., 1.0. There is a phase change from extreme polarization (yellow) with low T to convergence (dark blue) with high T . The phase change is largely independent of R . A and B indicate the $T = 0.25$ and $T = 0.35$ cases shown in [Fig. 2](#) on the boundary of the phase change.

Effect 2, cont: Loss of control can be irreversible

- The non-linear dynamics of outgroup aversion can cross a threshold / tipping point of irreversibility
- Key point: polarization becomes harder to reverse as party identity and intolerance increase

Fig. 5.

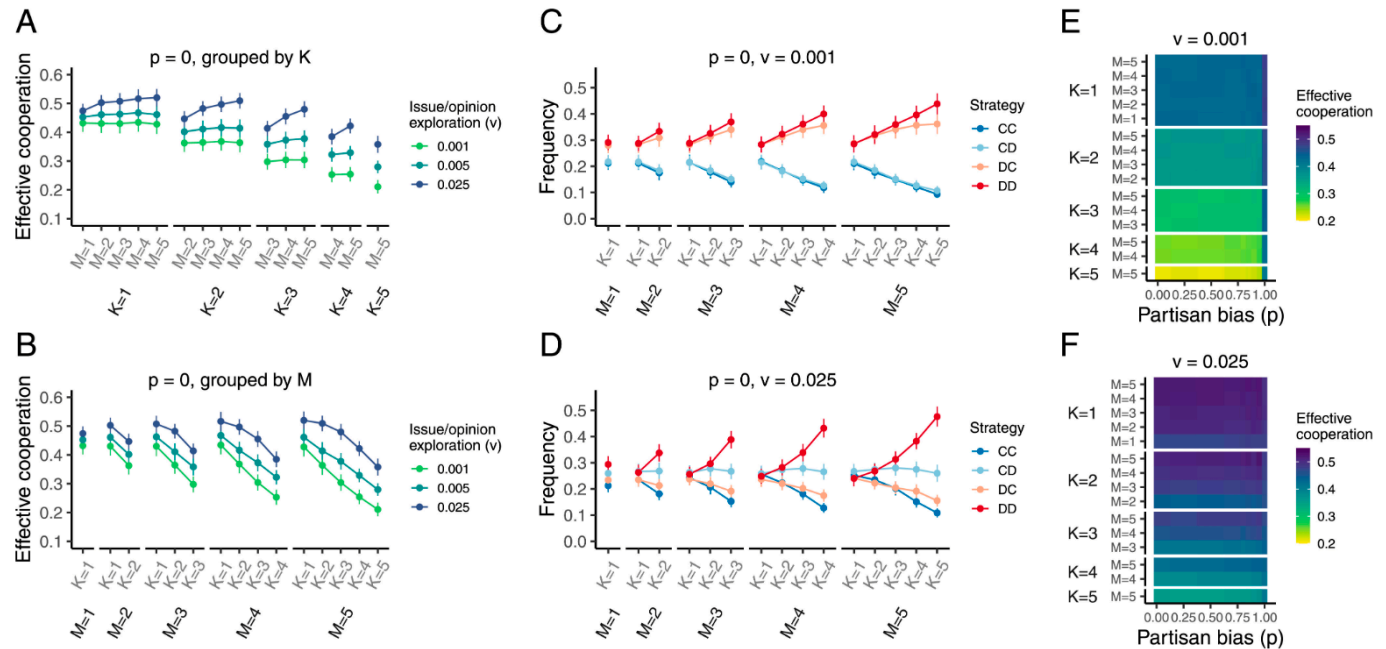


Robustness tests over the entire range of party identity and intolerance. The red surface shows the forward trajectory as polarization increases and the blue surface shows the recovery. The critical points (where the trajectory experiences a sharp change) are indicated in green along the cliff edge. The void between the red and blue regions corresponds to the hysteresis loops in Fig. 3 (in A and B) and Fig. 2 (in C and D). The critical values fluctuate widely for very small α and β . The width of the loops decreases along with the increase of the control parameters due to the larger decrease in the critical values for polarization compared to the decrease in critical values for recovery. In all four panels, polarization becomes increasingly hard to reverse as party identity and intolerance increase.

Effect 3: Polarization Undermines Interest and Issue Diversity

- Cooperation increases with the number of issues (ie, Madison's expanding the sphere)
- Partisanship and polarization reduce the number of issues available, for a global loss
- (Source Kawakatsu, Lelkes, Levin, Tarnita 2021)
- ****Most threatening to democracy's safeguards**

Fig. 2.



Cooperation increases with increasing number of available issues (M) and decreasing number of issues individuals care about (K). For each parameter setting, we ran an ensemble of 150 simulations with population

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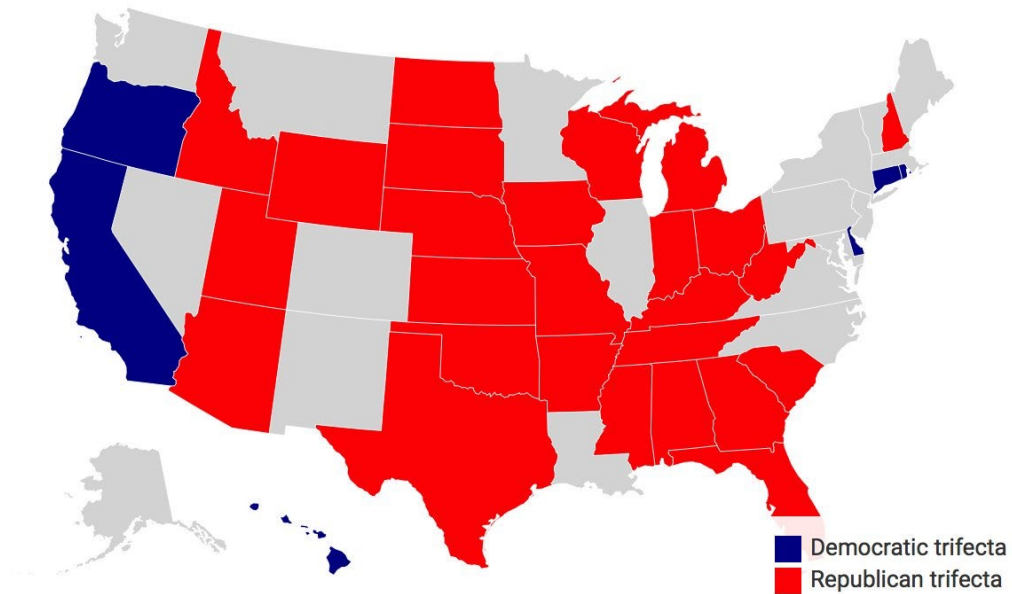
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Remedy: Support Issue Diversity

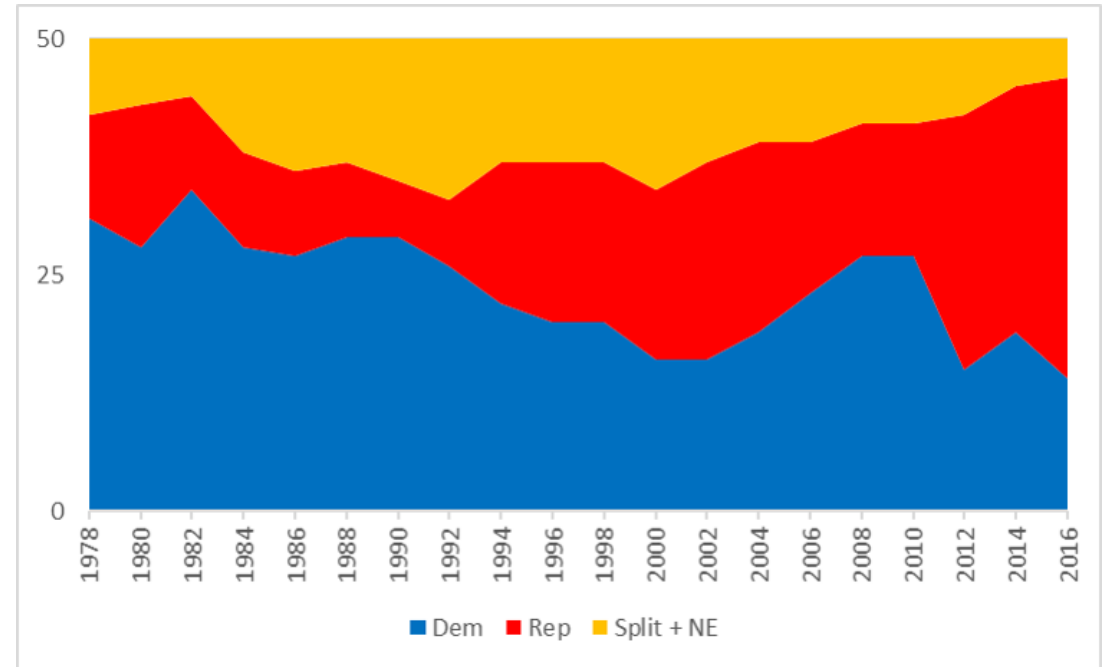
- Fix gerrymandering
- Introduce RCV, top-two runoffs
- Resist nationalization of state legislatures

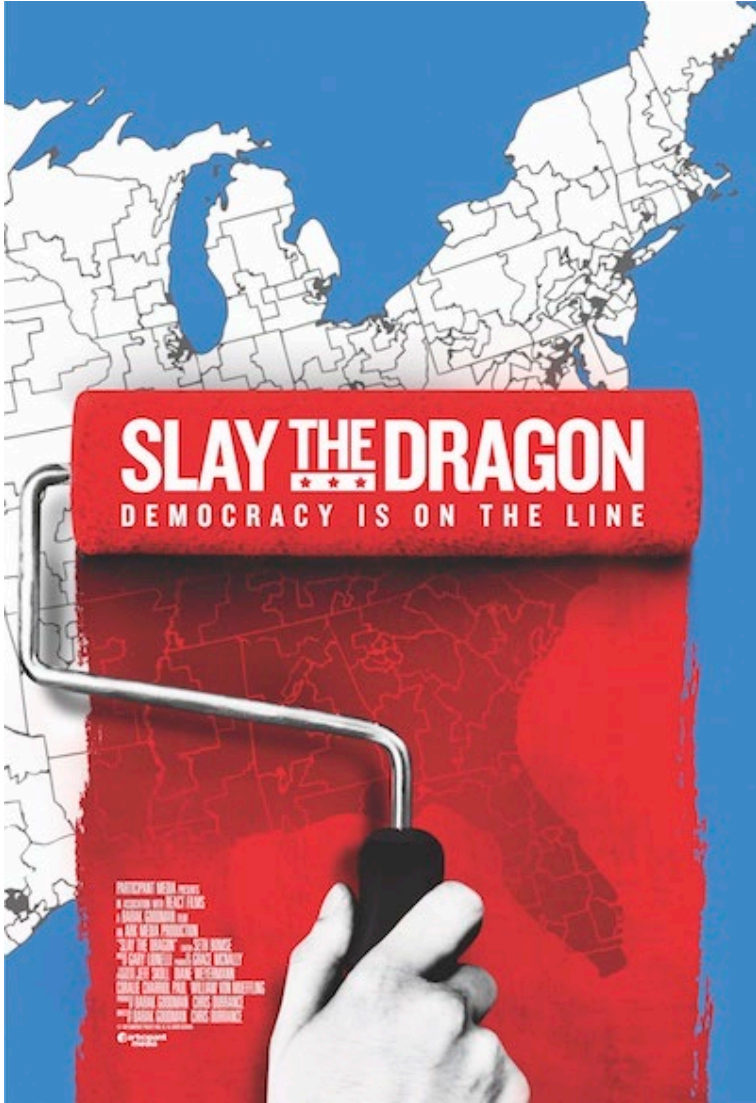
Current state government trifectas



Source: Ballotpedia

BALLOTPEDIA

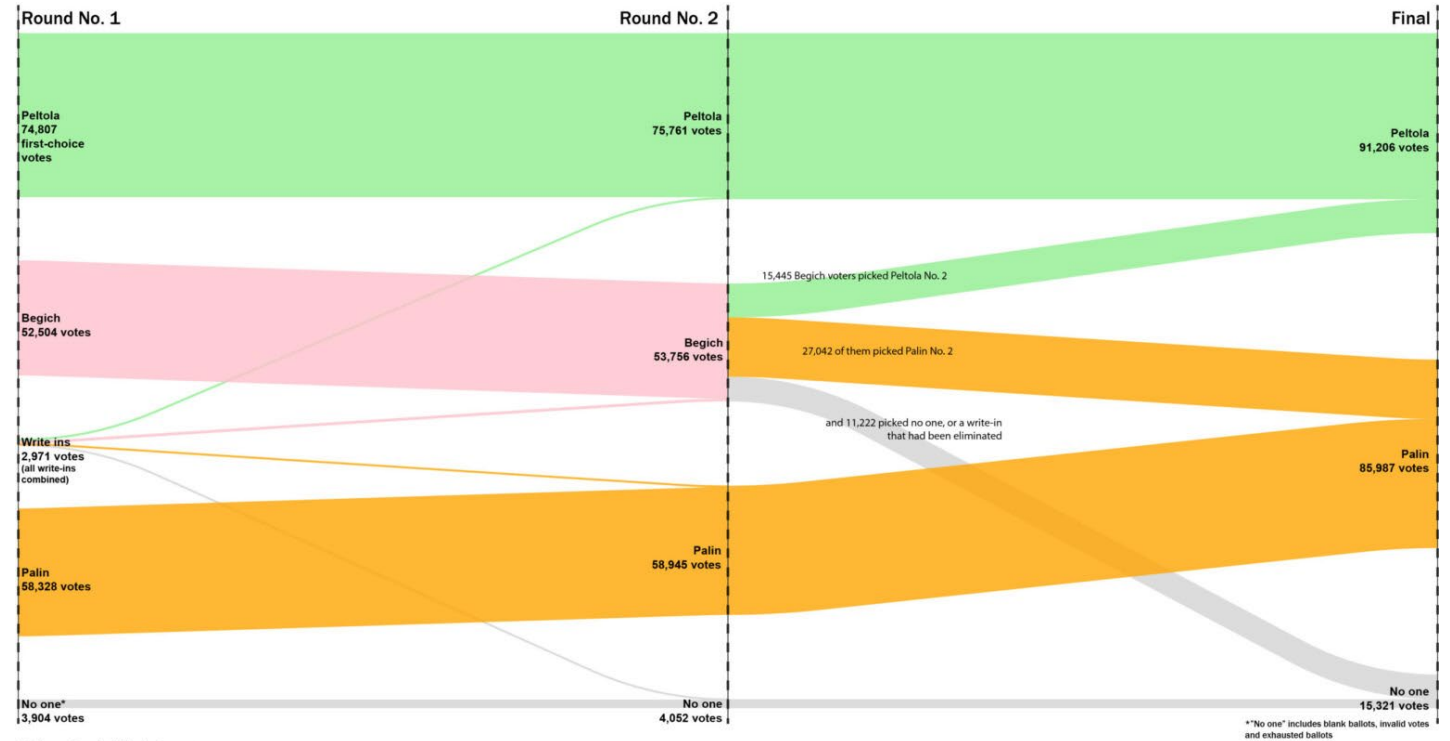




VOTERS
NOT POLITICIANS

Alaska Special Election, August 2022

Alaska's preliminary Aug. 31, 2022 ranked choice count



By James Brooks | Alaska Beacon
Sources: Alaska Division of Elections, Aug. 16 summary report and Aug. 31 RCV report, made with Sankeydiagram.net

- The majority of first votes cast were split between the two Republican candidates
- The Democrat prevailed
- Is RCV a flawed system?

The “Top Two” Primary

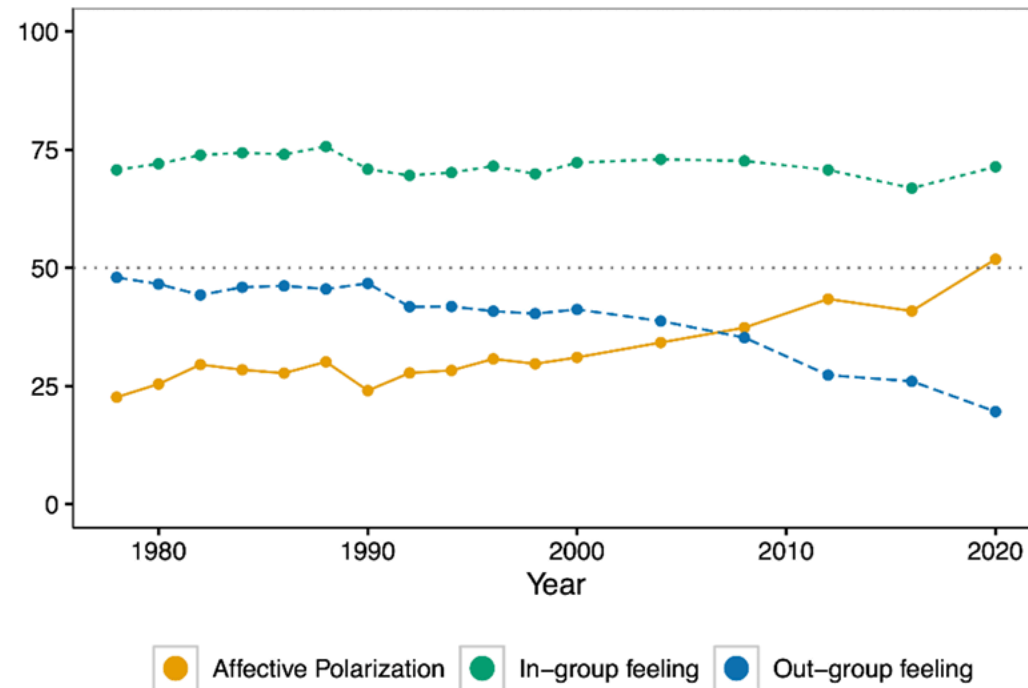
- Problem: reformers claimed that the old primary system was leading to more extreme nominees and increasing polarization
- Solution: open, nonpartisan primary where the top two vote getters move on to the general election
- Concerns about most popular party fielding too many candidates, and so being kept out of the general election altogether
- Adopted in WA, CA, NE (state), LA as runoff system
- Denver mayoral election: from 18 to 2

So, is the U.S. democracy in peril?

Robustness, Resilience, & Recovery

Reminder: affective polarization is the difference between in-group and out-group feeling

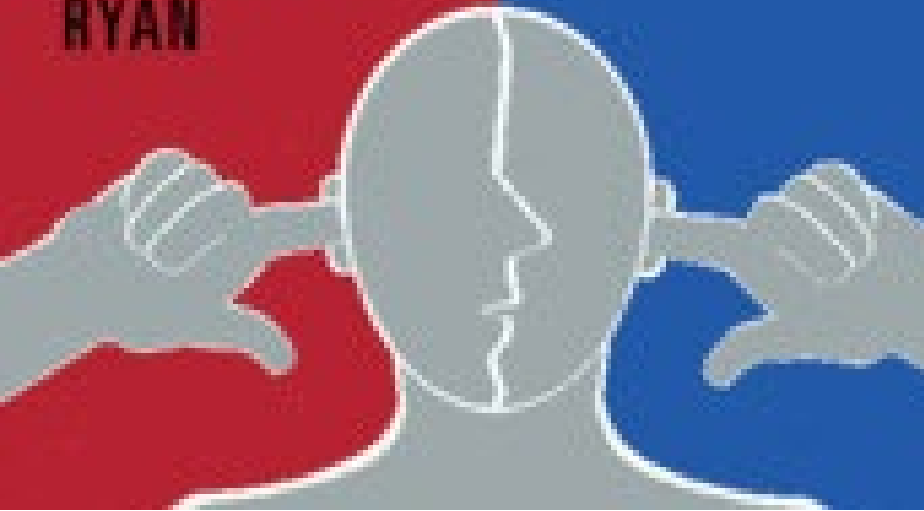
Figure 1: Affective Polarization Over-Time



THE OTHER DIVIDE

Polarization and Disengagement in American Politics

YANNA KRUPNIKOV
JOHN BARRY RYAN



Engaged voters are not representative of the broader public

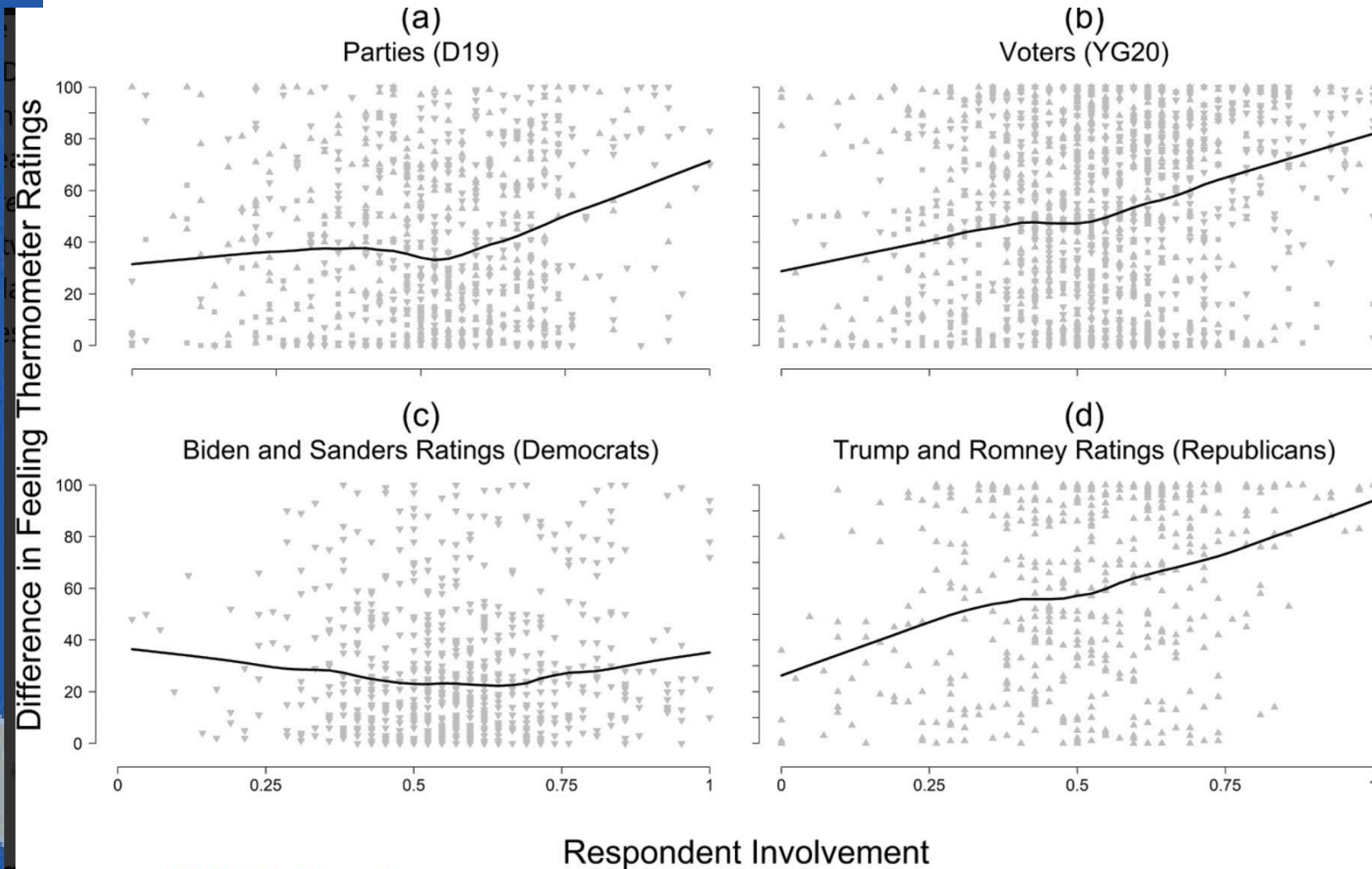


Figure 4.7 The relationship between involvement and affect toward parties, partisans, and elites.

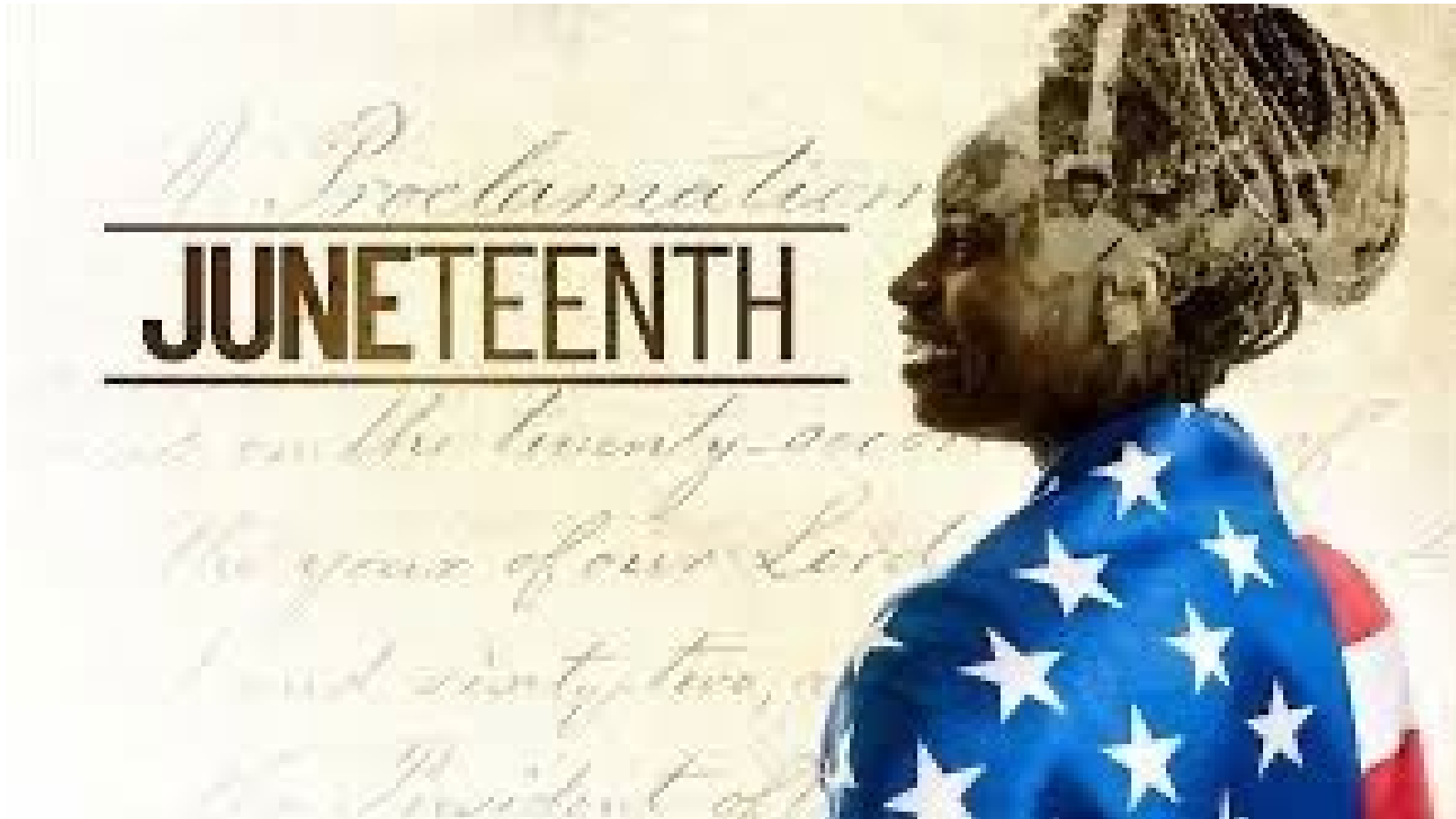
Krupnikov & Ryan (2022):

True Animus Vs. What We Typically Measure

- True *affective* polarization: “I like my party and dislike the other party regardless of who these people are.”
- If the “polarization” is about issue positions, then it is *ideological polarization*.
- If the “polarization” is about having to talk about politics, then it is just a *hatred of disagreement or hatred of partisan politics*.

Wrap

- Democracy in peril: ask why, from what
- Closer look using complexity science:
 - Structure / robustness
 - Threat / polarization dynamics
- Focus attention on institutional remedies that support diverse ideas, interests, and issues
- U.S. democracy is resilient (or at least there's a very strong argument for it)



As we celebrate Juneteenth, let's remember that democracy is not a state, but a process.