

Concentrated but Misaligned: Trends in Voter Agreement on Party Ideology in the United States, 1972–2020

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Abstract: Political parties play a central role in American politics as electoral brands and sources of social identity. Although Americans increasingly recognize differences between the major parties, it is unclear whether they share a common view of each party's ideology. Using ANES data from 1972–2020, this study shows that partisan bias in perceived party ideology was moderate before 2008 but became dominant thereafter. First, consistent with research on asymmetric ideological clarity, partisans in both parties agreed more on the Republican Party's ideology than on the Democratic Party's from 1978 to 2004. Since 2008, however, partisans have shown greater agreement on the opposing party's ideology than on their own. Second, although the partisan gap in perceived ideological extremity has persisted, it remained moderate before 2000 but has grown steadily since 2008—doubling by 2020. These findings suggest that partisan bias has intensified over time and increasingly overshadows shared perceptions.

Political parties play a central role in American politics, functioning both as collective entities with recognizable brand names in electoral competition (Aldrich 1995) and as sources of social identity (Huddy 2001) for voters. Whether in their role as brands or as identities, party images and reputations are crucial in shaping voters' decisions about which party to support or identify with (Grynaviski 2010; Klar and Krupnikov 2016; Levendusky 2009; Snyder and Ting 2002; Woon and Pope 2008). In recent decades, more Americans have come to recognize differences between the two major parties (Grynaviski 2010; Smidt 2017), particularly in terms of ideology (Armaly and Enders 2021; Baumer and Gold 2015; Grynaviski 2010).

While American voters increasingly agree that important differences exist between the major parties, they do not necessarily share the same perceptions of each party's ideology. Democracy functions not only to aggregate preferences but also to hold politicians accountable. In this regard, shared perceptions are critical to democratic accountability (Healy and Malhotra 2013; Little, Schnakenberg, and Turner 2022). Since the electorate also seeks to discourage parties from adopting extreme ideological positions (Busby 2022; Hall 2019; Hall and Thompson 2018), it is important to investigate whether voters hold common views of party ideology.

In this study, I examined voter perceptions of the ideological images of the two major parties in the U.S. using cumulative data from the American National Election Studies (ANES) surveys conducted between 1972 and 2020. Specifically, I investigated the extent to which voters agree on the ideological images of the Democratic and Republican parties, as well as which party is perceived as relatively more extreme over time. The findings reveal that the American electorate exhibited strong agreement on party ideology in 2000, followed by the greatest divergence in 2008. Since then, perceptions have become increasingly aligned again. Importantly, before 2008, partisans shared a common view of party images to some extent, and identity-based bias played

only a moderate role. After 2008, however, partisan bias widened and came to dominate perceptions of party ideology.

To quantify voter agreement, I use entropy from information theory as a measure of ideological dispersion (Shannon 1948). Unlike standard deviation, entropy better captures dispersion given the categorical nature of the data. This approach, commonly used in machine learning, was first introduced to political science by Wilcox (1973). The details and rationales of using entropy is elaborated in the later section.

Political Parties as Brand Names and Their Ideological Reputations

One of the key functions of political parties in democracies is to provide “brand names” with established reputations and recognizable images that allow politicians to be held accountable collectively (Aldrich 1995; Groeling 2010; Grynaviski 2010; Snyder and Ting 2002; Woon and Pope 2008). For politicians—especially new office seekers whose names are not widely recognized—an established party brand serves as a valuable tool for signaling their policy preferences and competence to voters. For voters, a party’s brand conveys general information about candidates who run under party labels, allowing them to make informed judgments at relatively low cost, without needing to learn about each candidate from scratch. A party’s reputation may reflect public perceptions of its ideology and policy preferences (Baumer and Gold 1995; Gerring 2001; Woon and Pope 2008), the group interests it prioritizes (Baumer and Gold 2015; Grossmann and Hopkins 2015; Philpot 2004), its competence and valence (Ashworth and Bueno De Mesquita 2009; Bélanger and Gélneau 2010; Butler and Powell 2014; Calvo, Chang, and Hellwig 2017; Eshima et al. 2023; Pope and Woon 2009; Stiers and Dassonneville 2024), or its association with corruption (Slomczynski and Shabad 2012).

Empirical research consistently shows that voters use party labels to form impressions of individual politicians, particularly their policy positions (Conover and Feldman 1989; Rahn 1993; Riggle et al. 1992; Simas and Evans 2011). Although a party's brand can help voters learn about politicians, it still requires some level of understanding for voters to use party labels effectively as informational shortcuts (Lau and Redlawsk 2001; Lodge and Hamill 1986). Recent literature suggests that ideological polarization among party elites in the United States has made the two major parties more distinguishable within the two-party system, thereby lowering the cost of using party cues as heuristics (Levendusky 2010). These reduced costs also make it easier for less-engaged voters to rely on party cues when making voting decisions (Smidt 2017). Nonetheless, because not all politicians within a party share identical ideologies, party cues cannot fully capture the positions of individual politicians and may sometimes be misleading (Dancey and Sheagley 2013).

The theory of political parties as collective entities with their own enduring reputations view “the electorate, even the party loyalists, as external to the political party” (Aldrich 2011, 217). But do voters also perceive parties this way? Empirical evidence suggests they do. When asked about a political party's name, individuals tend to view the party as a collective entity rather than as a certain group of people. They are more likely to associate a party label with its elites and prominent figures than with all those who self-identify as partisans (Druckman et al. 2022; Druckman and Levendusky 2019). Moreover, exposure to information about a specific subgroup within a party—either elites or ordinary partisans—can reshape individuals' perceptions of the party as a whole and of other subgroups linked to it (Ploger 2024). For ordinary Americans, who do not need to signal policy preferences for electoral purposes, some even avoid identifying as

partisans—despite aligning politically with a party—to distance themselves from the party’s public image (Klar and Krupnikov 2016).

Where do voters update their perceptions of a party’s ideology? First, the formal actions of a party’s elected officials—such as roll call votes in Congress—shape how voters perceive the party’s ideological position (Ansolabehere and Jones 2010; Fortunato and Stevenson 2013; Grynaviski 2010; Woon and Pope 2008). Second, because voters receive information through party campaigns and media, both party rhetoric and media coverage play a significant role in shaping these perceptions (Banducci, Giebler, and Kritzing 2017; Dahlberg 2013; Grossmann and Hopkins 2015; Somer-Topcu, Tavits, and Baumann 2020).

In the U.S., party images have become increasingly associated with liberal-conservative ideology since the 1970s, following the trend of ideological sorting and polarization in Congress (Aldrich 2011; Baumer and Gold 2015; Hetherington 2001). Americans more commonly associate the Democratic Party with liberal ideology and the Republican Party with conservative ideology. However, the literature also points out an asymmetry in the ideological images of the two parties (Baumer and Gold 2015; Ellis and Stimson 2012; Grossmann and Hopkins 2015). The Republican Party is more strongly associated with symbolic conservatism—an identification with the conservative label and abstract conservative philosophy. In contrast, the Democratic Party is often viewed as a coalition of diverse social groups united under a “big tent,” resulting in a weaker and less cohesive ideological image (Grossmann and Hopkins 2015).

Although party elites in the United States have been ideologically polarized for decades—and Americans increasingly recognize the differences between the two major parties—this does not necessarily mean that voters perceive either party as ideologically extreme. Nevertheless, a growing number of Americans now view at least one major party as extreme, with partisans

especially likely to characterize the opposing party in this way (Robison 2023). Notably, the label “extreme” implies a departure from societal norms and is often associated with negative connotations (Busby 2022). Moreover, ideological extremity is broadly stigmatized and widely disliked by the American public (Busby 2022; Homola et al. 2023; Lelkes 2021; Mason 2018).

Partisan Identity and Perceptions of Parties

While political parties serve an essential function as electoral brands, they also operate as social groups to which individuals form attachments and associate with their self-image (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002; Greene 1999; Huddy and Bankert 2017; Huddy, Davies, and Sandor 2020). In the United States, voters’ partisanship has become increasingly aligned with the liberal-conservative ideological divide (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2006; Levendusky 2009). Party images also play a role in partisan identity. One’s social identity is, to some extent, endogenous—individuals tend to avoid identifying with groups perceived to have low social status when they can (Huddy 2001; Tajfel and Turner 1979). In the United States, a significant proportion of Americans do not think themselves, or at least explicitly identify themselves, as a partisan, to distance themselves from party’s negative images (Klar and Krupnikov 2016). Still, Americans’ party identification is stable over time, although the change of identification throughout one’s lifespan can be common (Green and Platzman 2024).

As a form of social identity, partisans tend to view the party they support as their in-group and the opposing party as an out-group, applying a social comparison lens to interparty dynamics. In other words, partisans do not view political parties solely as vehicles for delivering policy outcomes; they also see them as extensions of group identity—“us” versus “them.” It should not be surprising that political parties can simultaneously function as electoral brands—with distinct

reputations and images—and as sources of social identity (Rothschild et al. 2019), much like individuals can also develop group identities around commercial brands (Fournier and Alvarez 2019; Kornberger 2010).

Importantly, partisanship shapes how individuals perceive both in-party and out-party groups through cognitive and motivational mechanisms (Huddy 2001). Partisans tend to believe that out-partisans who hold opposing views are motivated by a lack of information, self-interest, or ideology, while perceiving their own views as accurate and objective (Robinson et al. 1995; Sherman, Nelson, and Ross 2003). They also tend to overestimate the homogeneity of out-partisans, perceiving them as more alike than they actually are (Dias, Lelkes, and Pearl 2025; Mullen and Hu 1989; Sherman, Nelson, and Ross 2003; Simas 2018). Furthermore, partisans often misperceive the opposing party as more ideologically extreme than it is, which reduces their willingness to seek common ground and increases their support for more extreme positions themselves (Ahler 2014; Sherman, Nelson, and Ross 2003).

These misperceptions are not purely cognitive but also motivational. Social identity theory suggests that individuals are motivated to form derogatory beliefs about out-groups that threaten their group identity (Branscombe and Wann 1994; Chae, Dahl, and Zhu 2017; Huddy 2001; Tajfel and Turner 1979). For instance, individuals are more likely to associate out-groups with extremism (Busby 2022). Because extremism is socially stigmatized, partisans are particularly inclined to view the opposing party as more extreme than their own (Armaly and Enders 2021; Hare et al. 2015). The competitive nature of intergroup dynamics in partisan politics further motivates individuals to portray out-partisans as villainous (Turnbull-Dugarte and Wagner 2025).

Agreement in Voters' Perceived Party Ideology

While extensive scholarship has shown that the American electorate increasingly perceives a clear distinction between the two major parties, this does not necessarily imply that voters agree on the parties' ideological positions. First, disagreement may arise when a party does not consistently or clearly convey its ideological stance—for example, when its elected officials hold ideologically diverse positions (Grynaviski 2010; Woon and Pope 2008) or when the party downplays ideological labels (Gerring 2001; Grossmann and Hopkins 2015). A perceived distinction between parties can persist even if each party's ideological image remains ambiguous, as long as their average perceived positions are far apart. Moreover, parties possess reputations beyond ideology, and perceived differences may also reflect attributes such as competence or group representation. Second, even if individuals perceive the same ideological distance between the parties, their assessments of each party's position may shift in parallel, leaving the perceived gap unchanged. Thus, people can disagree about each party's ideological position even when they agree on the overall level of ideological polarization.

At the individual level, clarity of a party's ideological image depends on voters' beliefs about the party's position, which are often held with some uncertainty. Voters update these beliefs gradually over time as they encounter new information and experiences (Fortunato, Silva, and Williams 2025; Grynaviski 2006, 2010)¹. On the one hand, a voter's prior belief—representing party's enduring reputation perceived by the voter—serves a regularizing function, preventing drastic changes in response to a single outlier or isolated event². On the other hand, a party's

¹ The belief updating process does not need to strictly follow Bayes' theorem; psychological bias can be incorporated through additional parameters in the models (see Christensen (2023), Druckman and McGrath (2019), and Hill (2017)).

² Avina (2024) found that a party can make voters to start over their belief about the party by creating a brand new party label.

ideological position is non-stationary: its congressional membership, public messaging, and policy platforms evolve over time, though typically not abruptly. As a result, prior beliefs based on past information and experiences can be informative but may also become outdated, depending on the pace of change.

Formally, a belief can be represented as a statistical distribution with two key components: the mean and the variance. In the context of perceptions of party ideology, the mean reflects a voter's "point estimate" of a party's ideological position, while the variance captures the degree of uncertainty surrounding that estimate. This uncertainty may arise from two sources: limited information or the presence of dispersed signals from the party.

In line with the theories discussed above, Grynaviski (2010) found that when a party's members in Congress hold more ideologically diverse positions, voters tend to have a vaguer image of that party. Furthermore, the literature suggests an asymmetry between the Democratic and Republican Parties in how they brand themselves along the liberal-conservative spectrum. Gerring (2001) and Grossman and Hopkins (2015) argued that, during the late twentieth century and the early twenty-first century, the Democratic Party avoided using ideological labels³ and placed less emphasis on symbolic ideology. This strategy may have contributed to a relatively vague ideological image of the Democratic Party—compared to the Republican Party—in the minds of voters.

In addition to how a party brands itself, partisan identity also shapes perceptions of the clarity of a party's image at the individual level. Research has shown that individuals are more

³ Gerring (2001) noted that the Democratic Party was "campaigning against popular notions of 'ideology' - as dogmatic, radical, violent, and (for many) socialist" (Gerring 2001, 250), suggesting that left-wing ideology label was stigmatized in the United States at the time.

likely to use stereotypes when judging out-groups and thus tend to perceive out-group members as highly similar (Judd, Ryan, and Park 1991; Mullen and Hu 1989). In the context of political identity, empirical evidence further indicates that partisans stereotype out-party members and overestimate the ideological consistency of both out-party voters and elites (Dias, Lelkes, and Pearl 2025; Sherman, Nelson, and Ross 2003; Simas 2018). While one might expect this effect to result from partisans having greater exposure to information about their own party, Simas (2018) demonstrates that it is not driven by information asymmetry but rather by psychological bias. In sum, partisans may perceive the opposing party as having a clearer ideological position precisely because they view it through a stereotypical lens.

Partisan identity can also contribute to disagreements about the ideological positions of political parties through biased perceptions. Research suggests that partisans often believe out-partisans are guided by ideology or other distorting top-down influences (Sherman, Nelson, and Ross 2003). Consequently, individuals tend to place their own party closer to the center and the opposing party further toward the ideological extremes (Hare et al. 2015). Empirical studies have shown that partisans consistently exaggerate the extremity of the opposing party more than that of their own (Ahler and Sood 2018; Levendusky and Malhotra 2016; Robinson et al. 1995).

Overview of the Current Study

This study examines descriptive trends in voters' agreement on the ideological images of the Democratic and Republican parties over time. I used cumulative data from the American National Election Studies (ANES) surveys conducted between 1972 and 2020 (American National Election Studies 2022), which asked respondents to place the Democratic and Republican parties on a seven-point liberal-conservative scale, ranging from "extremely liberal" to "extremely

conservative." The ANES surveys were conducted every two years until 2000 and every four years thereafter.

First, I examine trends in the distribution of voters' perceptions of party ideological images. To assess the degree of shared perception among voters, I calculate the dispersion of respondents' ideological placements for the Democratic and Republican parties, respectively. A higher level of dispersion indicates greater disagreement among respondents about a party's ideological position.

Second, I analyzed trends in the perceived relative ideological extremity of the two parties, as such perceptions can also influence disagreement over ideological images. On the ANES seven-point scale, the midpoint is labeled "moderate, middle of the road," signifying a centrist position. Greater deviation from this midpoint suggests a party is perceived as more ideologically extreme. While much of the existing literature focuses on the perceived ideological distance between the parties, this distance may reflect either that both parties are seen as increasingly extreme or that one party is viewed as more extreme than the other. This study investigates how perceptions of relative extremity—particularly among partisans—have changed over time.

Distributions of Perceived Ideologies of the Democratic and Republican Parties Over Time

Figure 1 presents the distributions of perceived ideological positions of the Democratic and Republican parties over time, based on the ANES seven-point liberal-conservative scale from 1972 to 2020. Several trends emerge from the figure.

First, in most years, the modal perceived positions for the Democratic and Republican parties are "liberal" and "conservative," respectively—positions situated between "extremely liberal/conservative" and "slightly liberal/conservative" on the scale. However, the degree of agreement among respondents varies considerably. The distributions are most concentrated in

2000 for both parties. After 2000, perceptions became somewhat more dispersed, with more respondents placing both parties at the moderate position, particularly in 2008. Since then, the distributions appear to have become more concentrated again.

Second, beginning around 2000, there is a noticeable increase in the number of respondents who perceive the parties as “extremely liberal” or “extremely conservative.” This trend peaks in 2020—the most recent year in the data—with approximately 30% of respondents placing each party at the ideological extreme. Third, since the Reagan era, more respondents have placed the Republican Party at “conservative” rather than “slightly conservative” consistently. A similar shift in perceptions of the Democratic Party did not occur until around 2000.

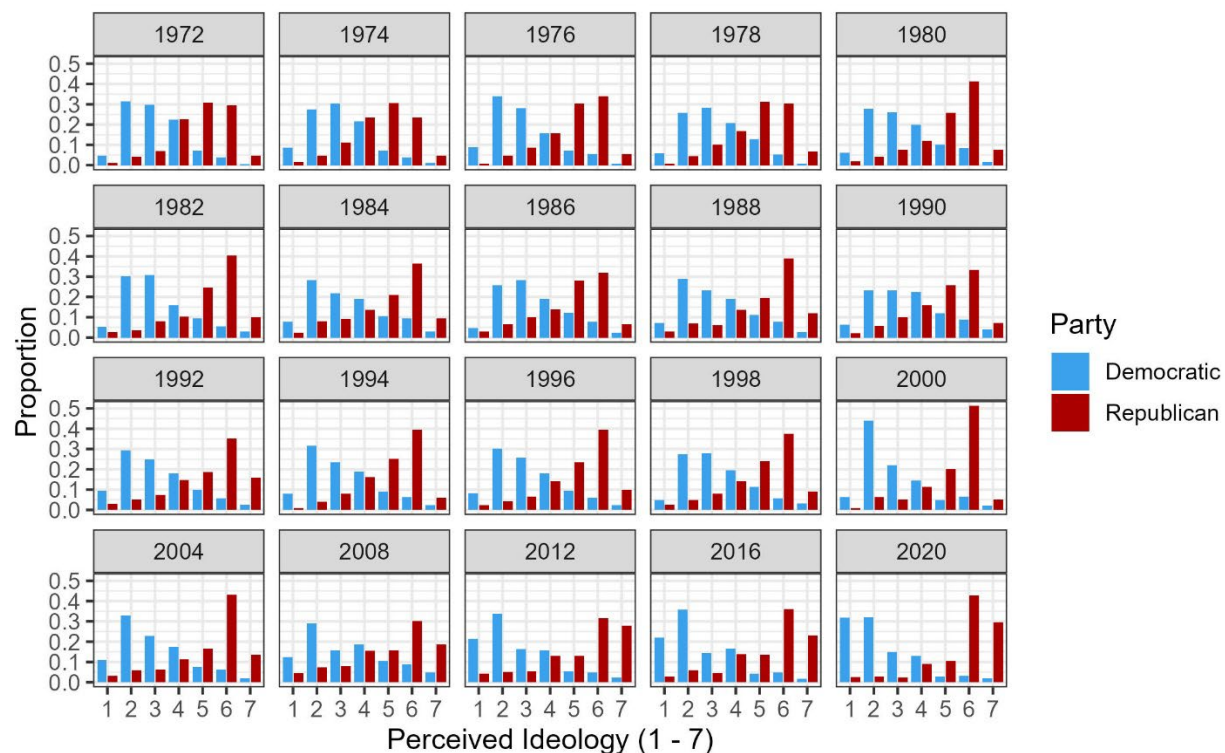


Figure 1. Distribution of Perceived Party Ideology by Year. Labels 1 to 7 represent “extreme liberal,” “liberal,” “slightly liberal,” “moderate, middle of the road,” “slightly conservative,” “conservative,” and “extreme conservative.” Darker bars show perceptions of the Democratic Party; lighter bars show perceptions of the Republican Party.

(Dis)agreement in Perceived Ideologies of the Parties Over Time

To quantify agreement on party ideological images among voters, I calculated the statistical dispersion of the distributions of perceived party ideology. A more concentrated distribution—indicating lower dispersion—reflects a higher level of agreement. The ANES party placement questions use a seven-point liberal-conservative scale. When all respondents place a party at the same point on this scale—indicating complete agreement—the result reflects the highest level of concentration and lowest dispersion. In contrast, when responses are evenly spread across all seven points, the distribution exhibits the lowest concentration and highest dispersion, indicating a lack of consensus.

Given the discrete nature and fixed lower and upper bounds of the ideology placement variables, I used entropy from information theory as a measure of dispersion instead of standard deviation. Standard deviation is sensitive to the location of the central tendency on bounded scales and can therefore yield misleading results. For example, consider two frequency distributions on a seven-point scale, each with 100 observations and identical distribution shapes: the modal category holds 40% of responses, and each of the remaining six categories holds 10%. In one distribution, the mode is at position one; in the other, it is at position four. Despite their identical shapes, the standard deviation is 2.177 for the former and only 1.682 for the latter.

An example from actual data further illustrates this issue. Consider the distributions of perceived Democratic Party ideology in 2020 and 1996. The distribution in 2020 was more concentrated than in 1996. In both years, the modal perceived ideology was “liberal,” reported by 32.26% of respondents in 2020 and 30.3% in 1996. The second most frequent category in 2020 was “extreme liberal,” accounting for 31.71% of respondents, while in 1996 it was “slightly liberal,” accounting for 25.65%. The cumulative share of the top two categories was 63.97% in 2020 and

55.95% in 1996. Thus, the 2020 distribution was more concentrated whether considering the mode alone or the two most frequent categories. Moreover, even across the full distributions, the cumulative frequency in 2020 consistently exceeded that of 1996 when response categories are ordered by frequency. In other words, the 2020 distribution is more concentrated than that of 1996. Nonetheless, the standard deviation was slightly higher in 2020—1.445 compared to 1.443 in 1996—highlighting how standard deviation can fail to adequately capture dispersion in such variables.

To address the limitations of using standard deviation, I use entropy from information theory to quantify the dispersion of perceived ideology. Entropy is a measure of statistical dispersion for nominal distributions and was first introduced by Shannon (1948) as an index of distributional uncertainty. It is widely used in machine learning and was first applied in political science by Wilcox (1973)⁴. Higher entropy indicates greater dispersion. Entropy equals zero when all observations fall into a single category—that is, the most concentrated distribution possible. The most dispersed distribution of ideological placements in the ANES data—when respondents distribute their placements evenly across all seven categories—yields the highest possible entropy for a seven-category scale. Because the number of categories is fixed, entropy can be normalized to a maximum value of one by using seven as the base of the logarithm in the following formula:

$$- \sum_{i \in \{1,2,3,4,5,6,7\}} \frac{f_i}{N} \log_7 \frac{f_i}{N}$$

, where N is the total number of respondents and f_i is the number of respondents choosing the i th placement.

⁴ Entropy is referred to as HREL in Wilcox (1973).

Following the earlier example, the entropy of perceived Democratic Party ideology in 2020 is 0.806, while in 1996 it is 0.876—correctly indicating that the 1996 distribution is more dispersed than that of 2020. Since the distributions in the data are generally unimodal, the potential limitation of entropy not accounting for the ordinal nature of ideological placement is less of a concern in this context.

Figure 2 shows the normalized entropy of respondents' placements of each party on a seven-point liberal-conservative scale from 1972 to 2020. As reflected in the visual patterns from figure 1, the trend in voter agreement on party ideology does not follow a monotonic trajectory. Agreement peaked in 2000, marking the most concentrated year in voters' perceptions of both parties' ideological positions. From 2000 to 2008, however, agreement declined sharply, with 2008 showing the highest level of dispersion. After 2008, perceptions of both parties became substantially more concentrated again, although overall agreement in 2020 did not return to the levels observed in 2000.

The trends in figure 2 also show that, from 1976 to 2008, voters consistently agreed more on the Republican Party's ideological position than on that of the Democratic Party. One possible explanation is that the Republican Party has been more strongly associated with the conservative ideological label, whereas the Democratic Party has historically downplayed symbolic ideology, as suggested by Gerring (2001) and Grossman and Hopkins (2015).

Figure 3 shows the entropy of perceived ideology for the Democratic and Republican parties over time, broken down by levels of political awareness. Across all years, entropy is consistently higher among respondents with lower political awareness, indicating greater noise in their perceptions of party ideology compared to those with higher awareness. This pattern suggests

that lower clarity in a party's ideological image contributes to lower levels of agreement on party ideology at the aggregate level.

Figure 3 also confirms the trend observed in figure 2: voters exhibit lower levels of agreement on the Democratic Party's ideology. This pattern is especially pronounced among respondents with higher levels of political awareness, suggesting that the greater noise surrounding the Democratic Party's ideological image is not due to a lack of political awareness, but rather to the party's own vague ideological signaling during this period.

Figure 4 shows trends in perceived ideological agreement within partisan and independent groups. From 1978 to 2004, both Democrats and Republicans showed greater agreement on the Republican Party's ideology than on the Democratic Party's. In contrast, since 2008, Republicans have shown more agreement on the Democratic Party's ideology than on their own party's, while Democrats have continued to agree more on the Republican Party's ideology than on that of their own party. Meanwhile, no consistent trend is observed among independents.

These patterns suggest that prior to 2008, partisans' perceptions of party ideology were shaped more by party signals than by partisan bias. Since 2008, however, partisans in both parties have shown greater agreement on the opposing party's ideology than on their own, indicating that partisan bias has become a more dominant influence on ideological perceptions. This implies that partisans construct more homogeneous images of the opposition than of their own party. As the social identity literature suggests, individuals tend to stereotype and simplify out-group characteristics more than those of their in-group. This shift cannot be explained by information asymmetry: presumably, partisans are more familiar with their own party's ideological stance than with that of the opposing party. If familiarity were driving agreement, we would expect greater

consensus on one's own party than on the opposition. Instead, there is greater consensus about the opposing party's ideological position than about one's own.

Since 2008, in addition to showing greater agreement on the opposing party's ideology than on their own, both Democrats and Republicans have shown substantial increases in agreement on the ideological positions of both their own and the opposing parties, as indicated by declining entropy. This suggests that partisans are increasingly associating specific ideological positions with each party, rather than merely viewing them as occupying opposite sides of the ideological spectrum. Additionally, Democrats generally exhibit higher levels of entropy than Republicans, indicating that they agree less with one another about the ideological positions of the parties than Republicans do.

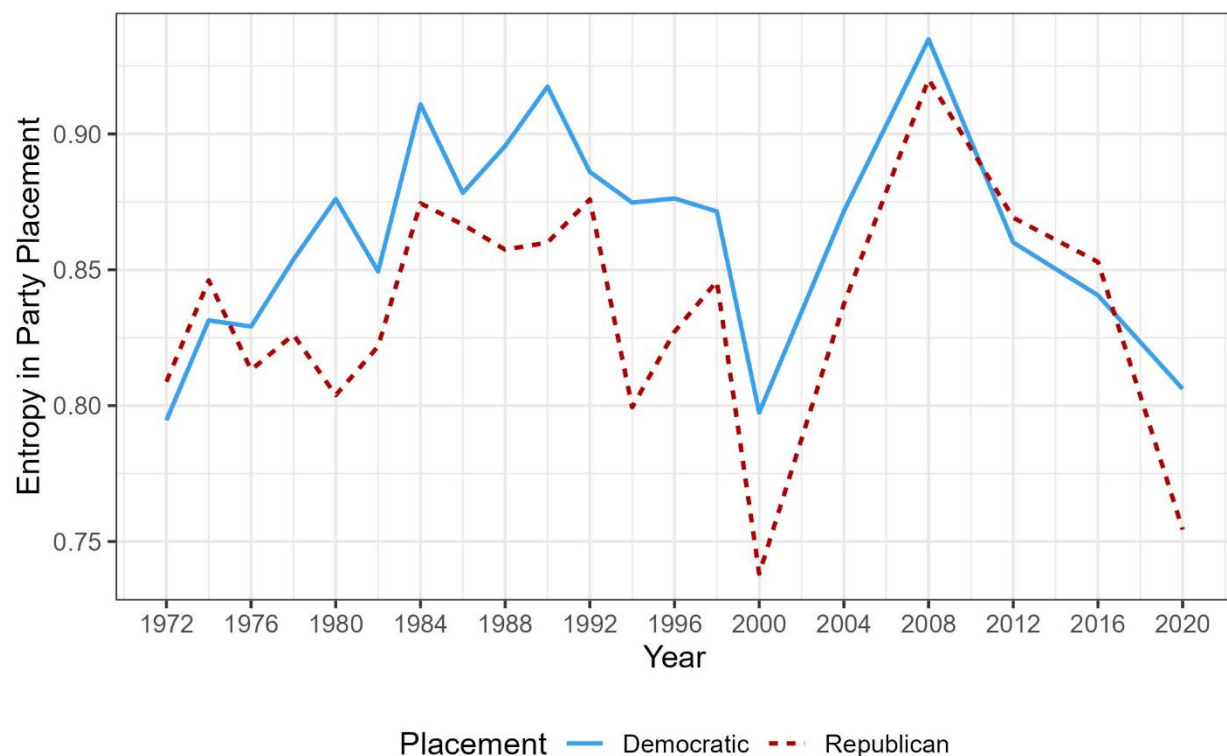


Figure 2. Voter Disagreement on the Perceived Ideology of the Democratic and Republican Parties, 1972–2020. Disagreement is measured using the normalized entropy of respondents' placements of each party on a 7-point liberal-conservative scale, reflecting inconsistency in voters' perceptions of the parties' ideological positions.

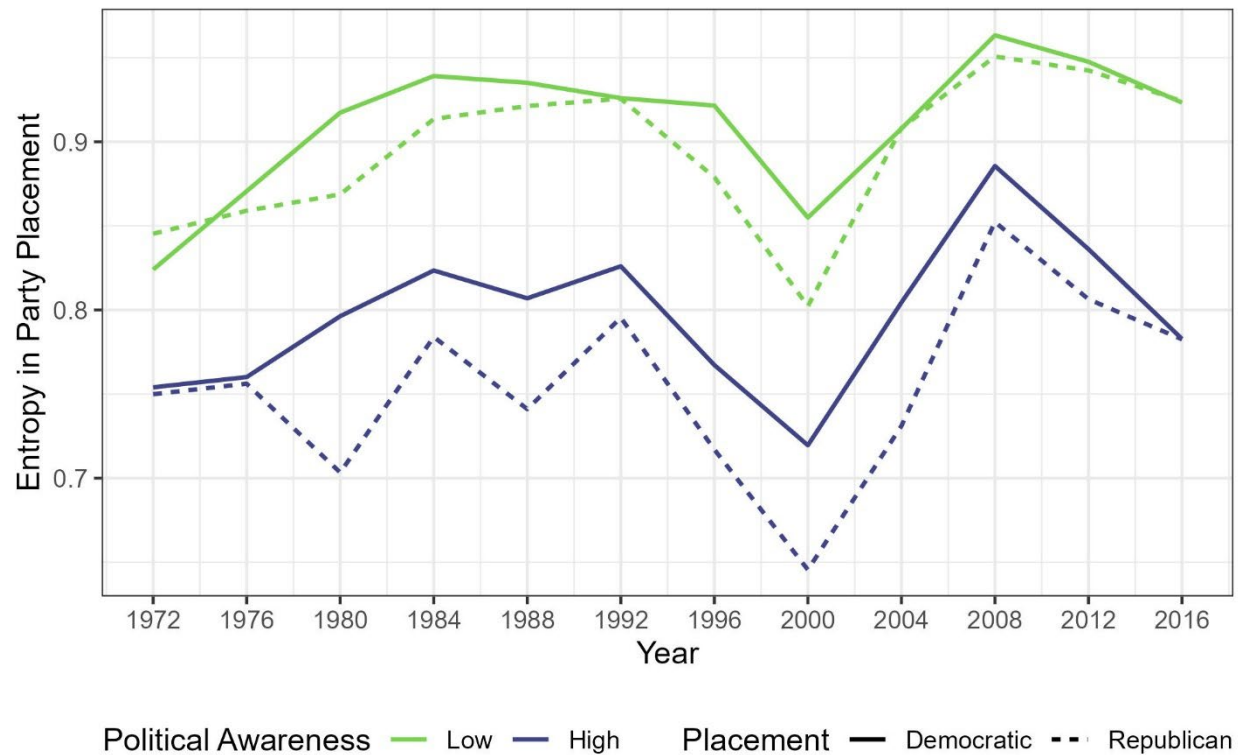


Figure 3. Voter Disagreement on the Placement of the Democratic and Republican Parties by Political Awareness, 1972–2016. Disagreement is measured using the normalized entropy of respondents’ placements of each party on a 7-point liberal-conservative scale, reflecting inconsistency in voters’ perceptions of the parties’ ideological positions. The cumulative ANES dataset includes the political awareness variable only through 2016. Following Smidt (2017), respondents are classified as having low political awareness if interviewers rated their political knowledge as “average” or below, and as having high awareness if rated “fairly high” or above.

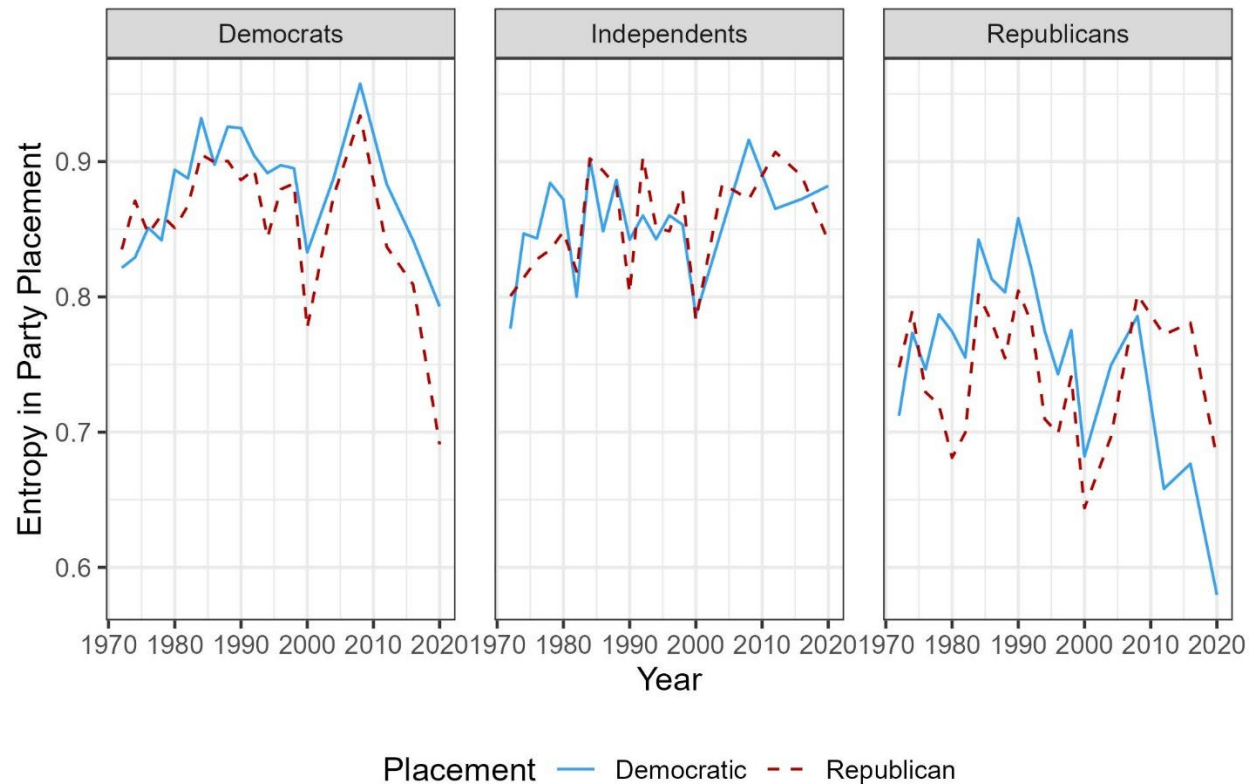


Figure 4. Intra-Group Disagreement on the Placement of the Democratic and Republican Parties Among Partisans (Including Leaners) and Independents, 1972–2020. The subplots from left to right show the level of disagreement within Democrats, Independents, and Republicans, respectively. Disagreement is measured using normalized entropy and reflects the inconsistency of perceived party ideology within each partisan group. Partisan groups include respondents who identify with a party as well as those who lean toward it. ANES surveys were conducted every two years prior to 2000 and every four years thereafter.

Perceived Relative Extremity of the Democratic and Republican Parties

Empirical findings consistently suggest that partisans tend to perceive the opposing party as more extreme than their own. Has this partisan bias intensified in recent decades, particularly as it has come to shape patterns of agreement in perceived party ideology? Figure 5 presents respondents' average perceived relative extremity of the Democratic Party compared to the Republican Party, broken down by party identification, along with the partisan gap in this perception.

A party is perceived as more extreme by a respondent when its placement deviates further from the midpoint of the ANES seven-point liberal-conservative scale. For example, if a respondent places the Democratic Party at “slightly liberal,” the perceived extremity is 1; if placed at “liberal,” the perceived extremity is 2; and so on. The relative extremity of the Democratic Party is calculated by subtracting the perceived extremity of the Republican Party from that of the Democratic Party. A positive value indicates that the Democratic Party is perceived as more extreme; a negative value indicates that the Republican Party is seen as more extreme; and a value of zero indicates that both parties are perceived as equally extreme.

A consistent pattern of partisan bias in perceived party extremity is evident across the period covered by the data. The dot-dash line in Figure 5 represents the partisan gap in perceived relative extremity, which remains consistently positive. Specifically, from 1972 to 2020, Democrats have consistently perceived the Republican Party as more extreme. Republicans also tend to view the Democratic Party as more extreme, although in some years they perceive little difference between the two parties. Independents' perceptions generally fall between those of Democrats and Republicans. Since 1976, Independents have more often perceived the Republican

Party as more extreme, although the magnitude of this perception is considerably smaller than that observed among Democrats.

While the partisan gap in perceived party extremity persists throughout the period, it has widened significantly since 2000—tripling overall and doubling since 2008. Moreover, the gap has grown steadily since 2008, coinciding with the period during which partisan bias became a dominant force shaping agreement on party ideology. In contrast, the gap was relatively moderate and stable before 2000.

Figure 6 shows that the effect is not driven by changes in partisan strength, as partisans across all strength levels increasingly perceive the opposing party as more extreme after 2008. Notably, beginning in 2012, leaners' perceptions of the out-party's relative extremity surpass those of weak partisans and approach the levels observed among strong partisans by 2020. These findings are consistent with Klar and Krupnikov (2016), who have found that leaners' attitudes and behaviors closely resemble those of partisans, even if they do not explicitly identify as such.

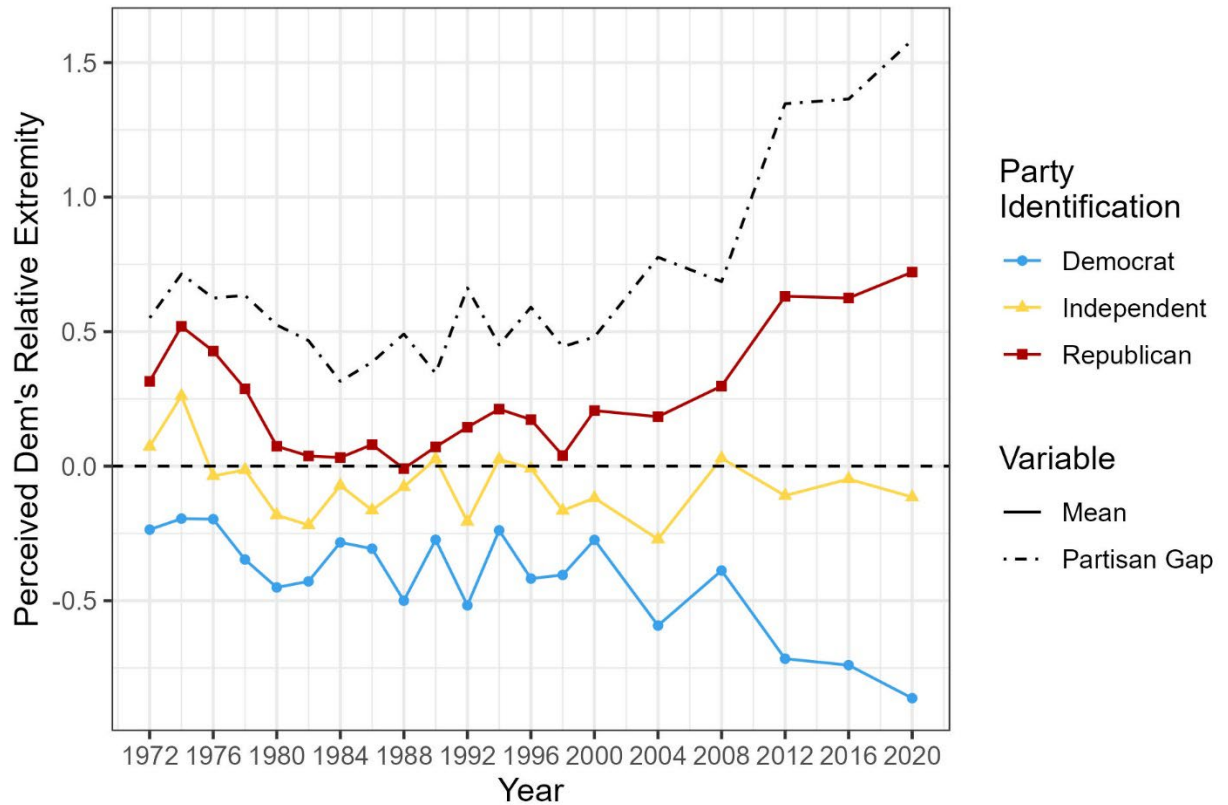


Figure 5. Perceived Extremity of the Democratic Party Relative to the Republican Party, Based on ANES Seven-Point Liberal-Conservative Scale, by Party Identification (Including Leaners), 1972–2020. Solid lines show the average perceived extremity among Democrats, Independents, and Republicans (including leaners). Extremity is calculated as the deviation from the midpoint of the ANES seven-point ideology scale. Positive values indicate the Democratic Party is perceived as more extreme. The dot-dash line represents the partisan gap between Democrats and Republicans.

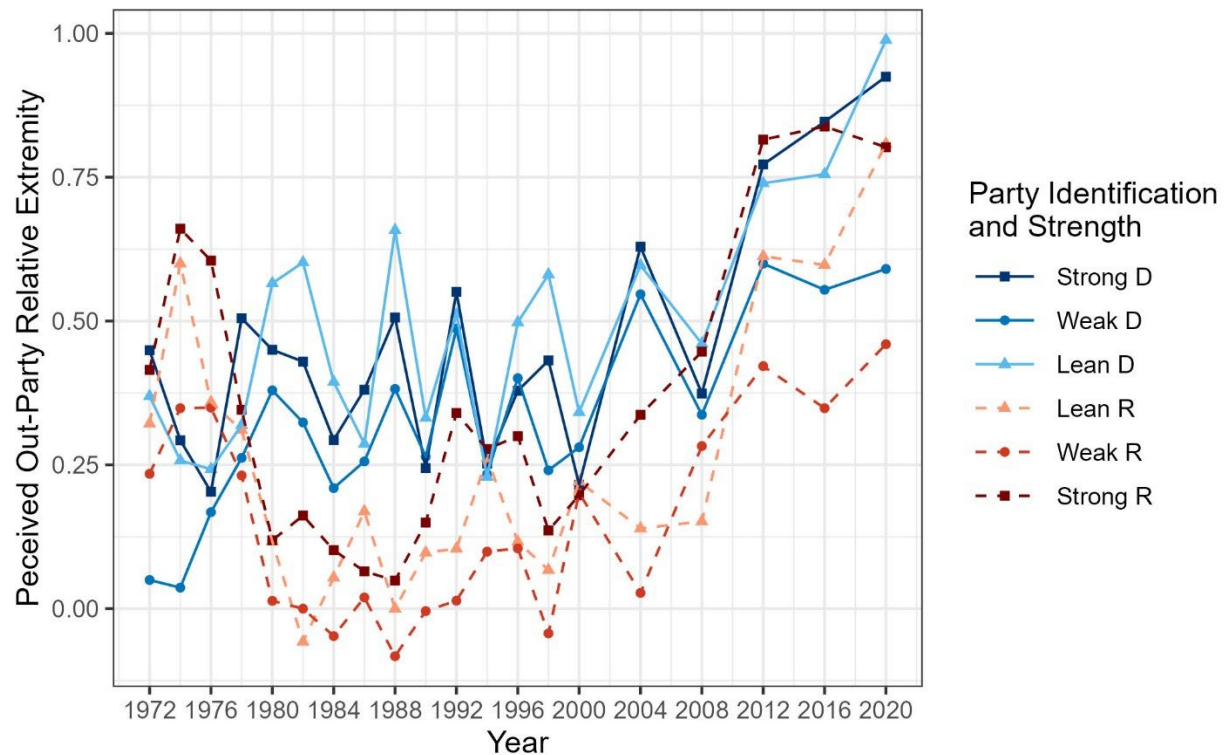


Figure 6. Perceived Relative Extremity of the Opposing Party, Based on ANES Seven-Point Liberal-Conservative Scale, by Party Identification and Strength, 1972–2020. Extremity is measured as the deviation from the midpoint of the ANES seven-point ideology scale. Positive values indicate that the opposing party is perceived as more extreme than the respondent’s own party.

Discussion

Using ANES data from 1972 to 2020, I found that partisan bias began to play a dominant role in perceptions of party ideology after 2008, even though elite-level polarization and affective polarization among voters had been present for decades. Prior to 2008, partisan bias played only a moderate role in shaping these perceptions, and partisans shared some common ground in how they viewed the parties.

First, agreement on party ideology fluctuated before 2008, peaking in 2000 and reaching its lowest point in 2008. Second, consistent with literature suggesting that the Democratic Party downplayed ideological labels in the late twentieth century (Gerring 2001; Grossmann and Hopkins 2015), partisans in both parties showed greater agreement on the Republican Party's ideology than on the Democratic Party's from 1978 to 2004. Since 2008, however, partisans have expressed greater agreement on the ideology of the opposing party than on their own—a pattern that aligns social identity theory (Sherman, Nelson, and Ross 2003; Simas 2018). Third, while the partisan gap in perceptions of relative extremity between the two parties has been persistent, it has steadily widened since 2008, with the gap in 2020 tripling compared to 2000.

While this study highlights descriptive trends, it does not identify the specific factors that have amplified identity-based bias. One possibility is that Americans now care more about partisan identity than in the past. For example, Hopkins et al. (2025) found that since 2008 many outlets have increasingly sought to attract audiences by appealing to social identities, consistent with this study's finding that identity-based bias began to dominate around the same time. A second question is whether partisan identity influences perceptions solely by motivating individuals to form derogatory beliefs without evidence, or whether it also operates through informational mechanisms

such as motivated reasoning and perceptions of source (Druckman and McGrath 2019; Little, Schnakenberg, and Turner 2022; Lupia and McCubbins 1999).

Amplified partisan bias also carries implications for democratic institutions. Although such bias may not substantially affect individual vote choices—since voters tend to support the party they already favor, often the one they are biased toward—it can undermine a party’s collective accountability. Specifically, partisan bias may obscure the role of political parties as institutions that voters are meant to hold accountable (Little, Schnakenberg, and Turner 2022). While some degree of bias is inevitable, partisan perceptions do not necessarily threaten democratic accountability, provided voters respond to political behavior in the same direction. Social identities can, in fact, motivate individuals to hold their in-group accountable (Eidelman and Biernat 2003; Marques and Paez 1994), and in-group members are often better positioned to do so (Fearon and Laitin 1996). However, when partisan identity distorts perceptions of party reputation, partisans may no longer recognize the need to hold their own party accountable—even in the face of poor performance.

Because a basic level of shared understanding is essential for the functioning of democratic institutions, it may seem that correcting misperceptions is a necessary step. However, recent research suggests that one-time corrections are unlikely to produce lasting effects (Dias et al. 2024). Future research might investigate the factors that contributed to the amplification of partisan bias after 2008 and, more importantly, explore how long-term institutional efforts can help sustain a fundamental shared understanding across partisans and foster a more constructive role for social identity in democratic life.

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