

## Still Close: Perceived Ideological Distance to Own and Main Opposing Party

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Two things are often stated about American politics: political elites are increasingly polarized, and that the issue positions of the masses haven't budged much. Assuming such to be the case, one expects the average distance between where partisans place themselves and where they place the 'in-party' (or the 'out-party') to increase. However it appears that the distance to the in-party has remained roughly constant (and very small), while distance to the out-party has grown, in line with what one expects from the theory of 'affective polarization' and group-based perception.

### Data and Measures

We use data from the ANES cross-sectional surveys between 1972 – the first ANES survey that carried party placements – and 2008. We use three measures from the ANES surveys: 1) self-placement on the seven point ideology scale, 2) placement of both parties on the same scale, and 3) party identification of the respondent. (In our analyses, we pooled those who leaned toward one party or the other with self-identified partisans.) Using these measures, we calculate average distance between where partisans place themselves, and where they place the parties for each year.

The placement questions run roughly as follows — “We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. Here is a seven-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Where would you place YOURSELF on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?” Respondents were then asked, “Where would you place the Republican/Democratic Party on this scale, or haven't you thought about this?” The party identification question was asked in roughly the same manner across years. Respondents were first asked, “Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?” Those identifying as either Republican or Democrat were then asked, “Would you call yourself a strong Democrat (Republican) or a not very strong Democrat (Republican)?” and those selecting non-partisan response categories were

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asked, “Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican Party or to the Democratic Party?”

## Results

Between 1972 and 2008, the mean DW-Nominate score of House Republicans moved from .24 to .67. To put this movement in perspective, the 95th percentile of the House Republicans in 1971 was roughly .49. During the same period, the mean for House Democrats moved far less steeply, from -.27 to -.39. Again to put these numbers in context, the Democratic House mean for the 112th congress was at the 70th percentile of Democrats in the 96th Congress. So the march toward extremity among Democrats has been considerably less pronounced than among Republicans.

Given the glacial movement in the ideological positions of rank and file partisans (DiMaggio, Evans and Bryson 1996; Evans 2003; Fiorina, Abrams and Pope 2005, 2008; Fiorina and Abrams 2008; Hill and Tausanovitch 2014), the distance between partisans and their placements of both parties should be considerably enlarged. However, the data suggest otherwise. The distance between self-placements and in-party placements has remained small over the forty or so years spanned by the surveys (see Figure 1).

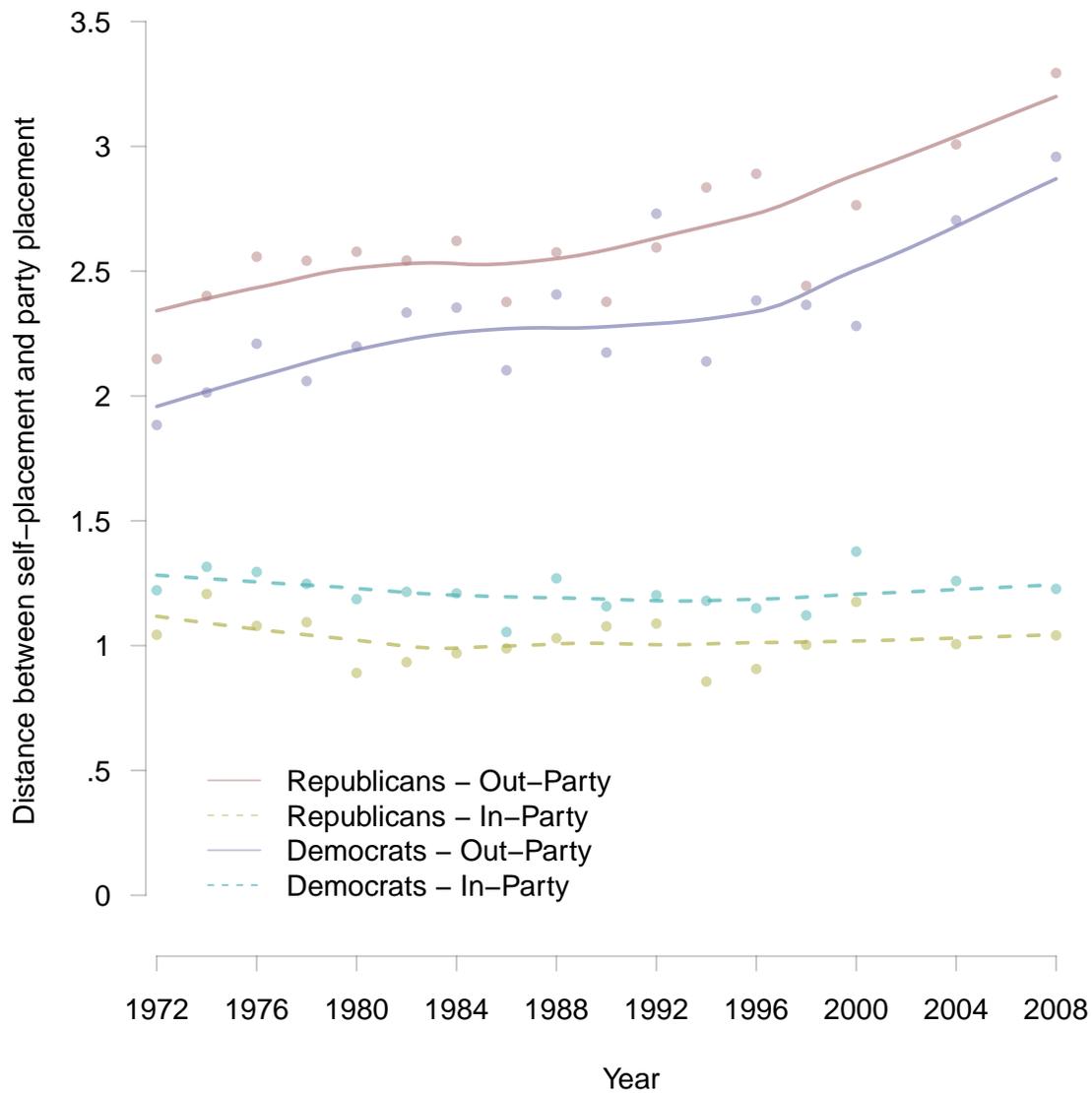
On the other hand, the distance between self-placements and placement of the opposition party has grown by nearly a full point. On a 7 point scale, that amounts to a change of about 14%. But since this is a growth in differences, which is capped at roughly 4 points (i.e. the majority of respondents are located toward the middle of the scale), the one point change reflects in fact a 25% increase in the perceptual distance between respondents and the out party.<sup>1</sup>

What accounts for the movement away from the out-party and a lack of movement from the preferred party? One possibility is that partisans are better sorted—a greater percentage of Republicans identify as conservatives and a greater percentage of Democrats as liberal, than twenty years ago (Levendusky 2009). But despite being sorted, partisans have not become more extreme (DiMaggio, Evans and Bryson 1996; Evans 2003; Fiorina, Abrams and Pope 2005, 2008; Fiorina and Abrams 2008; Hill and Tausanovitch 2014). The pattern of increased distance from the out-party but stable and small distance from the in-party can only be described as

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<sup>1</sup>There is a slight decline in the proportion of respondents indicating ‘Don’t Know’ on party placement questions indicating a slight increase in knowledge of party positions in the population. We expect the increases in knowledge to come primarily from those who are less interested in politics, a hypothesis backed by data - average political interest scores of those who know have declined slightly over the years. We expect these differences across years to attenuate our results.

Figure 1: Average distance between self-placement and placement of in- and out-party



‘principled’ if rank and file partisans have become as polarized on the issues as the elites. No one—including proponents of the mass ideological polarization thesis (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008)—have gone so far as to make this claim. The more plausible explanation lies in partisan affect. The strong correlation between where people place themselves on the ideology scale and where they place both parties strongly suggests the same. Regressing where people place themselves and where they place the parties (both rescaled to lie between 0 and 1) produces coefficients with an average magnitude of .35 ( $p < .001$ ).

### **Absolute Placements**

Rather than look at relative placements, one may want to look at absolute placement of parties. Given a small uptick in moderation during the mid-70s (observed in DW-Nominate), it is useful to look at data starting from 1980. Doing so yields an attenuated version of the patterns that we see in relative placement among Republicans. Republican respondents think that the opposing party is becoming gradually more extreme but see little change in the extremity of their own party. There is less to see among Democrats—their perceptions of the absolute positions of both parties have changed little. When we calculate the difference in perceived positions of the Republican and Democratic parties, we find a seesaw pattern that doesn’t correlate with real changes in parties during that time. Correlation between the mean perceived distance and the average distance between the party means on DW-Nominate for the House between 1971 and 1989 was -.59. From 1999 and onwards, despite the parties having moved far apart in the ‘common space,’ their relative ideological position stagnated in people’s minds. In all, except for the 10 year period between 1989 and 1999, when perception correlated with reality, it appears that real change in difference between the party ideologies was unaccompanied by any change in perceptions of that difference. See also (Hetherington 2008) on perceived differences between the parties on a variety of issues.

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