All Politics Is Partisan? Strategy, Policy, and Affective Polarization in Constituent Responsiveness*

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Abstract

Affective polarization is rising in American politics: partisans increasingly hate members of the opposing party and feel warmly toward their own party. Research shows that mass-level partisans discriminate against members of the opposing party even in nonpolitical domains like dating, the economic market, roommate selection, and scholarship decisions. Less work, however, examines the extent to which partisan affective polarization influences the decision-making of politicians. In this paper, I explore whether affective polarization affects responsiveness to constituent communications. I present results from an original experiment in a survey of local elected legislators, which randomly assigns politicians to read emails from either opposing partisan or co-partisan constituents. My results reveal how electoral strategy, ideology, and affective polarization shape partisan patterns of politician responsiveness to constituents. In short, my findings suggest that scholars should take seriously the role played by affective polarization in legislative decision-making: indeed, these experimental results indicate that affective polarization and partisanship may influence politicians' responsiveness in American politics.

legislative politics | representation | affective polarization | partisan identity

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All politics is local.
-Former House Speaker Tip O'Neill

There is no Democratic or Republican way of cleaning the streets.
-Former New York Mayor Fiorello La Guardia

Introduction

The quotes above reflect a long-held view in American politics that politicians should attend to the needs of their constituents, especially their individual and parochial concerns. Doing so, the reasoning goes, is not only good governance, as in the case of La Guardia, but is also something that is perceived to be electorally beneficial, as in the case of O'Neill. Beginning at least as early as Mayhew (1974*a*), political scientists recognized the electoral importance of being seen by constituents as providing positive valence benefits to individuals, extending beyond pure policy representation into constituency casework. By providing these personalized services to constituents, politicians are able to make an impression on their constituents, to be seen as competent conveyors of goods, which can help them stand out electorally (Fiorina, 1989). It was precisely this type of nonpartisan stewardship of constituent interests that scholars believed contributed to the incumbency advantage (Mayhew, 1974*b*).

Yet, recent studies have found that politicians do not respond to all constituent requests for help equally. In particular, politicians appear to view contacts from constituents who are not co-partisans less favorably (Butler and Dynes, 2016), and they appear to be less responsive to out-party constituents than co-partisan constituents (Butler and Broockman, 2011; Porter and Rogowski, 2018). These findings imply that individuals represented by out-partisan politicians may receive a lower quality of representation. Moreover, these results seem to conflict with the insights from previous research that constituency service can boost one's electoral prospects and with the sentiment expressed by O'Neill and La Guardia that service should be offered irrespective of the constituent's predisposition to sup-

port the politician electorally. The question remains why politicians might be less responsive to out-party constituents given the potential electoral advantages afforded by constituency service. Previous studies have assumed partisan discrimination is due to electoral considerations. As Mayhew (1974*a*) noted, much of politicians' behavior can be explained by electoral motivations, but taking this as the sole motivation of politicians may limit our understanding of elite behavior. Per Fenno (1973), politicians also pursue public policy or ideological goals: partisan discrimination may also be a reflection of ideological disagreements with constituents—real or anticipated. Finally, recent research suggests that partisan identity and affective polarization are strong predictors of mass-level behavior (Iyengar and Westwood, 2015). It may, therefore, be the case that politicians are motivated by their own partisan identities in responding to constituents from their own party.

In this paper, I present results from an experiment embedded in an original survey of local elected officials. This experiment presents politicians with an email from a hypothetical constituent, and I randomly vary the party, voting history, and policy content of the constituent's email. This design allows me to separate the effects of party, policy, and electoral strategy to best adjudicate among potential reasons for partisan discrimination against constituents. Surprisingly, in my sample, I find little evidence of partisan discrimination against constituents: politicians appear no more likely to favor in-party constituents over out-party constituents. However, I do find that there are some nuances to this finding: ideology and affective polarization appear to predict the effect of partisanship on constituent responsiveness.

Previous Literature

Electoral Motivations

Political scientists have long written about the preeminent role played by re-election concerns in politicians' behavior (Downs, 1957; Fenno, 1973; Mayhew, 1974*a*). Indeed, some

scholars who have found evidence of discrimination against constituents on the basis of partisanship have assumed that politicians view party labels through the lens of electoral benefit (Butler and Broockman, 2011; Butler and Dynes, 2016). However, electoral motivations might be a reason that politicians should *not* discriminate on the basis of partisanship in constituency contacts: constituency service and contact provide a way for politicians to build individual rapport and trust with constituents, which may even build enough goodwill for politicians to deviate from the constituency on policy issues (Mayhew, 1974*a*; O'Neill and Hymel, 1994). Fenno (1978) even notes that simply giving constituents an opportunity to interact with the politician can "neutralize the more intense opposition" (98).

Still, in recent years, the incumbency advantage has decreased, leading some to speculate that partisanship is eroding the ability of politicians to separate themselves from their parties by cultivating individual brands (Jacobson, 2015). As party comes to better predict voting behavior (Bafumi and Shapiro, 2009), constituency service may be insufficient to insulate politicians from partisan electoral tides. At the same time, politics has become increasingly nationalized, with partisanship better predicting votes at all levels of government (Hopkins, 2018). Thus, politics may no longer be best understood through the local lens, and politicians may view appealing to out-party constituents as futile. For these reasons, we might expect that politicians view the partisanship of their constituents as an electoral cue—a sign of potentially "gettable" voters. Politicians may see out-party constituents, even if they are reaching out to the politician personally, as unlikely to vote for them, so their efforts to help the constituent may not be the best investment of time in terms of electoral dividends.

Policy Motivations

Another of the most commonly cited motivations for the political behavior of politicians is policy: politicians want to see their preferred programs enacted (Fenno, 1973). Scholars have found that ideology is a more important construct for elite political thought than it is

for the masses (Broockman, 2016; Converse, 1964). Further, ideology is often neatly tied to politicians' behavior (Krehbiel, 1993; Poole and Rosenthal, 1997), and measures of politicians' ideology cannot be explained by electoral results alone (Bafumi and Herron, 2010). Politics have not only nationalized electorally, but the policy space has also become increasingly national (Hopkins, 2018). Even local governments are wading into national partisan issues, including by taking positions on immigration or by banning books (Harris and Alter, 2023; Lee, Omri and Preston, 2017). Similarly, voters have sorted into parties and ideological identities, such that partisanship increasingly matches ideology and geography no longer shapes the link between partisanship and ideology (Levendusky, 2009). Consequently, it may be the case that politicians, who themselves feel strongly about policy issues, see partisanship as a cue for the policy positions of constituents. Because they anticipate disagreement with opposing constituents on policy, they may be less likely to communicate with out-party constituents than with co-partisans. They may be more likely to view out-partisans unfavorably because of this anticipated disagreement (Butler and Dynes, 2016). Disagreement may also lead politicians to ascribe negative motives to constituents, which may make politicians dislike opposing partisans even more (Stone, 2023). Accordingly, then, we might expect that politicians see party as a cue for policy positions. In this chain of logic, out-partisans are perceived as holding different policy positions, simply due to their partisan affiliation. As a result of perceived policy disagreements, politicians may perceive that contact with the constituent would be unpleasant due to the disagreement or futile in changing the constituent's mind, and would therefore be less likely to respond to the constituent or view the constituent favorably.

Partisan Identity and Affective Polarization

Lastly, affective polarization (love of one's own party and hatred of the opposing party) has been rising in American politics (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, 2012). This shift at the mass-level is conventionally interpreted in terms of social identity theory: partisanship, as a so-

cial identity, naturally leads individuals to discriminate against out-group members (Green, Palmquist and Schickler, 2002; Greene, 1999; Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, 2012; Tajfel, 1970; Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Partisanship has long been an important driver of mass-level political behavior (Campbell et al., 1960; Green, Palmquist and Schickler, 2002). Increasingly, partisanship has come to influence non-political behavior as well, shaping preferences for social relationships (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, 2012; Huber and Malhotra, 2017; Shafranek, 2021), scholarship decisions (Iyengar and Westwood, 2015), and economic decisions (Engelhardt and Utych, 2020; Gift and Gift, 2015; McConnell et al., 2018). Moreover, partisan identity and affective polarization help determine whether people spread or believe misinformation (Jenke, 2023; Osmundsen et al., 2021). Though partisan identity and affective polarization have been shown to influence behavior in a variety of settings at the mass level, little work has examined the influence of these characteristics among elites.

If partisanship influences behavior among people for whom politics is less salient (Campbell et al., 1960), we might expect it to be an even more important driver of behavior at the elite level, where partisan identity is perpetually salient. Moreover, the masses are often thinking about the most politically engaged individuals when they are asked about their feelings toward the parties, suggesting that affective polarization is driven by feelings toward elites (Druckman and Levendusky, 2019; Druckman et al., 2022). Since politicians regularly interact with the most politically engaged people (other politicians and activists), we might expect the most engaged partisans are even more top of mind when politicians evaluate the parties. Finally, the members of the mass public who are the most involved in politics are often the most extreme partisans (Mason, 2018). This might work to generate an even more biased view of the parties among elites than among the masses. Indeed, previous work has shown that patterns of contact by the public do generate biased perceptions of the masses among elites (Broockman and Skovron, 2018). Consistent with this theory, Enders (2021) shows that elites are more affectively polarized than the masses. Given the

prevalence of partisan discrimination at the mass level, even in nonpolitical settings, as well as the higher salience of partisanship among politicians, we might expect that elites, like the masses, engage in discrimination in favor of co-partisans and against opposing partisans. Thus, the partisan discrimination observed in previous studies may be a manifestation of strong partisan identities and affective polarization among elites. Throughout this paper, I evaluate the three competing explanations for partisan discrimination among politicians against constituents.

Study Design

To better parse the influence of ideology, electoral politics, and partisanship in constituent responsiveness, I embedded a vignette experiment in an original survey of local elected officials conducted with CivicPulse. This survey was fielded in late March 2024 and has 500 responses total.[1] To increase experimental power, I treated individuals as partisans when they did not express a preference for either party on the standard battery of party identification questions but did express a preference for one party on party feeling thermometer ratings (I call these individuals "Feeling Thermometer Partisans"). As my study is focused on partisan discrimination in constituency responsiveness, I exclude respondents who do not express a preference for either major party from all of my analyses.

In the vignette experiment, following Butler and Dynes (2016), respondents were shown a hypothetical email from a constituent and asked a variety of questions about the constituent in the email. I randomly varied three attributes of the email: (1) the topic of the email;[2] (2) the party of the constituent (Democrat or Republican); and (3) whether the constituent voted for the politician in the last election (see Appendix A.1 for the complete text of each

[1] At the time of this writing, I have a preliminary dataset with 325 responses.

[2] The topics were park maintenance, speeding/traffic controls, support for local rezoning, opposition to local rezoning, support for local public-sector collective bargaining, opposition to local public-sector collective bargaining, support for local school vouchers, and opposition to local school vouchers. The full content of each topic can be found in Table A.1.1.

treatment). To ensure that this experiment generalizes across types of issues and constituent concerns, the treatment encompasses party-polarized issues like school vouchers and collective bargaining as well as more parochial concerns like local parks and traffic. Respondents were block randomized by party and party type (Democrat, Republican, Feeling Thermometer Democrat, Feeling Thermometer Republican) with equal probabilities of treatment in each block. In this way, I am able to separate policy and ideology (conveyed by the email topic) from partisanship and electoral strategy.

After showing respondents the email, I asked the extent to which they agreed the constituent cared deeply about the issue, was knowledgeable about the issue, was friendly, and whether the constituent wanted what was best for the community (seven-point Likert items). These items were modeled in part on items used by Butler and Dynes (2016) and were crafted to capture inferences about the constituent's personal characteristics as well as the positivity of politicians' feelings toward the constituents. These items were analyzed individually and also combined into an additive scale ($\alpha = 0.73$). Additionally, I asked respondents how likely they would be to respond to the email in some way from 0 (extremely unlikely) to 100 (extremely likely). These items constitute my main outcome measures for the vignette experiment. By employing these measures, I am able to determine how respondents evaluate the content of the email and the traits of the constituent and can more directly explore whether respondents would take concrete action to help the constituent. I measure partisan discrimination as viewing in-party constituents more positively than out-party constituents and being more willing to help co-partisans. Apart from these outcome measures, I included two manipulation checks asking respondents to place the ideology of the constituent from 0 (extremely liberal) to 10 (extremely conservative) and the extent to which they agreed the constituent would vote for them (seven-point Likert item).

Using this design, I first examine whether politicians do indeed discriminate against constituents from the opposing party: do they believe constituents from the opposing party

care less about the issue, are less knowledgeable or friendly, or are less likely to want what is best for their community? Are politicians less likely to respond to out-party constituents, as previous research suggests (e.g., Butler and Broockman, 2011)? Next, I explore whether partisan discrimination is motivated by electoral strategy. If politicians discriminate against opposing partisan constituents primarily because they presume out-party individuals will not vote for them, politicians must, first and foremost, believe that in-party constituents are more likely to vote for them. In addition, partisan discrimination should be lower when the constituent says they supported the politician's election, diluting the electoral basis for discrimination. Following this chain of logic, we would expect politicians' propensity to discriminate on the basis of partisanship would vary with the likelihood that they will face a competitive election (measured by their perception that they will face a competitive election and by the county-level vote share for their party in the 2020 presidential election).[3]

Next, I explore whether partisan discrimination is generated by real or anticipated disagreements with opposing partisan constituents. Under a policy-based view of partisan discrimination, it must be the case that the partisanship of the constituent shifts the politician's perception of the constituent's ideology: Democratic (Republican) constituents should be seen as more liberal (conservative), and in-party constituents should be seen as closer to the politician ideologically. Moreover, we should see that the party gaps in responsiveness and views of the constituent are largest among the most ideologically extreme survey respondents (extremely liberal Democrats and extremely conservative Republicans). More ideologically extreme politicians should likely anticipate greater policy-based disagreement

[3]The relationship between electoral competition and partisan discrimination could cut in multiple directions. Politicians who do not face competitive elections may simply have less of an incentive to respond to anyone of either party as they are not worried about losing their re-election bids. Politicians in competitive areas, on the other hand, may be more responsive, regardless of party, in an attempt to draw more voters at the margins. In this case, we might expect to see more partisan discrimination at middling levels of electoral competition. Still, if politicians perceive that out-partisan constituents will not vote for them, regardless of their efforts, marginal politicians may conclude that their scarce time may be better spent on more "gettable", in-party voters. This calculus would mean that marginal politicians may be the most likely to discriminate on the basis of partisanship.

with members of the opposing party as their own ideology is further from that of the opposing party. We might also expect that politicians would think more about potential disagreement with out-partisan constituents when the constituent sends an email about a party-polarized issue. The contested nature of these issues could prompt respondents to view constituent contacts through the lens of ideology and lead politicians to reflect on other potential areas of disagreement with an out-party constituent, generating more negative feelings toward the out-partisan. Finally, this partisan discrimination among politicians should be more pronounced when the constituent disagrees with the politician, particularly on partisan issues, and should be reduced when the constituent takes a party-inconsistent view on a policy (e.g., when a Republican opposes school vouchers). If politicians use partisanship to infer policy positions, learning that an out-party constituent agrees with them or has atypical policy views for an opposing partisan should reduce the strength of the partisan cue.

Finally, I test a third potential driver of partisan discrimination among politicians: partisan affective polarization. If partisan discrimination does not dissipate after accounting for electoral and ideological considerations, it is possible that politicians, like the masses, discriminate against members of the opposing party because of their social identities (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, 2012). To explore this possibility, I examine whether more affectively polarized politicians are more likely to favor co-partisan constituents over out-party constituents. Politicians who hate the opposing party and feel warmly toward their own party should naturally be more likely to respond positively to co-partisans than to opposing partisans. Partisan discrimination may also be driven by in-party warmth alone or by out-party hatred alone (rather than the combination). McConnell et al. (2018) find that partisan discrimination at the mass level is better explained by in-party favoritism than by out-party hatred. Thus, I test both competing explanations in addition to affective polarization, measured using pre-treatment party feeling thermometer ratings.

Results

First, I examine whether I previous findings about partisan discrimination among politicians hold in my sample. Surprisingly, given the findings of Butler and Broockman (2011), Butler and Dynes (2016), and Porter and Rogowski (2018), I find little evidence that politicians discriminate against opposing partisans relative to co-partisan constituents. In Table 1, most of my model specifications across outcome measures display substantively small and statistically insignficant coefficient estimates of the out-party constituent treatment. In fact, if anything, I find that politicians display a slight preference for out-partisan constituents. Politicians appear to believe that out-party constituents are more knowledgeable and more likely to want what's best for the community. On the other hand, whether the constituent voted for the politician or not appears to also predict outcomes. In particular, constituents who voted for the politician are perceived as more knowledgeable and more friendly, holding the constituent's partisanship constant. Still, it is possible that different types of politicians could react to opposing partisans differently.

Table 1: How Politicians View Out-Party Constituents

	Likely Respond	Knowledgeable	Cares Deeply	Wants What's Best	Friendly	Scale Outcome
Out-Party	0.019	0.045+	−0.006	0.068*	0.010	0.035
	(0.025)	(0.024)	(0.023)	(0.030)	(0.025)	(0.023)
Voted For	−0.004	0.048*	0.025	0.013	0.070**	0.047*
	(0.025)	(0.022)	(0.024)	(0.029)	(0.025)	(0.022)
Constant	0.703***	0.534***	0.769***	0.556***	0.634***	0.548***
	(0.046)	(0.040)	(0.036)	(0.045)	(0.041)	(0.035)
Issue Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N	277	278	279	279	278	278

+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

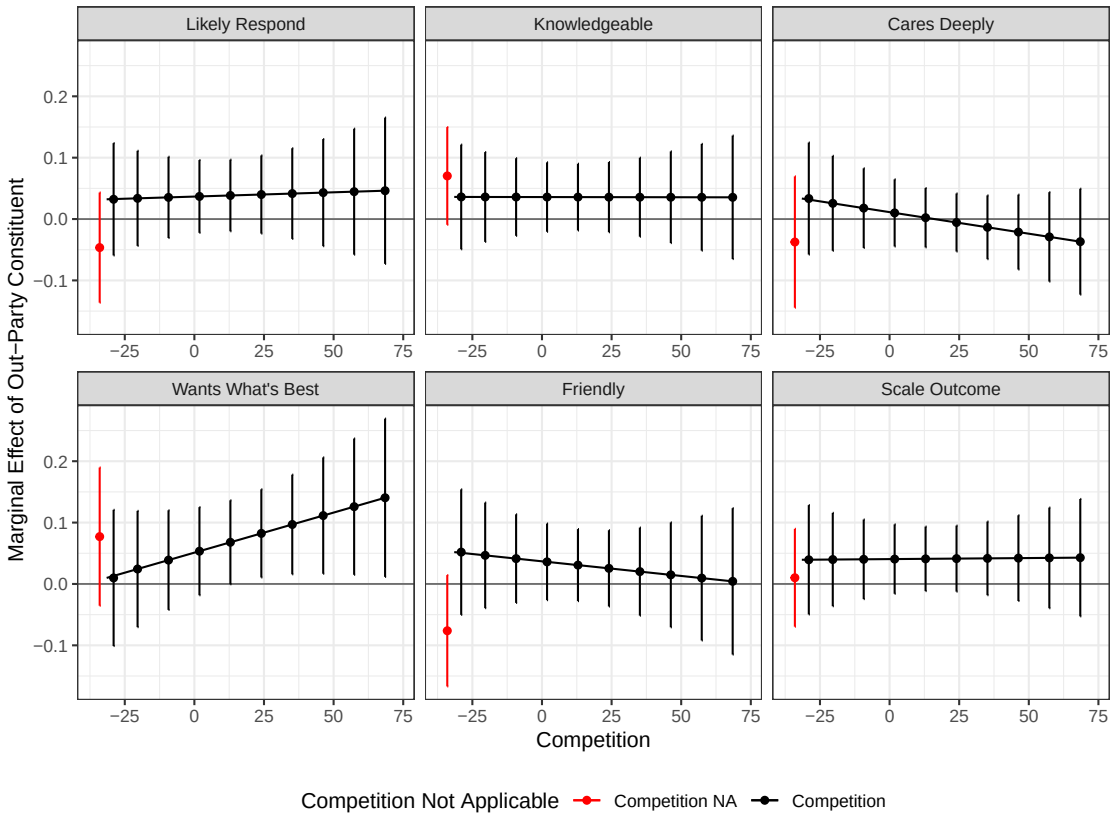
Note: Coefficient estimates from OLS models fit on Party Identifier subset with HC2 standard errors. All models include indicators for constituent party and whether the constituent voted for the politician as well as vignette-issue fixed effects.

Scholars have previously assumed that the party of constituents is a proxy for their likelihood of voting for the politician (Butler and Broockman, 2011). According to this logic,

politicians should be less favorable toward out-party constituents because they perceive less potential electoral benefit from engaging with these individuals. My experiment provides a unique opportunity to separate electoral motivations from partisanship, as partisanship and electoral background were independently randomized. In addition, I collected a pre-treatment measure of the politician's perceived likelihood of facing a competitive election with an out-party candidate. In Figure 1, I show the treatment effect of the constituent coming from the opposing party, across the range of perceived electoral competition. Overall, the figure provides a mixed portrait of partisanship and electoral competition. Politicians in competitive elections are more likely to believe that the out-party constituent wants what's best for the community relative to in-party constituents than their peers in safe electoral areas. There is also some suggestive evidence that politicians in less competitive settings view out-partisans as more friendly and as caring more deeply about the issue relative to in-party constituents than their peers in competitive districts. Broadly, Figure 1 indicates that the relationship between electoral competition and partisan discrimination is somewhat tenuous.

In Figure 2, I examine how the effect of constituent partisanship varies with the constituent's vote history. If politicians use partisanship as a cue to infer the probability that they will earn a constituent's vote, we might expect partisan discrimination to be most pronounced when a constituent did not vote for the politician: politicians might reasonably expect that co-partisans—even those who did not vote for the politician in the past—will be more likely to vote for the politician than opposing partisans. Instead, Figure 2 shows that politicians do not appear to consistently discriminate against opposing partisan constituents who did not vote for them relative to co-partisan constituents who did not vote for them. However, there does appear to be a consistent finding that politicians prefer out-partisans who voted for them over co-partisans who voted for them. Interestingly, politicians are not more likely to respond to one party or another, but they do seem to view out-party con-

Figure 1: Partisan Discrimination and Electoral Competition

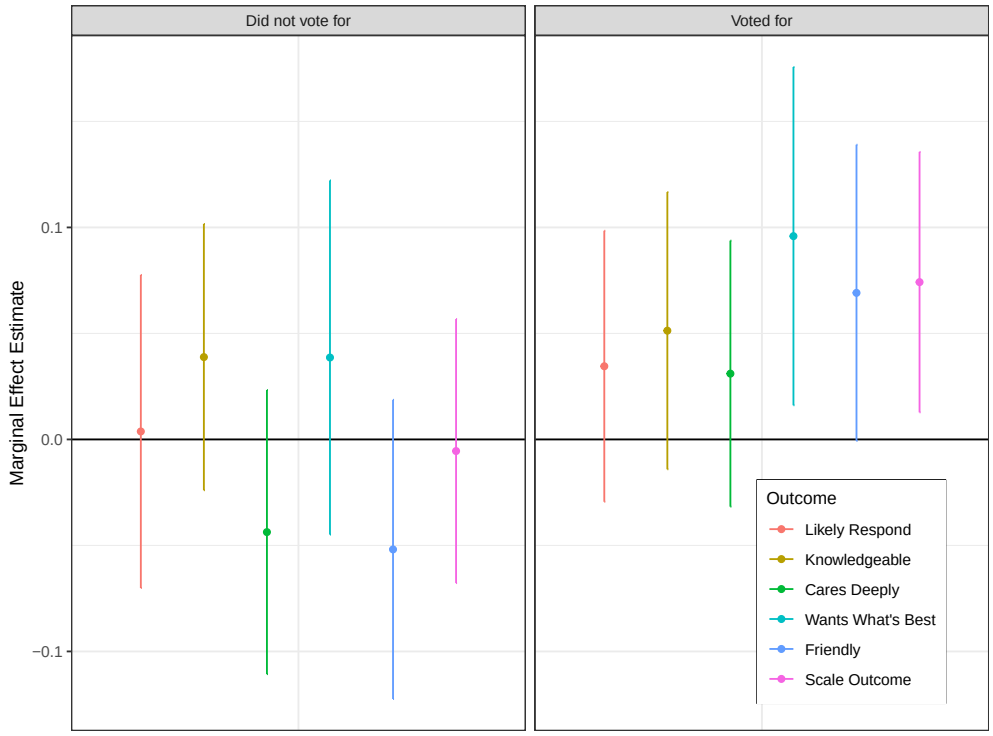


Note: Marginal effect of viewing an email from an out-party constituent at different levels of perceived electoral competition. Marginal effects calculated from OLS models fit on Party Identifier subset with HC2 standard errors. All models include indicators for the voting history of the constituent as well as vignette-issue fixed effects. Outcomes rescaled to lie between 0 and 1.

stituents who voted for them as more friendly and more likely to want what's best for the community than co-partisans who voted for them. In sum, the evidence that elites view constituent partisanship through the lens of electoral politics is mixed. Indeed, in Appendix Figure B.1.1, I show that partisanship is not a significant predictor of the perceived likelihood that the constituent will vote for the politician—even after accounting for the voting history of the constituent. That said, there is some evidence that politicians favor opposing partisans who voted for them over co-partisans who voted for them.

A great deal of research in American politics suggests that elites are more ideological

Figure 2: Partisan Discrimination and Constituent Voting History



Note: Marginal effect of viewing an email from an out-party constituent at different levels of perceived electoral competition. Marginal effects calculated from OLS models fit on Party Identifier subset with HC2 standard errors. All models include indicators for the voting history of the constituent as well as vignette-issue fixed effects.

than the masses (Broockman, 2016; Converse, 1964). Thus, elites may be using partisanship as a proxy for ideology, and anticipating disagreement with out-partisans on the issues, more ideologically extreme politicians may be less favorable toward constituents from the opposing party. If elites use partisanship as a heuristic for ideology, the partisanship of the constituent should affect how they perceive the ideology of the constituent: I find that politicians do believe Democratic constituents are significantly more liberal than Republicans and that out-party constituents are further away ideologically from them (see Appendix Figure B.1.1). To further test the ideological hypothesis, I show how the effect of constituent partisanship varies with party-consistent ideology.[4] Figure 3 shows that, for every outcome measure, politicians

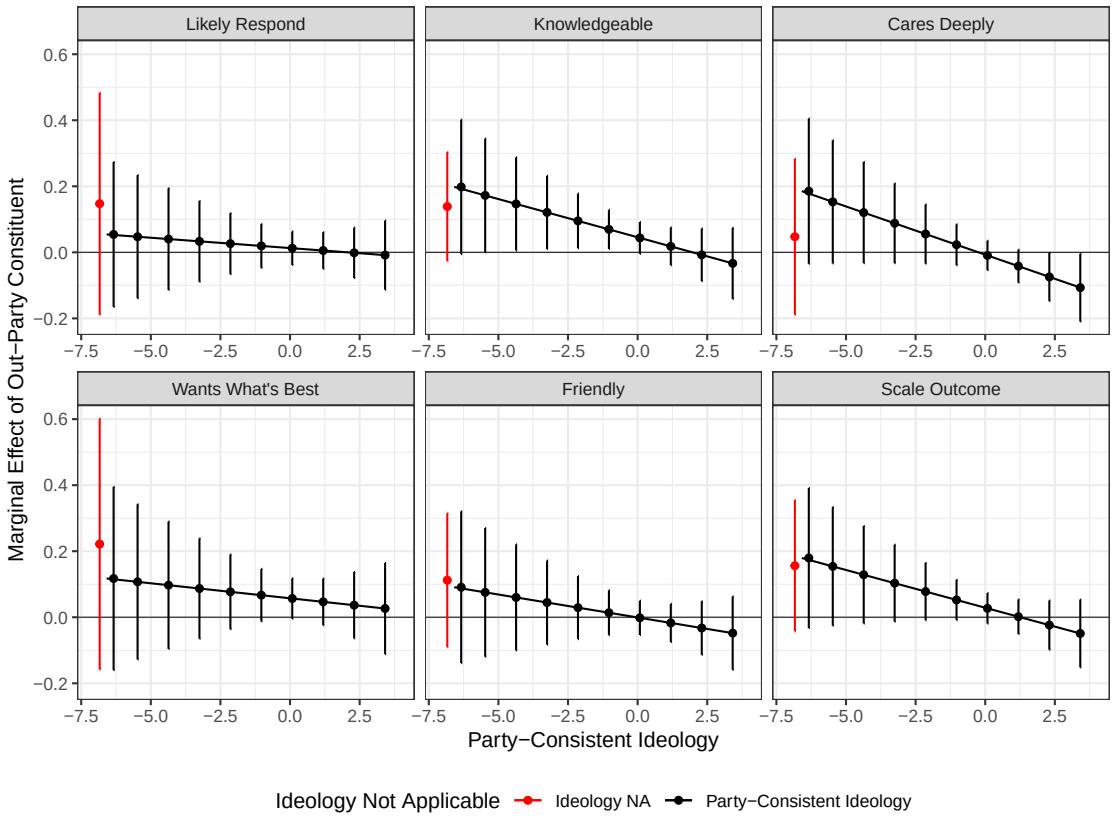
[4]I define party-consistent ideology as liberalism among Democrats and conservatism among Republicans.

with party-consistent ideologies are less favorable to out-partisans relative to co-partisans than are their less party-consistent peers. Indeed, for some outcome measures, the most party-consistent politicians appear to discriminate against opposing partisan constituents. By themselves, these results suggest that politicians may view partisanship as a heuristic for the ideology of their constituents. Politicians whose ideologies are not consistent with their parties' appear to favor opposing partisan constituents, while party-consistent politicians favor co-partisan constituents, in some areas. It is possible that the relationship between the politician's ideology and the effect of the constituent's party could be explained by anticipated disagreement with the constituent: ideologically extreme or consistent politicians have reason to suspect they disagree with opposing partisan constituents more, or agree with co-partisan constituents more. For this reason, they may favor in-party constituents over out-party constituents.

I use the independent randomization of vignette content and partisanship to further probe the involvement of policy-based disagreement in partisan discrimination against constituents. Taking pre-treatment measures of politician's policy positions, I note whether the politician saw a vignette in which the constituent agreed with their position or disagreed with their position. For example, a politician who supports collective bargaining could be randomly assigned to see a constituent email either supporting (agreeing) or opposing (disagreeing) collective bargaining. I then examine the effect of constituent partisanship depending on whether the constituent agrees or disagrees with the politician. Figure 4 displays the marginal effect of viewing an out-partisan constituent email relative to a co-partisan constituent email depending on whether the politician and constituent agree or not. The effects of viewing an out-partisan email are largely negative when the constituents disagree with the politician, though these effects all fail to reach conventional levels of statistical sig-

Individuals are defined as having a more party-consistent ideology if they are more extreme liberal Democrats or more extreme conservative Republicans.

Figure 3: Partisan Discrimination and Ideology

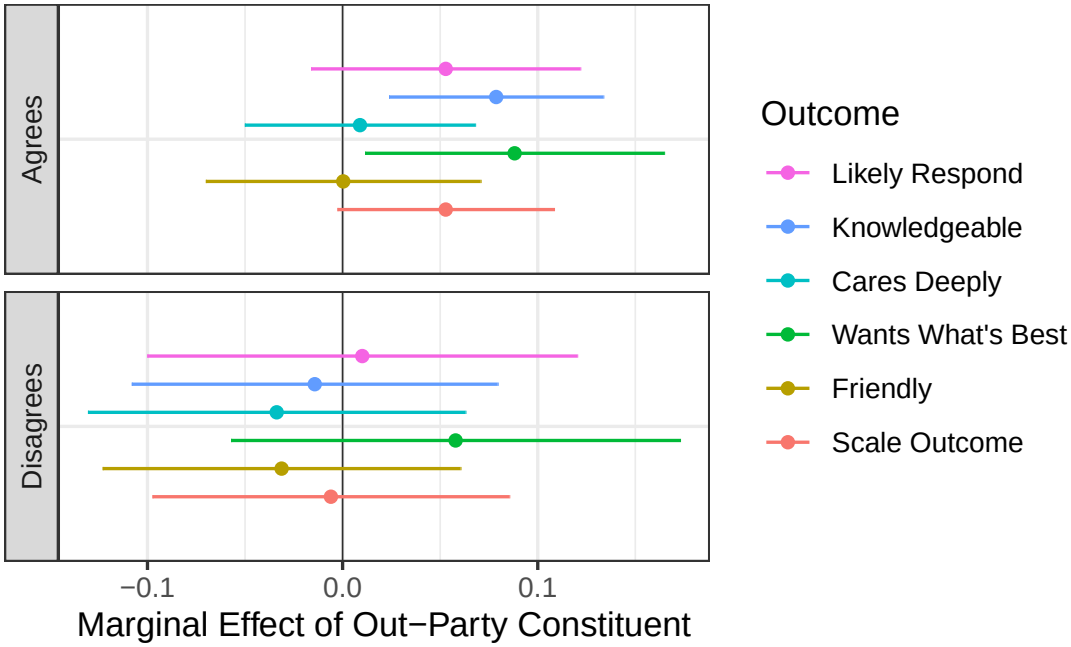


Note: Marginal effect of viewing an email from an out-party constituent at different levels of ideological consistency with the respondent's party (more liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans are more ideologically consistent). Marginal effects calculated from OLS models fit on Party Identifier subset with HC2 standard errors. All models include indicators for the voting history of the constituent as well as vignette-issue fixed effects. Outcomes rescaled to lie between 0 and 1.

nificance; however, if the constituent agrees with the politician, politicians appear to favor opposing partisans over their co-partisan constituents, viewing them as more knowledgeable and more likely to want what's best for the community. Politicians who agree with the constituent are even somewhat more likely to reply to opposing partisan constituents than to their co-partisans.

If politicians are using party as a heuristic to infer the policy positions of constituents (or use policy positions to infer partisanship), we might expect that seeing a constituent with party-consistent views on an issue would reinforce the party cue (and may also inform

Figure 4: Partisan Discrimination and Policy Disagreement



Note: Marginal effect of viewing an email from an out-party constituent who either "Agrees" or "Disagrees" with the respondent. Marginal effects calculated from OLS models fit on Party Identifier subset with HC2 standard errors. All models include indicators for the voting history of the constituent as well as vignette-issue fixed effects. Outcomes rescaled to lie between 0 and 1.

the politician that the constituent is a committed partisan). For example, if a politician saw a Democratic constituent supporting public-sector unions, they might infer both that the constituent is a more committed partisan and that the constituent likely has other views within the party orthodoxy, leading them to prefer constituents of their own party. Seeing a constituent with party-inconsistent views (e.g., a Republican constituent who opposes school vouchers) may reduce the strength of the party and policy cues about the constituent, such that politicians view constituents as less committed partisans and perhaps less extreme or committed ideologues. The politician may anticipate less disagreement with party-inconsistent constituents from the opposing party and more disagreement with party-inconsistent co-partisans.[5] Looking solely at vignettes about party-polarized issues (school

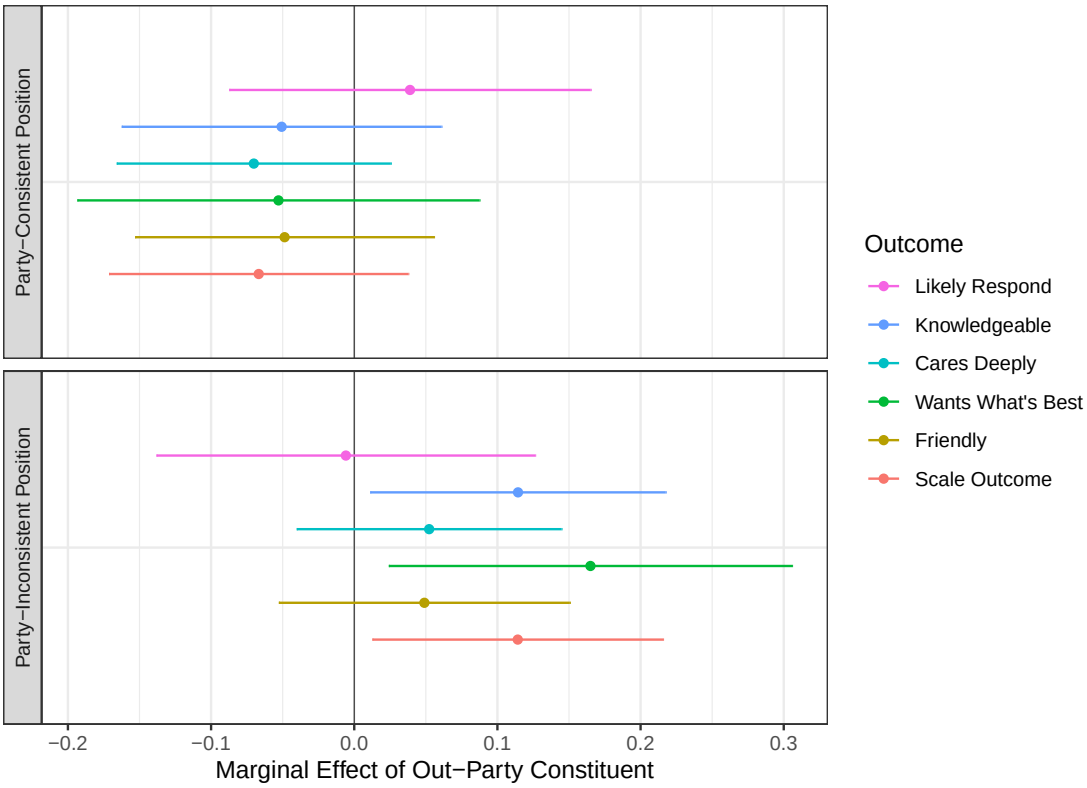
[5] Appendix Figure B.2.1 shows that the effect of party does not appear to vary across issues. Notably, constituent partisanship does not appear to have a stronger effect for polarized vignette topics as opposed

vouchers and public-sector unions), in Figure 5, I show how the marginal effect of constituent party varies with the party (in)consistency of the constituent's views. First, Figure 5 makes clear that, among party-consistent constituents, politicians evince a slight preference for co-partisan constituents, viewing out-partisan constituents less favorably across most outcome measures. Turning to the sample of party-inconsistent constituents, politicians seem to prefer out-partisan constituents over co-partisan constituents. In particular, politicians believe party-inconsistent out-partisans are more knowledgeable and more likely to want what's best for the community, though they view out-partisans as somewhat more friendly and more invested in the issue they are writing about. While Figure 5 cannot fully sort out whether policy is reinforcing the partisan cue or whether party is reinforcing the policy cue (Dias and Lelkes, 2022; Orr, Fowler and Huber, 2023), this analysis indicates that policy positions are an important part of how politicians view partisanship, generating more negativity toward consistent out-partisans and more positive feelings toward inconsistent out-partisans, relative to co-partisans.

Finally, a great deal of recent research suggests the importance of partisan identity and affective polarization for mass-level behavior (e.g., Iyengar and Westwood, 2015; Jenke, 2023; Osmundsen et al., 2021). Because Enders (2021) finds that elites are even more affectively polarized than the masses, we might expect that affective polarization influences the behavior of elites more than the masses: affectively polarized politicians may exhibit a preference for co-partisan constituents over out-partisan constituents. Examining the marginal effect of constituent partisanship across the distribution of affective polarization (the difference between in-party and out-party feeling thermometer ratings), I do find that less affectively polarized politicians appear to prefer out-partisan constituents over co-partisans on a variety of measures (see Figure 6). In particular, they believe out-party constituents

to non-polarized, local issues. This finding suggests that discussing a polarized topic is not, by itself, enough to prime politicians to behave in a partisan fashion.

Figure 5: Partisan Discrimination and Party-Inconsistent Positions

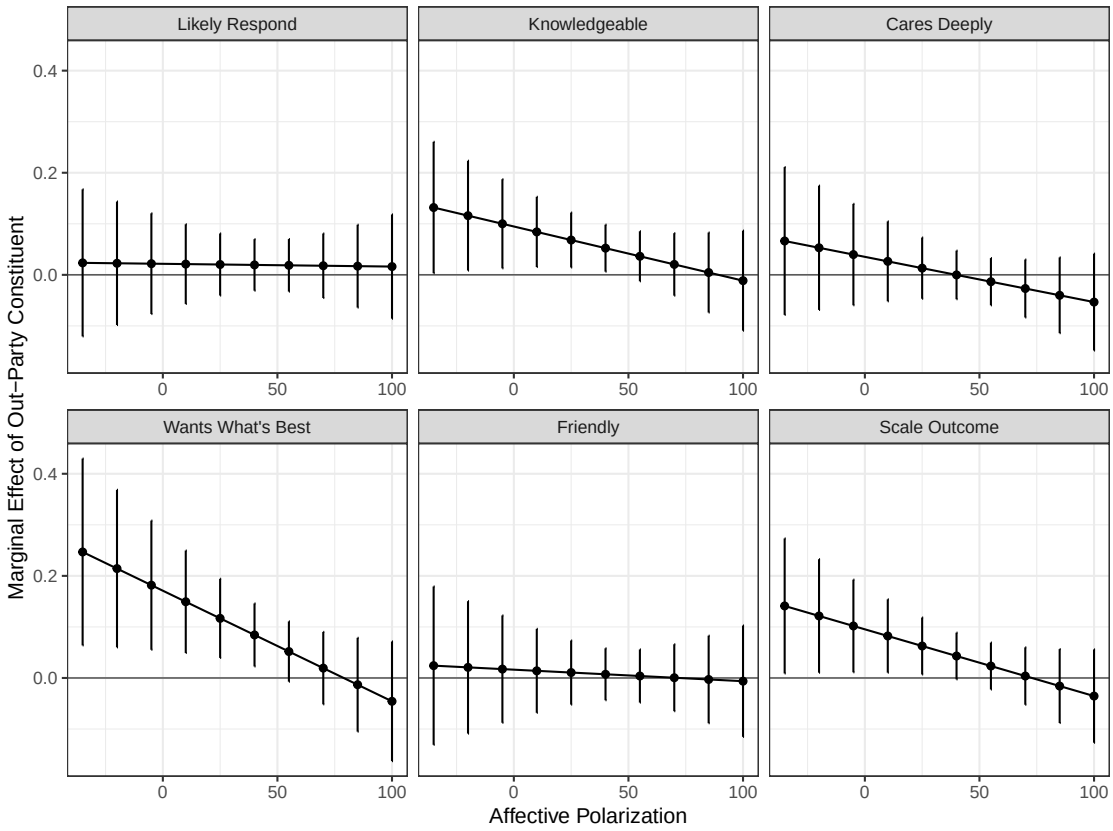


Note: Marginal effect of viewing an email from an out-party constituent who either takes a party-consistent or party-inconsistent position on the vignette issue. Marginal effects calculated from OLS models fit on Party Identifier subset, including only vignettes with polarized policy issues (school vouchers and collective bargaining), with HC2 standard errors. All models include indicators for the voting history of the constituent as well as vignette-issue fixed effects. Outcomes rescaled to lie between 0 and 1.

are more knowledgeable and more likely to want what's best for the community than their co-partisan constituents. The figure also shows some evidence that the most affectively polarized politicians discriminate against opposing partisan constituents on some metrics, viewing them as less likely to care deeply about the issue and less likely to want what's best for the community—though these marginal effects are not statistically significant.

The construct of affective polarization contains within it both feelings of warmth toward one's own party and feelings of coldness toward the opposing party (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, 2012). Some research contends that out-party hatred is an important driver of mass-behavior

Figure 6: Partisan Discrimination and Affective Polarization



Note: Marginal effect of viewing an email from an out-party constituent who either takes a party-consistent or party-inconsistent position on the vignette issue. Marginal effects calculated from OLS models fit on Party Identifier subset, including only vignettes with polarized policy issues, with HC2 standard errors. All models include indicators for the voting history of the constituent as well as vignette-issue fixed effects. Outcomes rescaled to lie between 0 and 1.

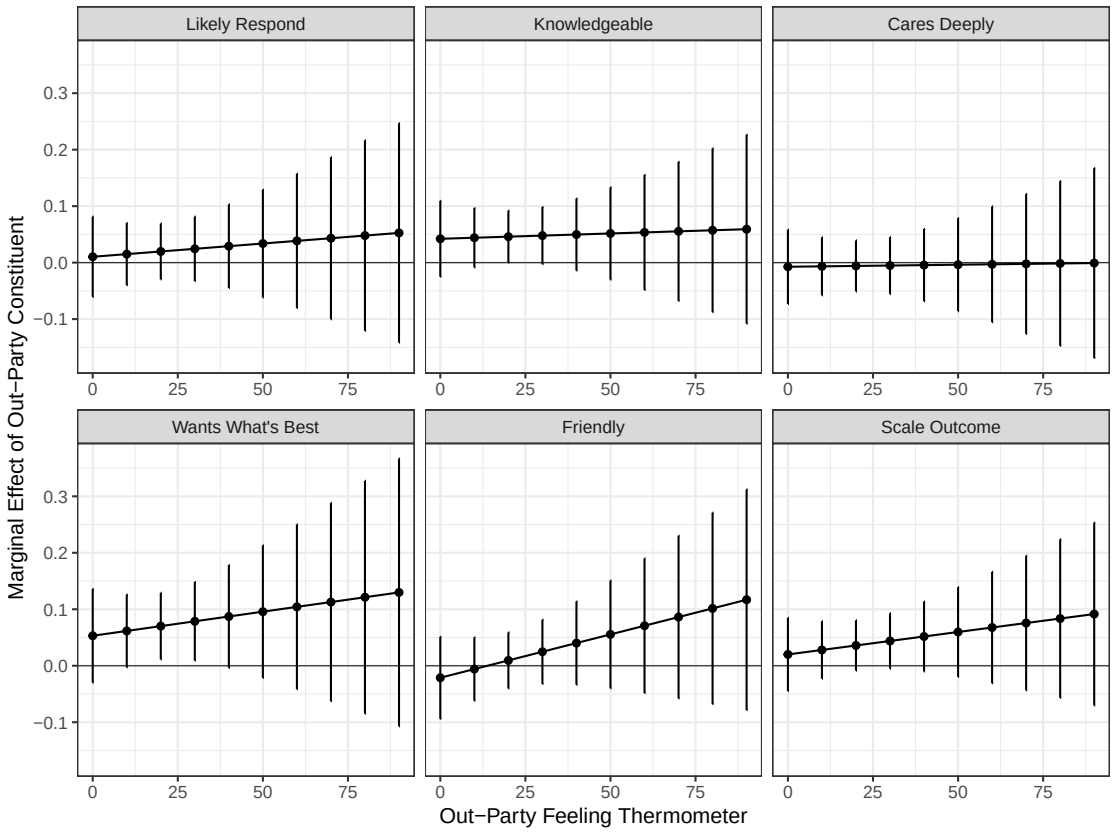
(see e.g. Abramowitz and Webster, 2018; Iyengar and Westwood, 2015). On the other hand, McConnell et al. (2018) find that partisan discrimination is more a reflection of in-party favoritism than out-party discrimination. Below, I test both hypotheses, examining how the marginal effect of constituent partisanship varies with feelings toward the opposing party and with feelings toward one's own party. There is some evidence that feeling more warmly toward the opposing party is associated with politicians favoring out-party constituents over in-party constituents (see Figure 7). Politicians who feel warmest toward the out-party do appear to believe that out-partisan constituents are more friendly and more likely to want

what's best for the community than in-party constituents, relative to politicians who feel coldly toward the out-party. However, the marginal effects of party are generally quite noisy across the distribution of out-party feeling thermometer ratings and cannot rule out a null effect. Turning to examine in-party feeling thermometer ratings, I show in Figure 8 that feelings toward one's own party are more consistently predictive of the effect of constituent partisanship. Across most measures, politicians who like their own party least are more likely to favor out-party constituents. At higher levels of in-party warmth, politicians even express slight favoritism for in-party constituents over out-partisans, viewing constituents from their own party as somewhat more likely to want what's best for the community and more likely to care deeply than opposing partisans, though these marginal effects are not significantly different from zero. Overall, my results suggest that how elites interact with opposing partisan constituents may be most related to their feelings toward their own party as well as the difference in how they feel toward the two parties as opposed to being driven by hatred of the out-party.

Conclusion

In this paper, I presented results from a vignette experiment embedded in an original survey of local elected officials. In this experiment, I showed politicians a hypothetical email from a constituent and asked them what they thought of the constituent who wrote the email and how likely they would be to respond. This experiment independently varied the party, voting history, and policy content of the email, giving me the ability to parse the effects party from electoral strategy and ideology. Contrary to previous experiments, I find that, generally, politicians in my sample do not appear to discriminate against opposing partisans. If anything, they appear to express a slight preference for out-party constituents over in-party constituents. Support for partisanship as a cue for electoral considerations is mixed in my results. Partisanship is an insignificant predictor of politicians' perception that

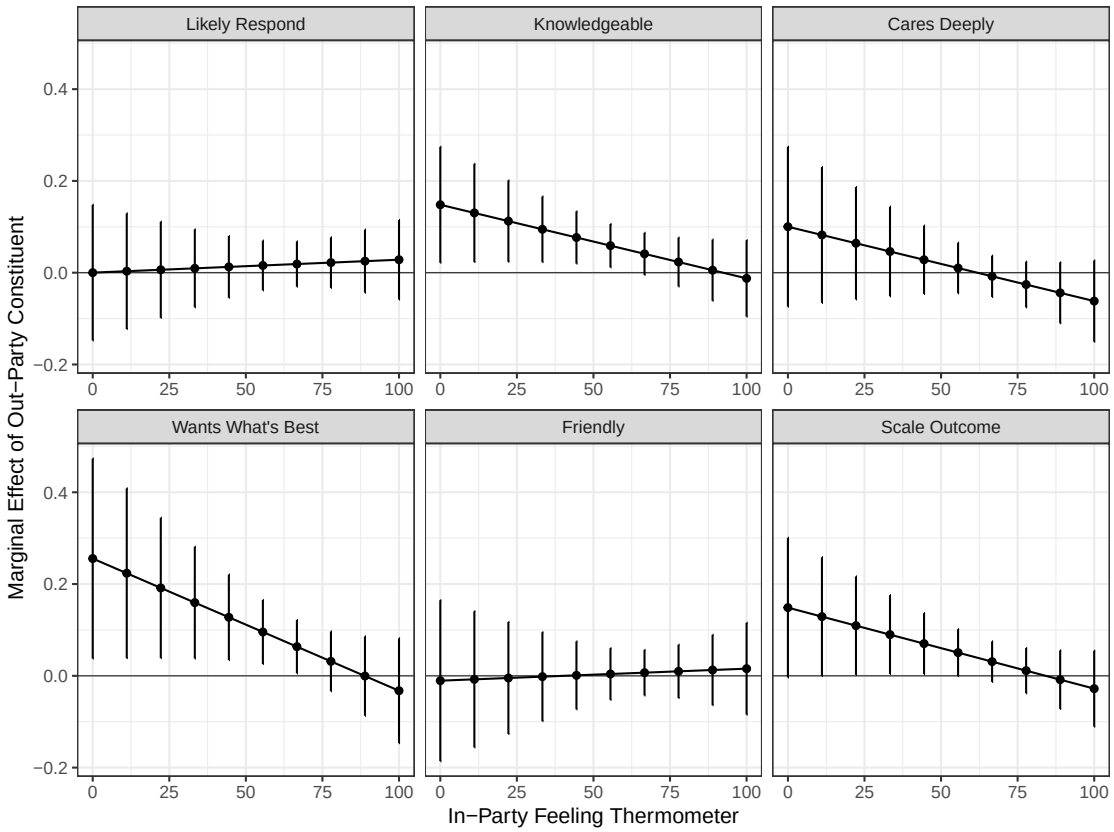
Figure 7: Partisan Discrimination and Out-Party Feeling Thermometer Ratings



Note: Marginal effect of viewing an email from an out-party constituent at different levels of out-party feeling thermometer ratings. Marginal effects calculated from OLS models with HC2 standard errors. Models include voting history and vignette-issue fixed effects.

the constituent will vote for them, and the effect of partisanship does not vary significantly or consistently depending on whether the constituent voted for them. I do find somewhat more consistent support for partisanship as a cue for policy disagreements: ideologically extreme politicians are more likely to discriminate against opposing party constituents than are less extreme politicians, and the least extreme politicians favor out-party constituents. I also show that politicians prefer out-party constituents to in-party constituents when the constituent agrees with the politician and when the constituent takes a heterodox view on policy for their party, while they discriminate against out-party constituents when the reverse is true. Finally, my results indicate that affective polarization is consistently a strong

Figure 8: Partisan Discrimination and In-Party Feeling Thermometer Ratings



Note: Marginal effect of viewing an email from an out-party constituent at different levels of in-party feeling thermometer ratings. Marginal effects calculated from OLS models with HC2 standard errors. Models include voting history and vignette-issue fixed effects.

predictor of the effect of partisanship: more affectively polarized politicians are the least favorable toward out-party constituents relative to in-party constituents. Intriguingly, the effect of partisanship seems less related to feelings toward the out-party than it is to in-party feeling thermometers.

My findings should be reassuring for those who worry about the increasingly bitter partisanship which seems to pervade American politics and for those who note the increasing nationalization of politics (e.g., Hopkins, 2018; Mason, 2018). Local elected officials appear quite willing to respond to contacts from out-party constituents and from constituents who did not vote for them. In fact, politicians in my sample viewed out-party constituents more

favorably than in-party constituents on some measures. That said, there is some evidence that partisanship even plays a role in how local politicians think about their constituents. As politicians become more ideologically extreme (McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal, 2016) and constituents become more ideologically sorted (Levendusky, 2009), politicians may discriminate against opposing partisans more, according to my findings. Moreover, affective polarization, pervasive at the mass level, appears related to behavior at the elite level as well: more affectively polarized politicians are somewhat more likely to discriminate against out-partisan constituents than their less polarized peers. This result especially implies that researchers should more thoroughly explore the role of affective polarization in elite decision-making. My survey experiment suggests that both ideological and affective polarization may influence how politicians view their constituents, potentially degrading the quality of representation afforded to constituents who are not represented by a co-partisan politician. While my findings broadly support the old adage that "all politics is local," shifts in the macro-political environment hint that politics is likely to become increasingly partisan.

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Contents

A CivicPulse Survey Experiment

A.1 Vignette Details

We are interested in learning how policymakers think about and respond to communications from members of the public. Please read the hypothetical email from a constituent below.

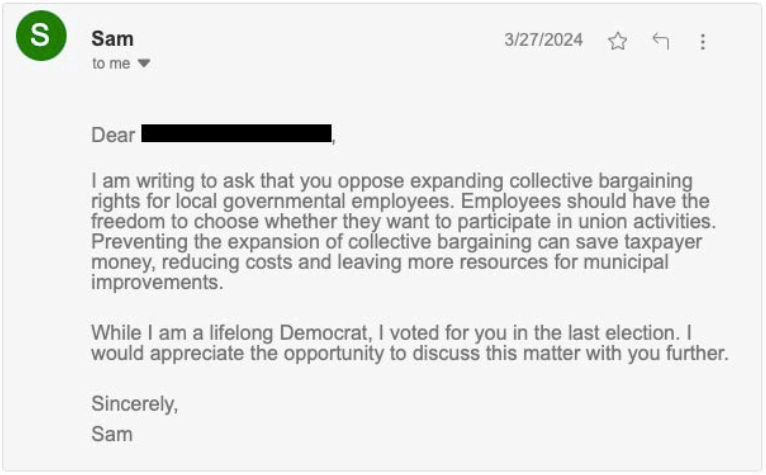


Figure A.1.1: Example Vignette Display

Table A.1.1: Vignette Topics

Issue	**Content**	**Polarized Policy?**
Traffic Control	I am writing to express my strong concern about a recent increase in speeding drivers near my house. This situation is creating a safety issue for children in the neighborhood. To address this problem, I request that a speed bump and stop sign be placed at the intersection.	N
Park Maintenance	I am writing to request maintenance at a park near my house. Lately, I have noticed an increase in litter, and the facilities have started falling apart. Neighborhood children play in this park, and the park often draws visitors from nearby towns. Please direct more resources to repair this park.	N
Rezoning	I am writing to ask that you oppose rezoning land in my neighborhood for commercial use. I am concerned the new business will change the character of our area and harm local wildlife. Residents like me living near the proposed business site are also worried about increased disturbances and traffic.	N
Rezoning	I am writing to ask that you support rezoning land in my neighborhood for commercial use. The business will revitalize a currently empty lot, adding value to the surrounding homes. I believe the new business will bring in income for our area and contribute to the existing community.	N
Collective Bargaining	I am writing to ask that you oppose expanding collective bargaining rights for local governmental employees. Employees should have the freedom to choose whether they want to participate in union activities. Preventing the expansion of collective bargaining can save taxpayer money, reducing costs and leaving more resources for municipal improvements.	Y
Collective Bargaining	I am writing to ask that you support expanding collective bargaining rights for our local governmental employees. Employees in our local government work hard to ensure that our municipal resources are kept up to the highest standards, and they deserve to be compensated fairly for their work.	Y
School Vouchers	I am writing to ask that you oppose efforts to expand school voucher programs. Our local tax dollars should not support schools which promote religion and are less accountable for educational progress. Voucher programs also reduce resources for our local schools, hurting the education of children with fewer resources.	Y
School Vouchers	I am writing to ask that you support efforts to expand school voucher programs. Parents in our area should have the freedom to choose the education our tax dollars support for our children. Expanding vouchers will help all students succeed by giving them access to the best learning environments.	Y

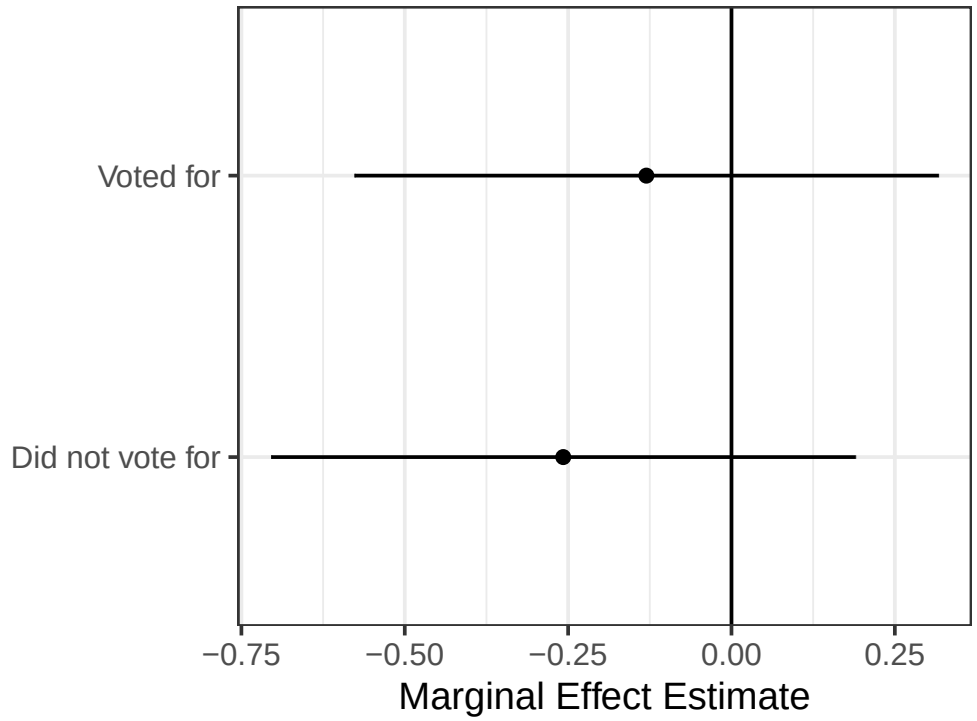
Table A.1.2: Vignette Party-Voting Treatments

Content	**Respondent Party**	**Party Treatment**	**Voting Treatment**
I am a lifelong Democrat, and I voted for you in the last election. I would appreciate the opportunity to discuss this matter with you further.	Democrat	In-Party	Voted For
While I am a lifelong Democrat, I did not vote for you in the last election, but I would appreciate the opportunity to discuss this matter with you further.		In-Party	Did Not Vote For
While I am a lifelong Republican, I voted for you in the last election. I would appreciate the opportunity to discuss this matter with you further.		Out-Party	Voted For
While I am a lifelong Republican and did not vote for you in the last election, I would appreciate the opportunity to discuss this matter with you further.		Out-Party	Did Not Vote For
I am a lifelong Republican, and I voted for you in the last election. I would appreciate the opportunity to discuss this matter with you further.	Republican	In-Party	Voted For
While I am a lifelong Republican, I did not vote for you in the last election, but I would appreciate the opportunity to discuss this matter with you further.		In-Party	Did Not Vote For
While I am a lifelong Democrat, I voted for you in the last election. I would appreciate the opportunity to discuss this matter with you further.		Out-Party	Voted For
While I am a lifelong Democrat and did not vote for you in the last election, I would appreciate the opportunity to discuss this matter with you further.		Out-Party	Did Not Vote For

B Alternate Models

B.1 Manipulation Checks

Figure B.1.1: Marginal Effect of Out-Party on Perceived Possibility of Constituent Voting for Politician



Note: Marginal effect of viewing an email from an out-party constituent on the perceived possibility of the constituent voting for the politician. Marginal effects calculated from OLS models fit on Party Identifier subset with HC2 standard errors. Model includes vignette-issue fixed effects.

Table B.1.1: Party Influence on Perceived Ideology

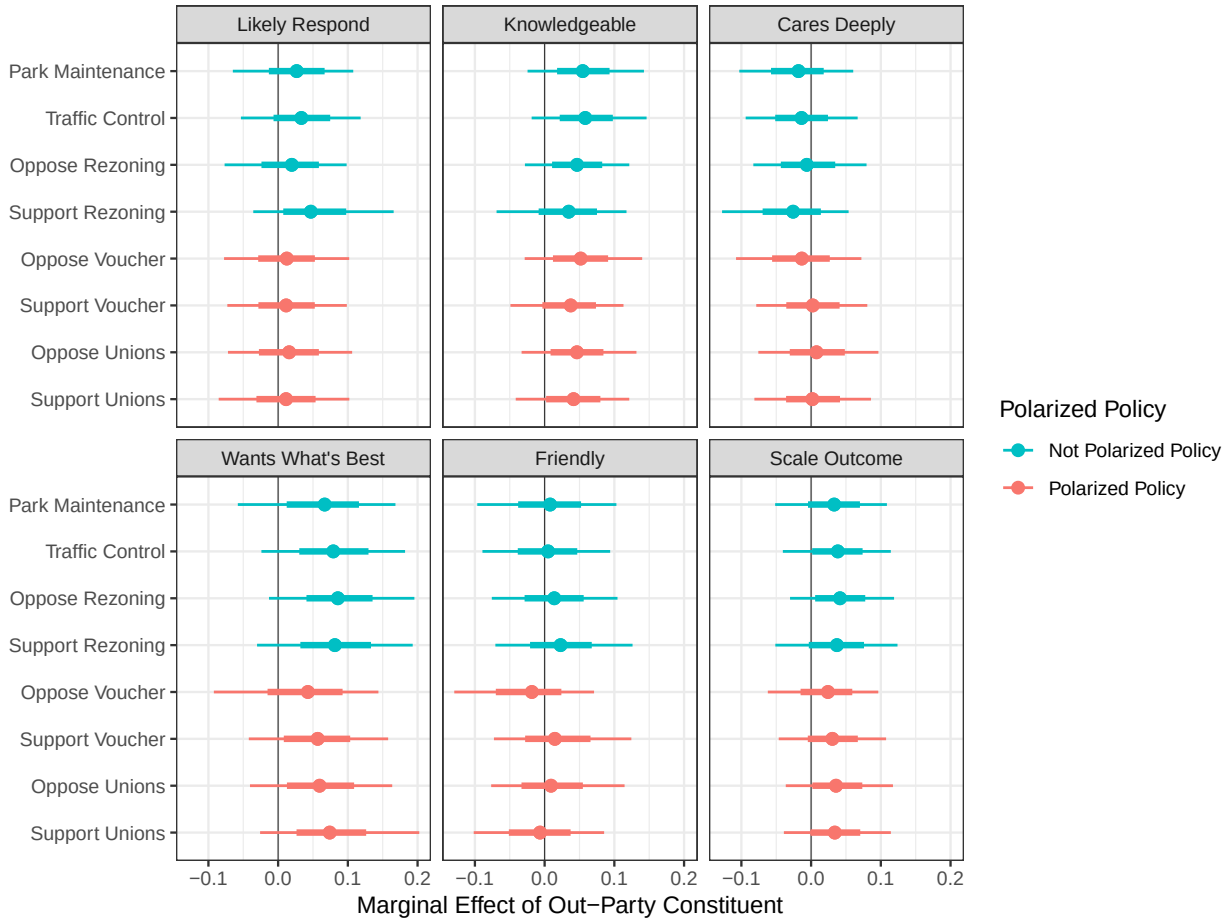
	Perceived Ideological Distance	Perceived Constituent Ideology
Outparty	0.800**	
	(0.249)	
Democrat		−1.203***
		(0.250)
Vote-For Fixed Effect	✓	✓
Issue Fixed Effects	✓	✓
N	225	238

+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Note: Coefficient estimates from OLS models fit on Party Identifier subset with HC2 standard errors. All models include an indicator for whether the constituent voted for the politician as well as vignette-issue fixed effects.

B.2 Partisanship and Policy

Figure B.2.1: Marginal Effect of Out-Party Constituent



Note: Marginal effect of viewing an email from an out-party constituent. Marginal effects calculated from multilevel linear models fit on the Party Identifier subset. Model includes issue-specific random effects with a fixed effect for polarized policies and for the constituent's voting history. Out-Party effects allowed to vary by issue.