

Legislative Party Polarization and Trust in State Legislatures

Kevin K. Banda*
kbanda@unr.edu

Justin H. Kirkland†
jhkirkland@uh.edu

Abstract

We argue that citizens dislike party polarization because it tends to encourage conflict. We further posit that, among partisans, this relationship is driven primarily by the ideological extremity of the opposing party because more extreme opposition parties appear more threatening. Trust attitudes should not, on the other hand, be informed by partisans' own parties degree of extremity. Using roll-call based estimates of state legislative party polarization and public opinion data drawn from the 2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, we show strong evidence in favor of our theory: higher levels of party polarization within legislative chambers depresses citizens' trust in their legislatures. Among partisans, we further find that trust attitudes respond to the ideological extremity of the opposing party, but not to a citizen's own party's extremity.

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*Department of Political Science, University of Nevada, Reno

†Department of Political Science, University of Houston

Over the past several decades, two important changes have taken place in American politics: (1) political elites within the two major parties have become increasingly ideologically polarized at both the state (Shor and McCarty, 2011) and national levels (Theriault, 2008); and (2) the degree to which citizens feel trust towards government and government institutions declined dramatically during the 1960's (Citrin, 1974; Miller, 1974) and continues to be low today. Political trust is an important concept because it provides elected officials with greater “leeway to govern effectively,” (Hetherington, 1998, 803). Low levels of trust may thus be problematic for elected officials. The extant research is mostly silent on the relationship between party polarization and trust in government (but see Hetherington and Rudolph, 2015) and much of the research focuses solely on trust attitudes expressed towards the national government. However, U.S. citizens are represented by multiple governments, and while trust in national government institutions has fallen, there is considerably more heterogeneity in attitudes towards state government institutions (Richardson Jr., Konisky, and Milyo, 2012; Kelleher and Wolak, 2007; Wolak and Palus, 2010). As such, we turn our attention towards this state level variation in trust and address the following question: to what extent does legislative party polarization affect citizens’ trust attitudes towards state legislatures?

More polarized parties express very different policy positions and thus provide citizens with clearer choices on Election Day relative to less polarized parties. In this sense, they may produce some benefits for citizens. However, polarized parties also produce a potentially significant cost: politics tends to become more contentious as the ideological gap between parties becomes wider, and citizens tend to dislike partisan conflict, even when it produces policies they prefer (Atkinson, 2015). We argue that this conflict — or at least citizens’ perceptions of conflict — should lead citizens to become less trusting of government institutions because they view those institutions as being comprised of politicians who are more interested in demonizing their opponents than they are with producing beneficial public policies.

We further argue that polarization makes the opposing party appear to be more threatening to partisans due to the disparate ideological positions of the American parties. These salient perceptions of threat discourage citizens from ceding authority to government institutions.

We test our theory using public opinion data drawn from a module embedded in the 2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (see Richardson Jr., Konisky, and Milyo, 2012) and Shor and McCarty's (2011) measures of state legislative party ideology. We find strong evidence that party polarization drives trust attitudes. As the parties in a state legislative chamber become more polarized, citizens are less likely to express trust in their state legislatures. We observe this relationship for both chambers and when we use an average measure of the level of polarization in both state legislative chambers. We also find that among partisans, these trust attitudes (1) are driven in large part by the ideological extremity of the opposing party and (2) are not affected by the extremity of the in-party. These findings not only suggest that elite party polarization can strongly influence the way in which people assess government institutions, but also that citizens are more attentive to subnational politics than many researchers suspect.

1 Political Trust

Early research on political trust focused on citizens' evaluative orientations towards the political system as a whole, rather than individual institutions within that system (Stokes, 1962; Easton, 1965). Miller (1974) argued that these evaluations are driven in large part by the normative expectations that citizens hold about how the government has and should operate, thus making these evaluations process-oriented. When the processes governing political outcomes become contorted or manipulated, trust in government ought to decline. This process-oriented perspective is supported by more recent work on the relationship between scandals and trust (Chanley, Rudolph, and Rahn, 2000; Bowler and Karp, 2004; Orren,

1997), and citizens' level of involvement in the democratic process (Towfigh et al., 2016).

In contrast to this work, a number of studies have suggested that trust has a strong performance component (Erber and Lau, 1990; Craig, 1993). For example, when the state of the national economy is strong, citizens tend to express more trust in the national government (Citrin and Green, 1986; Hetherington, 1998; Chanley, Rudolph, and Rahn, 2000). Higher crime rates also lower trust, and when a sitting president experiences a boost in approval ratings citizens express more trust (Mansbridge, 1997; Hetherington, 1998). Finally, a number of individual-level characteristics influence trust in governing institutions: (1) perceptions of greater congruence between preferences and outcomes leads to higher trust (Flavin, 2013), (2) higher levels of trust in the federal government encourage greater trust in institutions (Hetherington and Nugent, 2001), and (3) higher levels of education appear to produce expressions of higher levels of trust (Cole, 1973). Thus, extant research has suggested that trust may be a result of both citizens' perceptions of the political process, and the performance of governments. Given that party polarization can influence both citizens' perceptions of governing processes by encouraging gridlock, and alter citizens' perceptions of their own congruence with government and the performance of that government, there is good reason to believe that party polarization is likely tied to trust attitudes towards legislatures.

2 Party Polarization

The conventional wisdom within political science suggests that parties should locate themselves near the center of the the distribution of voters' ideological preferences (e.g. Downs, 1957; Hinich and Munger, 1997), but there is strong evidence that the contemporary national parties began to drift apart during the 1960's (Citrin, 1974; Miller, 1974; Poole and Rosenthal, 1997; Fleisher and Bond, 2004). What has driven this elite polarization? Though

there is some research on polarization in the federal judiciary (Clark, 2009; Gooch, 2015) and at the state level (Shor and McCarty, 2011), much of the research on elite polarization has focused on the U.S. Congress.

Scholars have posited several possible causes of Congressional polarization. First, the shift in partisan alignment of white — mostly conservative — Southerners from the Democratic to the Republican Party may have led the parties to become more ideologically heterogeneous (Hood III, Kidd, and Morris, 1999): Democratic identifiers became more consistently liberal while Republican identifiers became more consistently conservative. Over time, strategic elites may have responded to these changes by slowly staking out more ideologically extreme positions in order to appeal to their increasingly heterogeneous party bases. This behavior may have been driven in large part by the extreme preferences of party activists (Layman et al., 2010). Second, the degree to which power is delegated to Congressional leaders (Rohde, 1991; Cox and McCubbins, 1993), who are more ideological than in the past, may also drive Congressional polarization because it discourages cross-party cooperation. Third, income inequality may exacerbate polarization (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, 2006).

There is some debate about the degree to which citizens are polarized. Some research suggests that citizens' ideological and policy preferences are not particularly polarized (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope, 2005) or at least that citizens are less polarized than elites (Bafumi and Herron, 2010). A second and perhaps larger strain indicates just the opposite: that citizens' preferences are highly polarized (Abramowitz and Saunders, 1998; Layman and Carsey, 2002*a,b*; Stonecash, Brewer, and Mariani, 2003; Carsey and Layman, 2006). This mass polarization appears to be driven by several factors including better sorting by citizens into parties on the basis of ideological congruence (Carmines and Stanley, 1990; Levendusky, 2009), the messages produced by partisan media outlets (Levendusky, 2013), and polarization among party activists (Aldrich, 1995; Layman et al., 2010).

Some research suggests that elite polarization can affect public opinion. More polarized parties should communicate increasingly divergent messages, thus sending strong signals that the parties prefer starkly different political outcomes (Hetherington, 2001). These messages should suggest to citizens which issue positions are congruent with which party, therefore offering them exemplars of what Democrats and Republicans should look like (Carmines and Stimson, 1989; Zaller, 1992). There is also evidence that elite polarization encourages citizens to rely more heavily on party cues and decreases the importance of substantive information during the opinion formation process (Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus, 2013). Partisan conflict, while not precisely the same concept as party polarization, is more prevalent when parties diverge from one another to a greater extent and also appears to affect public opinion. For example, Atkinson (2015) finds that partisan conflict drives down support for policy initiatives and Ramirez (2009) observes that Congressional approval declines as conflict increases. These findings are directly relevant for our own theoretical argument below.

3 Legislative Polarization and Trust Attitudes

Citizens' political views are informed in part by their perceptions of elite-level party polarization. Specifically, we focus on citizens' evaluations of government institutions and argue that legislative polarization affects the degree to which citizens trust legislatures. More specifically, we posit that the likelihood that a citizen expresses trust in a legislative body should decline as that legislature becomes increasingly polarized. Three reasons underlie our line of thought.

First, as noted above, elite polarization encourages party conflict. Citizens do not like political conflict because they view it as being incongruent with democratic norms. Parties that are constantly at odds with one another may be perceived of as being more interested

in maintaining ideological purity at the cost of failing to work on behalf of citizens when crafting legislation. Thus citizens may be increasingly reluctant to grant their legislatures trust and the leeway that is associated with it as legislative polarization increases.

Second, the news media tends to focus on political conflict rather than political compromise. Thus the media as a whole is likely to spend more time covering both the conflicts that are generated by legislative polarization and polarization itself as legislative polarization increases. Pundits are especially likely to spend time discussing polarization and blame it for the political ills of the day. Thus citizens should respond to these negative messages about polarized legislatures by expressing lower levels of political trust.

Third, as parties become increasingly polarized, they should be viewed as more threatening. More specifically, partisans should view the opposing party as more threatening for two reasons: (1) their own elites are likely to put forth a greater effort to demonize the opposition as polarization increases and (2) they are more likely to notice differences between the parties when polarization is greater. This phenomena is likely magnified by the fact that the degree to which partisans dislike those who identify with the opposing party has grown over time (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes, 2012). Independents, at least those who are not ideological extremists, should also find polarized parties more threatening because they both appear to hold dangerously extreme policy preferences. Thus, trust should decline as legislative polarization increases because citizens should view one or both parties as being increasingly threatening.

These three arguments lead us to draw what we call the “polarization hypothesis:” *citizens are less likely to express trust in legislatures as legislative polarization increases.* In addition, the third argument leads us to draw a second hypothesis, which we call the “extremism hypothesis:” *partisans are less likely to express trust in legislatures as the opposing party becomes increasingly ideologically extreme.*¹ We do not, however, expect partisans’

¹It is important to note that while these two hypotheses are clearly related, there are important differences

trust attitudes to respond to the ideological extremity of their own party in large part due to biased information processing strategies that lead them to ignore or discount information that might lead them to view their own party in a more negative manner. Thus we expect party extremity to affect trust attitudes, but only the extremity of the opposing party.

4 Research Design

We test our theory at the subnational level because states offer a great deal more potential variance in legislative polarization than exists within single time points for trust attitudes in the U.S. Congress. In addition, state legislatures vary on a number of institutional dimensions, so this environment allows for a richer test of our theory. We use data drawn from the University of Missouri’s team content module embedded in the 2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) (see Richardson Jr., Konisky, and Milyo, 2012) for individual-level public opinion data.

The CCES is a large-scale survey of a representative population of adult citizens in the U.S. The University of Missouri team content module includes responses from 1,000 people. In addition to being asked a number of standard demographic and political questions, respondents were also asked to express the degree to which they trust their state legislatures. The question was worded as follows: “How much of the time do you think you can trust each branch of government? Please answer for each branch of the Federal or your state government listed below.” For this research, the key response was for a respondent’s state legislature. The possible responses were “hardly ever” (26%), “some of the time” (55%), “most of the time” (18%), and “just about always” (1%).

between them. Research on legislative polarization has consistently treated polarization as a relational concept measuring the distance between two political objects (Shor and McCarty, 2011; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, 2006; Garand, 2010; Theriault, 2006). Polarization may increase in a legislature when a citizen’s own party becomes more extreme, when the opposing party becomes more extreme, or both. Our ideological extremity hypothesis suggests that only opposing party’s extremity matters.

We recoded this variable such that it equalled 0 if the respondent reported trusting their state legislature “hardly ever” and 1 if they gave any other response. Thus we have a measure of whether or not a respondent reported trusting the state legislature at all. We did this because there is a clear increase in the level of legislative polarization among respondents who expressed any of the three higher levels of trust compared to those who chose the lowest level, but there are no clear differences among those three higher levels of trust. This binary indicator of trust serves as the dependent variable in the analyses testing the polarization and extremity hypotheses. Because the dependent variable is dichotomous, we use logistic regression to evaluate these hypotheses.

To assess the possibility that citizens’ reported trust attitudes in state legislatures are essentially identical to their levels of trust in the federal government — a more salient political object relative to state legislatures — we include a placebo test later in the paper. In this set of tests, the dependent variable is trust in the federal government. Respondents were asked the same question as above and could give the same set of responses. They could have reported that they trusted the federal government “hardly ever” (49%), “some of the time” (42%), “most of the time” (8%), or “just about always” (less than 1%). As was the case with our indicator of trust in state legislatures, we collapse this measure to a binary indicator for ease of comparison. This choice does not affect the substance of our findings.

Our primary independent variable for testing the polarization hypothesis is the degree of legislative polarization in a state during 2008. These data are drawn from the American Legislatures data (Shor and McCarty, 2011) on state legislative ideology. We used these data to create chamber-level measures of party polarization. First we calculate the median across the ideal points estimated for members of the Democratic and Republican Parties in each chamber. Then we subtracted these medians from one another to calculate a measure of chamber polarization for which higher values indicate greater polarization. Thus we have

measures of legislative polarization in both the lower and upper chamber of each state². We use each as our primary independent variable of interest in separate models, but we do not include both in the same model due to collinearity, as the two indicators are highly correlated (0.87) with one another. We do, however, include a third measure of legislative polarization that is the mean of the polarization in the lower and upper chambers. We expect to observe negative coefficients for these variables in our models.

We use a different, but related, concept as our primary independent variable of interest in our tests of the extremity hypothesis: the ideological extremity of the opposing party, i.e. the party with which a given *partisan* respondent does not identify.³ We use the absolute value of the median party ideal point within each chamber. This gives us a direct measure of the ideological extremity within a party by chamber. Higher values indicate greater ideological extremity. In our models testing the extremity hypothesis, we also control for the ideological extremity of a respondent's own party, which is calculated in the same way as the extremity of the opposing party.

In addition to the covariates meant to test our primary hypotheses, we control for potential differences in trust driven by partisanship by including two dummy variables that are coded 1 if respondent identifies with either the Democratic or the Republican Parties and 0 if they do not.⁴ We also include dummy variables indicating whether or not respondents are women, African-American, or Latino and include a variable capturing the age in years of respondents, which allows our statistical models to account for differences in levels of trust across age groups. We also account for differences in our respondents' levels of education by including a measure ranging from 1 to 6 in which higher values correspond with higher levels of education attainment. We control for respondents' levels of political interest with

²We omit respondents who live in Nebraska due to the nonpartisan and unicameral nature of their state's legislature.

³We omit independents from this analysis because they have neither an in nor an out-party.

⁴We code "leaners" as partisans.

an indicator ranging from 0 to 2 for which higher values correspond with higher levels of interest.

Finally, we included four additional control variables tapping into the political and economic contexts in which respondents found themselves in their states: (1) the state unemployment rate,⁵ (2) respondents' perceptions of the strength of the national economy,⁶ (3) the number of legislative chambers controlled by the respondent's party,⁷ and (4) the presence of divided government.⁸ The first controls for the likely dissatisfaction that citizens will hold towards government institutions when unemployment rates are higher, the second controls for the finding that more positive economic perceptions tend to lead citizens to express higher levels of trust, and the third controls for the possibility that citizens express lower levels of trust when there is more salient political conflict between legislatures and governors. We report the summary statistics for each of the variables used in our analyses in Table 1.

5 Results

5.1 Testing the Polarization Hypothesis

We evaluate the polarization hypothesis using the results of the models reported in Table 2. Each model uses a different measure of legislative polarization as the primary independent variable of interest. Polarization in the lower chamber is shown in the first column, upper chamber polarization is used in the second column, and the average polarization is utilized

⁵This ranges from 3 to 8.3% in these data.

⁶This indicator ranges from 1 to 5. Higher values indicate increasingly negative perceptions of the state of the national economy.

⁷We include this control to account for the higher levels of trust that are observed when institutions are controlled by members of a citizen's own party (Citrin, 1974; Keele, 2005; Hetherington and Rudolph, 2015). This variable can take on the values of 0, 1, or 2.

⁸This is coded 1 for respondents residing in states in which control of the governorship and at least one legislative chamber is split between the two major parties.

Table 1: Summary Statistics

	Mean	Standard deviation	Min.	Max.
Trusts the state legislature	0.74	0.44	0.00	1.00
Trusts the national government	0.51	0.50	0.00	1.00
<i>Legislative polarization</i>				
Lower chamber	1.59	0.67	0.52	3.21
Upper chamber	1.58	0.54	0.48	2.79
Average	1.58	0.59	0.55	3.00
<i>Opposition party extremity</i>				
Lower chamber	0.80	0.42	0.02	1.92
Upper chamber	0.79	0.40	0.01	1.79
Average	0.79	0.39	0.03	1.72
<i>In-party extremity</i>				
Lower chamber	0.84	0.43	0.02	1.92
Upper chamber	0.82	0.39	0.01	1.79
Average	0.83	0.40	0.03	1.72
# of legislative chambers controlled by respondent's party	0.94	0.90	0.00	2.00
Divided government	0.45	0.50	0.00	1.00
Respondent is a Democrat	0.46	0.50	0.00	1.00
Respondent is a Republican	0.43	0.50	0.00	1.00
Respondent is female	0.49	0.50	0.00	1.00
Respondent is African-American	0.06	0.23	0.00	1.00
Respondent is Latino/a	0.06	0.23	0.00	1.00
Age in years	48.45	15.80	18.00	93.00
Level of education	3.45	1.50	1.00	6.00
Level of political interest	1.60	0.61	0.00	2.00
State unemployment rate	5.78	1.06	3.00	8.30
Perceptions of the national economy	1.50	0.69	1.00	5.00

in the last column. Recall that we expect the coefficients for legislative polarization to have negative signs.

The results of all three models provide strong support for our theory. Note that all three of the coefficients for legislative polarization are negative as expected. They also all differ significantly from zero ($p \leq 0.05$), thus allowing us to confidently reject the null hypothesis that legislative polarization and trust in state legislatures are statistically unrelated.⁹ But to what degree does legislative polarization shape trust attitudes?

⁹Some readers may be concerned that the effects of state legislative polarization on trust attitudes may be conditioned by political interest. We tested this possibility by interacting our polarization measures with political interest. The marginal effects of legislative polarization produced by these models behaved in the ways one might expect; they were increasingly negative as interest increased. But while the point estimates of these marginal effects became more certain at higher levels of interest, their magnitude did not become much larger. More generally, the models including this interaction did not appear to fit the data better than those that we present in Table 2.

Table 2: State Legislative Polarization and Political Trust in State Legislatures

	Lower Chambers	Upper Chambers	Average
Legislative polarization	-0.332* (0.143)	-0.423* (0.208)	-0.406* (0.172)
# of legislative chambers controlled by respondent's party	0.400* (0.143)	0.401* (0.143)	0.401* (0.142)
Divided government	0.023 (0.254)	0.025 (0.240)	0.028 (0.247)
Respondent is a Democrat	0.663 (0.464)	0.677 (0.464)	0.673 (0.464)
Respondent is a Republican	0.257 (0.352)	0.281 (0.353)	0.272 (0.352)
Respondent is female	0.129 (0.197)	0.130 (0.196)	0.130 (0.196)
Respondent is African-American	-0.155 (0.489)	-0.172 (0.483)	-0.167 (0.487)
Respondent is Latino/a	-0.145 (0.414)	-0.169 (0.411)	-0.152 (0.413)
Age in years	-0.007 (0.006)	-0.007 (0.006)	-0.007 (0.006)
Level of education	0.039 (0.084)	0.039 (0.084)	0.039 (0.084)
Level of political interest	-0.069 (0.206)	-0.079 (0.204)	-0.074 (0.204)
State unemployment rate	-0.073 (0.118)	-0.075 (0.116)	-0.069 (0.117)
Perceptions of the national economy	0.337† (0.189)	0.336† (0.190)	0.337† (0.190)
Intercept	1.166 (0.832)	1.314 (0.810)	1.251 (0.822)
Random Intercept			
σ_{State}^2	0.181	0.142	0.161
BIC	964.329	963.869	963.852
N	835	835	835

Note: cell entries are estimated coefficients generated using mixed effects logistic regression along with probability weights. Standard errors are reported in parentheses.

* = $p \leq 0.05$ (two tailed)

† = $p \leq 0.05$ (one tailed)

To address this question, we turn to a series of predicted probabilities, plotted in Figure 1. We generated these predicted probabilities by simulating across the observed values of our measures of lower chamber polarization, upper chamber polarization, and the average level of polarization across chambers. We held the control variables at their observed values for each observation in our data.

The first plot in Figure 1 shows the predicted probability of expressing trust in state legislatures across all values of legislative polarization in the lower chamber. When polarization is at its lowest, the predicted probability of expressing trust in the state legislature is 0.81.

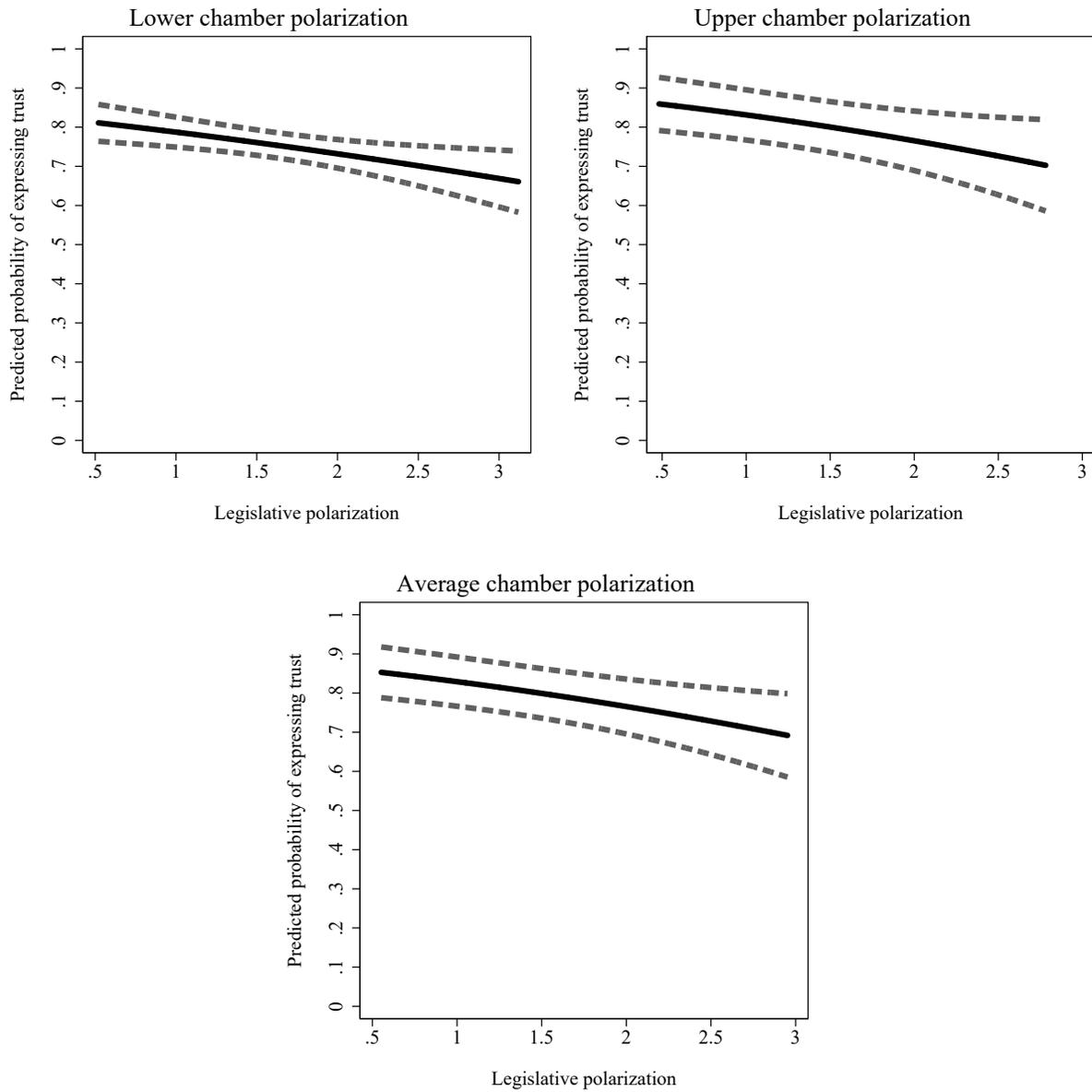


Figure 1: The predicted probability of expressing trust in state legislatures across levels of legislative polarization. Generated using the observed values of the remaining variables across observations.

As polarization increases, the predicted probability of expressing trust declines. At the high point of legislative polarization, this predicted probability is 0.66, a total decrease of 0.15.

The predicted probability of expressing trust similarly declines as polarization increases in the upper chamber of a state's legislature. The predicted probability here ranges from 0.86 when upper chamber polarization is at its nadir to 0.70 when polarization is at its peak, a decline of 0.16.

We turn last to the final plot, which presents the predicted probability of expressing trust in the state legislature across our averaged measure of chamber polarization. The pattern here is similar to the results of the previous analyses. The predicted probability of expressing trust in the state legislature is 0.85 when polarization is at its minimum. This probability declines as polarization increases. At the maximum of polarization, the predicted probability is 0.69, a total decline of 0.20.

5.2 Placebo Test

While the above results seem to strongly suggest that legislative polarization affects the levels of trust that citizens hold in their state legislatures, some readers may be concerned that citizens are too inattentive to subnational politics for the results to be credible. Given the paucity of attention citizens pay towards state government, it is possible that our results are simply an artifact of some relationship between polarization and citizens' general attitudes towards all governments. Our theoretical expectations are very specific: we expect that the level of polarization in a legislature drives trust in that chamber. Thus, if our theory has merit, state legislative party polarization ought to influence trust attitudes towards state legislatures (which we have already seen), but not towards other government bodies. As such, a placebo test is in order. To perform such a test, we observe how legislative party polarization influences trust in the national government. If our theory is correct, we will

observe essentially no relationship between these two variables. We report the results of these tests in Table 3.

Table 3: State Legislative Polarization and Trust in the Federal Government

	Lower Chambers	Upper Chambers	Average
Legislative polarization	0.213 (0.137)	0.259 (0.184)	0.256 (0.163)
# of legislative chambers controlled by respondent's party	-0.024 (0.096)	-0.029 (0.097)	-0.027 (0.097)
Divided government	-0.200 (0.186)	-0.197 (0.184)	-0.200 (0.185)
Respondent is a Democrat	0.863* (0.331)	0.843* (0.335)	0.853* (0.333)
Respondent is a Republican	0.623* (0.299)	0.610* (0.302)	0.615* (0.301)
Respondent is female	0.309† (0.162)	0.310† (0.163)	0.311† (0.163)
Respondent is African-American	0.187 (0.324)	0.190 (0.323)	0.191 (0.323)
Respondent is Latino/a	-0.339 (0.343)	-0.318 (0.348)	-0.332 (0.344)
Age in years	-0.010* (0.005)	-0.011* (0.005)	-0.010* (0.005)
Level of education	0.054 (0.069)	0.052 (0.069)	0.054 (0.069)
Level of political interest	-0.292* (0.143)	-0.285* (0.143)	-0.288* (0.144)
State unemployment rate	-0.185* (0.084)	-0.188* (0.084)	-0.189* (0.084)
Perceptions of the national economy	0.362* (0.125)	0.362* (0.125)	0.363* (0.126)
Intercept	0.395 (0.693)	0.387 (0.698)	0.426 (0.698)
Random Intercept			
σ_{State}^2	0.015	0.021	0.016
BIC	1,221.425	1,221.530	1,221.224
N	865	865	865

Note: cell entries are estimated coefficients generated using mixed effects logistic regression along with probability weights. Standard errors are reported in parentheses.

* = $p \leq 0.05$ (two tailed)

† = $p \leq 0.05$ (one tailed)

In the previous section, the estimated coefficients for the legislative polarization variables were observed to be negative. In this analysis, all three are positive. In addition, none of these coefficients differs significantly from zero at a traditional level ($p \leq 0.05$). Thus, these results provide no evidence that state legislative polarization affects citizens' expressed levels of trust in the federal government. This suggests the systematic relationships we observe in prior analyses are not a function of general attitudes towards governments, and

are instead a function of specific evaluations of a specific institution. Furthermore, note that the correlation between our measures of trust in state legislatures and trust in the federal government is about 0.32. While the two variables are positively correlated with one another, there is a substantial degree of independent variance in both measures.

5.3 Testing the Opposition Extremity Hypothesis

We report the results of our tests of the extremity hypothesis in Table 4. Once again, the results focusing on the lower chamber are in the first column while those of the upper chamber are reported in the second column. The last column shows the results when we average our extremity measures across the two chambers. Recall that these models omit independents, who do not have clear in and out parties. Thus the following results hold only for partisans.

As expected, the estimated coefficients for our opposition party extremism variables are negative across all three models. The standard errors are also small enough relative to the coefficients that we are able to confidently ($p \leq 0.05$) reject the null hypothesis that opposition party extremism is unrelated to these trust attitudes. This implies that the probability of expressing trust in the state legislature declines as a respondent's opposing party becomes increasingly ideologically extreme. In other words, the probability that a Republican (Democrat) will express trust in their state legislature declines as the Democratic (Republican) Party becomes more liberal (conservative).

While the coefficients provide us with evidence favoring our theory, they do not allow us to directly observe the substantive impact of opposition party extremism on trust in state legislatures. In order to observe these substantive effects, we present a series of predicted probabilities generated from these models in Figure 2. As expected, all three plots show that the predicted probability of trusting the state legislature declines as opposition party

Table 4: Opposition Party Extremity and Trust in State Legislatures

	Lower Chambers	Upper Chambers	Average
Opposition party extremism	-0.791* (0.244)	-0.819* (0.319)	-0.903* (0.261)
In-party extremism	-0.218 (0.294)	-0.139 (0.368)	-0.210 (0.327)
# of legislative chambers controlled by respondent's party	0.341* (0.135)	0.335* (0.131)	0.328* (0.135)
Divided government	0.157 (0.341)	0.141 (0.339)	0.154 (0.336)
Respondent is a Democrat	0.236 (0.257)	0.238 (0.253)	0.232 (0.255)
Respondent is female	0.271 (0.220)	0.283 (0.224)	0.277 (0.222)
Respondent is African-American	-0.047 (0.476)	-0.060 (0.473)	-0.061 (0.473)
Respondent is Latino/a	0.100 (0.484)	0.075 (0.492)	0.086 (0.487)
Age in years	-0.009 (0.006)	-0.009 (0.006)	-0.009 (0.006)
Level of education	0.063 (0.084)	0.061 (0.085)	0.062 (0.084)
Level of political interest	-0.062 (0.239)	-0.076 (0.241)	-0.074 (0.238)
State unemployment rate	-0.210 (0.176)	-0.248 (0.183)	-0.220 (0.180)
Perceptions of the national economy	0.186 (0.186)	0.201 (0.185)	0.195 (0.186)
Intercept	2.782* (1.077)	2.997* (1.064)	2.942* (1.074)
Random Intercept			
σ_{State}^2	0.363	0.387	0.352
BIC	794.451	793.901	793.557
N	745	745	745

Note: cell entries are estimated coefficients generated using mixed effects logistic regression along with probability weights. Standard errors are reported in parentheses.

* = $p \leq 0.05$ (two tailed)

† = $p \leq 0.05$ (one tailed)

extremity increases.

The first panel shows the effects of lower chamber opposition party extremity on trust attitudes. At the lowest level of opposition extremity, the predicted probability of expressing trust in the state legislature is 0.86. At the highest level of opposition party extremity, the predicted probability is 0.62, a total decline of 0.24. Upper chamber opposition party extremity exhibits a similar effect on trust as shown in the second panel; the predicted probability decreases from a starting point of 0.87 to 0.64 as opposition extremism increases from its minimum to its maximum values, a total decrease of 0.23. Finally, the last panel

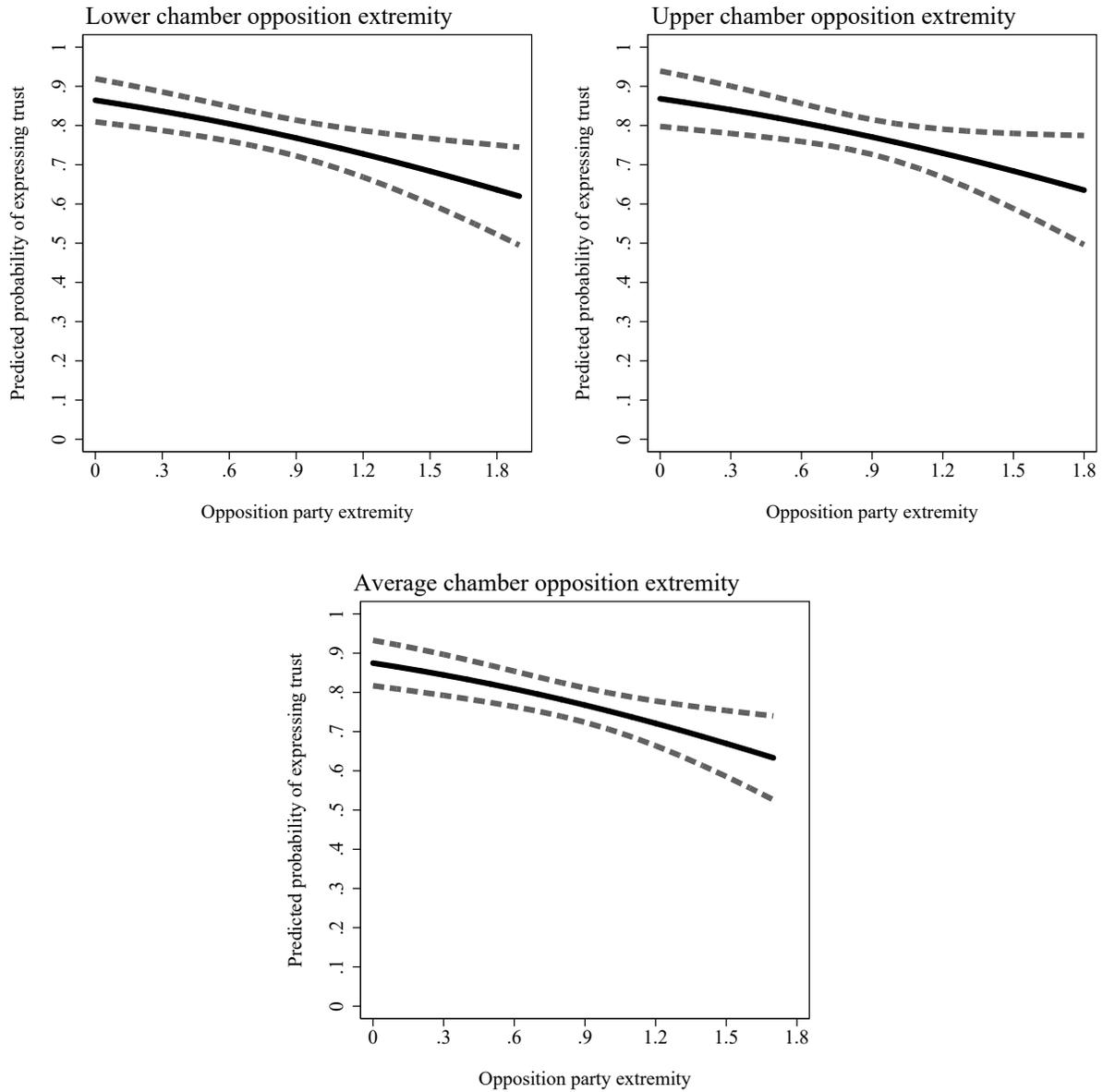


Figure 2: The predicted probability of expressing trust in state legislatures across levels of opposition party extremism. Generated using the observed values of the remaining variables across observations.

shows the substantive effects of our average chamber extremism measure on trust in the state legislature. The predicted probability of expressing trust among partisans who live in states with the least ideologically extreme opposition parties is 0.88. This value declines to 0.63 among those living in states with the most extreme opposition parties, a total change in the predicted probability of 0.25.

Returning to momentarily to the results presented in Table 4, we further note that, as expected, partisans' trust attitudes do not appear to be responsive to their own party's ideological extremity within — or averaged across — the chambers. The coefficients generated for the in-party extremism measure are negative across the three models, but none differ significantly ($p \leq 0.05$) from zero. Thus it appears that whereas opposition party extremism exhibits a substantively meaningful effect of partisans' expressions of trust in their state legislatures, the ideological leanings of partisans' own parties do not inform these same trust attitudes. While each parties level of polarization tends to move with the opposition meaning both parties are typically polarized to similar degrees (Lebo, McGlynn, and Koger, 2007), it is important to note that our results suggest that citizens' trust in state legislatures are driven more by fear of the opposing party than by discontent with the extremity of their own parties representatives. Thus, in the event of asymmetric elite polarization, we might expect asymmetric changes in the level of trust in state legislatures.

6 Conclusion

In this research, we presented a theory about how legislative polarization affects citizens' trust in their state legislatures. Our analyses produced evidence that strongly favors our argument; as polarization increases, the likelihood that citizens express trusting attitudes towards their legislatures appeared to decline. In addition, we also found evidence supporting our argument that these trust attitudes among partisans (1) are strongly informed by the

ideological extremity of the opposing party and (2) are not influenced by the extremity of their own parties. In sum, the evidence supports our theory.

Citizens appear to be more willing to cede greater authority to their state legislatures when those bodies are less polarized relative to when they are more polarized. This suggests that less polarized legislatures may be more empowered to act on behalf of their residents than their more polarized cousins. Polarization, then, drives trust attitudes down and may make it more difficult for legislatures to produce policy changes. It may also constrain the ability of legislators to act on behalf of their constituents in situations in which policy changes may benefit citizens, but in ways that may not be obvious to those constituents who are lacking in political sophistication.

In addition, these results imply that citizens are threatened by increasing ideological extremity among their out-parties. This implication still speaks to our argument about polarization, but it appears as if ideological extremity only directly matters to partisans in terms of the opposing party, not the extremity of the in-party. Increasingly distinct parties may encourage the formation of cognitive images of the opposing party as increasingly dangerous. It may be sensible from the perspective to partisans, then, to avoid ceding authority to government and government institutions when they fear the consequences of the opposing party taking control. They may be comfortable with granting greater leeway to the government when it is controlled by their party's representatives, but they may perceive of unacceptable levels of danger in situations in which the government is dominated by the opposing party.

Our research is important for two reasons. First, it provides evidence of which political reformers should take heed. If they wish to produce institutions that people trust, one way to achieve that goal is to change the electoral rules in such a way that less ideologically extreme legislators are more likely to win elections. Drawing state legislative districts that

are more electorally competitive and that contain a partisan and ideological mix of citizens may help to reduce legislative polarization in the aggregate.

Second, Tip O’Neill and others may not have been entirely correct when they claimed that all politics is local, but our results imply that citizens are attentive enough to subnational politics that their attitudes about state politics are shaped at least in part by state-level conditions. Thus, citizens may be more attuned to subnational politics than some prior public opinion research suggests.

Our research is limited in that we only have individual-level public opinion data from a single year. Unfortunately, there is little available data on citizens’ levels of trust in subnational institutions. But given the variance in levels of legislative polarization across the states in these data, not to mention the different constellations of rules and institutions within each of the chambers, we are confident that these results are deeply meaningful. Future work might expand the analysis to additional years, examine how trust in the U.S. Congress is shaped in response to levels of Congressional polarization both cross sectionally and over time, and observe how trust attitudes towards state courts vary in response to polarization and more generally the ideological make up of state courts of last resort.

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