

## Accounting for Temporal Trends in Party Affect: Negativity versus Neutrality

HARVEY D. PALMER\* & JUSTIN WEDEKING\*\*

\*Department of Political Science, University at Buffalo, SUNY, NY, USA; \*\*Department of Political Science, University of Kentucky, USA

**ABSTRACT** *This paper investigates whether affect toward the two major parties has shifted in a negative or neutral direction over the past half-century based on several systematic tests that structure citizens by their type of party affect: whether they feel positively about both parties (optimists), negatively about both (pessimists), neutral toward both (indifferent), or positive toward one party and negative toward the other (partisans). Using ANES data from 1952 to 2004, with feeling thermometers and likes/dislikes about the parties as measures of party affect, we conduct several tests and find that changes in mean party affect toward the parties, as well as changes in the distribution of individuals across different types of party affect, support the negativity theory. Additionally, our results indicate that the role of the parties in the political environment has changed, with citizens structuring their affect toward the parties differently.*

Scholars of American politics and political behavior have dedicated an enormous amount of attention to understanding the meaning of the changing role of the party and the flow of partisanship in the electorate. Some scholars have argued that the decline of partisanship in the electorate was a temporary consequence of changes in political circumstances during the 1960s and 1970s that caused citizens to feel alienated from the parties (e.g., Nie et al., 1976). While others writing at a later date have contended that the importance of partisanship has declined as a result of the mass media expansion, rise of candidate-centered elections, and decline of regionalism (e.g., Wattenberg, 1991, 1998; for a cross-national treatment see Dalton & Wattenberg, 2002). Parties adapted to the changing nature of mass politics to seek to influence politics more through indirect than direct means (Beck et al., 1997). Elected politicians emphasized their independence as delegates for their constituents (Fenno, 1978) but did not abandon partisan labels. Similarly, “independent” citizens voted as if they were partisans (Keith et al., 1992).

Within this larger debate is a narrower debate about temporal change in party affect – how citizens’ feelings about the two major parties have changed since the early 1960s. Wattenberg (1998) argues that the public have become more neutral

---

*Correspondence Address:* Harvey D. Palmer, Department of Political Science, University at Buffalo, SUNY, 520 Park Hall, Buffalo, NY 14260-4120, USA. Email: hpalmer@buffalo.edu

toward the parties, reflecting their waning electoral relevance. In contrast, Nie et al. (1976) posit that public alienation from the parties has been accompanied by greater negativity. Resolution of this narrower debate has important implications for the larger debate about the changing role of the party in American politics.

The neutrality thesis implies that citizens are becoming more and more indifferent toward the parties and view the differences between them as less and less relevant to American politics. Hence, evidence supporting the neutrality hypothesis indirectly supports the position that the importance of party in the electorate has declined. In contrast, the negativity thesis does not necessarily imply a permanent decline in the electoral relevance of partisanship. Rather, a rise in negativity could change the *nature* of partisanship while not changing its *relevance* as a determinant of voting behavior and as a filter in the processing of political information.<sup>1</sup> People may simply vote *against* the party they dislike rather than voting *for* the party they like. Similarly, they may process information more on the basis of partisan fear than attraction, responding more to messages criticizing the policies, actions, and leaders of the opposing party than to those promoting the strengths of their preferred party. This conception of the changing nature of partisanship, where negative information becomes more valuable, is not inherently inferior in terms of the use of party identification as a voting heuristic or as a perceptual filter, nor is it incompatible with previous research. Rahn (1993), in looking at cognitive heuristics, concluded that partisan stereotypes continue to have “considerable influence” in information processing (see also Lodge & Hamill, 1986; Zaller, 1992), and scholars find that negative information is useful to citizens (Kernell, 1977; Lau, 1982).

In this paper, we investigate temporal trends in party affect since the early 1960s as a means of evaluating the negativity and neutrality theories.<sup>2</sup> Previous empirical research on this topic has produced mixed results largely due to methodological difficulties associated with defining neutral party attitudes and distinguishing between Independents and “unrealized partisans”. Our study seeks to avoid these difficulties by conducting a comprehensive analysis of trends in party affect, as defined by feeling thermometer scores and likes/dislikes measures that do not rest on subjective definitions of neutrality and negativity. Our novel approach grants us the necessary leverage to examine trends in feelings about the parties by differentiating among subpopulations based on their type or pattern of party affect. To differentiate among respondents, we incorporate an idea from research in social and political psychology arguing that attitudes (toward the parties), “can be represented more completely within a bivariate space” (Cacioppi et al., 1997: 3). In other words, a citizen’s overall party affect, how he or she feels toward the parties in general, is structured systematically by their feelings toward each party individually. We posit that a citizen’s feelings toward both parties collectively represent a complex structure that reacts differently, depending on its form, to changes in the electoral environment. Simply put, some people have overall positive feelings for both parties, some have negative feelings for both parties, others have positive feelings for one and negative feelings for the other, while others are indifferent toward both parties. By sorting out the different types of party affect, we will be able to discern the exact nature of any

trend in overall party affect. Conditioning the analysis on the type of party affect gives our study a methodological advantage over previous research by allowing us to directly test the negativity and neutrality theories head-to-head.<sup>3</sup>

Overall, the paper makes three important contributions. First, it illustrates the importance of treating party affect as multidimensional, enabling us to directly test the negativity and neutrality arguments. Second, it provides robust empirical evidence by applying an analytical approach that is comprehensive in three respects: (1) we use two different indicators of party affect: feeling thermometers and party likes/dislikes; (2) we use multiple dependent variables based on our two complementary measures of party affect: the mean level and the structure or how citizens are distributed across party-affect types; and (3) we estimate our models with several alternative coding schemes. Thus, we show that the findings are not contingent upon measurement choices or subjective coding decisions. The paper's third contribution is that it documents support for the changing role of party in the electorate based on how citizens structure their attitudes toward the two major parties, which has some parallels to the literature on rebounding relevance of the parties (e.g. Bartels, 2000; Hetherington, 2001). However, we caution that our evidence indicates that parties have not resurged to their prior levels of the 1960s, but rather represents a more qualitative change.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. The next section reviews the literature on the decline of partisanship that serves as a theoretical foundation for our empirical analysis. We then explain in detail the logic underlying our novel approach to evaluating the negativity and neutrality theories. The third section presents the results of our analysis. The final section discusses the larger implications of our results and related issues for future research. In this section, we also address the possibility that partisan polarization accounts for our evidence supporting the negativity argument.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Campbell et al. (1960: 60) state that, "The most enduring objects of the political environment are of course the Republican and Democratic Parties". Reflecting this crucial role, there has been intense scrutiny over the direction of change in public attitudes toward the parties and how these attitudes have evolved over time. Several studies perceived that the party in the electorate weakened from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s, though the cause has been debated (for several examples, see Burnham, 1970; Converse, 1976; Gilmour & Lamb, 1975; Miller, 1974; Norporth & Rusk, 1982; Polsby, 1980; Schwartz, 1973).<sup>4</sup> The perception of the declining importance of the parties was so common that scholarly debate focused not on whether the decline occurred, but rather on the exact meaning and nature of the decline. Nie et al. (1976) develop a negativity theory for the decline of partisanship. They portray the American electorate as having become alienated about the role of parties in the political system, which has resulted in greater negativity toward the parties. Wattenberg (1991, 1998) debates this premise, however, by arguing that the parties became unimportant to the

electorate and consequently feelings about them are best described as apathetic or neutral.<sup>5</sup>

Both theoretical views of the decline of partisanship have attracted their share of critiques. Wattenberg (1981: 941) examines attitude toward the two parties from 1952 to 1980 using American National Election Studies data from open-ended likes/dislikes questions and, after arranging citizens into different categories based on their affect (more on this below) and their levels of trust/cynicism, he finds evidence that directly counters the negativity theory and argues that “the increase in alienation toward the parties has been minimal”, and the major change in party affect “has been toward a neutral attitude rather than a negative one”. Additionally, in his greatly expanded treatment of the subject, Wattenberg (1998) examines a wide range of indicators, including the participation of independents, level of “party-line” voting over time, and correlations between party and candidate likes/dislikes measures, among other things, and finds evidence to support his main thesis of the growing irrelevance of political parties. Wattenberg also contends that Nie et al.’s classification methods are biased toward “negativity”.

Wattenberg’s evidence, though, has also been scrutinized. Stanga and Sheffield (1987) demonstrate that Wattenberg’s analysis exaggerates the neutrality trend due to a “neutrality bias” by distinguishing between citizens that are “artificially” neutral and those that are “true” neutrals, according to the party likes and dislikes questions, and they do not find an increase of “true” neutrals.<sup>6</sup> Stanga and Sheffield then propose a new measure based on a discriminant analysis procedure to find that there are far more prototypical partisans than other studies. Going further, Craig (1985, 1987) examines the levels of neutrality at the aggregate level and finds that it has remained fairly constant from 1964 to 1980. Craig also examines the relationship between partisan strength, party differentiation scores, party support, and attitudes toward political independents using 1980 American National Election Study (ANES) data and finds that there is a relationship between nonpartisanship and negative views of the parties’ capacities to represent citizens. This leads Craig to challenge the validity of the neutrality argument, though Craig’s analysis also provides little support for the negativity argument. Adding to the debate, Keith and his colleagues (1992) find only weak relationships between party identification and various measures of alienation and thus conclude that alienation does not lead to political independence.

Finally, Konda and Sigelman (1987) examine both sides of the debate to determine which is correct. They develop a new scheme to classify citizens that does not have a negativity or neutrality bias and examine trends in engagement and positivity over time to test dual hypotheses: (1) the neutrality hypothesis which says that Americans have become more disengaged from the two political parties; and (2) the negativity hypothesis, which says that Americans have become more negatively disposed toward the two major political parties. Konda and Sigelman find that the negativity and neutrality trends are not directly related, claiming that the negativity trend allows one party to benefit at the expense of the other, while the neutrality trend ties the fate of both parties together. They conclude that the neutrality trend was brief and overstated (ending in 1968); yet the “less positive” feelings toward the

parties were also incorrectly identified as a long-term trend, finding instead that the parties have rebounded in the 1980s.

The present paper uses Konda and Sigelman's (1987) research as a starting point to further investigate the relative validity of the negativity and neutrality hypotheses by incorporating the multidimensionality of party affect. This is the idea that citizens structure their attitudes toward the Democrats and Republicans in systematically different ways. For example, one individual may have relatively positive feelings toward both parties, and another may have relatively negative feelings toward the parties (or some other combination). Theoretically disentangling how the negativity and neutrality theses would operate, we argue, depends critically on how party affect is structured by an individual. By sorting out these different types of party affect, we are able to examine more cleanly the implications of the negativity and neutrality arguments.

To do this, similar to Konda and Sigelman (1987), we examine temporal changes in party affect using survey data from the ANES that cover a wide time span. Unlike previous research, though, we consider temporal changes in the intensity of party affect within party affect categories as well as temporal changes in the distribution of respondents across those categories. Examining these changes will allow us to gain leverage in understanding the trends in party affect, which is still relevant to understanding electoral change (e.g., see Weisberg & Devine, 2010). Because our analysis differentiates between different types of affect, we will be able to assess whether the fates of the parties are tied together as the neutrality theory argues. Furthermore, we employ feeling thermometer scores as measures of party affect, as well as responses to the likes/dislikes questions, whose validity has been criticized (Smith, 1980; Rahn et al., 1994). Additionally, we use multiple dependent variables to incorporate a stringent test of the negativity/neutrality arguments.

The crux of the debate is whether temporal changes in party affect display a trend toward greater negativity or greater neutrality. The negativity theory posits that party affect is trending downward (for everyone, regardless of how they evaluated the parties in the past). The neutrality theory, in contrast, posits that party affect is trending toward indifference or at least away from positivity or negativity. Yet, because different people have different types of party affect (e.g., some people feel positive toward both parties while others feel positive toward one and negative toward the other), analyzing their trends collectively would be intractable and unintelligible. Given this, we distinguish among individuals using *four* categories of party affect: "pessimists" who feel negatively toward both parties, "partisans" who feel positively toward one party and negatively toward the other party, "optimists" who feel positively toward both parties, and "indifferents" who feel indifferent (or neutral) toward both parties.<sup>7</sup> By considering these subpopulations separately, we are able to pit the negativity and neutrality theories against each other by evaluating whether temporal changes in the party affect of these subpopulations is more consistent with one theory or the other.

Before we proceed, we feel it is warranted to distinguish how our categories differ from Wattenberg's (1981: 946, 1998). In testing the negativity and neutrality

arguments, Wattenberg uses the likes/dislikes statements to classify respondents into six categories: (1) negative-negative; (2) negative-neutral; (3) neutral-neutral; (4) positive-negative; (5) positive-neutral; and (6) positive-positive. Our scheme has four categories and constructs separate classifications using feeling thermometers and likes/dislikes statements, so it is not dependent on a particular measurement strategy. The main difference with our likes/dislikes classification scheme is that it treats negative-neutral and positive-neutral as equivalent to negative-negative and positive-positive, respectively, while Wattenberg's distinguishes among these categories, treating citizens in the former two as "indifferent" toward the parties. For the reasons outlined above (also see note 7), we think this combination of attitudes (i.e., positive or negative toward one party and neutral toward the other) does not represent "indifference" since the expressed attitudes represent a meaningful distinction. We find support for this belief in the supplementary analyses discussed below that check whether our central inferences are robust to changes in our coding scheme, which includes a version consistent with the definition of "indifference" in Wattenberg's classification.

In order to understand our empirical evaluation of the negativity and neutrality theories, it is necessary to demonstrate briefly the importance of differentiating among the different types of party affect. For the *neutrality* theory, the trend would be downward for optimists who feel positively about both parties, but upwards for pessimists who feel negatively about both parties. While for the *negativity* theory, the trend for both optimists and pessimists would be downward. It is important to clarify that while both trends are similar for optimists, the two theories imply different trends for pessimists.

Our initial analysis considers temporal change in party affect within each affect category. Obviously, this analysis of temporal change within an affect category is only relevant to the first three categories since no within-category change is possible for the fourth category of indifferents.<sup>8</sup> The indifferents category is relevant later when we investigate temporal changes in the distribution of respondents across affect categories. Before moving on, it is necessary to introduce briefly our dependent variables. The dependent variables are constructed from responses to feeling thermometers and likes/dislikes questions. The first dependent variable, mean party affect, is the mean of the feeling thermometer scores for the Democratic and Republican parties. The second dependent variable, unordered categorical measure of party affect, is a classification of respondents based on their feeling thermometer scores for the major parties. As discussed above, respondents are grouped into four categories: partisans, pessimists, indifferents, and optimists. We also analyze alternative versions of these two dependent variables constructed with the likes and dislikes questions about the major parties. Because the expectations regarding the temporal trends in these dependent variables differ under greater negativity and greater neutrality, it is important for us to specify exactly what each theory predicts the trend to be.

Table 1 compares our primary statistical expectations for the negativity and neutrality theories. Statistical expectations derived from the negativity theory are the

**Table 1.** Summary of primary statistical expectations

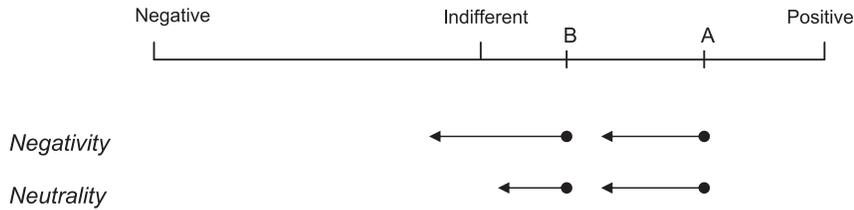
	Expected temporal trend	
	Negativity	Neutrality
<i>Mean party affect</i>		
Optimists	Negative	Negative
Partisans	Negative	0
Pessimists	Negative	Positive
<i>Percentage of respondents</i>		
Optimists	Negative	Negative
Partisans	Positive	Negative
Pessimists	Positive	Negative
Indifferents	Negative	Positive

same regardless of the category of party affect. According to this theory, we should observe a decline over time in the mean affect toward the Democratic and Republican parties. In contrast, statistical expectations derived from the neutrality theory differ depending on the category of party affect. The expected trend toward indifference implies different directional changes for the three categories. It implies that the mean party affect should have a negative trend for optimists, a positive trend for pessimists, and no trend for partisans.

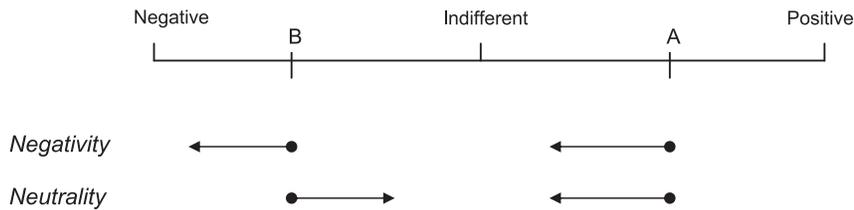
The logic underlying these statistical expectations is illustrated in Figure 1, where A and B denote the two major parties and their initial locations on a party affect thermometer scale. For optimists, the expectations are the same – mean party affect for this subpopulation declines over time under both theories. For partisans, however, the expectations of the two theories begin to diverge. Under negativity we expect individuals to become more negative toward both parties, while under neutrality we expect individuals to become more positive about their less preferred party and more negative about their most preferred party, thereby becoming more indifferent about the two major parties. Hence, mean party affect for the partisans subpopulation would decrease over time under negativity but not change under neutrality. Finally, for pessimists, you see the most striking divergence between the expectations of the two theories. Under negativity we would expect individuals to become more negative toward both parties, while under neutrality we would expect individuals to become more positive toward both parties. Hence, mean party affect for the pessimists subpopulation would decrease over time under negativity but increase over time under neutrality.

Additionally, the two theories imply different expectations regarding the temporal trend in the distribution of respondents across the party affect categories. The neutrality theory implies that the percentage of indifferents increases at the expense of the other three categories. In contrast, the negativity theory implies a more

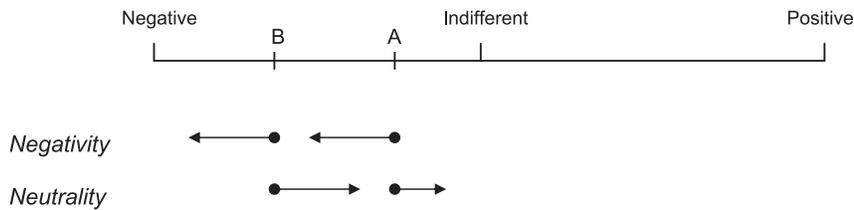
**Optimists**



**Partisans**



**Pessimists**

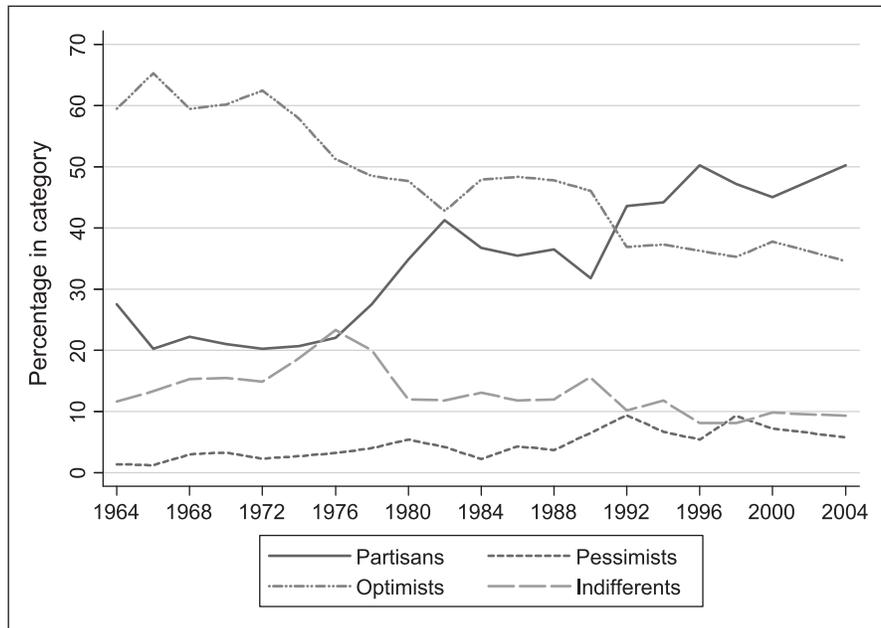


**Figure 1.** Logic of statistical expectations about temporal change in party affect.

complex pattern of movement among the four party affect categories. While the percentage of pessimists increases at the expense of the other three categories, the partisans category also gains at the expense of the optimists category. In other words, a (gradual) downward shift in party affect among optimists will produce partisans as an intermediate step in the transition to becoming pessimists. To illustrate the logic, consider the optimists section of Figure 1. As party affect becomes more negative gradually over time, optimists first become partisans as their affect

toward their less favored party (i.e., B) changes from positive to negative while their affect toward their more favored party (i.e., A) remains positive (though less strongly so than before). Assuming that the downward trend continues, affect toward their most favored party will eventually also switch from positive to negative causing partisans (who were formerly optimists)<sup>9</sup>

In sum, the negativity theory predicts not only that the percentage of pessimists in the population will increase (or trend positively, see *bottom* section of Table 1), but also an increase in the percentage of partisans (until the optimists category becomes so small that gains from the optimists category are offset by losses to the pessimists category). Figure 2 presents the distribution of ANES respondents across the four categories of party affect, as classified by their feeling thermometer scores for the Democratic and Republican parties. Simple inspection reveals several trends consistent with the negativity argument: 1) decline in percentage of optimists; 2) rise in percentage of partisans; 3) slight increase in percentage of pessimists; and 4) indifferents decline steadily, despite showing a slight increase from 1964 to 1976. More formally, the correlation coefficients corresponding to these trends ( $-0.943$ ,



**Figure 2.** Distribution of respondents across party affect categories, 1964–2004.

*Notes:* Entries are percentages. Party affect categories are based on feeling thermometer ratings. Pessimists are respondents that feel negative toward one party and negative or neutral toward the other party. Partisans are those that feel positive toward one party and negative toward the other party. Optimists are those that feel positive toward one party and positive or neutral toward the other party. Indifferents are those that feel neutral toward both parties.

0.908, 0.804, and  $-0.577$ , respectively) are all highly significant and in the direction predicted by the negativity argument. We explore this issue more thoroughly in the next section as part of a multivariate investigation of the negativity and neutrality theories.

Before proceeding, however, we must first identify how this explanation about the changing structure of party affect, which implies that the role and importance of party attitudes has changed, differs from an argument based on ambivalence. Ambivalence is the idea that opinions toward the two parties contain conflicting (i.e., both positive and negative) beliefs and feelings. Research on ambivalence by several scholars (e.g., Alvarez & Brehm, 1995; Basinger & Lavine, 2005; Greene, 2005; Lavine, 2001; Zaller, 1992; Zaller & Feldman, 1992) suggests that higher levels of ambivalence reduces predictability in vote choice, influences candidate assessment, reduces reliance on partisan cues, and reduces the likelihood of voting, among other things. Ambivalence is a potential complementary explanation that we do not investigate here due mostly to space reasons. We believe it is complementary because an individual could have some ambivalence about the parties but still hold a summary positive or negative attitude toward each party. In other words, the categories employed in this paper – optimists, partisans, pessimists, and indifferenters – are not directly comparable to those created by ambivalence scholars (e.g., Basinger & Lavine, 2005 classify individuals as either ambivalent, univalent, or indifferent). In short, a citizen classified as “ambivalent” using Basinger and Lavine’s measure (2005; also Lavine, 2001), which is constructed with likes/dislikes statements, could be either an optimist, pessimist or partisan in our coding scheme depending on the intensity of their attitudes toward the parties as reflected in feeling thermometers as well as likes/dislikes. Thus, there are measurement and theoretical matters that complicate any straightforward comparison between the negativity and ambivalence arguments. However, because our focus in this paper is on testing the negativity versus neutrality explanations, and ambivalence being a separate explanation, we leave it for a future study to disentangle the differences between negativity and ambivalence.<sup>10</sup>

With the descriptive results generally supportive, next we turn to our multivariate analyses to test these dual hypotheses. The primary reason we use multivariate models and then generate predicted values is that it accounts for survey-to-survey differences and temporal changes in the means of the control variables. By including control variables into the multivariate models, along with our primary independent variable of interest, we can control for potentially confounding trends in demographic characteristics and strength of partisanship.

### **Empirical Results**

Ideally, we would investigate temporal change in party affect using survey data for a panel running over 5–10 years (if not longer). Unfortunately, such data do not exist. Instead, we pool survey data over time and consider change in party affect for the different affect categories defined in the previous section (i.e., optimists, pessimists,

partisans). In other words, we consider temporal changes for each subsample as a means of inferring temporal changes in party affect among the members of each underlying subpopulation. To the extent that the independent subsamples from these subpopulations are representative, temporal changes in the mean characteristics of these subsamples should reflect temporal changes in the underlying subpopulations.

Our empirical analysis has two parts. Both of these parts test the negativity and neutrality arguments directly against each other by investigating temporal trends in: 1) mean party affect among respondents in different party affect categories; and 2) the distribution of respondents across the party affect categories. In the first part, the dependent variables are constructed from responses to feeling thermometer ratings of the parties. To check the robustness of our findings, in the second part of the analysis the dependent variables are constructed from responses to likes/dislikes questions about the parties.

To ensure that the pooled samples are representative, it is necessary to model individual-level differences when estimating temporal trends in mean party affect and the distribution of respondents across affect categories. More specifically, we include controls for strength of partisanship and demographic characteristics that might influence the likelihood of being in a particular party affect category and the level of party affect given the person's affect category. While we do not have strong theoretical expectations about their effects, the control variables increase our confidence that the temporal trends are due to changes in the nature of party affect rather than to survey-to-survey changes in the distributions of the demographic characteristics or strength of partisanship. In other words, we estimate trend coefficients with models including individual-level controls (rather than simply comparing sample means over time) since this approach will provide more reliable estimates of the temporal trends (not because our goal is to test theories about individual-level differences in party affect).<sup>11</sup>

#### *Feeling Thermometer Measures of Party Affect*

The first set of results are presented in Tables 2, 3 and 4, estimated with ANES survey data from 1964–2004. Robust standard errors were used in order to account for possible heteroskedasticity across survey years. Table 2 reports subsample regression models of mean party affect measured as the mean of the feeling thermometer scores for the Democratic and Republican parties.<sup>12</sup> Basic control variables, such as education, income, race, sex, age, and region are included in the models to account for other possible explanations not covered by the negativity or neutrality theses. In the results, the negativity hypothesis is strongly supported. Our main independent variable, the time trend variable, has a negative sign for all three models, corresponding correctly to our expectations from Table 1. The neutrality hypothesis is only marginally supported for the optimists; yet this is an overlapping expectation, thus nullifying any support for the neutrality argument over the negativity argument. The negative coefficient for the trend variable indicates that as time goes on, it results in a decrease in the mean party affect of optimists, partisans, and

**Table 2.** Regression models of mean party affect for optimists, partisans, and pessimists

	Model 1 Optimists	Model 2 Partisans	Model 3 Pessimists
Trend 1964–2004	–0.1492*** (0.0070)	–0.1107*** (0.0069)	–0.0692* (0.0341)
Strength PID	1.250*** (0.084)	1.100*** (0.081)	2.184*** (0.378)
Education	–0.772*** (0.092)	–0.368*** (0.082)	0.943* (0.406)
Income	–0.391*** (0.075)	0.029 (0.071)	0.947** (0.351)
Black	2.36*** (0.23)	–0.79*** (0.24)	–3.68** (1.24)
Female	0.55*** (0.15)	0.70*** (0.14)	1.58* (0.69)
Age	0.0632*** (0.0045)	0.0012 (0.0043)	–0.0173 (0.0220)
South	0.89*** (0.17)	0.82*** (0.16)	0.53 (0.78)
Constant	68.18*** (0.36)	52.14*** (0.35)	27.21*** (1.62)
<i>N</i>	16267	11482	1557
Adjusted <i>R</i> -squared	0.091	0.050	0.043
<i>F</i> -statistic for model	223.5***	75.2***	9.2***

*Notes:* Least squares coefficients are reported with Huber–White robust standard errors in parentheses. Party affect categories are same as those plotted in Figure 2.  
\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$  (two-tailed test)

pessimists. From 1964 to 2004, mean party affect decreased by 4.4 points for partisans and by 2.8 points for pessimists. Thus, over time, trends of mean party affect for partisans and pessimists are inconsistent with the neutrality argument, but consistent with the negativity argument.<sup>13</sup>

In Table 3, we present the results of a multinomial logit (MNL) model designed to determine which party affect categories are gaining and losing members across time. In other words, we want to find out how the distribution of respondents across party affect categories is changing over time. The main benefit of performing this test (rather than just gauging the percentages in Table 1) is that it allows us to infer which groups are benefiting at the expense of other groups based on the change of time while controlling for other possible demographic explanations. It should be noted that a fourth category has been added to our analysis, the group of respondents we label indifferent, or people who feel neutral toward both parties. Observing changes in this group is crucial to testing the negativity argument against the neutrality argument. If Wattenberg was correct in positing that people are becoming

**Table 3.** Multinomial logit model of distribution of party affect categories

	Pessimists	Indifferents	Optimists
Trend 1964–2004	0.0109*** (0.0027)	–0.0378*** (0.0018)	–0.0385*** (0.0012)
Strength PID	–1.119*** (0.030)	–1.372*** (0.022)	–0.498*** (0.015)
Education	–0.095** (0.033)	–0.415*** (0.024)	–0.300*** (0.016)
Income	–0.049 (0.028)	–0.020 (0.019)	–0.033* (0.013)
Black	–0.07 (0.10)	–0.72*** (0.08)	–0.02 (0.04)
Female	–0.18** (0.06)	0.11** (0.04)	0.19*** (0.03)
Age	–0.0001 (0.0017)	–0.0099*** (0.0012)	0.0044*** (0.0008)
South	–0.05 (0.07)	0.05 (0.04)	0.17*** (0.03)
Constant	0.06 (0.13)	3.14*** (0.09)	2.30*** (0.07)

Notes: Party affect categories are same as those plotted in Figure 2 with the dependent variable coded as follows: 0 for Partisans (baseline category), 1 for Pessimists, 2 for Indifferents, and 3 for Optimists. Huber–White robust standard errors are reported in parentheses.

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$  (two-tailed test)

$N = 33852$

Wald chi-square statistic: 6799.5\*\*\*

% Predicted Correctly = 55.1%

% Modal Category (Optimists) = 48.1%

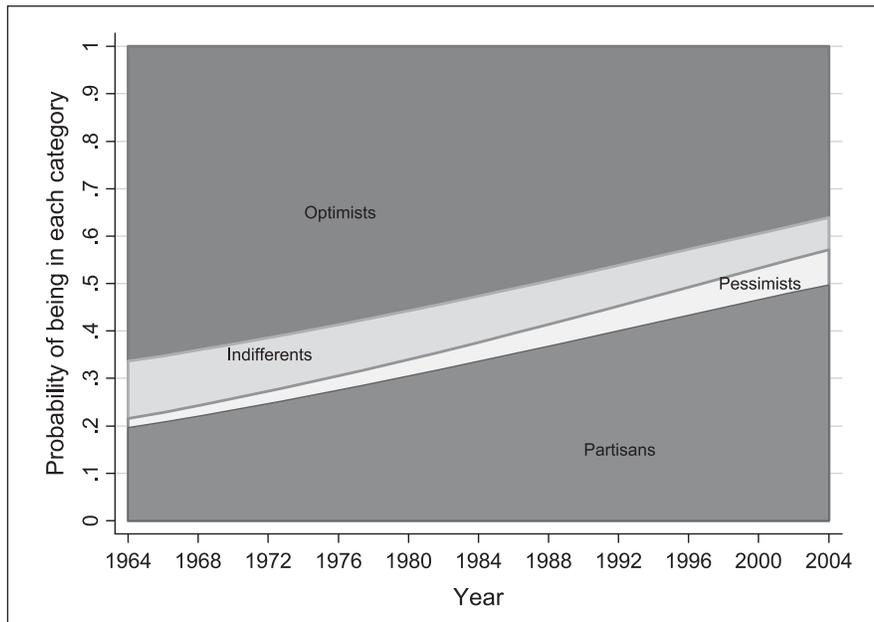
% Error Reduction = 13.6%

more neutral, then we should see this group actually gain members at the expense of the other categories. In contrast, if the negativity argument is correct, the pessimists category should gain at the expense of the indifferents category.

The important results in Table 3 are the coefficients for the trend variables and their relative signs and magnitudes across the party affect categories. Note that the coefficients for the partisans (baseline) category are standardized to zero. Hence, the coefficients for the other categories must be interpreted with respect to this baseline value. Overall, the set of trend coefficients is fully consistent with the expectations of the negativity argument. Pessimists benefit at the expense of all three groups, while partisans represent a transition group whose percentage increases at the expense of indifferents and optimists but decreases to the benefit of pessimists. More specifically, the negative *Trend 1964–2004* coefficients for indifferents and optimists indicate that partisans benefited at the expense of these two groups. The positive *Trend 1964–2004* coefficient for pessimists, though, indicates

that the percentage of pessimists increased over time at the expense of partisans as well as indifferents and optimists.

The interpretation of the results are more intuitively understood when graphed as cumulative probabilities in Figure 3, which illustrate the temporal change in the predicted probabilities of being in each category for an average respondent.<sup>14</sup> The vertical distance for each of the four categories (separated by three lines) represents its predicted probability, so change in the width of its region illustrates temporal change in its predicted probability. The changing size of the categories show that the likelihood of being a pessimist or partisan increases over time at the expense of the likelihood of being an optimist or indifferent. This temporal change in the distribution across affect categories is consistent with the negative trend in mean affect for partisans revealed in Table 2. More specifically, the negative trend is consistent with the distribution of partisans shifting to a higher proportion having a more negative attitude toward one party coupled with a less positive attitude toward the other party, which would generally be associated with more partisans becoming pessimists than optimists becoming partisans (where the net increase in the proportion of partisans comes from citizens shifting from indifferent to partisan). What is more difficult to discern is that the rate of increase in the likelihood of being a pessimist is increasing over time while the rate of increase in the likelihood of being a partisan



**Figure 3.** Predicted temporal change in distribution across party affect categories, party feeling thermometers.

*Notes:* Predicted probabilities were generated with Long and Freese's (2006) SPOST commands.

begins to decline at the end of the time period (specifically after 1988). In sum, the results in Table 3, as illustrated in Figure 3, provide strong evidence that people were not actually becoming more neutral toward the parties, but rather they were becoming more negative, reflected in shifts to partisan and pessimistic attitudes toward the parties.<sup>15</sup>

As a side note, the estimated effects of the race, education, and age variables in Table 3 indicate some interesting demographic differences in party affect. The negative *Black* coefficient for indifferents combined with the zero (or near zero) coefficients for the other three categories indicate that blacks are less likely to feel neutral toward the parties. For *Education*, the negative coefficients for all three party affect categories indicate that more educated respondents are more polarized in their affect toward the parties. Another interesting story is told by the coefficients for the *Age* variable. The negative sign for indifferents combined with the positive sign for optimists suggests that as people age they tend to become less indifferent toward the parties and more optimistic (which does not necessarily imply that older citizens do not have strong partisan preferences, but rather that such preferences stem from positive feelings toward their most preferred party rather than negative feelings toward their least preferred party).

The next analysis investigates the possibility of the parties increasing their electoral relevance since the 1980s, as posited by Bartels (2000) and Hetherington (2001), by re-estimating the models in Tables 2 and 3 with a squared trend variable included.<sup>16</sup> A negative trend coefficient coupled with a positive coefficient for the squared trend variable would indicate a decline in the strength of the negativity trend (or a reversal of that trend). The results in Table 4 appear to offer some evidence consistent with the argument that parties are increasing in relevance, especially among optimists and partisans, but upon closer inspection it appears that the change that is taking place is qualitatively different from a resurgence, which implies a return to the 1960s levels. The trend variable is significant and negative for these two cases, but the squared term is positive, indicating that the electorate has changed how they structure their attitudes toward the parties. For both optimists and partisans, the strength of the downward trend in party affect declined by over 50% in magnitude from 1964–2004. Yet this change is qualitatively different from a resurgence, because neither of the variables for the pessimists were significant (suggesting that the specification in Table 2 is sufficient for modeling the temporal trend in mean party affect among pessimists).

Extending this investigation, we re-estimated the MNL model in Table 3 with the squared trend variable included. These results are not shown due to space reasons (they are reported in a supplemental appendix; see note 7 for URL), but do provide some evidence consistent with the changing nature of how citizens structure their party attitudes, though less convincing. In particular, while pessimists still gain at the expense of the other three categories across the entire time period, the rate of this gain declines by roughly 40% from 1964 to 2004 (based on predicted probability changes for an average respondent). Similarly, the rate of increase in the partisans category increases over time while the indifferents

**Table 4.** Regression models of positivism rebound in mean party affect

	Model 1 Optimists	Model 2 Partisans	Model 3 Pessimists
Trend 1964–2004	–0.3165*** (0.0243)	–0.2297*** (0.0255)	–0.2557 (0.1311)
Trend 1964–2004 Squared	0.00458*** (0.00062)	0.00293*** (0.00060)	0.00442 (0.00303)
Strength PID	1.247*** (0.084)	1.087*** (0.081)	2.187*** (0.378)
Education	–0.780*** (0.092)	–0.363*** (0.082)	0.921* (0.405)
Income	–0.388*** (0.075)	0.029 (0.071)	0.961** (0.351)
Black	2.32*** (0.23)	–0.80** (0.24)	–3.62** (1.22)
Female	0.56*** (0.15)	0.71*** (0.14)	1.59* (0.69)
Age	0.0624*** (0.0045)	0.0004 (0.0044)	–0.0176 (0.0220)
South	0.92*** (0.17)	0.80*** (0.16)	0.53 (0.78)
Constant	69.20*** (0.39)	53.06*** (0.41)	28.71*** (1.88)
<i>N</i>	16267	11482	1557
Adjusted <i>R</i> -squared	0.094	0.052	0.044
<i>F</i> -statistic for model	204.1***	68.9***	8.3***

*Notes:* Least squares coefficients are reported with Huber–White robust standard errors in parentheses. Party affect categories are same as those plotted in Figure 2.

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$  (two-tailed test)

category starts to lose more to the partisans and pessimists categories than it gains from the optimists category after 1978.

#### *Likes/Dislikes Measures of Party Affect*

At this point, we have presented strong evidence indicating that temporal trends in party affect are consistent with the negativity theory and not with the neutrality theory. This evidence, however, is based on an analysis of feeling thermometer ratings of the parties rather than on responses to likes/dislikes questions about the parties. Not using likes/dislikes questions might cause some readers to question our conclusions. Our contention is that the feeling thermometer questions provide a superior measure of party affect since they do not have the same cognitive requirements of the likes/dislikes questions.<sup>17</sup> More specifically, it is possible for someone

to feel positive or negative toward a party but not be able to communicate that feeling in the form of a specific like or dislike about the party (off the top of their head) when asked to do so by the interviewer. Research by Zaller (1992) suggests that the ability of individuals to translate their feelings about the parties into specific likes and dislikes is positively correlated with their level of political sophistication. If this is true, the failure of citizens to state likes and dislikes about the parties (especially in response to survey questions) might be a consequence of low sophistication rather than an indication of neutrality toward the parties.

Given this concern, we have more confidence in the results of an analysis of party affect measured with feeling thermometer ratings. In order to demonstrate the robustness of our statistical inferences, though, we have replicated this analysis using party affect measured with responses to likes/dislikes questions. Respondents with more likes than dislikes for both parties are categorized as “optimists”, while those with more dislikes than likes for both parties are categorized as “pessimists”. In turn, respondents with more likes than dislikes for one party but more dislikes than likes for the other party are placed in the “partisans” category. Finally, those with as many likes as dislikes for both parties (including no mentions for both) are placed in the “indifferents” category.

Table 5 presents the results of a replication of the analysis presented above in Table 2. The models in Table 5 estimate the temporal trends in mean party affect for optimists, partisans, and pessimists (as defined above) but using the mean of the number of likes minus the number of dislikes for the Democratic and Republican parties as the measure of party affect. Despite the positive but insignificant trend coefficient for optimists (which contradicts both theories), the results provide further evidence supporting the negativity argument. The significant but negative trend coefficients for partisans and pessimists indicates that mean party affect for these two subpopulations decreased over time, which is consistent with the negativity argument and contrary to the neutrality argument that predicts no change for partisans and a positive increase for pessimists.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, the small magnitudes of the constants in the models for optimists and pessimists highlight the concern stated above about the cognitive requirements of the likes/dislikes measure of party affect.

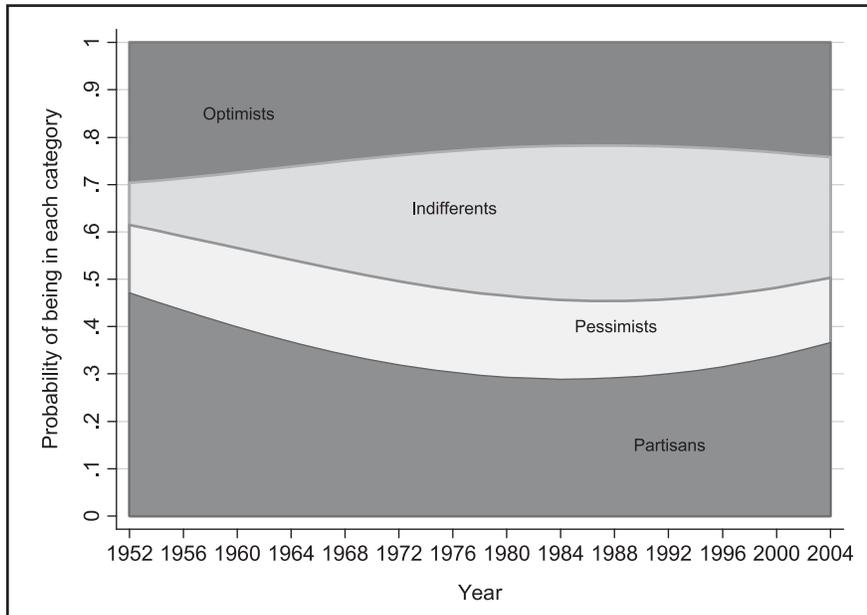
The next step is to reconsider temporal trends in the distribution of respondents across party affect categories defined with the likes/dislikes measure. Due to space considerations, we present the full replication of the MNL analysis in the supplemental appendix and focus here on illustrating the estimated temporal effects. Overall, this replication generates mixed results revealing a significant positive trend for pessimists consistent with growing negativity but also a significant positive trend for indifferents consistent with growing neutrality. Additionally, we find evidence that parties are rebounding, though in a slightly different way, with the positive trends in the percentages of indifferent, pessimists, and optimists (at the expense of partisans) decreasing in magnitude over time. To help understand these complex results, Figure 4 graphs the predicted probabilities generated with a MNL model that includes *Trend 1952–2004 Squared* (which allows for a nonlinear trend) to

**Table 5.** Regression models of mean likes/dislikes party affect for optimists, partisans, and pessimists

	Model 1 Optimists	Model 2 Partisans	Model 3 Pessimists
Trend 1952–2004	0.0010 (0.0005)	–0.0019*** (0.0005)	–0.0018* (0.0008)
Strength PID	0.037*** (0.008)	0.020** (0.008)	0.061*** (0.011)
Education	0.059*** (0.009)	–0.045*** (0.008)	–0.068*** (0.012)
Income	0.013 (0.007)	–0.013* (0.007)	–0.001 (0.010)
Black	0.02 (0.02)	0.05* (0.02)	0.02 (0.04)
Female	–0.05*** (0.01)	0.06*** (0.01)	0.10*** (0.02)
Age	0.0017*** (0.0004)	–0.0011** (0.0004)	–0.0026*** (0.0006)
South	–0.04* (0.02)	–0.02 (0.02)	0.07** (0.02)
Constant	0.77*** (0.03)	0.12*** (0.03)	–1.01*** (0.05)
<i>N</i>	7197	11122	5091
Adjusted <i>R</i> -squared	0.018	0.012	0.027
<i>F</i> -statistic for model	16.5***	17.4***	18.6***

*Notes:* Least squares coefficients are reported with Huber–White robust standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is the mean number of likes minus dislikes for the Democratic and Republican parties. \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$  (two-tailed test)

illustrate the changing distribution of respondents by party affect category. Figure 4 shows several important trends worth mentioning. First, while the size of the indifferents category grows initially, it decreases in size starting in 1990. While the initial increase supports the neutrality argument, the decline is inconsistent with the neutrality argument, which suggests their size should continue to grow. If anything, the decrease in size of indifferents is consistent with the rebounding importance of the parties, though in a qualitatively different way. Second, pessimists change little over the time span. While this is not consistent with the negativity argument, it does not support the neutrality argument either, which suggests pessimists should be declining along with the electoral relevance of the parties. Third, optimists mirror indifferents, decreasing in size at first, but then later slowly increasing. Fourth, partisans appear to lose ground during the first half of the time trend, but increase in size over the last 20 years. While the first half of the trend for partisans is inconsistent with the negativity argument, the second half of the trend supports the negativity argument and not the neutrality argument.



**Figure 4.** Predicted temporal change in distribution across party affect categories accounting for potential non-linear change, party likes/dislikes.

*Notes:* Predicted probabilities were generated with Long and Freese's (2006) SPOST commands.

The mixed results illustrated in Figure 4, however, rest on the assumption that all indifferents are truly neutral toward the major parties rather than being (unrealized) partisans or pessimists (or even optimists) who were unable to express their feelings toward the parties in the form of specific likes and dislikes. In light of this concern about the composition of the indifferents category, we augmented the categorical measure of party affect by distinguishing between “no mentions” indifferents and “sophisticated” indifferents. “No mentions” indifferents are respondents who did not state any likes or dislikes about either party. Given the cognitive requirements of the likes/dislikes questions, this category could contain unrealized partisans and pessimists as well as respondents who are truly neutral toward the parties. In contrast, “sophisticated” indifferents are respondents who had a positive but equal number of likes and dislikes for each party. We have the greatest confidence that respondents in this category embody the concept of neutrality toward the parties theorized by Wattenberg (1998). Indeed, Miller et al. (1986: 538, n3) control for this and call it “articulateness”. Hence, while a temporal increase in the percentage of “no mentions” indifferents would not provide definitive evidence in support of either theory, a temporal increase in the percentage of “sophisticated” indifferents would provide clear evidence supporting the neutrality argument.

Again due to space considerations, these auxiliary results are reported in the supplemental appendix, but they support our suspicions about the source of the positive trend in the percentage of indifferents. Contrary to the neutrality argument, the temporal increase in the percentage of indifferents proved to be entirely attributable to a temporal increase in the percentage of “no mentions” indifferents. In other words, the absence of any positive trend in the percentage of “sophisticated” indifferents undermines the only definitive evidence supportive of the neutrality argument. While proponents of the neutrality argument might point to the temporal increase in the percentage of “no mentions” indifferents, the implication of this result depends on one’s belief about why these respondents failed to state any likes or dislikes about either party, which simply highlights an old debate (e.g., see Mattei & Niemi, 1991). Given the uncertainty associated with the interpretation of this result, we contend that scholars should look elsewhere to discern the relative validity of the negativity and neutrality theories and hence point to our analysis of feeling thermometer ratings of the parties, which provides overwhelming evidence favoring the negativity thesis.

## **Discussion**

In this paper, we analyze temporal trends in party affect for the purpose of evaluating the competing statistical expectations of the negativity and neutrality theories. This paper makes several important contributions. First, it raises awareness of the importance of understanding that party affect is multidimensional. Additionally, the analysis offered here is novel due to its comprehensive approach. We investigate changes in the mean party affect toward the Democratic and Republican parties among citizens in different party affect categories as well as changes in the distribution of individuals across those categories. Moreover, this investigation employs feeling thermometer scores to construct the measure of party affect, which is superior in terms of validity over a measure constructed with responses to the party likes/dislikes questions. Yet we also demonstrate that our conclusions are not conditioned on this measurement decision by replicating the core empirical results with a likes/dislikes measure of party affect.

Overall, our results provide strong support for the negativity theory. First, the downward trend in party affect for the “optimist” category is paralleled by downward trends in party affect for the “pessimist” and “partisan” categories. These latter two trends directly contradict the statistical expectations of the neutrality theory. Second, we discover temporal trends in the distribution of individuals across party affect categories consistent with the negativity argument but contrary to the neutrality argument. More specifically, the proportions of “pessimists” and “partisans” increased while the proportions of “indifferents” and “optimists” declined from 1964 to 2004. Moreover, the proportion of “pessimists” grew at an increasing rate while the rate of growth in the proportion of “partisans” began to decline after 1988.

Does partisan polarization account for our evidence supporting the negativity argument? Some of our results supporting negativity are also consistent with polarization

– the increase in the percentage of partisans and decreases in the percentages of optimists and indifferents over time – but others are not. If polarization were “balanced” – respondents becoming more positive toward their preferred party and more negative toward the opposing party – we would expect no temporal change in mean party affect for partisans and a decline in the percentage of pessimists. Our findings are inconsistent with both of these expectations, which are contrary to those derived from the negativity argument.

If the temporal changes in party affect were asymmetric, however, the two theories would be complementary if polarization were manifested in more negative affect toward the least preferred party. We conducted an auxiliary analysis of the absolute difference in party affect to investigate this possibility. Again due to space considerations, these auxiliary results are reported in the supplemental appendix, but they only provide mixed support for negativity-driven polarization. If negativity-driven polarization accounted for the negative trends in Table 3, we would have found strong evidence of positive trends in the absolute difference in party feeling thermometers over the entire time period (and for all three affect categories). Only the trend for optimists was positive and statistically significant (at the 5% level), and even if the temporal increase in the party affect difference were entirely attributable to more negative attitudes toward the least preferred party, it would only account for 7.6% of the negative trend in mean party affect for optimists identified in Table 2. Moreover, these findings based on the feeling thermometer measure are largely confirmed by a parallel analysis conducted with the corresponding likes/dislikes measure, which finds no evidence (for any affect category) of increasing divergence in party affect over time.

In addition to validating the negativity argument, we discover evidence that partisan attitudes have started to rebound, but in a different way from their structure in the 1960s, and this change is manifested in two forms. First, there were accelerated changes in the proportions of partisans and indifferents at the end of the time period covered by our analysis, which suggests that the conversion of indifferents to partisans has accelerated since the early 1980s. Second, there was a positive shift in party affect at the end of the time period analyzed. This positive shift does not necessarily imply any change in the relevance of parties but does suggest a shift back in the direction of a more positive basis for partisanship. For those readers who adhere to the neutrality theory despite the counter-evidence presented here, this finding indicates that the neutrality trend posited by Wattenberg was only temporary. Additionally, our auxiliary analysis of the absolute difference in party affect indicates that polarization is only a partial explanation since the evidence of increasing divergence in party affect since 1980 is weak and limited in scope. When the estimation is limited to 1980–2004, we only find a significant positive trend for optimists (at the 5% level) and the magnitude of this trend is far too small to account for the positive trend in mean affect after 1988 revealed in Table 4.

In sum, while this evidence of the changing relevance of party attitudes is consistent with the general conclusions in Bartels (2000) and Hetherington (2001) that the electoral importance of partisanship has rebounded in recent years, we build upon

those works by noting that these changes have not brought feelings toward the parties back to the same level as in the 1960s. The change we document is qualitatively different because the “pessimistic” portion of the electorate has yet to fully rebound. Once citizens become pessimistic in terms of how they evaluate both parties, the evidence suggests that those attitudes may be more difficult to change when parties and candidates attempt to convert “pessimists” into a more classic “partisan” mold. Moreover, the most effective means of attracting (and retaining) partisans might be through negative attacks rather than positive appeals, resulting in polarization driven by negativity toward the least preferred party.

### Acknowledgements

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2002 Southern Political Science Association Meeting in Savannah, GA and the 2002 Southwestern Social Science Association Meeting in New Orleans, LA, and won the 2002 Southwestern Social Science Association Distinguished Paper Award. We wish to thank Bob Brown, Audrey Haynes, and Tim Nordstrom for helpful comments. An online appendix referenced in the article is available at: (<http://www.uky.edu/~jpwede2/supplementalappendixPAffect.pdf>).

### Notes

1. The negativity thesis also complements recent research on negative campaign advertising (e.g., Geer, 2006; Lau et al., 2007) and the decline of trust in government (e.g., Hetherington, 1999, 2005).
2. We recognize that some scholars may not view the “negativity” and “neutrality” arguments as theories, but more as descriptions.
3. Ideally, we would like to distinguish people with positive and negative affect for both parties to take into account possible ambivalence (e.g., Greene, 2005), and we have more to say on this below, but unfortunately data over the time period of interest do not exist. The feeling-thermometer and likes-dislikes measures we use can best be described as summary attitudes. Fortunately, our approach of treating the structure of party affect as multidimensional, structured by attitudes toward both parties and not just one or the other, is still consistent with the spirit of Cacioppo et al. (1997).
4. There was also a tremendous amount of scholarly research on the rise of independents (e.g., Carmines et al., 1987; Keith et al., 1992; Luskin et al., 1989; Miller & Wattenberg, 1983; Weisberg, 1980), and also on differences between true partisans and leaners (e.g., Greene, 2000). In addition to this, recent research has investigated the presence of parties becoming relevant again since the early 1980s (Bartels, 2000; Hetherington, 2001).
5. Consistent with Wattenberg (1998), Miller (1991) contends that the decline in party attachment was due to a decline in the number of individuals who developed party schemata to process, store, and retrieve political information. However, DeSart (1995: 791), using a measure of schematic thinking developed by Lau (1989) finds that party schemata accessibility did not decline monotonically from 1952 to 1992 and even increased from 1972 to 1988 as “the parties became more relevant to the electorate as apparent accountability mechanisms”.
6. Wattenberg (1998) treats non-responses as equivalent to neutral responses.
7. The “pessimists” and “optimists” categories also include respondents with a neutral attitude toward one party and a negative or positive attitude toward the other party (respectively). Based on our assumption that a feeling thermometer score of 50 represents a neutral position, these respondents have expressed a negative or positive feeling toward one party and a neutral attitude toward the other

party. This does not strike us as partisan since their negative or positive feeling toward one party is not balanced by an opposing feeling toward the other party. Hetherington (2001) adopts the same coding scheme. In order to investigate whether our findings are driven by the coding of the party affect categories, we conducted an auxiliary analysis based on an alternative classification that defines the partisan category more inclusively. These results are discussed below and reported in a supplemental appendix available at (<http://www.uky.edu/~jpwede2/supplementalappendixPAffect.pdf>).

8. As discussed in more detail below, we demonstrate in an auxiliary analysis that using a more inclusive definition of the indifferents category does not alter our core findings.
9. Obviously, this movement across party affect categories would happen first for optimists who are only weakly positive toward both parties and last (if at all) for optimists who are strongly positive toward both parties.
10. Also in the concluding section we address how our argument and evidence differ from a party polarization based explanation.
11. While one could argue that temporal changes in the strength of partisanship could be due to negativity or neutrality, these would be indirect rather than direct effects, and it is also possible that changes in the strength of partisanship are due to other distinct factors (e.g., party system change in the South and election-specific shifts to the party of the winning presidential candidate). Moreover, the effects of party polarization and ambivalence are more likely to be manifested via strength of partisanship given that past research has shown no temporal change in the percentage of independents, which would be expected under the neutrality argument. Hence, our modeling approach also controls for the indirect effects of these alternative explanations.
12. See the Appendix for details on the coding of the independent variables. For space reasons, the descriptive statistics are reported in the supplemental appendix (see note 7).
13. In an auxiliary analysis (reported in the supplemental appendix), we investigated the trend in feelings toward “political parties in general”. Unfortunately, this feeling thermometer question was only available in eight surveys. This analysis revealed that party affect among the subpopulation with a negative/neutral rating of the parties (0–50) decreased significantly from 1980 to 2000 (by 2.4 points). This result provides further support for the negativity argument, especially given that the subpopulation includes indifferents, or people with a neutral rating of the parties, the percentage of whom should increase over time under the neutrality hypothesis. We also found that mean party affect decreased significantly over time for the subpopulation with a positive rating of the parties (51–97), but this finding is consistent with both arguments.
14. An “average” respondent is defined as someone who has mean values for all of the independent variables except the time trend.
15. A potential concern about our analysis is that the evidence for the negativity hypothesis is driven by the coding of the party affect categories. In an auxiliary analysis (reported in the supplemental appendix), we explore the robustness of our results by re-estimating the models in Tables 2 and 3 using alternative coding schemes. The first replication employs a more inclusive coding of partisans that include optimists and pessimists who expressed a neutral position toward one party. This alternative coding scheme increases the total percentage of partisans from 33.9 to 52.6 while decreasing the total percentages of optimists and pessimists from 48.1 to 31.2 and from 4.6 to 2.8, respectively. Overall, the results based on this alternative coding of partisans still support the negativity argument, revealing a significant negative trend in mean party affect among partisans and the percentage of pessimists increasing significantly over time at the expense of the other three groups with partisans representing a transition group whose percentage increases at the expense of indifferents and optimists. The only notable change in these alternative results is the absence of a trend (the coefficient is insignificant) in mean party affect among pessimists. The second replication employs a more inclusive coding of indifferents that treats feeling thermometer scores of 45–55 (inclusive) as neutral. This alternative coding scheme increases the total percentage of indifferents from 13.4 to 13.8. Given this relatively small change, it is not surprising that the results based on this alternative coding of indifferent essentially match those in Tables 2 and 3.

16. Additionally, it might be more appropriate to compare the change in the distribution of respondents across affect categories illustrated in Figure 3 with the temporal trends in mean party affect estimated in Table 4 given the inherent nonlinear nature of statistical relationships in the MNL model. For instance, the finding in Table 4 that the downward trend in mean affect among partisans has decreased in magnitude over time is consistent with the finding in Figure 3 that the upward trend in the percentage of partisans became flatter after 1988.
17. Yet we fully recognize the measurement concerns associated with thermometer scales (e.g., positivity bias, no explicitly defined neutral position). The reliability of our feeling thermometer results depends upon these measurement errors being largely random, which seems likely given that we have no theoretical reason to expect respondents in different party affect categories to interpret the thermometer scale in systematically different ways.
18. In an auxiliary analysis (reported in the supplemental appendix), we also replicated the models in Table 4 using the likes/dislikes measure of party affect. While these results overall provide weaker evidence of party rebound, the results also reveal a qualitatively distinct change characterized by a similar decline in the negative trend in party affect among optimists.

## References

- Alvarez, R. Michael & Brehm, John (1995) American ambivalence toward abortion policy: development of a heteroskedastic probit model of competing values. *American Journal of Political Science*, 39(4), pp. 1055–1082.
- Bartels, Larry M. (2000) Partisanship and voting behavior, 1952–1996. *American Journal of Political Science*, 44, pp. 35–50.
- Basinger, Scott J. & Lavine, Howard (2005) Ambivalence, information, and electoral choice. *American Political Science Review*, 99(2), pp. 169–184.
- Beck, Paul Allen, Dalton, Russell J., Haynes, Audrey A. & Huckfeldt, Robert (1997) Presidential campaigning at the grass roots. *Journal of Politics*, 59, pp. 1264–1275.
- Burnham, Walter Dean (1970) *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics* (New York: Norton).
- Campbell, Angus, Converse, Philip E., Miller, Warren E. & Stokes, Donald E. (1960) *The American Voter: Unabridged Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
- Cacioppo, John T., Gardner, Wendi L. & Berntson, Gary G. (1997) Beyond bipolar conceptualizations and measures: the case of attitudes and evaluative space. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 1(1), pp. 3–25.
- Carmines, Edward G., McIver, John P. & Stimson, James A. (1982) Unrealized partisanship: theory of dealignment. *Journal of Politics*, 49, pp. 376–400.
- Converse, Philip E. (1976) *The Dynamics of Party Support* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage).
- Craig, Stephen C. (1985) The decline of partisanship in the United States: a reexamination of the neutrality hypothesis. *Political Behavior*, 7, pp. 57–78.
- Craig, Stephen C. (1987) Neutrality, negativity, or both? A reply to Wattenberg. *Political Behavior*, 9(2), pp. 126–138.
- Dalton, Russell J. & Wattenberg, Martin P. (eds) (2002) *Parties without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (New York: Oxford University Press).
- DeSart, Jay A. (1995) Information processing and partisan neutrality: a reexamination of the party decline thesis. *Journal of Politics*, 57, pp. 776–795.
- Fenno, Richard F., Jr. (1978) *Home Style: House Members in their Districts* (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman).
- Geer, John G. (2006) *In Defense of Negativity: Attack Ads in Presidential Campaigns* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
- Gilmour, Robert & Lamb, Robert (1975) *Political Alienation in Contemporary America* (New York: St. Martin's Press).

- Greene, Steven (2000) The psychological sources of partisan-leaning independence. *American Politics Quarterly*, 28(4), pp. 511–537.
- Greene, Steven (2005) The structure of partisan attitudes: reexamining partisan dimensionality and ambivalence. *Political Psychology*, 26(5), pp. 809–822.
- Hetherington, Marc J. (1999) The effect of political trust on the presidential vote, 1968–96. *American Political Science Review*, 93, pp. 311–326.
- Hetherington, Marc J. (2001) Resurgent mass partisanship: the role of elite polarization. *American Political Science Review*, 95, pp. 619–631.
- Hetherington, Marc J. (2005) *Why Trust Matters: Declining Political Trust and the Demise of American Liberalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).
- Keith, Bruce E., Magleby, David B., Nelson, Candice J., Orr, Elizabeth, Westlye, Mark C. & Wolfinger, Raymond E. (1992) *The Myth of the Independent Voter* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press).
- Kernell, Samuel (1977) Presidential popularity and negative voting. *American Political Science Review*, 71, pp. 44–66.
- Konda, Thomas M. & Sigelman, Lee (1987) Public evaluations of the American parties, 1952–1984. *Journal of Politics*, 49, pp. 814–829.
- Lau, Richard R. (1982) Negativity in political perception. *Political Behavior*, 4, pp. 353–378.
- Lau, Richard R. (1989) Construct accessibility and electoral choice. *Political Behavior*, 11, pp. 5–32.
- Lau, Richard R., Sigelman, Lee & Rovner, Ivy Brown (2007) The effects of negative political campaigns: a meta-analytic reassessment. *Journal of Politics*, 69, pp. 1176–1209.
- Lavine, Howard (2001) The electoral consequences of ambivalence toward presidential candidates. *American Journal of Political Science*, 45(4), pp. 915–929.
- Lodge, Milton & Hamill, Ruth (1986) A partisan schema from political information processing. *American Political Science Review*, 80, pp. 505–519.
- Long, J. Scott & Freese, Jeremy (2006) *Regression Models for Categorical Dependent Variables Using Stata* (College Station, TX: Stata Press Publication).
- Luskin, Robert C., McIver, John P. & Carmines, Edward G. (1989) Issues and the transmission of partisanship. *American Journal of Political Science*, 33, pp. 440–458.
- Mattei, Franco & Niemi, Richard G. (1991) Unrealized partisans, realized independents, and the inter-generational transmission of partisan identification. *Journal of Politics*, 53, pp. 161–174.
- Miller, Arthur H. (1974) Political issues and trust in government. *American Political Science Review*, 68, pp. 951–972.
- Miller, Warren E. (1991) Party identification, realignment, and party voting: back to the basics. *American Political Science Review*, 85, pp. 557–568.
- Miller, Arthur & Wattenberg, Martin P. (1983) Measuring party identification: independent or no partisan preference? *American Journal of Political Science*, 27, pp. 106–121.
- Miller, Arthur, Wattenberg, Martin P. & Malanchuk, Oksana (1986) Schematic assessments of presidential candidates. *The American Political Science Review*, 80(2), pp. 521–540.
- Nie, Norman H., Verba, Sidney & Petrocik, John. 1976. *The Changing American Voter*, Enlarged edn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
- Norpoth, Helmut & Rusk, Jerrold G. (1982) Partisan dealignment in the American electorate: itemizing the deductions since 1964. *American Political Science Review*, 76, pp. 322–337.
- Polsby, Nelson W. (1980) The news media as an alternative to party in the presidential selection process, in: Robert A. Goldwin (ed) *Political Parties in the Eighties* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute).
- Rahn, Wendy M. (1993) The role of partisan stereotypes in information processing about political candidates. *American Journal of Political Science*, 37, pp. 472–496.
- Rahn, Wendy M., Krosnick, Jon A. & Breuning, Marijke (1994) Rationalization and derivation processes in survey studies of political candidate evaluation. *American Journal of Political Science*, 38(3), pp. 582–600.
- Schwartz, David C. (1973) *Political Alienation and Political Behavior* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company).

- Smith, Eric R. A. N. (1980) The levels of conceptualization: false measures of ideological sophistication. *American Political Science Review*, 74, pp. 685–696.
- Stanga, John E. & Sheffield, James F. (1987) The myth of zero partisanship: attitudes toward the American political parties. *American Journal of Political Science*, 31, pp. 829–855.
- Wattenberg, Martin P. (1981) The decline of political partisanship in the United States: negativity or neutrality? *American Political Science Review*, 75, pp. 941–950.
- Wattenberg, Martin P. (1991) *The Rise of Candidate Centered Politics: Presidential Elections of the 1980's* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
- Wattenberg, Martin P. (1998) *The Decline of American Political Parties, 1952–1996* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
- Weisberg, Herbert F. (1980) A multidimensional conceptualization of party identification. *Political Behavior*, 2, pp. 33–60.
- Weisberg, Herbert F. & Devine, Christopher J. (2010) Partisan defection and change in the 2008 US presidential election. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion & Parties*, 20(2), pp. 213–240.
- Zaller, John R. (1992) *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (New York: Cambridge University Press).
- Zaller, John R. & Feldman, Stanley (1992) A simple theory of the survey response: answering questions versus revealing preferences. *American Journal of Political Science*, 32(2), pp. 416–550.