

United States: Racial Resentment, Negative Partisanship, and Polarization in Trump's America

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Growing racial, ideological, and cultural polarization within the American electorate contributed to the shocking victory of Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election. Using data from American National Election Studies surveys, we show that Trump's unusually explicit appeals to racial and ethnic resentment attracted strong support from white working-class voters while repelling many college-educated whites along with the overwhelming majority of nonwhite voters. However, Trump's campaign exploited divisions that have been growing within the electorate for decades because of demographic and cultural changes in American society. The 2016 presidential campaign also reinforced another longstanding trend in American electoral politics: the rise of negative partisanship, that is voting based on hostility toward the opposing party and its leaders. We conclude with a discussion of the consequences of deepening partisan and affective polarization for American democracy and the perceptions by both experts and the public of an erosion in its quality.

Keywords: polarization; Donald Trump; 2016 presidential election; political parties; realignment

Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 presidential election was one of the most shocking upsets in American electoral history. Perhaps more than any presidential candidate since George Wallace in 1968, and certainly more than any major party candidate in the past 60 years, Donald Trump's candidacy reinforced some of the deepest social and cultural

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divisions within the American electorate—those based on race and religion. Nevertheless, it was, in many ways, the natural outgrowth of the racial, cultural, and ideological realignment that has transformed the American party system and the American electorate since the 1960s. Divides between a shrinking white majority and fast-growing nonwhite minority; values, morality, and lifestyles; and views about the proper role and size of government have been mirrored in the political parties (Abramowitz 2018).

The movement of white working class voters from the Democratic camp to the Republican camp has been going on since at least 1964, when Lyndon Johnson firmly aligned the Democratic Party with the cause of civil rights for African Americans. The movement of white evangelicals and other religious conservatives has been going on since at least 1980, when Ronald Reagan and the Republican Party came out for the repeal of *Roe v. Wade*.¹

These voter shifts and the Southern Democratic political party realignment in the 1970s and 1980s led to increased party polarization in the 1990s and 2000s as Americans sorted into more ideologically homogeneous political parties, perceived the parties as growing further apart on policies, and their representatives in Congress voted in more lock-step party unity roll-call votes (Campbell 2016; Pew Research 2016). Within the electorate, the growing affective polarization (sympathy to the in-party and antipathy toward the out-party) accelerated after Barack Obama was elected in 2008 as the first African American biracial president, giving voice to an underrepresented minority with a long history of discrimination.

Obama's presidency disappointed those who hoped that the United States had entered a postracial political era. Instead, political scientists determined that racial resentment, ethno-nationalism, and racial prejudice played a major role in predicting voting choice among whites in the next two presidential elections, costing Obama votes in his second election in 2012 and lending votes to Trump in 2016 (Abramowitz 2016; Knuckey and Kim 2015; Morgan and Lee 2017; Tesler 2016).

Obama's election also spurred a counter-mobilization of white, conservative, and evangelical voters in the Tea Party movement. The early Tea Party movement expressed anger and resentment at the distributive injustice of welfare programs for "undeserving" immigrants, minorities, and youth, while favoring entitlement programs like Social Security and Medicare for "hard-working" Americans (Skocpol and Williamson 2016).

Six years later, the reaction to the growing racial, ethnic, religious, and gender diversity of the American electorate produced a surprising win for Donald Trump, whose campaign rhetoric was starkly polarizing and anti-establishment, dividing the country between "Us"—the "real" Americans who hungered for a return to an idealized past when industrial jobs provided for upward mobility and

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white males were in charge in the workplace and the family, and “Them”—the immigrants, minorities, and liberal elites who had wrought an “American carnage.”² Trump’s victory spawned another grass-roots counter-mobilization, this time on the Left and among college-educated women, who marched and ran for political office in massive numbers.

The U.S. story thus reflects the dynamics of severe polarization laid out in the introduction to this volume and in McCoy, Rahman, Somer (2018). The empowerment of new minority groups in the form of Barack Obama’s election reinforced a sense of loss and disempowerment by white working-class voters whose economic base was shifting in a globalized economy and whose previously dominant social status was being challenged by the growing diversity of the country in terms of race and ethnicity, gender roles, and sexual orientation. Their sense of injury and injustice was exploited by Trump, who employed a populist polarizing message casting blame on the “nefarious” Washington elites working against the “virtuous” people, giving permission to his supporters to express their resentment and anger even, at times, in violent ways at some of his campaign rallies. As an outsider candidate, Trump masterfully articulated and reinforced the existing divides in the electorate, but did not create them. He appealed to the camp who viewed the effects of the demographic and social changes of the last half-century as mostly negative, as opposed to those in the other camp who viewed them positively (Abramowitz 2018).

Deepening racial, cultural, and ideological divides within the American electorate and the dramatic increase in negative affect toward the opposing party and its leaders made it possible for Donald Trump to win the 2016 presidential election despite having the highest negatives of any major party nominee in the history of public opinion polling. Trump first won the Republican nomination over the opposition of virtually the entire GOP establishment by playing to the anger and frustration of a large segment of the Republican electorate with the party’s leaders for not delivering on campaign promises to reverse the policies of Barack Obama—promises that were clearly not realistic to begin with. That anger and frustration was fueled by alarm over changes in American society and culture, including, especially, the growing visibility and influence of racial and ethnic minorities (Ingraham 2016).

In the Republican primaries, Donald Trump’s reputation as the nation’s most prominent advocate of birtherism³ (Barbaro 2016), his attacks on Mexican immigrants and Muslims and his promise to “make America great again” by renegotiating trade deals and bringing back lost manufacturing jobs resonated most strongly with white, working-class voters. However, the appeal of his message was by no means limited to the economically marginalized. Many relatively affluent whites found Trump’s promise to reverse Barack Obama’s policies and his attacks on the Washington political establishment appealing (Silver 2016). At the same time, however, Trump’s racist, xenophobic, and misogynistic comments, as well as his attacks on the media and on leaders of both major parties turned off a large number of voters, especially racial minorities and college-educated white women. Even after winning the Republican nomination, Trump’s unfavorable ratings remained far higher than his favorable ratings (Lauter 2016).

Two powerful trends affecting the American electorate further contributed to Donald Trump's rise and to his eventual victory in the 2016 presidential election: the politicization of racial resentment among white voters, especially among white working-class voters, and the rise of negative partisanship. Both of these trends reflected the transformation of the American party system in the twenty-first century due to the growing alignment of partisanship with race, religion, and ideology. The resulting political polarization reflected greater sorting of the electorate into more attitudinally homogeneous parties and exhibited the characteristics of severe polarization described by McCoy and Somer in the introduction to this volume: growing affective polarization, ethnocentrism (predisposition to divide society into Us vs. Them groups), social intolerance of out-groups, and unwillingness to cooperate and compromise.

Trump's Populist Appeal: Economic Discontent, Racial Resentment, and the Revolt of the White Working Class

According to the 2016 national exit poll (CNN 2016),⁴ Donald Trump won the white vote by about 20 percentage points, almost the same margin as Romney. However, the exit poll data show that there were shifts in opposing directions among white voters. According to the data in Table 1, Republican support rose among white men but fell among white women. Trump's well publicized misogynistic comments bragging about inappropriate sexual advances on the notorious Hollywood Access tapes and accusations of sexual assault by various women undoubtedly contributed to his problems with female voters. Nevertheless, Trump still managed to outpoll Hillary Clinton by 9 percentage points among white women according to the national exit poll. Moreover, Trump made up for his losses among white women by outperforming Mitt Romney and defeating Hillary Clinton by close to a two to one margin among white men.

The opposing swings among white college graduates and nongraduates in Table 1 are even more striking than the opposing swings among white women and men. Among white college graduates, according to the national exit poll, Trump's three-point margin was the smallest in decades, and far smaller than Mitt Romney's 14-point margin in 2012. Among white voters without college degrees, however, Trump's 37-point margin was much greater than Romney's already impressive 25-point margin.

Related to the education divide, the exit polls showed that, among white voters, the class divide was also much larger than the gender divide. Trump defeated Clinton by 61 percent to 34 percent among white working-class women, and by a remarkable 71 percent to 23 percent among white working-class men. In contrast, Trump's margin among white male college graduates was a much narrower 53 percent to 39 percent and he lost to Hillary Clinton among white female college graduates by 51 percent to 44 percent.

White working-class voters have been moving toward the Republican Party since at least the 1970s, but the shift toward Donald Trump in 2016 was truly

TABLE 1
Change in Republican Margin among White Voter Groups between 2012 and 2016

Voter Group	Republican Margin in		
	2012	2016	Change
Male	+ 27	+ 31	+ 4
Female	+ 14	+ 9	- 5
College Grads	+ 14	+ 3	- 11
Non-Grads	+ 25	+ 37	+ 12

remarkable. While the size of this group has been shrinking for decades, it continues to make up a large share of the American electorate, especially in the key swing states in the Northeast and Midwest. This shift made Donald Trump’s narrow victories in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin possible. A crucial question for anyone trying to understand the results of the 2016 election, therefore, is why Donald Trump’s candidacy was so appealing to a large number of white working-class voters even as it repelled a large number of white college graduates along with the vast majority of nonwhite voters across the country.

Explanations for Donald Trump’s appeal to white working-class voters have generally focused on two sets of factors. One explanation emphasizes the role of economic discontent and anxiety in fueling Trump’s rise among this group. According to the economic discontent hypothesis, Trump’s attacks on trade deals such as NAFTA and his promise to bring back manufacturing jobs appealed strongly to white working-class voters in small to medium-sized cities and rural areas that had been hard hit by the Great Recession and had not experienced as strong a recovery as larger metropolitan areas (Rasmus 2016; Hilsenrath and Davis 2016; Bell 2016). A second explanation emphasizes cultural factors in the roles of white racial resentment and ethno-nationalism. This hypothesis focuses on Trump’s early embrace of birtherism, his explicit attacks on immigrants and Muslims, and his retweeting of messages and reluctance to disavow support from prominent white nationalist leaders and groups (Ingraham 2016; Yglesias 2016; Stone, Abramowitz, and Rapoport 2016, 8–10; Ball 2016).⁵

Of course, these two explanations are not mutually exclusive. Both may have some validity. Moreover, as Michael Tesler has argued, economic anxiety and discontent among white voters in 2016 appear to be closely connected to racial resentment. His analysis of survey data indicate that many white voters, especially those without college degrees, believe that racial minorities and immigrants have been favored by government policies while their own communities have been neglected, especially during the Obama years (Tesler 2016b). The Trump campaign explicitly connected these issues by arguing that illegal immigrants were taking jobs away from American citizens and reducing wages for American workers.

TABLE 2
Correlations of Racial Resentment Scale with Presidential Candidate Feeling
Thermometer Difference Ratings by Education among White Voters, 1988–2016

Year	All White Voters	College Grads	Not College Grads
1988	.205	.308	.175
1992	.275	.510	.157
2000	.247	.398	.154
2004	.398	.628	.261
2008	.485	.611	.416
2016	.636	.699	.549

NOTE: Feeling Thermometer Difference Ratings subtract the average feelings (scale of 0–100, from cool to warm) toward the Democratic candidate from the average feelings toward the Republican candidate.

SOURCES: American National Election Study Cumulative File and 2016 American National Election Study.

To sort out these competing explanations, we test the hypothesis that Trump’s surge among white working class voters, compared with previous GOP presidential candidates, was due to his explicit appeal to white racial resentment and ethno-nationalism. Thus, Trump’s campaign may have helped to politicize these attitudes, identifying them with a political party, especially among less educated white voters who tend to be less attentive to political campaigns and therefore less aware of differences between candidates on racial and other issues (Tesler 2016c). To test this hypothesis, we can compare the correlations between scores on the racial resentment scale and relative ratings of the Republican and Democratic presidential candidates on the feeling thermometer scale over time among white voters with and without college degrees. Table 2 displays these correlations for presidential candidates between 1988, when the American National Election Study (ANES) first began asking the questions in the racial resentment scale, and 2016. Data are not available for 2012 because the ANES survey did not include all four of the racial resentment items that year.

The results in Table 2 indicate that the sorting into political parties based on levels of racial resentment among white voters began well before 2016. As expected, these results also show that this relationship has consistently been stronger among white college graduates than among whites without college degrees. This is a typical finding due to greater attention to politics and higher information levels among college graduates than among the noncollege educated. In 2008, however, the presence of an African American presidential candidate on the ballot led to a sharp increase in the correlation between racial resentment and feeling thermometer ratings among white working-class voters. Data from the 2016 ANES indicate that Donald Trump’s heavy emphasis on racial issues led to a further increase in the strength of this relationship, especially among white voters without college degrees. In terms of shared variance, the

relationship between racial resentment and candidate feeling thermometer ratings was about 2.6 times stronger in 2016 than in 2004 among all white voters, but it was more than four times stronger among white working-class voters.

The findings in Table 2 reflect the fact that, over the past four elections, there has been a dramatic increase in support for Republican presidential candidates among the most racially resentful white working-class voters. In 2000, only 62 percent of working-class whites scoring high on racial resentment voted for George W. Bush over Al Gore. That percentage increased slightly to 68 percent in 2004 and 69 percent in 2008. In 2016, however, 87 percent of the most racially resentful white working-class voters supported Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton. In contrast, among the least racially resentful white working-class voters, the Republican share of the major party vote actually fell from 48 percent in 2000 and 41 percent in 2004 to 19 percent in 2008 and 24 percent in 2016.

Donald Trump's 2016 campaign included frequent appeals to white voters who were upset about economic trends such as stagnant wages and the loss of manufacturing jobs. What was most striking about Trump's campaign, however, was its explicit appeals to white resentment of the increasing visibility and influence of racial and ethnic minorities. Trump tried to connect these two issues by blaming economic problems on bad trade deals with countries such as Mexico and China, and competition for jobs from immigrants. Moreover, Trump's call for a ban on Muslims entering the United States sought to connect the issue of immigration to the threat of terrorism.

According to the 2016 exit poll, Trump's appeals to discontented white voters resonated most strongly among those without college degrees. The data from the 2016 ANES show the same pattern. According to the ANES data, Trump won 66 percent of the vote among white voters without college degrees, compared with only 44 percent of the vote among white college graduates. Moreover, the evidence displayed in Table 3 indicates that white voters without college degrees were much more likely to agree with key elements of Trump's campaign message than white college graduates.

The data in Table 3 show that, compared with college graduates, white voters without college degrees were much more likely to score high on measures of racial and ethnic resentment and misogyny.⁶ They were also somewhat more likely to hold negative views of economic conditions, to view economic mobility as less possible than in the past, and to oppose free trade deals—although these differences were generally smaller and relatively few whites with or without college degrees were opposed to free trade agreements.

To compare the impact of racial and ethnic resentment with that of economic discontent, we conducted a multiple regression analysis of relative feeling thermometer ratings of Trump and Clinton among white voters, using the data from the 2016 ANES survey. Relative feeling thermometer ratings provide a more nuanced measure than the dichotomous vote choice question. However, these ratings strongly predict vote choice: only 3 percent of white voters rated Trump and Clinton equally on the feeling thermometer scale and 97 percent of those rating one candidate higher on the scale reported voting for that candidate. In addition to the measures of racial/ethnic resentment and economic discontent

TABLE 3
Political and Economic Attitudes of College and Non-College White Voters in 2016

	College Grads	Non-College
Mean FT Rating of Trump	31.0	50.1
Mean FT Rating of Clinton	42.6	31.7
High Racial Resentment	31%	50%
Anti-Immigration	27%	50%
High Misogyny	29%	51%
Anti-Gay Rights	26%	40%
Anti-Gun Control	39%	53%
National Economy Worse	23%	36%
Family Finances Worse	21%	30%
Little/No Econ Opportunity	28%	37%
Oppose Free Trade Deals	15%	27%
Economic Conservative	33%	41%

SOURCE: 2016 American National Election Study. FT: Feeling thermometer.

discussed above, we included several control variables in the regression analysis, including party identification, ideology, age, education, and gender. The results of the regression analysis are displayed in Table 4.

The variables included in the regression analysis explain 80 percent of the variance in relative feeling thermometer ratings of Trump and Clinton. After party identification, racial/ethnic resentment was by far the strongest predictor of relative ratings of Trump and Clinton—the higher the score on the racial/ethnic resentment scale, the more favorably white voters rated Trump relative to Clinton. The impact of the racial/ethnic resentment scale was much stronger than that of any of the economic variables included in the analysis, including opinions about free trade deals and economic mobility. Among the measures of economic discontent, ratings of the national economy had the strongest influence on feeling thermometer ratings of Trump and Clinton—the more negative the rating of the economy, the more positively white voters rated Trump relative to Clinton. Other measures of economic discontent had relatively weak effects.

After controlling for the other variables included in the regression analysis, the impact of education on relative ratings of Trump and Clinton completely disappears. In fact, the difference between white voters with and without college degrees in support for Trump is almost entirely explained by racial/ethnic resentment. Figure 1 displays the relationship between scores on the racial/ethnic resentment scale and support for Trump among white voters with and without college degrees.

The results in this figure show that there was a very strong relationship between racial/ethnic resentment and support for Trump regardless of education. Trump received almost no support among those scoring at the low end of

TABLE 4
Regression Analysis of Trump-Clinton Feeling Thermometer Ratings
among White Voters in 2016

Independent Variable	Beta	t-ratio	Significance
Age	-.026	-1.95	.05
Education	.003	0.25	
Family Income	-.001	-0.04	
Gender/Female	-.024	-1.81	.05
Republican Identification	.432	21.54	.001
R/E Resentment	.283	12.23	.001
Misogyny	.062	4.07	.001
Economic Conservatism	.040	1.73	.05
Anti-Gay Rights	.075	3.52	.001
Anti-Abortion	.022	1.30	
Anti-Free Trade	.052	3.74	.001
Financial Situation Worse	.031	2.04	.05
National Economy Worse	.135	7.97	.001
Econ Mobility Harder	.044	3.29	.001
Adjusted $R^2 = .80$			

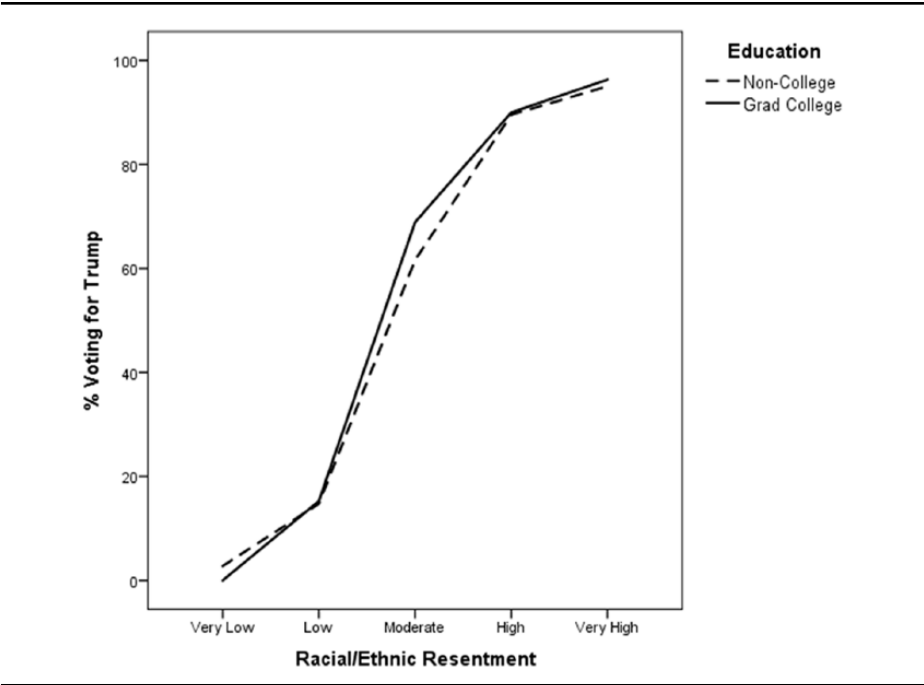
NOTE: Dependent variable is Trump FT rating – Clinton FT rating. FT: Feeling thermometer; R/E racial/ethnic.
SOURCE: 2016 American National Election Study.

the scale, and almost unanimous support among those scoring at the high end of the scale. Moreover, there was almost no difference in support for Trump between white voters with and without college degrees after controlling for racial/ethnic resentment. White voters with high levels of racial/ethnic resentment voted overwhelmingly for Trump regardless of education, and white voters with low levels of racial/ethnic resentment voted overwhelmingly for Clinton regardless of education.

The results in Table 4 indicate that ratings of the national economy had a substantial impact on relative ratings of Trump and Clinton on the feeling thermometer scale by white voters after controlling for all the other predictors in the regression analysis, including racial/ethnic resentment. However, there was a close connection between racial resentment and economic discontent among white voters: the correlation between these two measures was a strong 0.53. Fifty percent of those scoring “very high” or “high” on the racial/ethnic resentment scale rated economic conditions as worse than one year earlier compared with only 6 percent of those scoring “low” or “very low” on the scale.

While these cross-sectional survey data do not make it possible to determine the direction of influence between these two variables, there are good theoretical reasons to believe that racial resentment has a stronger influence on economic discontent than economic discontent has on racial resentment. For one thing,

FIGURE 1
Percentage Voting for Trump by Racial/Ethnic Resentment among
College and Noncollege Whites in 2016



SOURCE: 2016 American National Election Study.

racial attitudes are generally more fundamental and stable at the individual level than assessments of economic conditions, which can fluctuate considerably, even over a relatively short time. Moreover, as discussed previously, the Trump campaign directly connected job losses for white workers with government policies favoring the interests of nonwhites and immigrants.

Affective Polarization and Negative Partisanship in 2016

One of the most important developments in American public opinion over the past 30 years has been the rise of affective polarization. Democrats and Republicans are increasingly divided, not just in their policy preferences but also in their feelings about the parties and their leaders. The main reason for this growing divide has been the increasingly negative feelings that partisans hold about the opposing party and its leaders (Iyengar and Westwood 2015). This has given rise to the phenomenon of negative partisanship: large proportions of Democrats and Republicans now dislike the opposing party and its leaders more than they like their own party and its leaders. Dislike of the other side is so

strong, in fact, that even when partisans have reservations about their own party's candidate, they are very reluctant to cross party lines. The result, as we have seen, is that recent elections have been characterized by record levels of party loyalty and straight ticket voting (Abramowitz and Webster 2016).

The 2016 presidential election set new records for affective polarization and negative partisanship. Both major party nominees, Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, had exceptionally high unfavorable ratings. According to the Gallup Poll, Trump had the highest unfavorable ratings of any presidential candidate in modern history with Clinton not far behind (Saad 2016b). However, this does not mean that most voters disliked both candidates. According to Gallup, only about one out of four Americans disliked both candidates (Newport and Dugan 2016). In fact, most Democratic voters had a favorable opinion of Clinton and most Republican voters had a favorable opinion of Trump. It is true that many Republican voters had reservations about Donald Trump and quite a few Democratic voters had reservations about Hillary Clinton. However, the vast majority of Republicans and Democrats strongly preferred their own party's nominee because they intensely disliked the opposing party's nominee (Saad 2016a).

Both Trump and Clinton experienced lengthy and divisive battles for their party's nomination. Clinton was viewed as a strong favorite from the outset but had to fend off a much stronger than expected challenge from the Left by Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders. Trump, in contrast, shocked almost everyone by winning the nomination rather easily over a crowded field of politically experienced Republican candidates. Even though he led in polls of Republican voters almost from the moment he announced his candidacy, Trump ended up winning less than half of the vote in the primaries. For both Clinton and Trump, therefore, one of the biggest challenges in the general election campaign was uniting their party by winning over voters who had supported other candidates in the primaries.

Despite the divisiveness of the Democratic and Republican nomination contests and their own high unfavorable ratings, in the end both Clinton and Trump largely succeeded in uniting their party's voters behind their candidacies in the general election. According to the national exit poll, the level of party loyalty in the 2016 presidential election was very similar to that in other recent presidential elections: almost 89 percent of Democratic identifiers and 88 percent of Republican identifiers voted for their own party's nominee. Only 8 percent of Democratic and Republican identifiers defected to the opposing party's nominee while 3 percent of Democratic identifiers and 4 percent of Republican identifiers voted for third party candidates. The key to both Trump's and Clinton's success in uniting their party's voters behind their candidacies was negative partisanship. Table 5 displays the average feeling thermometer ratings of Trump and Clinton by Democratic and Republican voters supporting different primary candidates in the 2016 ANES Pilot Study, which was conducted in late January, at the beginning of the presidential primary season. Among all Republican voters, Donald Trump received an average rating of 65 degrees on the feeling thermometer scale. Among all Democratic voters, Hillary Clinton received an average rating of 71 degrees on the feeling thermometer scale. These are rather mediocre ratings for presidential nominees from their own party's voters. In 2012, according to

TABLE 5
Affective Polarization in 2016: Average Feeling Thermometer Ratings of Clinton and Trump by Party and Primary Candidate Preference

	Clinton	Trump	Difference
Identify/Lean Dem	70.9	18.9	+ 52.0
Favor Clinton	86.8	20.4	+ 66.4
Favor Sanders	55.5	13.6	+ 41.9
Identify/Lean Rep	12.5	65.0	- 52.5
Favor Trump	11.4	90.8	- 79.4
Favor Other	12.6	49.9	- 37.3

SOURCE: 2016 ANES Pilot Study

ANES data, Barack Obama received an average rating of 82degrees from Democratic voters and Mitt Romney received an average rating of 72degrees from Republican voters. However, ratings of the opposing party’s candidate were far more negative in 2016 than in 2012. In 2012, according to ANES data, Barack Obama received an average rating of 29degrees from Republican voters and Mitt Romney received an average rating of 28degrees from Democratic voters. In 2016, Hillary Clinton received an average rating of only 12degrees from Republican voters and Donald Trump received an average rating of only 19degrees from Democratic voters.

The data in Table5 show that, among both Democrats and Republicans, there was a large gap in feelings toward the party’s nominee between voters who supported the nominee in the primaries and voters who supported other candidates in the primaries. Republican voters who supported Donald Trump in the primaries gave him an average rating of 91degrees on the feeling thermometer while those who supported other candidates gave him an average rating of only 50degrees—a gap of more than 40degrees. Similarly, Democratic voters who supported Hillary Clinton in the primaries gave her an average rating of 87degrees on the feeling thermometer, while those who supported Bernie Sanders gave her an average rating of only 58degrees—a gap of almost 30degrees.

Despite the very weak ratings of both party’s nominees by those supporting other candidates in the primaries, the vast majority of these voters rated them more favorably than the opposing party’s nominee. Eighty-eight percent of Sanders supporters rated Hillary Clinton higher than Donald Trump on the feeling thermometer and 82percent of Republicans supporting candidates other than Donald Trump rated him higher than they rated Hillary Clinton. Only 8percent of Democrats supporting Sanders rated Trump more favorably than Clinton and only 12percent of Republicans supporting candidates other than Donald Trump rated Clinton more favorably than Trump. The reason for this is clear from the data in Table5. Sanders’ supporters actually disliked Donald Trump even more than Clinton supporters did; they gave Trump an average rating of only 14degrees on the feeling thermometer. Similarly, Republicans supporting

candidates other than Trump in the primary disliked Hillary Clinton almost as much as those supporting Trump; they gave Clinton an average rating of only 13 degrees on the feeling thermometer.

It is striking that the intensely negative feelings toward the opposing party's eventual nominee that we see in Table 5 were measured in late January 2016. This was long before Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton became their party's presidential nominees and began what would ultimately become, in the eyes of many political observers, one of the nastiest and most negative campaigns in modern political history.

According to these data, Democratic and Republican voters hardly needed to be persuaded to despise the opposing party's candidate. The large majority of Republicans strongly disliked Hillary Clinton and the large majority of Democrats strongly disliked Donald Trump long before the general election campaign began. It appears that for most Democratic and Republican voters, the general election campaign served mainly to reinforce the extremely negative feelings that they had held toward the opposing party's nominee even before the presidential primaries began.

Because of their intense dislike of the opposing party's nominee, even voters who had serious reservations about their own party's nominee were very reluctant to cross party lines. Donald Trump was an unacceptable choice for the vast majority of Democrats, even those who had supported Bernie Sanders in the Democratic primaries. Likewise, Hillary Clinton was an unacceptable choice for the vast majority of Republicans, even those who had supported candidates other than Donald Trump in the Republican primaries. In some ways, however, negative partisanship was more important on the Republican side in 2016. That is because, during and after the primaries, Republican elites had been far more divided than Democratic elites about their party's eventual nominee.

Looking Ahead: Polarization in the Age of Trump

Changing voting patterns in 2016 represented, in important ways, a continuation of the realignment of the American electorate that has been occurring since the 1970s. The most dramatic shift in voting patterns in the election involved the growing alignment of partisanship with education among white voters. White voters with college degrees shifted toward the Democratic Party while white voters without college degrees shifted toward the Republican Party. Donald Trump's candidacy clearly had something to do with this. Trump's campaign slogan, "Make America Great Again," was directed at white working-class voters hoping to turn back the clock to a time when people like them enjoyed greater influence and respect, rather than economic issues.

Like other populists with a savior message, in his campaign rhetoric, and even in his inaugural address, Donald Trump constantly painted a portrait of a nation in steep decline—decline that only he could reverse. Trump repeatedly claimed, without any evidence, that the unemployment rate in the United States was far higher than government statistics indicated, that rates of violent crime in the

nation's inner cities were soaring, and that the quality of health care available to most Americans had deteriorated badly since the adoption of the Affordable Care Act. He also portrayed Islamic terrorism as a dire threat to the lives of ordinary Americans despite that very few Americans had actually been killed or injured in terrorist attacks by Islamic militants post-9/11 (Cassidy 2016; Kilgore 2017).⁷

According to an August 2016 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, the large majority of Trump's supporters shared his dark vision of the condition and direction of the nation. Fully 81 percent of Trump supporters compared with only 19 percent of Clinton supporters believed that "life for people like them" has gotten worse in the past 50 years. Moreover, 68 percent of Trump supporters compared with only 30 percent of Clinton supporters expected life for the next generation of Americans to be worse than today (Pew Research Center 2016b).

The deep pessimism evinced by so many of Trump's supporters appears to be based largely on unhappiness with the nation's changing demographics and values. Trump's appeals to white racial resentment and ethnonationalism resonated with a large proportion of less-educated white voters who were uncomfortable with the increasing diversity of American society. Analyses using group status theory buttress the impact of this message as they show that threats to the status of the traditionally dominant group in the United States—white Christian males—by the increasingly multi-ethnic society and the perceived loss of American global dominance (Mutz 2018) helped to produce a cultural backlash similarly found in some European countries (Inglehart and Norris 2016).

Likewise, Trump's promise to appoint conservative judges who would limit the rights of gays and lesbians and curtail access to abortion appealed to religious conservatives upset with the growing liberalism of the American public on cultural issues. However, the same message that turned on a large number of white working-class voters, turned off an overwhelming majority of African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and LGBT voters, along with many white college graduates, especially women, who benefited from, and welcomed, these changes. It thus deepened the polarization between the camp largely situated in the Democratic Party viewing the changes positively, and the camp aligning in the Republican Party viewing the changes negatively.

The president's behavior since his inauguration continues his strategy of polarization—identifying out-groups, especially immigrants, unfair trade agreements and defense alliances, and the "liberal" media and intellectuals as enemies of the people. He vilifies and ridicules his own critics from within the government, the society, or his own party. In turn, Democratic Party leaders have responded with increasingly harsh attacks on the president, including calls by some to begin impeachment proceedings. At the same time, negative feelings toward Mr. Trump have hardened among rank-and-file Democrats.

Consequences for democracy

Rising mistrust and, at times, hatred of the opposing party and its leaders may be one of the most dangerous consequences of growing partisan polarization. As McCoy, Rahman, and Somer (2018) note, when supporters of each party come

to see both leaders and supporters of the other party not just as political rivals but as evildoers out to harm the nation, they are more likely to be willing to accept illiberal measures such as restrictions on freedom of expression or even the use of force against political opponents.

Partisan antipathy rose dramatically compared with 1994, when only 21 percent of Republicans and 17 percent of Democrats had highly unfavorable views of the other. By 2016, those figures had risen to 58 percent and 55 percent, respectively. Even more disturbing, roughly half of voters of each party say the other party makes them feel afraid, while those who say that the policies of the other party are so misguided they are a threat to the nation have risen rapidly. In 2016, 45 percent of Republicans viewed Democratic policies as a threat, up 8 points in just two years; 41 percent of Democrats viewed Republican policies as a threat, up 10 points in two years (Pew Research Center 2016).

Based on developments during the first 18 months of the Trump administration, there appears to be a strong likelihood that ideological conflict and partisan hostility will reach new heights during the Trump years. As a result, ideological polarization and negative partisanship are likely to remain major obstacles to efforts to work across party lines in government. Any such efforts will likely be greeted with deep suspicion by voters on both sides of the party divide, especially more attentive and politically active voters who vote in primaries to choose the party candidates. Republicans in Congress will be under intense pressure to use their majorities in the House and Senate to ram through key items on the Trump/GOP agenda without input from Democrats. Likewise, Democrats will be under intense pressure to use all the tools at their disposal, including the filibuster in the Senate for as long as it remains in place, to oppose the GOP/Trump agenda.

With very limited ability to resist congressional Republicans and Trump, Democrats and their liberal allies will likely turn increasingly to state governments under Democratic control and to the federal courts for assistance, as seen in the responses to President Trump's early executive orders. In an age of partisan hostility and conflict, the Trump years are likely to witness the most intense partisan hostility and conflict in modern American history. Given Trump's authoritarian inclinations, as seen in his attacks on the legitimacy of the news media, political opponents, the courts, and the electoral process itself, this is an especially worrisome development.

Polarization's impact on U.S. democracy has been primarily one of gridlock and careening as Republicans carried out an explicitly obstructionist strategy against the Obama administration, and Obama made use of unilateral executive orders to implement policy change. Subsequently, the Trump administration in its first year exhibited an evident bent to undo anything accomplished by Obama. The Republican-led Senate ended a practice of supermajority voting (filibuster and cloture) for Supreme Court appointments and attempted to enact major legislation without bipartisan consultation or support in 2017. Diminished tolerance of opposing views among political elites is also reflected in the degradation of respect for counter-arguments as indicated in a scale of 1–5 in which the United States fell from 4 to 3 (acknowledge but not value counterarguments) in

2013 and then to 2 (elites acknowledge the counterarguments only to degrade them and debase the individuals and groups who make such arguments) in 2016.⁸

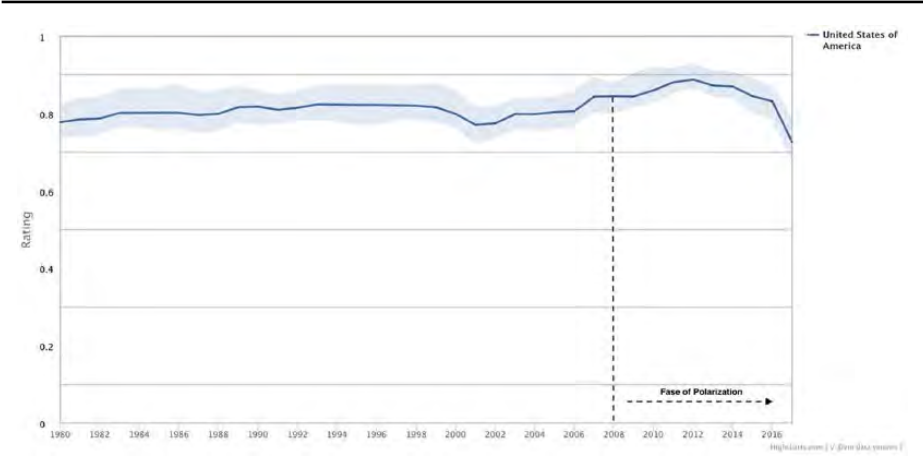
Warning signs of another of our possible outcomes—democratic backsliding—emerged in the public’s apparent tolerance of illiberal behavior by the new administration and some of its supporters in 2017. Violation of democratic norms in recent years, and especially since the election of Donald Trump, include the erosion of partisan restraint, presidential respect for freedom of the press, and the idea of a legitimate opposition (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018).

Strong institutions have ensured executive constraint, particularly in the courts suppression of the early Muslim travel bans and separation of immigrant parents and children at the U.S. border. On the other hand, the Republican Party, with some exceptions, proved more an enabler than a constraint on the erosion of democratic norms as it upended bipartisanship and failed to counter the president’s attacks on the independent judiciary and special counsel, as well as the media. The Democratic Party, under pressure from its own base, and in reciprocation for the Senate Republican majority refusal to schedule a vote on then-President Obama’s Supreme Court nominee Merrick Garland in 2016, engaged in a tit-for-tat strategy to further the breakdown of bipartisan efforts at compromise, going for broke in filibustering Trump’s Supreme Court nominee Neil Gorsuch. The filibuster provoked the Senate Republican leadership to use the “nuclear option” and end the 60-vote supermajority requirement to overcome filibusters for Supreme Court nominees. The Supreme Court battle extended the slow death of the filibuster begun in 2013 when Senate Democrats ended the 60-vote procedural vote for lower court nominees, in frustration at Republican blocking of Obama nominees.

This dramatic shift away from bipartisanship on important national decisions such as life-time judicial appointments is a product of deep polarization in which citizens and their elected representatives put partisan interests (my “team”) above national interests. Thus, as Huq and Ginsburg (2017) note, even strong institutions and constitutional protections are vulnerable to regression. Scholars tracking assessments of political scientists indicate an increased risk of democratic backsliding and even breakdown (Democracy Threat Index 2018). Experts are asked to rank the threats to American democracy on a scale of 0 to 100 (complete democratic breakdown in next four years). From an average threat level in the mid-20s in first half of 2017, by August 2018 those assessments had raised to the high 30s. In substantive terms, this changed the assessment from Significant Violations atypical of a consolidated democracy, but that do not yet threaten breakdown, to Substantial Erosion with violations that signal significant erosion of democratic quality and warn of high potential for breakdown in the future. Not surprisingly, the largest threat was perceived in Political Leaders Rhetoric, followed by Executive Constraints and Treatment of the Media, but Respect for Elections emerged as a concern as well (Authoritarian Warning Survey 2018).

Another tracking survey of political science experts shows a continuous decline in the assessments of the quality of American democracy since 2015 (Brightline Watch 2018). Interestingly, the experts rated the quality slightly higher than the general public, who were more pessimistic about the quality of democracy. Ominously, however, a growing polarization in the public over those assessments

FIGURE 2
United States' Liberal Democracy Index: 1980–2017



SOURCE: V-Dem data version 7.

became evident in July 2018: for the first time, Trump approvers saw an *improvement* in the quality, while Trump disapprovers saw a continuing *deterioration*, producing a new divergence in public opinion (Brightline Watch 2018).

Varieties of Democracy is a database that measures changes in more than 350 indicators of democracy worldwide since 1900. Figure 2 shows the lowest score on its Liberal Democracy Index for the United States since 1975. Though still relatively high, it fell in 2017 to 0.73 from a height of 0.83 on a scale of 0 to 1, with 1 as the strongest democracy score.⁹

The United States has survived periods of intense political polarization in the past. The deep hostility between Federalists and Democratic-Republicans in 1800 raised concerns about whether there could be a peaceful transition in party control of the presidency. A bloody Civil War over the institution of slavery between 1861 and 1865 posed a direct threat to the survival of the United States as a nation. Deep divisions over civil rights and the Vietnam War led to bloody confrontations in the streets and sharp divisions in the halls of Congress during the 1960s and 1970s. The nation even survived a president in Richard Nixon whose behavior threatened democratic norms and led to his eventual resignation under threat of impeachment.

Something feels different about the current period, however. In his sheer mendacity and willingness to violate crucial democratic norms, apparently to protect himself and his family, Donald Trump appears to have gone beyond anything experienced during the Nixon years. Just as importantly, the rise of partisan polarization, hostility and mistrust has allowed Trump to maintain the support of the large majority of his own party's base and discouraged Republicans in Congress from acting as a check on many of his dangerous tendencies as long as they feel they need him to accomplish their policy objectives and maintain their own power.

On the other hand, there are some encouraging signs of functioning checks and balances. The Republican-led Congress tried, with limited success, to impose additional sanctions on Russia over the objections of the president, in the wake of evidence of Russian meddling in the 2016 elections (Philips 2018). The Senate came to the defense of U.S. citizens under attack by Russian President Putin, in the wake of Trump's apparent openness to Putin's offer during the July 2018 Summit to exchange interrogation rights (Schor 2018). Courts have weighed in to block some executive initiatives, while allowing others. A number of individuals within the Trump administration have shown a willingness to stand up to the president on issues such as Russian meddling and his requests to halt the Mueller investigation. And of course the Mueller probe itself continued despite the president's regularly stated desire to shut it down.

Most importantly, the American people will have an opportunity to render a verdict on the functioning of Congress and the administration in the 2018 midterm elections and, eventually, in the 2020 presidential election. If the midterm election results in a Democratic takeover of at least one chamber of Congress, as commonly happens in midterm elections, it will be widely viewed as a sharp rebuke of the president. A Democratic House or Senate would result in much more intense scrutiny and heightened oversight of the president and his administration, but also potentially an even greater gridlock. In the end, whether the decades-long deepening of polarization results in long-term damage to democratic norms and institutions or sparks a political reaction that ends up strengthening those norms and institutions may rest largely in the hands of the American electorate.

Notes

1. The following five paragraphs draw from McCoy, Rahman, and Somer (2018).

2. Donald Trump Speech Transcript from Inauguration as President. 2017. Available from <https://www.news.com.au/finance/work/leaders/what-donald-trump-said-in-his-inauguration-speech/news-story/ebdd3cb77f0b2b385f8c663dbc724a7e>.

3. "Birtherism" refers to a movement questioning the citizenship of Barack Obama. Donald Trump introduced the question into the national conversation in 2011. See Barbaro (2018).

4. Data for the national exit poll in 2016 were collected by Edison Research for the National Election Pool, a consortium of ABC News, The Associated Press, CBSNews, CNN, Fox News and NBC News.

5. For evidence that Trump's attacks on Mexican immigrants and Muslims were crucial to his support among Republican primary voters, see Rapoport, Abramowitz and Stone (2016); See also Ball (2016).

6. The measure of racial and ethnic resentment combines the traditional four-item racial resentment scale with six items measuring support or opposition to immigration. I combined these into one scale because the correlation between the racial resentment scale and the anti-immigration scale was a very strong 0.65. Moreover, a factor analysis of the 10 items indicates that they are measuring a single underlying dimension and the 10-item racial/ethnic resentment scale has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87. The misogyny scale is based on three items measuring negative or hostile attitudes toward women.

7. For an analysis of Trump's inaugural address, see Kilgore (2017). Trump's Dark, Weird Inaugural Campaign Speech.

8. Varieties of Democracy. Variable graph. Accessed August 8, 2018. <https://www.v-dem.net/en/analysis/VariableGraph/>.

9. Ibid.

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