Irresponsible Partisanship and Democratic Accountability: How Citizens Understand Party Conflict

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Abstract

American citizens resent contemporary party conflict largely for its "process consequences." These include incivility, gridlock, and government dysfunction. Political science generally concludes these consequences emerge for strategic reasons—that is, Democratic and Republican politicians strategically manipulate and intensify conflict to gain electoral and messaging advantages. However, recent scholarship in political psychology suggests that citizens understand party conflict emotionally—and, importantly, that they see their own party as motivated by love and the other by hate. This not only suggests that American citizens fundamentally misunderstand political conflict, but also that this *asymmetric motive attribution* impedes their ability to hold elites accountable for its process consequences. With data from the 2015 IGS-California Poll, I directly assess the degree to which citizens view elite party conflict as strategically- versus affectively-driven. I find citizens see both parties as significantly more motivated by strategy than emotion, especially when conflict is presented in less abstract, more policy-related terms. However, I also show that citizens generally oppose or hold zero-valence attitudes toward reforms that could potentially curb process consequences. This suggests that blindness to institutional externalities, rather than to elite strategy, sustains irresponsible partisanship.

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Seemingly intractable partisan conflict is the new norm in American politics. Democratic and Republican politicians have become increasingly and openly uncivil toward each other (Jamieson and Falk 2000; Uslaner 1993), and government dysfunction has waxed tremendously. Gridlock occurred on nearly three-quarters of salient agenda items in the 112th Congress (Binder 2015). Even more concerning are the acute symptoms of party conflict. Between 2011 and 2016, partisan skirmishes in Washington caused the U.S. to suffer its first-ever credit downgrade (2011), forced a 16-day government shutdown estimated to have cost the economy $24 billion (Hicks 2013), and threatened another shutdown, resolved only by the resignation of Speaker of the House John Boehner (2015). Despite being internally cohesive and polarized from each other, today's parties-in-government are far from the "responsible parties" political scientists hoped for in the 1950s (APSA 1950).

Unsurprisingly, citizens disapprove of irresponsible partisanship. Congressional approval hit an all-time low of 7% in 2014 (Riffkin 2014), and more generally, many have noted correspondence between partisan polarization and citizens' dissatisfaction with government (e.g., Durr, Martin and Wolbrecht 1997; Fiorina and Abrams 2009; Ramirez 2009). While political science has primarily focused on polarization's implications for *policy* representation—namely, the purported "disconnect" between ideological politicians and ideologically-innocent voters (e.g., Bafumi and Herron 2010)—citizens may also rue elite polarization for its comorbid effects on the political *process*: the dysfunction, incivility, and brinkmanship described above (Harbridge, Malhotra and Harrison 2014; Flynn and Harbridge Forthcoming; Hetherington 2008; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2001; Lee 2009). In what follows, I present original survey evidence demonstrating that citizens disapprove of polarization primarily because of its effects on the political process rather than policy concerns.

Party conflict's process consequences thus present a democratic accountability puzzle, particularly because they often emerge from elites' strategic choices and in public view—despite citizens' distaste for the outcome. The 2013 shutdown is a prime example. Planned months in advance by the Republican elite, the shutdown itself was preceded by a massive public relations blitz despite strong opposition to the tactic, even among conservative citizens (Stolberg and McIn-

tyre 2013). By many accounts, the shutdown was part of a broader messaging strategy: many in the GOP believed the tactic would make President Obama and congressional Democrats appear intransigent, which would bolster support for repealing the Affordable Care Act (Joseph 2013; Stolberg and McIntyre 2013). In addition to journalistic accounts, shutdown participants provided direct evidence: Senators McConnell and Paul of Kentucky were caught by a hot microphone discussing how to best use the shutdown for messaging purposes (Everett 2013), and Representative Bachmann of Minnesota was even more candid, noting, "This is about the happiest I've seen members in a long time, because we see we are starting to win this dialogue on a national level" (qtd. in Scheiber 2013).

More generally, existing scholarship concludes that the parties-in-government often strategically manufacture or intensify political conflict. Ranney (1954) first noted the potential for polarized parties to behave irresponsibly under the U.S. system of institutions and elections; his wisdom has been borne out. Today's polarized parties are said to engage in "partisan misbehavior" (Mann and Ornstein 2012), "hostage taking" (Mann and Ornstein 2012), "partisan bickering" (Lee 2009), "strategic disagreement" (Gilmour 1995), "blame-game politics" (Groseclose and McCarty 2001; Smith 1988), and even "guerrilla-style tactics" (Schickler 2001) to articulate their agendas and advance their short-term interests. These tactics are characterized by their effects on the process—indeed, in cases of "strategic disagreement" and "blame-game politics," genuine disagreement between the parties is either minimal or of little importance as a motive. Thus, irresponsible partisanship is often deployed as an electoral and messaging strategy—especially when control of policymaking institutions is closely contested (Lee 2016).

Given that citizens disapprove of irresponsible partisanship, why do elites use it so brazenly as a messaging strategy? And ultimately, why doesn't the public hold its democratically-elected government accountable for irresponsible partisanship?

One possible explanation is that citizens are just as strategic as the elites who represent them. That is, Democrats (Republicans) may dislike irresponsible partisanship but accept its use to advance the Democratic (Republican) agenda and improve Democrats' (Republicans') electoral fortunes. Harbridge and Malhotra (2011) find that the strongest partisans support partisan ac-

tion by individual legislators while punishing Congress as a whole for conflict. However, weak and leaning partisans and independents—the bulk of citizens—generally prefer legislators who project bipartisanship. Moreover, Harbridge and Malhotra (2011) did not investigate attitudes toward irresponsible partisanship or process consequences, but simply toward bipartisanship (or lack thereof) in legislators' behavior. By contrast, Flynn and Harbridge (Forthcoming) investigate citizens' reactions to gridlock and find, surprisingly, that citizens often prefer *out-party* policy victories to gridlock. (Even on the hotly-contested issue of gun regulation, Flynn and Harbridge [Forthcoming] find that partisans, on average, are indifferent between status-quo preserving gridlock and an out-party victory.) Thus, citizens' own strategic considerations are unlikely to sustain irresponsible partisanship.

A second explanation for irresponsible partisanship in the face of popular disapproval is that the public fails to observe the strategic nature of party conflict. Under this explanation, citizens interpret party conflict not through elite strategy, but instead through the affective motives they attribute to the parties in conflict. Building on the attribution literature in psychology (e.g., Hewstone 1989; Pettigrew 1979; Ross 1977), Waytz, Young and Ginges (2014) find that partisans tend to attribute their party's role in conflict to in-group love while attributing the out-party's role to out-group hatred. As such, partisans may see their out-party as purely vengeful when they observe irresponsible partisanship, and their own party as justified in responding accordingly. For this reason, Waytz, Young and Ginges (2014) argue that the bias they document has the potential to fuel intractable political conflict.

This provokes a pessimistic conclusion about democratic competence. In particular, it suggests that citizens may support their own party's role in irresponsible partisanship—despite their opposition to its consequences—out of blind party-following and motivated emotional reasoning. Moreover, it suggests that citizens fail to connect suboptimal democratic outcomes to elite strategy, instead interpreting them simply as the result of ill-will on the part of the out-party. If true, then latent public demand for institutional reforms to curb irresponsible partisanship is likely weak.

Alternatively, irresponsible partisanship may simply be an institutional moral hazard problem. That is, the public and politicians alike recognize that conflict is often strategic and that

citizens dislike the resultant process consequences, but single-member districts shield individual politicians from bearing blame for collective irresponsibility (similar to Fenno's [1978] paradox). And if this is the case, then the two-party system further gives rise to a textbook prisoner's dilemma in which irresponsibility strictly dominates responsible party government.

Two variations on this explanation exist. First, citizens may be highly attuned to the reality of party conflict: they may fully understand that intense party conflict is often strategic in nature, and moreover, can trace institutional arrangements to irresponsible partisanship. If so, then the onus for continued irresponsibility falls entirely on party elites for precluding reform.

On the other hand, citizens may fall somewhere between uninformed and fully informed about the nature of party conflict. Under this explanation, citizens understand that intense party conflict is strategic but fail to connect institutional arrangements to partisan misbehavior and suboptimal outcomes. In sum, citizens' and elites' asymmetric information about how institutions structure elites' incentives to be responsible, rather than partisans' asymmetric beliefs about the parties' motives, may sustain irresponsible partisanship and its consequences.

This paper adjudicates between these explanations. With original survey data, I find that citizens recognize that party politicians' strategic motives, not just political passion, drive conflict. And while partisan citizens are more likely to attribute positive affective motives to their own party and negative ones to the out-party (consistent with Waytz, Young and Ginges [2014]), they more strongly attribute conflict to strategy, and do so consistently across party lines. Moreover, I find asymmetric attribution of non-affective motives to the parties, implying that the pattern Waytz, Young and Ginges (2014) document is unlikely to fuel intractable conflict; rather, it most likely reflects citizens' (generally strong) partisan affect (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012) and automatic reasoning toward affectively-consistent conclusions (Westen 2007).

However, I also show that while citizens favor relatively mild electoral and political reforms that have little chance of curbing party conflict's process consequences, they reject more substantial, potentially impactful, reforms. Thus, I conclude that citizens generally recognize the strategic nature of party conflict—but that they may be blind to how policymaking institutions structure the parties' strategic incentives to behave irresponsibly.

Citizens Disapprove of Irresponsible Partisanship and its Process Consequences

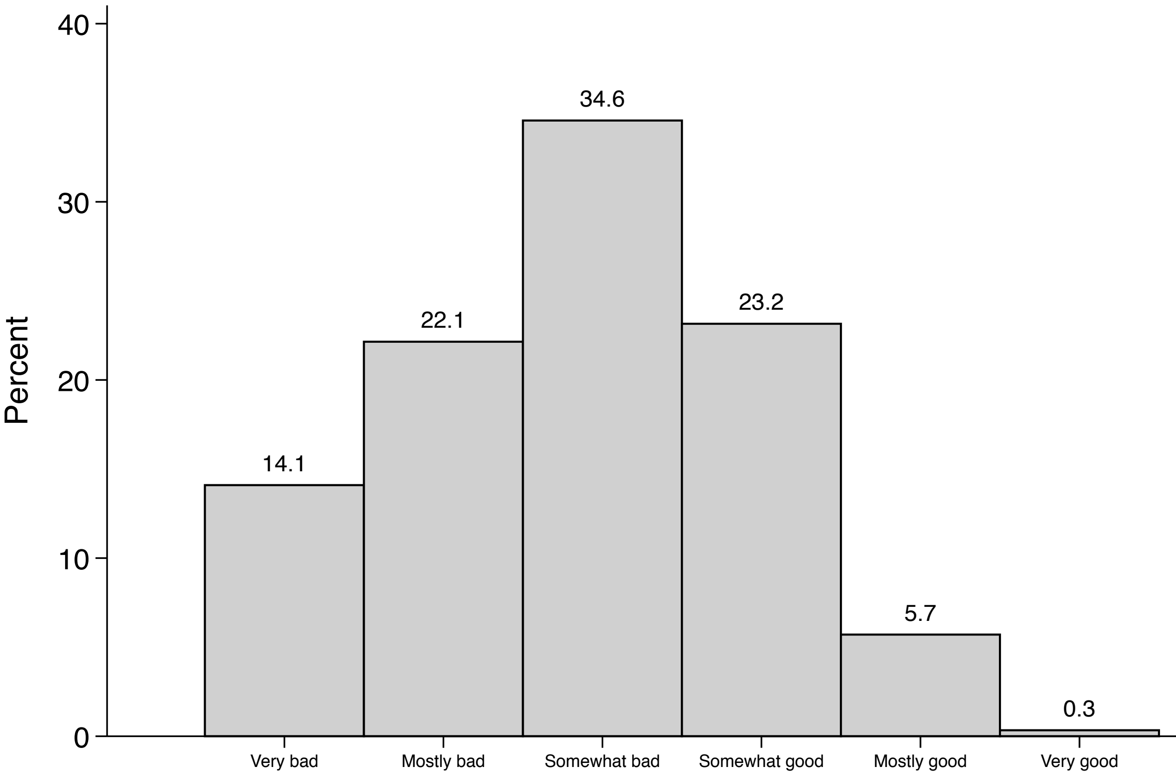
Irresponsible partisanship is puzzling as a political strategy because, by most accounts, citizens (the messaging audience) appear disgusted by such gamesmanship and its effects. I provide new evidence that this is the case. The 2015 IGS-California Poll asked a high-quality sample of Californians, recruited via Survey Sampling International (SSI) whether they believe elite party polarization to be good or bad. (The full question text is shown alongside the distribution of responses in Figure 1. See see the Supporting Information [SI], section SI 1.1, for demographics and additional details on the sample. While the sample was a non-probability sample, as most online samples are, sample demographics correspond well to the target population, and all analyses use survey weights to account for purposeful oversampling of Latinos and Asians for other projects included in the poll.)

70.1% of respondents reported that polarization was at least "somewhat bad," as Figure 1 shows. By contrast, just 29.9% reported that polarization has been a net positive, with just 0.3% saying it's been "very good."

Respondents were then asked to provide reasons for their assessment of polarization. They were given a number of often-cited pros or cons of polarization (depending on their response to the previous question) and were instructed to pick and rank up to three. (They could also provide open-ended responses, although few did.) In Table 1, I present the results for participants who saw polarization as at least somewhat negative (see SI 1.2 for responses from the 30% who believed polarization to be positive). As the second column demonstrates, polarization's process consequences appear to be its most lamented effects. And as the third column demonstrates, over 60% of respondents cited a process consequence as their primary reason for disliking polarization, compared to just 37.2% citing policy considerations generally. (Interestingly, just 11.4% cited partisan extremity, the most oft-lamented effect of polarization, in any form.)

If polarization is indeed responsible for citizens' increasing dissatisfaction with Washington, as many have argued, then its process consequences appear to be the reason why. But this is

Figure 1: "There is a lot of talk today about elite political polarization, that is, Democratic and Republican leaders increasingly having difficultly agreeing about government policies. In your opinion, is this polarization a good thing or a bad thing?"



NOTE: Data from the 2015 IGS California Poll. $n = 294$. Survey weights used to account for oversampling of certain demographic groups.

Table 1: Why Citizens View Polarization Negatively

	% citing	% ranking as worst consequence
"Neither party represents my personal mix of issue positions very well."	35.6	25.8
	[29.1, 42.4]	
"Polarization has made politics nasty and uncivil."	48.5	21.8
	[41.6,55.4]	
"Gridlock in Congress has prevented important legislation."	51.5	21.7
	[44.6, 58.4]	
"The parties focus too much on grandstanding and not on solving problems."	63.8	18.2
	[57.2, 70.4]	
"The parties want policies that are more extreme than what I want."	27.8	6.9
	[21.6, 33.4]	
"Republicans are too conservative."	14.9	2.6
	[10.0, 19.8]	
"Democrats are too liberal."	9.5	1.9
	[5.5, 13.6]	
"Media has become too biased."	30.6	1.2
	[24.2, 37.0]	
Other	0.6	
	[0, 1.8]	

NOTE: 95% confidence intervals presented in brackets for "% citing." I do not present confidence intervals for "% ranking as worst consequence" because of strict dependence between the selection of individual items.

puzzling in that a large body of existing scholarship concludes that gridlock, incivility, and grandstanding often emerge from conflict strategically manufactured for public consumption. One potentially troubling possibility is that citizens overlook the strategic nature of elite partisan conflict, believing its intensity to be genuine rather than manufactured. If so, they may "easy marks" for the parties, easily mobilized to support their party even in the face of process consequences. Moreover, if citizens believe that interpersonal affect, rather than strategic incentives, fuel intense conflict, they may be less likely to believe that institutional reforms can change Washington.

Testing Whether Citizens see Irresponsible Partisanship as Strategic or Affect-Driven

A recent, prominent study takes this alternative as a given. Waytz, Young and Ginges (2014) investigate the mass-level, psychological roots of intractable political conflict. In doing so, they document an apparent cognitive bias known as *motive attribution asymmetry* and argue that it sustains intense political conflict. Under this explanation, Democratic and Republican supporters explicitly believe that their own party engages in conflict out of empathy for co-partisans, but that the other party does so out of out-group animus. As a result, Waytz, Young and Ginges (2014) suggest, citizens are less likely to support negotiation and compromise solutions.[1]

If people genuinely perceive party elites as affectively-motivated, and asymmetrically so by love and hate across party lines, then they likely view their own party's role in conflict as justified and the other party's as illegitimate. Thus, affective reasoning about politics may explain the regularity with which we observe irresponsible partisanship.

However, alternative explanations exist. These alternatives are especially troubling because, remarkably, Waytz, Young and Ginges (2014) fail to consider the strategic aspect of political conflict. The study's attribution task asks respondents to rate the plausibility of six potential motives for Democrats' or Republicans' "engaging in conflict with the opposing party." However, all six of these potential explanations are affective, with three capturing "in-group love" and the

[1] Waytz, Young and Ginges's (2014) direct evidence on this point comes from Study 4, which uses the Israel-Palestine conflict as a context, rather than American party conflict.

other three "out-group hate." Thus, the design provides no leverage for assessing the degree to which citizens reason about American party conflict through their explicit beliefs about the parties' affective motives, because it fails to provide alternative types of motives that citizens may see as more plausible. For similar reasons, one may worry that participants rated affective motives as more plausible than they actually believed them to be. Since the attribution battery only provided positively- and negatively-valenced affective explanations for conflict, and because partisans face consistency pressures when responding to questions about the parties (e.g., Lodge and Taber 2013), they may have ascribed positive motives to their own party and negative ones to the out-party expressively rather than genuinely.

Other work in political psychology offers a reason to believe that citizens recognize conflict as strategic. Affective intelligence theory suggests that while citizens typically process political information automatically, unusual or threatening circumstances lead them to break from habit, pay closer attention to politics, and search for information (Marcus, Neuman and MacKuen 2000). Irresponsible partisanship may render citizens *more* likely to observe elites' strategic motives for conflict, as they often involve intense rhetoric and tangible consequences—e.g., credit defaults and government shutdowns—the very circumstances that should lead citizens to seek out novel information. Moreover, information about the parties and the process is unusually available in times of intense conflict. Rather than being sustained by blindness to elites' strategic motives, irresponsible partisanship may actually lead citizens to recognize those motives.

In sum, one view holds that citizens' reliance on affective explanations for political conflict sustains such conflict, and that "curing" motive attribution biases might help citizens to hold politicians accountable. However, an alternate view suggests that citizens recognize the strategic nature of intense party conflict, but that an institutional moral hazard problem sustains partisan irresponsibility.

Hypotheses

In what follows, I first compare the degree to which people attribute strategic motives to the parties, vis-à-vis affective ones, when they think about political conflict. Building on Waytz, Young

and Ginges (2014), the null hypothesis is that people see the parties as motivated primarily by group affect. Alternatively, if citizens appear to attribute elite conflict to party strategy as much or more than group affect, we must reconsider the view of citizens as naïve political marks.

Second, I assess the degree to which question design influences the motives respondents attribute to the parties when asked about party conflict. In particular, I test the null hypothesis that respondents are no more likely to attribute conflict to group affect when provided with an attribution battery that includes non-affective motives in addition to affective ones.

Finally, I assess whether the presentation of political conflict in these types of survey questions matters. I test the null hypothesis that respondents are equally likely to ascribe emotional and strategic motives to the parties, regardless of whether conflict is presented generally (as it is in Waytz, Young and Ginges [2014]) or in more policy-specific terms.

Research Design

To test these hypotheses, I extended Waytz, Young and Ginges's (2014) design, which asks respondents to attribute either their party's or the out-party's role in conflict to various affective motives, using a seven-point scale to indicate how much they ascribe each of those motives to the party.[2] I did so on the 2015 IGS-California Poll, discussed above. This study relied on a random subset of 1,383 partisan respondents (including leaners).

The original preamble to the battery read: "When (your party/the opposing party) engages in conflict with (the opposing party/your party), how much is (it) motivated by each of the following?" As discussed above, Waytz, Young and Ginges (2014) ask respondents to evaluate six potential motives. I first modified this design by asking people about "The Democratic (Republican) Party" instead of "your party (the opposing party)" and creating a dummy variable indicating whether the respondent's target was their in-party or out-party after all data had been collected.

Most important for testing the first two sets of hypotheses above, I randomly assigned (roughly) half of respondents ($n = 825$) to a battery that asked them only to rate the plausibility

[2] I rescale all variables 0-1.

of two affective motives: "Empathy for people in the Democratic (Republican) Party" and "Dislike of people in the Republican (Democratic) Party." The other $n = 776$ respondents, by contrast, rated the plausibility of those two motives, plus three non-affective motives drawn randomly from this list: "Improving the Democratic (Republican) Party's chances in future elections," "Swaying public opinion," "Achieving public policies consistent with the Democratic (Republican) Party's agenda," "Satisfying groups that support the Democratic (Republican) Party's agenda," "Supporting (Opposing) President Obama," "Strategically trying to make the Republican (Democratic) Party look bad," "Achieving good public policies for the American people," and "Ignorance."

The items in the `comprehensive attribution battery` vary in two key ways. First, as noted, they differ in nature. Two are primarily affective, six are primarily strategic, and the final two are neither. Second, they differ in valence. Some of the items in the battery are positively-valenced, others are negatively-valenced, and still others carry minimal valence. I use the pattern of responses to these items to assess the uniqueness of people's beliefs about affective motives vis-à-vis other motives. In particular, asymmetric attribution of non-affective but valenced motives to the parties would imply that responses to these questions reflect partisan affect and a need for cognitive-affective consistency, rather than deeply-held beliefs that *cause* intense partisanship.

I use the within-condition results in the `comprehensive attribution battery` condition to assess the degree to which people see the parties as strategically- and affectively-motivated. I use results between these two conditions to determine whether the attribution battery itself affects people's tendency to attribute conflict to partisan affect.

I also randomly assign how party conflict is presented to respondents to assess such framing's effects. 793 respondents saw a battery preamble asking them to evaluate the Democratic or Republican Party's motives when it "engages in conflict," the broad phrasing Waytz, Young and Ginges (2014) use. The other 808 respondents were asked about the party's motives more concretely—in terms of policies that have (ostensibly) been at the heart of intense party conflict in recent years. These respondents assessed the Republican Party's motives when it "demands that the Democratic Party accept proposed tax cuts," and the Democratic Party's motives when it "demands that the Republican Party accept proposed spending increases." Although conflict is

not explicitly mentioned in these descriptions, the unilateral demands connote the intransigence that characterizes contemporary party conflict.

I estimate the independent effects of the three randomly-assigned treatments—`out-party target`, `comprehensive attribution battery`, and `policy-specific conflict`. I first estimate these as *average marginal component effects* (AMCE) on people's tendency to attribute party conflict to in-party empathy and out-party dislike by regressing treatment indicators on the dependent measures (via OLS). I then examine how battery items and the description of conflict may work in tandem to influence the inferences people make.

Results

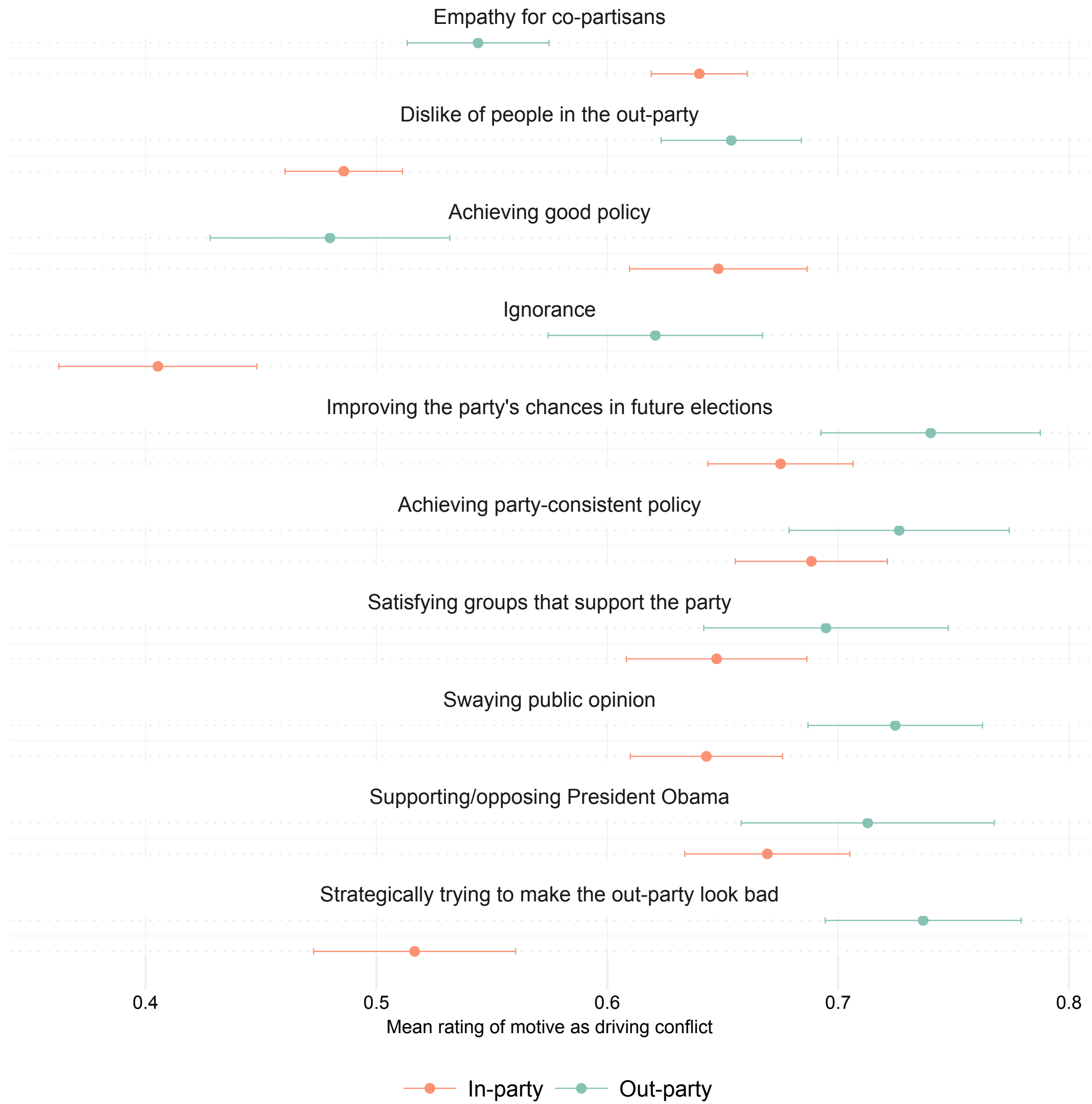
People Perceive Party Conflict as Strategic

To probe the relative weight that citizens place on affective explanations for party conflict vis-à-vis strategic ones, I first examine responses under the `comprehensive attribution battery`. Figure 2 plots the average plausibility respondents assigned to each of the potential motives in the battery, separately for respondents asked about their own party and about the out-party.

The top two panels of Figure 2 demonstrate asymmetric motive attribution for political conflict: people are more likely to report that their own party fights out of in-group love and the other party out of out-group animus. Waytz, Young and Ginges (2014) suggest that this fuels partisan intransigence. However, Figure 2 shows asymmetric attribution of conflict to other factors too. For example, while respondents asked about their own party rated in-party empathy as 0.10 points more likely to motivate conflict than did respondents asked about the out-party (95% CI: [0.06, 0.13]), the asymmetric ascription of sociotropic concerns ("achieving good policy [for the nation]") was significantly larger (diff. = 0.17, 95% CI: [0.10, 0.23]). Similarly, while respondents rated out-party dislike as significantly less credible when assessing their own party's motives (diff. = -0.17, 95% CI: [-0.22, -0.13]), I observe a larger asymmetry on the decidedly non-affective "ignorance" (diff. = -0.22, 95% CI: [-0.16, -0.28]).

Tellingly, respondents demonstrated substantively and statistically significant asymmetry

Figure 2: Respondents Favor Strategic Motives as Explanations for Partisan Conflict



when ascribing all valenced motives to the parties. This was not the case with motives that carried less obvious valence. (Figure 2 shows this visually between panels; see SI 2.1 for a table.) These differences are all in the expected direction: whether the possible cause of conflict is strategic, affective, or neither, if it carries a clear positive valence, respondents tend to ascribe it to their own party and not to the out-party, and vice-versa for negatively-valenced reasons.

However, the broader finding in Figure 2 is the relative appeal of strategic motives as explanations for partisan conflict. Respondents rated "improving the party's chances in future elections," "swaying public opinion," "achieving public policies consistent with the (party) agenda," "satisfying groups that support the (party)," and "(supporting/opposing) President Obama" as equally or significantly more plausible than co-partisan empathy when evaluating their own parties' role in conflict. Even more notably, respondents rated all strategic motives as significantly better explanations for their out-parties' polarizing behavior than sheer dislike (or ignorance, for that matter). Thus, while partisans clearly disfavor inter-party hostility and in-group affinity as explanations for conflict initiated by their own party and the out-party, respectively, they also appear to see political conflict as animated by strategy as much as group affect, if not more.

Explaining Respondents' Explanations

To this point, I have examined results within the `comprehensive attribution battery` condition. I now compare results between conditions to better understand how questionnaire design may affect the explanations respondents provide for political conflict. I start by discussing the effect of these treatments on the ascription of inter-party dislike, and then turn to their effect on the attribution of conflict to co-partisan empathy.

Consistent with results from just the comprehensive condition, I find asymmetric attribution of dislike by partisanship in the full sample and controlling for the assignment of other treatments. As Table 2 shows, respondents were 16 points more likely to ascribe out-group dislike to their out-party than to their in-party. More surprising, however, is the apparent effect of how conflict is described. Respondents who were asked about conflict over specific policies rated out-party dislike as nine points less plausible as an explanation for conflict. Since political conflict is

Table 2: Average Marginal Component Effects of Treatments

	DV: Attribution to dislike (1)	DV: Attribution to empathy (2)
Asked about out-party	-.16***	-.10***
	(.01)	(.01)
Comprehensive attribution battery	-.02	.01
	(.01)	(.01)
Specifically-defined conflict	-.09***	-.01
	(.01)	(.01)
Constant	.55	.63
	(.01)	(.01)
R^2	.13	.04
SER	.25	.25
n	1358	1359

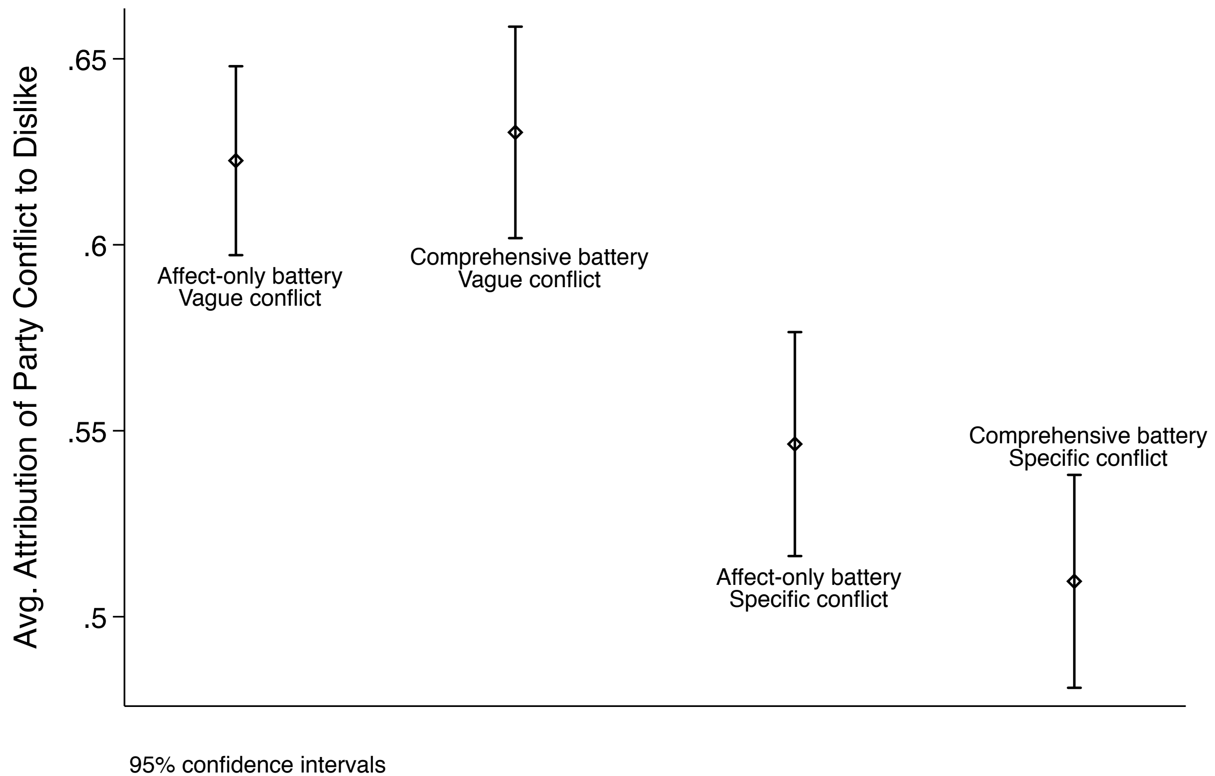
NOTE: All variables are scaled 0 to 1. Standard errors reported in parentheses. * = $p < .10$, ** = $p < .05$, *** = $p < .01$, two-tailed.

rarely presented as divorced from policy in the media, reports in the "specific conflict" condition are likely more representative of people's reasoning about actual irresponsible partisanship than those in the "vague conflict" condition.

In the full sample, the comprehensive attribution battery failed to meaningfully affect respondents' ascription of dislike to the parties. Its AMCE is quite close to zero (a two-point decrease) and precisely-estimated. However, when conflict is presented specifically, the comprehensive attribution battery yields a four-point decrease in the attribution of conflict to out-party dislike (95% CI: [-.08, .00]). I show this visually in Figure 3, which more generally shows that as conflict is described in a more externally valid way and as people are given a broad list of potential causes of conflict, they rely less on inter-group animus as an explanation.

Turning to respondents' use of empathy to explain conflict, I again find the expected asymmetry by partisanship. Table 2, Column 2 shows that people are ten points more likely to explain conflict through empathy when asked about their own party's role in conflict. On the other hand, I fail to observe substantively or statistically significant AMCEs of the other randomly-assigned treatments.

Figure 3: Attribution of Party Conflict to Dislike, by Attribution Battery and Description of Conflict



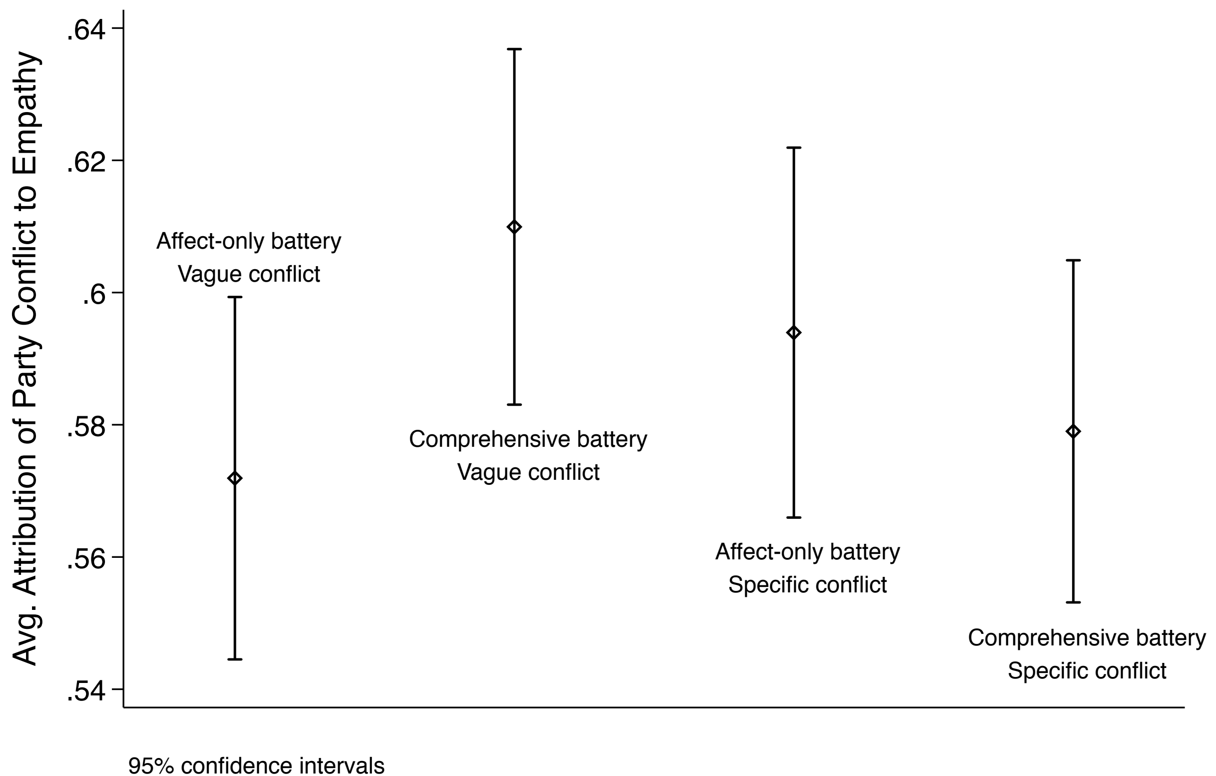
However, an interesting pattern belies the coefficients. Recall that respondents were randomly shown just three of the eight possible motives from the comprehensive attribution battery (in addition to empathy and dislike). I can thus leverage random assignment to rate the out-party's motivation to "achiev(e) public policies consistent with the (party) agenda" as an exogenous treatment. I do so to determine whether priming people to think about this potential motive also leads them to attribute greater empathy to the out-party. And, indeed, respondents randomly primed to consider party policies as a motive were 8 points more likely to attribute out-party-driven conflict to empathy (95% CI: [.02, 0.15]).[3] Thus, when citizens perceive their out-party as engaging in conflict out of a desire to achieve party-consistent policies, they also appear to perceive that party as more motivated by empathy. That is, giving respondents the chance to explain political con-

[3]This is not true of people's ascription of empathy to their own parties, which see a 2-point decline, statistically indistinguishable from zero.

flict in terms of strategic motives, and not just affective ones, reduced the asymmetry with which respondents ascribed empathy to their in-party vis-à-vis the out-party.

This pattern is even more noteworthy because it depends entirely on how conflict is presented. Participants asked about their out-party and assigned to the `vaguely-described conflict` treatment were 14 points more likely to ascribe empathy when their attribution battery included "achieving policies consistent with the (party) agenda" (95% CI: [.05, .22]). The corresponding apparent effect among those assigned to the `specifically-defined conflict` treatment was a meager two points (95% CI: [-.08,.11]). Thus, priming people to think about the parties' policy motives appears to only affect perceptions of the the parties' empathetic motives when conflict is presented as divorced from specific policy battles—something that rarely occurs in media depictions of political conflict. This helps to explain the odd pattern of results in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Attribution of Party Conflict to Dislike, by Attribution Battery and Description of Conflict



Finally, data from the `comprehensive attribution battery` condition suggest one more way that a limited battery may drive partisans' tendency to rely on affect to explain party conflict: expressive responding. As noted above, some items in the comprehensive attribution battery carried negative valence—in particular, "ignorance" and "making the (other party) look bad." Partisans are unlikely to want to ascribe these motives to their party's leaders. If people lack "palatable strategic options" in the response set, one might expect respondents to attribute in-party polarizing behavior to empathy at higher rates. This is exactly what the data show. Respondents asked about their own party's motives, and whose batteries randomly included both "ignorance" and "making the (other party) look bad" were 6.4 points more likely to explain the conflict through their own party leaders' co-partisan empathy than were respondents who had access to more palatable motives (95% CI: [-0.13, 0.00], $n = 221$). As a placebo test, I evaluate whether this random assignment affected respondents' tendency to explain their party's role in conflict as a function of out-group dislike and find no apparent effect (diff. $= 0.03$, 95% CI: [-0.07, 0.12]). Thus, partisans' reliance on "in-group love" to explain their own parties' role in political conflict appears to partially reflect the set of motives researchers allow them to choose from.

In sum, people's explanations for political conflict depend on both the way conflict is presented and the set of plausible reasons given to them. When political conflict is described specifically and respondents are given the opportunity to think about a broader set of explanations for conflict, they are less likely to cite out-party dislike. People's reliance on in-group empathy to explain political conflict appears, in part, to reflect the strategic motives available in memory. This implies that people's reasoning about political conflict is more complex than the purely affective account Waytz, Young and Ginges (2014) offer. And, when provided with a comprehensive set of motives to choose from, people's explanations for party conflict look more like political scientists' and less like naïve rubes'.

In Search of the Accountability Failure

The analyses thus far suggest that citizens primarily rue polarization for its consequences on the political process—the bickering, gridlock, and dysfunction that stem from intense and strategic

party teamsmanship. But the data also suggest that citizens, like political scientists, tend to recognize the strategic nature of party conflict. Thus, irresponsible partisanship appears not to be sustained by simple naiveté about politicians' motives.

While motives drive behavior, politicians' motives aren't determined exogenously. Electoral and policymaking institutions shape elites' incentives. The overarching view from political science is that the American system—with frequent elections, separated policymaking institutions, and multiple veto points—is unusually prone to "irresponsible partisanship" (e.g., Mann and Ornstein 2012).

Do citizens favor reforms that would likely curb polarization's process consequences? If so, then irresponsible partisanship is truly a phenomenon forced on the American public. However, Table 3 suggests that this is not the case. As part of the 2015 IGS-California Poll, I asked respondents to indicate whether they would favor or oppose various electoral and political reforms. These reforms fall into three distinct categories, drawn from Mann and Ornstein's (2012) influential analysis of party polarization and conflict: "bromides to avoid" (reforms that are unlikely to cure polarization's ills, in this case, the first two items in Table 3), "reforms to the party system" (items 3-6), and "institutional reforms" (items 7-9). Respondents appeared to favor the "bromides to avoid"—term limits and full public financing of elections—more than all other reforms. By contrast, the least popular were the institutional reforms, and especially the one most likely to eliminate process consequences: "Amending the Constitution to create a parliamentary system, in which the the party that wins a majority of seats in Congress governs, with its leader serving as president."[4] Although this reform would remove the veto points and institutional separation that fuel partisan irresponsibility, it is even less popular than compulsory voting. Moreover, the modal respondent claims a zero-valence opinion on all reforms but term limits, suggesting that most citizens simply don't think much about institutions and reforms.

So while citizens aren't easy "marks" mobilized by party conflict without understanding its strategic nature, they also aren't clamoring for reforms to curb the process consequences they

[4]One possible concern is that the question wording may have spurred Republicans to support the reform and Democrats to oppose it because of contemporary chamber control. However, Republicans were 1.3 points less favorable toward the reform, on average (95% CI: [-0.09, 0.06]).

Table 3: Citizens Favor “Bromides to Avoid,” are More Skeptical of Reforms that Could Curb Process Consequences

	Strongly oppose	Oppose	Somewhat oppose	Neither favor nor oppose	Somewhat favor	Favor	Strongly favor	Mean rating (Std. error)	n
Congressional term limits	1.1	1.4	4.6	21.4	16.0	20.6	34.9	0.75 (0.02)	206
Full public financing of of elections (and ban on private contributions)	4.2	3.8	8.8	27.2	15.3	21.5	19.2	0.64 (0.02)	192
Ranked-choice voting	1.9	3.8	6.1	42.6	17.1	13.7	14.8	0.62 (0.02)	194
Independent redistricting commissions	0.9	4.0	5.8	49.1	18.6	9.7	12.0	0.60 (0.02)	186
Top-two primaries (to replace partisan primary elections)	6.9	6.9	14.2	38.9	18.6	11.3	3.2	0.50 (0.02)	208
Compulsory voting	18.6	10.9	10.6	33.5	13.8	7.6	5.1	0.43 (0.02)	207
Abolishing the filibuster	3.4	7.1	7.5	37.4	24.2	11.9	8.5	0.57 (0.02)	216
4-year terms and concurrent elections for pres. and all MCs	4.0	8.1	10.1	23.8	21.4	17.3	15.3	0.61 (0.02)	213
"Full parliamentary reform"	17.8	15.1	8.7	44.6	5.1	4.8	3.9	0.39 (0.02)	229

dislike so much. And the proliferation of zero-valence attitudes toward these reforms implies that many aren't even considering ways to do so. This suggests that citizens' lack of knowledge about how institutions structure elite behavior, rather than misunderstanding the motives such underlie conflict, is a more likely explanation for the long-term existence of irresponsible partisanship. That is, citizens appear to understand that the parties' true motives often deviate from those publicly proclaimed, but their lack of institutional awareness prevents them from adequately diagnosing the causes of democratic dysfunction.

Discussion

Irresponsible partisanship is not a symbolic phenomenon. It has affected the national economy, the ability of government to conduct necessary business, and ultimately, citizens' trust in government. It is these process consequences that citizens most lament about contemporary party polarization. This is puzzling because political science generally concludes that process consequences—like incivility, gridlock, and government dysfunction—emerge strategically, often precisely when politicians believe the public is watching. Why doesn't the audience hold the parties accountable?

One possible resolution for this puzzle is that citizens fail to observe the strategy inherent to party conflict, instead interpreting conflict only through affect. Under this explanation, citizens see their own party as motivated primarily by in-group love but see the out-party as motivated by out-group animus. However, evidence presented here suggests citizens recognize that strategy strongly motivates both parties in times of conflict, more so than partisan affect.

Not only do survey respondents see strategic explanations for political conflict as generally more plausible than affective ones, but the degree to which they rely on affective explanations depends on the full set of motives they are asked about. When asked whether various non-affective motives fuel party conflict, people are significantly less likely to attribute conflict to inter-party animus. Moreover, the particular non-affective motives respondents are shown affect their apparent perceptions of how much in-group empathy and out-group dislike fuel political conflict.

This points toward the importance of survey design when studying attribution processes, especially when asking people to attribute characteristics to affect-laden groups. Because Amer-

icans have such strong feelings toward the parties (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012; Iyengar and Westwood 2014), they may respond to survey questions about party conflict in an affectively-consistent manner (Lodge and Taber 2013). Questionnaire design may exacerbate this tendency (Palmer and Duch 2001). The more general point is that when asking people to attribute causes to effects, the universe of potential causes given—that is, the items in the battery—can shape their responses.

The way an effect is described can also influence how respondents explain it. In this case, I found that people are significantly less likely to attribute political conflict to inter-party animus when the conflict is described in specific policy terms instead of vaguely. Similarly, respondents shown the `comprehensive attribution battery` were less likely to ascribe empathetic motives to their out-party when conflict was described concretely. When studying citizens' beliefs about elite conflict, failing to attend to the fact that politics *is* strategic can lead researchers to overestimate the degree to which citizens reason about party conflict through an affective lens, especially if conflict is presented in the abstract. More broadly, scholars studying attribution processes through closed-ended questionnaires must give respondents a diverse range of explanations, lest they force respondents into committing a fundamental attribution error (Ross 1977).

We should not draw too sanguine a conclusion from these results, however. People recognize the strategy inherent to party conflict, meaning that they aren't completely misguided about why process consequences occur. But they also overwhelmingly oppose or lack meaningful opinions on institutional and electoral reforms that could potentially ameliorate polarization's ills—and, indeed, support reforms that have been termed "bromides to avoid" (Mann and Ornstein 2012). This suggests that irresponsible partisanship endures not because of the motives people attribute to party leaders, but instead out of their failure to link institutional incentives to strategic behavior.[5]

Determining what the public knows about politics, and perhaps more importantly, what citizens need to know to hold their democratically-elected government accountable is an impor-

[5] An alternative explanation is that people are ambivalent about America's institutional system. For example, they may like its protection against policy volatility or its emphasis on local representation, even if they dislike its process consequences. This seems unlikely since the typical respondent appears not to have thought extensively about institutional or electoral reforms.

tant function of political science (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). As such, political psychology has much to contribute to resolving the puzzle of irresponsible partisanship. But we must also recognize that the problem is institutional in nature, and more systematically assess citizens' knowledge about how electoral and policymaking institutions fuel party conflict's ill effects.

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Supporting Information

SI 1 Citizens Disapprove of Irresponsible Partisanship and its Process Con- sequences

SI 1.1 The 2015 IGS-California Poll: Sample Details

The table below compares the distribution of demographic covariates in the SSI sample used throughout the paper to other established benchmarks.

	IGS Poll	Weighted IGS Poll	CCES	Weighted CCES	CA Census	CA Sec. of State
	(August 2015)		(September 2012)		(2010)	(2015)
Sampling frame	population		population		population	registered voters
	quota (SSI)		quota (YouGov)		census	census
Age						
18-29	26%	27%	18%	24%		
30-39	17%	20%	9%	16%		
40-49	12%	10%	13%	17%		
50-64	28%	27%	36%	26%		
65 & over	17%	17%	23%	17%		
Gender						
Female	59%	51%	50%	51%	50%	
Male	41%	49%	50%	49%	50%	
Race						
Asian	14.5%	17.8%	5%	8%	17%	
Black/African-American	4%	7%	9%	7%	8%	
Hispanic/Latino	19%	28%	20%	21%		
Native American	2%	1%	1%	1%		
White/Caucasian	61%	47%	59%	56%	75%	
Ethnicity						
Hispanic or Latino					38%	
Not Hispanic or Latino					62%	
Education						
Some high school	1%	12%	3%	11%	12%	
High school/GED	13%	24%	17%	23%	24%	
Some college/2-year degree	36%	35%	28%	31%	34%	
4-year college degree	33%	18%	25%	19%	18%	
Graduate/professional degree	17%	11%	13%	10%	11%	
Party registration/ID						
Democratic	46%	44%	44%	40%		43%
Republican	24%	34%	24%	22%		28%
No party preference	27%	30%	22%	28%		24%
Other	3%	3%	10%	10%		5%

SI 1.2 Beliefs about Polarization: Why 30% of Californians Say it's at Least "Somewhat Good"

29.9% of respondents reported that polarization has been at least "somewhat good," on the whole. (Compared to the vast majority, 70.1%, who reported that it's been at least "somewhat bad.") In the paper, I show why people tend to think polarization is negative. Here, I present a similar table, but showing people's reasons for saying polarization has been a net positive.

Table SI 1.4: Why Some View Polarization Positively

	% citing	% ranking as best consequence
"Clearer differences between Dems. and Reps."	64.1	35.6
	[53.9, 74.2]	
"Selecting candidates is easier."	47.0	20.6
	[36.4, 57.6]	
"My views are better represented by a party."	43.8	17.9
	[33.3, 54.3]	
"Politicians talk more about issues than in the past."	33.6	9.9
	[23.6, 43.6]	
"News outlets that share my views."	29.0	5.9
	[19.3, 38.6]	
"Politics is more interesting."	25.6	5.4
	[16.3, 34.8]	
Other	0.7	0
	[0, 2.4]	

SI 2 Testing Whether Citizens see Irresponsible Partisanship as Strategic or Affect-Driven

SI 2.1 Item Valence Appears to Drive Responses to Attribution Battery

The table below provides coefficients for the regression of attribution i on the out-party target indicator. That is, the table shows how well the party respondents were asked about predicts their responses to the attribution battery. I observe asymmetric ascription of all items carrying a clear valence—not just affective items.

	b	95% CI	n
Valenced items			
In-party empathy	-.10	[-.13, -.06]	657
Out-party dislike	.17	[.13, .21]	657
Good national policy	-.17	[-.23, -.10]	242
Ignorance	.22	[.15, .28]	237
Making the other party look bad	.22	[.16, .28]	294
Non-valenced items			
Achieving party policies	.04	[-.02, .09]	239
Satisfying party-affiliated groups	.05	[-.02, .11]	251
Supporting/opposing the pres.	.04	[-.02, .11]	253
Swaying public opinion	.08	[.03, .13]	256
Winning elections	.07	[.01, .12]	249