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ARTICLE

Seeing "Us" and "Them": How Political Symbols Polarize Through Anger, Anxiety, and Enthusiasm

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated how political symbols influence affective polarization through emotions. Integrating research on visual communication, social identity theory, and the affective contagion hypothesis, we theorized that partisan symbols compared to national symbols would exacerbate affective polarization—and that anger, anxiety, and enthusiasm mediate this process. An experiment ($N = 1,013$) found the expected emotional impact and mediation effects—partisan symbols compared to national symbols indirectly influenced affective polarization through these emotions. Theoretical implications are discussed in the context of mounting concerns over rising polarization.

The United States and other democracies around the world have grown more affectively polarized in recent decades (Westwood et al., 2018), prompting concerns over the ramifications to political and social life (Iyengar et al., 2019; Overgaard et al., 2022). Political polarization occurs when political opinions move away from the center and toward extremes (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008). As our understanding has increased, polarization has been divided into two types: *ideological*, or divisions on policy issues, and *affective*, which is the emotional dislike of those in the out party compared to those in the in party and our focus here (Iyengar et al., 2019). Although many trends may be responsible for increasing affective polarization (Iyengar et al., 2019), one explanation lies in social identity theory (SIT; Turner & Tajfel, 1986), which says people make sense of their worlds by dividing others into ingroups (us) or outgroups (them). Ingroup members are seen positively, whereas outgroup members are viewed negatively and often discriminated against (Hewstone et al.,

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2002). In recent decades, partisanship has become a more salient social identity in the United States (Iyengar et al., 2012; Mason, 2018), and research suggests it can influence affective polarization (Levendusky, 2018; Wojcieszak & Garrett, 2018). We expand on this work by drawing on the affective contagion hypothesis (Erisen et al., 2014) to show that social identities can indirectly shape affective polarization through emotions aroused by political symbols.

Whereas prior work has used text (Levendusky, 2018) or reflection exercises (Wojcieszak & Garrett, 2018) to influence affective polarization, we focus on the role of visual symbols such as flags, sports photos, and party logos, among others. Despite their prominent use in journalism and mass communication, this form of visual has been overlooked in polarization research (Schill, 2012; Tucker et al., 2018). Visual symbols are ubiquitous on social media, an increasing path of news exposure globally (Newman et al., 2019). We link visuals with the affective contagion hypothesis to propose that visual symbols will have indirect effects on affective polarization through the emotions of anger, anxiety, and enthusiasm. Specifically, we theorize that viewing partisan symbols, as compared to national ones, will influence the retrieval from memory of negative feelings associated with partisan rancor and disagreement, leading to increased anger and anxiety along with decreased enthusiasm. These emotions in response to partisan symbols, as compared to national ones, will then indirectly increase affective polarization in the process of affective contagion. Relatedly, prior negative feelings will influence political evaluations of others in affectively congruent ways. This allows us to expand existing knowledge about the emotional and political impact of visual symbols, the consequences of anger, anxiety, and enthusiasm beyond voting, and the antecedents of affective polarization. The theoretical linkages we describe below are that exposure to visual symbols that convey political party identities, compared with those that convey national social identities, will influence affective partisanship, through the causal mechanism of priming participants' positive feelings toward ingroups and negative feelings toward outgroups.

Literature review

Much evidence shows a sizable increase in polarization in the United States (Mason, 2015). The gap between Republicans' and Democrats' political values is larger than at any time since 1994 (Pew Research Center, 2017). For example, Azzimonti (2018) created two indexes to measure partisan conflict. The Historical Partisan Conflict index, which ends in 2013, the Historical Partisan Conflict, showed an increasing trend since 1965, and a more contemporary Partisan Conflict Index showed the second highest level in 2016. Partisanship has become more ubiquitous among people in the United States, encroaching into even more issues (Brewer, 2005). An analysis of opinion trends over 40 years showed members of both parties

have been moving in opposite directions (Lasala Blanco et al., 2021). This is most visible among political leaders (Mann & Ornstein, 2016), but extends to the public across many issues (Abramowitz & Wesbster, 2018).

Our specific concern, affective polarization, is on the rise in many democracies, including the United States (Iyengar et al., 2019; Westwood et al., 2018). In contrast to other types of polarization, which may focus on policy or party identification, affective polarization is the phenomenon where people's feelings and emotions grow increasingly apart, with people tending to dislike and distrust those from the other party more, while their feelings and emotions grow more positive toward members of their own party (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019). This is especially true of elites from the opposing political party, such as U.S. Representatives Nancy Pelosi or Kevin McCarthy, more so than with ordinary voters. We conceptually define affective polarization in this way because this study is concerned with general attitudes about broader concepts, such as political parties, rather than with behavioral outcomes. It is our intent to understand how polarizing images shape political evaluations and prejudicial feelings (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019). This tendency is worrisome, not only because it has been rising more than other forms of polarization, but also, because it might hamper deliberation and even contribute to partisans believing different facts to be true (Overgaard & Collier, 2023; Overgaard et al., 2022). Research suggests affective polarization is driven by political news (Overgaard, 2024), social media (Lee et al., 2022), cues from political elites (Banda & Cluverius, 2018), and people's propensity to selectively consume congenial political information (for a review, see Iyengar et al., 2019). An underlying theoretical explanation can be found in social identity theory.

Social identity theory

According to social identity theory (SIT; Turner & Tajfel, 1986), people understand their social worlds through the lens of group belonging and tend to divide others into us (one's social ingroup) and them (one's social outgroup). Ingroup members are perceived as similar to oneself, whereas outgroup members are perceived as different. This, according to SIT, helps people understand their own identity and place in the world. A long line of research has shown that people tend to favor their ingroup members in a wide range of situations, and discriminate against their outgroups, especially in contexts characterized by group conflict or competition over scarce resources (Hewstone et al., 2002; Turner & Tajfel, 1986). People's tendency to favor the ingroup has even emerged in experiments using the minimal group paradigm, where subjects are arbitrarily divided into meaningless groups. Even when aware that group membership is based on random

assignment or meaningless factors, people often evaluate and treat ingroup members more favorably than outgroup members (Turner & Tajfel, 1986).

Outside the laboratory, many factors go into group categorization, including race, social class, religion, ideology, and partisanship. In recent years, partisanship has grown particularly salient in the United States (Mason, 2018), leading voters to discriminate against members of their outparty (Iyengar et al., 2019). If social identity is an important driver of affective polarization, understanding it could be one of the most effective ways to curb political divisiveness (Hartman et al., 2022). There is evidence that when the salience of Americans' partisan identities decreases, so does their contempt for their outparty. Natural experiments show that when events make Americans' national identity more salient, thereby reducing the relative salience of their partisan identities, affective polarization falls (e.g., Levendusky, 2018).

Experiments also show that increasing national identity salience can reduce affective polarization. Levendusky (2018) exposed research participants to articles about "What Makes America Great" (national condition) or a library that let workers check out kittens (control condition) and found the national condition decreased affective polarization relative to the control. Upon thinking of themselves as "Americans, Not Partisans," participants felt less hostile toward their outparty. National identity has been shown to be an underlying mechanism leading to framing effects (Sheets et al., 2022). Other work has found that interventions manipulating the salience of superordinate identities (i.e., humans, the broadest social identity) can help decrease outgroup dehumanization (Albarello & Rubini, 2012), as can news stories highlighting open-mindedness (Wojcieszak et al., 2020). Yet, increasing national identity salience is not a panacea and may even backfire, for example, exacerbating hostility toward illegal immigrants (Wojcieszak & Garrett, 2018). Research notably focuses on verbal and textual information, neglecting the impact of visuals, yet news media stories and social media posts increasingly rely on images. This study examines the impact of partisan and national cues through one type of this underexplored medium—visual symbols.

Visuals and affective polarization

One way of understanding visuals is through semiotics' theory of signs. In this theory, a sign is something that stands for something else (Eco, 1986). Signs are divided into three non-mutually exclusive categories: the iconic, indexical, and symbolic (Peirce, 1931). *Iconic* signs are realistic and resemble another thing; these include photographs and portraits (Moriarty, 2005). *Indexical* signs imply the existence of something—smoke offers evidence of fire (Moriarty, 2005). *Symbolic* signs—the focus of our study—stand for

something else and are understood as a matter of convention, such as the cross to indicate religion (Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001), a flag standing for a country or patriotism, or a mascot for a team (Moriarty, 2005). Because symbols have deep roots in the cultures that produce them, they evoke stronger responses than indexical or iconic signs (Peirce, 1868), and require more interpretations based on prior knowledge (Neuman et al., 1992).

Although any visual can contain more than one of these sign categories, it is the symbolic function of signs that interests us because of their ability to "combine, compress and communicate social meaning" and their "more complex, often culture-bound interpretations" (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011, p. 56). The form that symbols take is less important than what they do, which is communicate social meaning in a compressed fashion (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011). Symbols make claims and arguments by association and are not subject to rigorous evaluation the way verbal claims are (Schill, 2012). Evidence shows visuals tend to have a greater impact than text at triggering emotional responses (Graber, 1996), which, in turn, can shape how people interpret events or issues (Iyer & Oldmeadow, 2006). This phenomenon is captured in the theory of symbolic politics (Edelman, 1971), which posits that because most people are not interested in politics and know little about it, they relate through simple symbols with emotional responses that can be intense (Sears, 2001). For instance, the American flag is a symbol of the nation and evokes feelings of pride. Fierce anger can be activated when others are seen to be disrespecting it, such as athletes not saluting. Much research illustrates the importance of visual symbols in U.S. political communication, including the fetus to symbolize the pro-life position on abortion (Petchesky, 1996), and how masks came to symbolize divisions in society during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kenworthy et al., 2021). Computer vision techniques have been used to understand ideological symbols in U.S. politics, including flags and the military for conservatives, trees symbolizing environmentalism, and hard hats and hammers as symbols of the working class (Xi et al., 2020). The authors conclude that written and spoken media "lack the emotional salience, persuasive power and compactness of images as means of political rhetoric" (p. 734).

Because logical arguments are not as persuasive as these emotional, symbolic appeals, politicians don't attempt to communicate complex policy positions, but instead use symbols to evoke emotions (Mendelberg, 2018). This underscores the importance of understanding how political symbols might shape people's emotions and lead to outcomes such as affective polarization, which we undertake here.

Subtle political symbols may influence behavior outside of conscious awareness and can have effects on people's mood or affect: "Unnoticed as well as noticed-but-unappreciated priming effects like these are proving to be critically influential" (Erisen et al., 2014, p. 188). They showed that

emotions aroused by symbols early during information processing can bias conscious processing that occurs later in what they term "affective contagion" (Erisen et al., 2014, p. 188). In our study, we extrapolate this finding to suggest that symbols of the two U.S. political parties arouse negative emotions and depress positive ones that then negatively influence judgments of outparty others, resulting in affective polarization, when compared with national symbols.

The symbols in this study have been identified as symbols of political identity (Schill, 2012) and include flags, a baseball bat and glove, a bald eagle, and the Statue of Liberty to represent national identity. The Democratic party donkey and the Republican party elephant logos are used to symbolize partisan identity. We present the two party logos together, as other studies have done (Guilbeault et al., 2018), instead of showing each participant only their ingroup symbol, to strengthen the efficacy of our treatment. Like others, we believe that presenting ingroup symbols and outgroup symbols leads to stronger group identification than presenting ingroup symbols alone (Randolph-Seng et al., 2012). This represents an ecologically valid way that U.S. voters typically encounter these partisan symbols in media; for example, news organizations' social media posts frequently use both party logos to convey balance and fairness. Thus, all our conclusions are interpreted in terms of partisan vs. national symbols.

Viewers are relatively unaware of the visual syntax that leads them to interpret an image a specific way, making visuals especially effective at transmitting ideological messages (Messaris & Abraham, 2001). Although visuals writ large have been neglected by affective polarization literature, the "condensing symbols" they contain that suggest a specific way to interpret them (Gamson & Stuart, 1992, p. 60) make them especially appropriate for influencing affective polarization via partisan or national meaning and the emotions that engenders. Yet, little is known about how audiences process and respond to visual symbols, and whether they are better or worse for political life than other communication forms (Schill, 2012). This study begins the process of understanding those questions.

Visual studies of affective partisanship

Although the impact of partisan and national visual symbols on affective polarization has not to our knowledge been tested, the use of visual symbols to represent polarization has been prominent since the electoral map was first depicted with red and blue states in the 2000 U.S. presidential election (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008). Since then, studies of visual cues in political communication have grown. Dan and Arendt (2021) demonstrated that a subtle visual background symbol or cue, in this case, flags, religious symbols, a marijuana joint, and women in homemaker or professional roles, caused people to infer either liberal or conservative ideology, which

affected voting intentions. That study used ideology cues, whereas our study uses party cues, in the form of logos to represent partisanship. A different study that used the elephant and donkey logos together found their presence undermined participants' ability to correctly interpret climate change information; however, when the logos were removed, participants were able to agree (Guilbeault et al., 2018).

Another study used even more subtle visual cues to demonstrate a "visual polarizing effect" (von Sikorski, 2022, p. 1), where the background color of a photo caused viewers to grow farther apart in their evaluations of a politician. The author recommended that future studies examine other factors that may contribute to visual polarization. We agree and take up this challenge. We make the theoretical proposition that visual symbols will indirectly influence affective polarization similarly to textual cues.

Whereas the aforementioned studies on visuals focused on voting intentions (Dan & Arendt, 2021) or candidate evaluations (von Sikorski, 2022), we bring their insights on political visuals to bear on affective polarization. Furthermore, we extend the type of visual beyond color and photographs to that of symbols of identity and partisanship. We could find no studies that examined the effects of this type of visual on polarization; however, there was much that recommended the use of such symbols for influencing affective polarization. For example, Sleeboom (2002) explained that national symbols (e.g., the American flag or the dragon of China), become powerful when they gain meaning and trigger sentiments. Logos and symbols serve as a kind of shorthand by which people associate themselves with party, community, or country and are particularly prevalent in politics (Engle, 2014), with the American flag "the most potent national symbol" (p. 325) in the United States.

Butz (2009) reviews work showing the psychological and social effects of symbols, including enhancing national identification and subconsciously promoting group unity. Symbols conceptually represent group membership (Billig, 1995), which makes them particularly well-suited for manipulating the salience of partisan and national identity. Our study employs national symbols (American flags, the Statue of Liberty, a bald eagle, and baseball) and political party symbols (the Republican elephant and Democratic donkey logos) because they have been shown to accurately communicate their group association and trigger emotion.

Although we are primarily interested in the indirect effect of partisan vs. national symbols through emotion, we begin by positing this main effect hypothesis:

H1: Subjects exposed to partisan visual symbols will exhibit greater levels of affective polarization in the form of **(a)** increased negative feelings toward the outparty, **(b)** ascribing more negative traits to the outparty,

and **(c)** ascribing fewer positive traits to the outparty, than those exposed to national visual symbols.

Affective contagion

The causal mechanism by which we expect visual symbols to influence affective polarization is found in affective contagion theory (Erisen et al., 2014). Based in priming, it says that subtle cues will, either consciously or unconsciously, trigger affective reactions, which will then bias the downstream processing in a congruent direction, linking these feelings to thoughts and behaviors (Lodge & Taber, 2005). Positively valenced cues trigger positive emotions that link to positive associations in memory, while negative cues activate negative emotions and are followed by negative considerations. In one study, dark, moody backgrounds, threatening images, ominous music, and frowning or angry faces activated negative feelings and thoughts about danger or dishonesty. Attractive, smiling faces, upbeat music, and bright colors triggered positive emotions and thoughts, which then congruently influenced evaluations, attitudes, and behaviors (Brader et al., 2008). The priming of affect triggers congruent emotions and thoughts, which indirectly influence outcomes in a congruent direction.

We propose that, because of partisan hostility in the United States, the symbols of the donkey and elephant together will induce people to feel negative emotions, congruent with the negative thoughts retrieved from memory, and suppress positive emotions. These will, in turn, result in negative evaluations of outparty members. National symbols, commonly associated with positive feelings of pride (Butz, 2009), will induce people to feel more positive emotions, congruent with the retrieval of positive thoughts, that results in more positive evaluations of outparty members. In this study, we assess negative feelings toward the outgroup with anger and anxiety, while positive feelings toward the ingroup were measured using enthusiasm.

Emotions

One key way visuals are processed and influence outcomes is via emotion. Research has shown that political judgments, attitudes, and voting behavior are connected to emotions (e.g., González-Bailón et al., 2012). Although emotions are most often studied at the individual level, these work in tandem with the other three levels: dyads, groups, and culture (Keltner & Haidt, 1999). At the group level, emotions function to inform us about social events, develop our identities within groups, and strengthen differences (Keltner & Haidt, 1999). Emotions at the

four levels "can occur simultaneously and in mutually interlocking ways … the social functions of emotion at one level are likely to work in tandem with the social functions of the adjoining levels" (Keltner & Haidt, 1999, p. 512). In one experiment, inducing fear in individuals increased their feelings of group solidarity and derogation of the outgroup (Greenberg et al., 1990). In another, anxiety motivated people to avoid being alienated from the group (Baumeister & Tice, 1990). Conversely, group norms and membership shape individuals' regulation and expression of emotion (Fischer & Evers, 2011), and groups shape individuals' responses to the expression of emotion by others (Heerdink et al., 2013). Individual emotions are influenced when group goals are achieved or not. Emotional contagion is proposed as the underlying mechanism for this synchrony between individuals and groups (Hess & Fischer, 2016). We propose this is the process by which partisan symbols compared to national symbols influence affective polarization through emotions.

To operationalize emotions, we rely on three fundamental emotion dynamics derived from the affective intelligence tradition: anger, anxiety, and enthusiasm (MacKuen et al., 2010; Marcus et al., 2000). We show how these emotions might arise because of exposure to national or partisan symbols, and how they might have important downstream consequences on affective polarization.

Anger, defined as rage or wrath (Alia-Klein et al., 2020), represents obstacles to one's goals or offenses against oneself that result in blame (Lazarus, 1991), and leads people to hold others responsible (Lerner & Keltner, 2000). Americans often get upset, angry, and even disgusted when thinking about politics, especially in the current polarized climate, so we expect that seeing outparty political visuals will increase their anger compared to seeing national visual symbols.

Anxiety, defined as being scared or anxious, or feeling harm or sudden danger (Lazarus, 1991), results from situations that are out of one's control and threatening (Lazarus, 1991). Because ingroups often feel threatened by outgroups (Hewstone et al., 2002), seeing symbols that call to mind the competition between inparty and outparty should provoke anxiety compared to seeing unifying national symbols.

Enthusiasm consists of hope and pride. Hope keeps people focused on their goals and overcoming obstacles, leading to certainty about the present and future (Lazarus, 1991; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). Pride is associated with high certainty and control (Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). It can lead people to rely on political ideology and party identification when making decisions (Johnston et al., 2015). National cues that make Americans think of their country will make them feel patriotic, proud, and hopeful, whereas partisan cues will do the reverse. We predict:

H2: Subjects exposed to partisan visual symbols will exhibit **(a)** less enthusiasm, **(b)** more anxiety, and **(c)** more anger than those exposed to national visual symbols.

There is reason to expect that emotions will mediate the impact of political visual symbols on affective polarization. Feelings of anger (DeSteno et al., 2004) and anxiety (Arceneaux, 2017) can exacerbate intergroup prejudice. Recent work shows that graphic visuals (e.g., vivid depictions of death or illness) can intensify people's feelings of hostility toward racial outgroups—and both anger and anxiety mediate this effect (Overgaard, 2021). Based on theory and prior research, we expect that partisan visual symbols, compared to national visual symbols, will increase anger and anxiety, which will fuel affective polarization. We also expect that partisan visual symbols will dampen people's enthusiasm, thereby indirectly intensifying affective polarization, compared to national visual symbols:

H3: There will be indirect effects of partisan visual symbols on affective polarization through emotions; specifically, partisan visual symbols, as compared to national visual symbols, will be linked to increased affective polarization through **(a)** decreased enthusiasm, **(b)** increased anxiety, and **(c)** increased anger.

Method

This study uses a mediation model to examine how political visual symbols influence interparty evaluations indirectly through emotions. Following IRB approval at the University of Texas at Austin on June 6, 2020 (IRB Exempt Determination for Protocol Number 2020-05-0079), subjects were randomly assigned to one of two conditions designed to activate thoughts and feelings from memory of either partisan ($n = 500$) or national ($n = 513$) identity. A balance check of the demographic variables including liberal/conservative ideology, party ID, age, gender, education, and race. We confirmed randomization was successful because the two groups (national images/partisan images) were equivalently distributed on all the variables. This study does not include a control group, so all conclusions are interpreted in terms of partisan vs. national symbols. Participants answered demographic and ideological questions and were then randomly assigned to see either four partisan or four national images of common symbols used in social media, campaign materials, and news visuals (order randomized; see additional details in the online supplemental materials). After seeing each of the four images, enthusiasm, anger, anxiety, and affective polarization were measured.

Participants

A total of 1,015 subjects participated. An *a priori* power analysis based on related experiments (Albarello & Rubini, 2012; Levendusky, 2018; Wojcieszak & Garrett, 2018) found that 983 would be sufficient at a level of 0.80. We recruited more to account for attrition. Participants in the United States were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk, which better represents the U.S. population than other samples (e.g., undergraduate students) often used in experimental research (Berinsky et al., 2012) and works particularly well for image-based research (McMaster, 2012). Recently, lower quality data has been reported, including participants who are inattentive (Aguinis et al., 2021). Thus, this study included an attention check ("What is 2 + 2?"); only those who passed were retained. Subjects were recruited through CloudResearch, which specializes in high-quality subjects that are engaged and pass fraud detection measures (Litman et al., 2022).

Two respondents were removed for duplicate IP addresses, yielding a final sample of 1,013. Participants took an average of 5.14 minutes (median = 4.45) and were paid 60 cents. Women made up 56% of the sample. Ages ranged from 18 to 89 years ($M = 41.64$, $SD = 13.51$). Racially, 76.3% were White, 9% were Asian/Pacific Islander, 7.6% Black, 4.7% Hispanic/Latinx, 1.6% were "other," 0.3% were Native American, and 0.5% did not say. A bachelor's degree was held by 43.3% of participants. Because we were interested in political partisans, we screened out those who identified as Independents, leaving 63.9% who identified as Democrat or leaning Democrat, 36.1% Republican or leaning Republican. On a scale of 1 = *very conservative* to 5 = *very liberal*, participants averaged 3.30 ($SD = 1.26$).

Stimuli

Four visual symbols represented partisan identity and four national identity. National identity symbols used an American flag, Statue of Liberty, a bald eagle, and a baseball glove and bat. Partisan identity symbols used four variations on the red and blue logos of the Republican elephant and Democratic donkey. Manipulation checks, described below, showed they worked best for consistently manipulating thoughts of partisan and national identity as intended. We did not include text in the stimuli because our objective was to isolate the influence of visuals. Stimuli are shown in the online supplemental materials.

Manipulation checks

Two manipulation checks were conducted: one before the actual study and one within it. The first check used 35 students who received course credit.

After seeing each image, participants were asked: "What does this image represent?" with possible answers "America" or "the Republican or Democratic party;" "What do you mostly think of when you see this image?" with possible answers "My country" or "my political party;" and "How does this make you feel?" with possible answers "Like an American" or "like a Democrat or Republican." Chi-square tests showed all images were perceived as intended at $p < .001$. Additional details are available in the online supplemental materials.supplemental materials.[1]

A check embedded in the main study, using the second question showed the same, all at $p < .001$ [Image 1 $X^2 = 554.8(1)$; Image 2 $X^2 = 643.43(1)$; Image 3 $X^2 = 642.03(1)$; Image 4 $X^2 = 594.21(1)$. See the online supplemental materials for details.

Measures

We used negative feelings toward the outgroup as assessed through anger and anxiety, and positive feelings toward the ingroup measured using enthusiasm. We asked to what extent participants felt proud, hopeful, angry, disgusted, anxious, and afraid "at this moment" on a 1 = *not at all* to 6 = *very much* scale. Following other studies (MacKuen et al., 2010), proud and hopeful were indexed into *Enthusiasm* ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 1.56$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .869$; Spearman Brown = .869); angry and disgusted into *Anger* ($M = 1.66$, $SD = 1.17$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .886$; Spearman Brown = .887); anxious and afraid into *Anxiety* ($M = 1.73$, $SD = 1.12$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .830$; Spearman Brown = .839).[2]

[1]The pre-study manipulation check also tested images of the partisan animals fighting. However, those manipulations were unsuccessful as participants did not reliably say these made them think of the political parties rather than their country. This was surprising given that depictions of intergroup competition would be expected to make people focus on the conflict between their ingroup and outgroup (Tajfel, 1982). One possibility is that the fighting images may have had a backfire effect because of associations with too much aggression. It is also worth noting that, for the partisan conditions, we used the simplest possible versions of the partisan animals (blue donkey, red elephant) without stars or stripes to avoid accidentally invoking national identity via associations with the flag. See the online supplemental materials for stimuli and details.

[2]In addition to relying on prior literature, a confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to support the way these items were combined as shown in section five of the online supplemental materials. Further, robustness checks showed that the results remain consistent, with two minor exceptions, if the analyses are conducted using the single items instead of the combined indices as shown in section three of the online supplemental materials.

Affective polarization (i.e., outparty hostility) was operationalized by focusing on feelings and traits perceptions (Overgaard et al., 2022; Wojcieszak & Warner, 2020). Respondents indicated how they felt toward each party, using an 11-point feeling thermometer. Out party *feeling* was measured using the following item:

> We'd like to get your feelings toward a number of people and groups. A rating of 0 means you feel extremely negative. A rating of 10 means you feel extremely positive. A rating of 5 means that you don't feel particularly positive or negative.

Out party feeling was defined as how negative respondents felt toward their outparty ($M = 7.77$, $SD = 2.03$); in other words, the scale was recoded such that a higher value indicates greater levels of affective polarization. Respondents indicated how they felt toward each party, using an 11-point feeling thermometer. Out party feeling was operationalized as how negative respondents felt toward their outparty ($M = 7.77$, $SD = 2.03$). Whereas another common operationalization subtracts respondents' outparty feeling from their inparty feeling (Iyengar et al., 2019), outparty feeling was deemed more appropriate in the current context because this more precisely maps onto the conceptual definition of affective polarization as people's tendency to dislike those they disagree with politically, especially elites.[3] This also avoids the possibility of measuring a general aversion to politics rather than affective polarization (Klar et al., 2018). Traits perceptions were measured using a six-point scale of how well the following words described the respondents' political adversaries: selfish, hateful, mean, misguided (negative traits, $M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.38$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.88$); reasonable, honest, caring, informed (positive traits, $M = 2.57$, $SD = 1.06$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.87$).

This approach differs from Wojcieszak and Warner (2020) who focused entirely on respondents' outparty members but aligns with Overgaard et al. (2022) who also measured perceptions toward people with different political beliefs more broadly. Although affective polarization research often focuses on Democrats disliking Republicans and vice versa, we see value in this approach because it can capture important nuances in the U.S. context and be applied to multi-party systems.

Results

The effects of the experimental treatment on affective polarization (H1) and emotions (H2) were tested by regressing each outcome variable on

[3]Respondents' feelings toward their own side did not differ by treatment ($p = .186$).

Table 1. Indirect effects of treatment on affective polarization.

	Effect (BootSE)	LLC	ULCI
Partisan symbols → Anger → Affective Polarization			
Negative outparty feelings	0.115 (.03)	−0.1811	−0.584
Negative traits	0.095 (.02)	0.514	0.1452
Positive traits	0.26 (.02)	−0.0586	0.0027
Partisan symbols → Anxiety → Affective Polarization			
Negative outparty feelings	0.038 (.02)	−0.0829	0.0002
Negative traits	0.50 (.02)	0.0199	0.0875
Positive traits	0.004 (.01)	−0.0188	0.255
Partisan symbols → Enthusiasm → Affective Polarization			
Negative outparty feelings	0.314 (.05)	−0.4186	−0.2218
Negative traits	0.158 (.03)	0.0978	0.2270
Positive traits	0.172 (.03)	0.2298	−0.1195

Confidence Intervals that do not contain zero are significant.

experimental treatment, which was dummy coded with the national treatment as the reference category.

Counter to H1, the treatment had no significant main effect on: negative outparty feelings $b = 0.04$, $SE = 0.13$, $t(1{,}011) = 0.31$, $p = .78$; negative traits perceptions, $b = 0.09$, $SE = 0.09$, $t(1{,}005) = 1.00$, $p = .32$; or positive traits perceptions, $b = 0.03$, $SE = 0.07$, $t(1{,}004)$, $p = .61$.

In support of H2, those exposed to partisan symbols exhibited: lower levels of enthusiasm, $b = -0.98$, $SE = 0.09$, $t(1{,}011)$, $p < .001$; and higher levels of anger, $b = 0.43$, $SE = 0.07$, $t(1{,}008)$, $p < .001$; and anxiety, $b = 0.31$, $SE = 0.07$, $t(1{,}010)$, $p < .001$, than those exposed to national symbols.[4] Seeing partisan symbols, compared to national symbols, decreased enthusiasm by almost a point on the six-point scale, increased anger by more than four-tenths of a point, and increased anxiety by about a third of a point. These effects were not moderated by partisanship, with one exception: for enthusiasm, the effect was more pronounced among Republicans ($b = -1.28$, $p < .001$) than Democrats ($b = -0.84$, $p < .001$).

H3 predicted that exposure to the partisan symbols (as compared to the national symbols) would have indirect effects on affective polarization through decreased enthusiasm and increased anger and anxiety. This was tested with PROCESS Model 4 in SPSS, using bootstrapping procedures with 10,000 samples and full results are shown in Table 1 and Figure 1.

In support of H3a, there were significant indirect effects of the treatment through: decreased enthusiasm, $b = -.98$, BootSE .09, 95% CI (−1.16, −.79); on negative out party feelings, $b = .32$, BootSE .04, 95% CI (.24, .40); negative traits perceptions, $b = -.16$, BootSE .03, 95% CI (−.22, −.10); and positive traits perceptions, $b = .17$, BootSE .02, 95% CI (.13, .21).

[4]Because the emotion indices had non-normal distributions, a robustness check was conducted, using the Kruskal-Wallis rank sum test. These tests confirmed that the treatment had significant effects on anger (X^2 [1] = 32.78, $p < .001$), anxiety (X^2 [1] = 20.60, $p < .001$), and enthusiasm (X^2 [1] = 98.95, $p < .001$).

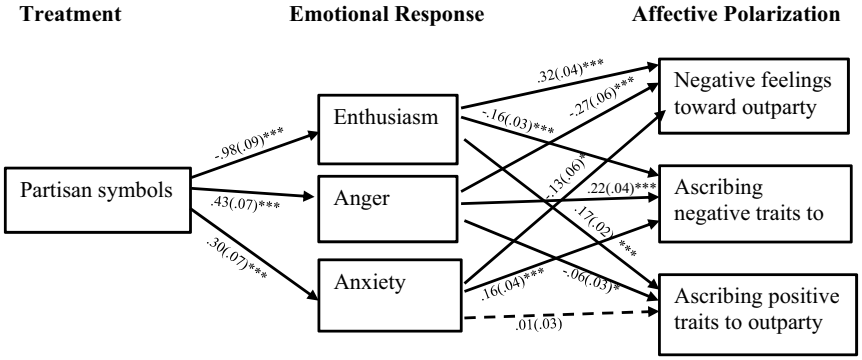

Figure 1. Indirect effects of partisan symbols through enthusiasm, anger, and anxiety. Standard errors in parentheses, ***$p < .001$, **$p < .01$, *$p < .05$. The figure is based on three separate mediation analyses, for enthusiasm, anger, and anxiety, respectively.

There were significant indirect effects of the treatment with: anger as the mediator, $b = .43$, BootSE .07, 95% CI (.29, .57); significant indirect effects were found on negative out party feelings $b = -.27$, BootSE .06, 95% CI (−.38, −.16); and negative traits evaluations, $b = .22$, BootSE .04, 95% CI (.15, .29); and positive traits evaluations, $b = -.06$, BootSE .03, 95% CI (−.12, −.01), supporting H3b. For anxiety, $b = .30$, BootSE .07, 95% CI (.17, .44), the expected indirect effects were found for: negative out party feelings, $b = -.13$, BootSE .06, 95% CI (−.24, −.01); and negative traits evaluations, $b = .16$, BootSE .04, 95% CI (.09, .24); but not positive traits evaluations, $b = .01$, BootSE .03, 95% CI (−.04, .07), partially supporting H3c.

Discussion

This study investigated how exposure to national and political symbols indirectly influences affective polarization through anger, anxiety, and enthusiasm. We found the expected effects of visuals on emotions. Specifically, partisan visual symbols of the Democrat and Republican logos—when compared to national visual symbols—increased anger and anxiety, and decreased enthusiasm. Participants felt angrier and more afraid and had less hope and pride simply upon seeing these partisan visual symbols with no accompanying text.

Our full model theorized that these emotions would mediate an effect of partisan visuals on affective polarization in line with the affective contagion hypothesis. We found this was the case; these visual cues, whether consciously or not, triggered affective reactions which then lead to assessments

of outparty others in congruent directions. When participants saw partisan symbols, they experienced negative emotions, including more anger and anxiety and less enthusiasm, that were linked to negative feelings toward and trait evaluations of people on the other side. We found significant effects when enthusiasm increased, leading people to ascribe more positive character traits to outparty members. Interestingly, the positive emotion of enthusiasm affected both negative and positive evaluations of others, whereas the two negative emotions—anger and anxiety—only had effects on their negative downstream evaluations. That is, anger and anxiety led to significantly more negative trait evaluations and outparty feelings, but not fewer positive trait evaluations, whereas enthusiasm affected all three outcomes. This should be investigated further and if replicated, theoretical adjustments to the affective contagion hypothesis incorporated.

While the indirect pathway was supported, the treatment had no significant main effects on affective polarization. This stands in contrast to the textual national identity manipulations that have previously been shown to have direct effects on reducing affective polarization (Levendusky, 2018). Unlike textual partisan cues, visual partisan symbols only had indirect effects through the activation of emotions. It is possible that the textual cues used in prior research had a direct effect because verbal material requires extra effort to read and understand than visual information (Messaris & Abraham, 2001). Explanations should be explored, keeping in mind that visual and verbal information frequently result in different processing and outcomes. Previous studies have reduced affective polarization by increasing the salience of Americans' national identity using textual manipulations but have not examined the effect on affective polarization when increasing partisan identity salience.

Future research can build on ours by looking at other types of political visuals as they relate to affective polarization. It is possible that realistic images of polarizing political figures would yield different effects. Yet this is not a certainty; with visuals, it is often the more subtle ones that have the greatest impact. During the Vietnam War, for example, increasingly explicit and graphic images of burning bodies and piles of corpses failed to garner the expected reactions. When more understated imagery was employed, such as the high-school-yearbook-like mug shots of one day's war dead, citizens began to change their attitudes (Goldberg, 1991). The few prior studies of visuals and political polarization have used images that implied rather than directly stated the meaning and found effects (Dan & Arendt, 2021; von Sikorski, 2022). Perhaps images are more effective when they leave something to the imagination or give viewers just a hint of meaning, allowing them to draw their own conclusions. Future research could build on our work with approaches like intergroup emotions theory,

which is concerned with differences between group emotions and individual emotions (Mackie et al., 2015), to further understand the indirect impact of symbols on affective polarization.

Limitations of this study include measuring rather than manipulating the mediators, which is common in most communication studies (Chan et al., 2022). Future research should manipulate these emotions to determine if they have a causal relationship with affective polarization. This does not invalidate our study, however; as mediators are psychological processes that must be measured before being manipulated in a second study (Wu & Zumbo, 2008). It is also important to reiterate that our conclusions are based on a comparison of national and party symbols; we do not claim that it is only party symbols that induce or depress emotions, but that national symbols also may provoke and depress these emotions oppositely.

We acknowledge that the effect sizes in this study are small. Some outcomes are easier to influence than others, attitudes being among the more difficult (Bakker et al., 2019). Effect sizes can also fall prey to "the use of subtle manipulations" (Cortina & Landis, 2009, p. 288). Our manipulations are indeed subtle—these are not shocking or graphic photographs, particularly novel images, or even images of faces that convey emotions well. They are well-worn images that Americans have been exposed to repeatedly—flags, baseball bats, cartoon animals. The fact that these manipulations had any effect at all is telling. It illustrates that even subtle cues can indirectly shape polarization through emotions. Also, our manipulations are ecologically valid compared to others that have resulted in larger effects. It should be relatively easy to convince journalists and others tasked with creating political messages to avoid party symbols and substitute national symbols instead. Conversely, it is more difficult to request that journalists write articles praising the strength of Americans (e.g., Levendusky, 2018). And, outside of an academic experiment, in what context are ordinary people asked to write about why they are proud to be Americans (Levendusky, 2018)? Our intervention has potential because it is scalable, which is important in terms of societal impact (Hartman et al., 2022; Overgaard et al., 2021). In addition to testing a practical intervention, this study provides evidence for a theoretical claim that advances our understanding of the polarization phenomenon. In this case, the size of an effect is even less important (Bakker et al., 2019).

Conclusion

Communication and polarization research overwhelmingly focuses on text (Schill, 2012; Tucker et al., 2018), yet visual communication is all around. Aside from radio, podcasts, and some books, almost all mass communication in contemporary societies involves visuals. This study shows that merely seeing common symbols can influence emotions like anger, anxiety,

and enthusiasm in predictable ways. Given the ubiquity of visuals coupled with mounting evidence that these emotions shape many outcomes of central interest to communication research (e.g., Webster & Albertson, 2022; Weeks, 2015) this study expands knowledge and theory about the influence of visual symbols.

We have expanded on theoretical concepts in the affective contagion hypothesis (Erisen et al., 2014) to show that social identities can indirectly shape affective polarization through emotions that are aroused by subtle political symbols, in this case, visuals. Specifically, we add to theory by showing that viewing partisan symbols as compared to national ones can evoke feelings associated with partisan identities, leading to increased anger and anxiety, and decreased enthusiasm. These emotions in response to symbols then indirectly influence affective polarization in the process of affective contagion—prior feelings influence political evaluations of others in affectively congruent ways.

We expand on prior work that has mostly focused on the impact of text-based manipulations by concentrating on visuals—a potentially powerful driver of social identity and the emotional outcomes at the heart of affective polarization. By further integrating these strands of theorizing, and testing how they relate to each other, this research moves us closer to bringing together us and them, and, thereby, lay the foundation for a healthy democracy.

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Data availability statement

Data and materials are available from the authors upon request.

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