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President on Honeymoon: Elections, Media, and the Winner–Loser Gap in Affective Polarization

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Abstract

Affective polarization has risen to concerning levels in the United States, and elections are among the events that most intensify it. Yet how election outcomes reshape partisan affect and whether they do so differently for winners and losers has only recently drawn scholarly attention. Using the pre- and post-election panels of the American National Election Studies for the seven presidential elections between 2000 and 2024, I measure the within-respondent change in affective polarization toward the presidential candidates and compare winners with losers. Winners become more affectively polarized after the vote, while losers become less so. Rather than reflecting embittered losers, this gap is driven by a presidential "honeymoon": both sides come to rate the newly or re-elected president more warmly, even as feelings toward the losing candidate scarcely move. The gap is concentrated among heavy consumers of traditional news but not among social-media users, and a three-election panel shows that the honeymoon is short-lived. Consistent with an emerging winner–loser literature, these findings suggest that elections open brief windows in which partisans grow more tolerant of the opposing side.

Keywords: Polarization, affective polarization, elections, media, United States.

Introduction

We live in an era of rising polarization between political camps not only over issues (ideological polarization) but in how partisans feel about one another (affective polarization), defined as "the tendency of [partisan] people to view opposing partisans negatively and copartisans positively" (Iyengar and Westwood 2015, 691). Affective polarization places a distance between political groups that is emotional rather than merely ideological, and at high levels it can corrode democratic norms: strongly polarized partisans are more willing to see constitutional protections denied to their opponents (Kingzette et al. 2021).

Elections are among the events that most intensify these feelings (Hernández, Anduiza, and Rico 2021). Held only every few years and decisive of who governs, they raise the stakes of partisanship: months of campaigning in which politicians blame and antagonize the other side give way, once the votes are counted, to one group taking office and another having to wait. Because the aftermath of an election is so different for the two sides, its consequences for affective polarization need not be the same for winners and losers.

I argue that they are not. Winners emerge from an intense contest with access to power and the knowledge that a majority of voters sided with them, which should reinforce their attachment to their own party and its candidate. What losers feel is more ambiguous. They are less satisfied with the way democracy is working (Anderson and Guillory 1997; Anderson and Tverdova 2001; Blais and Gélineau 2007; Singh, Karakoç, and Blais 2012) and must live with a disliked party in office; and because losses loom larger than gains (Tversky and Kahneman 1992, 1991), their disappointment may be acute. Yet this tells us little about how they come to feel toward the winning side.

A small but growing literature has begun to document a winner–loser gap in affective polarization, and it points in a consistent direction: winners end up more polarized than losers. Andrews and Huang (2025) show this across 37 countries in the CSES and trace it to winners' heightened in-party favoritism; Hamrak (2025) reaches the same conclusion in a series of U.S. survey experiments; and Phillips and Warner (2026), using a regression-discontinuity design, argue that the gap is instead driven by losers cooling toward their own party. These studies establish the gap but leave two openings of their own: most rely on party-level, post-election, or hypothetical measures, and none tests a mechanism for why it arises. In line with this literature, I expect winners to become more affectively polarized than losers after elections.

To test this, I use the pre- and post-election panels of the American National Election Studies (ANES) for the seven presidential elections between 2000 and 2024. Because each respondent rates the presidential candidates both before and after the election, I can measure the within-respondent change in affective polarization that accompanies the result, rather than comparing winners and losers only after the fact. The main independent variable is winner status, which I identify by matching each respondent's pre-election vote intention to their post-election vote report. I situate the study in the United States because there "partisanship means identifying with the Democrat

group or the Republican group" (Iyengar et al. 2019, 130), with no other mass partisan camps, and because single-member plurality rule sorts almost all voters into winners or losers (Duverger 1954). Although affective polarization in the United States is not markedly higher than in other Western democracies, it remains at a level of real concern (Gidron, Adams, and Horne 2020), of which the January 6, 2021 attack on the Capitol is one expression.

I find that winners become significantly more affectively polarized than losers—by about 6.5 points, roughly 29% of a standard deviation of the change. The direction runs against the intuition that embittered losers should polarize the most, but it is consistent with the emerging literature. Crucially, the mechanism is not growing hostility. The change on both sides is driven by rising warmth toward the newly or re-elected president: winners warm to the candidate they voted for, and losers, too, come to rate the winner less coldly, while feelings toward the losing candidate barely move. Presidents, in short, enjoy a brief "honeymoon" extended by supporters and opponents alike (Segatti, Poletti, and Vezzoni 2015; Miyazaki et al. 2023; Locander 1979). This candidate-level account complements party-level work: where Phillips and Warner (2026) find losers withdrawing from their own party, at the level of leaders the gap runs through warming toward the winner, consistent with evidence that affect toward leaders exceeds and behaves differently from affect toward parties (Reiljan et al. 2024). The size and even the sign of the gap, however, depend on context. It is largest in 2008 and fails to reach significance only in 2004, the sole re-election of a Republican incumbent in the sample.

I then ask when the gap is strongest, and find that it is conditional on media consumption. Where the ANES measures news exposure behaviorally, days per week following national news, the gap appears only among heavy consumers, who are also, as I show, those who follow the most ideologically congenial outlets. This holds for news-site use in 2024 but not for social media, and it reverses in 2020, where the measure is subjective and asked after the election. Consistent with evidence that losers withdraw from disappointing political coverage (Cakmak 2023), one-sided news exposure appears to sustain the gap while other channels do not. Neither partisanship strength nor the timing of the interview moderates the effect, as I show in the Online Appendix.

Finally, the honeymoon is short-lived. Following respondents across the 2016, 2020, and 2024 studies, I find that the post-election thaw does not persist: polarization climbs from one election to the next, more than undoing each dip. The window in which partisans feel more warmly toward the opposing winner is real but narrow. That such windows exist at all, however, suggests that affective polarization is not monotonically rising, and that a president willing to build on the goodwill of the first months might help widen them—an opportunity that, so far, has gone largely unrealized (Markowitz 2021).

Affective Polarization and Elections

Affective polarization is "the tendency of [partisan] people to view opposing partisans negatively and copartisans positively" (Iyengar and Westwood 2015, 691). Unlike ideological polarization, which concerns divergence over issues, it concerns how partisans feel about the political camps that hold those positions. As the definition implies, it presupposes some attachment, if only a vote, to a political group, that is, partisanship.

Partisanship gives rise to two attitudes: in-group favoritism and out-group derogation (Greene 2004). Identifying with a party draws a line between an in-group and an out-group (Tajfel and Turner 1979), and that line fosters in-group bias and out-group discrimination (Carlin and Love 2013; Iyengar and Westwood 2015), each of which can deepen polarization. A partisan who likes her own party warmly but is neutral toward the rival is as polarized as one who is neutral toward her own party but hostile to the rival: warmth toward one's own side is the first component of affective polarization, coldness toward the other side the second (Wagner 2021). To be affectively polarized is to divide the political world into "us" and "them" (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012).

Scholars have long sought to explain why this divide widens or narrows. Negative partisanship has risen in the United States since the 1980s. By 2012, 74 percent of Americans reported disliking the opposing party (Abramowitz and Webster 2016, 16) and warmth toward co-partisans has grown as well (Robison and Moskowitz 2019), though some attribute the overall trend chiefly to out-party animus. Either way, Americans are more affectively polarized than in the past (Phillips 2022).

Elections are among the events that most shape this affect. Their outcome determines who governs, and for how long: winners gain access to power and resources for a fixed term, while losers, absent coalition options, must wait to compete again. Until recently, little work examined how this outcome divides winners from losers. Janssen (2024) shows that the association between winning or losing and political support is stronger among highly polarized voters, and Sheffer (2020) traces how partisans' in-group bias shifts around elections.

In the United States, both parties typically enter a presidential race with a plausible path to victory, and the transfer of power is routine, so both sides campaign in hope of winning. That campaign is long and intensifies as election day nears. Partisanship rises before elections and recedes afterward as its salience fades (Singh and Thornton 2019; Michelitch and Utych 2018); tolerance toward co-partisans grows while tolerance toward opponents falls (Hansen and Kosiara-Pedersen 2017); and affective polarization climbs toward election day (Bassan-Nygate and Weiss 2022) before declining as the contest loses salience (Hernández, Anduiza, and Rico 2021). Negative campaigning, and exposure to it, adds further fuel (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Nai and Maier 2025). Parties now mobilize their base rather than persuade the undecided (Panagopoulos 2016), which is a strategy of microtargeting and canvassing that dates to the 2000 Republican campaign (Panagopoulos 2016; Beck and Heidemann 2014) and that, by appealing to partisan emotion to spur turnout, is more polarizing than persuasion (Moral 2017).

The campaign's intensity should therefore raise affective polarization before the vote and let it subside afterward, especially in the United States, where the majoritarian system leaves little room for the cross-party collaboration that dampens polarization elsewhere (Bassan-Nygate and Weiss 2022; Adams, Gidron, and Horne 2023). Consistent with this, Sheffer (2020) finds that reduced out-group discrimination, more than co-partisan favoritism, accounts for the post-election decline, and Hernández, Anduiza, and Rico (2021, 6) attribute it both to "an improvement in the evaluations of the least liked parties" and to a softening of enthusiasm for the most liked one.

Winners and losers, however, do not experience this aftermath alike. One side is declared the victor and will hold power for the coming term. Winners, knowing a majority sided with them, grow more committed to their party and more satisfied with democracy (Anderson and Guillory 1997; Anderson and Tverdova 2001; Blais and Gélineau 2007; Singh, Karakoç, and Blais 2012), an effect that persists well beyond the election (Dahlberg and Linde 2017; Loveless 2021; Nemčok and Wass 2021). Their in-party attachment should, if anything, strengthen. What losers feel is less clear. They are less satisfied with how democracy works, must accept a disliked party in office, and, because losses loom larger than gains (Tversky and Kahneman 1992, 1991), may feel their defeat acutely. Some are left "sad, angry, disoriented and so, so tired" (Proctor 2024, 37). Yet dissatisfaction with one's own side says little about how losers come to feel toward the winning out-party.

Recent studies have begun to close this gap and they converge: winners end up more polarized than losers. Andrews and Huang (2025) document this across 37 countries in the CSES and attribute it to winners' greater in-party favoritism. Drawing on Wann and Grieve (2005), they argue that winners should display stronger in-party warmth, whereas the two sides' out-group dislike need not differ. Because the CSES offers only post-election measures, however, they cannot control for pre-election polarization, making it hard to attribute the gap to the election itself. Hamrak (2025) reaches the same conclusion from a series of U.S. survey experiments fielded between July 2023 and April 2024, finding higher in-party warmth among winners but no lower out-party dislike among losers. An experiment isolates the comparison cleanly, though it can only approximate the emotional weight of a real outcome. Phillips and Warner (2026) bring a regression-discontinuity design to the question and reach a different conclusion about the mechanism: that losers drive the gap by cooling toward their own party. Neither of the first two studies tests why the gap arises. In line with the literature, I expect:

H1: *Winners become more affectively polarized than losers after elections.*

Media Consumption

If winners and losers diverge, why? Existing accounts document the gap but do not test a mechanism. I propose one centered on the media. The rise of affective polarization has coincided with the spread of the internet and social media (Lelkes, Sood, and Iyengar 2017), and Törnberg (2022)

argues that digital media fuel polarization through partisan sorting, particularly when users meet the out-group outside their own bubbles and process those cues through motivated reasoning. Pro-partisan outlets, in turn, stoke negative partisanship (Abramowitz and Webster 2018). Audiences that consume one-sided political information, especially from highly partisan sources, reinforce their own views without hearing the other side, and the stereotypical framing such outlets favor polarizes them further (Han and Federico 2018).

Media shape not only opinion but behavior. Gerber, Karlan, and Bergan (2009) show that coverage can raise support for particular candidates, and Lupia (1994, 63) notes that "access to... widely available information shortcuts allow(s) badly informed voters to emulate the behavior of relatively well-informed voters," with opinion often moving in the same direction regardless of political sophistication (Enns and Kellstedt 2008). The influence reaches the ballot box: DellaVigna and Kaplan (2007) find that the introduction of Fox News raised Republican vote share. Most relevant here, Santoso, Stevenson, and Weschle (2024) and Santoso (2025) show that voters track how the media report cooperation and conflict among parties and adjust their feelings toward the out-party accordingly.

The election result, then, is not the only thing that moves post-election affect. Exposure to political content does too, and the two sides differ in that exposure. Cakmak (2023) argues that losers withdraw from political news after a defeat they find dispiriting, turning to non-political content and cutting themselves off from one-sided information. Winners have no such reason to look away. If anything, victory invites them to follow what their new president and party will do. If heavier consumption of congenial political content sustains polarization, the winner–loser gap should widen with media consumption.

Thus, I hypothesize the following:

H2: *As media consumption increases, the winner/loser gap in affective polarization increases.*

Data and Research Design

The data employed here are composed of 7 time-series election studies of the American National Election Studies (ANES), which cover all presidential elections between 2000 and 2024. The challenger party's candidate won 5 of these elections, the 2000, 2008, 2016, 2020 and 2024 elections. Most of the respondents are interviewed before and after elections in the ANES studies (2016; 2016; 2015; 2016; 2017; 2021; 2025), enabling me to measure the change in affective polarization of the same respondents with the influence of the election result. The ANES is one of the most comprehensive electoral studies focusing on the United States, allowing the use of pre- and post-election measures. Despite some concerns over a possible "artificial increase" in affective polarization levels due to its mixed methods (face-to-face and online), it is still considered a robust source for measuring polarization (Tyler and Iyengar 2024).

In all ANES studies used here, the respondents are asked to rate their feelings towards the presi-

dential candidates, as ratings between 0 and 50 indicate unfavorable feelings, and ratings between 50 and 100 indicate favorable feelings with 50 being neutral. This measure captures the emotion level that the respondents feel towards a particular candidate. Reiljan et al. (2024) reports that feelings toward leaders are more polarized than parties in the United States, but this should not be a problem for this design, as the dependent variable is the change in polarization before and after the elections.

I calculate affective polarization as the difference between the feeling score given to the candidate that the respondent voted for and the feeling score given to the opposing candidate (Iyengar et al. 2019, 131).

The dependent variable in all models, the change in affective polarization, is continuous and can potentially range between -200 and 200. The following formula is used to calculate the change in affective polarization:[1]

$$\begin{aligned}\Delta \text{ Affective Polarization} = &(\text{Post-election feeling score for voted candidate} \\ &- \text{Post-election feeling score for opposite candidate}) \\ &- (\text{Pre-election feeling score for voted candidate} \\ &- \text{Pre-election feeling score for opposite candidate}).\end{aligned}$$

The main independent variable is the winner status, which is binary, and scores 1 for the respondents who voted for the winning candidate. However, previous studies suggest that some loser voters may report that they voted for the winning candidate in a survey conducted after elections (Carsey and Jackson 2001; Mattei 1998; Wright 1993). To overcome this misreport bias, I matched the respondents' pre-election vote intentions with their post-election voting reports.[2]

The ideological extremity variable is the distance of each respondent from the ideological center which intended "to account for the intensity of respondents' ideological views" (Moral 2017, 948). In the studies between 2004 and 2024, respondents are asked to place themselves on a 0-10 left-right scale. The respondents are asked to place themselves on a 1-7 liberal-conservative scale only in the 2000 study. The 2000 variable is expanded to a 0-10 scale. The family income variable is logged and adjusted for inflation. In addition, I also control for sex (coded 1 for male), and education with a college degree binary variable.

I also introduce the mode of the interview, and the people's expectations of how close the election race will be between the candidates. There are some concerns over a possible "artificial increase" in affective polarization levels due to surveys' mixed methods (Tyler and Iyengar 2024). This could potentially influence the dependent variable even though this study is not interested in the

[1] The results of the same models calculated with absolute values are provided in the Online Appendix in Table A3

[2] This operation drops those who were undecided about whom to vote for. The model only considering respondents' post-election voting reports is presented in the Online Appendix in Table A3.

question of "how polarized the society is," but rather in "how polarization changes." Before 2012, all interviews were conducted face-to-face. Meanwhile, the election closeness expectation might also influence the outcome, since the closer an election is expected to be, the more emotions are heightened. Both of them are binary variables. Interview modes involving an interviewer (face-to-face, video, telephone, and CASI&face-to-face) are coded as 0, and the Internet mode 1. For the election closeness expectation, 1 indicates that the respondents think the race will be close, whereas 0 indicates that they think that one candidate will win by quite a bit.

Moreover, some of the models include election year fixed effects except the ones where the election year is used as an interaction term with the winner status. Using election year in the interaction term helps to assess if different elections have different effects on the dependent variable. Partisan identity "generate[s] strong emotional reactions to ongoing campaign events" (Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe 2015, 15). This can suggest that different types of electoral campaigns might generate different influences. It is fair to expect a slightly different influence of Donald Trump's presidential election campaign compared to Barack Obama's or Mitt Romney's campaigns as the former scores higher on the Dark Triad characteristics (Nai and Toros 2020). Some studies suggest that negative campaigning increases affective polarization (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012).

For the media models, I added a media consumption variable. In elections between 2000 and 2016, the respondents were asked how many days in a typical or the last week they had watched the national news in the pre-election survey. Before 2016, this question included only television as the medium to watch the news. However, in 2016, the respondents are asked "During a typical week, how many days do you watch, read, or listen to news on TV, radio, printed newspapers, or the Internet, not including sports?" In 2024, the respondents are separately asked their consumption habits on news sites and social media sites in the post-election survey. I grouped the respondents into three categories for media consumption to have more observations in each group: 0 for those who said they did not watch national news on any day in a week, low level of consumption means they watched 1-3 days, high level means they watched 4-7 days in a week.

Different from previous surveys, in 2020, the respondents were asked "how closely do you follow politics on TV, radio, newspapers, or the Internet?" Instead of number of days, they choose between: "Very closely, Fairly closely, Not very closely, Not at all." Another difference from the previous studies is that this question was asked after the election in the 2020 study. Therefore, the finding for the 2020 study is presented in a different model.

The empirical specification of the main model is as follows with α_i representing the year fixed-effect:

$$\begin{aligned}\Delta\text{Affective Polarization}_{it} = {} & \beta_0 + \beta_1\text{Winner Status}_{it} + \beta_2\text{Age}_{it} + \beta_3\text{Gender}_{it} \\ & + \beta_4\text{Ideological Extremity}_{it} + \beta_5\text{Family Income}_{it} + \beta_6\text{College Degree}_{it} \\ & + \beta_7\text{Interview Mode}_{it} + \beta_8\text{Election Closeness}_{it} + \alpha_i + \epsilon_{it}\end{aligned}$$

The empirical specification of the media model is as follows:

$$\begin{aligned}\Delta\text{Affective Polarization}_{it} = {} & \beta_0 + \beta_1\text{Winner Status}_{it} + \beta_2\text{Media Consumption}_{it} \\ & + \beta_3\text{Media Consumption}_{it} \times \text{Winner Status}_{it} + \beta_4\text{Age}_{it} + \beta_5\text{Gender}_{it} \\ & + \beta_6\text{Ideological Extremity}_{it} + \beta_7\text{Family Income}_{it} + \beta_8\text{Interview Mode}_{it} \\ & + \beta_9\text{Election Closeness}_{it} + \beta_{10}\text{College Degree}_{it} + \alpha_i + \epsilon_{it}\end{aligned}$$

Because winner status is fixed by the election outcome and each respondent's affective polarization is measured both before and after that outcome, the design differences out every stable individual trait and rules out reverse causation from post-election affect to the result. It does not, however, offer the causal leverage of an experiment or a regression-discontinuity design (Phillips and Warner 2026): winning is not randomly assigned and unobserved factors that sort voters onto the winning side could also shape how their feelings evolve. I therefore read the estimates as the within-person change in affective polarization associated with having backed the winner rather than the loser, and treat the accompanying mechanism evidence, not any single coefficient, as the paper's central contribution.

The descriptive statistics of the variables are presented in the Online Appendix in Table A1. To make a healthy comparison between the main model and the interactive partisanship strength model in the Online Appendix, I omit 767 non-partisans from the model to have the same sample. The model with non-partisans included is presented in the Online Appendix in Table A3.[3] Since the leaning partisan question additionally asks independents which party they would choose if they had to, the partisanship categories contain a very large proportion of the society.

Empirical Findings and Discussion

Table 1 presents a general summary of the dependent variable, that is the affective polarization change from before to after the election. Decomposing this change sharpens what is happening and sets the finding apart from recent party-level work. For losers, the movement is almost entirely toward the winner: their rating of the winning candidate rises by about 2.4 points (from 14.3 to 16.7), while their feeling toward their own losing candidate barely moves (from 80.6 to 79.6). Losers become less polarized not because they abandon their own side but because they warm to the victor. This is the mirror image of Phillips and Warner (2026), who find the post-election gap at the party level driven by losers cooling toward their own party. The two accounts are reconcilable once we recall that affect toward individual leaders is stronger than, and distinct from, affect toward parties (Reiljan et al. 2024): at the level of the incoming president, the dominant post-election movement is a thaw toward the winner, extended even by those who voted against them. Winners, in parallel,

[3]For the following models, I continue to omit the non-partisans as partisanship is at the core of polarization.

become more polarized chiefly by warming to their own candidate (from 81.1 to 84.9), with little change toward the loser. Both movements point in the same direction, toward the president, which is the signature of a honeymoon rather than of rising hostility.

Table 1: Means of Feeling Scores for Both Winner and Loser Candidates Before and After Elections for the Full Sample

Voters	**ΔPol**	**Pre-feel for winner can.**	**Post-feel for winner can.**	**Pre-feel for loser can.**	**Post-feel for loser can.**
Losers	-3.44	14.3	↑ 16.7	80.6	↓ 79.6
Winners	3.05	81.1	↑ 84.9	15.4	↑ 16.3
All	.04	50.1	↑ 53.2	45.7	45.7

The OLS regression full-sample estimates of the change in affective polarization from before to after the election are reported in Table 2. The winners' affective polarization level changes by 6.5 points more than the losers' with a standard error of 0.4. Dividing the coefficient of the winning status (6.5) by the standard deviation of the affective polarization change (21.9) results in approximately 0.29. This means that a one-unit change in the winning status corresponds to about 0.29 standard deviations of the outcome, suggesting that the main independent variable is strongly associated with the outcome.

To put it in context, and to see if the groups' polarization increased or decreased, the coefficient plot and predicted values are presented in Figure 1 with 95% confidence intervals.[4] The plot shows that on average, winners become significantly more affectively polarized after elections by around 5 points; losers become less polarized by around 2 points. These numbers on a scale between -200 and 200 might seem relatively small, but this is a short-term change occurring within a few months.

Model 1 also shows that the change is larger among younger/more ideologically extreme respondents, as well as Internet respondents and among those who think the election will be close. Moreover, for 3,867 respondents, polarization does not change between waves. Of these, 1,608 (42%) were already at the maximum score of 100 before the election and thus could not become more polarized. This ceiling mechanically produces much of the mass at zero change, and the estimated gap is therefore driven by respondents with room to move.

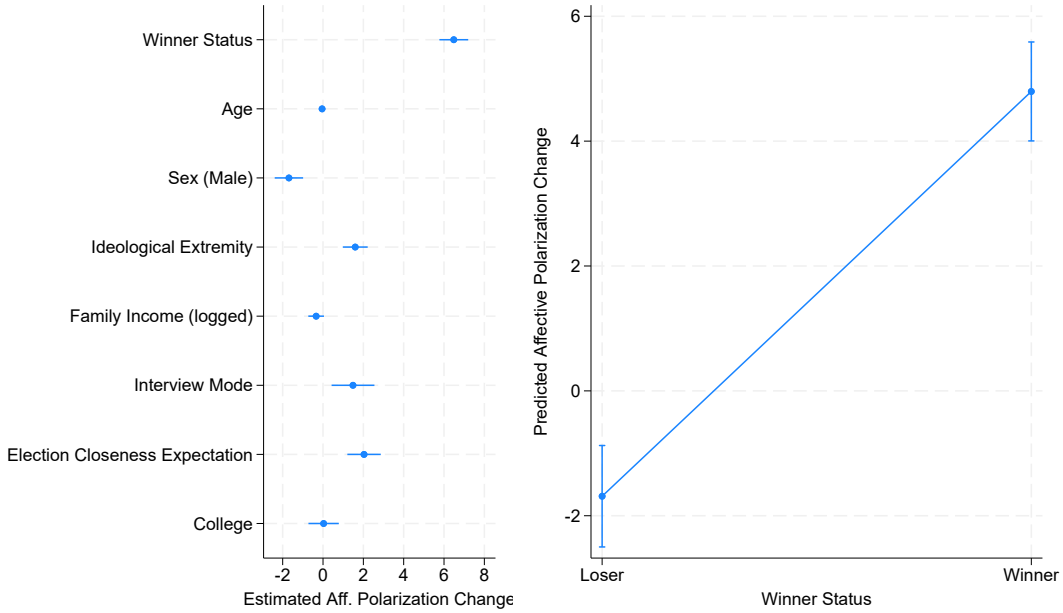
[4] All confidence intervals are calculated at 95% .

Table 2: The Effect of Winner Status on Affective Polarization Change

	Model 1
Winner Status	6.484***
	(0.365)
Age	-0.046***
	(0.011)
Sex (Male)	-1.689***
	(0.361)
Ideological Extremity	1.597***
	(0.315)
Family Income (logged)	-0.341*
	(0.198)
Interview Mode	1.487***
	(0.542)
Election Closeness Expectation	2.035***
	(0.423)
College	0.031
	(0.384)
Constant	6.034**
	(2.484)
R^2	0.039
N	14426
Year FE	✓
Robust standard errors in parentheses.	
Two-tailed tests. * p<0.1, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01	

This finding can be explained by the honeymoon effect because newly elected presidents enjoy much higher approval rates in the first few months of their term (Segatti, Poletti, and Vezzoni 2015; Miyazaki et al. 2023). Locander (1979, 267) argues, for example, "At the beginning of a new administration, a traditional honeymoon period is extended to the president by the Congress, the public, and the press." As the election campaign period's intensity fades away and people start to watch politics less often, they start rating the opposite candidate in a less hostile manner. This should be especially true for the president as they will govern and be the leader of the country for the next term. Moreover, when the elections are over, the campaigns are also over, meaning that the voters are not constantly exposed to negative rhetoric.

Figure 1: The Coefficient Plot and Predicted-Values of the Effect of Winner Status on Affective Polarization Change



Election Context

The estimated effect of the winner (loser) status on the affective polarization change by election is plotted in Figure 2 with a different model presented in Table 3. The model includes the interaction of the election year with the winning status to see the election-based effect. For each election, except 2004 in which George W. Bush got re-elected, the winners are above the losers in the gap. Only in 2000 and 2004 did losers become more polarized after the election.

Democrats won three and Republicans won four of these elections. In what is becoming the norm in U.S politics, the president's party changed in five of these elections. In both the 2000 and 2016 elections, the losing Democratic candidates lost the election despite winning the popular vote.

These findings suggest that the context matters as well, as different election campaigns have different impacts on emotions as expected. Not surprisingly, incumbent wins are associated with smaller changes in feelings than non-incumbent wins as the continuation of the status quo is mostly expected. The difference between winners and losers is largest in the 2008 election, in which Democrat Barack Obama beat Republican John McCain in a result "neither especially close nor particularly large when set in historical perspective" (Campbell 2009, 1).

Figure 2: The Predicted Values of Affective Polarization Change by Election Year

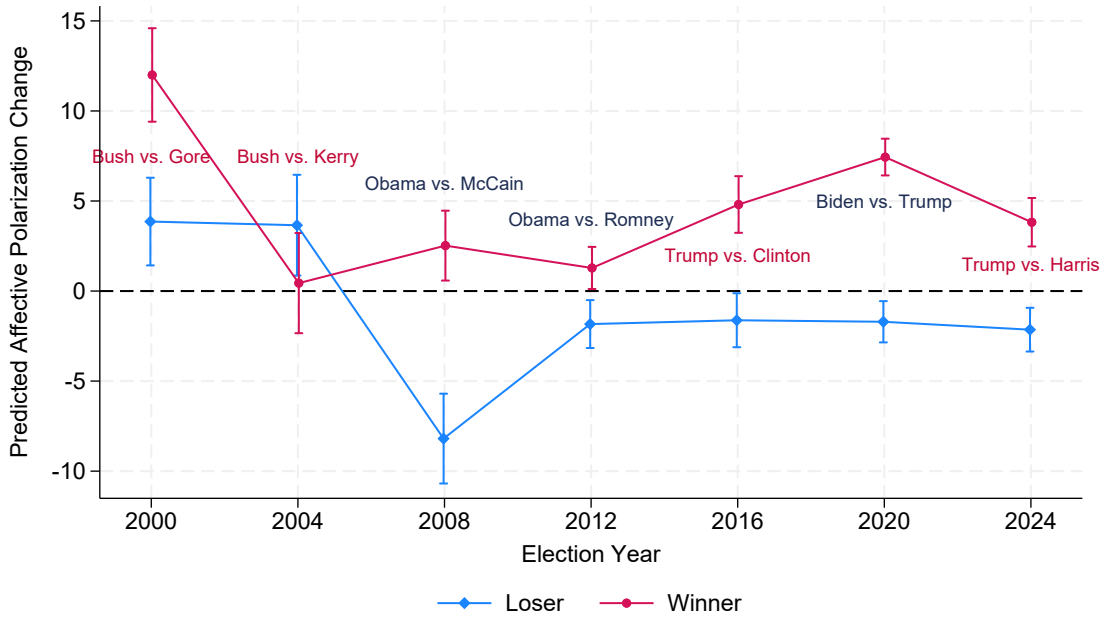


Table A9 in the Online Appendix shows the weighted winner and loser groups' average feeling ratings for both candidates in all elections. In all elections except 2000, losers' ratings towards the winning candidate increased, which decreased affective polarization, except in 2004 when the losing Democrats warmed to their own candidate, John Kerry, as well.

For 2008, both winner and loser citizens had a better feeling toward the United States' first black president, Obama, after the election. Interestingly, Republicans' rating toward their candidate, McCain, decreased by 3.6 points (75 to 71.4). Democrats, on the other hand, had warmer rating for him after the election. This difference can be attributed to McCain's personality and political stance: he was "unusually" central compared to other Republican presidential candidates (Campbell 2009, 1). This could have led more radical Republicans to favor him a little bit less, perhaps blaming him for the defeat, and Democrats rated him more warmly.

Initially, the race between Obama and McCain was expected to be close. The Democratic base unified behind Obama later in the campaign (Birnbaum 2008). After the Wall Street crisis in September, the race turned in favor of Obama with incumbent Bush having low approval rates due to the economy and the Iraq War (Campbell 2009).

Obama built his campaign around hope and change, which directly target emotions. Many factors influenced voters' emotions in 2008, such as "the long and bitter history of racism in America, the anger and fear many Americans felt over the war and the economy, and the pervasive theme of hope promoted by the Obama campaign" (Finn and Glaser 2010, 263). Breaking some racial prejudices, Obama's address of hope and change might have appealed to the Republican voters as well in times

of economic turmoil. Strikingly, the Republicans' feeling toward Obama increased more than the Democrats after the election (30.1 to 38.5 versus 82 to 88.1).

Table 3: OLS Regression on Affective Polarization Change

	Model 2
Winner Status	8.140***
	(1.610)
2004	-0.202
	(1.697)
2008	-12.051***
	(1.571)
2012	-5.692***
	(1.326)
2016	-5.479***
	(1.354)
2020	-5.563***
	(1.316)
2024	-6.003***
	(1.300)
2004 × Winner Status	-11.355***
	(2.435)
2008 × Winner Status	2.576
	(2.128)
2012 × Winner Status	-5.024***
	(1.803)
2016 × Winner Status	-1.713
	(1.905)
2020 × Winner Status	1.005
	(1.741)
2024 × Winner Status	-2.173
	(1.806)
Constant	5.142**
	(2.565)
R^2	0.043
N	14426
Controls	✓

Robust standard errors in parentheses.
The base category for the election year is 2000.
Two-tailed tests. * p<0.1, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

There is also a smaller difference between winners and losers in 2016 than in 2008. In 2016, voters were much more polarized towards the presidential candidates. Perhaps with the lack of a central figure, more negative campaigns, and higher levels of polarization, voters already hated the out-group candidates before the election. In the 2016 campaign, both Trump and Clinton personally attacked the other, with the former constantly mocking and name-calling the latter (Sides et al.

2022).

In 2008, Obama enjoyed an 8-point higher rating by the other group, Republicans, after the election, whereas this is around 5 for Trump in 2016. In fact, in the 2016 campaign, much more negative political ads were aired than in the 2020 campaign (Sides et al. 2022). Even though this figure is higher in 2012 than in 2016 according to the same source, Obama's continuation of incumbency perhaps reduced this gap between winners and losers.

The 2020 campaign was again shaped by a crisis, this time the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though we again saw mutual targeting and attacks between Trump and Biden, and the former name-calling the latter, the campaign was mainly shaped around recovering from the pandemic (Sides et al. 2022). The Democrats may have felt relief at Trump's defeat, a highly polarizing figure, in times of crisis, thus leading to a higher difference between winners and losers than in 2016.

The only anomaly seems to be the 2004 election in which the winners are not statistically distinguishable from the losers in terms of the outcome. Although there are some concerns about the election's integrity at a level bordering on conspiracy theories, the 2000 election is also famous for its controversial ballot paper design used in Palm Beach County, Florida, which may have led to Democratic candidate Al Gore's defeat (Foley 2024; Sinclair et al. 2000).

The 2004 election was mainly shaped by the Iraq War, which further polarized the voters (Campbell 2004). Republicans already highly favored Bush before the election, perhaps due to a rally-around-the-flag effect of the Iraq War, so his rating does not rise substantively with the election as opposed to the other elections. Another difference is that the Democrats, the losers, favored their candidate, John Kerry, around 4.2 points more after the election, which again is not observed to this extent in the other elections. The 2004 election is the only election that a Republican candidate got re-elected in the sample.

2016-2020-2024 Panel Data

What happens in the long term? Some respondents in the ANES sample participated in the 2016, 2020 and 2024 studies, completing six different waves with pre- and post-election surveys. Table 4 shows those respondents' polarization levels before and after these elections, for those people who voted for only Democratic or Republican candidates in all elections, and who are included in the main sample.

In 2016, the Democrats lost the election, and these respondents' polarization level decreased by around 1.4 points on average. However, their polarization surged by more than 10 points over the next four years towards the other election. This means that the main finding, the decrease in polarization after the elections, can fade within four years with more developments. 2016 winners, the Republicans, also became more polarized in four years. The presidential honeymoon effect stays only as a honeymoon and is not carried to the term of Donald Trump. Among these panel survey respondents as well, election winners become more polarized and losers, though by a smaller

margin, become less polarized. Meanwhile, the average polarization level of both groups was around 68 points in 2016, whereas it surged to 80 in the 2024 election, suggesting a possible ceiling effect for polarization.

Table 4: Average Polarization for the 2016-2020-2024 Panel Data

	2016		**2020**		**2024**	
	Pre	**Post**	**Pre**	**Post**	**Pre**	**Post**
Republicans	65.9	68.2	74.5	73.9	76.9	80.3
N			298			
Democrats	70.5	69.1	79.3	84.4	83.2	80.4
N			438			

The difference between the Democrats and Republicans after the 2020 election is also staggering. While some Republicans attacked the Capitol building, possibly showing displays of anger and affective polarization, the Democrats were around 10 points more polarized than the Republicans in this panel. The relief at Trump's defeat might have played an important role in these people's emotions.

These respondents remained in the ANES across three elections and eight years; because panel attrition and repeated interviewing tend to retain the most engaged and committed partisans, this subset is not representative of the electorate, and its rising trajectory should be read as illustrative of how the honeymoon can dissipate rather than as a population-level estimate.

The situation is not different when we look at the average ratings of the 2020 respondents in Table A9 in the Online Appendix. Democrats could hardly rate Trump lower, while Biden is less disliked. This suggests that despite high levels of polarization and partisanship, individual differences still matter. Before the election, Trump's rating by all respondents in the sample, 41.1, is much less than Biden's 49.2. This can be attributed to Trump's unorthodox, more polarizing style of politics.

Findings for Media Consumption

To show that respondents consume ideologically like-minded media, I proceed as follows. In each study, the ANES asks respondents which programs, shows, networks, and websites they regularly follow. For each outlet, I compute an ideological score equal to the mean left–right self-placement (0–10) of the sample respondents who follow it. I then assign each respondent the average of these scores across the outlets they report following, and correlate it with the respondent's own 0–10 self-placement. The correlation is 0.51 in 2012, 0.60 in 2016, 0.66 in 2020, and 0.54 in 2024, strong and consistent across all four studies. In other words, respondents overwhelmingly follow outlets whose audiences share their own ideological leaning, consistent with selective exposure to ideologically congenial media.

Why is this important? Because partisan media outlets favor their party and disfavor the opposite

party. The pro-partisan outlets give more coverage to a) the problems in the country when the incumbent president is from the opposite party (Larcinese, Puglisi, and Snyder 2011), b) the issues the party they support is more proficient at (Puglisi 2011), and c) the scandals that the opposite party is involved in (Puglisi and Snyder 2011).

Therefore, following only pro-partisan outlets would feed the voters' support to their party, while continuing to present the other group as disfavorable. Through motivated reasoning, the partisans increase their commitment to their ideas and political support by not hearing the alternative (Vegetti and Mancosu 2020; Boyer 2023; Nir 2011).

Table 5 shows the OLS regression on the effect of winner status interacting with media consumption for the election years of 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, 2016 and 2024. 2024 is shown differently due to the changing nature of the media consumption habits. For the first model the interaction term becomes significant when media consumption is high with a coefficient of 4.5 and a standard error of 1.8. This indicates that the winner status is associated with the change only among frequent media users. The predicted values of the same model in Figure 3 show that, among high-consumption losers, affective polarization decreased by about 2 points on average, whereas among high-consumption winners it increased by about 4. There is no statistically significant difference between low and no consumers for the effect of winning (losing). Therefore, media consumption moderates the relationship between the winning status and affective polarization change for frequent watchers.

In 2024, the respondents are asked about their news consumption habits for both social media and websites in the post-election survey. For news sites, the winner–loser gap widens among the heaviest consumers (High $\times$ Winner = 3.5, p $<$0.1), mirroring the 2000–2016 pattern and the tendency of heavy consumers to select ideologically congenial outlets documented above. For social media, by contrast, the gap is present but statistically indistinguishable across all levels of use (Figure 4): winners and losers diverge as much among non-users as among the heaviest users, indicating that the moderation operates through traditional news rather than social feeds. One reading is that social media raises out-group hostility broadly, lifting polarization for winners and losers alike without widening the gap between them. Another is that algorithmic feeds, unlike election-night and transition news coverage, do not deliver the post-election de-escalation that underlies the honeymoon, especially considering that these questions were asked in the aftermath of the election. Either way, as news migrates onto platforms, the traditional-news channel that has historically conditioned the winner–loser gap may attenuate, which is a question for future elections. News consumption habits are changing and it is difficult to isolate the effect of one type of media amid constant exposure to all types.

Table 5: The Effect of Winner Status on Affective Polarization Change Conditional on Media Consumption

	2000-2016	2024 (News Sites)	2024 (Social Media)
Winner Status	1.499	4.140***	6.614***
	(1.640)	(1.600)	(1.174)
Media Consumption=Low	-1.607	0.775	3.440**
	(1.503)	(1.529)	(1.484)
High	-4.210***	-2.637*	0.172
	(1.348)	(1.374)	(1.132)
Media Consumption=Low × Winner Status	1.945	1.375	-3.351
	(2.006)	(2.132)	(2.154)
High × Winner Status	4.495**	3.512*	0.626
	(1.760)	(1.948)	(1.689)
Constant	12.365***	-10.375**	-11.480**
	(3.758)	(5.161)	(5.143)
R^2	0.032	0.036	0.034
N	7156	2847	2847
Year FE	✓		
Controls	✓	✓	✓

Robust standard errors in parentheses. The base category for media consumption is None
2024 models are single elections, hence no fixed effects.
Two-tailed tests. * p<0.1, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

The model based on the 2020 study shows a different picture. Table 6 shows the results of the same model with the 2020 study. The media consumption still moderates the relationship between the winning and polarization change, but this time the other way around. Figure 5 shows that the gap between the winners and losers appears the most for those who reported not closely following politics at all, and the least for those who reported that they are very closely following.

This difference between the previous studies and the 2020 study might be due to the difference in the wording and the question type. In 2020, the respondents themselves indicated how closely they follow politics via media. This is a self-report that invites over-statement. Respondents may present themselves as more engaged than they are. In the previous studies, there was a better indicator as the respondents had to report a day number in which they watched national news, from which we can understand how much they are really exposed to political content.

Moreover, social media and internet usage is much more prevalent in 2020, capturing more media than television. In fact, the new generations spend much less time watching television or reading printed media (Twenge, Martin, and Spitzberg 2019). Instead of a scheduled time for the evening news on television, social media exposes viewers to all sorts of content constantly, which makes it difficult to measure its effect.

Table 6: The Effect of Winner Status on Affective Polarization Change Conditional on Media Consumption

	2020 Election
Winner Status	15.291***
	(3.398)
Not very closely	3.884*
	(2.333)
Fairly closely	2.854
	(2.249)
Very closely	7.814***
	(2.426)
Not very closely × Winner Status	-3.661
	(3.646)
Fairly closely × Winner Status	-5.511
	(3.516)
Very closely × Winner Status	-10.734***
	(3.654)
Constant	-3.579
	(4.659)
R^2	0.059
N	4418
Controls	✓

Robust standard errors in parentheses.
The base category for media consumption is "Not at all".
Two-tailed tests. * p<0.1, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

Additionally, this question was asked after the election in 2020 and in 2024. If loser partisans avoid following political content on media, there would be fewer strong partisan losers for very close followers than strong partisan winners. For strong partisan losers in the sample in 2020, 50 and 23 percent of them state that they follow politics on media "fairly closely" and "very closely" respectively. For strong partisan winners, this is respectively 48 and 36 percent.[5] Because the 2024 items were also collected after the election yet the news-site measure still shows the main pattern, the 2020 reversal appears to stem from how that item is worded rather than when it was asked.

[5] Author's calculation not presented here.

Figure 3: The Predicted Values of Affective Polarization Change Conditional on Media Consumption (First Model in Table 5)

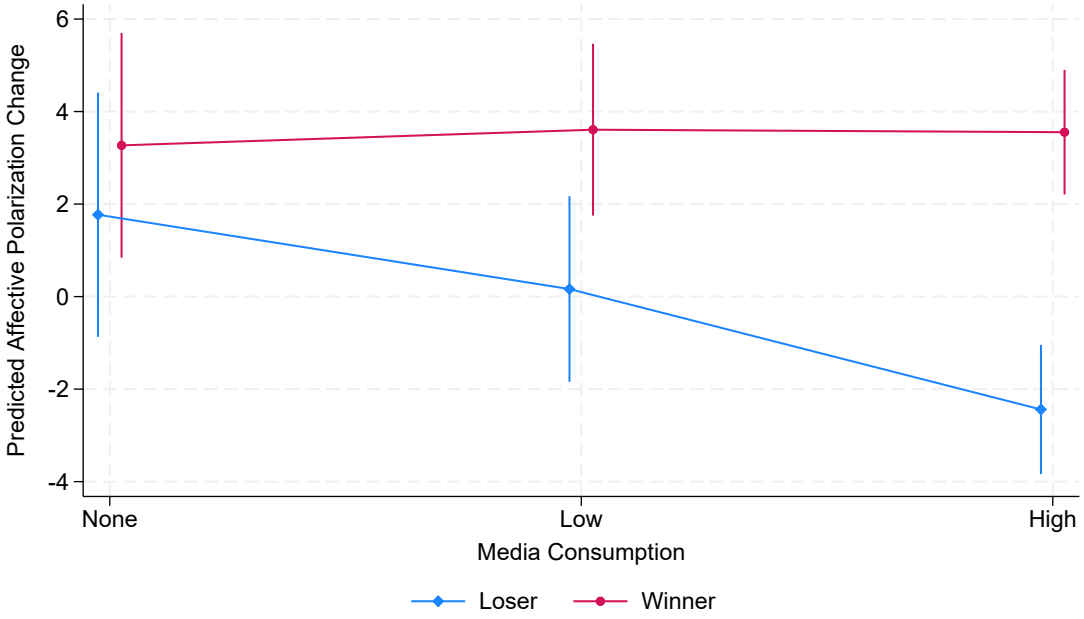


Figure 4: The Predicted Values of Affective Polarization Change Conditional on Media Consumption in 2024

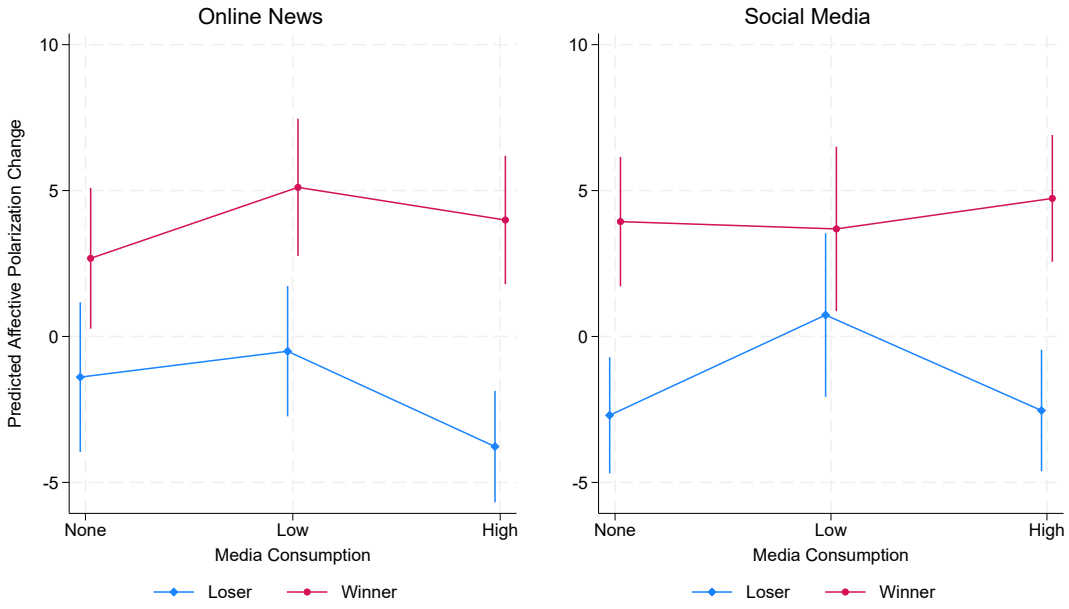
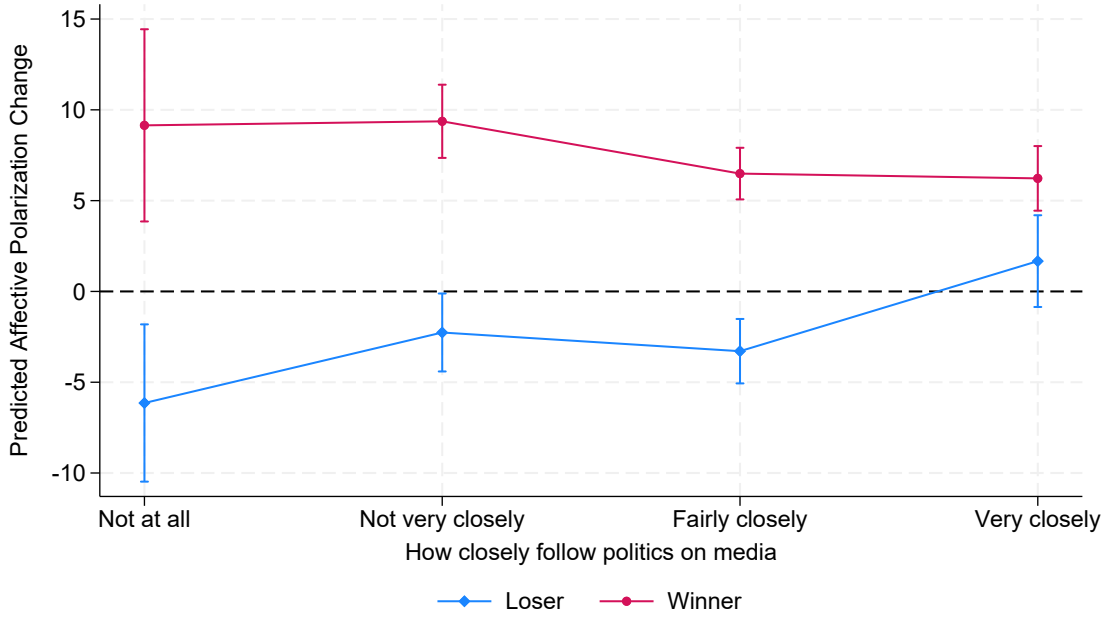


Figure 5: The Predicted Values of Affective Polarization Change Conditional on Media Consumption in 2020



Robustness and Sensitivity Checks

The main result, that winners become more affectively polarized than losers after elections, is robust to a wide range of alternative specifications reported in the Online Appendix. Table A3 re-estimates the main model under seven variations: relying only on post-election vote reports without matching them to pre-election intentions and including non-partisans (Column 1), adding non-partisans back to the matched sample (Column 2), applying the ANES sample weights (Column 3), measuring the dependent variable with the absolute-value formula (Column 4), dropping ideological extremity as a potential post-treatment "bad control" (Column 5), excluding respondents whose partisanship contradicts their reported vote (Column 6), and recoding reverse (cross-candidate) preferences to missing (Column 7). Across all six, the coefficient on winner status remains positive and significant at the 0.01 level, ranging from roughly 5.8 to 6.9, and rising to 11.5 once weighted, closely tracking the main estimate of 6.5. The finding also holds under an alternative lagged-dependent-variable design that models post-election polarization while controlling for its pre-election level (Table A5); in split samples by whether an incumbent or a challenger won (Table A6) and by whether a Republican or a Democrat won (Table A7), though the effect is stronger for challenger wins and for Democratic wins; and when the outcome is measured at the vice-presidential rather than presidential level, where winning exerts a smaller but still significant effect (Table A8 and Figure A2). Finally, the winner–loser gap is conditioned by neither partisanship strength (Table A13) nor the timing of the survey interview (Table A17), the two moderators examined in the Online Appendix.

Conclusion

This study examines how election outcomes reshape affective polarization by separating winners from losers across seven U.S. presidential elections between 2000 and 2024. Using the pre- and post-election panels of the ANES, I measure the within-respondent change in affective polarization toward the presidential candidates and estimate how it differs for those who voted for the winning and losing candidates. Consistent with H1 and with a growing body of recent work (Andrews and Huang 2025; Hamrak 2025; Phillips and Warner 2026), winners become significantly more affectively polarized than losers after the election, by about 6.5 points, or roughly 29% of a standard deviation of the outcome. The effect is robust to alternative sample definitions and dependent-variable constructions, to sample weighting, to dropping potential bad controls, to Republican and Democratic wins, to incumbent and non-incumbent wins, and to measuring polarization toward vice-presidential rather than presidential candidates.

The change for both groups is driven by rising warmth toward the newly or re-elected president: winners warm to the candidate they voted for, and losers, too, come to rate the winner less coldly, while feelings toward the losing candidate barely move. The winner–loser gap thus emerges from a presidential "honeymoon" that both sides extend to the incoming president in the months after the vote (Markowitz 2021). This candidate-level account complements, and helps reconcile, recent findings at the party level. Where Phillips and Warner (2026) attribute the gap primarily to losers cooling on their own party, I find that at the level of individual leaders the gap runs instead through warming toward the winner, a divergence consistent with evidence that affective polarization toward leaders behaves differently from, and exceeds, polarization toward parties (Reiljan et al. 2024).

The size and even the sign of this gap depend on electoral context. Losers grew more polarized only in 2000 and 2004, and 2004—the sole re-election of a Republican incumbent in the sample—is the only case in which winners and losers do not significantly differ. The gap is largest in 2008, when Barack Obama, campaigning on hope and change, drew warmer post-election ratings even from Republican losers. Winning also moves emotions more when a challenger takes the White House than when an incumbent is returned, underscoring that campaigns and candidates, not just outcomes, shape how elections register emotionally.

This honeymoon is, however, short-lived. Following the respondents who appear in the 2016, 2020, and 2024 studies, I find that the post-election de-escalation does not persist: average polarization among these panelists climbs from roughly 68 points in 2016 to 80 in 2024, and the dip after each election is more than undone by the next campaign. The 2024 election, won by Donald Trump, reproduces the general pattern. Republican winners grew more polarized while Democratic losers grew slightly less, but against a steadily rising baseline. The window in which partisans feel more warmly toward the opposing winner is real but narrow; whether it can be widened into something more durable is, as the honeymoon metaphor implies, largely up to the presidents who receive it. In fact, Markowitz (2021) argues that the scale of the honeymoon effect has been getting smaller

over the years due to increasing polarization.

The gap is also conditional on how partisans consume news. Where the ANES measures news exposure behaviorally, the winner–loser gap concentrates among the heaviest consumers, precisely those who, as I show, follow the most ideologically congenial outlets. It does not widen with social-media use in 2024, and it runs in the opposite direction in 2020, where the measure is subjective and asked only after the election. These patterns fit the idea that one-sided political content sustains the gap while losers disengage from disappointing coverage (Cakmak 2023), and they suggest that as news migrates from national broadcasts to fragmented and algorithmic platforms, the traditional-news channel that has historically conditioned the gap may weaken.

These findings show that affective polarization is not merely a backdrop to elections but an outcome of them, one that moves in opposite directions for winners and losers—a point distinct from work asking how polarization conditions the winner–loser gap in political support (Janssen 2024). Several limitations mark the way forward. The design is observational. Although the within-respondent change and the matching of vote intentions to reported votes reduce the most obvious biases, it cannot claim the causal leverage of the regression-discontinuity approach (Phillips and Warner 2026), and future work might combine the two. The outcome is measured at the level of presidential candidates rather than parties or ordinary partisans, and only in the majoritarian, two-party United States; whether the honeymoon extends to party- and citizen-level affect, to ideological polarization (Webster and Abramowitz 2017; Rogowski and Sutherland 2016), to multiparty and consensual systems where losers may still govern (Adams, Gidron, and Horne 2023; Wagner and Praprotnik 2024), and to lower-salience midterm contests remains open. So does the question of what, concretely, transmits the honeymoon: if it is partly what the media report about cooperation and conflict among newly governing elites (Santoso, Stevenson, and Weschle 2024; Santoso 2025), then tracing the gap to media content rather than merely media exposure is a natural next step. Finally, affective polarization remains "conceptually muddied and poorly measured" (Bakker and Lelkes 2024, 431). Testing whether these results survive richer measures of partisan affect is a task for future research.

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