Origin of (A)symmetry: The Evolution of Out-Party Distrust in the United States

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Abstract

Partisans tend to be skeptical of governments only when they are led by the other side. This president-in-power effect threatens democratic functioning by limiting partisans' ability to hold their own party accountable. As polarization rises, the problems associated with this phenomenon are likely to aggravate. This paper examines the evolution and drivers of the president-in-power effect since 1974. Mirroring the general rise in polarization, we document a steady increase in the president-in-power effect. Our research demonstrates that this increase can be attributed to an intensification of partisan identification, combined with a growing perceived ideological distance towards the opposed party. Contrasting the narrative that polarization is stronger on the right, however, we find evidence that the president-in-power effect has grown faster for Democrats than for Republicans. To explain this pattern, we show that highly educated people, who display a stronger president-in-power effect, have shifted towards the left in recent years.

Keywords: Partisanship, Polarisation, President-in-power effect, Trust in Government

In recent decades, the United States has experienced a rapid increase in polarization, leading to heightened in-group/out-group sentiments among partisans (Iyengar et al., 2012; Druckman. et al., 2013; Iyengar et al., 2019; Finkel et al., 2020). As a result, partisans appear to be reluctant to grant legitimacy to governments led by the other side, a phenomenon called the 'president-in-power effect' (Jacobson, 2003; Keele, 2005; Gershtenson et al., 2006; Morisi et al., 2019; Evans and Andersen, 2006; Gerber and Huber, 2009; Jilke, 2018; Anderson and Guillory, 1997; Anderson and Tverdova, 2003; Blais and Gélineau, 2007). Prior work argues that this effect can threaten democratic functioning both by limiting partisans' ability and willingness to hold their own party accountable for their actions and by encouraging attempts to undermine governments led by the opposite side (Keele, 2005; Gershtenson et al., 2006; Hetherington and Rudolph, 2015). As polarization continues to rise, the problems associated with the president-in-power effect might aggravate further.

To further elucidate the rise in polarization, various scholars assert that polarization is more pronounced on the conservative end of the political spectrum (Barber et al., 2015; Hetherington and Rudolph, 2015; Grossmann and Hopkins, 2016; Broockman and Skovron, 2018). As a result, a logical prediction is that the president-in-power effect has grown faster among Republicans than Democrats. Such an asymmetry could have societal implications, as it suggests that Republicans might subject their party to less scrutiny than Democrats do, potentially tilting the political playing field in favor of the Republican party. Previous research by Morisi et al. (2019) confirms that the president-in-power effect is indeed asymmetric, but they do not explore how this asymmetry came about.

The current paper aims to answer two main questions. First, using data from the General Social Survey (GSS), we investigate the co-evolution of the 'president-in-power effect' and polarization between 1974 and 2021. We employ a difference-in-differences methodology to causally estimate the effect of partisans' presidential support on their confidence in the federal government. Second, to explore whether polarization is asymmetric, we separately examine the evolution of the president-in-power effect for Republicans than Democrats, using independents as a control group. Our analyses also include ancillary tests to identify the underlying causes of the observed patterns. Taken together, these analyses track the development of a specific aspect of polarization on both sides of the political spectrum.

Our results reveal a sharp increase in the president-in-power effect over time, with the effect size more than quadrupling between 1974 and 2021. We attribute this increase to two main factors: the growing strength of partisan identification and a widening gap between people's own ideology and that of the opposing party.[1] As individuals increasingly tie their personal identity to their political affiliation, in-group/out-group biases are exacerbated, resulting in greater distrust of governments led by the other side. Furthermore, the perception that the other party is moving away ideologically provides an additional reason to distrust governments led by that party. As such, the combined effects of heightened partisan identification and perceived elite polarization lead to increasingly pronounced fluctuations in governmental trust following electoral turnovers.

Contrasting the asymmetric polarization hypothesis, however, we find no evidence that the president-in-power effect grows faster for Republicans than for Democrats. While Republicans initially display a stronger effect, this asymmetry, if anything, decreases over time and eventually even reverses. Our results thus suggest that Democrats now display a stronger in-group/out-group differentiation regarding the party leading the federal government. We attribute this reversal to a compositional shift in partisanship over time, with highly educated people, who tend to display a stronger president-in-power effect, increasingly identifying as Democrats. Contrasting prior research (Morisi et al., 2019), the role of psychological differences between liberals and conservatives appears to be limited.

Our results add to a growing body of literature on polarization in the United States. Polarization exists in many forms, including affective polarization (partisans increasingly dislike political opponents; Iyengar et al. (2012); Rogowski and Sutherland (2016); Iyengar et al. (2019)), elite polarization (parties diverge ideologically; Hetherington (2001); Zingher and Flynn (2018)), and issue polarization (partisans diverge on policy positions; (Abramowitz, 2010)). For each of these forms, research suggests that polarization is stronger on the right than on the left (Barber et al., 2015; Hetherington and Rudolph, 2015; Grossmann and Hopkins, 2016), although this conclusion remains controversial (Fiorina and Abrams, 2008; Iyengar et al., 2012; Guay and Johnston, 2022). Our results contribute to this debate by showing the president-in-power effect, a measure of polarization, has grown faster

[1] Prior research suggests that intensification of partisan identification may be driven by partisan sorting (Levendusky, 2009), media content (Levendusky, 2013), negative political advertisement (Sood and Iyengar, 2016), and political homophily (Mummolo and Nall, 2017).

among Democrats than Republicans.

Our results also contribute to an ongoing debate in political psychology regarding whether Republicans (conservatives) are more biased than Democrats (liberals) (Ditto et al., 2019; Baron and Jost, 2019; Guay and Johnston, 2022; Sleiman et al., 2023). Much of this literature focuses on politically motivated reasoning, which refers to the tendency of partisans to interpret information more positively when it aligns with their partisan identity (Kahan, 2015). The results in this literature are mixed, with one meta-analysis finding no difference in ideological bias between partisans on both sides of the political spectrum (Ditto et al., 2019), and another meta-analysis showing that conservatives (Republicans) are significantly more biased than liberals (Democrats) (Baron and Jost, 2019). It is important to note that the president-in-power effect need not necessarily be a bias, as the incumbent president directly or indirectly influences the quality of government institutions. At the same time, however, motivated reasoning exacerbates any existing president-in-power effect, because directional motives in information processing lead partisans to evaluate a given level of government performance differently depending on who is leading the government. By showing that asymmetry in the president-in-power effect reverses over time, our results paint a nuanced picture of partisan bias that highlights the importance of studying the evolution of biases instead of assuming them to be fixed.

Last, we contribute to the literature on the president-in-power effect. Prior research shows the existence of a president-in-power effect for evaluations of the federal government (Keele, 2005; Gershtenson et al., 2006; Morisi et al., 2019), the economy (Evans and Andersen, 2006; Gerber and Huber, 2009), public institutions (Jilke, 2018), and democracy itself (Anderson and Guillory, 1997; Anderson and Tverdova, 2003; Blais and Gélineau, 2007). Our research makes three distinct contributions. First, we show that the effect grows over time, with a faster growth rate for Democrats than for Republicans. Second, we provide evidence that the president-in-power effect is positively associated with the strength of partisanship and the gap between partisans' own position and the perceived position of the opposite party. Third, we demonstrate that the president-in-power effect is stronger for highly educated people.

Analysis

To study the evolution of the president-in-power effect, we use 40 years of data from the General Social Survey (GSS). The GSS is an annual/biannual face-to-face survey administered by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. The survey contains questions on a wide range of political, economic, and religious topics. Each year's sample is an independent, nationally representative cross-section of American adults. After excluding respondents with incomplete information, our data contains 43,928 observations. Section A1 in the Supplementary Material gives additional details about the final data set used in the analyses.

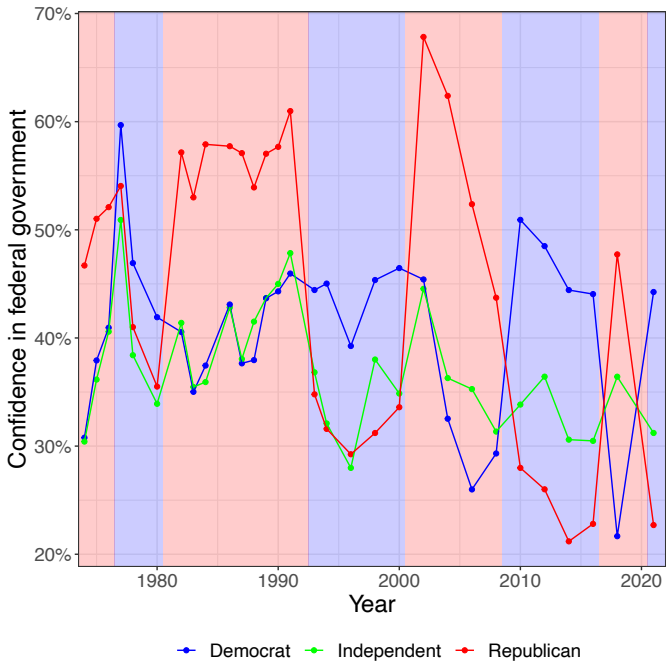
Our main outcome variable is a respondent's confidence in the federal government. Respondents rate their confidence on a three-point scale ranging from 'hardly any' to 'a a great deal'. We code these responses as 0 (hardly any), 0.5 (only some), and 1 (a great deal). To measure partisan identity, we use respondents' self-rated partisanship, which is chosen from 7 values ranging from 'strong Democrat' to 'strong Republican'. We code respondents as Democrats and Republicans when they identify as 'strong Democrat/Republican', 'not very strong Democrat/Republican', or 'Independent, close to Democrat/Republican', respectively. We code as Independents those who identify as 'Independent'.[2]

In our analysis, we use confidence in the federal government as a proxy for political trust, a common practice substantiated by a large body of empirical literature (see, for instance, Foster and Frieden (2017)) While the constructs of 'trust' and 'confidence' are closely associated (Citrin, 1974; Hetherington, 1998; Chanley et al., 2000), it is important to highlight some important differences. Specifically, 'trust in government' embodies a deep-seated belief, anchored in the anticipation that the government will function with integrity and reliability (Hetherington, 1998). This form of trust is relatively stable, enduring over time as it is rooted in fundamental expectations of governmental conduct. On the other hand, 'confidence in government' reflects a more immediate assessment that depends on citizens' evaluations of the government's adeptness in managing specific issues. Consequently, confidence is more volatile and sways with contemporary events or specific policy outcomes, making it a dynamic indicator of public sentiment.

[2]Figures A1 and A2 in the Supplementary Material show that our results are robust to using alternative partisan classification schemes.

Figure 1 shows the level of confidence in the federal government among partisans between 1974 and 2021. The president-in-power effect is apparent for both Republican and Democrat-leaning subjects, as each group's confidence in the government fluctuates markedly depending on the party of the incumbent president. Independents, by contrast, are less responsive to the president's party, and for most of the sample, their confidence in the government neatly tracks the level of out-party partisans.[3]

Figure 1: Confidence in federal government



Notes: The figure shows confidence in the federal government for Democrats (blue), Independents (green), and Republicans (red). Blue-shaded regions indicate Democrat presidencies while red-shaded regions indicate Republican presidencies.

To formally assess the evolution of the president-in-power effect, we consider all turnover elections between 1974 and 2021 in which the party of the incumbent president loses the election. Such turnover elections provide a natural experiment that allows us to examine the degree to which Republicans and Democrats lose (gain) trust in the government when their supported party loses (wins) the presidential election. To causally estimate the president-in-power effect, we use Independents as a control group and compare partisans' change in confidence through a turnover election to the same

[3]Since the mid-2000s, confidence among Independents has remained largely stable while out-party partisans have become increasingly skeptical of current governments.

change among Independents using a difference-in-differences approach. The identifying assumption is that Independents' confidence in the government does not systematically vary with the party in power.[4] Figure 1 provides tentative support for this assumption, while Section A3 in the Supplementary Material explores the parallel trends assumption in more detail. Section A2 in the Supplementary Material explains the empirical strategy in detail.

In our main specification, we consider the two most recent surveys before and after each turnover election.[5] We additionally consider shrinking window regressions where we progressively shift forward the first year of the sample, and fixed window regressions where we estimate the effect in all 15-year periods in our data.[6][7] In all analyses, we control for income, age, gender, employment status, education level, race, religion, and the year of the survey. For all variables except income, we allow for maximal flexibility in the functional form of the relationship by including the variables as fixed effects. For each turnover election, we present two estimates: the president-in-power effect itself, corresponding to the treatment effect for Democrats, and an estimate of whether the effect is asymmetric between Republicans and Democrats. The treatment effect for Republicans is the sum of the two estimates.

Figure 2 presents the results. Panel A shows a clear upward trend in the president-in-power effect over time. In 1977, when Carter succeeded Ford, Democrats' confidence in the federal government increased by 0.07 points ($t = 2.56$; $p = 0.010$) compared to otherwise similar Independents. When Biden took office in 2021, by contrast, the effect size more than quadrupled, and Democrats' confidence increased by 0.31 points ($t = 9.75$; $p < 0.001$).[8] Panels B and C, which consider shrinking and shifting windows, confirm that the president-in-power effect has risen continuously since 1974.

Contrasting the upward trend in the president-in-power effect, however, there is some indication

[4] To accommodate the fact that the composition of Independents has changed over time (Twenge et al., 2016), we add a rich set of control variables and make the weaker assumption of conditional independence.

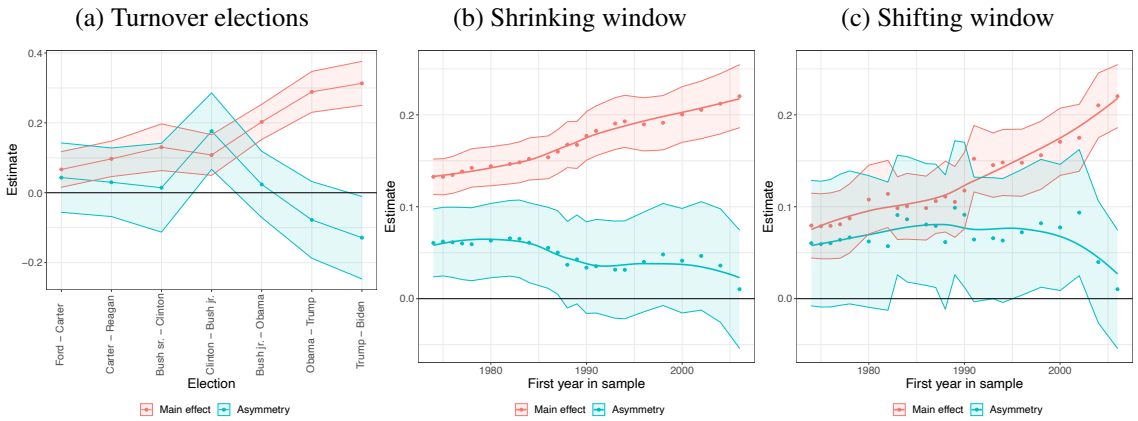
[5] The only exceptions are the elections in 2016 and 2020 because no surveys were conducted in 2020 as the result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Hence, for 2016, we only consider one post-election survey (2018), and for 2020, we consider only one pre-election survey (2018) and one post-election survey (2021).

[6] The shrinking window analysis estimates our main regression model for the following subsamples: 1974 to 2021, 1975 to 2021, 1976 to 2021, etc. The fixed window analysis estimates our main regression model for the subsamples of 1974 to 1988, 1975 to 1989, 1976 to 1990, etc.

[7] Figure A10 in the Supplementary Material shows the results for different window lengths. All conclusions remain unchanged.

[8] Table A4 in the Supplementary Material shows the tabular results.

Figure 2: Evolution of president-in-power effect

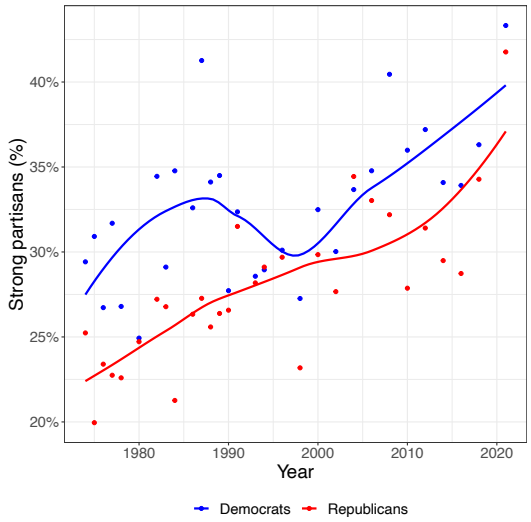


Notes: The figure shows the evolution of the president-in-power effect for Democrats and Republicans. Panel A shows the estimates for all electoral turnovers using the two most recent GSS surveys before and after the election. Panel B shows the estimates for a shrinking window, where the horizontal axis displays the first year of the subsample, with each subsample ending in 2021. Panel C shows the estimates for a shifting 15-year window, where the horizontal axis displays the first year of the subsample. The red dots and curve show the main president-in-power effect. The blue dots and curve show the difference in the president-in-power effect between Republicans and Democrats. Shaded areas depict 95% confidence intervals.

that the asymmetry between Republicans and Democrats has steadily decreased over time. While Republicans exhibited stronger own-party favoritism for all elections until 2008, the asymmetry has reversed for the two most recent elections. Indeed, for Biden's election, the president-in-power effect is 0.13 points ($t = -2.14$; $p = 0.033$) stronger for Democrats than Republicans. The effect in the most recent electoral turnover statistically significantly lower than all previous turnovers (Wald tests, all $p < 0.048$), except the Bush sr. - Clinton transition ($p = 0.106$) and the Obama - Trump transition ($p = 0.535$). The decrease in the asymmetry is not significant for the shrinking and shifting window analyses, although the estimate in the most recent period is still consistently lower than the preceding periods.

To explain our two main results—the president-in-power effect increases over time whereas the asymmetry between Republicans and Democrats decreases—we draw on findings from social identity theory and the literature on motivated reasoning. Starting with the increase in the main effect, social identity theory suggests that stronger identification with one's in-group makes people more negatively predisposed towards members of the out-group and more positively towards members of the in-group (Iyengar and Westwood, 2015). Hence, the centrality of political identity to one's self-image should

Figure 3: Strength of partisan identification



Notes: The figure shows the average strength of partisan identification for Republican and Democrat-leaning respondents. The vertical axis shows the fraction of partisans who identify strongly with their party.

aggravate the president-in-power effect. To test this hypothesis, we first investigate whether people who identify strongly with their party exhibit a stronger effect, and then examine changes the intensity of partisan identification over time. Table A6 shows that the president-in-power effect is more than twice as strong for people who strongly identify with their party compared to those with medium to low identification. Figure 3 shows a bipartisan increase in the strength of partisan identification since 1974. The latter finding is consistent with prior research by (West and Iyengar, 2022). Taken together, these patterns explain the rise in the president-in-power effect, as the fraction of strong partisans, who display larger effects, increases on both sides of the spectrum. Indeed, the increase in the strength of identification closely corresponds with the rise in the president-in-power effect.

We then show that the intensification of partisan identification is accompanied—and perhaps partly explained—by a perceived rise in elite polarization (see Section A5 in the Supplementary Material). In other words, partisans perceive a growing distance between their own ideology and that of the opposite party.[9] In conclusion, the combined effect of partisans identifying increasingly strongly with their party and elites moving away from each other produces an increasingly strong president-in-power effect.

[9]Because these patterns are roughly the same for Democrats and Republicans, however, changes in the perceived distance towards the other party cannot explain the evolution of the asymmetry.

To explain the apparent decrease in the asymmetry between Republicans and Democrats, we focus on changes in the demographic composition of both groups. Existing literature shows that highly educated individuals tend to be more politically aware and actively involved (Zaller, 1992; Carpini and Keeter, 1996). Consequently, it is plausible that this demographic group exhibits heightened levels of the president-in-power effect because they have a more nuanced understanding of policy differences between parties, which amplifies their sensitivity to shifts in party control at the White House (Druckman. et al., 2013; Lavine et al., 2012). Another reason why highly educated individuals might display a larger effect is that people with advanced reasoning abilities are prone to engaging in motivated reasoning (Kahan et al., 2017), although later research calls this finding into question (Pennycook and Rand, 2019).

We put this hypothesis to a test by first examining the president-in-power effect across education groups, and then exploring trends in partisan alignment among educated people. Table 1 shows that highly educated people display a significantly stronger president-in-power effect than lower-educated people. This finding is consistent with stronger political awareness and higher proneness to motivated reasoning among those with higher education levels. In the next step, we examine the difference in education levels between Republicans and Democrats over time. Figure 4 reveals a notable increase in the number of highly educated individuals identifying as Democrats, a trend that mirrors the evolution of the asymmetry in the president-in-power effect. Taken together, these results provide a plausible reason why the president-in-power effect might have grown more on the left than on the right. To corroborate this interpretation, Figures A6 to A8 demonstrate that the evolution of the president-in-power effect is comparatively stable within education groups, thereby suggesting that composition plays an important role in explaining the observed changes. Section A3 in the Supplementary Material shows that our results cannot be explained by psychological differences between conservatives and liberals (Morisi et al., 2019).

An interesting additional question is whether there exists a congress-in-power effect, whereby alignment with the majority party in the Senate and House of Representatives affects partisans' confidence in the government. To explore the existence and evolution of such an effect, we estimate the same model as before, but now with additional alignment dummies for the Senate and House

Table 1: Effect of alignment on trust in government by education level

	No HS	HS	Junior college	Bachelor	Graduate
Democrat	−0.001	−0.030***	−0.063***	−0.098***	−0.111***
	(0.012)	(0.007)	(0.023)	(0.015)	(0.021)
Republican	0.027**	−0.009	−0.055**	−0.095***	−0.101***
	(0.014)	(0.008)	(0.023)	(0.015)	(0.022)
President-in-power effect	0.089***	0.147***	0.153***	0.235***	0.268***
	(0.009)	(0.005)	(0.015)	(0.009)	(0.013)
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	7,581	19,672	2,252	6,088	3,042
Adjusted R^2	0.053	0.092	0.104	0.166	0.172

Notes: The table shows the estimated effect of alignment with the incumbent president on confidence in the federal government. *Republicans* and *Democrats* are indicator variables that take the value of 1 if a respondent is Republican or Democrat, respectively. *Independents* are the control group. *President-in-power effect* is an indicator variable that takes the value of 1 if the respondent is aligned with the incumbent president. *Socioeconomic controls* include individual-level data for employment, income, ethnicity, education, age, gender, and religion. The results are shown separately per education class. Column 1 shows the results for high school dropouts, Column 2 for high school graduates, Column 3 for Junior/community college graduates, Column 4 for bachelor's, and Column 5 for people with graduate degrees. Standard errors are given in parentheses. Asterisks denote significance at the 0.01 (***), 0.05 (**) and 0.1 (*) level.

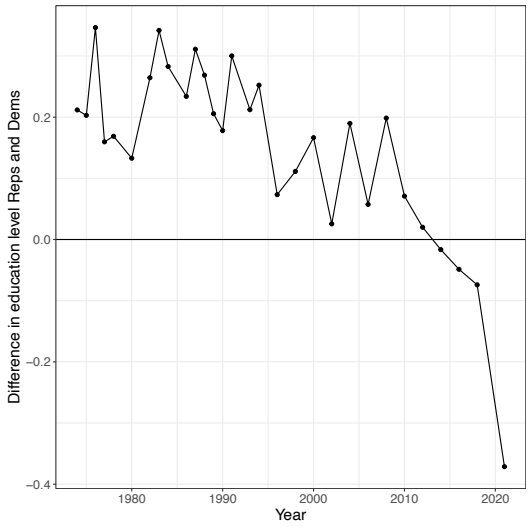
of Representatives. We furthermore consider an additional outcome variables, namely confidence in Congress.

Figure A9 in the Supplementary Material show the results. There appears to be a significant Congress-in-Power effect for alignment with the House of Representatives, but not for alignment with the Senate. Moreover, the House effect is stronger for Democrats than for Republicans, as can be seen from the negative asymmetry estimates. In contrast to our main analysis, we find comparatively little evidence that the Congress-in-Power effect has changed over time.

Discussion

In this study, we investigate the evolution of the president-in-power effect—the tendency to report high or low levels of trust in government depending on whether they are run by their supported or opposed party. Mirroring the overall rise in polarization, our findings show a persistent increase in

Figure 4: Difference in education level between Republicans and Democrats



Notes: The figure shows the difference in the average education level between Republican and Democrat respondents. Education is measured on a five-point scale, consisting of high school drop-out (1), high school graduate (2), junior/community college graduate (3), bachelor's (4), and graduate degree holder (5). Positive values indicate higher education levels for Republicans, negative values indicate higher education levels for Democrats.

the president-in-power effect. This increase is both economically and statistically significant, with the effect size quadrupling between 1974 and 2021. Our research demonstrates that this increase can be attributed to an intensification of partisan identification, combined with a growing perceived ideological distance towards the opposed party. Both these factors exacerbate in-group/out-group biases, leading to heightened distrust of governments led by the other side.

Contrasting the notion that polarization is stronger on the right than on the left (Hacker and Pierson, 2015), however, we find some evidence that the president-in-power effect has grown faster among Democrats than Republicans. Although Republicans initially display a stronger president-in-power effect, this asymmetry reverses over time. We show that this reversal is caused by a changing composition of Democrat and Republican voters. Our results show that the president-in-power effect is considerably stronger for higher-educated individuals, who have recently shifted towards the left. This leftward shift precisely coincides with the reversal of the president-in-power effect.

The general increase in the president-in-power effect shows that both parties are increasingly unwilling to grant legitimacy to opposed governments. Even though it is unsurprising or even logical that people trust institutions more when they are run by their preferred party, our findings raise con-

cerns about democratic functioning. After all, partisans have become less willing to hold their own politicians accountable for their actions, and potentially more inclined to undermine those on the other side. Democracy requires that all parties recognize the legitimacy of the current government, independent of who is leading it. The required level of trust and willingness to accept defeat becomes increasingly unlikely to be met if the trends we observe continue into the future.

Our research also highlights the importance of treating partisan bias as a moving factor rather than a fixed one. A large body of prior research seeks to answer whether left or right-leaning people are more biased (Baron and Jost, 2019; Ditto et al., 2019). Our findings suggest that both might have been true at different points in time. Hence, our results demonstrate the deficiency of models trying to explain differences in politically motivated reasoning by static factors such as psychological differences between conservatives and liberals. Instead, our findings point towards the need for a more nuanced understanding of what drives bias in different contexts to fully appreciate partisan differences.

Furthermore, by showing a positive relationship between education and the president-in-power effect, our results cast doubt on the notion that better education insulates people from in-group/out-group biases. Hence, to mitigate the negative effects of such biases, new methods need to be developed. Some promising avenues are to reframe political issues in different moral terms for conservatives and liberals (Feinberg and Willer, 2013), and to ask partisans to explain policy issues in detail (Fernbach et al., 2013). More research is needed, however, to develop methods that can be employed at scale.

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Supplementary Material for *Origin of (A)symmetry: The Evolution of Out-Party Distrust in the United States*

The supplemental materials provide additional details about the data and analyses described in the main text of the article, as well as follow-up analyses and robustness checks. Section A1 provides a detailed overview of the GSS data. Section A2 provides additional details for the estimation strategy. Section A3 examines the validity of the identifying assumptions in our main analysis. Section A4 presents an analyses for whether the president-in-power effect is driven by ideology or partisanship. Section A5 shows the evolution of perceived ideological distance towards the other party. Section A6 gives additional tables and figures that examine the robustness of our results.

A1 Data

Table A1 shows descriptive statistics for Democrats, Independents, and Republicans under Democrat and Republican presidencies. Both Democrats and Republicans report higher confidence in the federal government during own-party presidencies as compared to other-party presidencies. In terms of socioeconomic characteristics, Republicans were on average richer, more likely to be white, and higher educated than Democrats. In addition, respondents in each partisan group are younger, poorer and less highly educated during Republican presidencies. These differences arise because relatively many Republican presidencies took place in earlier parts of our sample period. Since these changes appear to be symmetric between groups, there is no reason to believe that group composition changes between presidencies.

Table A1: Summary statistics

	Democrats		**Independents**		**Republicans**	
	Pres = Rep	Pres = Dem	Pres = Rep	Pres = Dem	Pres = Rep	Pres = Dem
Party president	Republican	Democrat	Republican	Democrat	Republican	Democrat
Confidence Federal Government	0.36	0.46	0.38	0.34	0.55	0.31
Age	45.83	47.20	41.44	42.95	46.68	48.25
Unemployed	0.04	0.04	0.05	0.05	0.03	0.03
Income	$28,095	$31,499	$27,337	$27,140	$36,299	$38,826
College	0.12	0.17	0.10	0.11	0.18	0.20
Black	0.23	0.21	0.11	0.11	0.04	0.03

Notes: The table shows summary statistics for Democrats, Independents, and Republicans. For each group, we give information under both Republican and Democrat presidencies. *Party president* is the party of the incumbent president. *Confidence in Federal Government* gives people's confidence in the federal government. Responses are coded as 0 (hardly any), 0.5 (only some), and 1 (a great deal). *Age* is a respondent's age in years. *Unemployed* is a dummy variable that takes the value of 1 if a respondent is unemployed and 0 otherwise. *Income* is a family's income in constant dollars. *College* is the fraction of respondents with a bachelor's degree or more. *Black* is the fraction of African Americans.

A2 Methodology

We follow the logic of a difference-in-differences estimator; when the president changes from Republican to Democrat (or vice versa), we estimate Republicans' (Democrats') president-in-power effect as their change in institutional confidence before and after the election, minus the same change in institutional confidence for Independents. Using Independents as a control group eliminates all factors other than alignment that might confound institutional confidence. Hence, our approach allows us to isolate the causal effect of presidential alignment on institutional trust.

We estimate the following model:

$$Y_{it} = \beta_1 \times Dem_{it} + \beta_2 \times Rep_{it} + \beta_3 \times Support_{it} + \beta_4 \times Rep_{it} \times Support_{it} + \delta X_{it} + \alpha_t + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (1)$$

Y_{it} is subject i's confidence in the federal government in year t. Rep_{it} and Dem_{it} are indicator variables that take the value of 1 if an individual identifies as either Republican or Democrat, respectively. $Support_{it}$ is an indicator variable that takes the value of 1 if respondent i supports the party of the incumbent president. X_{it} is a vector of control variables that include age, income, gender, employment, education, race, and religion. The main parameters of interest are β_3, which measures the effect of presidential alignment on institutional trust, and β_4, which measures whether the effect is different between Republicans and Democrats. We weigh observations by the weights given in the GSS data to obtain representative samples.

Our difference-in-differences specification may raise questions about negative weights (see e.g. De Chaisemartin and d'Haultfoeuille, 2020). Because treatment never overlaps between Democrats and Republicans, however, our methodology never compares newly treated units with already treated units, and negative weights do not occur. The minimum weight is 0 and the maximum weight is 0.059 (estimated using de Chaisemartin, d'Haultfoeuille and Deeb (2019)). When we estimate the overall president-in-power effect for Republicans and Democrats combined using the did_multiplegt function

in R (De Chaisemartin, d'Haultfoeuille and Guyonvarch, 2019), the estimated effect is similar to our main estimate (0.182 vs. 0.163).[1]

A3 Parallel Trends Assumption

The main identifying assumption of our difference-in-differences analysis is that outcomes for Independents on the one hand, and Democrats and Republicans on the other hand, would have developed similarly had there been no treatment.

To examine the validity of the parallel trends assumption, it is most useful to focus on our analysis that considers each turnover election separately (Panel A in Figure 2), because the rolling and shrinking window regressions have multiple periods in which treatment turns on and off for both Democrats and Republicans. For each turnover election, we consider two periods before and after the election. We then estimate the following model that includes separate time dummies (pre- and post-election) for both Democrats and Republicans:

$$\begin{aligned} Y_{it} = \beta_1 \times Dem_{it} + \beta_2 \times Rep_{it} + \sum_{k=-2}^{1} \gamma_{dem}^{k} \times \mathbb{1}_{t=k} \times \mathbb{1}_{Democrat} + \\ \sum_{k=-2}^{1} \gamma_{rep}^{k} \times \mathbb{1}_{t=k} \times \mathbb{1}_{Republican} + \delta X_{it} + \alpha_t + \varepsilon_{it} \end{aligned} \tag{2}$$

where $\mathbb{1}_{t=k}$ is an indicator variable that takes the value of 1 if a respondent answered the survey in year k, measured in years relative to the turnover election. $\mathbb{1}_{Democrat}$ and $\mathbb{1}_{Republican}$ are indicator variables that take the value of 1 if a respondent is Democrat or Republican, respectively. The last period before the election ($t = -1$) is taken as the reference point.

The time dummies γ_{dem}^{k} and γ_{rep}^{k} measure the trend difference between Independents on the one hand, and Democrats and Republicans on the other. The estimates from before the election (γ^{-2}) indicate whether there are differences in pre-trends for Republicans and Democrats (compared to Independents). The estimates for after the election (γ^{0} and γ^{1}) provide estimates for the treatment effects. As in our main analysis, we control for income, age, gender, employment status, education level, race, and religion.

Figure A1 shows the results. We find little to no evidence of pre-trend violations. 11 of out of 12 pre-trend estimates are statistically insignificant. The figure also highlights the increase in the president-in-power effect over time, with post-election estimates being smaller for earlier elections compared to later ones. Table A2 shows the regression tables underlying the figures.

Despite the fact that we find no evidence of parallel trends violations, one may nevertheless be concerned that Independents do not constitute a valid control group, for example because their composition changes with each election. To address this concern, we also estimate an event study specification, where we compare Republican/Democrat confidence in the federal government before and after an election. In particular, we estimate the following model:

$$Y_{it} = \beta_1 \times Dem_{it} + \beta_2 \times Rep_{it} + \beta_3 \times Support_{it} + \beta_4 \times Rep_{it} \times Support_{it} + \delta X_{it} + \varepsilon_{it} \tag{3}$$

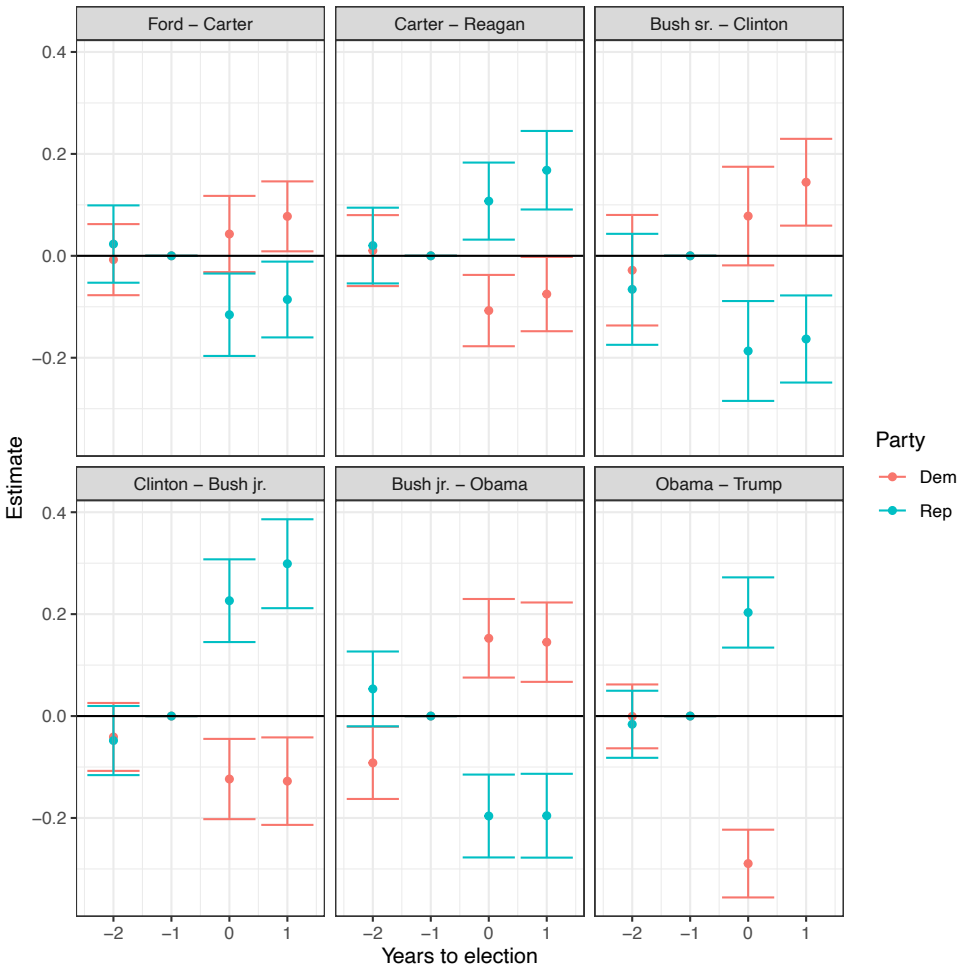
[1] These estimates are without additional controls, because the did_multiplegt function in R does not allow for additional fixed effects besides party and year.

Table A2: Estimation pre- and post-trends for each turnover election, regression tables

	Ford - Carter	Carter - Reagan	Bush sr. - Clinton	Clinton - Bush jr.	Bush jr. - Obama	Obama - Trump
Dem.	0.011	0.085***	−0.001	0.103***	0.003	0.111***
	(0.025)	(0.025)	(0.035)	(0.024)	(0.029)	(0.023)
Rep.	0.103***	0.002	0.161***	−0.022	0.149***	−0.080***
	(0.027)	(0.027)	(0.035)	(0.024)	(0.031)	(0.024)
Dem. x Year = -2	−0.008	0.010	−0.028	−0.041	−0.092**	−0.001
	(0.036)	(0.036)	(0.055)	(0.034)	(0.036)	(0.032)
Dem. x Year = 0	0.043	−0.107***	0.078	−0.124***	0.153***	−0.289***
	(0.038)	(0.036)	(0.049)	(0.040)	(0.039)	(0.034)
Dem. x Year = 1	0.077**	−0.075**	0.144***	−0.128***	0.145***	
	(0.035)	(0.037)	(0.043)	(0.044)	(0.040)	
Rep. x Year = -2	0.023	0.020	−0.066	−0.048	0.053	−0.016
	(0.039)	(0.038)	(0.056)	(0.035)	(0.037)	(0.034)
Rep. x Year = 0	−0.116***	0.107***	−0.187***	0.226***	−0.196***	0.203***
	(0.041)	(0.039)	(0.050)	(0.041)	(0.041)	(0.035)
Rep. x Year = 1	−0.086**	0.168***	−0.163***	0.299***	−0.196***	
	(0.038)	(0.039)	(0.044)	(0.045)	(0.042)	
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Socioeconomic controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	5,406	5,667	4,273	4,639	5,095	4,464
Adjusted R^2	0.060	0.055	0.087	0.111	0.117	0.131

Notes: The table shows the estimated president-in-power effect for Democrats and Republicans for all electoral turnovers using the two most recent GSS surveys before and after the election as plotted in Figure A1. The outcome variable is confidence in the federal government. Republicans and Democrats are indicator variables that take the value of 1 if a respondent is Republican or Democrat, respectively. Independents are the control group. President-in-power effect is an indicator variable that takes the value of 1 if the respondent is aligned with the incumbent president. Socioeconomic controls include individual level data for employment, income, ethnicity, education, age, gender and religion. The results are shown separately per turnover election. Standard errors are given in parentheses. Asterisks denote significance at the 0.01 (***), 0.05 (**) and 0.1 (*) level.

Figure A1: Estimation pre- and post-trends for each turnover election

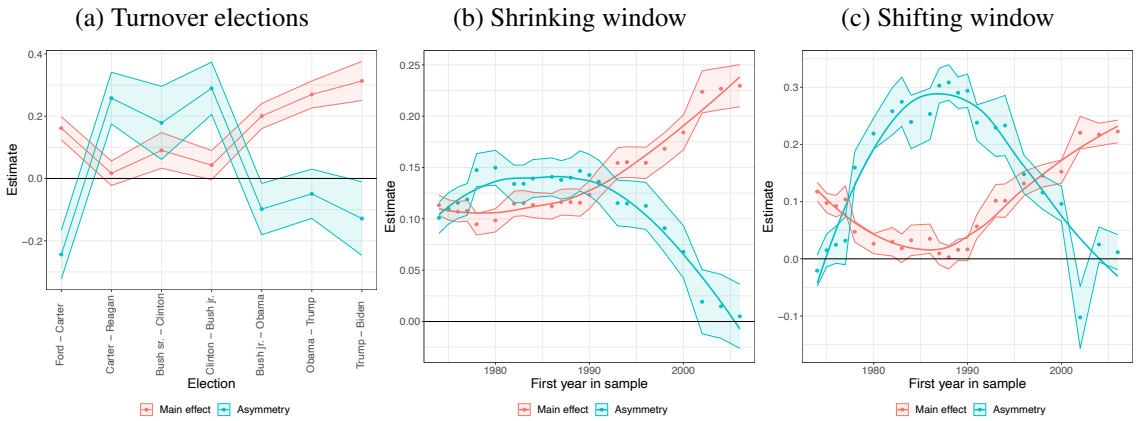


Notes: The figure shows the estimated president-in-power effect for Democrats and Republicans for all electoral turnovers using the two most recent GSS surveys before and after the election. The red dots and curve show the main president-in-power effect. The blue dots and curve show the difference in the president-in-power effect between Republicans and Democrats. Shaded areas depict 95% confidence intervals.

The event study analysis excludes all Independent respondents. Instead of year fixed effects, X_{it} now contains separate linear time trends for Republicans and Democrats. All other definitions are the same as in Equation (1).

Figure A2 shows the results of the event study. The results are broadly consistent with our main analysis, as the president-in-power effect increases over time, while the asymmetry shows a decreasing trend. The main difference is that the current analysis shows a hump-shaped pattern for the asymmetry estimate, which increases until the early 80s, and decreases thereafter. Nevertheless, our main conclusions remain unchanged.

Figure A2: Evolution of president-in-power effect, event study



Notes: The figure shows the evolution of the president-in-power effect for Democrats and Republicans using an event study methodology. Treatment effects are estimated according to Equation (3). All definitions are as in Figure 2.

A4 Partisanship vs. Ideology

This section examines whether the president-in-power effect is primarily driven by partisanship or ideology. Morisi et al. (2019) suggest that the president-in-power effect is related to psychological differences between conservatives and liberals. As such, their theory predicts that the effect is driven by ideology. Social identity theory, by contrast, suggests that partisan identification is the main driver of the effect (Iyengar et al., 2019). To distinguish between these two explanations, we consider the subset of conservative Democrats (31% of self-identified conservatives) and liberal Republicans (16% of self-identified liberals). Insofar as conservative ideology enhances the effect, we should expect to find a stronger effect among conservative Democrats than liberal Republicans. The control group is the same as in our main analyses. We estimate Equation (1) using the whole sample period.

Table A3 shows the regression results. Contrasting the ideology explanation, we find no compelling evidence of an asymmetry between liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats. If anything, the effect is slightly stronger for the former than the latter, although the difference is statistically insignificant. Because we do find a strong main president-in-power effect, the current analysis supports the notion that partisanship is a more important driver of the president-in-power effect than ideology.

Table A3: President-in-power effect for conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans

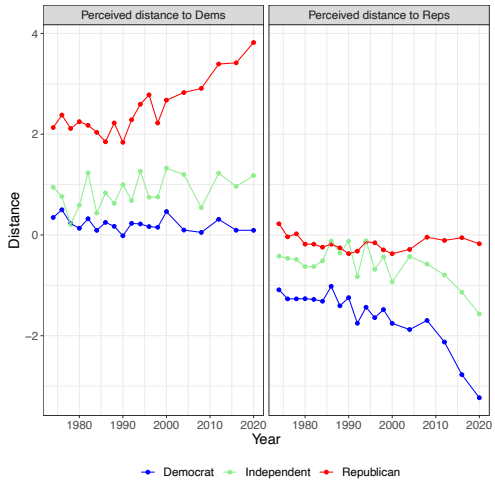
Democrat	0.021**
	(0.010)
Republican	0.029**
	(0.013)
President-in-power effect	0.060***
	(0.014)
Rep. x President-in-power effect	0.032
	(0.027)
Year fixed effects	Yes
Socioeconomic controls	Yes
Observations	11,059
Adjusted R^2	0.056

Notes: The table shows the estimated president-in-power effect for conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans. The outcome variable is confidence in the federal government. *Republicans* and *Democrats* are indicator variables that take the value of 1 if a respondent is Republican or Democrat, respectively. *Independents* are the control group. *President-in-power effect* is an indicator variable that takes the value of 1 if the respondent is aligned with the incumbent president. *Socioeconomic controls* include individual level data for employment, income, ethnicity, education, age, gender and religion. The results are shown separately per education class. Column 1 shows the results for high school dropouts, Column 2 for high school graduates, Column 4 for Junior/community college graduates, Column 4 for bachelor's, and Column 5 for people with graduate degrees. Standard errors are given in parentheses. Asterisks denote significance at the 0.01 (***), 0.05 (**) and 0.1 (*) level.

A5 Ideological Distance

To examine people's perceived ideological distance towards the other party, we use data from the American National Elections Survey (ANES). The data include 20 surveys between 1975 and 2020. We measure ideological distance by the difference between people's answers to the following two questions: "Here is a seven-point scale on which political views are arranged from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Where would you place the Democratic/Republican Party?", and "When it comes to politics, do you usually think of yourself as extremely liberal, liberal, slightly liberal, moderate or middle of the road, slightly conservative, extremely conservative, or haven't you thought much about this?". Both variables are measured on the same 7-point scale, ranging from extremely conservative (7) to extremely liberal (1). Ideological distance towards a party is calculated as the difference between one's own ideology and the ideology of the respective party. Figure A3 shows the average perceived ideological distance between 1974 and 2020. Positive values indicate that people see themselves as more conservative than the other party, whereas negative values indicate that someone perceives themselves as more liberal. Results are discussed in the main text.

Figure A3: Perceived ideological distance to parties



Notes: The figure shows the perceived ideological distance between one's own views and the views of the Republican (left panel) and Democrat (right panel) party. Positive values indicate that a respondent is more conservative than they perceive a party to be, and negative values imply that a respondent perceives themselves as more liberal than the party.

A6 Additional Tables and Figures

Table A4: President-in-power effect per turnover election

	Ford - Carter	Carter - Reagan	Bush sr. - Clinton	Clinton - Bush jr.	Bush jr. - Obama	Obama - Trump	Trump - Biden
Democrat	0.007	−0.007	−0.011	−0.025	−0.050***	−0.178***	−0.170***
	(0.018)	(0.019)	(0.027)	(0.025)	(0.018)	(0.025)	(0.026)
Republican	0.006	0.012	−0.011	−0.045**	−0.046**	−0.088***	−0.076***
	(0.020)	(0.019)	(0.021)	(0.018)	(0.021)	(0.017)	(0.021)
President-in-power effect	0.067**	0.097***	0.130***	0.108***	0.203***	0.289***	0.313***
	(0.026)	(0.026)	(0.034)	(0.030)	(0.026)	(0.030)	(0.032)
Rep. x President-in-power effect	0.043	0.030	0.014	0.176***	0.024	−0.078	−0.129**
	(0.051)	(0.050)	(0.065)	(0.056)	(0.048)	(0.056)	(0.060)
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Socioeconomic controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	5,406	5,667	4,273	4,639	5,095	4,464	3,431
Adjusted R^2	0.060	0.055	0.087	0.110	0.113	0.132	0.135

Table A5: *Notes:* The table shows the estimated president-in-power effect and asymmetry for Democrats and Republicans for all turnover elections. The outcome variable is confidence in the federal government. Republicans and Democrats are indicator variables that take the value of 1 if a respondent is Republican or Democrat, respectively. Independents are the control group. President-in-power effect is an indicator variable that takes the value of 1 if the respondent is aligned with the incumbent president. Socioeconomic controls include individual level data for employment, income, ethnicity, education, age, gender and religion. Standard errors are given in parentheses. Asterisks denote significance at the 0.01 (***), 0.05 (**) and 0.1 (*) level.

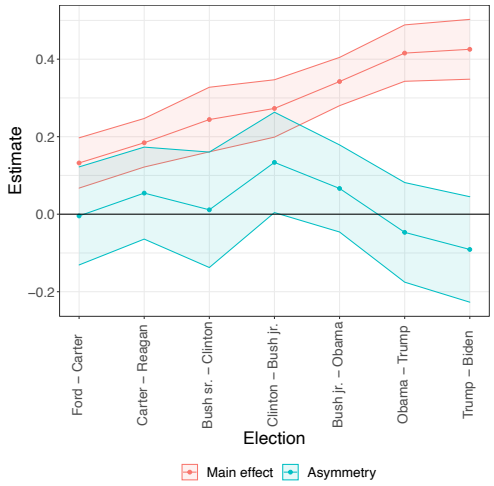
Table A6: President-in-power effect by the strength of partisan identification

	Weak identifiers	Medium identifiers	Strong identifiers
Democrat	-0.040^{***}	0.010	-0.055^{***}
	(0.009)	(0.008)	(0.009)
Republican	-0.044^{***}	-0.005	-0.081^{***}
	(0.010)	(0.009)	(0.010)
President-in-power effect	0.108^{***}	0.072^{***}	0.237^{***}
	(0.013)	(0.011)	(0.012)
Rep. x President-in-power effect	0.045^{**}	0.058^{***}	0.102^{***}
	(0.022)	(0.021)	(0.022)
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Socioeconomic controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	14,204	19,819	15,664
Adjusted R^2	0.072	0.070	0.143

Notes: The table shows the estimated president-in-power effect by strength of partisan identification. The outcome variable is confidence in the federal government. Republicans and Democrats are indicator variables that take the value of 1 if a respondent is Republican or Democrat, respectively. Independents are the control group. President-in-power effect is an indicator variable that takes the value of 1 if the respondent is aligned with the incumbent president. Socioeconomic controls include individual level data for employment, income, ethnicity, education, age, gender and religion. The effect is estimated in different columns for those who identify weakly (Independent, leaning Democrat/Republican) (column 2), medium-strongly (Not very strong Democrat/Republican) (column 3), and strongly with their party (Strongly Democrat/Republican) (column 4). Standard errors are given in parentheses. Asterisks denote significance at the 0.01 (***), 0.05 (**) and 0.1 (*) level.

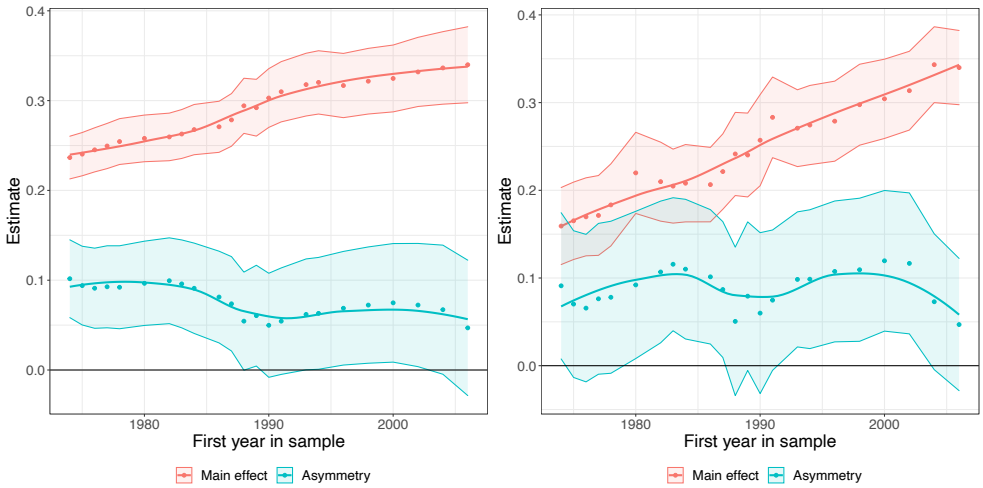
Figure A4: Extreme partisans

(a) Turnover elections



(b) Shrinking window

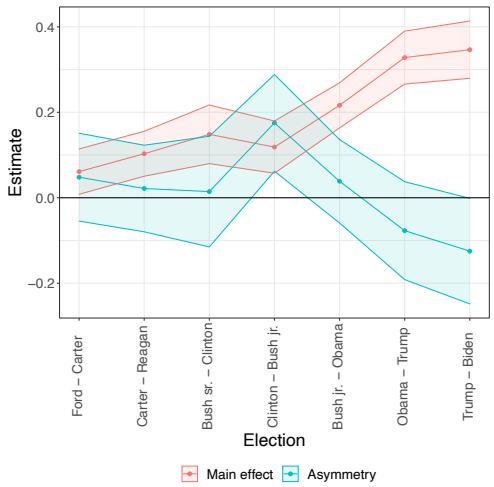
(c) Shifting window



Notes: The figure shows the estimated effect of alignment with the president on confidence in the federal government for people who identify either as strong Republicans or as strong Democrats. We code respondents as Democrats and Republicans when they identify as 'strong Democrat/Republican'. We code as Independents those who identify as 'Independent'. Panel A shows the estimates for all electoral turnovers using the two most recent GSS surveys before and after the election. Panel B shows the estimates for a shrinking window, where the horizontal axis displays the first year of the subsample, with each subsample ending in 2021. Panel C shows the estimates for a shifting 15-year window, where the horizontal axis displays the first year of the subsample. The red dots and curve show the main president-in-power effect. The blue dots and curve show the difference in the president-in-power effect between Republicans and Democrats. Shaded areas depict 95 % confidence intervals.

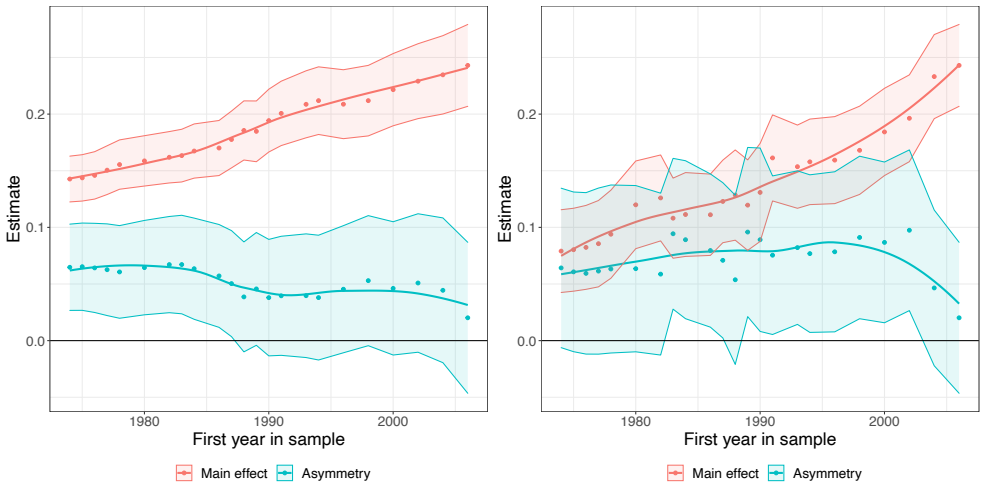
Figure A5: Alternative partisanship classification

(a) Turnover elections



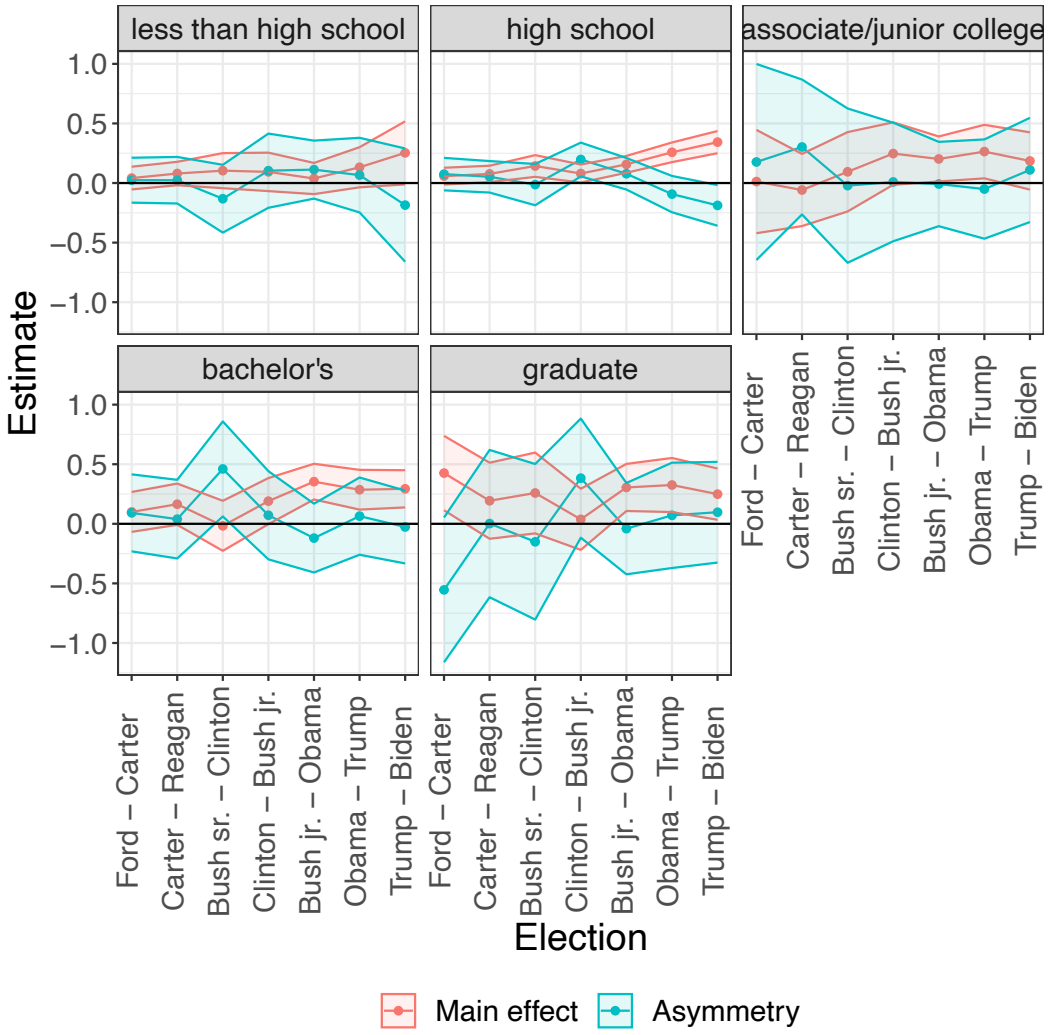
(b) Shrinking window

(c) Shifting window



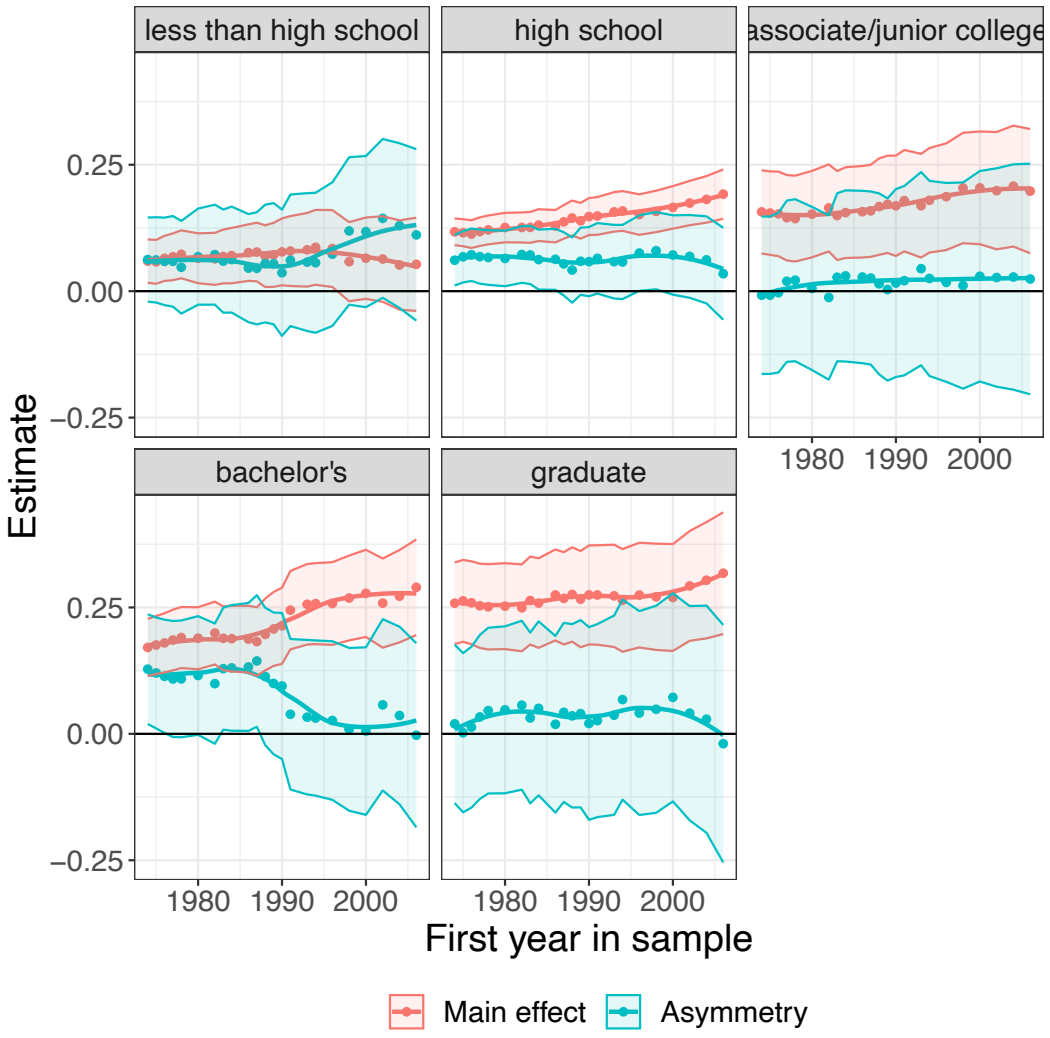
Notes: The figure shows the estimated effect of alignment with the president on confidence in the federal government for an alternative partisan classification scheme. We code respondents as Democrats and Republicans when they identify as 'strong Democrat/Republican' or 'not very strong Democrat/Republican', respectively. We code as Independents those who identify as 'Independent'. All other definitions are as in Figure A4.

Figure A6: Evolution of president-in-power effect per education level, turnover elections



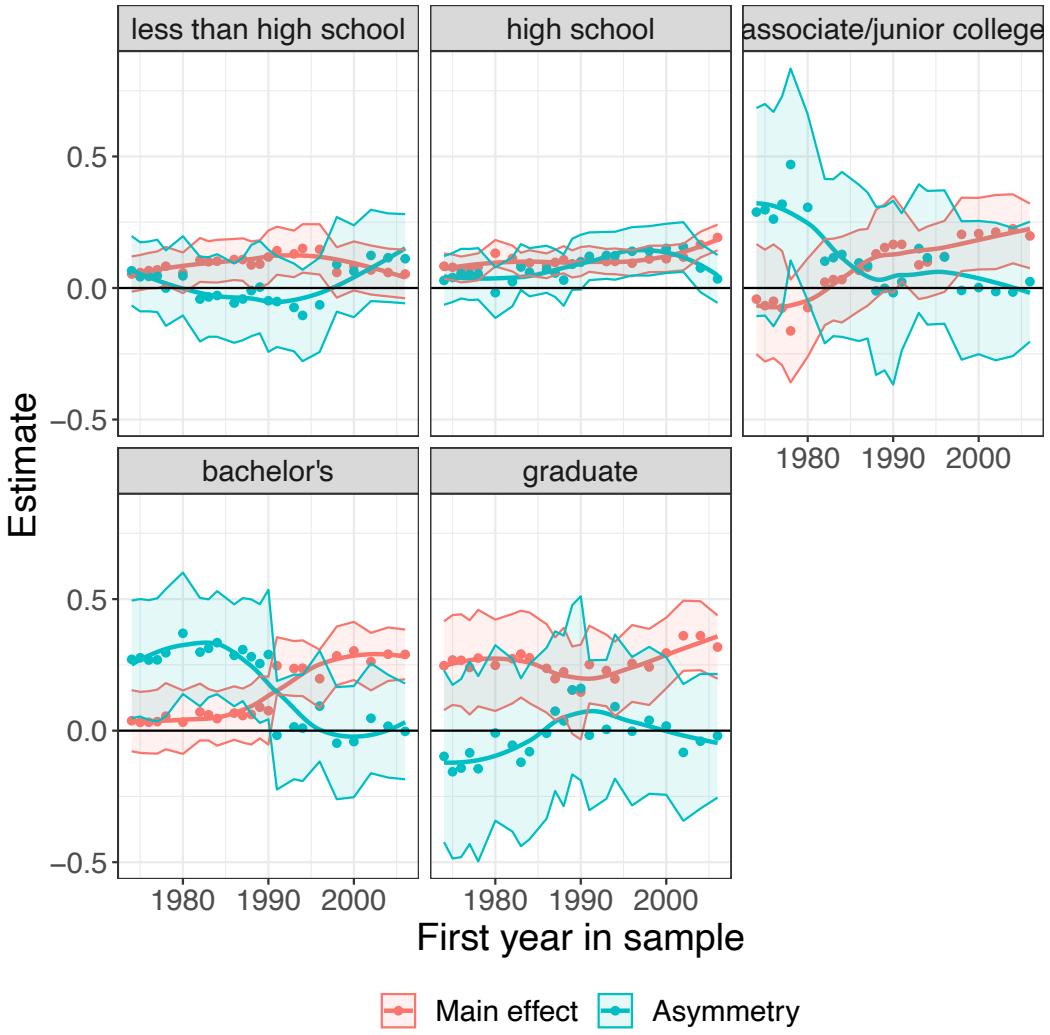
Notes: The figure shows the evolution of the president-in-power effect and asymmetry by education level for every turnover election. All definitions are as in Figure 2.

Figure A7: Evolution of president-in-power effect per education level, shrinking window



Notes: The figure shows the evolution of the president-in-power effect and asymmetry by education level for a shrinking window where the horizontal axis displays the first year of the subsample, with each subsample ending in 2021. All definitions are as in Figure 2.

Figure A8: Evolution of president-in-power effect per education level, shifting window

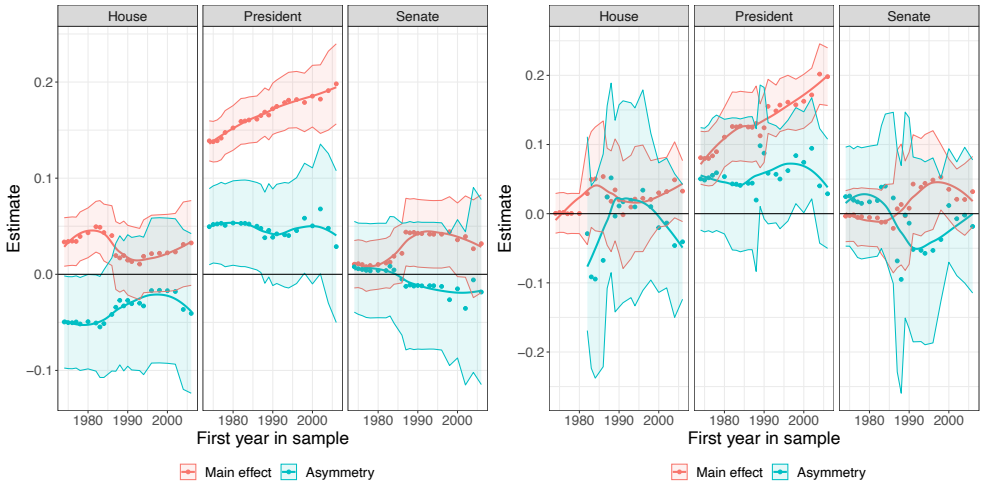


Notes: The figure shows the evolution of the president-in-power effect and asymmetry by education level for a shifting 15-year window, where the horizontal axis displays the first year of the subsample. All definitions are as in Figure 2.

Figure A9: Evolution of president/congress-in-power effect

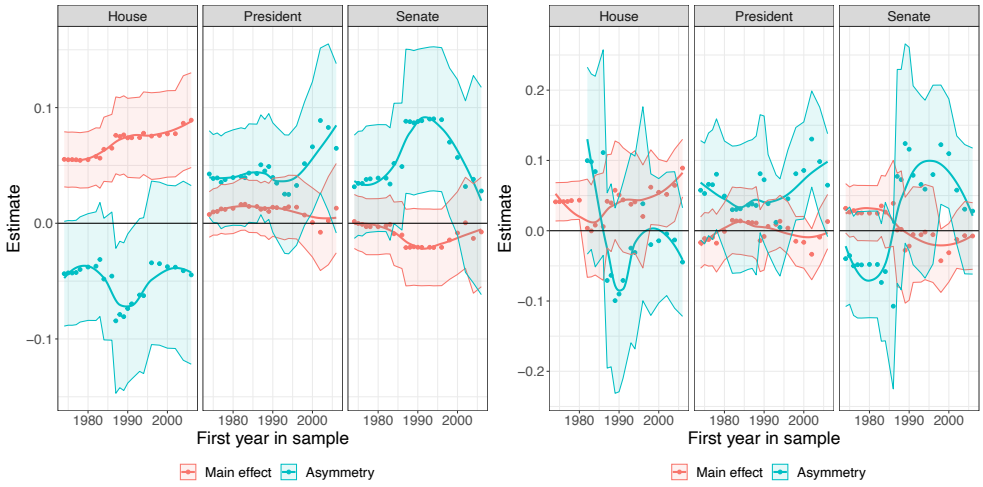
(a) Shrinking window, fed. gov.

(b) Shifting window, fed. gov.



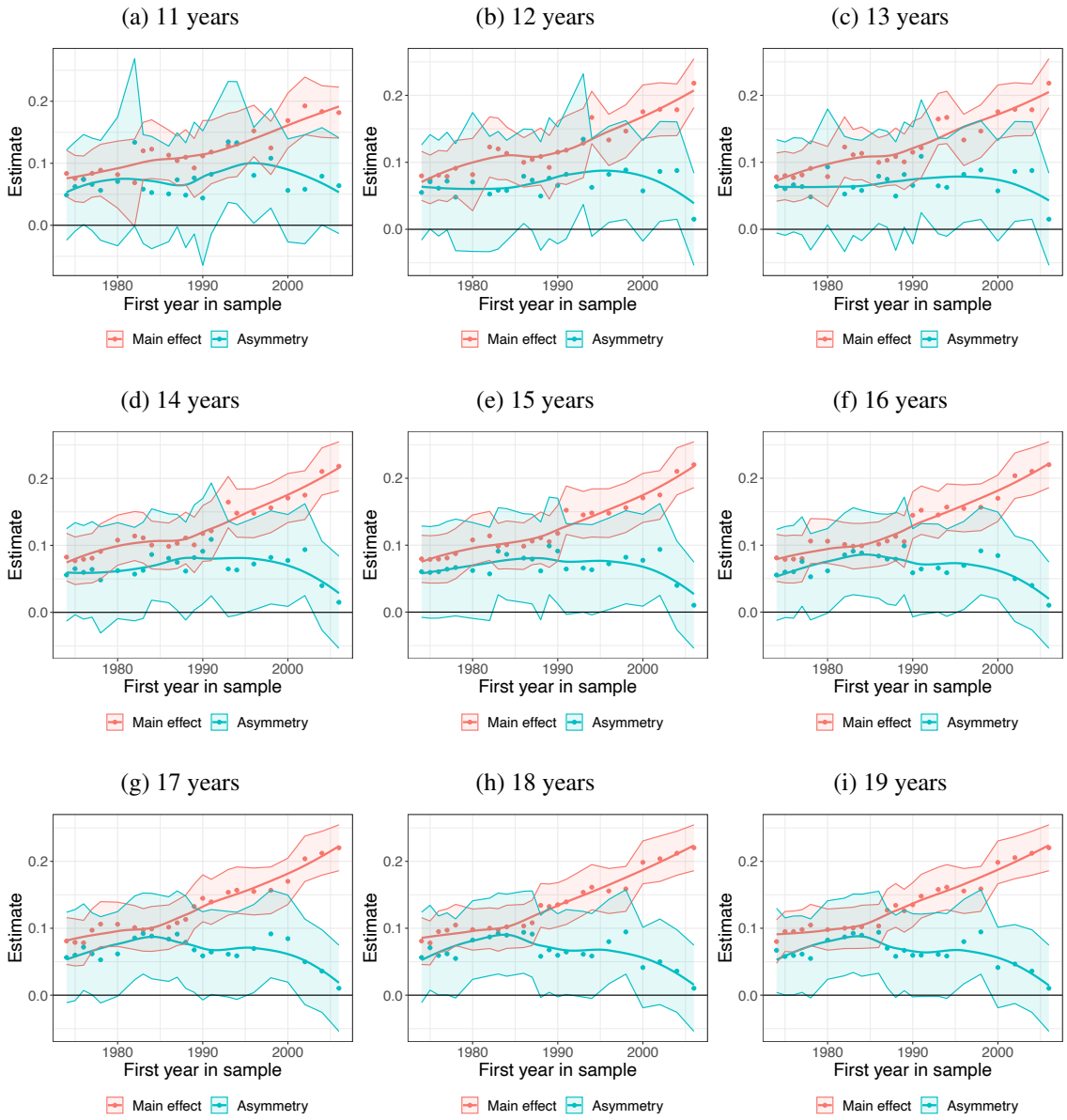
(c) Shrinking window, Congress

(d) Shifting window, Congress



Notes: The figure shows the estimated effect of alignment with the House, President and Senate on confidence in the federal government (a & b)and Congress (c & d). Panels a & c show the estimates for a shrinking window, where the horizontal axis displays the first year of the subsample, with each subsample ending in 2021. Panels b & d show the estimates for a shifting 15-year window, where the horizontal axis displays the first year of the subsample. All definitions are as in Figure 2.

Figure A10: Evolution of president-in-power effect, shifting window of different lengths



Notes: Figure shows the estimates for variable length shifting windows where the horizontal axis displays the first year of the subsample. All definitions are as in Figure 2.

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