

Origin of (A)symmetry

The evolution of Out-Party Distrust in the US

George Melios

London School of Economics and Political Science

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

35 Pages • Posted: 13 Apr 2023 • Last revised: 11 Oct 2023

[Bouke Klein Teeselink](#)

King's College London; Yale School of Management

[Georgios Melios](#)

London School of Economics & Political Science (LSE) - Department of Psychological and Behavioural Science; University College London

Date Written: March 9, 2023

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.

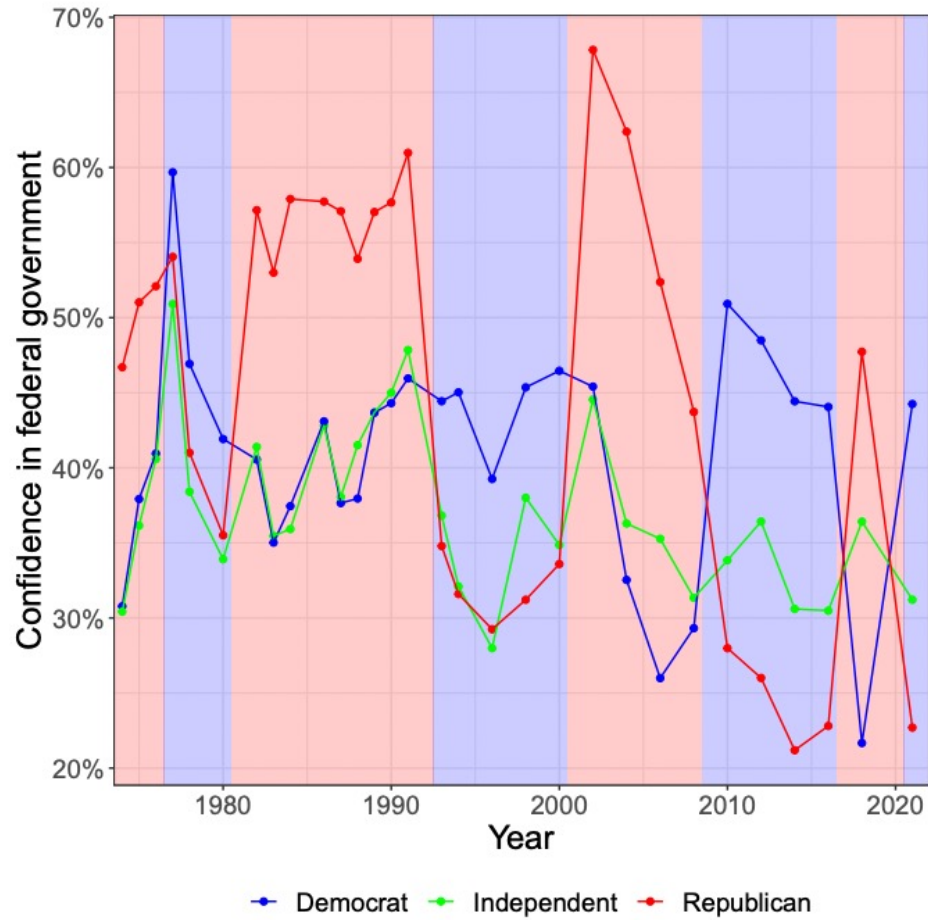
Keywords: Partisanship, Polarization, Political Psychology

Suggested Citation:

Klein Teeselink, Bouke and Melios, Georgios, Origin of (A)symmetry: The Evolution of Out-Party Distrust in the United States (March 9, 2023). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4404221>



Motivation



Partisanship and trust

- Connects to the broader literature debate on:
 - Cross cutting identities
 - Affective Polarisation
 - Partisan biases
- Evidence suggest that:
 - Partisans are more reluctant to grant legitimacy to gov led by the other side (ie Morisi et al., 2019; Jilke, 2018)
 - Threat to democratic functioning
 - Limiting partisans' ability/willingness to hold their party accountable
 - Encourages undermining other-party governments
- Some evidence that:
 - Affective polarization is more pronounced on the conservative end
 - Republicans grow a larger president in power effect than democrats (Morisi et al, 2019)

Our paper

- We build on the asymmetry shown in Morisi et al (2019) to answer three research questions:
 - How did this asymmetry come about?
 - Whether the asymmetry follows similar patterns for both parties
 - What could be the causes of both the phenomenon and the asymmetry

Data and methodology

- We use survey data from 1974-2021:
 - GSS (main estimations)
 - Confidence in the Federal Government (0, 0.5, 1)
 - Partisanship (7 point scale)
 - ANES (as a robustness)
 - Control for income, age, gender, employment, education, race, religion and time
 - We allow maximum flexibility of functional form by adding all but income as fixed effects
 - We use the turnover elections as a natural experiment to examine how Republicans/ Democrats lose(gain) trust when their supported party loses(wins) an election
 - We use Independents as the control group
 - Independents trust does not systematically vary with the party in power
 - We use the 2 most recent waves of GSS before and after each election
 - We estimate:

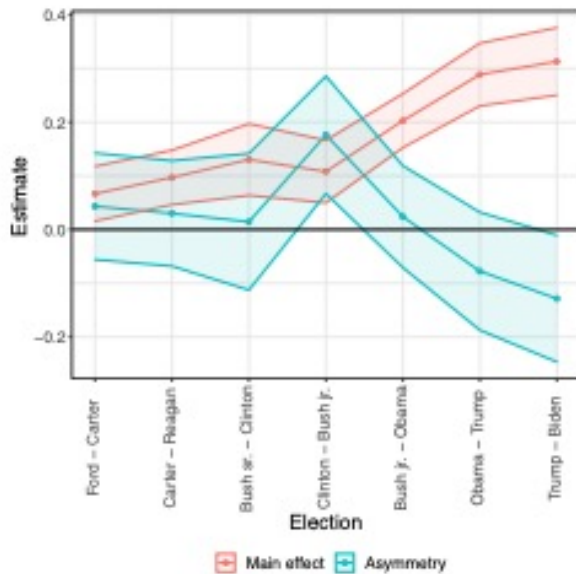
$$Y_{it} = \beta_1 \times Dem_{it} + \beta_2 \times Rep_{it} + \beta_3 \times Support_{it} + \beta_4 \times Rep_{it} \times Support_{it} + \delta X_{it} + \alpha_t + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (1)$$

Analysis

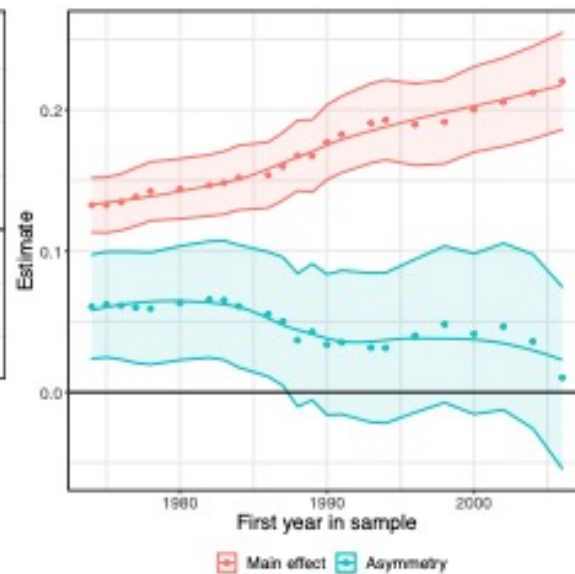
- We find that between 1977 and 2021:
 - president-in-power effect increases steadily (in comparison to ind)
 - More than quadrupled for Democrats (from 0.07 to 0.31 of additional trust when in power)
 - Results hold under multiple specifications
 - Using surveys around turnover elections
 - Shrinking windows (progressively shift forward the first year of the sample)
 - Shifting (fixed) 15 year windows
 - Asymmetry
 - Has steadily decreased over time
 - Initially high for Republicans
 - After 2008, if anything, reverses with Democrats distrusting more out-party governments

Analysis

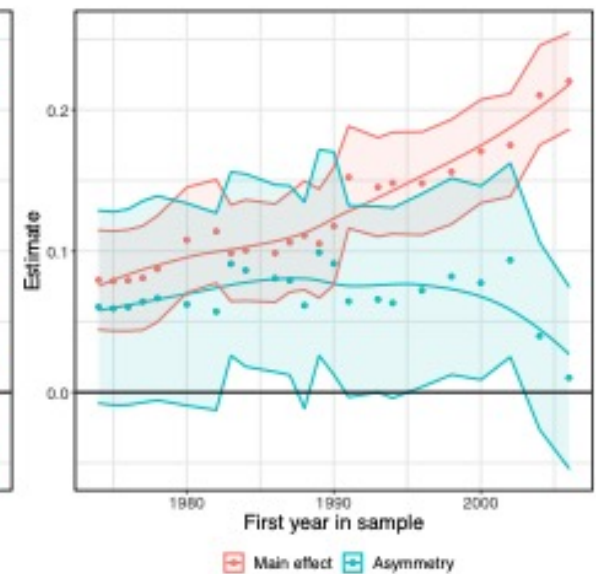
(a) Turnover elections



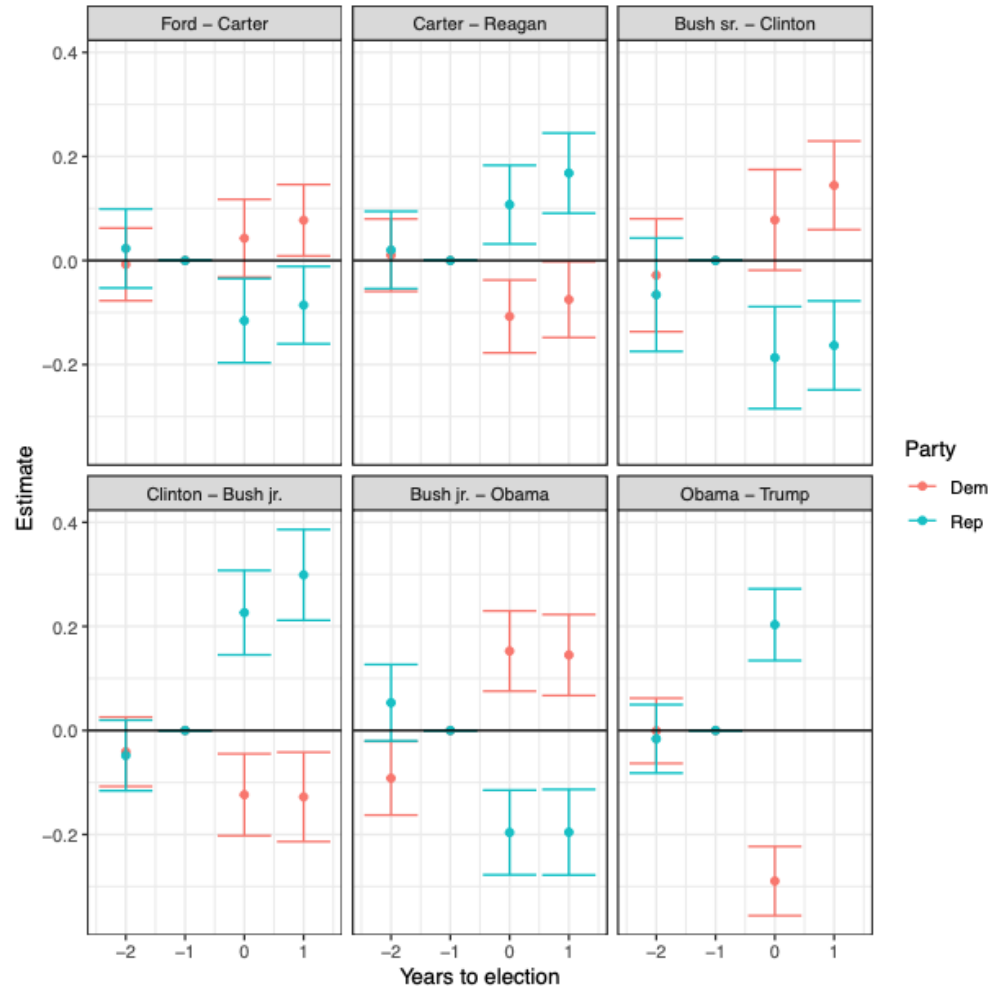
(b) Shrinking window



(c) Shifting window

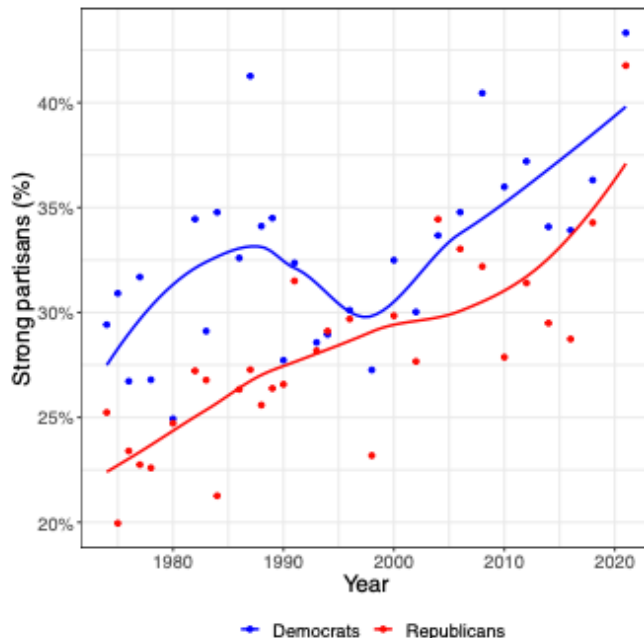


Pre-trends violations for each turnover



But why?

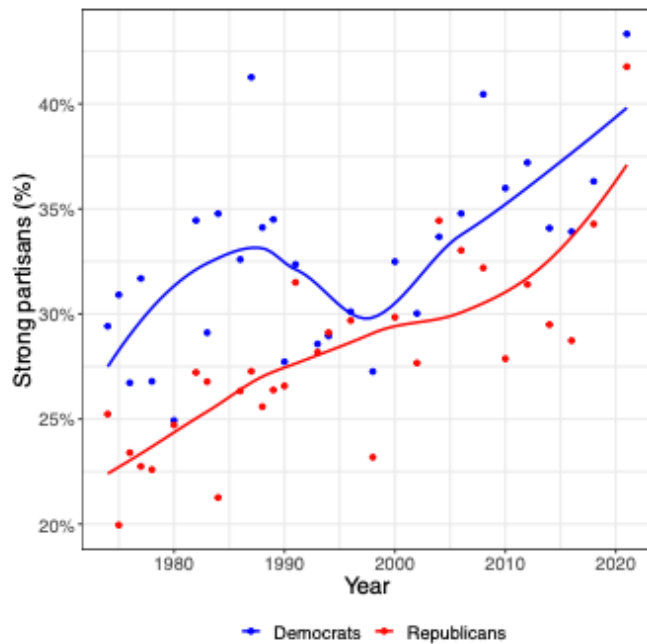
- Maybe strength of partisanship?
 - Social identity theory suggests that stronger party identification increases outgroup animus
 - Looking at the strength of partisanship over the same window we find that



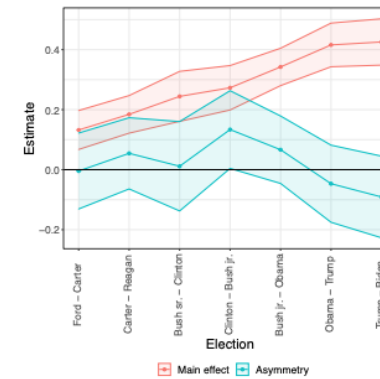
- The share of strong partisans has almost doubled
- Strong partisans exhibit DOUBLE the president-in-power effect
- We then show that the intensification of partisan identification is partly explained by a perceived elite polarization
 - Partisans perceive a growing distance between their ideology and the opposite party
 - Explains the increasing PiP effect but not the asymmetry

But why?

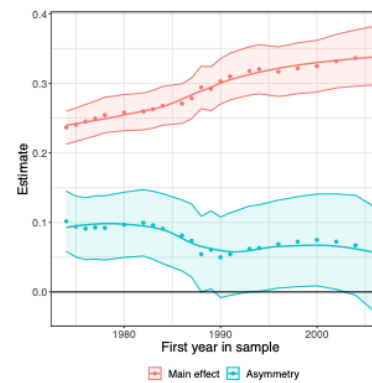
- Maybe strength of partisanship?



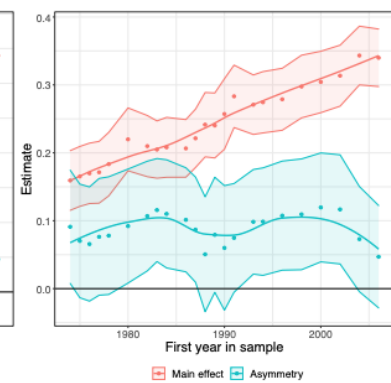
(a) Turnover elections



(b) Shrinking window

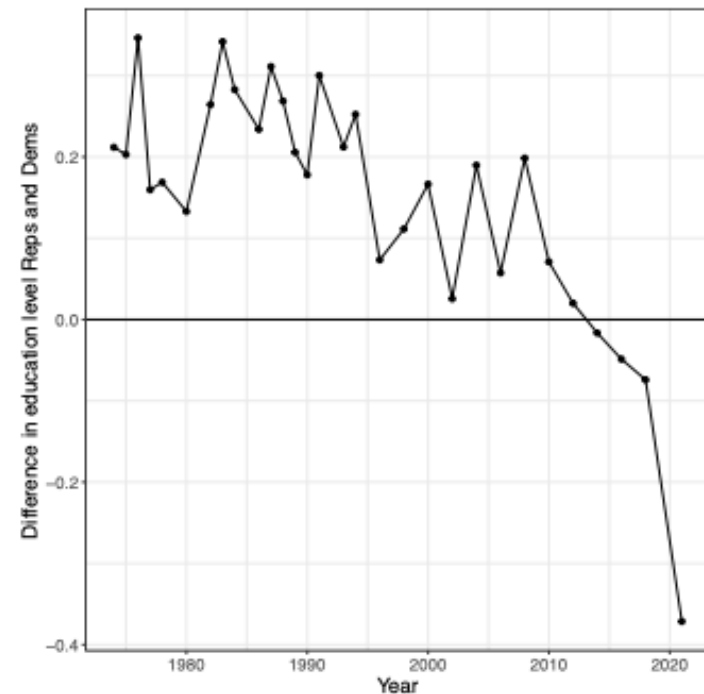
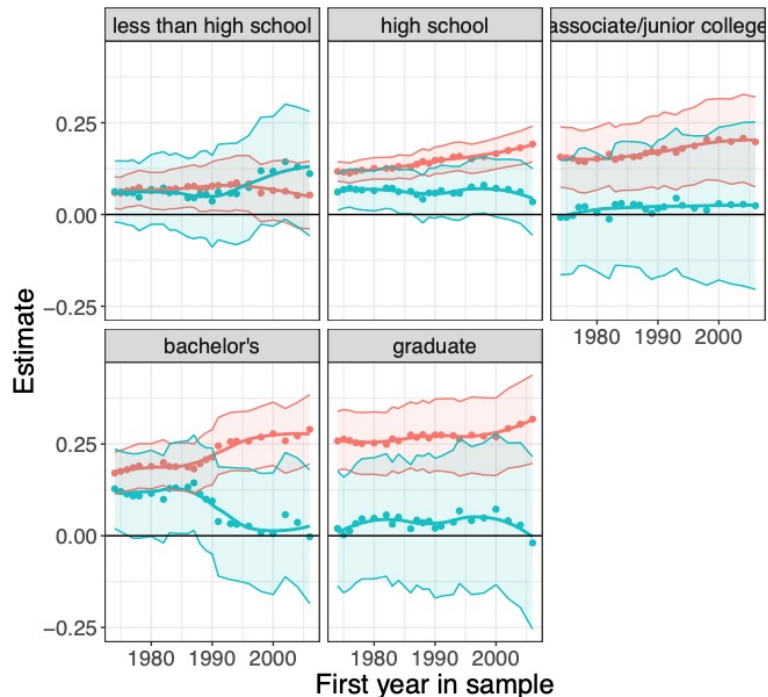


(c) Shifting window



But why?

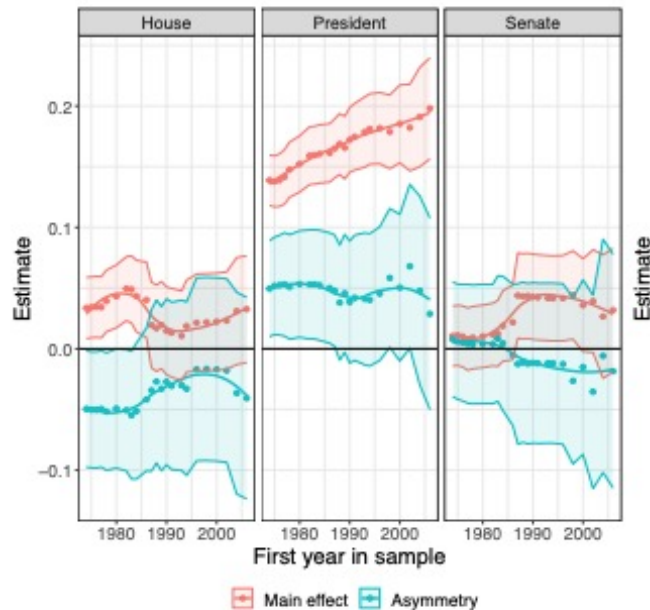
- Maybe changes in the composition of groups
 - Existing literature shows that highly educated individuals tend to be more politically aware and actively involved (Zaller, 1992; Carpini and Keeter, 1996)
 - Effect is much stronger for educated individuals (0.089 no HS, 0.268 Graduates)



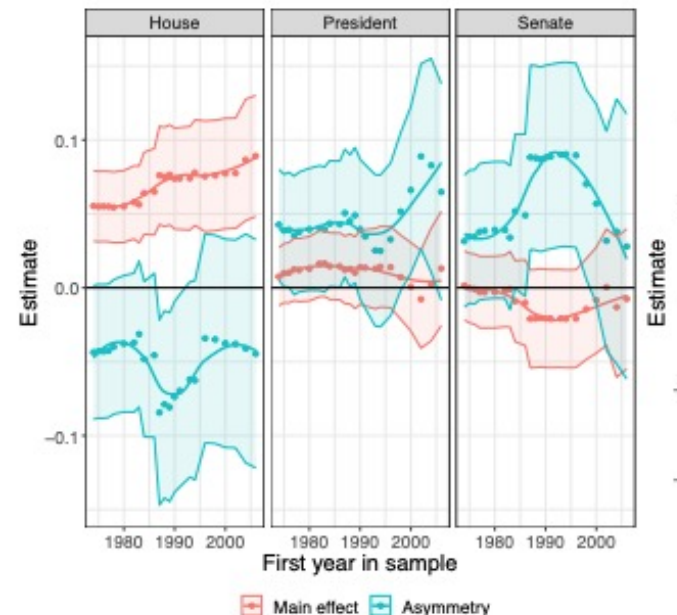
Is it a presidency phenomenon?

- Using the same methodology, we examine:
 - Congress in power effect for alignment with the House of Representatives
 - Alignment with Senate
 - House effect is stronger for Democrats but little effect on overtime evolution

(a) Shrinking window, fed. gov.



(c) Shrinking window, Congress



Conclusions and Implications

- We examine the evolution of President in Power effect between 1974-2021
- We show that in contrast to existing evidence, if anything, democrats are becoming increasingly more distrusting of out-party governments and Houses
- We attribute this increasing PiP effect to:
 - Increases in share of people that strongly identify with the parties
 - Increased misperceptions of ideological differences with other party
- We attribute the reversal of the asymmetry to demographic changes of the parties
- In a follow-up paper, we show that this turnover distrust effect has significant monetary implications through charitable donations