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Partisan Polarization on Campus Too?

Paul A. Djupe

February 25, 2020

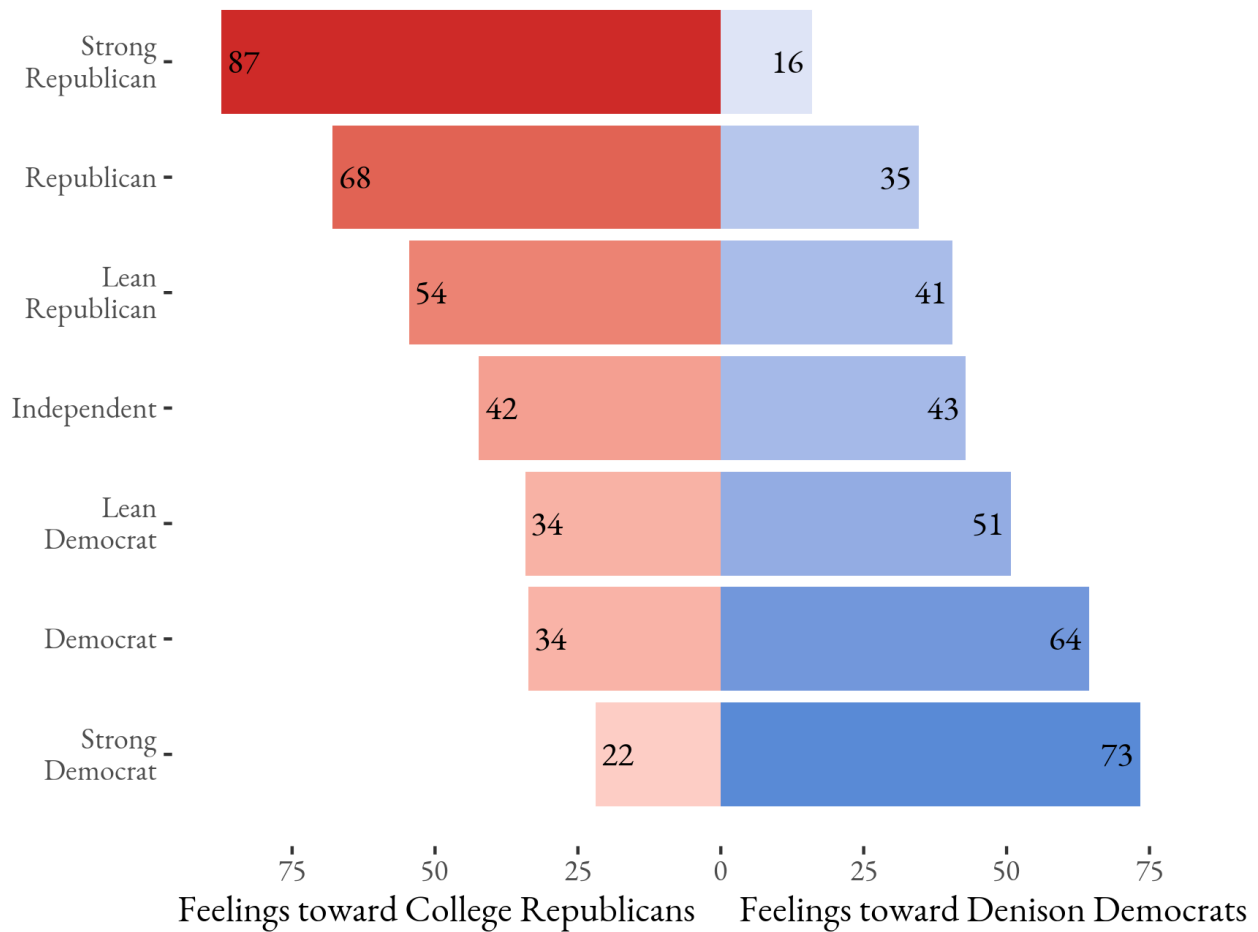
By Paul A. Djupe

A defining feature of American politics is the deep animosity partisans have for those of the other party. They don't like each other, they won't date each other, and they'd be unhappy if their offspring married someone with another party affiliation. Recent research, however, questions some of these findings, suggesting that survey representations of these sentiments are inaccurate and inflated. The researchers argue that once you have people reflect on people *they actually know* of the other party, their animosity is much reduced.

We have a way of looking at this problem. Denison students are different –they are not national-level partisans. And there's solidarity among Denisonians, right? I used the March 2019 survey data, which included 'feeling thermometer' ratings (0=cold, 100=warm) toward the Denison Democrats and College Republicans. Are students polarized in their view of campus partisans?

The figure below shows views toward campus partisans for each partisan category. Two things stand out. First, there are very sizable gaps that show 'affective' (i.e., regarding emotions) polarization – Republicans feel warmly toward Republicans and coolly to Democrats and vice versa. Second, polarization is relatively symmetric as Democrats dislike Republicans almost as much as Republicans dislike Democrats (strong Republicans are the exception). There is also something a bit harder to see – dislike for other partisans is a bit stronger than is warmth toward your own party. Also a hallmark of polarization (and intergroup relations theory), it is easier to hold the group together with hate than it is to affirm principles and social ties that would justify unity.

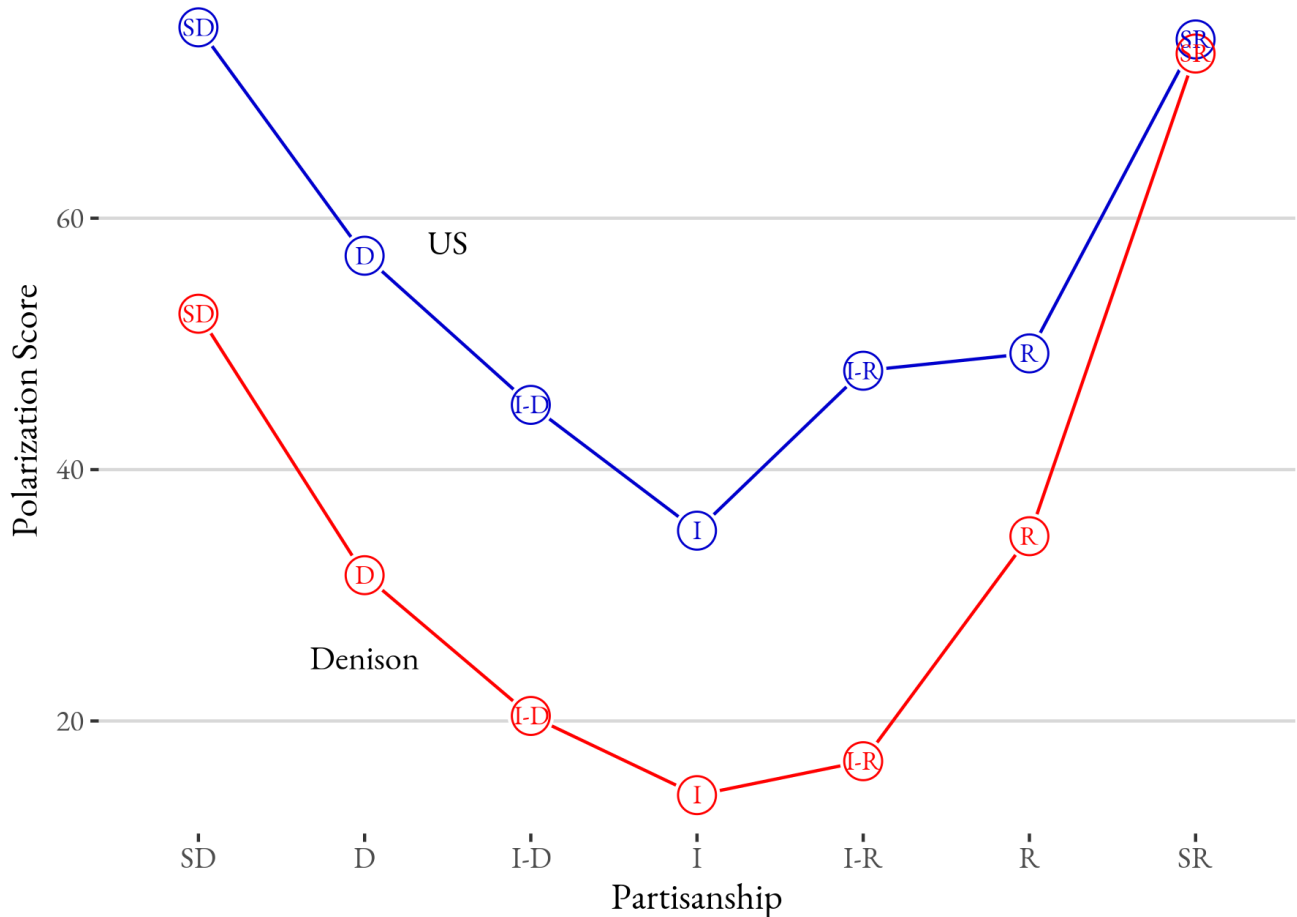
Feelings toward Campus Partisans, by Partisanship



Source: March 2019 Survey

It's hard to know whether Denison polarization is large or small. I mean, these gaps look big to me, but are they national-politics big? Fortunately, I have data from a national sample in May 2018 that allows us to compare on the same scale. Shown below is the gap in warmth toward the two parties. It's clear that affective polarization at Denison is much lower than national-level polarization – in most cases, the gap is 15-20 points. But there is one exception, Denison strong Republicans, who have the same level of polarization as national strong Republicans (~74).

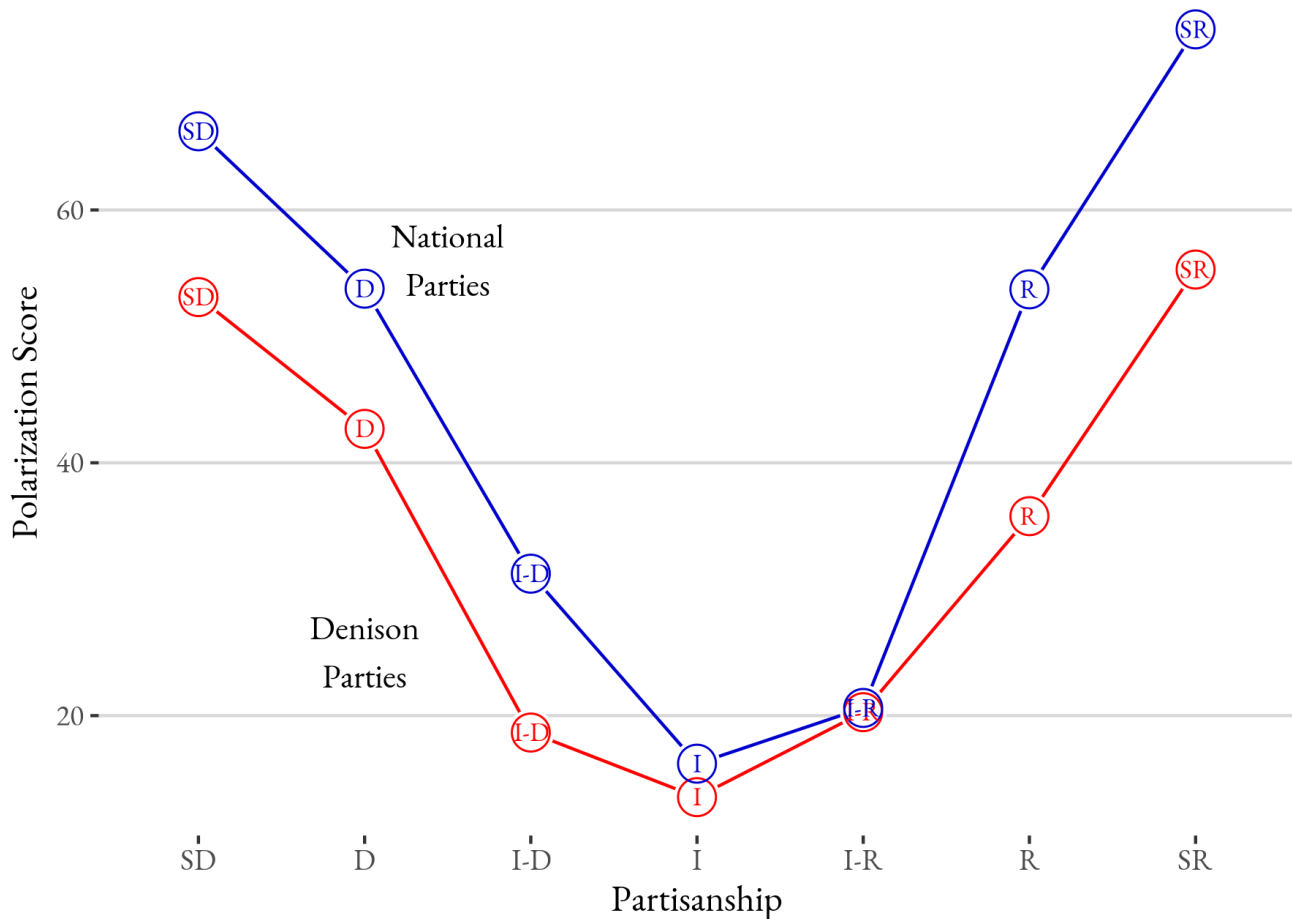
Polarization is Lower at Denison, Mostly



March 2019 Survey.
Note: D=Democrat, R=Republican, I=Independent

This is good news, but it makes you wonder whether Denisonians are making distinctions or just have different pictures in their heads. That is, are they just as polarized about national partisans as the US adult population is? In October 2018, we asked the same ‘feeling thermometer’ question but asked about both national Democrats/Republicans as well as the Denison versions. Those results are shown below and mostly confirm that negative feelings toward people you know are less than those felt toward abstracted others. That is, polarization with respect to Denison partisans is less than what is felt toward national partisans. However, that gap is not large, averaging about 10 points among Democrats, zip among independents, and almost 20 points among Republicans and strong Republicans. That’s interesting since Republicans at Denison are surrounded by hordes of Democrats, which means they are more likely to have worked with Democrats and, perhaps as a result, have somewhat more positive feelings toward them.

Polarization Regarding Denisonians is Lower, Mostly



Source: October 2018 Survey.

Note: D=Democrat, R=Republican, I=Independent

One of the things my species (poli sci profs) debates is whether to think of partisanship as an identity or a set of interests and what to do with them (ideologies). It's never either/or, but we look for evidence about whether content or labels matter most. The evidence here is suggestive that people weigh content when providing evaluations of the parties. Denisonians are considering the relationships they have with other students and docking their animosity toward the other party label. Of course, there is still quite a bit of antipathy for the other side, but we're looking at a model for how to put dents into some of today's deep political divisions. We need working relationships in organizations (e.g., classes or teams) that cross lines of difference so we continue to humanize the other side and keep lines of communication open. That lesson is an old one and not exclusive to politics; it is also one of the crucial lessons that a Denison education imparts.

Paul A. Djupe is a local cyclist who coincidentally has taught social science research methods and political science at Denison for millenia. He started onetwentyseven.blog a few years ago in a bid to subsidize collective action. He's on Twitter and you should be too along with your president.

