

Partisan Schadenfreude and the Demand for Candidate Cruelty

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Abstract

Americans are divided along partisan lines. Yet, little is known about how partisan conflict influences extreme attitudes and behaviors. In this study, we examine whether Americans experience *partisan schadenfreude*—that is, taking “joy in the suffering” of partisan others—when bad things happen to those with whom they disagree politically. Analyzing attitudes on climate change, health care, taxation, and the coronavirus pandemic, we find that a sizable portion of the mass public engages in partisan schadenfreude and that these attitudes are most commonly expressed by the most ideologically extreme Americans. Finally, we demonstrate that partisan schadenfreude is predictive of the demand for candidate cruelty: those who experience schadenfreude about politics are more likely to express an intention to vote for candidates who promise to pass policies that “disproportionately harm” supporters of the opposing political party. In sum, our results suggest that partisan schadenfreude is both widespread and consequential for American political behavior.

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1 Introduction

Recent years have seen an increasing scholarly focus on the nature of polarization within the American electorate. Moving beyond debates as to whether the mass public is ideologically polarized (Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008) or not (Fiorina, Abrams and Pope, 2005), a new consensus has emerged that Americans are polarized along an affective dimension. Thus, regardless of whether citizens are ideologically polarized or moderate in their views, political scientists largely agree that members of the Democratic and Republican parties increasingly dislike each other. Such dislike is important for mass behavior, as it has led Americans to view their counter-partisans as dangerous (Kalmoe, 2018) and a threat to the country’s well-being (Webster, 2020). More troublesome, a growing body of work has shown that partisans tend to “de-humanize” supporters of the out-party (Cassese, 2019; Crawford, Modri and Motyl, 2013), which can—and often does—lead to behavioral biases outside of politics (Engelhardt and Utych, 2018).

Previous studies have shown that this affective polarization is consequential for American political behavior, with plenty of evidence pointing towards a strong relationship between both in-group and out-group affect and voting behavior (see, e.g., Abramowitz and Webster, 2016; Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, 2012). Less understood, however, are the ways in which the implications of these biases influence voter behavior. In this study, we seek to fill this gap in our understanding by showing how *partisan schadenfreude*, a term that captures the extent to which Americans experience “joy in the suffering of others”—particularly *partisan* others—affects voters’ intentions at the ballot box.

We begin by documenting the existence of schadenfreude across four issues-areas: health care, taxes, global climate change, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Then, replicating prior work on schadenfreude, violence, and “radical partisanship” (Kalmoe and Mason, N.d.,N), we show that the extent to which individuals engage in schadenfreude is a function of their ideological ex-

tremity. It is the most conservative and the most liberal respondents in our data that are the most prone to exhibiting schadenfreude. For instance, we show that it is the most liberal individuals who are the most likely to agree that those who flout government health warnings “get what they deserve” if and when they get sick due to COVID-19. Analogously, we find that it is the most conservative individuals who are the most likely to agree that those who follow government regulations on business during the pandemic “get what they deserve” if and when they lose their job.

Unique to our study, we then show that schadenfreude predicts individuals’ vote intentions. We present survey respondents with a hypothetical candidate for the United States Senate from their own political party whose ideological leanings and policy preferences are not known. However, respondents are told that this candidate has “regularly stated” a preference for enacting policies “that disproportionately harm the welfare” of opposing party supporters throughout the country. We find that individuals who are prone to engaging in schadenfreude are more likely to express an intention to vote for such a candidate than those who are not experiencing schadenfreude. We find that this relationship exists across party lines, that it persists when conditioning on ideological extremity, and that the magnitude of this relationship is stronger than the relationship between identifying as a “strong partisan” and voting for this candidate.

These results have vast implications for American political behavior and electoral competition. First, given that ideological extremity predicts schadenfreude and that the most ideologically extreme members of the public are most likely to participate in primary elections (Norrandner, 1989), the two parties’ nominating contests may be more likely to both attract candidates who seek to elicit schadenfreude and encourage candidates to make an increasing number of appeals to the electorate along these lines.

Second, our work also helps resolve an area of conceptual uncertainty in the literature. On the one hand, it could be the case that partisans passively accept extreme (i.e., punitive) candidates at the ballot box, simply due to party loyalty (e.g., supporting whomever the party’s nominee is, in a general election contest, irrespective of their views toward the other side). On the other hand, it

could alternatively be the case that strong partisans *actively support* politicians and policies that punish partisan out-groups. Our approach—by conditioning on strength of partisanship—allows us to partially disentangle these two potential dynamics, and suggests that partisans’ acceptance for punitive political action may be more reflective of an active, as opposed to passive, desire to harm the other side.

This paper proceeds as follows: first, we outline recent work on *schadenfreude*, affective polarization, and voting behavior in American politics. In doing so, we develop a theory linking ideological extremity to *schadenfreude* and *schadenfreude* to vote choice. Next, we describe our empirical methods and present a series of results from two different sources of data that are consistent with our theoretical expectations. We then conclude with a discussion on the implication of these results for American politics.

2 Schadenfreude, Affect, and Voting Intentions

Schadenfreude is a term that refers to the phenomenon whereby individuals take pleasure in seeing some misfortune befall another. Thus, *schadenfreude* measures the extent to which an individual experiences “joy in the suffering of others.” Within social psychology studies, *schadenfreude* is shown to be most typically expressed by those who are envious (van de Ven et al., 2014), vengeful (Sawada and Hayama, 2012), anti-social (Greitemeyer, Osswald and Brauer, 2010), low in self-esteem (van Dijk et al., 2011), feel others are deserving of misfortune (Feather, 1989), or stand to gain from another’s misfortune (Smith et al., 2009). Other work has shown that *schadenfreude* is not simply an individual-level dynamic. Instead, some argue that *schadenfreude* is most likely to be expressed when certain group dynamics are met. In particular, individuals are most likely to experience *schadenfreude* toward another group’s suffering when they feel that their own group is inferior to the suffering group on some dimension or set of dimensions (Leach et al., 2003).

In addition to being present when there is a perceived status imbalance between groups, *schaden-*

freude is commonly experienced when intergroup rivalries and competition are high. Ouwerkerk and van Dijk (2014), for instance, draw on a series of laboratory experiments to show that “competitiveness may . . . be the underlying reason why schadenfreude is” elicited in intergroup relations. Such a finding builds on work by Cikara, Botvinick and Fiske (2011), whose study found that portions of the brain that govern the feeling of pleasure were activated when study participants witnessed a disliked baseball team perform poorly. Related work shows that empathic concern at the group-level also fuels schadenfreude, leading to affective polarization (Simas, Clifford and Kirkland, 2020).

Within the domain of politics, schadenfreude has been linked to strongly identifying with a political party (Combs et al., 2009). More recent work has shown that ideological extremity is also predictive of schadenfreude. Indeed, as part of their broader work on the correlates of lethal mass partisanship, Kalmoe and Mason (N.d.a) show that the strength of one’s ideological identity predicts a greater amount of acceptance of statements tapping into support for, and enjoyment of, partisan-directed violence. Ultimately, their analysis suggests that roughly 5 – 15% of the public supports—or enjoys—threats of violence directed towards the out-party.

Though prior work has linked schadenfreude and negative attitudes to support for accepting political violence, our study is—to our knowledge—the first to examine the linkage between schadenfreude (across a variety of issue dimensions) and voting intentions. That schadenfreude should be expected to predict voting intentions is grounded in canonical works in both social psychology and political science. In particular, we draw on human beings’ tendency to seek pleasure and situate this behavior within a political environment that is governed by high levels of inter-party animosity and antipathy.

Human beings are motivated primarily by a desire to obtain happiness and pleasure. Such a claim was popularized with Freud’s (1900) notion of the “pleasure principle,” which argued that all behavior—whether conscious or unconscious—was motivated by the desire to maximize pleasure and minimize pain (see also, Freud, 1920). Studied often in the context of *subjective well being*,

scholars have debated whether people have happiness “set-points” (Brickman and Campbell, 1971; Easterlin, 2003), whether individuals are aware of what makes them happy or unhappy (Gilbert et al., 1998), and whether happiness and related states have a similar meaning across cultures (Markus and Kitayama, 1991).

Despite the many theoretical, conceptual, and contextual debates, scholars of happiness and pleasure have identified a number of correlates of individual subjective well being. Happiness and well-being have been found to be correlated with income (Larson, 1978), gender (Cameron, 1975), employment status (Catalano and Dooley, 1977), race (Bortner and Hultsch, 1970), and being socially active (Beiser, 1974). More tenuous evidence exists linking happiness to religiosity (Clemente and Sauer, 1976) and marriage (Glenn and Weaver, 1979).¹ Happiness and well-being, then, vary at the individual-level and do so according to specific traits or characteristics.

What it means to seek happiness and contentment in terms of politics has changed. In previous eras, Americans used to feel positive attachments to their own party and were motivated to participate in politics through positive-oriented emotions. This suggests that happiness regarding politics was achieved through—among other things—seeing one’s party win an election or pass a significant piece of legislation. In the current era, which is characterized by high levels of negativity and partisan rancor (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, 2012; Bafumi and Shapiro, 2009; Mason, 2015), the sources of happiness are likely to be different. Indeed, with affective evaluations of one’s own party remaining constant and evaluations of the out-party dropping precipitously, Americans today are largely motivated by antipathy and dislike of the opposing party (Abramowitz and Webster, 2016). Because political identification and participation has become oriented around the parties and politicians that individuals oppose, rather than the ones they like, individual-level political happiness and well-being is most likely to be obtained when bad or undesired things happen to the out-party: a legislative setback in Congress, the loss of an election, a politician’s forced resigna-

¹For an excellent overview on the sources of variation in individual-level happiness and social well-being, see Diener (2009).

tion, or something else entirely. We call the happiness one feels when unfortunate events happen to the out-party and its supporters *partisan schadenfreude*.

Experiencing partisan schadenfreude has important implications for American political behavior. In particular, it should be expected to predict a greater likelihood that an individual will cast a vote for a candidate who seeks to inflict some sort of political harm on the out-party and its supporters. More specifically, we expect that those who are experiencing partisan schadenfreude will support candidates who seek to do this legislatively by passing policies that “disproportionately harm” supporters of the opposing party. In Section 3 we lay out our empirical test of this theory; in Section 4 we present results consistent with these expectations.

3 Design

We begin our study by first examining whether Americans, do in fact, engage in partisan schadenfreude. To do so, we draw on a series of unique datasets fielded via the Lucid Theorem platform. Although data from Lucid is not nationally representative, Lucid uses quota sampling to target representativeness on factors like age, race, income, sex, partisan identification, and region of residence. Moreover, data from Lucid has been shown to be much more reflective of nationally representative benchmarks than conventional convenience sample data (see, e.g., Coppock and McClellan, 2018). In our case, the data mirrors the partisan, ideological, and demographic breakdowns found in the American National Election Studies (ANES). Full summary statistics of our data are shown in Table 1 in the Appendix.²

In addition to asking a series of sociodemographic questions, our first study—fielded in January 2018 to approximately 3,000 respondents—contained questions that asked respondents to place themselves on the standard 7-point party identification and ideological leanings scales (higher val-

²The Appendix also contains information on IRB approval, how we obtained informed consent, and how respondents were compensated for their time.

ues indicate a more Republican and ideologically conservative identity, respectively). To measure schadenfreude, survey participants were first presented with one of two vignettes about a new neighbor's political behavior. Democratic respondents were told that a new resident in their neighborhood that had typically voted for Democrats voted for a Republican in the most recent election and, subsequently, lost her government-subsidized health insurance.³ Republican respondents were told that a new resident in their neighborhood that had typically voted for Republicans voted for a Democrat in the most recent election and, as a result, saw her monthly take-home pay decrease in the wake of newly enacted taxes.⁴

After these vignettes, survey respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement with three different statements designed to measure schadenfreude. Drawn from van de Ven et al.'s (2014) work on schadenfreude, these statements are: "I would be a little amused by what happened to her;" "I would be pleased by the little misfortune that happened to her;" and, finally, "I'd find it difficult to resist a smile." There are seven possible responses for each question, ranging from "not at all" to "very much so." Responses to these items are then added together to obtain an overall measure of schadenfreude that ranges from 0 (the least amount of schadenfreude) to 18 (the greatest amount of schadenfreude).

In addition to observing how policy considerations motivate general feelings of schadenfreude, we also examined schadenfreude in application to specific issue areas by asking about attitudes pertaining to climate change and public health. In our first study, we asked our survey respondents two sets of questions about climate change. First, we asked individuals their views about the issue. Respondents could indicate that they do not know whether climate change is occurring;

³The full text of this vignette is as follows: *Suppose a new resident of your neighborhood had previously identified as a Democrat. However, during the most recent election, she voted straight-ticket for Republicans. She has subsequently lost her health insurance, which was provided to her through government subsidies.*

⁴The full text of this vignette is as follows: *Suppose a new resident of your neighborhood had previously identified as a Republican. However, during the most recent election, she voted straight-ticket for Democrats. She has subsequently seen her amount of take-home pay each month decrease due to tax increases.*

that climate change is not occurring; that climate change is occurring and is caused by “natural causes;” and, finally, that climate change is occurring and is caused by “human activities.” Second, if people indicated a belief that human activities are primarily responsible for climate change, we then followed up by asking them whether or not “people who don’t believe in climate change get what they deserve” when naturally occurring disasters strike where they live. Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with this statement using the standard seven-point scale (ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree).

Studying schadenfreude on this issue is both important and timely. In fact, those who deny the scientific consensus on the causes of climate change (that human activity is primarily to blame for climate change) have been on the receiving end of high-profile “victim blaming” in recent years. For example, an article run in *The Guardian* in the fall of 2018 received substantial backlash from other journalists and on social media after it suggested that “victims of Hurricane Michael voted for climate deniers.”⁵ Of course, studying the issue of climate change is likely to allow for an examination of schadenfreude on only one side of the political divide. Indeed, given the tight relationship between Democratic party identification and belief in human-caused climate change (McCright and Dunlap, 2011; Funk and Kennedy, 2016), the issue of climate change is likely to elicit schadenfreude primarily among a certain partisan subset (i.e., Democrats and those on the ideological left) of the American electorate.

Consequently, we fielded a follow-up study in December 2020 (N = 996)—again using the Lucid Theorem platform—designed to observe evidence of issue-specific schadenfreude on both sides of the partisan aisle. To elicit schadenfreude across the political spectrum, we asked respondents a series of questions pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic. This topic is useful for our purposes because the ideological left and right focused on different issues during the government’s response to the pandemic. Specifically, Democrats and liberals were comparatively more likely to

⁵<https://amp.theguardian.com/environment/climate-consensus-97-per-cent/2018/oct/11/victims-of-hurricane-michael-voted-for-climate-deniers>

be concerned about the pandemic's impact on public health; Republicans and conservatives, on the other hand, were more likely to be concerned about pandemic's effects on the performance of the economy (Pickup, Stecula and van der Linden, 2020; de Bruin, Saw and Goldman, 2020; Impelli, 2020). These differences closely mirror the rhetorical and policy differences among partisan elites. For example, Democratic elites were more likely to indicate support for government intervention in service of containing the virus' spread and were quicker to support the adoption of stringent social distancing guidelines. Republicans, by contrast, frequently downplayed the virus' public health risks in the pandemic's early stages (Gollust, Nagler and Fowler, 2020; Motta, Stecula and Farhart, 2020; Green et al., 2020; Adolph et al., 2020). On the other hand, Republican elected officials were more likely than Democrats to support policy efforts to re-open state and local economies in the wake of stay-at-home orders. Democrats, meanwhile, were more likely to express reservations about the possibility of lifting those measures prematurely (Green et al., 2020; Chiacu, 2020).

Correspondingly, we measure issue-specific schadenfreude in two ways. First, to measure schadenfreude on the ideological left, we ask respondents to report the extent to which they agree (on a standard five-point Likert scale) with the following statement: "people who do not follow CDC-recommended physical distancing guidelines get what they deserve if and when they contract COVID-19." Given Democrats' elevated levels of concern about the pandemic's impact on public health, we expect to see more evidence of schadenfreude in responses to these questions on the ideological left.

Second, to measure schadenfreude on an issue more pertinent to Republicans and conservatives, we asked respondents to report the extent to which they agree or disagree with the following statement: "people who support restrictions on how businesses operate get what they deserve if and when they lose their jobs." Because Republicans were comparatively more concerned with the pandemic's economic effects, this question gives us the opportunity to observe evidence of schadenfreude on the ideological right.

Finally, to measure the relationship between schadenfreude and vote choice, we presented sur-

vey respondents in Study 1 with a vignette about a hypothetical candidate running for the United States Senate from their state. This vignette was designed to present individuals with a candidate whose ideological leanings and policy preferences were not known; the only information given to respondents was that this candidate had voiced support for enacting policies that are harmful to supporters of the other party. The full text of the vignette is as follows:

The [Democratic/Republican] Senate candidate in your state is a relative newcomer to politics. Accordingly, little is known about his ideological leanings and policy preferences. However, he has regularly stated that he favors enacting policies that disproportionately harm the welfare of [Republicans/Democrats] throughout the country. Knowing only these facts, how likely would you be to vote for this candidate?

To assess our expectation that *partisan* schadenfreude should alter vote intentions, Democratic respondents were given information about a Democratic Senate candidate who wanted to pass policies that harmed the welfare of Republicans. By contrast, Republican respondents were given information about a Republican Senate candidate who supported passing laws that harmed the welfare of Democrats. After seeing this vignette, respondents rated their likelihood of voting for this candidate on a 0-100 scale, where zero represents “not at all” and 100 indicates that they would “definitely” vote for this candidate.

4 Results

4.1 Partisan Schadenfreude Among Democrats and Republicans

To begin, we examine whether Americans engage in partisan schadenfreude and how this propensity varies according to various political attitudes and identities. To do this, we rely on our three-fold measure of schadenfreude described in Section 3. The schadenfreude scale has a mean value of 8.03 for the entire sample. The mean schadenfreude score for Democrats is 7.72, while the mean

score for Republicans is 8.43. Though Republicans have a higher mean score on the schadenfreude measure, there is slightly more variance on the schadenfreude measure for Democrats (standard deviation of 4.92) than for Republicans (standard deviation of 4.40). We also note that Democrats and Republicans were presented with fundamentally different vignettes, so comparisons should not be overinterpreted.

To more systematically examine the nature of partisan schadenfreude in the mass public, we regressed our measure of schadenfreude on a measure of ideological extremity. This ideological extremity measure is calculated so that higher values indicate a more liberal ideology for Democrats and a more conservative ideology for Republicans. We also include measures of gender, educational attainment, age, race, household income, and feeling thermometer ratings of the opposing party. Because the schadenfreude measures were obtained after respondents saw a vignette that varied based off of their own partisanship, we subset our models by party. This allows us to alleviate concerns that any observed partisan differences in schadenfreude are an artifact of being presented with different vignettes rather than true partisan differences in engaging in such psychological processes. The results of these regressions are shown in Table 1.

The results of the regressions shown in Table 1 suggest that an individual's ideological extremity is a key predictor of the extent to which he or she engages in partisan schadenfreude. For both Democrats and Republicans the coefficient on the ideology variable is positive and statistically significant at the $p < .01$ level. This indicates that it is the most ideologically liberal Democrats and the most ideologically conservative Republicans who engage in the most partisan schadenfreude. The models also indicate that men are more likely than women to engage in partisan schadenfreude. For Democrats, younger individuals and non-white individuals have higher levels of partisan schadenfreude than their older and white counterparts.

To better illustrate the relationship between ideology and partisan schadenfreude, we estimated predicted levels of partisan schadenfreude via the models displayed in Table 1 for both Democrats and Republicans at each level of ideological self-placement.⁶ These predicted levels of schaden-

	Schadenfreude	
	Democrats	Republicans
Ideology	0.527*** (0.087)	0.292*** (0.095)
Male	0.993*** (0.236)	1.336*** (0.240)
Bachelor's Degree	-0.063 (0.271)	-0.063 (0.263)
Age	-0.029*** (0.008)	-0.010 (0.008)
Non-White	0.717*** (0.256)	0.507 (0.360)
Household Income	-0.026 (0.019)	-0.012 (0.019)
FT Other Party	0.008 (0.005)	-0.006 (0.006)
Constant	5.464*** (0.685)	6.820*** (0.686)
N	1,661	1,314
R ²	0.056	0.035
Adjusted R ²	0.052	0.030
Residual Std. Error	4.770 (df = 1653)	4.323 (df = 1306)
F Statistic	13.904*** (df = 7; 1653)	6.776*** (df = 7; 1306)

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

Table 1: *Schadenfreude in the Mass Public*. This table shows the relationship between ideology and schadenfreude for Democrats (first column) and Republicans (second column). More extreme ideologues engage in the most schadenfreude.

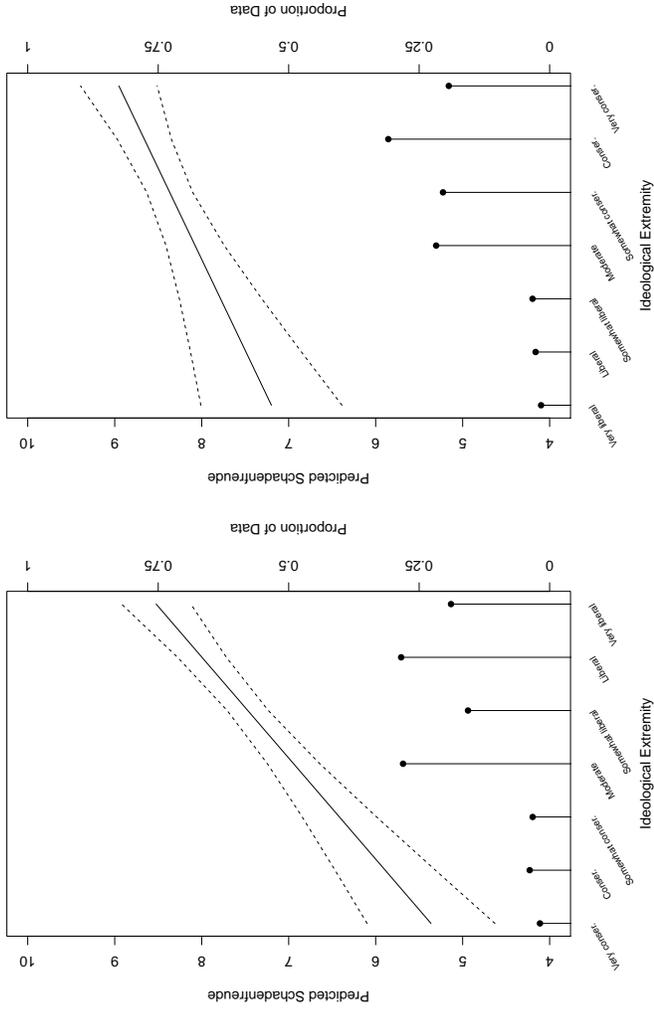
freude are shown in Figure 1. As can be seen in Figure 1, increasing levels of ideological extremity are associated with higher amounts of partisan schadenfreude. Figure 1(a) shows the predicted amount of schadenfreude for Democrats at various levels of ideological affiliation. Democrats who self-identify as “very conservative” have a predicted schadenfreude score of 5.33, while those who self-identify as “very liberal” have a predicted schadenfreude score of 8.49. Thus, moving from the most conservative to the most liberal outlook is associated with a 59.29% increase in the predicted level of schadenfreude among Democrats. A similar pattern exists for Republicans. Figure 1(b) shows the predicted amount of schadenfreude for Republicans at each level of ideological self-placement. Republicans who identify as “very liberal” have a predicted schadenfreude score of 7.18, while Republicans who identify as “very conservative” have a predicted schadenfreude score of 8.94. This move from the most liberal ideological outlook to the most conservative is associated with a 24.51% increase in predicted schadenfreude score.

4.2 Issue-Area Schadenfreude: Climate Change & COVID-19

The analysis in Section 4.1 suggests that Americans engage in partisan schadenfreude. Moreover, we have argued that the extent to which one engages in partisan schadenfreude is dependent upon his or her ideological leanings. To better illustrate how this process operates in contemporary American politics, we now turn to analysis of partisan schadenfreude in regards to two politically contentious policy issues: climate change, and both government and personal responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

To begin, we present results from our study of schadenfreude and climate change. To examine partisan schadenfreude in regards to climate change, we asked our survey respondents two questions. As described in Section 3, the first question asked individuals to give their opinion on climate change. Possible responses were “I do not know;” climate change is not occurring; climate change is occurring and is mainly attributable to “natural causes;” and, lastly, that climate change

⁶All other variables are held at their mean levels.



(a) Schadenfreude for Democrats

(b) Schadenfreude for Republicans

Figure 1: *Predicted Levels of Schadenfreude*. These figures show the predicted level of schadenfreude for Democrats (left) and Republicans (right) at various levels of ideological self-placement. The most liberal Democrats and the most conservative Republicans have the highest levels of partisan schadenfreude. Error bands indicating 95% confidence intervals are included. Vertical lines indicate the proportion of the sample identifying with each ideological label.

is happening and its primary source is human activities. Respondents whose opinion on climate change is in accordance with the scientific consensus—that humans are primarily to blame for climate change—were then asked to rate their agreement with the following statement: “People who don’t believe in climate change get what they deserve when disasters like hurricanes make landfall where they live.” Individuals’ level of agreement with this statement was measured along a seven-point scale, where higher values indicate a greater level of agreement.

Nearly a quarter of our survey respondents— 23.3%—indicated their belief that climate change is occurring but is mainly attributable to “natural causes.” Twelve percent of respondents denied the existence of climate change, while a further 10% indicated that they did not know whether climate change was occurring. The remaining 54% of our respondents indicated that climate change is caused by human activities, an opinion shared by most members of the scientific community (Funk, Rainie and Page, 2015). This estimate tracks closely with those from previous research using both Lucid samples (Motta et al., 2019) and nationally representative data (Funk, Hefferon and Strauss, 2016). Democrats were the most likely to believe that human activity is to blame for climate change, though a considerable percentage of Republicans and independents also expressed this belief.

Critically, and perhaps alarmingly, we find that over a *third* of respondents who indicated a belief that climate change is primarily caused by human activity agreed with the idea that natural disaster victims who do not accept climate science “get what they deserve” when disasters occur where they live. The overwhelming majority (68%) of these individuals were Democrats, although some Republicans (22%) and Independents (10%) held these feelings as well. Full summary statistics of the responses to this question, broken down by partisan affiliation, are shown in Table 2.

To better understand why some people who accept the scientific consensus on climate change engage in *schadenfreude* over the issue, we regressed a dummy variable indicating whether or not an individual agreed that climate change deniers “get what they deserve” on a series of political and sociodemographic variables (those who “somewhat agree,” “agree,” and “strongly agree” are

	Party ID		
	Democrat	Independent	Republican
Deniers get what they deserve . . .			
somewhat agree	13.59	9.20	11.71
agree	12.24	9.60	11.11
strongly agree	11.46	11.20	10.71

Table 2: *Victim-Blaming by Party Identification*. This table shows the percentage of respondents who believe that climate change is primarily caused by human activity and that climate change deniers “get what they deserve” when disasters occur where they live. Those individuals who reported that they were independents but leaned toward one of the parties are classified as partisans.

coded as agreeing that climate deniers “get what they deserve”). These variables include dummy variables for Democrats and Republicans, as well as the standard 7-point ideology scale (where higher values indicate a more conservative ideology). We also include measures of each respondent’s age, gender, racial identity, and educational attainment. Only those who believe that climate change is occurring and is happening primarily due to human activity are included in the model. The results from this regression are shown in Table 3.

Consistent with our expectations regarding schadenfreude in an era of negative partisanship, we find that the likelihood of an individual engaging in schadenfreude is conditional on their political identities. In particular, an individual’s ideological leaning is the strongest predictor of engaging in schadenfreude. The most ideologically liberal respondents are the most likely to engage in schadenfreude over the issue of climate change. This is in line with our findings in Section 4.1. Moreover, because the most liberal and conservative ideologues are the most likely to engage in schadenfreude and because climate change is an issue often associated with liberals and Democrats (Funk and Kennedy, 2016), we unsurprisingly find that the coefficient estimate on our ideology measure in Table 3 is negative.

Get What They Deserve	
Democrat	0.227 (0.156)
Republican	0.338* (0.174)
Ideology	-0.119*** (0.034)
Age	-0.002 (0.003)
Male	0.618*** (0.092)
Non-White	0.327*** (0.102)
Education	-0.082** (0.034)
Constant	-0.622*** (0.239)
N	2,165
Log Likelihood	-1,368.497
AIC	2,752.995

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

Table 3: *Victim Blaming in the United States*. This table shows the results of a logistic regression predicting whether an individual who accepts the scientific consensus on climate change also believes that climate change deniers “get what they deserve” when disasters strike where they live.

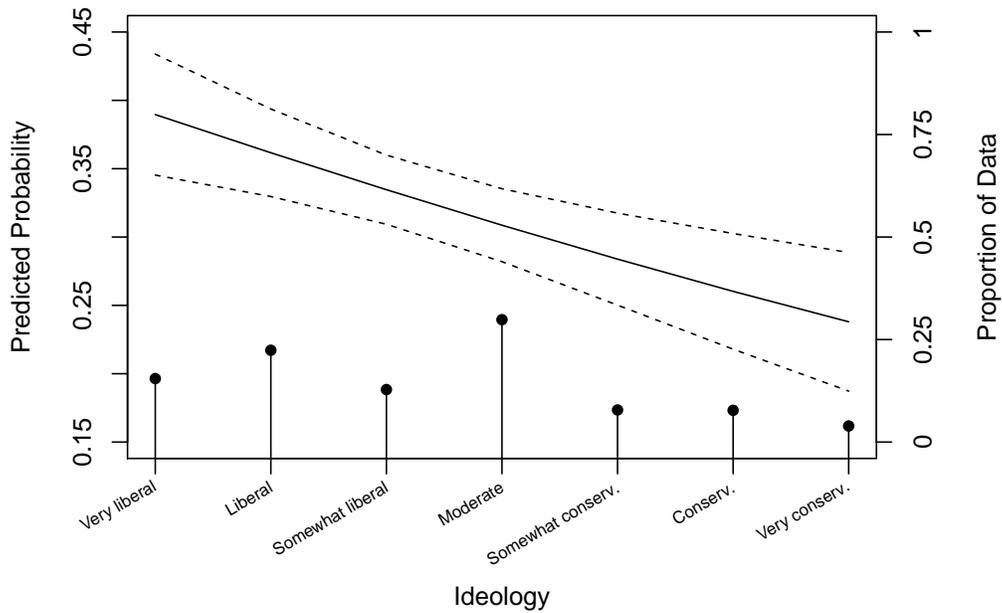


Figure 2: *Predicted Probability of Engaging in Schadenfreude (Climate Change)*. This figure shows the predicted probability, conditional on partisanship, of engaging in schadenfreude for each of the seven ideological self-placement categories. Error bands indicating 95% confidence intervals are included. Vertical lines indicate the proportion of the data at each ideological label.

To illustrate the relationship between ideological affiliation and engaging in schadenfreude, consider the relationship in Figure 2. This figure shows the predicted probability of engaging in schadenfreude for each of the seven ideological self-placement categories among those who accept the scientific consensus on climate change.⁷ As can be seen, individuals who are the most liberal are the most likely to say that climate change deniers “get what they deserve” when disasters occur where they live. For the most liberal individuals, the probability of engaging in schadenfreude over the issue of climate change is .39. The probability of engaging in schadenfreude over this issue decreases monotonically as individuals express a more conservative ideological disposition. For

⁷Predicted probabilities are calculated with all other variables held at either their mean or median values.

the most conservative individuals, the probability of engaging in victim-blaming is .24.

Recognizing again that these results only present evidence of issue-specific schadenfreude on one side of the partisan divide, we next present results from our follow-up study on concern about the health and economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Recall from Section 3 that each of our dependent variables in this study was measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” Here, we collapse these measures into a dichotomous measure of agreement, where responses of “strongly agree” and “agree” indicate that the respondent experiences schadenfreude and all other responses indicate a lack of schadenfreude. Table 4 presents the results of two logistic regression models that regress this dichotomous measure of schadenfreude on a series of covariates similar to those used in Table 3. Column 1 predicts schadenfreude about individuals who get sick when they do not practice the recommended health safety measures; Column 2 predicts schadenfreude about individuals who support restrictions on business and subsequently lose their job.⁸

The results again suggest that issue-specific schadenfreude is highly politically polarizing. Turning to the first column in Table 4, we find that conservative ideological self-identification is associated with a statistically significant decrease ($\beta = -1.216$, $p < 0.01$) in experiencing health related schadenfreude. This implies that self-identified liberals are comparatively more likely to experience schadenfreude. Indeed, as we document in Figure 3(a), the predicted probability that the most liberal respondents in our sample experience health-related COVID-19 schadenfreude is 97%. This same figure is 89% for the most conservative respondents in our sample.

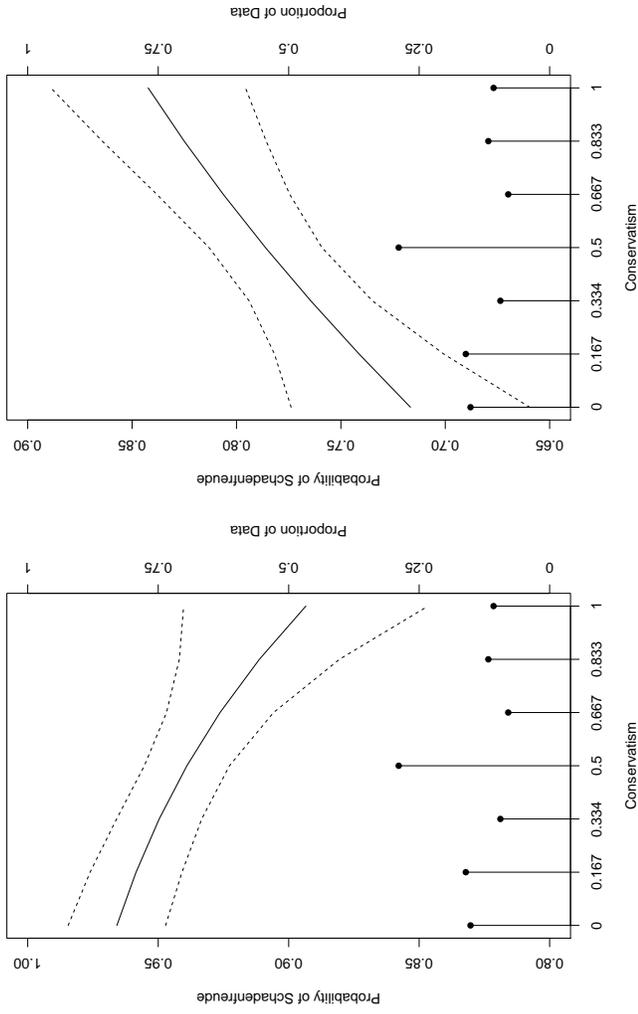
Likewise, we document a strong ideological asymmetry in the experience of COVID-19 schadenfreude as it pertains to economic loss. Turning next to the second column in Table 4, we find that ideological conservatism is associated with a statistically significant increase ($\beta = 0.747$, $p < 0.01$) in schadenfreude. As the predicted probabilities in Figure 3(b) make clear, schadenfreude

⁸Modeling schadenfreude on these issues via an ordered logistic regression produces similar results. Results derived from an ordered logistic regression can be found in the Appendix.

	Get Sick	Lose Job
	(1)	(2)
Democrat	0.539 (0.391)	-0.113 (0.246)
Republican	-0.190 (0.379)	0.169 (0.268)
Conservatism	-1.216*** (0.456)	0.747*** (0.280)
Age	0.264 (0.577)	-1.270*** (0.360)
Male	0.569** (0.266)	0.455*** (0.163)
Nonwhite	0.601 (0.369)	0.401** (0.202)
College	0.325 (0.260)	0.433*** (0.164)
Constant	2.423*** (0.466)	0.824*** (0.302)
N	995	995
Log Likelihood	-242.647	-513.722
AIC	501.294	1,043.443

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

Table 4: *Schadenfreude and COVID-19*. This table shows the relationship between ideology and schadenfreude as it pertains to COVID-19. Column 1 models schadenfreude about getting sick from contracting the novel coronavirus; Column 2 models schadenfreude about losing one's job due to following government regulations about COVID-19. Estimation is via logistic regression.



(a) Schadenfreude for Getting Sick

(b) Schadenfreude for Losing Job

Figure 3: Predicted Levels of Schadenfreude About COVID. These figures show the predicted probability of engaging in schadenfreude about getting sick from the novel coronavirus (left) and losing one's job due to following government regulations on business pertaining to COVID-19 (right) at various levels of conservatism. Predicted probabilities are calculated holding all other predictor variables at their means; dashed lines represent the 95% confidence intervals. Vertical lines indicate the proportion of the respondents at each level of conservatism.

over this issue is increasing in ideological conservatism. Indeed, among the most liberal respondents in our sample, the predicted probability of experiencing schadenfreude when one loses their job due to following government regulations pertaining to COVID-19 is 72%. The predicted probability of experiencing schadenfreude over this issue increases monotonically along the range of conservatism. For the most conservative respondents, the predicted probability of experiencing schadenfreude is 84%.

4.3 Schadenfreude and Vote Intention

The preceding analyses have shown two things. First, we have demonstrated that partisan schadenfreude exists in a broad segment of the American public. Second, we have demonstrated that it is the most ideologically extreme individuals who are the most likely to engage in schadenfreude. Left unanswered, however, is whether these attitudes are consequential for American political behavior. To address this question, we now present results from an analysis of the relationship between schadenfreude and vote intention.

To examine the relationship between schadenfreude and vote intention, we regress our measure capturing an individual's likelihood of voting for a candidate that seeks to enact policies that "disproportionately harm" supporters of the opposing party on our schadenfreude scale. We control for each individual's race (via a non-White dummy variable), gender, age, educational attainment, ideological extremity, and strength of partisanship. To determine whether the relationship between schadenfreude and voting for a candidate who promises to harm the opposing party's supporters varies by partisanship, we also present results of models that are estimated separately for Democrats and Republicans. These models are shown in Table 5. To facilitate a cleaner comparison, all covariates have been scaled to range from 0-1.

The first column of Table 5 shows the results of the relationship between schadenfreude and vote intention for the pooled sample. The results of this estimation show that moving from the lowest to the highest amount of schadenfreude predicts a 31.3 point increase in the vote inten-

tion measure, an increase of nearly a third of the scale’s range. Schadenfreude, then, is a strong predictor of voting for a candidate who promises to pursue policies that “disproportionately harm” supporters of the opposing party. Indeed, a one-thirds increase in schadenfreude is analogous to the difference in the stated likelihood of voting for this candidate between weak and strong partisans.

The relationship between schadenfreude and voting for this hypothetical candidate, estimated separately for Democrats and Republicans, is shown in Columns 2 & 3. The results of the within-party estimation show that the relationship between schadenfreude and the intention to vote for a candidate who wants to pass policies that “disproportionately harm” supporters of the opposing party is nearly identical for Democrats and Republicans. Moreover, the within-party results are almost identical to the results derived from the estimation on the pooled sample. Collectively, these models indicate three things: first, schadenfreude is strongly related to voting intentions; second, schadenfreude predicts voting intentions equally well for Democrats and Republicans; and, third, schadenfreude is at least as important a predictor as strong partisanship.⁹

5 Conclusion & Discussion

American politics is increasingly divisive. While such a claim is relatively undisputed, few have attempted to study how those divisions psychologically motivate extreme and punitive forms of political participation. In this study we have taken an important first step in this regard. Utilizing a series of novel datasets on nearly 4,000 Americans, we have shown that a significant portion of the mass public is prone to engaging in what we have called *partisan schadenfreude*, or taking “joy in the suffering” of partisan others. Moreover, we have shown that this partisan schadenfreude is not limited to one issue area. We have shown evidence of partisan schadenfreude among the mass public on the issues of climate change, health care, taxes, and the government’s response to the

⁹When we convert to a binary measure of schadenfreude (cut point at the median), the coefficient on schadenfreude remains larger in magnitude than the coefficient on strong partisan.

	Vote Harm		
	Pooled (1)	Democrats (2)	Republicans (3)
Schadenfreude	31.348*** (1.738)	31.197*** (2.266)	31.499*** (2.763)
Non-White	3.227*** (1.033)	4.557*** (1.299)	1.239 (2.000)
Male	3.700*** (0.894)	3.709*** (1.216)	3.674*** (1.324)
Age	1.425 (2.043)	2.688 (2.820)	-0.897 (3.031)
Education	-0.168 (1.304)	1.930 (1.775)	-2.342 (1.944)
Ideological Extremity	0.292 (2.027)	-1.252 (2.702)	2.094 (3.156)
Strong Partisan	10.390*** (0.953)		
Strong Democrat		9.230*** (1.281)	
Strong Republican			11.712*** (1.446)
Constant	26.364*** (1.860)	25.898*** (2.523)	26.933*** (2.800)
N	3,317	1,853	1,464
R ²	0.154	0.150	0.163

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

Table 5: Schadenfreude and Vote Intention. This table show the relationship between schadenfreude and vote intention. Schadenfreude predicts a greater likelihood of voting for a hypothetical candidate who has expressed a desire to pass policies that disproportionately harm supporters of the opposing party. All variables have been scaled to range from 0-1. Estimation is via OLS.

coronavirus pandemic.

Importantly, we have also demonstrated that this partisan schadenfreude is not simply an unimportant reaction to elite rhetoric that is without cost. On the contrary, we have shown that partisan schadenfreude is predictive of voting intentions: those who experience schadenfreude about politics are more likely to vote for candidates who express a desire to pass policies that “disproportionately harm” supporters of the opposing political party.

We also help resolve uncertainty about whether the public passively accepts politicians who espouse punitive policies and rhetoric, or actively demands them. Our voting behavior analyses demonstrate that the most ideologically extreme partisans *actively* support politicians who take action that harms the welfare of “the other side.” In sum, our results suggest that partisan schadenfreude is widespread, occurs on both sides of the partisan divide, and has important consequences for American political behavior.

Though our study is among the first to document both the existence and consequences of schadenfreude in American politics, future work can improve upon these findings. First, scholars should seek to experimentally manipulate individuals’ levels of schadenfreude in order to determine the causal effect of schadenfreude on various political phenomena. Second, future work should continue to explore schadenfreude in other issue-areas—taxation or trade agreements, for instance—in order to determine whether schadenfreude works similarly across issues pertaining to domestic and foreign policy. Scholars should also examine schadenfreude longitudinally. Does schadenfreude co-occur with the development of partisan identity and then dissipate quickly? Or, do the effects of schadenfreude persist? In other words: is partisan schadenfreude best thought of as a psychologically-stable trait, or a state activated in moments of political tension and unrest? Future work might try to disentangle the psychological origins and political consequences of state vs. trait partisan schadenfreude (see, e.g., Nai and Otto, 2020). Finally, future work should consider whether schadenfreude in one area can spill over to assessments and evaluations of other areas. With Americans increasingly and durably divided along partisan lines, more precisely understand-

ing the nature and the implications of schadenfreude is likely to be a fruitful line of research.

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