How Executive Institutions Shape Affective Polarization: Evidence from Israel, 1975-2001

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Abstract

Presidential institutions are often thought to foster political conflict and democratic instability. I offer a new perspective on this debate. I argue direct election of the executive dampens affective polarization by encouraging intra-party division and blurring party brands, thus weakening partisan attachments in the mass public. I identify a negative causal effect of presidentialism on affective polarization by leveraging an institutional reform in Israel, which temporarily elected its head of government by popular vote in the 1990s. I further demonstrate possible mechanisms connecting the behavior of party elites to mass attitudes toward parties. Direct executive elections increased uncertainty around parties' ideological profiles, weakened party organizations, and neutralized the tone of political headlines in *The Jerusalem Post*. The same features of presidentialism that complicate democratic governance may also help keep affective polarization at bay.

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As concerns about political polarization have mounted over the past two decades, many scholars and practitioners have laid blame on the shoulders of political institutions (Drutman 2020; Klein 2020; Persily 2015). In the United States, authors have targeted the primary system (Foley 2024), electoral system (McCoy 2023), Electoral College (Kamarck and West 2024), and Senate (Bowler 2022), among others, for reforms that would supposedly turn down the temperature in the political arena. Many proposed solutions take inspiration from other countries; variations in electoral rules, legislative institutions, and party systems all help mold the contours of elite contestation and thus the degree of polarization in the mass public (Bernaerts et al. 2023; Bol et al. 2019; Katz and Mair 2018).

The sense that institutions contribute to political malaise in the United States and elsewhere comports with a longstanding idea in comparative politics that "institutional arrangements have an autonomous impact in shaping politics" (Mainwaring and Shugart 1997, p. 2).[1] Enthusiastic debate surrounds presidential institutions, in particular. Linz (1990b) famously argued direct elections and fixed term lengths stoke political tension and make presidential systems more likely to experience democratic breakdown (cf. Lijphart 2004; Stepan and Skach 1993). This argument would lend support to the notion that mass polarization in the United States and other presidential democracies is partially a product of their executive institutions. Other scholars, however, countered that presidentialism offers opportunities for coalition-building and that its impacts are difficult to disentangle from other characteristics of the geographic regions in which it has been implemented (Cheibub et al. 2004; Curini and Hino 2012; Horowitz 1990). I side with the latter group of scholars: Presidential institutions are more likely to alleviate affective polarization than to aggravate it.

My central argument is that separate origin and survival—two institutional features distinguishing presidential systems from parliamentary ones—decrease affective polarization by generating greater ambiguity about party identities, both in government and in the electorate. When the head of government is directly elected, parties tend to be less ideologically cohesive, less prone to in-

[1] Among many others, see Lijphart (1984), Rae (1971), and Sartori (1976).

flammatory cross-party rhetoric, and more likely to develop intra-party division. From the perspective of democratic stability, divided government and inter-branch conflict have long been framed as presidentialism's weaknesses; they can produce gridlock and weaken programmatic coherence (Linz 1990; Stepan and Skach 1993).

Yet from the perspective of affective polarization, the implications are more complex. Precisely because the separation of origin and survival fosters more varied ideological commitments and opportunities for coalition-building, it blurs the boundaries of partisan identity and dilutes the sense of unified partisan camps. Voters are therefore less able to discern clear party brands and less likely to hold strong party identities. Affective polarization requires, in part, that partisans feel strong, positive affect toward their party and that these feelings are collectively shared. Such conditions are less likely to attain under presidentialism.

I first use cross-national survey data to show that respondents in presidential systems perceive a greater degree of variation in parties' left-right positions. Accordingly, they also display greater variation in their party affect and they are less likely to identify with a party at all. The remaining analyses aim to uncover the causal effects of presidentialism on affective polarization and related outcomes. To identify these effects, I exploit an institutional reform that led Israel to temporarily elect its head of government by popular vote during the 1990s. Using country-year panel estimates of affective polarization from 1975-2001 in conjunction with synthetic control methods (Mehlhaff 2025; Xu 2017), I show the institutional reform led polarization to be lower than it would have been had Israel retained its pure parliamentary system.

I then probe possible mechanisms driving this relationship. Expert-coded data on party characteristics reveals switching from parliamentarism to a directly elected executive produced greater uncertainty about where Israel's parties stood on key issues and led to weaker party organizations with less proclivity to attack opposition parties (Düpont et al. 2022). Finally, I perform sentiment analyses of over 100,000 political headlines published in *The Jerusalem Post*. Interrupted time series models indicate the implementation of direct elections had a sustained, neutralizing effect on the tone of political rhetoric in the media. These results offer a new perspective on the behavioral

consequences of institutional design: by blurring party brands and making it difficult for voters to develop and sustain strong party identities, presidential institutions may actually dampen affective polarization instead of instigate it.

Executive Institutions and Party Affect

Presidential systems are primarily distinguished from parliamentary ones by the separate origin and survival of the executive (Lijphart 1984; Shugart and Carey 1992; Shugart and Mainwaring 1997).[2] Presidents are elected separately *from* the legislature and, aside from impeachment for misconduct, they are not formally accountable *to* the legislature—they serve a fixed term in office. By contrast, the selection of executives in parliamentary systems is typically determined by the success of their party in legislative elections, and their tenure is at the discretion of the majority party or coalition.[3]

Scholars have long pinpointed these institutional features as sources of problems that tend to plague presidential democracies. Linz (1990a,b) touches off a robust debate over whether presidentialism is inimical to stable democracy (Chaisty et al. 2014; Cheibub and Limongi 2002; Riggs 1988). He argues presidentialism's rigid structure and winner-take-all elections provoke elite conflict, complicate coalition-building, and lead to policy gridlock (see also Bünte and Thompson 2023; Lijphart 2004; Stepan and Skach 1993).

Perhaps counterintuitively, however, I argue the very institutional features that could make democratic governance difficult are also likely to keep affective polarization at bay. My theory centers on two claims: First, separate origin and survival of the executive generate inter-branch and intra-party conflict. As a result, parties in government are organizationally weaker, less ideo-

[2]Other variations in executive institutions, such as electoral concurrence, can also affect party politics (e.g. Sartori 1994). I set aside these sources of variation to focus on the more straightforward effects of separate origin and survival.

[3]For theoretical concision and empirical simplicity, I reduce the panoply of semi-presidential designs to two "pure" types (Duverger 1980; Elgie 1999; Sartori 1994).

logically distinct, and less capable of projecting party unity.[4] Second, the wider range of *signals* coming from parties in government are reflected in a wider range of *attitudes* about parties in the electorate. Under presidentialism, partisans in the mass public are less likely to harbor strong positive feelings toward their own party, their feelings are less likely to be shared by copartisans, and the outcome is a polity less riven by affective polarization.

Intra-Party Conflict under Presidentialism

The structural separation of executive and legislative branches under presidentialism generates *inter-branch* conflict, which typically implies *intra-party* conflict (Elinson 2023; Samuels and Shugart 2010). During election season, separate origin generates competing incentives that weigh on party unity and organization. Parties frequently court different constituencies in executive and legislative elections and therefore must navigate often-conflicting roadmaps to electoral success (Samuels and Shugart 2010). For instance, voters may prioritize national policy in executive elections but ability to secure pork in legislative ones (Samuels and Shugart 2003). Even if national policy drives both electoral decisions, the median voter in a presidential contest is likely to differ from the median voter in many legislative districts (e.g. Ahler and Broockman 2018). Legislative and presidential candidates cannot always campaign on the same platform and they must respond to different constituent priorities.

This "electoral separation of purpose" (Samuels and Shugart 2010, p. 123) leads parties to deprioritize policy in favor of a vote-seeking strategy (Samuels 2002; Strom 1990). The immense value of holding the executive office incentivizes parties to outsource control of their branding and messaging to the presidential campaign. The side effects of this strategy are atrophied party organizations and broader, less coherent programmatic appeals (Doyle and Power 2020; Fish 2005; Mainwaring and Scully 1995). Because presidential candidates must command mass appeal that transcends party loyalists, they engage in personalistic campaigning and preemptive coalition-

[4] I use "parties in government" not to distinguish the parties in a ruling coalition, but rather as a reference to Key's (1952) distinction between the three faces of parties: as organizations, in government, and in the electorate. The theoretical mechanics I discuss apply just as much to opposition parties as to ruling parties.

building (Curini and Hino 2012; Reiljan et al. 2024), which dilute the meaning of party labels (Carey and Shugart 1995; Samuels and Shugart 2010). Indeed, political scientists once worried that parties in the United States' strong presidential system had become so weak as to threaten the quality of representation (American Political Science Association 1950). Such schemes of riding coattails to legislative control does not occur in parliamentary systems, where executive and legislative elections are fused and parties maintain control over campaigns, platforms, and messaging.

Even more acute effects of executive institutions appear when parties reach the legislature, where they are affected by both separate survival mechanisms and the lingering effects of separate origin. Because voters are empowered to split their ticket, presidencies are more likely than parliamentary systems to experience divided government, where the party controlling the presidency does not control a majority of the legislature. These strange bedfellows are typically stuck with each other for the entirety of their fixed terms in office; separate survival means legislatures cannot dismiss the executive when the government is ineffective. Such a situation could set the stage for presidents to pursue their governing priorities using extra-constitutional actions (Linz 1990b; Stepan and Skach 1993), but it also opens the door to compromise and coalition-building.

Presidents in divided government can serve as brokers among diverse legislative blocs (Faundez 1997; Neustadt 1960; Shugart and Carey 1992), seeking compromise to avoid paralyzing gridlock (Cheibub 2002; Haggard and McCubbins 2001). When political imperatives dictate, they may even openly break with their own party (Corrales 2002). The outcome is a governing style that prioritizes centripetal policy appeals over cross-party confrontation (Curini and Hino 2012).[5] Coalitional politics also play a role. When the president does not enjoy support of the legislative majority, they are compelled to negotiate support through coalition-building. Sometimes these coalitions are stable and negotiated prior to the election (Cheibub et al. 2004; Horowitz 1990). Other times they are pieced together on an issue-by-issue basis (Chaisty et al. 2014; Shugart and Mainwaring

[5]Critically, only the executive is incentivized to move their policies toward the center. The same is not necessarily true for legislators, who respond to different constituencies. The result is intra-party division on policy.

1997). Such broad but shallow coalitions blur the distinctiveness of party brands by diminishing ideological commitments (Samuels and Shugart 2010).

Even under unified government, separate origin means presidents cannot automatically count on the loyalty of their co-partisans in the legislature. Legislators respond to different constituencies than presidents do and have incentives to cultivate their own reputations (Carey and Shugart 1995), particularly when the president is unpopular or approaching the end of a term (Carey 2009; Skowronek 1997). Presidents are more likely than prime ministers to be political outsiders with little party experience. They are less beholden to the party, less apt to uphold the party's image, and more likely to spurn their legislative colleagues when strategically prudent (Samuels and Shugart 2010). Relative to parliamentary systems, presidencies therefore have chronically weak party discipline and executives exert less control over their copartisans in the legislature (Carey 2009; Janda and Colman 1998; Shugart and Mainwaring 1997).

Varied Party Signals, Varied Party Affect

In short, separate origin and survival foster parties in government that are more internally discordant, less ideologically coherent, and less disciplined than under parliamentarism. These elite-level characteristics directly shape how citizens perceive and evaluate parties. When parties lack internal unity or send inconsistent signals, the informational cues that ordinarily anchor mass partisanship become weaker and less reliable. Without clear or consistent messages, citizens are likely to view parties as less ideologically distinct and have more heterogeneous understandings of their party's positions. Partisans ought to be less sure of their party identity, less unified in their feelings toward the parties, and therefore less prone to affective polarization.

In order for affective polarization to take hold, citizens must be able to easily ascertain their relationship to a party. Because they often rely on party elites for cues on where to stand on salient issues and how to interpret the political environment (Lenz 2012; Zaller 1992), programmatic disagreements—and, perhaps more importantly, the messaging associated with them (Iyengar et al. 2012)—are valuable sources of party affect (Algara and Zur 2023; Gidron et al. 2025; Rogowski

and Sutherland 2016). They provide information about which social groups parties purport to represent and whether citizens can see their own priorities reflected in those of the party.

When the messages coming from parties are clear, partisans respond with stronger party identification (Hetherington 2001). But parties operating under conditions of separate origin and survival are likely to have weaker *party brands* than their counterparts in parliamentary systems. When parties send unclear or inconsistent messages, or when their positions converge on key issues, their brands become less distinguishable and it is harder for voters to develop strong attachments (Dassonneville et al. 2023; Lupu 2013, 2016). If the president must cooperate with other parties in the legislature, this further blurs the line between one party and the next.[6]

To the extent that partisanship is a social identity (Green et al. 2002; Huddy et al. 2015; Iyengar et al. 2019), this blurring partially dissolves symbolic boundaries between partisan in-groups and out-groups, making it harder for elites to activate strong in-party affect or to sustain a cohesive partisan identity in the mass public. The personalist voting and weak party discipline exhibited in presidential systems also lead voters to detach from parties at a higher rate (Dalton et al. 2000; Huber et al. 2005). This pattern is visible even in the United States—the contemporary archetype of affective polarization in a presidential democracy—where partisans display a meaningful degree of heterogeneity in how positively they feel toward their own party (Groenendyk et al. 2020; Young and de-Wit 2025).

This intra-party heterogeneity carries implications for affective polarization, which not only implies that citizens feel warmly toward their in-party and coldly toward out-parties, but also that copartisans *agree with each other* on those evaluations (Mehlhaff 2024). If some partisans feel strong positive affect toward their party but others do not, affective polarization will be lower than it would be if all partisans concurred in that strong positive assessment. In short, intra-party conflict at the elite level is reflected in diffuse party perceptions at the mass level. More heterogeneous in-party assessments imply lower affective polarization, as partisans are less unified in their feelings toward the parties.

[6]The blurring effect of coalitional politics also occurs in parliamentary systems (e.g. Fortunato 2021). My claim is that inter-branch conflicts make this effect more common, and more severe, under presidentialism.

Cross-National Survey Evidence

The theory I outline above generates several testable implications. Before diving into more complex analyses, I offer an initial test of four key implications in cross-national survey data. I use modules one through five of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), which surveyed respondents in 56 countries over the period 1996-2021, providing up to 226 total country-years.[7]

First, under presidentialism, party elites project more varied programmatic signals and blur their party brand. If citizens pick up on these signals and incorporate them into their attitudes about the parties, I would expect to observe a greater degree of variation in how citizens evaluate parties' policy stances; they should be less capable of consistently pinning down a party's ideological position. The CSES asked respondents to place each party on the overall left-right scale. I calculate the average variance in each party's left-right placements to get a sense of whether respondents perceive a great deal of clarity in parties' positions.[8]

Heightened uncertainty about party positions should likewise impact how citizens feel toward the parties. Two aspects of their party affect could differ: there could be a narrower gap between how they feel about the parties—they may like their own party less and the other parties more—and partisans could display a wider range of feelings about their own party, reflecting the wider range of perceptions they hold about their party's image. That is, both *inter*-party heterogeneity and *intra*-party homogeneity should decrease—two differences that would imply lower affective polarization (Mehlhaff 2024). To test both conjectures about party affect, I leverage respondents' assessments of how warmly or coldly they feel toward each party. I calculate the average difference in party affect between the two largest parties in each election cycle. A smaller difference in affect between the two parties would indicate lower affective polarization. I also calculate the variance in respondents' affective attachments to their own party. If partisans are less unified in how they feel toward their party, that would also indicate lower affective polarization.

[7] I exclude country-years in which the country was identified as an autocracy, using the Varieties of Democracy classification (Coppedge et al. 2020).

[8] In the Supplementary Information, I limit this analysis to the two largest parties in each election cycle to avoid estimates being inflated by smaller parties about which respondents know relatively little. Results are substantively consistent.

Finally, unfocused party brands and the declining salience of party affect may even contribute to partisans decoupling from their preferred parties, resulting in fewer citizens identifying with a political party at all. Accordingly, I calculate the proportion of respondents who report identifying with a party. All variables are standardized to facilitate comparison.

Table 1: Cross-National Survey Evidence of Institutional Differences

	Dependent variable:							
	Variance in Perceived Party Ideology		Difference in Party Affect		Variance in Own-Party Affect		Proportion with Party ID	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Presidential	0.881*	0.400*	−0.351*	−0.420*	0.705*	0.325	−0.344*	0.078
	(0.160)	(0.192)	(0.169)	(0.188)	(0.157)	(0.211)	(0.158)	(0.144)
Democracy		−0.641*		−0.345		0.032		−0.023
		(0.221)		(0.213)		(0.220)		(0.148)
GDP		−0.366*		−0.125		−0.701*		0.606*
		(0.127)		(0.140)		(0.151)		(0.117)
Gini		0.221*		0.087		0.111		0.078
		(0.052)		(0.080)		(0.090)		(0.085)
Eff. Parties		0.110		−0.493*		−0.179		−0.424*
		(0.141)		(0.220)		(0.122)		(0.110)
Intercept	−0.223*	0.648*	0.097	0.502*	−0.160*	0.512*	0.162*	−0.459*
	(0.070)	(0.166)	(0.068)	(0.150)	(0.075)	(0.251)	(0.066)	(0.134)
Observations	214	208	222	215	221	213	226	218
R^2	0.140	0.419	0.025	0.134	0.089	0.324	0.026	0.253
Adjusted R^2	0.136	0.404	0.021	0.114	0.085	0.307	0.022	0.236

Note: $^*p < 0.05$. All models use OLS with heteroskedasticity-consistent standard errors.

The models reported in Table 1 assess how the four CSES variables differ among presidential and parliamentary systems, using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression with heteroskedasticity-consistent standard errors.[9] Examining models without covariates, all four dependent variables

[9]I explain my institutional coding criteria below, in the context of the Israeli case study.

differ across executive institutions in ways consistent with the theory. Voters' perceptions of parties' brands vary to a much greater degree under presidentialism, suggesting they see parties as projecting a less clear, less coherent ideological identity. Uncertainty over party brands should spill over into voters' affective attachments to parties, and results also support this expectation. In presidential systems, there is a smaller gap between how voters feel about the two largest parties. The variance in how partisans feel about their own party is also significantly lower, indicating that partisans are less unified in their feelings toward their party. This effect magnitude—nearly three-quarters of a standard deviation—is quite large. Finally, presidential systems have fewer voters who identify with a party at all. This effect is equivalent to a decrease of 7.3 percentage points in the proportion of respondents identifying as partisans.

Most of these patterns hold when controlling for a range of covariates likely to affect citizens' attitudes about parties. I include the level of electoral democracy (Coppedge et al. 2020), logged GPD per capita (*World Development Indicators* 2021), market income inequality as measured by the Gini coefficient (Solt 2020), and the number of effective parties in the legislature (Bormann and Golder 2022). Effects of presidentialism on the variance in respondents' perceived party ideologies and the difference in their party affect remain statistically significant, and the latter even increases in magnitude. The other two variables are no longer significant, with GDP overwhelming the effect of institutions in both cases.

The cross-national data used here are valuable for painting in broad brush strokes; they provide comparative evidence that is suggestive of presidentialism's impact on citizens' perceptions of parties and, consequently, on affective polarization. But they also make it difficult to draw any concrete conclusions beyond mere correlation. Executive institutions are not uniformly distributed; Latin America is "the continent of presidentialism" (Linz and Valenzuela 1994, p. x) while parliamentary systems are concentrated in Western Europe and former British colonies. As partially demonstrated by the models including covariates, it is difficult to separate the effects of institutions from the effects of other covariates that also differ among regions, such as economic development (Horowitz 1990; Mainwaring 1990; Mainwaring and Shugart 1997). For this reason, Shugart and

Mainwaring (1997) call on researchers to move past correlational evidence of institutional effects and examine more appropriate counterfactuals.

Quasi-Experimental Context: Institutional Reform in Israel

To infer a causal relationship between presidentialism and affective polarization, I need to know how polarized a presidential democracy would be *if it were parliamentary*. This is a difficult quantity to estimate, since it is impossible for a country to be both presidential and parliamentary at the same time. The next best option is to observe how a single country changes as it transitions from one institutional structure to the other (e.g. Abadie et al. 2015; Górecki and Pierzgalski 2023; Roesel 2017). To that end, I use Israel's brief experience with a directly elected chief executive to identify a causal effect of presidentialism on affective polarization, in addition to several intermediate outcomes.

Israel's shift from fused to separate origin (and, to a limited degree, separate survival) was the outcome of long-simmering concerns over governability, accountability, and the distribution of bargaining power in a fragmented proportional representation (PR) system, culminating in a crisis of confidence in 1990 (Brichta 1998; Diskin and Diskin 1995). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, political elites, scholars, and advocates debated institutional reforms to stabilize coalitions and clarify responsibility to voters. They included proposals to raise the electoral threshold, implement a mixed-member proportional system, or adjust rules related to confidence and government dissolution (Doron and Kay 1995; Harris and Doron 1999; Hazan 1996).

These proposals repeatedly failed. Small parties vetoed change over fears they would lose political leverage, major parties distrusted each other and worried they would be systematically disadvantaged, and backbenchers were reluctant to put their reelection chances in jeopardy (Diskin and Diskin 1995; Doron and Kay 1995; Rahat 2001). Instead of continuing to press for legislative reforms that concentrated losses on identifiable actors, advocates pared down previous proposals until the only major element remaining was direct election of the prime minister. "Basic Law:

The Government (1992)" grafted a directly elected executive onto a PR system that was otherwise untouched (Brichta 1998; Hazan 1996; Rahat 2008a).[10] This move promised a clearer mandate for the head of government, left the electoral system intact, and could be passed with a simple majority vote (Harris and Doron 1999; Hazan 1996; Rahat 2001).[11]

Contrary to reformers' hopes, the post-reform period saw further party system fragmentation as voters backed major-party prime ministerial candidates while allocating their legislative votes to niche or religious lists (Hazan and Rahat 2000; Peretz and Doron 2000). The two large parties lost even more bargaining power and pre-electoral alliances did not translate into durable legislative coalitions (Harris and Doron 1999; Hazan 2001). Instead, cabinet formation continued to rely on cross-party bargaining in an increasingly fractured Knesset (Arian and Shamir 1999; Bueno de Mesquita 2000). Israel returned to standard parliamentarism in 2001, less than a decade later (Ottolenghi 2001; Rahat 2006).

Nevertheless, Israel's brief experience with direct executive elections provides a valuable opportunity to identify a causal effect of institutional change. Without making any other changes, the institutional reform introduced *de jure* separate origin. It also had the unintended consequence of introducing *de facto* separate survival. The Knesset technically retained the power to dismiss the cabinet, and the prime minister could likewise choose to dissolve the Knesset. However, either action would trigger new elections for *both* prime minister and Knesset.[12] This mutually assured destruction made it much less likely that either branch would use their dissolution power (Diskin 1999; Sartori 1994). Further, prime ministers were effectively unaccountable to their own party. Stripped of the power to appoint a copartisan as they could in a parliamentary system, parties controlling the executive had no incentive to remove the prime minister. Doing so would only trigger a new election, with no guarantee they would retain the office (Samuels and Shugart 2010).

[10]The resulting system most resembled a presidential-parliamentary system (Hazan 1996; Shugart and Carey 1992). Some parties also implemented primaries to select their prime ministerial candidate, but they were not required to do so and most parties quickly abandoned those efforts (Doron and Kay 1995; Rahat 2008b).

[11]The head of state—primarily a ceremonial figurehead—continued to be appointed by the Knesset.

[12]The Knesset could avoid such a fate by marshaling a supermajority on the vote of no confidence, but this was a tall order in such a fragmented legislature.

Moreover, although the reform is clearly not exogenous to political considerations (e.g. Hermann 1995), it was the product of elite bargaining under uncertainty and not a response to mass attitudinal change (Doron and Kay 1995; Rahat 2001). It isolated a core institutional feature while minimizing changes to the rules that structure other arenas of political competition. Comparing Israel's experience before and after the reform to those countries which maintained either separate origin or survival throughout the same time period allows me to identify the effect of executive institutions on key variables of interest. [13]

Assessing Impact on Affective Polarization

The overarching hypothesis structuring my argument is that presidential institutions should depress affective polarization levels. I begin by testing this conjecture directly, exploiting Israel's switch to a directly elected head of government in the 1990s. Results from synthetic control models indicate Israel's institutional reform led to a decrease in affective polarization, relative to what it would have otherwise experienced.

Data and Methods

As comparative research on affective polarization has expanded, so too has the number of datasets tracking it across countries and time (Boxell et al. 2024; Orhan 2022; Reiljan et al. 2024). Yet most of these resources are not ideal for identifying the causal effect of institutional reform. That task calls for data with both high temporal frequency and broad geographic coverage, preferably in the form of country-level *panels* rather than repeated cross-sections.

The main limitation is sparse coverage. Scholars frequently rely on the CSES, which contributes only one to six observations per country (Gidron et al. 2020; Wagner 2021). Some broaden the evidence base by stitching together multiple national election studies to increase the number of country-years (e.g. Garzia et al. 2023). But this strategy introduces substantial harmonization

[13] Samuels (2002) and Samuels and Shugart (2010) use the Israeli case for similar purposes.

challenges: item wording and response scales differ across surveys, identical questions can be interpreted differently across settings (Stegmueller 2011), and sampling and fieldwork protocols vary across survey programs. Even after adjusting for these differences, the resulting time series remain thin and unevenly spaced, making them ill-suited for designs that depend on detecting shifts in country-level trajectories at specific points in time.

I therefore use affective polarization estimates from the Polarization in Comparative Attitudes Project (PolarCAP; Mehlhaff 2025). Like other large-scale efforts, PolarCAP pools a wide range of survey sources—about 3.5 million respondents across 35 survey programs—but it additionally applies latent variable models that correct for forms of non-stochastic measurement variation (see also Claassen 2019). The models also impose temporal smoothing, producing estimates for every country-year, including years without raw survey observations. PolarCAP uses respondents' assessments of their feelings toward parties to estimate affective polarization: the degree to which citizens like some parties, dislike others, and share those evaluations with copartisans.

I analyze annual affective polarization estimates for 49 countries from 1975—the first year with available data—through 2001, when Israel returned to parliamentarism. Relative to prior data sources, these estimates offer three key advantages. First, they align more closely with the concept of polarization by capturing both intergroup heterogeneity and intragroup homogeneity (Esteban and Ray 1994; Fortunato and Stevenson 2021; Mehlhaff 2024). Second, their broad spatial and temporal coverage supports more generalizable inference. Third, annual panel structure enables the time-series causal tests described below.

I also need to group countries according to which type of executive institution they employ—this is the "treatment" Israel experienced as part of its institutional reforms. I code countries as "presidential" if the head of government satisfies two criteria: First, they are either directly elected, or they are appointed by a head of state who is not chosen by the legislature. Second, they do not rely on the legislature for confidence. If a head of government does not enjoy both separate origin and separate survival from the legislature, I do not consider their system presidential.[14] As a result,

[14]Under Israel's reform, fused survival was a technicality; in practice, it was difficult for the Knesset to credibly threaten the prime minister with dismissal.

the control group might be more accurately described as "not strictly presidential," as it includes a variety of semi-presidential systems that combine, for instance, separate origin with fused survival. For clarity of exposition, I nevertheless refer to these systems as "parliamentary."[15]

Three additional notes on this coding scheme merit mention. First, to identify a causal effect, control units should be as similar as possible to treated units. Hence, I compare Israel to cases where the executive's selection or survival at least partially depends on legislative approval. I also focus specifically on the head of government instead of each country's figurehead leader (such as the president in France) because it offers a cleaner comparison to the Israeli case, which altered selection rules for its head of government while leaving its head of state unaffected. I validate this coding scheme against two publicly available datasets in the Supplementary Information. I also show that taking Samuels and Shugart's (2010) recommendation to consider semi-presidential systems as more presidential than parliamentary—thereby comparing Israel only to pure parliamentary systems—has no impact on substantive conclusions from this or any other analysis.

Second, this coding scheme likely provides a hard test of the theory. I previously described how I expect both separate origin and survival to affect party behavior in presidential systems; coding systems with one feature but not the other as "parliamentary" means those systems may experience some effects of presidentialism, but it should be of lesser magnitude than systems with both features.

Third, even though the reformed institutions were not used in practice until the 1994 election—and the first prime minister not directly elected until 1996—I designate 1992 as the first year in which Israel experienced treatment. In order to identify the causal effect of the institutional change, I need to assume political actors did not anticipate the change and begin adjusting their behavior—such as party strategy and rhetoric—before the change took place. My argument partly rests on the assertion that executive institutions alter the way parties approach campaigning, so it is all but certain that parties changed their strategy immediately after the reform passed as they adapted to the new method of executive selection. Designating treatment onset as 1992—the point at which

[15]I use the same coding scheme in the cross-national analysis above. The Supplementary Information shows institutional coding for each country-year and briefly discusses edge cases.

the rules of the game changed—helps assuage concerns about anticipation that could otherwise jeopardize identification.

Gaining causal purchase on this test requires me to compare the actual level of affective polarization observed in Israel to the level of affective polarization we *would have observed* if the reform had never been enacted. Synthetic control methods offer a powerful framework for estimating this counterfactual quantity when there is only one treated unit, as is the case here (Abadie 2021; Abadie et al. 2010; Ben-Michael et al. 2021). The first step in the generalized synthetic control method focuses on the pre-treatment period, using an interactive fixed effects model to learn patterns in control units that accurately predict the treated unit's outcomes *before* it undergoes treatment (Xu 2017).[16] I adjust for the same covariates as in the cross-national analysis above. The model then applies the patterns learned from pre-treatment data to the post-treatment period, building a "synthetic" control for the treated unit. Finally, subtracting the synthetic (untreated) outcome from the observed (treated) outcome and averaging over the time periods under treatment provides the average treatment effect on the treated unit (ATT).[17]

A final consideration is how to perform statistical inference. With only one treated unit, I cannot calculate standard errors that rely on asymptotic assumptions. Even a nonparametric bootstrap (e.g. Alrababa'h et al. 2021) will produce downward-biased standard errors when the number of treated units is small. I therefore use two different methods to obtain uncertainty estimates. First, Xu (2017) provides a parametric bootstrap approach that resamples full time series of model residuals, thereby avoiding bias from serial correlation. Second, I conduct a permutation test in which I shuffle countries' treatment statuses and re-estimate the model on each shuffled dataset (Abadie et al. 2010; Alrababa'h et al. 2021). These models produce a null distribution of treatment effects against which to test the effect estimated for Israel.

[16] In the Supplementary Information, I show that results do not differ substantially by using a matrix completion estimator (Athey et al. 2021) or a generalized difference-in-differences model.

[17] For a more detailed model explication, see the Supplementary Information.

Results

Figure 1 visualizes the effect of switching to direct executive elections using two different plots. The top plot shows the level of affective polarization in Israel over time. The solid line provides the observed outcome throughout the full time series and the dashed line provides the estimated counterfactual outcome—the level of affective polarization Israel would have been expected to experience if it never implemented the institutional reform. The difference between the solid and dashed black lines therefore denotes the treatment effect in each year. The plot is annotated with the overall ATT, its parametrically bootstrapped standard error, and an indication of statistical significance ($^{*}p < 0.05$). The bottom plot displays the treatment effect in Israel against the treatment effects estimated for all control units in the permutation test. The gray lines in the bottom plot thus represent the null distribution of ATTs I use to calculate permutation-based p-values. In both plots, the vertical line indicates the treatment cutoff. During years to the left of the vertical line, all units in the analysis are coded as "parliamentary." During years to the right of the vertical line, Israel is coded as having "presidential" institutions, while all other units remained parliamentary.

The first part of the plot to examine is the section to the left of the vertical line—the period before Israel experienced treatment. In order for the post-treatment estimates to represent an accurate counterfactual, the pre-treatment estimates must be well-calibrated to the observed data. This is precisely what I find. In the top plot, pre-treatment counterfactual estimates track well with observed outcomes. In the bottom plot, the black line denoting the treatment effect in Israel is approximately zero in every period before the treatment is administered. This indicates the model is picking up on patterns in the pre-treatment data that enable it to construct an accurate synthetic control in the post-treatment period.

The post-treatment section of Figure 1—the area to the right of the vertical line—is where a treatment effect can be seen. The treated and counterfactual units are approximately equal until the treatment is implemented, at which point the level of affective polarization actually observed in Israel begins to drop off from the counterfactual levels. In the post-treatment period, the level of polarization in the treated unit is consistently lower than the level Israel would have experi-

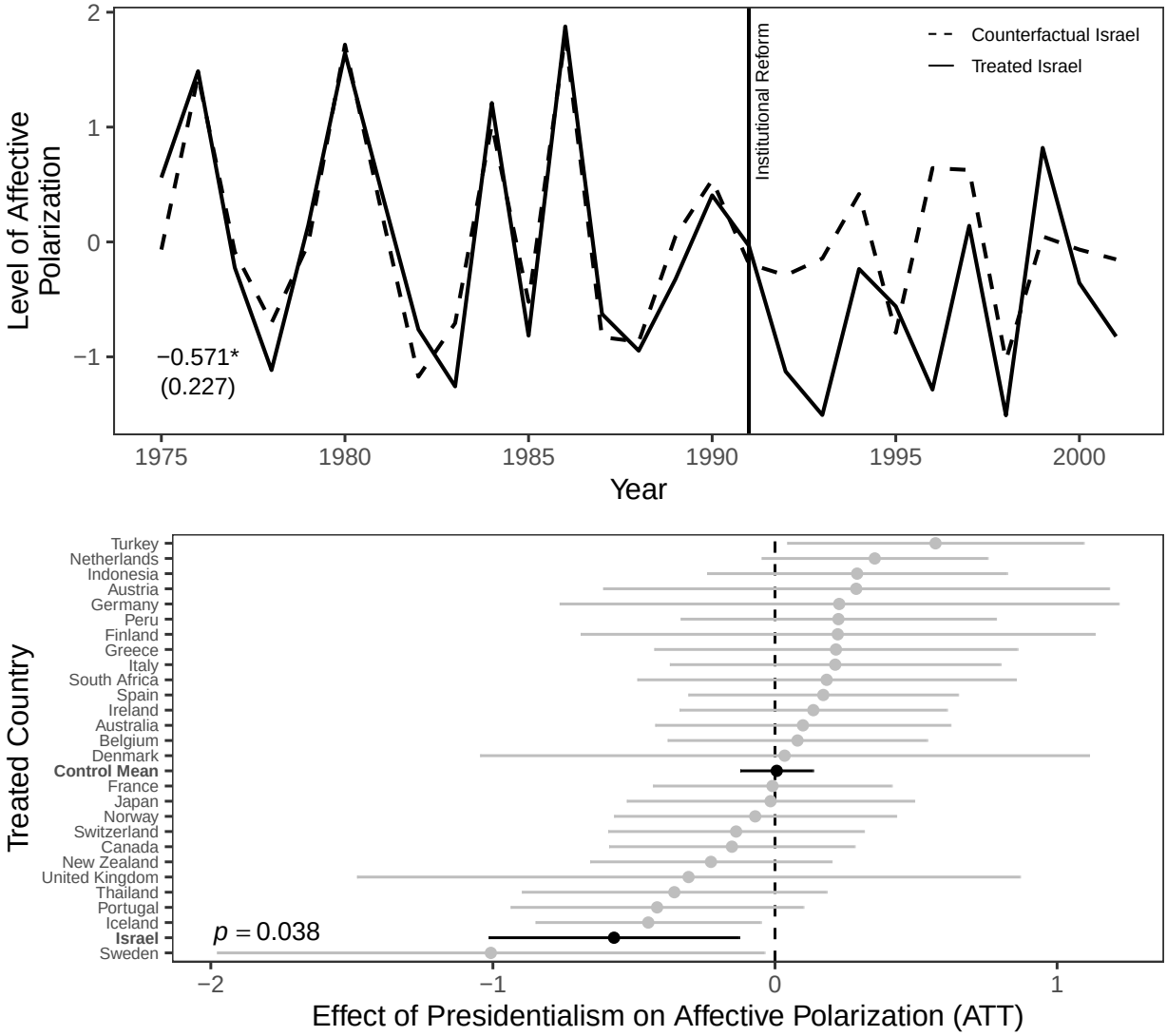

Figure 1: Comparison of Observed and Synthetic Affective Polarization Levels in Israel. Area to right of vertical bar indicates time period during which Israel used direct executive elections. Top plot: difference between solid and dashed black lines represents treatment effect; annotated numbers indicate ATT, parametrically bootstrapped standard error, and statistical significance ($^*p < 0.05$); affective polarization is standardized. Bottom plot: ATT and 95% confidence intervals for each unit in permutation test; annotated number is p-value from permutation test.

enced had it continued down the path of parliamentarism.[18] The average treatment effect over the entire period following the reform is -0.571 standard deviations, with a parametrically bootstrapped standard error of 0.227 ($p < 0.05$). To put this effect magnitude in context, the average

[18] 1999 is the notable exception. The election in this year was called early, the result of the only successful no-confidence vote in the post-reform period. It featured sharp disagreements over the implementation of the Oslo Accords (Peretz and Doron 2000) as well as perceptions the country was "in a state of deep crisis" (Yanai 2002, p. 228).

level of affective polarization in South Africa—the most polarized country over the post-treatment period—was 0.709 standard deviations above the mean. The effect of implementing presidential institutions in Israel was thus akin to moving from among the most bitterly polarized countries to one that was only slightly above average.

The results of the permutation test, shown in the bottom plot, tell a similar story. This test enables me to assess statistical significance by reassigning the treatment to units that were not, in fact, treated and subsequently re-fitting the synthetic control model to the permuted data. Since none of the control units experienced institutional changes over the time period being analyzed, the treatment effect among these units should be zero on average. Indeed, the control units plotted in the bottom plot of Figure 1 are approximately symmetric around zero, and the null distribution of treatment effects generated by the permutation procedure has a mean of only 0.006. Comparing the treatment effect in Israel to this null distribution indicates the effect of presidentialism on affective polarization in Israel is statistically significant at the $\alpha = 0.05$ level in both one- and two-tailed hypothesis tests.[19]

The overall pattern of results supports the central hypothesis I laid out above: Presidential institutions, characterized by the head of government's separate origin and survival, depress party-based affective polarization in the mass public. Israel's experience with a directly elected executive in the 1990s led to lower affective polarization levels than would be expected in the absence of institutional reform. The following two sections probe possible mechanisms I previously identified as undergirding this overall effect.

Muddled Party Brands, Atrophied Party Organizations

My theory linking presidentialism to lower affective polarization relies on political parties altering their behavior to adapt to different forms of executive institutions. In particular, I draw on a long

[19]The permutation test contains fewer countries than the main analysis, as some control units lack sufficient pre-treatment data for permutation. With relatively few control units, the permutation *p*-value may be conservative. See the Supplementary Information for country-years included in analyses.

history of comparative party research suggesting separate origin leads parties to have broader, less coherent brands and weaker organizations (Doyle and Power 2020; Mainwaring and Scully 1995; Samuels and Shugart 2010). When parties present unclear programmatic appeals and rely on personalism rather than party-based campaigning to connect to voters, party identities should be less strongly rooted in the electorate, resulting in lower affective polarization. I previously presented cross-sectional evidence for the variation in voters' party evaluations and causal evidence for the overall negative effect of presidentialism on affective polarization. Here, I again use the Israeli institutional reform to show presidentialism leads to less coherent party brands and diminished organizational vitality.

Data and Methods

To test the effect of transitioning to a directly elected head of government on party behavior, I take two sets of variables from the Varieties of Party Identity and Organization (V-Party) project (Düpont et al. 2022). A close relative to the Varieties of Democracy project (V-Dem; Coppedge et al. 2020), V-Party solicits expert annotations of party characteristics over a long historical period and aggregates those individual coder assessments using a Bayesian latent variable model (Pemstein et al. 2020).

The first set of variables aims to evaluate how the institutional reform affected the clarity of parties' policy proposals. I examine four issues that have long been salient in Israeli politics: economic left-right placement, immigration policies, views toward minority rights (including ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities), and the degree to which party priorities were driven by religious principles. However, I am not interested in *where* each party staked out their position on each of these dimensions. Rather, I need a measure of the *clarity* with which they did so. Fortunately, V-Party includes not only point estimates for each party's placement, but also the variance surrounding those estimates. In effect, this represents the degree of uncertainty about where each party stood on each issue, with much of that uncertainty coming from variation in individual coder assessments. If the electoral separation of purpose brought on by direct executive elections led

party positions to become less clear, I would expect the variance surrounding estimates of their policy positions to increase. To aggregate these variance estimates to the country-year level, I average over all parties evaluated in each country-year.

The second set of variables probes a different set of party behaviors: the degree to which parties attack their opposition, trend toward personalization, and maintain well-functioning party organizations. I examine the extent to which parties engage in negative campaigning against their opponents; if cross-party attacks decrease, that would help explain why affective polarization declines under presidentialism. Another intermediate outcome I posited above was an increase in personalist voting, so I examine the degree to which parties revolve around individual leaders. Finally, I operationalize the health of party organizations by examining the extent to which each party supports a permanent cadre of party activists in local communities and how widespread party offices are in the country's municipalities. If direct elections lead parties to shift control to presidential campaigns and away from more institutionalized forms of party organization, I would expect these measures of organizational strength to decline and the degree to which party appeals are centered on individual leaders to increase. As with the first set of variables, I aggregate party-level scores to the country-year level by averaging over all parties.

To estimate the causal effect of Israel's institutional reform on these party-level outcomes, I use the same generalized synthetic control approach as in the previous section, controlling for the same set of covariates. Again, as with the previous analysis, I consider the time period from 1975 until 2001, when Israel reverted to parliamentarism. This allows me to compare observed post-reform trends in party positioning uncertainty and party behavior to a synthetic counterfactual in which Israel retained its parliamentary institutions over the entire time period. Standard errors are again obtained via parametric bootstrap.

Results

Figure 2 plots generalized synthetic control results for each set of variables. As in Figure 1, the solid lines show the observed outcomes in Israel, and the dashed lines denote the counterfactual

Israel. The area of the plot to the left of the vertical line represents the pre-reform period, and the area to the right denotes the time period in which I consider Israel to be "treated." Numeric ATTs are printed on each facet, along with the parametrically bootstrapped standard error and an indication of whether the estimate is statistically significant ($^*p < 0.05$).[20] All variables are standardized to facilitate comparison. Examining the pre-treatment fit for each of the models depicted in Figure 2 indicates all models are very well-calibrated; the synthetic control unit constructed in each model closely tracks the observed unit throughout the entire pre-treatment period.

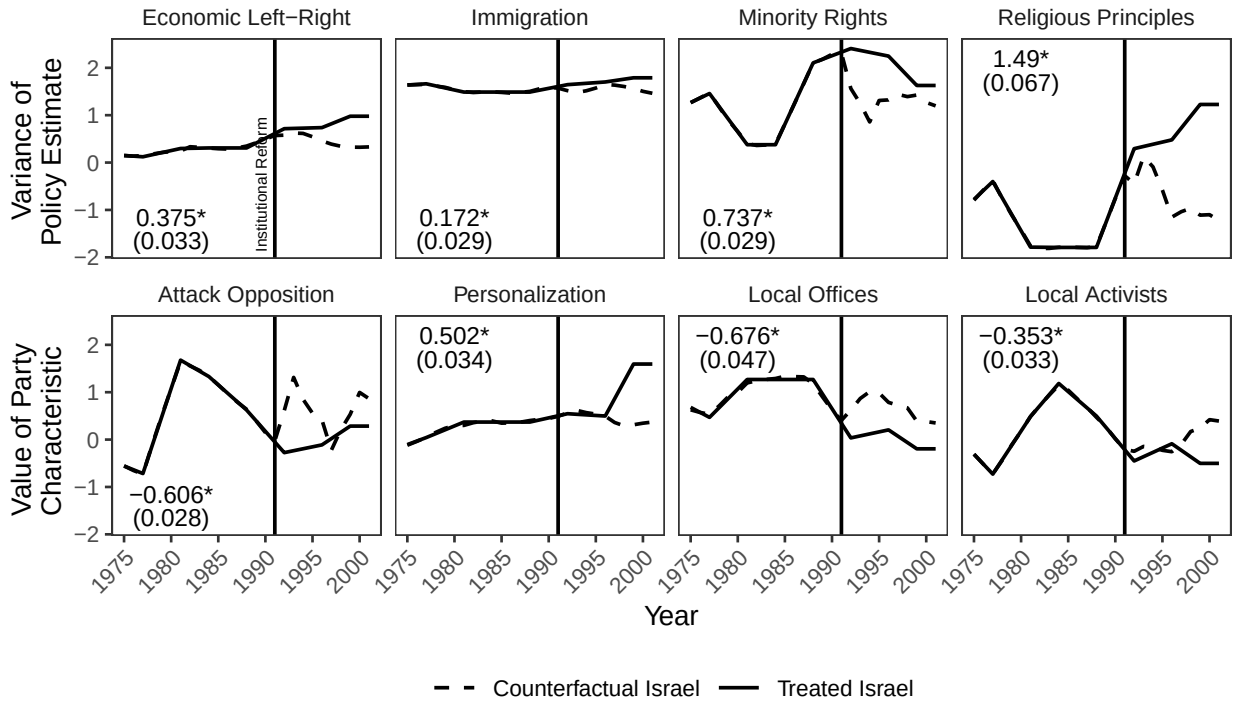

Figure 2: Effect of Institutional Reform on Party Characteristics and Uncertainty of Party Positioning. Area to right of vertical bar indicates time period during which Israel used direct executive elections. Difference between solid and dashed black lines represents treatment effect. Numbers annotated on plot indicate ATT, parametrically bootstrapped standard error, and statistical significance ($^*p < 0.05$). Variables standardized for comparison.

I focus first on the variables capturing the average degree of uncertainty surrounding parties' issue positions in each country-year, which are plotted in the top row of Figure 2. The differences between the solid and dashed black lines in the post-reform period represent the causal effect of the

[20]Full tabular results and permutation tests are presented in the Supplementary Information.

reform on the clarity of issue positions. All four models exhibit positive treatment effects and all are statistically significant, suggesting the effect of separating the head of government's origin from that of the legislature was to blur party brands. Effects for economic and immigration policies are modest, with estimates in the treated unit gradually departing from the synthetic control. Estimates for support of minority rights and incorporation of religious principles are more drastic. In both of the latter, the degree of uncertainty surrounding party positions increased prior to treatment onset. Each model predicted reversions to prior uncertainty levels, but they instead remained high and even continued to increase in the case of religious principles. These results suggest parties responded to the implementation of direct executive elections by projecting less coherent policy, which manifested in greater uncertainty surrounding each party's programmatic identity.

I next turn to the second set of V-Party variables: aspects of party organization and behavior. These variables are plotted in the bottom row of Figure 2. The bottom-left facet shows the reform decreased parties' propensity to engage in negative campaigning or demonize their opponents. This positions opposition attacks as another possible mechanism linking direct elections to lower affective polarization. Also as predicted, the second facet shows the degree to which party identities revolve around one individual (typically the candidate for executive election) increased following the reform. After staying relatively constant from 1975 to 1995, Israeli parties suddenly experienced a rapid increase in personalization, marking a significant change from the estimated counterfactual. Finally, the two facets on the bottom-right show effects on party organization. These models identify negative, statistically significant effects on both variables. Israeli parties maintained weaker local networks and fewer local offices than they would have been expected to in the absence of the institutional reform.

Less Affectively Charged Messaging

The effects I have demonstrated thus far operate primarily at the elite level, but one way they could trickle down to mass attitudes is through changes to political messaging conveyed through

news media. In the cross-national survey analysis above, I uncovered suggestive evidence that citizens perceive changes in party behavior and adjust their attitudes commensurately. In this final empirical analysis, I show direct executive elections neutralized the tone of political content available to Israeli citizens in the news. In combination with less negative campaigning by parties, less caustic coverage of party politics could help explain declines in affective polarization.

Data and Methods

News media acts as a prism for political messaging, repackaging party rhetoric for mass consumption. In their effort to grow and maintain their audience, media organizations are often incentivized to stoke political tension in a way that appeals to partisans and delegitimizes alternate information sources (Benkler et al. 2018; Berry and Sobieraj 2014). Media can thus reflect—if not contribute to—polarization processes occurring in both parties and the mass public (Mutz 2015; Pierson and Schickler 2020; Prior 2013). If parties alter their behavior in response to institutional change, it may also be reflected in the tone of news coverage.

To test this conjecture, I construct a corpus of newspaper headlines published in *The Jerusalem Post* from 1975 to 2001. Headlines likely represent a reasonable proxy for the political messaging to which citizens are exposed. They are pithy summaries of an article's content, designed to grab readers' attention, and more likely to be read in their entirety compared to the body of the article. I collect headlines from all articles mentioning at least one of three topics: political parties, party leaders, or the Knesset.[21] Articles could touch on political subjects without mentioning one of these topics. However, my objective is to examine the headlines most likely to reflect party rhetoric and the contours of political messaging informing citizens' attitudes toward parties. In that sense, headlines with this restricted set of keywords seem closest to the concept I aim to capture. These searches yield a total of 106,963 headlines—44,169 mentioning parties, 56,021 mentioning party leaders, and 56,829 mentioning the Knesset. In the Supplementary Information, I show that the number of articles published on parties and the Knesset remained relatively constant over time.

[21] Precise search parameters are provided in the Supplementary Information.

The number published on party leaders, however, increased substantially, consistent with the rise in personalization identified in the previous analyses.

I focus on *The Jerusalem Post* for two reasons. The first is substantive; the *Post* has long been a major news source with significant national and global relevance (Frenkel 1994; Zvielli 1992). As the largest English-language newspaper in Israel, it took seriously its role in communicating Israeli politics to the rest of the world throughout the twentieth century (Cohen 2007; Dridi 2020). The *Post* therefore figures to be a meaningful representation of Israeli political media. The second reason is practical; the *Post* is one of few Israeli newspapers with fully digitized, publicly available archives covering the entire historical period of interest, and certainly the most prominent of those newspapers. Because it has been published in English since its founding, I can use sentiment analysis tools developed for English-language text and avoid semantic distortions that could be introduced through translation (Bautin et al. 2021; Lucas et al. 2015; Miah et al. 2024).

I calculate four measures for each headline. First, subjectivity captures the degree to which a headline contains opinions or emotion instead of factual, neutral language (Liu 2010). It is thus conceptually distinct from but closely related to sentiment, and helps give a sense of the degree to which headlines slant their coverage or engage in editorializing. If direct executive elections decrease affective polarization, I would also expect to see decreasing subjectivity in news coverage.

The next three measures break the sentiment of a headline into more specific positive, negative, and neutral components. Sentiment analyses typically report a summary measure intended to describe the valence of a text, summing over measures of positivity and negativity (Bestvater and Monroe 2023; Pang et al. 2002). In this case, such a measure would be less informative. Affective polarization invokes both positive and negative feelings toward parties; lower affective polarization should be associated with less negative rhetoric meant to tear down other parties, but also less positive rhetoric meant to build up one's own. A summary measure of sentiment would not be able to detect such changes, as they would cancel each other out in the aggregate. Following the institutional reform, I expect negative and positive sentiment to both decrease, while neutral sentiment should increase. I calculate sentiment using the Valence-Aware Dictionary for sEntiment

Reasoning (VADER), an open-source, dictionary-based model designed for use on short texts like news headlines (Bestvater and Monroe 2023; Felmlee et al. 2020; Hutto and Gilbert 2014).[22]

Because I only have observations from one newspaper in one country, a synthetic control approach is not feasible. Instead, I use interrupted time series models to estimate the effect of the institutional reform on each measure of headline sentiment. Interrupted time series estimate the effect of a policy change or other discrete intervention when that intervention affects the entire population at the same time (Anderton and Carter 2001; Bates et al. 2017; Cross and Bølstad 2015). They produce estimates of both the immediate change in the outcome following the intervention and the sustained change observed over a longer time period. The former would be represented by a discontinuity in the trend line at the time of the reform, while the latter would manifest in different slopes before and after the reform.[23] I focus on the sustained change; particularly since the first election under the new system was not held until two years after the reform, I expect the effect on media content to accumulate as parties adjust their behavior and the media respond in turn.

One factor that could complicate inference is the *Post*'s changing editorial status. During the second half of the twentieth century, the *Post* was ideologically left-of-center and at least tacitly supported the Labour Party. In 1989, three years before the institutional reform, a new ownership and editorial group shifted the paper back toward mainstream Zionism (Zvielli 1992). It continued to track to the political right until another ownership change in 2004——outside the temporal scope of my analysis. Therefore, if patterns in the newspaper's headline sentiment change after the institutional reform, it may be difficult to know whether that is due to changes in party behavior and electoral incentives brought on by the reform, or whether it is due to changing editorial preferences.

However, the effects one would expect from a newspaper veering rightward are the opposite of what I theoretically expect as a result of institutional change. To the extent the *Post*'s new ideological lean affected its printed content, I would expect it to *increase* subjectivity, negative

[22] In the Supplementary Information, I show that results are consistent when using the Lexicoder Sentiment Dictionary, which is designed more specifically for use on political texts and news articles (Young and Soroka 2012).

[23] See the Supplementary Information for a more detailed model explication.

sentiment, and positive sentiment, and to *decrease* neutral sentiment. The *Post*'s editorial change may therefore offer a hard test of the theory. Nevertheless, there is reasonable doubt surrounding the assumptions required for causal inference in this analysis, so I interpret the results as purely correlational.

Results

If institutional reform had a sustained effect on the tone of political messaging conveyed in *The Jerusalem Post*, trend lines of sentiment over time should have different slopes before and after the reform, reflecting changes in party rhetoric in response to new electoral incentives. Figure 3 plots the four measures of sentiment over time, broken down across panels. As in previous figures, the area to the right of the vertical line denotes the period during which Israel directly elected its head of government. Solid lines represent trends in sentiment for headlines mentioning political parties, while dashed and dotted lines represent trends for headlines mentioning party leaders and the Knesset, respectively. All four measures are standardized to facilitate comparison across panels, and shaded error bands give 95% confidence intervals.

All four varieties of sentiment exhibit clear changes in trend following the reform. Subjectivity, shown in the top-left plot of Figure 3, slowly increased from 1975 until the reform, after which headlines concerning all three political topics began to rapidly employ more objective, factual language. Positive sentiment, shown in the bottom-right plot, displays similar patterns. Notably, there is little to no change in sentiment around the treatment cutoff, indicating the effect on media tone took time to develop. Neutral and negative sentiment, in the upper-right and bottom-left plots, respectively, do show some evidence of immediate change, but the more pronounced effect is that of sustained changes. The use of neutral sentiment dramatically increased after the reform and negative sentiment decreased or, at the very least, stopped its upward climb in prevalence.

Table 2 provides numerical results of the interrupted time series models, with standard errors adjusted for heteroskedasticity and autocorrelation (Newey and West 1987). I provide only the coefficients and standard errors representing the sustained effect of the reform; full results are

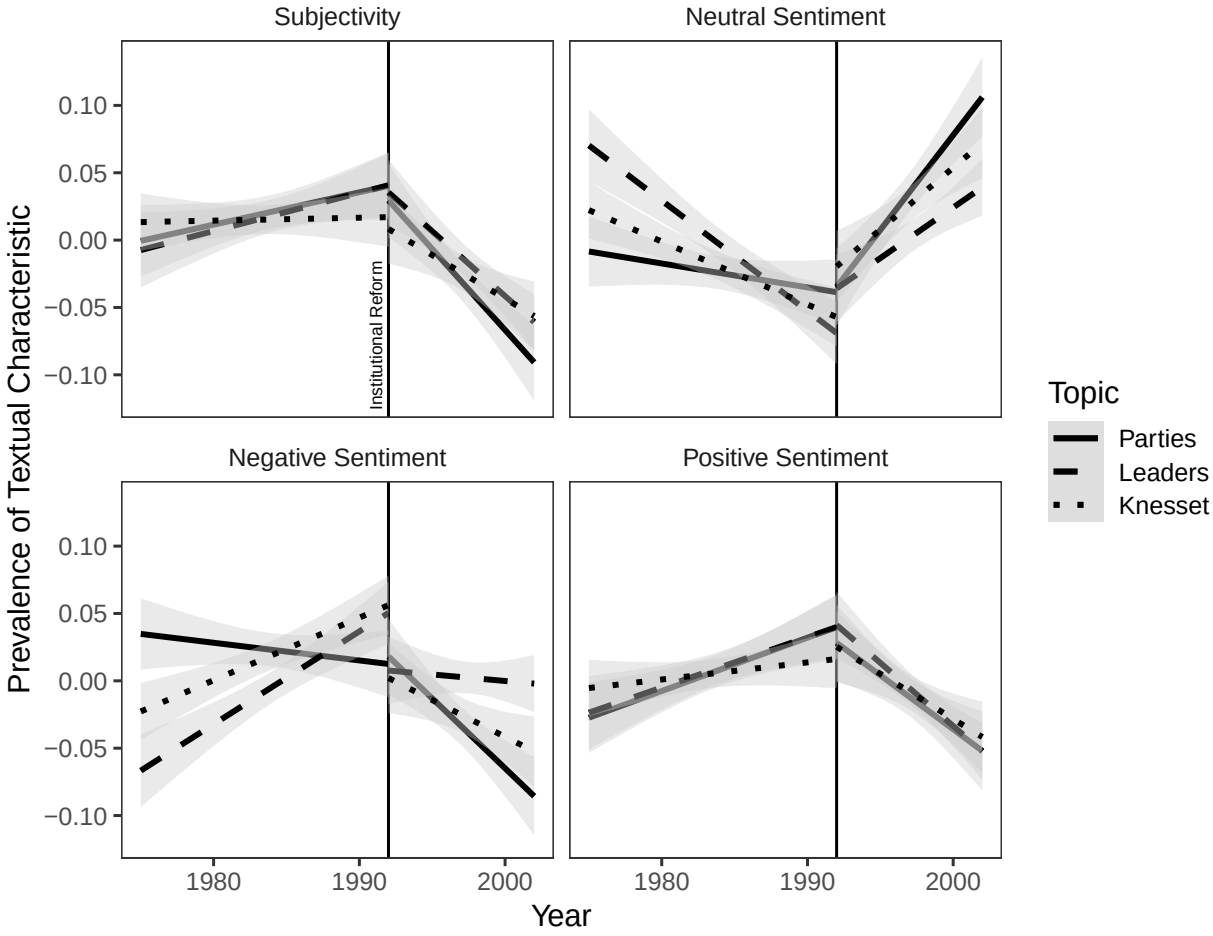

Figure 3: Trends in Newspaper Headline Sentiment Before and After Reform. Area to right of vertical bar indicates time period during which Israel used direct executive elections. Variables standardized for comparison. Error bands give 95% confidence intervals. See Table 2 and the Supplementary Information for tabular results.

available in the Supplementary Information. Results reflect expectations across all four sentiment varieties and all three headline topics. The reform led *The Jerusalem Post* to use more factual headlines rather than opinions, more neutral language, and less negative and positive sentiment. All estimates are statistically significant at the $\alpha = 0.05$ level. The effects are rather modest, averaging about 1.2 percent of a standard deviation per year following the reform. However, recall that the *Post* moving ideologically rightward during this period may be counteracting the effect of the reform, driving effect magnitudes downward. That I still observe statistically significant effects in the expected direction is perhaps a testament to their robustness. Collectively, these interrupted

Table 2: Sustained Effects of Institutional Reform on Newspaper Headline Sentiment

	Parties	Leaders	Knesset
Subjectivity	-0.002^*	-0.012^*	-0.007^*
	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.003)
Neutral Sentiment	0.016^*	0.016^*	0.014^*
	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.003)
Negative Sentiment	-0.009^*	-0.008^*	-0.01^*
	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.003)
Positive Sentiment	-0.012^*	-0.013^*	-0.008^*
	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.003)

Note: $^*p < 0.05$. Results of interrupted time series models with Newey-West standard errors. Full model results in Supplementary Information.

time series analyses appear to uncover a shift in media coverage to transmit less affectively charged political messaging, indicating that party messaging may be one mechanism through which presidential institutions can defuse affective polarization in the mass public.

Discussion

My core thesis is that executive institutions shape mass attitudes by altering the ways in which parties present themselves to voters. Because parties in presidential systems must appeal to different constituencies in executive and legislative elections, they tend to develop broader, less coherent brands and weaker party organizations. As a result, it is more difficult for voters to ascertain where each party stands, and intra-party variation in positioning leads parties' adherents in the mass public to feel less firmly rooted in their political identity. Because parties are organizationally weaker, it is more difficult for them to mount public messaging campaigns to attack opposition parties.

The upshot of all these effects is that presidentialism exerts downward pressure on party-based affective polarization in the mass public. This conclusion merits some qualification. First, I do

not mean to imply presidential systems cannot be polarized; some countries with presidents have quite combative politics indeed. Rather, my findings suggest that presidential systems are likely to be less polarized than they would be if they were instead parliamentary. Second, I make no claim about whether the party system itself becomes more or less polarized under presidentialism. My contention is that parties become less coherent and the *electorate* is less polarized as a result.

Most of the evidence I present relies on the identification strategy provided by the 1992 institutional reform in Israel. To some extent, I am thus generalizing from this single case of direct executive elections to presidential systems more broadly. On one hand, results could be vulnerable to idiosyncracies of the Israeli case. Maybe the particular combination of executive and legislative institutions in Israel helps drive the effect (Shugart and Carey 1992). Or perhaps imposing presidentialism on a political system already fraught with particularism helped facilitate national goods provision, and this took away incentives for party conflict (Shugart 1999). On the other hand, the types of mechanisms I examine tend to differ more *across* system types than *within* them (Samuels and Shugart 2010), suggesting a more limited explanatory role for the particularities of the Israeli case. That insight, combined with the cross-national evidence I present, suggests results could be robust to a wide range of conditioning factors.

This work helps breathe new life into a literature that has long been pessimistic about the prospects of presidential democracy and renews calls for scholars to remain sensitive to the conditioning impacts of institutional configurations. Great effort has been dedicated to understanding the dangers polarization poses to democratic stability (e.g. Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; McCoy et al. 2018). However, scholars have given less thought to how democratic institutions themselves may shape polarization. If one takes at face value the claim that presidentialism threatens democracy, then the fact that presidentialism also depresses affective polarization implies that polarization may not carry the negative causal consequences for democracy that scholars frequently assume.

Nevertheless, the party-weakening effects of presidentialism could push the pendulum too far in the opposite direction. Decades before the third wave of democratization, Schattschneider (1942, p. 1) famously asserted that "political parties created democracy and modern democracy is un-

thinkable save in terms of the parties." If presidentialism weakens party attachments, it could still have corrosive effects on democracy. Scholars of Latin American politics repeatedly point out how uprooted parties, poor representation, and ideological convergence in party systems contribute to poor democratic quality in the region (Hagopian and Mainwaring 2005; Mainwaring and Scully 1995; Morgan 2011). But even in this version of events, democratic erosion would not be due to polarization, but to the institutional configuration itself.

There is yet another, even less sanguine, interpretation of this evidence. Presidential systems are more likely to produce weak parties with personalist tendencies. Under strong personalism, voters come to identify with individual political elites rather than a larger party label—they support *Chavismo* in Venezuela or *Peronismo* in Argentina. What is important to these voters is not that their preferred *party* remains in power but that their preferred *leader* does. Or, if they dislike the figurehead of these movements, they think it critical to depose them. The outcome remains the same—citizens are less tightly attached to their parties and party-based affective polarization may therefore be lower—but the mechanism differs from the theoretical story I propose. If strong personalism links presidentialism to affective polarization, the consequences for democracy could still be severe.

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