

Ethnocentrism and Partisan Polarization in the United States

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Draft: July 6, 2026

Abstract

With groups central features of politics, group attitudes naturally relate to political decisions. But research often considers single identities, attitudes about either a given in-group or out-group, or ignores how people trade off in-group and out-group attitudes. To offer a more holistic understanding of the link between group outlooks and politics I turn to ethnocentrism, probing its connection with partisanship. I use race as a case to argue that the two parties' positions vis-a-vis in-groups affect how ethnocentrism maps to party choice, demonstrating asymmetries by racial background: ethnocentric people of color (PoC) are Democrats and ethnocentric whites are Republicans. I then use panel data to test whether these links relate to ethnocentrism changing partisanship or partisanship changing ethnocentrism. Since 2011 I find evidence for ethnocentrism changing among PoC and for both paths among whites. I conclude with what these relationships say about party politics and group-centric thinking.

Paper Prepared for the 2026 Annual Meeting of the International Society of Political Psychology

¹ I thank Abigail Valdez-Perez for excellent assistance on an early version of this paper and Larry Bartels; Efrén Pérez; John Sides; Corwin Smidt; the UNC-Greensboro political science workshop; and Vanderbilt's Research on Individuals, Politics, and Society lab group for helpful comments and feedback.

Social movement activism around Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, the Supreme Court's *Dobbs v. Jackson* and *Louisiana v. Callais* decisions, and presidential candidacies of Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, Kamala Harris, and Donald Trump, have all in different ways emphasized the relevance of groups to politics. Scholars interested in understanding these phenomena have marshalled evidence for the relevance of group identities (e.g., Jardina 2019; Ocenio et al 2023) and out-group prejudices and other hierarchy-reinforcing outlooks (e.g., Tesler 2016; Geiger and Reny 2024; Mason et al 2021). These investigations join a more general investigation into how different group-based attitudes shape political thinking, with partisan loyalties prominent among these efforts (Achen and Bartels 2016; Carlos 2026; Kane et al 2021; Pérez et al 2025; Raychaudhuri 2025; White and Laird 2020). Sexism, racism, feminism, anti-immigrant sentiment, linked fate, and national identities all relate to partisan preferences to different degrees.

But such targeted explanations face complications in understanding fully the link between group attitudes and political choice. First, in-group attitudes do not beget complementary out-group attitudes (Brewer 1999). Investigations into identities' links to politics require joint assessment of these outlooks because, while correlated, they can have distinct associations (e.g., Jardina 2021). But such approaches face complexities given the myriad of ways people can attach themselves to their in-groups (Leach et al 2008) and evaluate out-groups (e.g., Chudy 2024), complicating theorizing and empirical assessment. Second, even if one incorporates both in-group and out-group attitudes into their analyses, assessments would also need to consider how people trade off concern with their in-group over feelings about out-groups. Some people are willing to harm their in-group so long as an outgroup gets even less (Sidanius et al 2007) while others might go out of their way to help an out-group even if it costs their in-group (Mikkelsen 2025). Third, scholars tend to focus on specific identities. While sensible given the desire to understand a given phenomenon, this does not fully grapple with the many identities people hold and how some of these group attachments might be

closely connected to others (e.g., Devos and Banaji 2005). Explanations would need account for these alternative responses (Garcia-Rios et al 2019) while also considering individual-level variation in relative importance.

To offer a more holistic approach to thinking about the link between group attitudes and politics I consider variation across individuals in ethnocentrism. First explicitly described by Gumpłowicz (1879, in Bizumic 2019), ethnocentrism at its broadest captures a “predisposition to divide human society into in-groups and out-groups” (Kinder and Kam 2009, 31). It reflects differences across individuals in how much people care, generally, about their in-groups and associated out-groups, addressing the several limits in existing work linking identities to political choice. Bizumic (2019; Bizumic et al 2021) describes ethnocentrism as ethnic group self-centeredness and self-importance, identifying six components nested under an in-group focused dimension and an out-group focused dimension. Ethnocentrism incorporates in-group loyalty, the elevation of group over individual concerns, a preference for the in-group over out-groups, a belief the in-group is superior to out-groups, the rejection of out-groups, and a willingness to exploit out-groups. Taken together, “An ethnocentric person sees their ethnic group as the centre around which everything, including the life of the person, revolves” (Bizumic 2019, 96).²

Ethnocentrism’s generality makes it an ideal concept for thinking broadly about the link between social groups and political choice. Indeed, scholars find it correlates with opinion on: anti-terrorism and foreign policy (Kam and Kinder 2007; Kinder and Kam 2009; Bizumic 2019; Mutz 2021), crime (Bizumic 2019), democracy (Bartels 2020; Udani and Kimball 2018), health care (Maxwell and Shields 2014), immigration (Kinder and Kam 2009; Banks 2016; Hutchings and Wong

² Ethnicity reflects categories requiring descent-based attributes for members, including genetic and historical and cultural inheritances (see also Chandra 2012).

2014; Valentino, Brader, and Jardina 2013), nationalism and patriotism (Bizumic 2019; Wolak and Dawkins 2017), political candidates (Kam and Kinder 2012; Bizumic 2019; Benson, Merolla, and Geer 2011), religion (Bizumic 2019; Bilodeau et al 2018), sexual orientation and feminism (Kinder and Kam 2009; Bizumic 2019; Proctor 2021), social welfare programs including race conscious policy (Kinder and Kam 2009; Banks 2016), and viral outbreaks (Kam 2019). More fundamentally, ethnocentrism provides a basis for some of the particularistic prejudices—e.g., racism, anti-Islamic sentiments—scholars point to as important for understanding today’s politics (Kinder and Kam 2009; Sides and Gross 2013; Bizumic 2019).

Based on this evidence, I argue that ethnocentrism’s relevance to political opinions makes it plausibly connected to partisan identification specifically and a broader explanation for some of the specific links scholars have recorded between group opinions and partisan choice. This claim, however, runs against evidence that ethnocentrism and partisanship in the United States have no relationship (Kinder and Kam 2009). But, critically, this evidence comes from the early 2000s, before contextual changes that increased the prominence of identity-inflected issues in party conflict (Sides, Tausanovitch, and Vavreck 2022), conflict occurring in an environment with more interest in group cues generally (Hopkins, Lelkes, and Wolken 2025).

Similarly important, this reported null association considers Americans broadly. But ethnocentrism’s attention to prizing in-groups over out-groups implies that any connection with partisan loyalties should depend on where one’s in-groups fall in the party system. Consider race. The Democratic party’s long-standing commitment to racial liberalism means that it should be the home for people of color. This reputation functions as a pull factor for ethnocentric people of color and push factor for ethnocentric whites. Consequently, it is important to consider how background characteristics affect how people map this outlook to the party system.

I use data from several sources to probe the link between ethnocentrism and partisanship and use racial background as a case to evaluate how these links vary by the alignment between party brand and individual characteristics. I first show trends in ethnocentrism by party over time using data from the American National Election Study. I show that people of color have consistently linked ethnocentrism and partisanship, but this is only recently the case for whites. Democratic PoC and white Republicans are on average more ethnocentric. I then turn to two panel data sets to test hypotheses about party switching or shifting ethnocentrism. I find evidence for a bidirectional association between ethnocentrism and partisanship for white Americans but no such relationships for people of color. I conclude with what these results say about the nature partisanship, party coalition stability, and group-attitudes.

The Nexus of Ethnocentrism, Partisan Polarization, and Racial Hierarchy

Scholars locate ethnocentrism's origins early in life, with it crystallizing through early adulthood. Current perspectives incorporate both biological and environmental explanations. Evolution predisposes humans to closely affiliate with kin groups and be wary of outsiders, with socialization processes exacerbating or mitigating these individual predilections (Bizumic 2019; Kinder and Kam 2009; Wilson 2013). Following the human need to categorize the world around us, group-based attitudes, including in-group favoritism and ideas that some groups are better than others, develop early in life (Aboud 2003; Hailey and Olson 2013; Reifen-Tagar and Cimpian 2022; Roberts and Rizzo 2022). Diversity in one's early life, parenting choices, and educational contexts all appear to modulate these early biases' development (Katz 2003; Hooghe et al 2013; Raabe and Beelmann 2011; Vittrup and Holden 2011). After entering adulthood, realistic and symbolic threats, and a desire to increase one's power and status, may further stimulate ethnocentrism from this early core (Bizumic 2019; Vollebergh et al 2001). Put together, these characteristics make ethnocentrism

an arguably core predisposition, one scholars have argued plausibly helps anchor the opinions of a largely ideologically innocent mass public (Bizumic 2019; Kinder and Kam 2009).³

Ethnocentrism's potential political connections follow from groups as central protagonists, and today's party system is strongly divided on group-related issues. Democratic elites tend to express more support for: same-sex marriage (Hetherington and Weiler 2009), Black Lives Matter and addressing racial inequality (Berry, Glaser, and Schildkraut 2021; Engelhardt 2021b), #MeToo and addressing sexual harassment (Archer and Kam 2020; Berry, Glaser, and Schildkraut 2021; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2020), and immigration reform (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018). The Obama and Trump presidencies further solidified these divides with Obama a Black man who “provoked many Americans to question whether he was really ‘one of us’” (Kam and Kinder 2012, 326; see also Tesler 2016) and Trump openly denigrating various marginalized groups, at least indirectly valorizing white America, labeling COVID-19 the “Chinese virus,” and highlighting potential external threats to the nation (Sides, Tausanovitch, and Vavreck 2022; Parker 2021).

With increased clarification about where the parties stand on issues related to ethnocentric concerns of in-group deviance and intergroup difference, the same sorting processes that scholars

³ Evidence for ethnocentrism as a “core” orientation is, however, rare. Little evidence exists tracking its temporal stability, for instance, with stability a hallmark of a central attitude (Converse 1964). Error-corrected correlations for two measures available in the American National Election Study 2016-2024 panel (introduced later) shows 8-year stabilities of .69 and .73 for non-Hispanic whites and .47 and .89 for people of color. These generally lag stabilities for other arguably core outlooks like authoritarianism (.93 and .91; Engelhardt et al 2023) and partisanship (.81, .78). This suggests a lot of fluctuation for an ostensibly core outlook, one suggesting it might be an outcome of political processes.

have described as tethering individuals' various group orientations—their identities and particularistic prejudices—to their partisan loyalties may also mean ethnocentrism now underpins individuals' party attachments (e.g., Jardina 2019; Kuo et al 2017; Tesler 2016; White and Laird 2020).

But not all U.S. residents should respond to these developments similarly and I focus on racial hierarchy as a key moderator. Racial categorization in the U.S. determines access to power and opportunities. With members often treated categorically by social and political institutions, group membership becomes a “prism” through which people interpret the world (Masuoka and Junn 2013; Omi and Winant 2015; Sidanius and Pratto 1999). Group position then fosters group-based motives and goals. While members of subordinated groups—people of color (PoC)—are typically motivated to remedy their stigmatized and marginalized position, dominant group members—white Americans—typically desire to maintain this status (Craig and Phillips 2024; Pérez and Vicuña 2024).

Because politics gave rise to, and perpetuates, racial hierarchy, PoC and white Americans' status-based motivations contribute to political action (e.g., Dawson 1994; Jardina 2019; Pérez 2021a). Given the present party system, challenging the status quo means for many people of color an attachment to the Democratic Party. While these ties have long been recognized among Black Americans (Dawson 1994; Tate 1993; Walton 1985), scholars have noted more labile partisan loyalties for groups like Asian and Latino Americans (Hajnal and Lee 2011), though this may be changing (Hopkins, Kaiser, and Pérez 2023; McCann and Jones-Correa 2020; Pérez et al 2025). Group-based experiences with discrimination (Kuo, Malhotra, and Mo 2017), social identity content including norms (Hickel et al 2021; Leung 2021; Pérez 2021a; Saavedra Cisneros 2017; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018; White and Laird 2020), and the Democratic Party's ownership of civil rights (Schickler 2016; Stephens-Dougan 2020), may have cemented Democratic affiliation for PoC in part around the in-group prioritization that ethnocentrism reflects. In contrast, white Americans' concern

with losing their dominant position may increasingly connect their preference for group-centrism with Republican Party politics (Abrajano and Hajnal 2015; Craig and Richeson 2014; Mutz 2018; Parker 2021; Ostfeld 2019). Likewise, less ethnocentric whites may increasingly embrace the Democratic Party's increased diversity. This motivates my first hypothesis.

Ethnocentric sorting. Ethnocentrism precedes partisan preferences in ways that vary between whites and people of color. For whites, ethnocentrism aligns with stronger identification as a Republican for whites and as a Democrat for PoC.⁴

This sorting hypothesis builds on ethnocentrism's conceptualization as combining biological predilections and environmental socialization, making it a foundation for political thinking rather than an outcome of the same (Tesler 2015). But mounting evidence points to occasional revision of even presumptively fundamental orientations in light of politics. Both group-specific evaluations (cf. Engelhardt 2021a; Hopkins and Washington 2020) and even characteristic adaptations (cf. Bakker, Lelkes, and Malka 2021; Engelhardt, Feldman, and Hetherington 2023) may change to fit with people's partisanship. These works argue this responsiveness comes in part from the connection between the orientation and political decision-making. Political elites alternatively celebrating racial diversity or disparaging immigrant groups, contesting discrimination by sex and sexual orientation or promoting existing gender roles and identities, provide information which mass partisans may incorporate into their existing beliefs (Engelhardt 2021b; Enns and Jardina 2021; but see Archer and Kam 2020). Consequently, the same connection between ethnocentrism and political opinionation I

⁴ I readily acknowledge variation within and across these groups in their potential motivations for identification with either political party given position in the U.S. racial hierarchy (Zou and Cheryan 2017). My analysis of people of color collectively reflects the specific intersection between racial hierarchy and the U.S. party system (Pérez 2021b; Hopkins, Kaiser, and Pérez 2023; Pérez et al 2025).

view as a potential foundation for partisan change also opens up the possibility for party-driven changes in ethnocentrism.

But as with our sorting expectation, I think the nature of partisanship's influence may differ across the racial hierarchy. This again follows from the differential motivations group-position provides individuals. Republican elites expressing concerns about immigrant or LGBT populations would, for white Americans, correspond with stronger ethnocentric outlooks. The sorts of information and cues linking their ethnocentrism and partisanship in the first place opens a path through which persuasive elites, and the information environment constructed by partisan ties more generally (Zaller 1992), provide information from which these white Americans double-down on their predisposition toward group-centric thinking (e.g., Danbold and Huo 2015; but see Engelhardt et al 2025). The social and political changes elites cast negatively, coupled with their desire to maintain their dominant position, arguably heightens ethnocentrism (Bizumic 2019). But whites' PoC copartisans likely respond differently. They are likely on average less ethnocentric to begin with, and thus the flux their party elites highlight is of less concern. Republican PoC will then express less group centric concern as they move away from the more group-based politics of their non-Republican coethnics. Such a result would be consistent with Republican partisanship weakening PoC's sense of solidarity with other PoC (Engelhardt et al 2026).

Democratic partisanship functions opposite. For people of color, political mobilization to improve one's station means for many an *increased* concern with in-group difference and deviance (e.g., Cohen 1999; García-Bedolla 2005; Jefferson 2023). A desire to present the group in the best possible light to receive attention from mainstream political actors motivates both distancing oneself from marginal in-group members and strongly committing to one's racial in-group. A Democratic Party championing not only the interests of PoC but myriad other groups including LGBT Americans, feminists, and organized labor may signal to PoC that prioritizing their racial in-group is

increasingly important for achieving their political goals (see also Engelhardt et al 2026). Similarly, that the Republican Party of late more openly disparages PoC may lead to increased ingroup solidarity as members strive to bolster the group's status (Pérez 2015; Sides, Tausanovitch, and Vavreck 2022). Consequently, PoC's Democratic attachments may yield increased ethnocentrism.

In contrast, this same information environment may see decreasing ethnocentrism among white Democrats. Messages celebrating the Democratic Party's diversity and the more openly hostile rhetoric from Republican elites toward marginalized groups may push white Democrats to accept deviance and downplay group distinctions. Rhetoric elevating the party's egalitarian commitments could forge stronger connections between partisans' commitments to abstract egalitarianism and concrete policies (Lupton et al 2022). For white Democrats, achieving their political goals does not require the same group-based solidarity that either their Republican coethnics or PoC co-partisans require. Instead, their politics in part softens their concern with group boundaries. Indeed, recent research suggests an intriguing possibility that white Democrats may now actually favor individuals from disadvantaged outgroups, contradicting ethnocentrism's strict focus on in-group prioritization. white Democrats increasingly select Black over white candidates in candidate choice experiments (Mikkelsen 2025) and evaluate Black Democratic politicians more positively than white Democratic politicians (Weissman 2025), patterns plausibly connected to shifting racial attitudes (Weissman and Mikkelsen 2025).

Put together, this means that despite similar partisan information environments, the implications this information has on group-centrism will diverge between PoC and white Americans (e.g., Pérez, Deichert, and Engelhardt 2019; White 2007). This yields my second hypothesis.

Ethnocentrism change: Partisanship precedes shifting ethnocentrism, but in divergent ways for PoC and white Americans. Democratic partisanship associates with heightened ethnocentrism for PoC over time and decreased ethnocentrism for whites. Republican partisanship sees the opposite.

But even so, it could be that partisanship matters only for white Americans' group-centrism, with no relationship for people of color. As noted, PoC partisanship is sometimes characterized as less crystallized compared to white Americans' partisan ties (Hajnal and Lee 2011). Even Black Americans' consistent Democratic allegiances may be weaker than they first appear given their sensitivity to social connections (White and Laird 2020). Consequently, partisanship for PoC may then be a less likely causal force on other orientations compare to partisanship for whites (Converse 1964; Krosnick and Petty 1995). This motivates our final hypothesis.

Dominant group-centrism change: Partisanship predicts future ethnocentrism only for white Americans.

Ethnocentrism Polarizes over Time

I first chart the relationship between ethnocentrism and partisanship, assessing the potential for my ethnocentric sorting and change hypotheses. I show descriptively how the relationship between these two orientations has unfolded over time using the American National Election Study (ANES) cumulative file.

I operationalize partisanship using the standard branched item. I follow Kinder and Kam (2009) and operationalize ethnocentrism using 101-point feeling thermometers to create the measure they label E^* .⁵ I take respondents' feeling thermometer ratings of their racial in-group and subtract from this their average feeling thermometer ratings of their racial out-groups, using only ratings of Asian, Black, Latino, and white Americans.⁶ I scale E^* to run $[-1, 1]$, with positive values indicating a

⁵ Individuals rated groups on a 0-100 scale, with values above 50 denoting warm, positive views, values below 50 cold, negative views, and values at 50 neither positive nor negative views.

⁶ Specifically, $E^* = \text{in-group FT} - (\text{out-group FT}_1 + \text{out-group FT}_2 + \text{out-group FT}_3)/3$. I note that this construction could mean something different for PoC than for whites. E^* for PoC includes in the outgroup tally two groups that fall under the umbrella people of color, a group that is

relative preference for one's ethnic in-group, negative values a preference for one's ethnic out-groups, and 0 indifference. While distinct from Bizumic's (2019, Bizumic et al 2021) 6-factor ES2-12 measure of ethnocentrism, **E*** captures affective preference for one's ethnic group over other ethnic groups and correlates strongly with the more direct ES2-12 measure ($r=.58$, Bizumic et al 2021, 50).⁷

I take two approaches to exploring patterns over the last 3 decades and do so separately for whites and people of color. First, I plot average levels of ethnocentrism by party over time, combining independent leaners with strong and weak partisans. Second, I report the association between ethnocentrism and the 7-point partisanship scale in each year as estimated with a linear regression of ethnocentrism on partisanship after scaling both variables 0-1. This provides a picture of their connection uncontaminated by shifts in distributions which would affect correlation coefficients. Together, these two pieces of information show whether ethnocentrism differs markedly across partisan groups and whether partisanship and ethnocentrism do, or do not, go together and how this varies across groups.⁸

meaningful for many (Pérez 2021a). I use the present operationalization because it captures our concept of interest. But it is possible relations between party and these specific outgroup views differ compared to views of whites. I address this in the Appendix.

⁷ I would have liked also to operationalize ethnocentrism via stereotypes, what Kinder and Kam (2009) label **E**, but included stereotype items vary across years in the ANES making temporal assessments of levels and associations with partisanship inconsistent.

⁸ While survey mode changes could confound the 2020 readings, an assessment of self-administered web vs. interviewed completes in the 2020 ANES reveals only modest differences which do not alter the conclusions Figure 1 provides.

Figure 1 plots these various estimates. 1A shows means and 1B shows estimated regression coefficients. In each, the left panel reports information for PoC while the right panel reports information for whites.

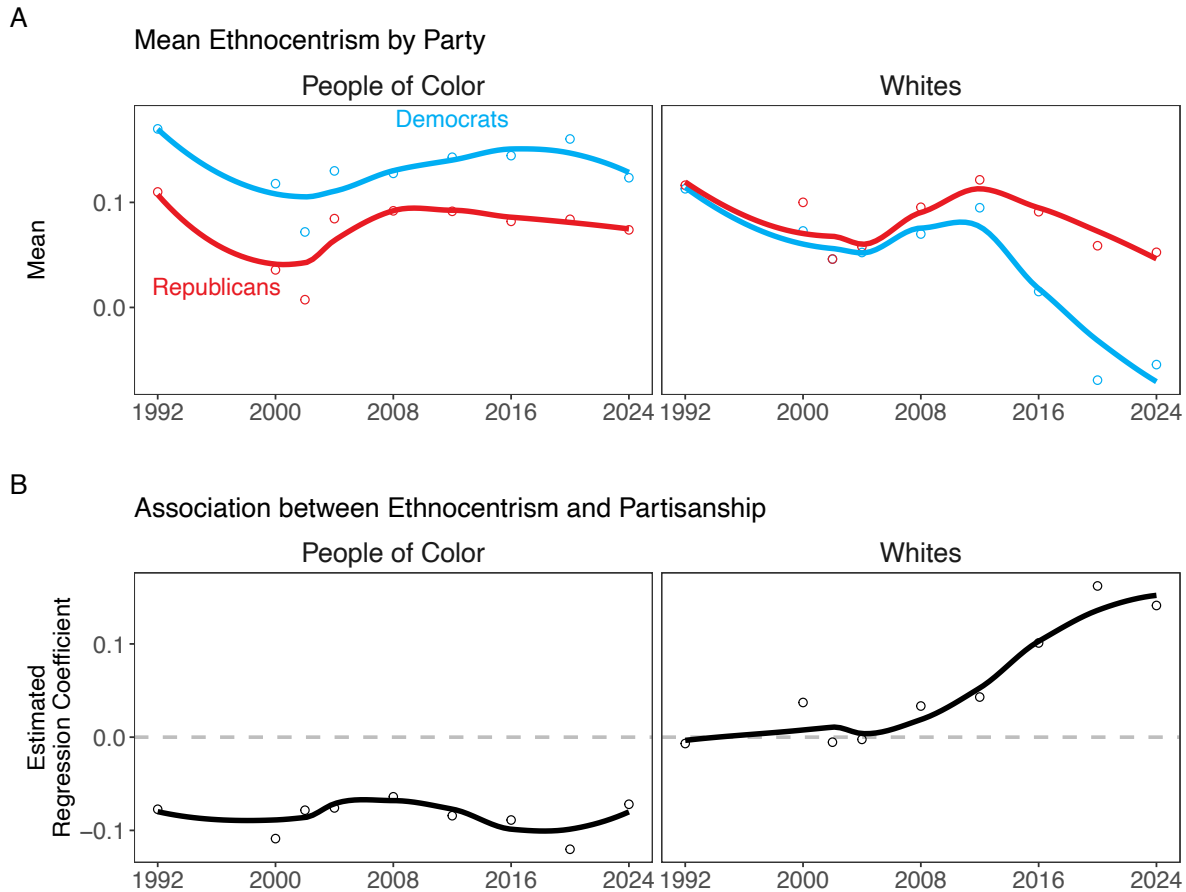


Figure 1: Relationship between Ethnocentrism and Partisanship by Racial Background. Analyses weighted. Coefficient estimates from linear regressions estimated via OLS with inputs scaled 0-1. Yearly estimates and smoothed trends.

Figure 1A's left panel offers initial evidence of the importance of considering the link between ethnocentrism and partisanship in the aggregate. In all years we see that Democratic PoC express more ethnocentrism than Republican PoC. This gap is also quite stable, averaging .06 points (on the $[-1, 1]$ interval) with a low of .04 in 2008 and a high of .08 in 2000. While these results point

to a persist partisan divide in ethnocentrism, the trends in this panel offer little to suggest changes in this connection. Despite consequential changes in the political system between 1992 and 2024, PoC's levels of ethnocentrism appear unchanged.

In contrast to people of color, I find substantial change among whites. Figure 1A's right panel shows that in 1992, white Democrats' and Republicans' levels of ethnocentrism did not meaningfully differ. While I also uncover some fluctuation over time in average levels, I also find that after 2004 a partisan gap emerges with Republicans on average more ethnocentric. By 2024, white Democrats and Republicans differ by an average of .11 points ($d = .60$).

Importantly, this gap is driven by white Democrats' expressing less ethnocentrism, a result contradicting perspectives that the period since 2016 reflects *heightened* ethnocentrism among Republicans. This is especially true with white Republicans' ethnocentrism declining since 2012, too. claims that this environment necessarily stimulated more ethnocentrism either among white Americans generally or white Republicans specifically. More plausibly, ethnocentrism provides a reservoir of support for Republican politicians (Bartels 2020; 2023). Setting these interpretational issues aside, that these patterns begin to appear as the parties became more clearly defined by the "identity-inflected" issues like race, gender, and sexual orientation made increasingly salient in this period by social movements like Black Lives Matter and politicians like Donald Trump strengthens my supposition that these events function to some degree as a stimulus (Sides, Tausanovitch, and Vavreck 2022). Contextual change may matter.

Patterns across Figure 1A's panels are also informative. Democrats of color express the most ethnocentrism on average, followed by Republicans regardless of party, and then white Democrats. As with the shift in ethnocentrism among white Democrats, this pattern runs against claims that Republican partisanship generally, and white Republican partisanship in particular, is the unique home of ethnocentric individuals, especially since 2016. This is most appropriately applied to

Democrats of color. What's more, ethnocentrism appears more likely to bifurcate Democrats' unity than cross-cut Republicans views, a point I return to in the conclusion. Finally, the relative stability of ethnocentrism levels among PoC regardless of party is informative. While these are cross-sectional pictures, this general stasis suggests against, but is not dispositive of, any sort of dynamic relations between the two.

Figure 1B complements these trends. The left panel shows that for people of color, the estimated effect of partisanship on ethnocentrism ranges between $-.06$ and $-.12$ through this period, consistent with the stability in levels of ethnocentrism by party. Likewise, the right panel highlights how ethnocentrism and partisanship were typically unrelated through 2004 for white Americans. After 2004, however, a consistent positive relationship emerges that increases through 2024. The effect of partisanship on ethnocentrism reaches $.14$ in 2024, tracking changes in ethnocentrism's levels by party.

To better understand these patterns, I separate ethnocentrism into its in-group and out-group facets. The in-group component consists of individuals' thermometer ratings of their racial in-group. The out-group component includes individuals' average ratings of the three relevant out-groups. I report these trends in Figure 2, with all scaled 0-1.

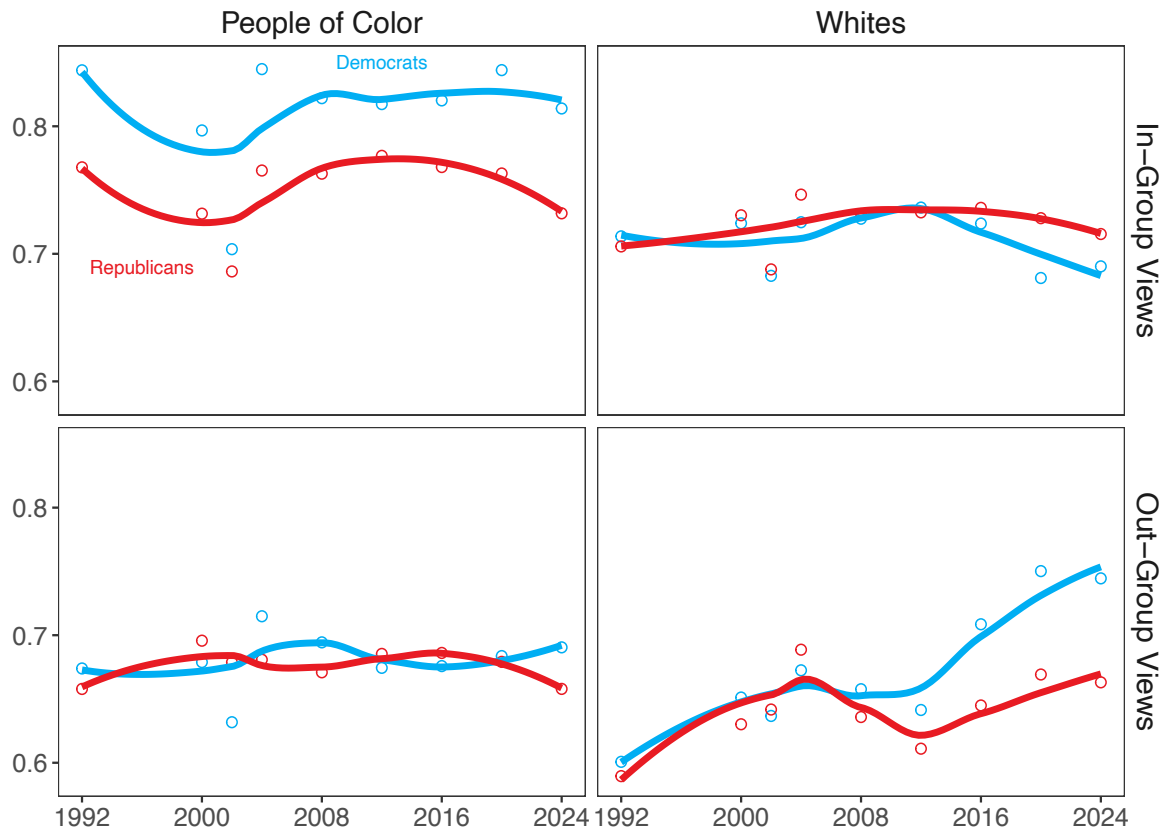


Figure 2: Average In-Group and Out-Group Evaluations by Partisanship and Racial Background. Analyses weighted. Yearly estimates and smoothed trends.

The patterns highlight differences between PoC and whites in why levels of ethnocentrism may vary by party. Focusing first on people of color, Democrats consistently report greater in-group favorability than Republicans, who look similar to pure Independents. While gaps vary across years, from 2004-2024 PoC Democrats in the ANES express on average 6 points more positive views of their in-group than PoC Republicans (.83 vs. .76, $d = .34$). In contrast, this same period sees on average equivalent ratings of outgroups (Republicans = .68, Democrats = .69). The stronger partisan division in in-group views among PoC aligns with my argument and existing work that the Democratic party's general status as advocating for improving the station of Asian, Black, and

Latino Americans functions as a pull factor (Hopkins, Kaiser, and Pérez 2023; Pérez et al 2025; White and Laird 2020). It also suggests that while hierarchy reinforcing views can turn some PoC toward the Republican Party (Alamillo 2019; Geiger and Reny 2024), these relations appear more situational than chronic pull factors given the limited difference in out-group views by Republican and Democratic PoC (e.g., Ortiz et al 2026).

Turning to whites, I find largely similar in-group ratings but a growing discrepancy in out-group ratings. Little distinguishes whites' in-group ratings in the ANES until 2016 when white Democrats begin feeling less positively about their in-group than white Republicans, a divide of about 3 points come 2024 ($d = .14$). More important to the shifts seen in Figure 1A is the change in out-group views. While little partisan gap exists here initially, this starts to change in 2008 with Democrats 2 points more positive (.66 vs. .64). This expands to about an 8-point gap in 2024 (.75 vs. .66, $d = .45$), driven by a stronger positive shift among Democrats than Republicans from 2012.

While these shifts among white Democrats track initial received wisdom on this period (Jardina and Ollerenshaw 2022), the patterns among white Republicans do not. They are not much more favorable toward their in-group than white Democrats, a result complicating clean arguments about the dominance of white identity politics in this group (Jardina 2019). But perhaps more importantly, that I do not see increased animosity toward out-groups contradicts ideas that Donald Trump's election embolden the expression of prejudice toward stigmatized groups (e.g., Newman et al 2021; Schaffner 2020; Crandall et al 2018). The nadir of out-group views is in 2012, and every year coinciding with Trump's political prominence sees increasing positivity (see also Hopkins and Washington 2020).

Comparing across panels is again informative. Party appears more strongly connected to in-group views for PoC than whites and out-group views for whites than PoC. This helps us better understand the nature of average differences presented in Figure 1A, while complicating easy

interpretations of the relevance of ethnocentrism broadly. While my interest is on the relative difference in group views it emphasizes, it is striking that one would expect white Republicans to at least look more like Democratic PoC in in-group views given the characterization of Republicans in recent years as concerned with in-group status (e.g., Parker and Lavine 2024). In fact, they generally lag Republican PoC in in-group favorably. Similarly, it is hard to say outgroup negativity uniquely drives their opinions as they log largely similar outgroup views as Republican PoC. White Democrats, instead, are unique among all groups.

I conclude my descriptive analyses by considering what these trends imply for attitude consistency among partisans, on the potential for increased heterogeneity or homogeneity in ethnocentrism across parties. I find that the modest polarization in ethnocentrism among people of color since 1992 has coincided with little change in intra-party agreement. Democrats and Republicans were similarly homogenous in their ethnocentrism in 1992 ($SD = .19$ and $.18$), with 2024 similar (Democrats = $.18$; Republicans $.19$). I find, for whites, somewhat more consistency between 1992 and 2024 for both Democrats ($SDs = .19$ and $.17$) and Republicans ($SDs = .17$ and $.15$).⁹ By pointing to more intraparty agreement, this increased consistency offers additional suggestive evidence for some sort of individual-level relations between ethnocentrism and partisanship among whites. The stable heterogeneity among PoC, in contrast, suggests dynamic relations are unlikely to appear here as changes in partisan alignment of any sort should reduce variability.

⁹ I find modest increases between 1992 and 2024 in variability in both in-group and out-group ratings for white Democrats and white Republicans (in-group: $.18$ to $.20$; out-group: $.15$ to $.18$ [Democrats] and $.19$ [Republicans]).

These trends offer initial evidence that the ethnocentric sorting and attitude change hypotheses may receive support, but perhaps most likely for white Americans. Ethnocentrism is increasingly divided by party, but with the timing and nature of this division conditioned by placement in the U.S. racial hierarchy. Furthermore, the nature of these ethnocentric connections appears conditional. While people of color appear more divided by in-group views, white Americans appear divided more by out-group views, and only slightly in-group concern. The nature of the link between prioritizing group-centrism and politics thus appears contingent on the confluence of both racial background and partisanship, qualifying current theorizing. I return to this point in the conclusion.

Ethnocentric Polarization: Roles for Sorting and Attitude Change

Having uncovered partisan polarization in ethnocentrism, I next evaluate how much sorting and attitude change account for these patterns, and how this translates between whites and PoC.

I use data from the 2011-2020 VOTER survey and 2016-2024 American National Election Study to test my hypotheses. The VOTER survey consists of self-administered online interviews from YouGov's online opt-in panel with respondents selected through a synthetic sampling procedure and weighted back to population benchmarks. The ANES data are probability-based with most completes self-administered online. While the analytical sample for the VOTER survey includes good numbers of both whites (n=2998) and PoC (n=752), the analytical sample for the ANES has a good share of whites (n=1575) and substantially fewer PoC (n=403). Consequently, while I use both data sets to test my hypotheses, the tests in the ANES are less diagnostic for PoC, a point I address in the subsequent extensions section. While I use weights supplied with each data collection that adjust in part for panel attrition, attrition related to partisanship and ethnocentrism could introduce errors into the analysis. Analyses predicting panel completion suggest some differential attrition related to partisanship and ethnocentrism but in different ways across data sets

and PoC and whites (see Appendix). Consequently, triangulating evidence across the two panels will strengthen conclusions. I also consider covariate adjustment and additional panels in the next section.

For each data set I estimate two types of cross-lagged panel models: the traditional cross-lagged panel model (CLPM) and the random intercepts cross-lagged panel model (RI-CLPM) (Hamaker, Kuiper, and Grasman 2015; Mulder and Hamaker 2021; Little 2024; Osborne and Little 2024). I use each because they address two separate types of dynamic temporal processes (Zyphur et al 2019) and address different types of time-invariant confounding (Hamaker 2023; Rohrer and Murayama 2023).

The traditional CLPM predicts values of a variable at time t as a function of values of that variable at $t-1$ as well as values of the other variable in the relationship, after accounting for the baseline correlation between the two variables. This produces two parameters of interest: construct stabilities and cross-lagged effects. Stabilities offer information on where someone at a given point in the distribution of the variable of interest at time 1 is likely to fall in the distribution of the same variable at time 2 after controlling for their relative positions on the other variable. Cross-lagged effects offer information on where a person will fall in the distribution of this focal variable at time t given their relative standing on the other variable of interest at $t-1$. Tests for the hypotheses focus on these cross-lagged effects, with significant associations telling us, for instance, that someone who was more ethnocentric in one wave was more likely to express stronger attachment to the Republican party in a future wave compared to someone who was less ethnocentric.

The RI-CLPM in contrast separates out the within-person and between-person stability in time-invariant, trait-like characteristics like partisanship and ethnocentrism, better addressing types of time invariant confounding (Hamaker 2023). This approach allows for testing how individual-level changes in each construct within the time-periods defined by these data relate to changes in the

other over time. The RI-CLPM offers information on the former by estimating not only the stable, average relationship between ethnocentrism and partisanship within individuals that exists across all panel waves, but by also estimating, between waves, how individual-level changes from these typical levels relate to changes within and between constructs in the subsequent wave. This separation better characterizes temporal dynamics by directly considering individual differences in each construct rather than between-individual differences as in the CLPM (Rohrer and Murayama 2023). These temporal dynamics come in two kinds: autoregressive effects, where short-term individual-level changes in ethnocentrism and partisanship carry over to the next wave within-construct, and cross-lagged effects, where short-term changes in ethnocentrism or partisanship relate to changes in partisanship or ethnocentrism in the next wave (Mulder and Hamaker 2021, 640; see also Hamaker et al 2015). While similar to the CLPM stabilities and cross-lagged effects, the estimates relate to how deviations in one wave carry over into the next rather than where people fall on average in the subsequent wave relative to their positions in the current wave. While my hypothesis tests again concern the cross-lagged effects, here significant associations tell us, for example, that someone who was more ethnocentric than their long-run average in one wave was more likely to express attachments to the Republican party that were stronger than their long-run average in a future wave.

By estimating both the traditional CLPM and RI-CLPM I get assessments of how much the link between ethnocentrism and partisanship might be related to average differences across individuals that carry over across time as opposed to changes within individuals that then carry over (see also Friehs et al 2024). Within-individual changes speak directly to partisanship and ethnocentrism as dynamically related while between-person relations suggest more general processes that promote alignment between the two. Given the purported stability of both ethnocentrism and partisanship, it is possible that between-person relations are at play; changes in associations come not from changes in a given attitudes but from forces encouraging shifts in one to bring it into

alignment with a more stable other a la Conversion (1964) dynamic constraint. However, the preceding descriptive results suggest a good degree of fluctuation in ethnocentrism among whites, opening the door for potential for actual attitudinal shifts carrying over.

I estimate these models using all waves of each data set, entering $\mathbf{E}^*$ and 7-point partisanship (scored toward greater Republican Party identification) as observed variables, doing so separately for whites and PoC.¹⁰ While these panel models are often estimated assuming stationarity, I relax this assumption because I have argued relations between ethnocentrism and partisanship are responsive to context, a position that expects differences in structural relationships across different periods. This comes at the expense of some estimate precision, but χ^2 tests of model fit reject stationarity for 6 of the 8 models I evaluate.¹¹

¹⁰ Model estimated in R using lavaan (v0.6-21).

¹¹ I fail to reject stationarity in the ANES models involving people of color (CLPM $p=.18$, RICLPM $p=.34$). Even so, I freely estimate all structural parameters.

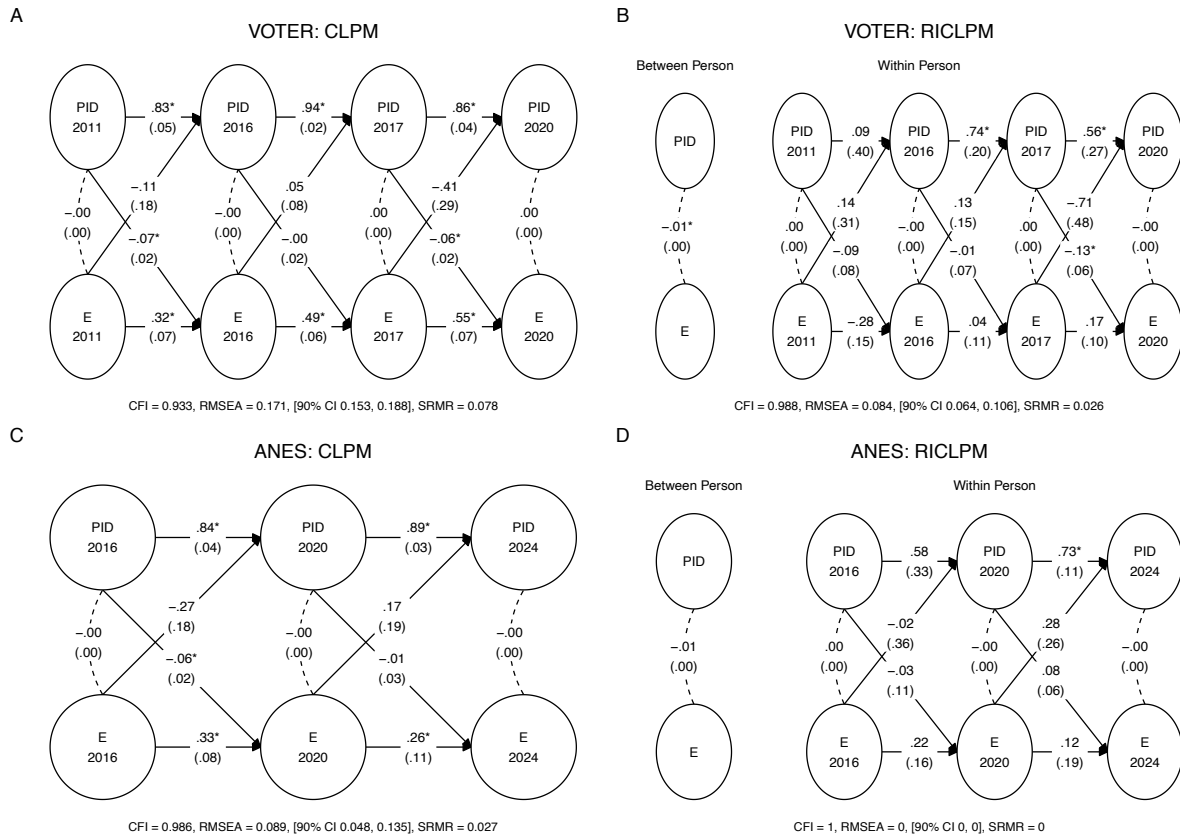


Figure 3. Model parameter estimates and associated standard errors for people of color. Analyses weighted. $*p < .05$

I focus first on Figure 3 which reports patterns among people of color. The left column reports the conventional CLPM results and the right column the RI-CLPM results. Taking first the results from the VOTER survey, panel A offers evidence consistent with the *ethnocentrism change* hypothesis. Between 2011 and 2016, for instance, partisanship has a negative and statistically significant association with ethnocentrism ($p < .001$). Substantively, this means that someone more Republican than others in 2011 became on average less ethnocentric compared to everyone else over time. While this pattern disappears between 2016 and 2017, it appears again between 2017 and 2020 ($p = .003$). These are also substantively large effects. After standardizing the coefficients, the estimates are above the 85th percentile in the empirical distribution of effect sizes found using psychological constructs (β s = -.26, -.18; Orth et al 2024). The estimates do not support the *ethnocentric sorting*

hypothesis. All cross-lagged paths from ethnocentrism to partisanship are imprecise (smallest $p=.153$).

Importantly, though, these patterns appear only weakly related to within-individual changes. Panel B reports the estimate from the RI-CLPM applied to these data. While the cross-lagged paths from partisanship to ethnocentrism between 2011-2016 and 2017-2020 remain negative, only the latter is distinguishable from 0 ($p_{2011-2016}=.264$; $p_{2017-2020}=.035$).¹² This result implies that the 2011-2016 relationship could be due to ethnocentrism not changing within individuals but instead their relative position shifting. But for 2017-2020, the results offer direct information that a shift in partisanship led to a shift in ethnocentrism, with this estimate above the 95th percentile of observed effect sizes for RI-CLPMs applied to processes linked to psychological dispositions ($\beta s=-.23$; Orth et al 2024). That the RI-CLPM recovered statistically significant estimates for the random intercepts for partisanship and ethnocentrism points to the importance of contrasting this estimation strategy to the traditional CLPM ($p s<.001$). These significant variances indicate that I have systematic differences in partisanship and ethnocentrism across individuals that persist across waves, with this stable trait-like variation complicating interpretations of the causal process in the 2011-2016 period. But even so, the VOTER data point to *ethnocentrism change* for people of color whereby ethnocentrism and partisanship become more closely aligned due to the former moving toward the latter. Less clear is how much this is due to actual changes in each, with evidence mixed.

Turning to the ANES, the parameter estimates for the CLPM reported in panel C offer some additional support for *ethnocentrism change*.¹³ Between 2016 and 2020 partisanship has a negative

¹² While I treat this is a lag-1 process, adding additional lags for the stabilities produces a better fitting model but does not change the results.

¹³ Adding more lags for the stabilities improves model fit but does not change the results.

and statistically significant association with ethnocentrism ($p=.005$), an association falling at the 90th percentile of observed effect sizes after standardization ($\beta=-.19$). This again indicates that people of color more strongly identified with the Republican party in 2016 fell comparatively lower in the distribution of ethnocentrism in 2020. Between 2020 and 2024, however, this relationship disappears. I again find no evidence for *ethnocentric sorting*. Parameter estimates are inconsistent in sign and imprecisely estimated (smallest $p=.127$), though this could be due to the relatively small sample.

The estimates for the RI-CLPM reported in panel D complement this picture by indicating the patterns are potentially more likely about shifts in ranks rather than individual-level change. The estimated cross-lagged effects for both partisanship (smallest $p=.197$) and ethnocentrism (smallest $p=.273$) are indistinguishable from 0, though with most estimates coinciding with large standard errors indicates imprecision potentially linked to the smaller sample (Mulder 2023). Interestingly, while I again find a significant estimate of stable trait-like variance for partisanship ($p=.010$), I do not find this for ethnocentrism ($p=.170$). This result suggests that a possible substantive interpretation of the parameters in Figure 3C is someone more Republican did change their ethnocentrism between 2016 and 2020, but this change in ethnocentrism is not due to a change in partisanship itself.

Together, the results from the ANES and VOTER survey results offer evidence of *ethnocentrism change*, but with these changes more about where people of color fall relative to each other in ethnocentrism rather than changes in ethnocentrism itself. The data, too, suggest contextual contingencies, something made possible by relaxing the stationarity assumption. *Ethnocentrism change* appears most likely before the 2020-2024 period, with a potential interruption between 2016 and 2017 though this could also be attributable to the brief widow (Little 2024). While these data cannot determine why shifts occurred, the periods of change coincided with the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement and subsequent activism around it, as well as the first Trump administration's family separation immigration policy and Muslim Ban. The 2020-2024 period, however, featured the

culmination of the COVID pandemic and, prominently, post-pandemic cost of living challenges due to inflation. While debates existed on issues related to transgender athletes and school curricula content, these generally lagged economic concerns, consistent with the turn from dynamics (Gallup 2026). The one prominent issue plausibly galvanizing ethnocentric concerns, immigration, was not a chief concern of Democrats (Saad 2026). It is thus unlikely that this coverage stimulated attitude change given polarized elite communication on the issue (Zaller 1992). Broadly, such information effects seem plausible given evidence partisanship itself isn't fluctuating, per the RI-CLPM, but averaging positioning in ethnocentrism is shifting to fit with partisanship (Miller 2000).

Turning to the estimates for white people, Figure 4A offers evidence for both the *ethnocentric sorting* and *ethnocentrism change* hypotheses.¹⁴ Across all waves I find reliable associations between present ethnocentrism and future partisanship (largest $p=.029$). Someone high in ethnocentrism increased their attachments to the Republican party compared to everyone else. These associations are substantively small to moderate, ranging from the 5th to 45th percentiles of observed effects after standardizing the regression paths (β s=.06, .02, .05). Similarly, I find across all waves present partisanship correlates with future ethnocentrism (largest $p=.003$). Here, associations are substantively larger, ranging from the 50th to 85th percentiles of observed effects (β s=.17, .07, .12).

Importantly, however, these dynamics seem more likely related to broad shifts across individuals in where they fall relative to one another rather than changes in one orientation causing the other orientation to change. Panel B shows only two cross-lagged paths support within-individual change accounts: between 2017 and 2020, deviations in ethnocentrism carry over into differences in partisanship ($p=.019$) while deviations in partisanship carry over into differences in ethnocentrism ($p=.034$). These associations are substantively large (β s=.11, .18). That the model

¹⁴ Adding additional lags for the stabilities improves model fit but does not change the results.

estimates for the variance of stable, trait-like features in partisanship and ethnocentrism were significant ($ps < .001$) strengthens the case that the CLPM does not offer clear evidence for individual-level change.

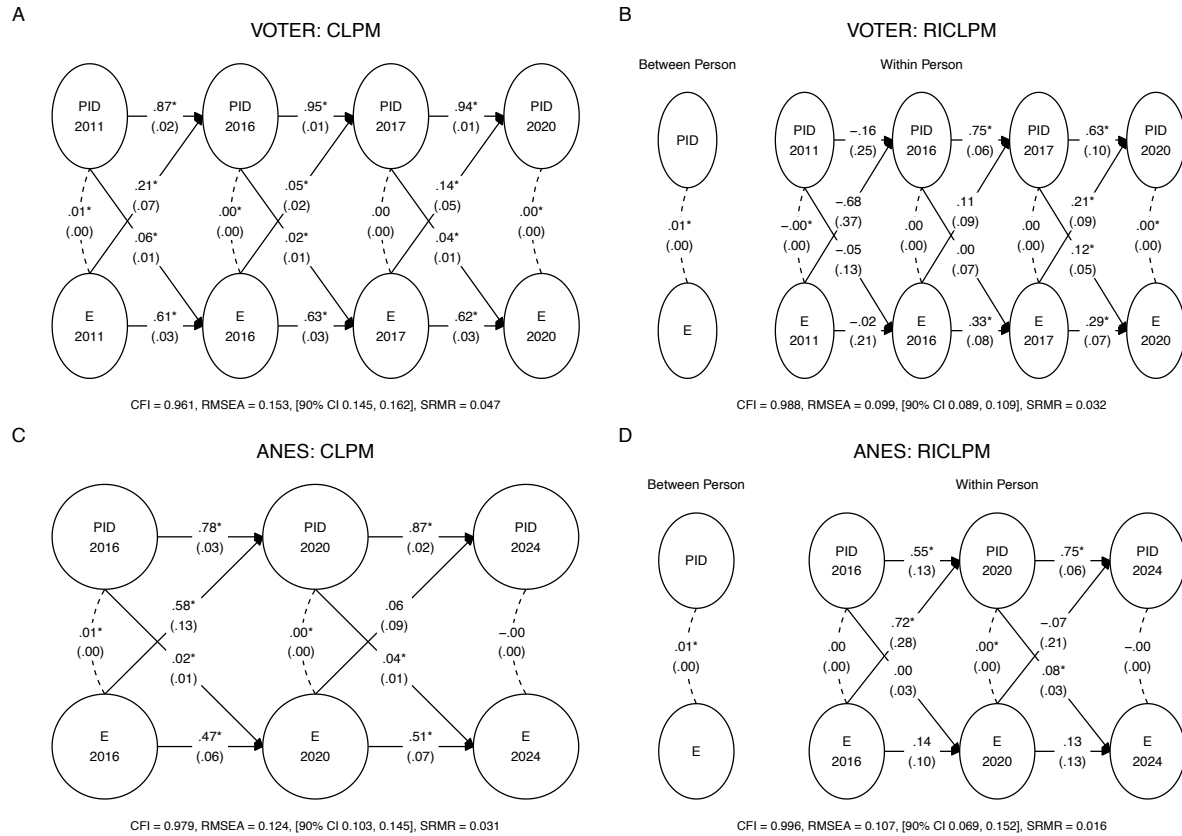


Figure 4. Model parameter estimates and associated standard errors for whites. Analyses weighted. $*p < .05$

Turning to the ANES, I again find support for both hypotheses.¹⁵ Between 2016 and 2020 I find ethnocentrism precedes partisanship and partisanship precedes ethnocentrism. While I again find temporal precedence for partisanship between 2020 and 2024, this period offers no evidence for ethnocentrism to partisanship, contra the *ethnocentric sorting* hypotheses. Partisanship's effect sizes

¹⁵ While I treat this as a lag-1 process, adding additional lags for the stabilities produces a better fitting model but does not change the results.

remain moderate to large relative to observed effect sizes, indicating the *ethnocentrism change* process is substantively meaningful (β s=.08, .17). Ethnocentrism's relevance to partisanship between 2016 and 2020 is likewise substantively large (β =.14).

But as with the VOTER survey, I have inconsistent evidence for within-person changes according to the RI-CLPM. But in contrast to those data, more paths in the ANES fit significant individual-level change accounts. Individual shifts in ethnocentrism in 2016 from one's overall average do carry over into changes in partisanship in 2020 (p =.010). Similarly, changes in partisanship in 2020 spill over into assessments of ethnocentrism in 2024 (p =.016). Only the link from partisanship to ethnocentrism between 2016 and 2020 in the CLPM appears unrelated to individual change, a point reinforced by significant trait variances estimated for the RI-CLPM (p s<.001). Consequently, I conclude that the evidence for *ethnocentric sorting* and *ethnocentrism change* is more likely due to individual change in these data, though not decisively so.

As with the estimates for PoC, Figure 4 demonstrates the utility of relaxing the stationarity assumption. Doing so points out that individual-level change might underpin dynamics at some points between 2011 and 2020 according to the VOTER panel, while also showing that relations between ethnocentrism and partisanship are not always dynamic in each period. The ANES results offer no clear evidence for ethnocentrism altering party attachments between 2020 and 2024, but point to a strong cross-lagged effect between 2016 and 2020. Combined with the VOTER survey results, this suggests that Trump's candidacy and first administration provided a shock to the party system that motivate partisan change. But this resolved during the Biden administration.

Together, Figures 3 and 4 more consistently support the *ethnocentrism change* hypothesis than the *ethnocentric sorting* hypothesis. But this depends on whether one looks at people of color or whites, consistent with the expectation that changes differ across the racial hierarchy. Similarly, the nature of relationships vary. Republican partisanship associates with lower levels of future ethnocentrism

among PoC but with higher levels of future ethnocentrism among whites. The utility of the cross-group comparison also appeared in testing *ethnocentric sorting*, as a pooled assessment would have occluded the irrelevance of this path for people of color and thus the importance of this relationship for whites alone in the periods considered. Paired with the trends in Figure 1, it is most likely PoC have already sorted on ethnocentrism, with subsequent information shocks motivating aligning this outlook with their existing partisanship. Similarly, while both groups demonstrate *ethnocentrism change*, the nature of this change may vary. I find more consistent evidence for within-individual shifts for whites than PoC, although this could be due to greater power in tests among the former given sample. At the same time, it is potentially informative that whites, but not PoC, demonstrate ethnocentrism change between 2020 and 2024 in the ANES. I noted above that this period, while heavily emphasizing post-pandemic issues like inflation, also saw substantial concern with immigration. It is possible that this contributed to the observed shifts in ethnocentrism among whites even if it did not affect the views of PoC. If so, this raises interesting questions about what, specifically, stimulates shifting ethnocentrism across groups.

Figures 3 and 4 also showed the utility of estimating both the traditional CLPM and the RI-CLPM as they often provided different results. Importantly, this does not mean that evidence for the hypotheses is inconsistent. Instead, the divergence concerns the specific explanation for *why*, for instance, people align their ethnocentrism with their partisanship. While I have discussed potential causal processes so far in terms of relative likelihood given patterns of significance on the RI-CLPM coefficients, I take advantage of the traditional CLPM nesting under the RI-CLPM—after constraining the random intercepts’ variances and covariances to 0—to get more systematic information. A series of $\bar{\chi}^2$ tests reject each CLPM in favor of the RI-CLPM (Mulder and Hamaker 2021). Substantively this means that the data are consistent with stable differences across individuals over time in partisanship and ethnocentrism, a result consistent with their conceptualization as

largely stable orientations that can fluctuate under specific circumstances. Consequently, the CLPM results should be taken to be informative on relative temporal precedence of each orientation, with the cross-lagged effects concerning individuals' shifting ranks relative to others rather than as clear evidence of individual-level change.

Extensions

I complement the preceding analyses four ways. First, I address additional sources of confounding that the models do not. Second, I break out relationships by political attentiveness. Third, I analyze additional, contemporaneous panel data sets to address issues of sampling and sample size and offer additional tests of my hypotheses. Fourth, I replicate the ANES analysis using a stereotype measure of ethnocentrism (Kinder and Kam 2009). For space I summarize these results here, reporting them in full in the appendix.

First, I explored my results' sensitivity to the inclusion of background demographics related to both partisanship and ethnocentrism that might affect their developmental trajectories (Little 2024). These covariates also sometimes relate to panel attrition, so adjusting for them at baseline helps account for potential discrepancies in future waves. Estimates reported in the Appendix show that adjusting for key covariates does not alter the results.¹⁶

Next, I consider whether attending to variation in political awareness sharpens our understanding of these dynamics. Scholars view it as a likely divider in who is most likely to engage in attitude change or party switching, including for group judgments (Carsey and Layman 2006; Engelhardt 2023). Given available measures in the VOTER survey, I segment respondents in both the VOTER survey and ANES by educational attainment defined by possessing a college degree (Zaller 1992). This test compares two models, one freely estimating the regression parameters across

¹⁶ These include age, sex, education, and political knowledge.

groups and the second constraining them to equality (Mulder and Hamaker 2021). Estimates reported in the Appendix indicate that imposing equality constraints does not consistently worsen model fit (4 of 8 comparisons). Further, where moderation appears, evidence as often suggests differences in magnitudes rather than the presence or absence of a path. Awareness may matter, but not consistently.

I use two different panel data sets to consider the findings' generality. First, I use the 2016 Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project which surveyed respondents from YouGov's opt-in pool in June and again in December.¹⁷ With only two waves I cannot estimate a RI-CLPM so rely only on the CLPM. While I cannot speak directly to individual change, results for average differences are still illustrative. These data offer support for both *ethnocentric sorting* and *ethnocentrism change* among white people but offer no evidence for dynamics among PoC. This holds despite a much larger sample of PoC than the ANES (n=1604).

Second, I use data from the 2024-2025 Survey Panel of People of Color (SPPoC) to address issues of sampling PoC. These data come from NORC's probability-based AmeriSpeak panel and consist of large numbers of Asian (n=774), Black (n=979), and Latino (n=949) Americans interviewed in June 2024, December 2024, and June-July 2025. Results from a RI-CLPM estimated with these data do not support either hypothesis. But the CLPM offers evidence consistent with *ethnocentrism change*.

Last, I replicate the ANES panel analyses using an alternative measure of ethnocentrism. The present feeling thermometer operationalization captures affective primacy, but ethnocentrism is conceptually broader. To ensure I demonstrate patterns across this breadth, I use a measure of

¹⁷ Subsamples were reinterviewed weekly throughout the campaign season but I focus on June and December given instrumentation.

relative stereotyping to capture the cognitive prioritization of the in-group over out-groups, an arguably clearer operationalization of ethnocentrism in these publicly available data (Kinder and Kam 2009). I rely on two stereotypes available in the ANES panel: judgments of a group's industriousness (measured on a 7-point semantic differential anchored by lazy and hardworking) and its tendencies toward conflict (measured on a 7-point semantic differential anchored by violent and peaceful). For each stereotype, I key responses so that higher values reflect positive attributes and subtract average outgroup ratings from in-group ratings. I then average together these responses across the two stereotypes.

This measure offers substantively similar results. I find evidence for both *ethnocentric sorting* and *ethnocentrism change* among whites and no relationships among PoC, the latter potentially from the small sample. For whites, *ethnocentric sorting* appears between 2016 and 2020 and in both the CLPM and RI-CLPM. Support for *ethnocentrism change* manifests in both time periods in the CLPM and most precisely between 2020 and 2024 in the RI-CLPM (2016-2020 $p = .172$). Because this tracks closely the results from the affect measure I conclude that my results are unlikely driven by simply capturing a slice of latent ethnocentrism

These extensions demonstrate that the main results are not reducible to omitted additional confounders or measurement choices for ethnocentrism. They also reinforce that dynamics between ethnocentrism and partisanship are conditional. While additional data showed change for whites, the patterns in the main analyses among PoC do not necessarily reflect power concerns. Instead, they suggest that the information stimulating dynamics for PoC may be different than that contributing to relationships among whites, something made plausible by the descriptive analyses suggesting that ethnocentrism's link to partisanship does more to reflect in-group concerns among PoC and out-group concerns among whites. Similarly, that patterns can vary by education suggests that the link between ethnocentrism and partisanship is not necessarily easy to make, a pattern consistent with

work on policy racialization (Federico 2004; Goren 2003). Even though group attitudes are well-developed, understanding their political implications, or the implications of politics for them, can vary (see also Engelhardt 2021a).

Conclusion

I set out to understand better the nature of group-centric thinking with the United States as our case. I showed that not just particularistic group evaluations and attachments divide the major parties today; so, too, do individuals' more foundational tendency toward group-centrism seen in ethnocentrism. Partisan divides in ethnocentrism now exist for both whites and people of color, and stem from both sorting and attitude change.

These findings have implications for the study of intergroup attitudes, partisanship, and public opinion. First, they offer additional evidence that some group judgments are politically endogenous. Although conceptualized as early-learned and stable predispositions, accumulating evidence points to their responsiveness to politics given the right context (Engelhardt 2021a; Engelhardt and Kam 2025; Enns and Jardina 2021; Goldman and Mutz 2014; Hopkins and Washington 2020; but see Archer and Kam 2020). Intergroup attitudes can in part reflect someone's political commitments, not just underpin these loyalties. While survey self-reports are of course susceptible to social desirability biases, particularly for dominant group members, recent evidence suggests most whites provide sincere responses, making these temporal changes likely genuine (Stark et al 2019; Engelhardt 2023). These insights have important methodological implications, too, as scholars often rely on arguments for construct stability when linking the results from statistical models to theoretical arguments. The present evidence that even ethnocentrism may change requires more careful explications of this mapping.

These results also have important theoretical implications for understanding the group bases of political behavior in the United States. While not dispositive, our results in part suggest people of

color appear more divided by in-group concern and white Americans appear divided more by out-group views. I find this pattern especially plausible because it fits with asymmetries constructed by racial hierarchy (Craig and Phillips 2023; Pérez and Vicuña 2023). Politics involves collective action. For marginalized groups like people of color, this frequently stimulates in-group solidarity (Dawson 1994; Pérez 2021a). But for dominant groups vigilant about threats to their station, group solidarity often focuses on out-groups, especially those potentially collaborating to challenge the status quo (Knowles, Tropp, and Mogami 2022).

Related, I find important differences in ethnocentrism by party-race pairs. I've noted the clarifying result that white Republicans are not particularly ethnocentric in context, results contradicting some accounts of present politics. But more puzzling for common wisdom is, perhaps, the result in both data sets that white Democrats express more positive views of PoC than whites. This result runs counter to the very notion of ethnocentrism and the prioritization of one's in-group over out-groups. In-group favoritism is a fundamental feature of group behavior and cornerstone of social identity theories of politics (Balliet et al 2014; Ellemers and Haslam 2012). But group norms might constrain its expression (e.g., Rutland et al 2015; Lewis and Bates 2017), a result related to System Justification theory's description of out-group favoritism among disadvantaged groups (Jost 2020).

While fully explaining this result is outside this paper's purview, I offer a couple hypotheses. One explanation comes from the specific measure. White Democrats may still report ethnocentric attitudes using other measures, for example Bizumic's (2019) ES2-12 scale. But an assessment of ethnocentrism measured via stereotypes in the ANES panel still finds the relative favoring, suggesting a pure operationalization story does not fully explain this. A second, related explanation considers this a particular reaction to Donald Trump's presidency and a disavowal of white identity (e.g., Jardina, Kalmoe, and Gross 2021). While plausible, and observable in decreased in-group

warmth, I believe this at best a partial explanation given I find concurrent increases in out-group positivity. A third possibility returns to the content of Democratic partisanship. Alluded to earlier, being a Democrat involves a commitment to egalitarianism (Lupton et al 2022). Out-group favoritism for white Democrats might then represent an extension of these commitments. Importantly, the present results do not demonstrate that white Democrats never exhibit in-group favoritism. Instead, the more likely result is they fit a general recognition of, and concern with, group-based inequalities (e.g., Chudy 2024; Chudy et al 2019), a concern aligning with a growing preference for Black over white politicians that has coincided with stronger beliefs in structural discrimination (Mikkelsen 2025; Weissman 2025; Weissman and Mikkelsen 2025).

I also recognize a potential limit operationally in placing these results for white partisans fully in context with people of color. My approach reflects ethnocentrism's emphasis on prioritizing one's in-group over myriad out-groups (see also Kinder and Kam 2009; Bizumic 2019). But operationally this might work cleanly for only white Americans as the relevant out-groups are all distinct. For people of color, two of the three targets fall under this same umbrella, a category with political relevance (Pérez 2021a). This then creates an asymmetry in ethnocentrism's measurement insofar as evaluations of the two PoC outgroups are differentiated from whites. While I cannot rule this out, I can offer some evidence that this is not necessarily the case. I do so by considering the correlations that respondents in-group feeling thermometer ratings have with the three other groups in question. Insofar as affect is asymmetric across groups, then we should see in-group ratings correlate more strongly with ratings of the other PoC groups than whites. But data from the ANES since 2000 as well as the VOTER survey do not support this. Ratings for whites are often correlate with in-group ratings as strongly as, or even more strongly than, ratings for other PoC groups. Nor do average ratings of whites look distinct relative to average ratings of other PoC groups. Consequently, I

conclude that the present operationalization, while imperfect, does offer useful comparisons between PoC and whites.

Outside of ethnocentrism, the results reinforce conceptualizations of partisanship as an orientation grounded in group attachments. Knowledge about the link between social groups and party coalitions contributes to partisan preference (Green et al 2002; Kane et al 2021). My findings extend this by offering evidence that ethnocentrism likewise matters. Part of what it means to be a Democrat or Republican today means not only liking the groups in one's coalition and disliking those in the other, it also means having a heightened concern with in-group deviance and out-group difference for white Republicans and Democrats of color, with this reduced for white Democrats and Republicans of color. Partisans differ in how much they care about their social in-groups and out-groups, with potential implications for coalition maintenance.

These findings open several interesting lines of inquiry regarding potential implications partisan polarization in ethnocentrism has for public opinion. First, they highlight potential intra-party divides, particularly among Democrats. How does the greater prioritization of their in-groups that PoC Democrats express challenge, if at all, the more limited concern of white Democrats when it comes to identifying policy positions and priorities unifying a diverse party coalition? Second, they suggest partisan asymmetries in the relevance of ethnocentrism to opinionation. Take whites. Republicans' on average greater ethnocentrism suggests this predisposition may more likely drive their opinions on policies like immigration and sexual orientation compared to Democrats. Future work should investigate these possibilities.

Pluralist democracies require navigating difference, and group coordination brought about by political party maneuvering can make this difference more or less relevant. By understanding the interface between ethnocentrism and partisanship, we have a better sense for how party organizing of political conflict rests on, and even modulates, one disposition that serves as an obstacle to

pluralism. As important, the connections between ethnocentrism and partisanship can fluctuate, so only time will tell if these links strengthen or attenuate and what sorts of challenges or opportunities for pluralist democracy they represent.

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