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Affective Polarization and Defensive Turnout of Black Voters: The 2020 Crucible

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Abstract

Why do African Americans vote in huge numbers, even when enthusiasm for the Democratic Party is low? For decades, scholars pointed to racial solidarity and loyalty to the Democrats. But what if hostility, not loyalty, is a driving force? This paper introduces the defensive turnout theory, which is the idea that in racially charged elections, many Black voters cast ballots not out of enthusiasm for Democrats, but to block Republican threats. Using standard logistic regression models to analyze the 2020 American National Election Studies (ANES) data, the study finds that hostility toward the Republican Party is positively associated with Black turnout rates more than warmth toward the Democratic Party. Each 10-point increase in anti-Republican sentiment is positively associated with a voting odd of 9%, while equivalent Democratic warmth is counterintuitively associated with a 14.7% decrease in turnout odds at a 95% confidence interval even after accounting for key sociodemographic factors. While causality cannot be inferred from the cross-sectional design, the 2020 election presents a unique case of a high-stakes and racially charged electoral landmark, which invites scholars and practitioners to rethink what truly motivates Black turnout and what belonging means when democracy itself feels contested in a polarized era.

Keywords: Affective Polarization, Negative Partisanship, Defensive Turnout, African American Voting Behavior, Linked Fate

1. Introduction

African Americans have for the longest time been the Democratic Party's most steadfast supporters. Nearly nine in ten consistently vote blue¹ (Hajnal and Lee, 2011: 40-41; White and Laird, 2020: 2, 4). This loyalty is often explained by "linked fate," which is the belief that individual and group destinies are intertwined and are shaped by the memory of shared struggle (Dawson, 1994). However, such accounts risk overlooking the role of negative emotions, such as hostility toward the Republican Party (also known as the Grand Old Party or GOP), in mobilizing Black voters today. In a political era marked by heightened racialized rhetoric and policy threats, many African Americans are motivated less by the celebration of the ideals of the Democratic Party and more by a vigilant

response to perceived danger from the right² (Crane, 2004; Iyengar and Westwood, 2015; Philips and Plutzer, 2023). This leads me to ask, how do feelings of affect influence Black voter turnout in racially polarized elections?

Political scientists once viewed partisanship as rooted in ideology or rational group interest (Campbell et al., 1960; Dawson, 1994). Yet, recent scholarship reveals a more turbulent emotional landscape. Affective polarization, which refers to the experience of warmth towards one's own party (in-group) and hostility against the opposing party (out-group) at the same time, now shapes not only voting but also how Americans see themselves and their communities (Brewer and Pierce, 2005; Iyengar et al., 2012; Amira et al., 2021; Tyler and Iyengar, 2022). For many African Americans, voting has always been more than a civic duty. It is a shield, a declaration, and sometimes a line of defense (Philips, 2024). In a nation where belonging has often been contested, the act of casting a ballot can feel like both claiming a place and protecting it. As American politics becomes more polarized and emotionally charged, understanding what truly drives voter turnout among Black electorate is both urgent and overdue.

While much of the research in this area has focused on white voters, the emotional and behavioral aspects of Black partisanship are drastically understudied. This paper introduces a novel theoretical concept of defensive turnout, where political participation is not driven by partisan enthusiasm but by the need to ward off perceived threats. Drawing on nationally representative data from the 2020 American National Election Study (ANES, 2021), I examine how negative emotions shape self-reported turnout among African American respondents.

This study is one of the first to empirically test whether hostility toward the out-party significantly outweighs warmth toward the in-party regarding Black voter turnout, and to do so using recent data from a racially charged election. It also integrates affective polarization with the unique historical and structural context of Black political behavior, which moves beyond generic models of partisanship. In this way, it extends newer work such as Slaughter (2025), who finds that Black voter participation is a form of democratic assertion and a response to political and policy threats in an increasingly polarized environment. This study contributes to our understanding of political participation and polarization by showing that the emotional engines of democracy run differently across racial lines and are also shaped by the ever-present perception of threat (Jardina, 2019; Philips and Plutzer, 2023; Reiljan et al., 2023).

1.1 Defensive Turnout and the Emotional Logic of Black Political Participation

The emotional nature of American politics is becoming more defined by what citizens resent, not by what they support. The political participation of African Americans is the clearest example of this. While frameworks like linked fate (Dawson, 1994) and group interest theory (Campbell et al., 1960) have explained Black voter cohesion, they run the risk of ignoring the more serious emotional factors that influence Black political behavior in the twenty-first century. According to recent studies, while enthusiasm for Democratic candidates among African Americans has declined, Black voter turnout in 2020 reached historic levels (Garzia and Ferrera da Silva, 2022; Philips and Plutzer, 2023). This contradiction suggests that the reasons behind Black political participation are changing. It also indicates that the record turnout was likely associated more with a feeling of urgency and resistance to perceived threats rather than just loyalty to a party or excitement for candidates. I argue that these classical theories do not account for what motivates voter turnout in elections where emotional hostility stemming from racial threat is heightened or clearly perceived. I therefore propose a new theoretical approach called defensive turnout to explain how negative emotions motivate Black electorates when partisan loyalty or group pride is weak, particularly in the 2020 election. This theory reframes Black political engagement as a defensive tactic in a polarized democracy, which may be motivated more by the urgent need to defend hard-won rights and fight the threat of exclusion than by partisan attachment.

1.1.1 The Mechanisms of Defensive Turnout

Defensive turnout refers to a kind of voter engagement where negative emotions toward the out-party are more likely to predict voter turnout than in-party love. The exercise of electoral franchise is performed as a means of

preventing racial marginalization and injustice. Voting becomes an act that is performed as a response to racialized cues, policy risks, and rhetorical hostility. In this way, defensive turnout captures the unique emotional calculus of Black political behavior in racially polarized elections. This theory rests on two core propositions. First, it assumes that the greater the perceived emotional and policy threats from the out-party, the more likely Black voters may be motivated to go to the polls. Second, emotional attachment to the in-party may be insufficient to motivate Black electorates compared to hostility toward the out-party in racialized contexts.

I argue that in the presence of racialized threats, Black voters may feel more urgency to push back threats, which will be linked to increased motivation to vote. However, the absence of a clearly visible racial threat will not inspire higher voter turnout. For instance, several studies document that after the historic election of Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012, many Black voters assumed Hillary Clinton would easily defeat the Republican candidate, Donald J. Trump, in 2016 and continue the Obama legacy (McDaniel et al., 2018; Philpot and White, 2018). Jackson et al. (2017) and McDaniel et al. (2018) argue that the Obama presidency and the expectation of a Clinton victory fostered optimism and a belief in continued progress. These factors led to complacency and overconfidence among Black voters in key battleground states who did not perceive Trump as a serious threat. This sense of security, or reduced perception of racial threat, contributed to lower urgency and turnout. Consequently, there was a sharp decline in Black voter turnout in key battleground and swing states like Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania (Jackson et al., 2017). However, Black voter turnout shot up to a historic high in the 2020 election when the presence of several racial threats, such as racialized Republican rhetoric and racial injustice, as I contend in this section. Black votes increased substantially and flipped key battleground states in the 2020 elections, with turnout rates in cities like Atlanta, Detroit, Milwaukee, and Philadelphia exceeding those of 2016 and in some cases approaching or surpassing 2008 levels (Philips and Plutzer, 2023).

The 2020 election presents a context of a high-stakes, polarized, and racially charged election with multiple incidents of threats that were clearly perceived by Black electorates. Beginning with the perception of racialized rhetoric by Donald J. Trump, to the threat of racial injustice signaled by the “Black Lives Matter” (BLM) movement, and targeted voter suppression in Black neighborhoods, racial hostility toward the Republican Party played a critical role in the historic turnout that occurred in 2020. The murder of George Floyd, which led to the BLM movement, sparked nationwide protests that ignited resentment and perceptions of injustice as well as racialized threats to Black lives, human rights, and safety (Bowman, 2021; Roman et al., 2025). In spite of these nationwide protests, Donald Trump’s repeated rhetoric on the BLM movement, in which he labeled the protesters as “thugs” and threats to “dominate” urban areas, further alerted many Black Americans that their communities were under threat (Chen, 2021). Also, he was perceived as an autocrat who was against Blacks when his rhetoric, like the May 2020 tweet, “when the looting starts, the shooting starts,” solidified the perception of racial danger among Blacks (Chen, 2021; McGregor and Parker, 2021). Twitter (now X), the widely used social media platform, in 2020 flagged the president’s rhetoric as a violation of its terms of service because it incited national violence (Gorwa et al., 2020). Trump was also widely regarded by Blacks as a racist in many notable and credible polls before the election. The Washington Post-Ipsos poll (2020), for instance, found that over 80% of Black Americans believed Donald Trump was racist and said he worsened racism in the country. These incidents sent a strong message to Black electorates that their communities were being attacked racially and they had to respond with their votes to keep the Republican Party out of power and secure their place in America.

Unlike models that emphasize logical voting or expressive loyalty, defensive turnout is protective. We cannot separate the emotional logic of defensive turnout from the history of Black citizenship in the United States. For many African Americans, political participation has not been fully protected nor equally accessible. Structural exclusion, legal disenfranchisement, and state surveillance have shadowed it (Keyssar, 2009; Berman, 2015; Hajnal et al., 2017). From the poll taxes and literacy tests of the Jim Crow era to current voter ID laws and felony disenfranchisement, mechanisms of suppression have consistently communicated that Black votes are both powerful and vulnerable. These long-standing patterns transform voting into an act that is more than a civic expression. To many African Americans, the Republican Party is more than just the “other side” or mere political opponents. For them, they represent a history of exclusion, racialized rhetoric, and policy threats (Tesler, 2016; Jardina, 2019). This view is intensely emotional rather than just ideological. This dynamic differs from other groups like Hispanic or Latinx and Asian American turnout patterns, which are often shaped by pan-ethnic identity

cues (Pantoja, 2016; Sadhwani, 2020; Kang, 2023). Thus, defensive turnout emerges from this emotional terrain as a rational, even habitual, strategy of political protection for African Americans.

1.1.2 Distinguishing Defensive Turnout from Key Theories of Black Political Participation

This theory differs from older models like linked fate by suggesting that where there are clear racial injustices and threats, simply being attached to a political party may not be enough to get African Americans to vote. Instead, hostility toward the opposing party can drive them to the polls, as seen in the 2020 election and other significant elections with high Black turnout. While linked fate and group interest theories argue that partisan attachment drives Black voter turnout because they believe that their group destinies are interconnected and Blacks identify with the Democratic Party because they represent their group interest, I argue that these theories hold true in elections where there are less or no visible racial threats from the Republican Party. In elections such as 2020, where racial threats were clearly perceived, hostility towards the Republican Party is more strongly associated with high voter turnout among Blacks than with their affiliation to the Democratic Party, especially when partisan pride or enthusiasm is weak.

Defensive turnout further builds on and adds distinct layers to negative partisanship and affective polarization to explain why Black turnout skyrocketed in 2020 despite low enthusiasm for the Democratic Party. Negative partisanship broadly refers to disliking the opposing party (Abramowitz and Webster, 2018), defensive turnout is a racialized and emotional intensification of this sentiment. It involves seeing the out-party as a credible threat to one's own rights, safety, or status. Turnout here is likely to be predicted more by how an individual perceives the danger posed by the out-party because of their racial background, as supported by recent empirical studies like Philips and Plutzer (2023). Moreover, it builds on affective polarization but adds new layers to it. While affective polarization affects all partisans no matter the race (Iyengar et al., 2019), defensive turnout affects specific racial groups, particularly Blacks in the United States. This is because African Americans share racial group memory, have experienced structural and historic marginalization, and perceive asymmetric political threat (Dawson, 1994; Berman, 2015; Philips and Plutzer, 2023). In this way, Black electorates do not only develop negative emotions toward the Republican party, nor do they only vote against them, but do so as a strategy to protect their individual freedoms and social standing.

As shown in Table 1, defensive turnout theory differs from linked fate, negative partisanship, and affective polarization in several key aspects.

Table 1: Comparing Theories of Black Political Participation

Theory	Distinctive Feature for Black Voters	Role of Racial Identity	Emotional Focus
Defensive Turnout	Voting as a defensive act in response to racialized danger, threat or exclusion	Central, racial threat is the trigger	Hostility, fear, urgency
Linked Fate	Voting as an expression of group unity and shared interest	Central, solidarity is key	Group solidarity, pride,

Negative Partisanship	Voting to block the out-party from power	Not necessarily racial	Hostility, resentment
Affective Polarization	Voting to show in-group love and out-group hate	Usually not racial by default	Both warmth and hostility

Source: Author

1.4 Beyond Traditional Models

Although linked fate and group interest are still significant frameworks, they are insufficient to account for the asymmetry in Black political participation that exists today. The evidence suggests that defensive sentiments may motivate voter turnout more than party affiliation (Iyengar and Westwood, 2015; Tesler, 2016; Philips, 2024). It suggests that Black political participation is a lived response to threats, as well as an ongoing struggle for belonging, rather than just a logical reaction to policy preferences.

I provide a conceptual model in Figure 1 to explain the theoretical argument. This framework describes how a defensive logic of participation can be triggered by negative affect, particularly hostility, aimed at the out-party. Such sentiments, I argue, are associated with higher Black voter turnout than positive sentiments like pride or enthusiasm for the in-party. In a racialized and high-stakes context where Blacks share a historic memory of marginalization and a perceive threat from the out-party, their hostility toward them will trigger the urgency to vote against them to protect their individual rights, as I have argued above.

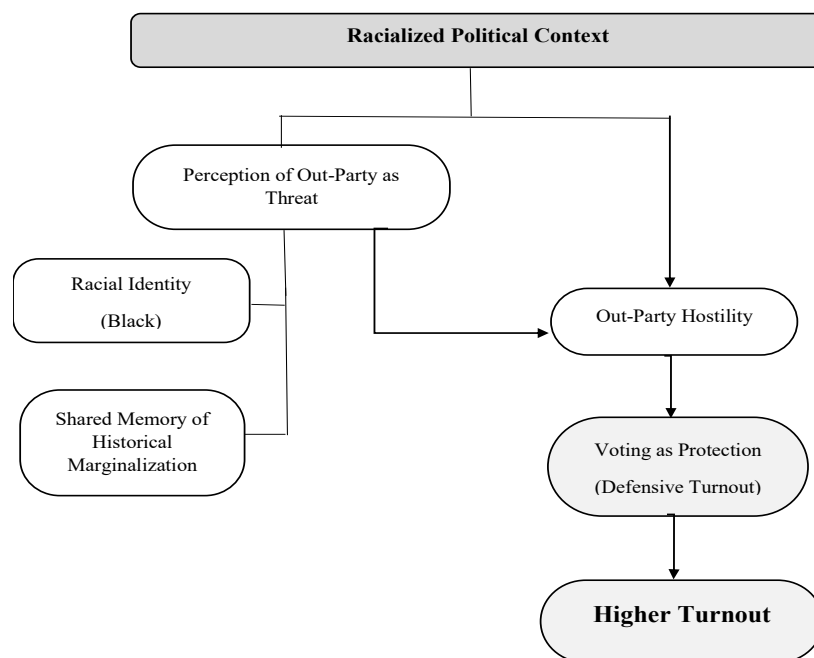


Figure 1: Theory Map of Defensive Turnout and the Emotional Logic of Black Political Participation.

Source: Author

1.5 Hypothesis

H1: Greater feelings of racial hostility toward the Republican Party will increase the likelihood African Americans voting in the 2020 election.

This hypothesis reflect the emotional asymmetry as posited by the defensive turnout theory. I expect voter behavior among African Americans in the 2020 election to be more strongly linked to hostility than to enthusiasm or loyalty. H1 shows that negative feelings towards the GOP might motivate Black voters to turn out more than connection to their own party during a time of racial threat.

2. Method

2.1 Data Source(s)

This study draws on the 2020 American National Election Studies (ANES) Time Series Study's data, a gold standard for nationally representative survey data on U.S. political attitudes and behavior (ANES, 2021). The ANES 2020 time series data used a combination of online, telephone, and video interviews, as well as intentionally oversampling Black Americans, which enables robust subgroup analysis (ANES, 2021; Tyler and Iyengar 2023). All analyses use ANES-provided sampling weights and appropriate variance estimation to account for the complex survey design. The study focuses on an individual-level analysis to examine voter turnout among African Americans and the "feeling thermometer" component of the data. Recent methodological studies have endorsed the ANES feeling thermometer as a robust measure of affective polarization (Tyler and Iyengar, 2023).

2.2 Sample

The analytic sample is restricted to self-identified Black or African American respondents, as indicated by the ANES race variable. Respondents who did not complete the key variables of interest are excluded from analyses that require calculation of partisan affect, consistent with best practice (Tyler and Iyengar, 2023). The study uses a sample size of 595 respondents, allows for subgroup analysis in behavioral analysis, especially considering that the study focuses on a single election (USDHHS, 2021).

2.3 Variable measurements and coding

Dependent Variable:

Voter Turnout

Measured as self-reported voting in the 2020 presidential election (binary: 1 = voted, 0 = did not vote) among African American respondents in the ANES 2020 dataset.

Key Independent Variables:

Racialized Republican Hostility³

The ANES "feeling thermometer" scale measures the respondents' feeling toward the Republican Party, ranging from 0 (coldest/most negative) to 100 (warmest/most positive). Hostility is reverse-coded, so higher values indicate greater hostility. Here, values closer to 100 become the most negative or coldest feelings toward the Republican Party.

Democratic Warmth

I measure the feeling thermometer toward the Democratic Party in a similar manner. Higher ratings (closer to 100) indicate greater warmth.

Affective Polarization Index (API)

The affective polarization index is calculated as the difference between Republican hostility and Democratic warmth (Republican hostility – Democratic warmth), which sometimes takes on negative values. I use it as an alternative measure of the dependent variable to assess the replication and robustness of my model.

Key Control Variables: Age, gender, education, income, and region (all standard sociodemographic controls available in ANES).

2.4 Analytical Strategy

The study first conducts descriptive analyses by investigating the spread of emotional responses, as well as the mean and standard deviation for Republican hostility and Democratic warmth. Additionally, I conduct both bivariate and multivariate analyses using logistic regression models (logit) to estimate associations between affect and voting. The key coefficients of interest are hostility toward the GOP and warmth towards Democrats, specifically in relation to Black voter turnout. I replicate the findings using alternative operationalizations of emotional responses (e.g., the affective polarization index as a new independent variable, with all controls maintained) and run a probability unit regression (probit) using the same variables and controls in the R statistical software or package (Version 4.4.2).

Since the ANES 2020 data is collected at one point in time and it is hard to determine cause and effect, I center the key independent variables at their means, perform a sensitivity analysis, and cluster the standard errors based on the regions where respondents were interviewed to account for differences in those areas (like voter ID laws, campaign and media exposure, etc.). This method is safer than traditional standard errors because it adjusts for both uneven error variance and the fact that responses from the same area or region may be related (Cameron and Miller, 2015). The sensitivity analysis presented in Appendix A (Table A2), shows that using clustered standard errors is important because key variables (like Democratic Warmth and the Southern region) have very different significant levels when different error methods are used. The evidence suggests that failing to account for regional clustering would lead to biased associations or conclusions. While multilevel modeling is an alternative, the study's primary goal is to identify associations with fixed effects rather than estimating regional variance components.

Odds ratios (ORs) are used because logistic regression models are estimated in log-odds, and reporting OR makes the results interpretable in percentage terms without requiring baseline assumptions. Predicted probabilities are useful and intuitive, but they are context-dependent, while ORs give a clean and model-wide summary.

3. Results

3.1 Quantifying Defensive Turnout through the Resistance Calculus

I will start with a descriptive analysis of the spread and distribution of feelings among Black voters toward both the Democratic and Republican parties, using histogram, and then I will proceed to bivariate and multivariate analyses that employ logit for the main analyses and probit models for replication.

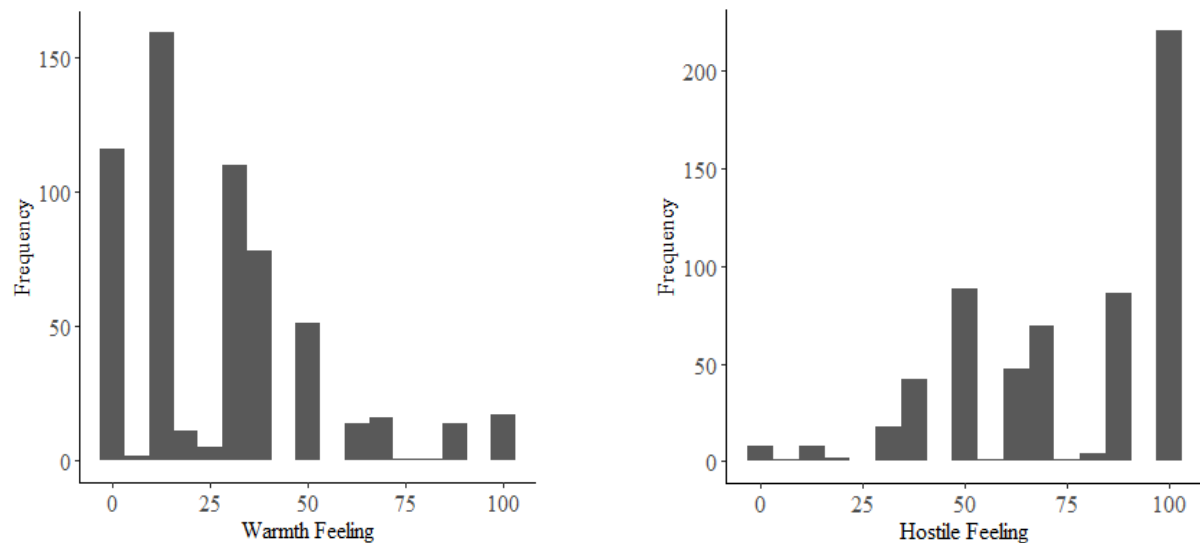


Figure 2: Histograms depicting feelings of warmth toward the Democratic Party (left) and feelings of hostility toward the Republican Party (right)

Source: Author

The emotional foundations of this behavior among Black voters are immediately visible in the histogram analyses presented above. With the histogram on the left, higher values to the right indicate greater warmth for the Democratic Party, while higher values to the right represent greater hostility for the Republican Party in the histogram on the right, respectively. The study finds that, whereas most Black respondents express moderate warmth toward Democrats (average $\approx 28.0/100$; standard deviation ≈ 24.0), their hostility toward Republicans is far more intense and politically consequential (average $\approx 74.3/100$, standard deviation ≈ 26.0). Additionally, 68% of respondents fully rate the GOP below 40 on the feeling thermometer, with responses clustering at the coldest end of the scale. This asymmetry lays the groundwork for my key finding, which suggests that negative stimuli have a stronger influence on voting decisions than positive ones.

Next, I explore the associations between emotional responses and Black voter turnout using logit in Table 2. Republican Baseline (M1) and Democratic Baseline (M2) represent the relationship between emotional responses and voter turnout without controls, while the full model (M3) and robustness check model (M4) represent the relationship between emotional responses and Black turnout, with controls. The regression table reports odds ratios with clustered standard errors (by region) in parentheses. The reference category for regions is the Northeast region. The pseudo R-squared reported is McFadden's. All models report 95% confidence intervals for statistical significance.

Table 2: Logistic Regression Models Depicting Black Voter Turnout in 2020 (Odds Ratios)

Outcome: Voted (1 = Yes, 0 = No)				
Variables	Republican Baseline (M1)	Democratic Baseline (M2)	Full Model (M3)	Robustness Model (M4)
Racialized Republican Hostility	1.018*** (0.001)	-----	1.009*** (0.004)	-----
Democratic Warmth	-----	0.982*** (0.003)	0.984*** (0.002)	-----
Affective Polarization Index	-----	-----	-----	1.012*** (0.001)
Age	-----	-----	1.029*** (0.006)	1.029*** (0.006)
Gender (Female)	-----	-----	0.797*** (0.169)	0.795*** (0.313)
Education	-----	-----	1.482*** (0.075)	1.460*** (0.064)
Income	-----	-----	1.079*** (0.039)	1.078*** (0.040)
Constant	4.980*** (0.042)	4.965*** (0.067)	0.390 (0.507)	0.391 (0.488)
Region Fixed Effects	No	No	Yes	Yes
Number of Observations	595	595	595	595
Pseudo-R ²	0.034	0.034	0.153	0.152
AIC	539.88	539.45	489.52	488.38
BIC	548.66	548.23	533.40	527.87

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

3.2 Love May Just Not Be Enough

The Democratic side of the equation presents a counterintuitive finding. In the full model specification (M3), Democratic Warmth is negatively and significantly associated with voter turnout, with an odds ratio of 0.984 ($p < .01$, CI = 95%). This suggests that for every one-point increase in warm feelings toward the Democratic Party, the odds of voting are 1.6% lower when other variables are held constant. When scaled to a more meaningful level, a 10-point increase (moving from a neutral 50 to 60 on the feeling thermometer) in warmth toward Democrats corresponds to approximately a 14.7% ($0.984^{10} \approx 14.7\%$) drop in likelihood of voting. While these findings may seem counterintuitive, they suggest that strong Black electorates or partisans are likely to be motivated by hostility toward the GOP than by enthusiasm for the Democratic Party in heightened racialized contexts, as supported by negative partisanship and affective polarization theories (Abramowitz and Webster, 2018; Philips and Plutzer, 2023).

Contextually, this finding has close similarities with the historic turnout in 1968. President Richard Nixon's campaign prominently featured "law and order" rhetoric, which, as scholars have shown, was widely interpreted as a coded message targeting Black communities and the civil rights movement (Alexander, 2010; Lassiter, 2013). This strategy capitalized on white anxieties about urban unrest and rising crime. But for African Americans, it represented a direct threat to their safety, dignity, and hard-fought political influence. Academic analyses reveal that Nixon's approach not only heightened racial polarization but also served as a platform of attack on civil rights progress, leading to a massive Black turnout in the 1968 election (Lassiter, 2013). The 1968 campaign thus reinforced the pattern in which racially charged rhetoric from the GOP prompts Black voters to turn out at higher rates, not out of enthusiasm for the Democratic Party, but as a defensive response to perceived threats.

3.3 Seeking Protection Through the Ballot

The odds ratios shown in the complete logistic regression model (M3) in Table 2 clearly and significantly support the defensive turnout argument. Each 1-point increase in hostility toward Republicans (GOP) is positively associated with a 0.9% likelihood of voting when all other factors are held constant ($OR = 1.009$, $CI = 95\%$, $p < .01$). While this effect appears moderate at first glance, its cumulative impact is substantial. If there is a heated campaign (which is common during the Trump and Biden eras), a 10-point increase in anti-Republican sentiment that is easily identified by African Americans after racially charged rhetoric or cues will be associated with a substantial turnout odd of 9.4% ($1.009^{10} \approx 9.4\%$). That means a 10-point shift (such as moving from a neutral 50 to 60 on the feeling thermometer) in hostility toward the GOP may mobilize close to 1 in 10 additional Black voters even after controlling for age, education, gender, region, and income.

To put this finding into proper context, historical electoral incidences have had similar outcomes. A prominent example is the famous 1988 "Willie Horton Ads." The 1988 presidential election offers a vivid example of a racially charged election and its impact on Black voter behavior. The infamous Willie Horton ad, aired by George H. W. Bush's campaign, used racially coded imagery to stir up fear about crime and implicitly associated Blackness with danger (Mendelberg, 2001). Academic research demonstrates that this kind of implicit racial threat primed both white and Black voters to respond along racial lines (Mendelberg, 2001; Valentino et al., 2002). For African Americans, the Willie Horton episode was a forceful reminder of the vulnerability of their rights and safety in the face of racially manipulative political tactics. Studies show that such messaging can mobilize Black voters defensively, as they perceive the stakes of the elections to be not just political but existential (Valentino et al., 2002). The 1998 election thus aligns with the findings in this study and supports the defensive turnout theory by highlighting how negative and racialized cues from the Republican Party can be strongly associated with Black political engagement.

3.4 Replication and Robustness Checks

The robustness checks suggest that the study's major results are reliable and consistent over different model specifications, multiple operationalizations, and diagnostic tests. Replications employing both the Affective Polarization Index and probit models yield results that closely resemble those obtained from logistic regression studies. Furthermore, supplementary fit statistics, null effect tests, and multicollinearity diagnostics reinforce the robustness of the estimates. These checks, when looked at together, makes the defensive turnout argument stronger and show that the outcomes are not just due to how the model was chosen or set up. For complete results and visualizations, readers should look at the detailed tables and figures in Appendix B.

3.5 Limitations and Future Directions

This study utilizes cross-sectional ANES data and self-reported turnout, which limits causal inferences and may slightly inflate participation estimates. These limitations point out important opportunities for future research. Longitudinal and experimental research may clarify the evolution of racialized threats and partisan animosity over time, while more comprehensive data on linked fate, mobilization, and other emotional responses, such as wrath or pride, would enhance our comprehension of the mechanisms underlying defensive turnout. Expanding the study beyond a single election year and utilizing larger Black samples might explain the applicability of this

methodology across various electoral situations, including midterm, state, and local elections. These constraints simultaneously facilitate significant theoretical and practical ramifications. Future research may expand upon this study to evaluate the generalizability of defensive turnout among other marginalized groups, investigate the interplay between institutional barriers such as voter suppression and emotional mobilization, and assess whether defensive turnout enhances or undermines democratic participation over time. By conceptualizing restrictions as stepping stones, this study establishes a platform for future studies that not only enhances the defensive turnout theory but also provides valuable insights for policymakers, civic leaders, and campaigns aiming to comprehend and engage Black voters in a polarized democracy.

4. Discussion

While the findings suggest that GOP hostility is associated with higher Black turnout, the cross-sectional data limits causal claims. Despite these constraints, the evidence supports a defensive turnout model. The fact that the results are similar across four different models, two ways of measuring the dependent variable again, and three tests for reliability, along with the use of various control factors and sensitivity checks, indicates that the study highlights an important aspect of today's Black political behavior, where voting is seen more as a way to protect against perceived dangers rather than just showing loyalty to a political party.

The 2020 election provides a useful context for understanding the strong associations found in my study. The observed 0.9% turnout boost associated with anti-Republican sentiment explains why Black voter turnout reached record-breaking highs in 2020, despite notably low enthusiasm for the Democratic nominee, Joe Biden (Philips and Plutzer, 2023). This paradoxical pattern of higher turnout without high candidate enthusiasm has been documented in recent academic work. For example, Garzia and Ferreira da Silva (2022) show that nearly one-third of American voters in 2020 reported voting more "against" than "for" a candidate, with this trend being particularly pronounced among groups facing direct threats to their rights or status. Further, Tesler (2016) and Jardina (2019) provide evidence that racialized political messaging and perceived threats from Republican candidates can activate defensive turnout among Black Americans. These studies argue that when voters perceive heightened racial threat, such as through racially charged rhetoric or targeted voter suppression efforts, they are more likely to vote as a form of resistance, even in the absence of strong enthusiasm for their party's candidate. This conclusion is consistent with White and Laird (2020), who emphasize that Black political behavior is often shaped by a sense of group-based threat and the need to defend hard-won rights.

Taken together, this body of research supports the argument that the historic Black turnout in 2020 was less likely a product of Democratic enthusiasm and more of a reflection of defensive turnout in response to perceived racial and political threats. This highlights the importance of affective polarization and negative partisanship in shaping electoral participation, particularly for marginalized communities in polarized contexts. It also confirms the traditional patterns that show high Black voter turnout during Republican administrations (Hasen, 2014; Brennan Center, 2024). These findings further suggest that Republican rhetoric and policy positions, particularly on racial issues, are inadvertently associated with higher Black voter turnout.

Furthermore, findings in this study fundamentally extend the negative partisanship and affective polarization paradigm by demonstrating that feelings of hostility outweigh positive party identification. It establishes defensive turnout as a measurable phenomenon with real electoral consequences by offering a new framework for understanding Black political behavior in an era of heightened racial polarization. This pattern is consistent with recent work by Abramowitz and Webster (2018) and Garzia and Ferrera da Silva (2022), who find that American electorates "vote against," not "vote for," but is now demonstrated specifically for Black Americans by arguing that voting is a protection tactic. As one focus group participant (not in this study) memorably put it, "I don't vote because I love Democrats; I vote because I remember what Republicans do."

5. Conclusion

These findings carry important implications for political strategy, political theory, and electoral lawmaking. For mobilization efforts, the results suggest that appeals to enthusiasm or loyalty fall short if they do not address the

perceived threats that many Black voters experience. Campaigns and civic organizations must reckon with the reality that racialized backlash and policy retrenchment may be more effective at predicting voter turnout than partisan identification alone among Blacks. It also suggests that policy and lawmakers have a duty to make laws that prevent or minimize voter suppression and disengagement. Theoretically, this work advances our understanding of affective polarization by showing how race transforms emotional politics into a survival strategy. Thus, defensive turnout reframes participation as a protective act in an era of racial polarization.

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Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Informed Consent Statement/Ethics approval: Not applicable. This study uses secondary, publicly available data (American National Election Studies 2020 Time Series), and no new data were collected from human participants by the author.

Data Availability Statement: The data used in this study are publicly available from the American National Election Studies (ANES) at <http://www.electionstudies.org>.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, The Author; Methodology, The Author; Formal Analysis, The Author; Writing – Original Draft Preparation, The Author; Writing – Review and Editing, The Author.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies: This study has not used any generative AI tools or technologies in the preparation of this manuscript.

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Notes:

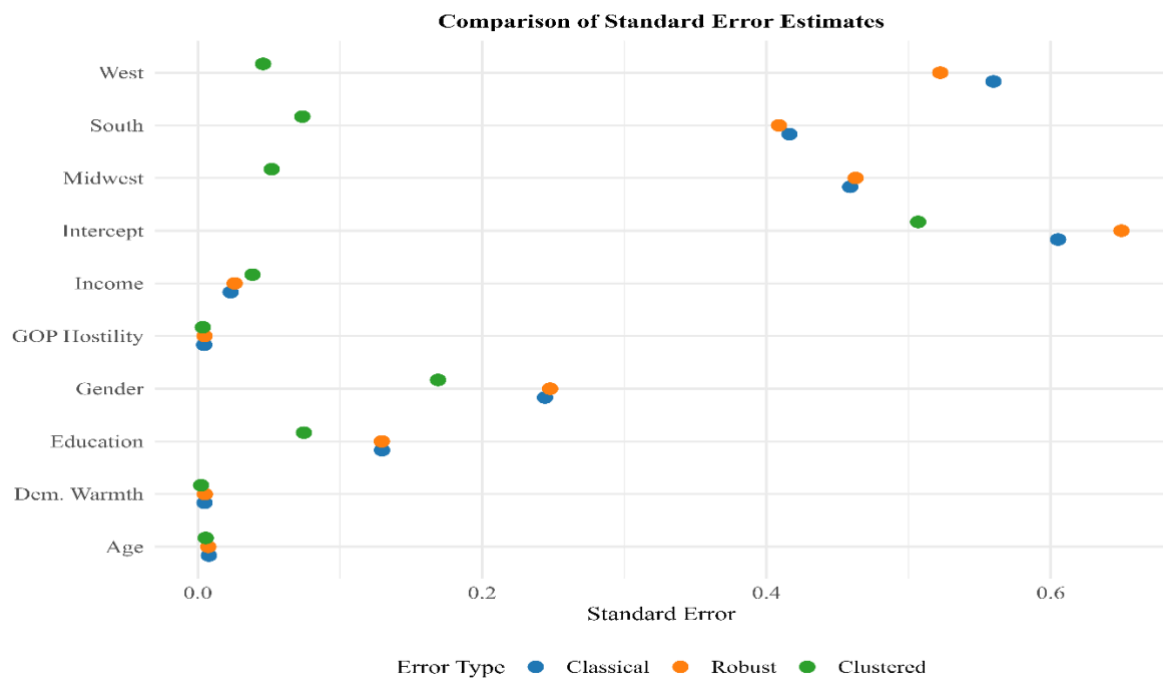
1. The Democratic Party identifies as blue, while the Republicans identify as red.
2. The Republican Party is often referred to as the right, while Democrats are often referred to as the left. This reveals the ideological positions of both parties.
3. Research proves that hostility toward Republicans is often racialized in American politics and hostility towards Republicans is closely linked to race. Studies show that Black voters and other minorities see the Republican Party as a threat to racial progress, which increases negative feelings toward it (Chen, 2021; Emery, 2023; King, 2025). I therefore interpret Republican hostility as racialized given that Black voters experienced racial threats in 2020 (Hasen, 2014; Chen, 2021).

Appendix A

Table A1. Tabular Comparison of Predictors for Republican Baseline Model (M1) and Full Model (M3).

Predictor	Baseline (M1)	Full Model
GOP Hostility	2.0%*	0.9%*
Controls?	No	Yes

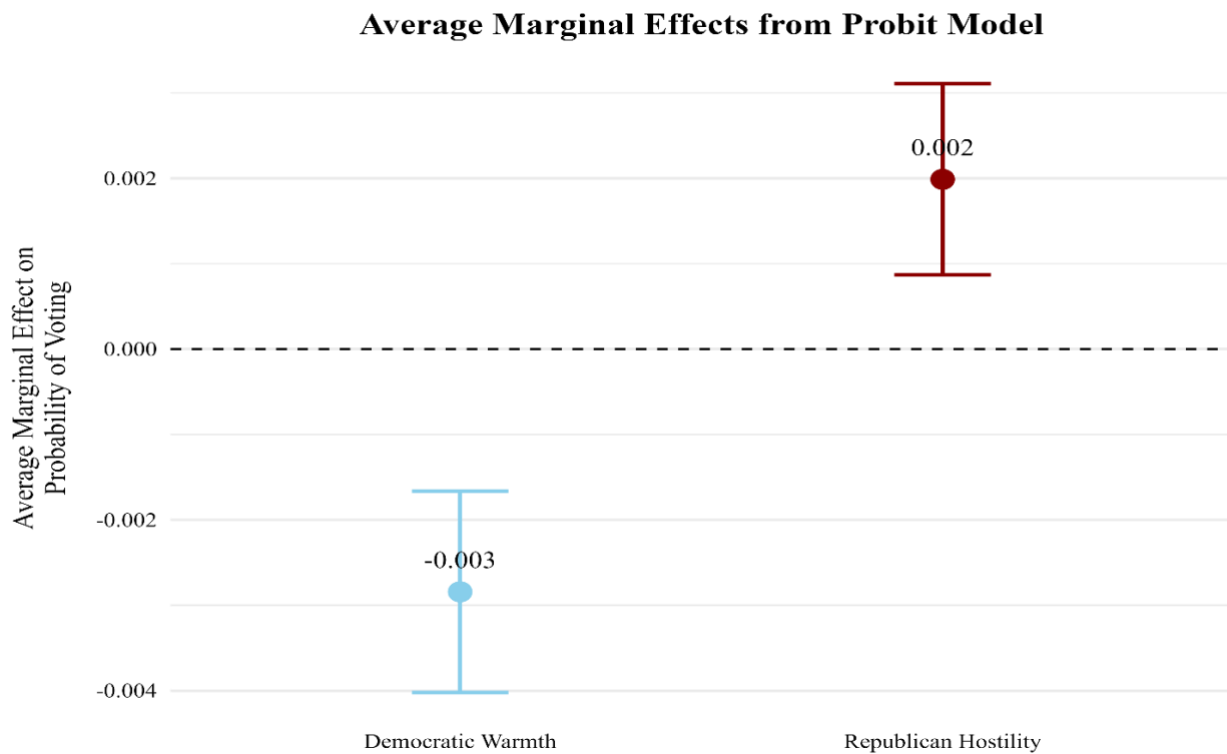
Table A2. Table showing sensitivity analysis of classic, clustered, and robust standard errors



Note: Appendix Table A2 compares classical, robust, and clustered standard errors. The largest discrepancies occur for variables with strong regional patterns (e.g., Democratic Warmth, regional indicators), reinforcing the need for clustering. Results are robust to alternative specifications, but clustered errors provide the most reliable associations.

Appendix B

Table B1. Probit Regression Showing Black Voter Turnout in 2020.

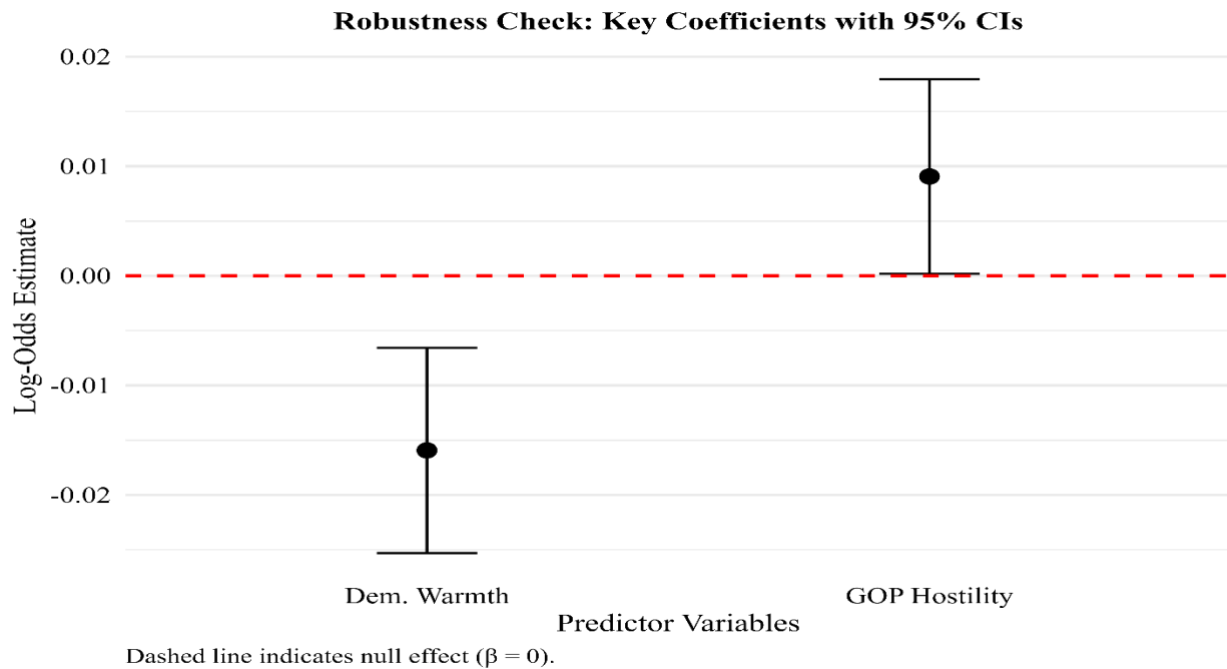


Note: Using probit regression gives the same results as the logit regression. This indicates that the study is replicable even when a different model is used.

Table B2. Tabular Comparison of Logit (OR) and Probit (AME) Regression Models.

Predictor	Effect Size	SE	z-value	p-value	CI Lower	CI Upper	Model
GOP_Hostility	1.009	0.005	2.3446	0.019	1.0017	1.0195	Logit (OR)
GOP_Hostility	0.0013	0.0006	2.3260	0.020	0.0002	0.0024	Probit (AME)
Dem_Warmth	0.984	0.0046	-3.0698	0.002	0.9770	0.9949	Logit (OR)
Dem_Warmth	-0.0018	0.0006	-2.9962	0.003	-0.0030	-0.0006	Probit (AME)

Note: I compared the reported odds ratios in the logit model and average marginal effects in the probit. Both logit (OR = 1.009, $p = 0.019$) and probit (AME = 0.001, $p = 0.020$) show that GOP hostility is strongly associated with the likelihood of Black voter turnout, whereas Democratic warmth decreases turnout (OR = 0.984, AME = -0.002; $p < 0.01$). This consistency across different regression models confirms that my findings are robust to model choice and also strengthens the defensive turnout argument.

Figure B1. Robustness of Partisan Affect Coefficients (95% CIs).

Note: I examined null effects to determine whether Confidence Intervals (CIs) included zero and checked the stability of confidence interval widths across model specifications. I find that confidence intervals excluded zero with no substantial CI widening, as shown in figure B1, with the results remaining statistically significant. This evidence also supports the reliability of the findings.

Table B3. Generalized Variance Inflation Factors (GVIF) by Model

Variable	Model 3 GVIF	Model 4 GVIF
Republican Hostility	1.08	NA
Democratic Warmth	1.16	NA
Affective Polarization Index	NA	1.04
Age	1.03	1.03
Gender	1.03	1.03
Education	1.19	1.17
Income	1.20	1.19
Region	1.06	1.05

Note: I performed multicollinearity diagnostics using generalized variance inflation factors (GVIF). The outcome indicated no concerning correlations between predictors in either of the full models. All GVIF values were below 1.2 in Model 3 (original specification) and 1.2 in Model 4 (Affective Polarization specification), which falls within the range of acceptable thresholds in statistical analysis (O'Brien 2007; Franke 2010).