

Political Polarization in the American Public

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Abstract

For more than two decades political scientists have discussed rising elite polarization in the United States, but the study of mass polarization did not receive comparable attention until fairly recently. This article surveys the literature on mass polarization. It begins with a discussion of the concept of polarization, then moves to a critical consideration of different kinds of evidence that have been used to study polarization, concluding that much of the evidence presents problems of inference that render conclusions problematic. The most direct evidence—citizens' positions on public policy issues—shows little or no indication of increased mass polarization over the past two to three decades. Party sorting—an increased correlation between policy views and partisan identification—clearly has occurred, although the extent has sometimes been exaggerated. Geographic polarization—the hypothesized tendency of like-minded people to cluster together—remains an open question. To date, there is no conclusive evidence that elite polarization has stimulated voters to polarize, on the one hand, or withdraw from politics, on the other.

INTRODUCTION

In his prefaces to earlier volumes of the *Annual Review*, founding editor Nelson Polsby (e.g., 1999) commented on the theoretical and methodological heterogeneity of political science. More than the other social sciences, political science defines itself by the subject matter it studies—politics and government, then and now, here and there—while lacking a dominant theoretical approach like the rational actor approach of economics, or a dominant methodology like the experimental tradition of psychology. As the essays in the edited volume by Katznelson & Milner (2002) illustrate, every approach and methodology found in the other social sciences finds a niche in political science (along with some that are humanistic rather than scientific).

In addition to methodological diversity, the subject-matter focus of the discipline naturally generates research agendas that reflect events and developments in the real world more than do the agendas of our sister social sciences. Although most research programs in the social sciences probably have roots in real-world concerns, our sense is that agendas in disciplines such as economics take on a life of their own more often than in political science. In our discipline, scholarly attention to various questions waxes and wanes as real-world events and developments come and go. In consequence, there is some truth to critics' charges that our research is not as conclusive or as progressive as that of other disciplines (e.g., Lindblom 1997).

The discipline has been this way since its beginnings more than a century ago, however, so it appears that we are what we are and probably not likely to change. But even if political science is not an ideal-typical science, many of those trained as political scientists have knowledge and analytic skills that allow them to falsify, confirm, clarify, and otherwise inform the beliefs of political practitioners and political observers—beliefs that have real-world consequences. In that spirit, we undertake this essay on a widely discussed

current development in American politics: polarization.

Beginning in the early 1990s, media and political interpreters of American politics began to promulgate a polarization narrative. Insurgent presidential candidate Pat Buchanan notably declared a culture war for the soul of America in his speech at the 1992 Republican national convention, and although that election showed few signs of such conflict, later developments made him appear prescient. In 1994, the Democrats lost control of the House of Representatives for the first time in 40 years, a shocking outcome attributed to economically insecure “angry white males” lashing out at abortion, affirmative action, gay rights, gun control, Hillary Clinton, immigration, and other cultural provocations. Two years later, the conflict narrative looked passé when Republican candidate Bob Dole was reduced to asking plaintively, “Where’s the outrage?” But in 1998, the Monica Lewinsky scandal catapulted the polarization narrative back into prominence, and it became a dominant feature of political commentary in the 2000 and 2004 election cycles.¹

After the 2000 election, political commentators gave the polarization narrative a visual representation: the notorious red-blue map of the United States, generally interpreted as the reflection of a fundamental division between the God-fearing, Bush-supporting states of the South and heartland on the one hand, and the godless, Gore-supporting states of the coasts and the declining Great Lakes industrial area on the other. And when the 2004 election almost reproduced the 2000 map, belief in the polarization narrative peaked as social conservatives gloated about the purported importance of “values voters” for the

¹Subsequent commentators generally ignored the fact that in 1998 the party of an incumbent president gained seats for only the second time since the Civil War, thoroughly embarrassing Republican attempts to exploit the Lewinsky affair. In the aftermath of the elections, some social conservatives lamented that the culture war was over and they had lost (Eakman 1999; see also Bennett 1998).

re-election of President Bush, and liberal commentators bitterly accepted that interpretation. One op-ed piece asked:

Where else [but in the red states] do we find fundamentalist zeal, a rage at secular-ity, religious intolerance, fear of and hatred for modernity? . . . We find it in the Muslim world, in Al Qaeda, in Saddam Hussein's Sunni loyalists. (Wills 2004)

Another writer proclaimed that the election constituted a historical turning point:

In the wee small hours of November 3, 2004, a new country appeared on the map of the modern world: The DSA, the Divided States of America. . . . [N]ot since the Civil War has the fault lines [sic] between its two halves been so glaringly clear. . . . It is time we called those two Americas something other than Republican and Democrat, for their mutual alienation and unforgiving contempt is closer to Sunni and Shia, or (in Indian terms) Muslim and Hindu. How about, then, Godly America and Worldly America? (Schama 2004).

A map widely circulated on the internet after the 2004 election labeled the red states "Jesusland" and combined the blue states with our northern neighbor to form the "United States of Canada."

Although students of Congress (Poole & Rosenthal 1984) and political parties (Stone et al. 1990) had earlier begun the discussion of rising elite polarization, public opinion scholars were slower to address the emerging narrative of popular polarization. In part this may have been because most elections inspire the media to adopt some short-hand explanation of the outcome (the Year of the Woman, the Year of the Angry White Male) and identify some critical voter bloc (soccer moms, security moms, NASCAR dads, values voters), so scholars bombarded by "red versus blue" commentary understandably assumed that this too would pass. But not only has the polarization

narrative had a longer half-life than most, it also seems to have influenced what actually happened in politics. To name two examples, we have observed a deemphasis of traditional electoral strategies aimed at persuading swing voters in favor of an emphasis on maximizing turnout of the base (Fiorina 1999), and exaggerated claims of governing mandates based on thin election margins (Weiner & Pomper 2006). Recognizing these real-world consequences, the literature on polarization has expanded greatly in recent years, as numerous scholars turned their attention to the contemporary scene.

A review of the literature on party polarization appeared in the *Annual Review of Political Science* only two years ago (Layman et al. 2006), and another is appearing in the *British Journal of Political Science* (Hetherington 2008). Rather than replot ground already well turned by others, we focus this review more narrowly and orient it somewhat differently than these nearly concurrent reviews.

First, our discussion addresses polarization in the mass public. There is an extensive literature on elite polarization, the lion's share of which focuses on Congress (McCarty et al. 2006). Methodological questions about roll-call measurement of polarization merit more attention, and there are debates over who started the movement (Hacker & Pierson 2006a,b,c; cf. Pitney 2006a,b), how much movement has occurred, how much of the polarization is genuine as opposed to a tactic for generating political support, and other specific features of the increase in elite polarization. However, there is general agreement among informed observers that American political elites have polarized.

Second, rather than repeating a comprehensive review of the literature, we focus critical attention on conceptual issues, starting with the obvious one of defining and identifying polarization. Then we examine five varieties of evidence that studies have treated as evidence for or against polarization: Americans' social and cultural characteristics, their fundamental values, their political

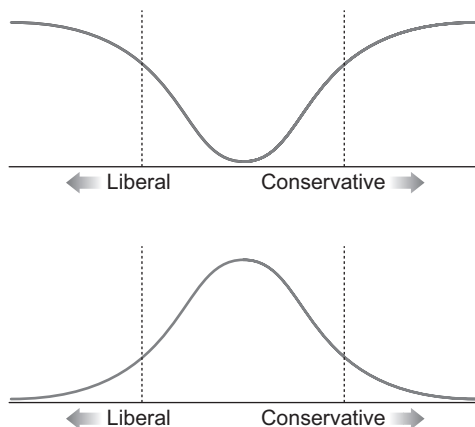


Figure 1

Polarized and nonpolarized distributions.

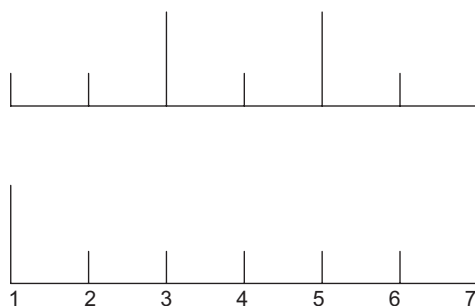


Figure 2

Polarization: levels and trends.

positions, their voting behavior and candidate evaluations, and even their places of residence. A critical consideration of this array of potential evidence shows that much of it is less relevant to the question of polarization than it seems. Next we turn to party sorting, a development often conflated with polarization. Finally, we briefly discuss a newer line of work—the impact of elite polarization on the attitudes of the mass public.

POLARIZATION: IDENTIFICATION AND MEASUREMENT

Standard dictionary definitions of polarization emphasize the simultaneous presence of

opposing or conflicting principles, tendencies, or points of view. In our experience, most scholars hold an intuitive notion of polarization as a bimodal distribution of observations.² Thus, **Figure 1** contrasts two hypothetical distributions on a liberal–conservative scale. We doubt that it would be very controversial to assert that the top distribution is a polarized distribution, whereas the bottom one is not.

Although many would consider bimodality a necessary condition for a distribution to bear the polarization label, fewer would consider it a sufficient condition. **Figure 2** illustrates two bimodal distributions on seven-point scales like those included in the National Election Studies (NES). We believe that more people would consider the bottom example to be an instance of polarization than the top example. Thus, an implicit assumption most of us make is that the two modes of the distribution lie at the extremes, not near the center.

DiMaggio et al. (1996) point out that polarization can be viewed as both a state and a process. Whether to characterize a given distribution as polarized is generally a matter of judgment. Is the top example in **Figure 2** polarized distribution? Some analysts might say no—lots of people consider themselves slightly conservative or slightly liberal, but the majority of respondents fall near the center of the scale. Some proponents of the polarization narrative, however, might say yes, the top distribution does indicate polarization: half of the respondents fall left of center and half right of center. Alternatively, is the lower example in the figure a polarized distribution? Probably most analysts would say yes, but some skeptics of the polarization narrative might say that “fragmented” or “heterogeneous” is a more accurate descriptor.

²In their exhaustive study of public opinion polarization, DiMaggio et al. (1996) examine the polarization of distributions from four different standpoints: as increases in (a) statistical variance, (b) bimodality, (c) constraint (e.g., ideological coherence), and (d) consolidation (intergroup differentiation).

In contrast to judging *levels* of polarization, identifying *trends* in polarization is an easier task. Considering **Figure 2** again, probably very few analysts would disagree with the judgment that a change in the shape of a distribution from the top to the bottom example is a polarizing trend. Movement away from the center toward the extremes would seem to be a noncontroversial definition of polarizing, even if judgments about how to characterize the starting and ending points remain disputable. In our earlier work (Fiorina et al. 2005, 2006), we may have deflected the discussion from its most profitable path by arguing that few opinion differences in the United States reached a level that merited the label of polarization. We emphasized levels of polarization largely because we wished to discredit the media's exaggeration of red state–blue state differences by showing that differences were not as large as generally presumed, and that usually majorities were found on the same sides of issues. But such cross-sectional evidence predictably resulted in “is too,” “is not” kinds of arguments: Is a 10% difference big or little? Except in the most extreme (and rare) cases of complete consensus or polar opposition, judging polarizing trends is easier than judging polarization levels, so research that includes a temporal dimension is particularly relevant to the current discussion, although it restricts analyses to time-series data.

An interesting feature of trend analysis is that polarization will increase when a population moves from one consensual state to its opposite. For example, a generation ago, about three quarters of the American population agreed that homosexual behavior is “always wrong” (Fiorina et al. 2006). That is a pretty consensual state of public opinion. Such beliefs began to decline around 1990, however, and today opinion about homosexuality appears considerably more polarized. But if current trends continue, in 20 years public opinion *circa* 2007 will appear as roughly the midpoint of a transitional period when

American society moved from a position of consensual rejection of homosexuality to a position of consensual acceptance of homosexuality. Thus, evidence of increasing polarization at one point in time may indicate something different when viewed in a longer context.

POLARIZATION? FIVE TYPES OF EVIDENCE

Proponents of the argument that Americans have polarized offer a wide array of evidence in support of their position. On close examination, much of this evidence has little or no relevance to the question.

Differences in Sociocultural Characteristics

The Year of our Lord 2000 was the year of the map... This election was Hollywood vs Nashville, “Sex in the City” vs “Touched by an Angel,” National Public Radio vs talk radio, “Doonesbury” vs “B.C.,” “Hotel California” vs “Okie From Muskogee.” It was *The New York Times* vs *National Review Online*, Dan Rather vs Rush Limbaugh, Rosie O'Donnell vs Dr. Laura, Barbra Streisand vs Dr. James Dobson, the Supreme Court vs—well, the Supreme Court. (Mattingly 2000)

Such colorful, humorous, and easy-to-appreciate contrasts are common fare in the media. We are told that red-state residents are more likely to be Evangelicals, gun owners, country music devotees, beer drinkers, and NASCAR fans, whereas blue-state residents are more likely to be agnostics or atheists, Volvo drivers, supporters of the fine arts, chardonnay sippers, and people who sail. Scores of such contrasts have been noted in one media outlet or another.

Implicit in such contrasts is the presumption that social characteristics correlate highly with political positions, so that a difference in, say, pornographic movie rentals (Edsall 2003)

translates into a comparable difference in, say, views on the legality of abortion or the necessity of gun registration. Sometimes such equations are valid. For example, if told that a randomly drawn partisan is African-American, we can estimate the odds that he or she identifies with the Democrats rather than the Republicans at upwards of 9:1. But more often, social characteristics have much weaker correlations with political positions. If told that a randomly drawn partisan is white, the odds that he or she is a Democrat rather than a Republican are a much more even 3:4.

The relationships between most social characteristics and political positions are not terribly strong.³ Even some that are widely believed to be highly indicative of political leanings are weaker than often assumed. For example, in 2004, the exit polls indicated that almost one third of white Evangelicals voted for John Kerry, as did more than one third of gun owners. Thus, differences in the size of these categories of citizens must be discounted by one third when translated into political differences. Even larger discounts must be applied to characteristics not as closely related to political positions as these.

In addition, the correlations between social characteristics and political preferences vary over time. Republican campaign operatives may have learned this lesson in 2006. Media observers credited the 2004 Bush campaign with a sophisticated turnout operation that utilized “microtargeting.” Voter registration data were merged with consumer databases to identify potential Republican voters based on their spending and lifestyle choices. We suspect that relationships between political preferences and consumption behavior are both weak and variable—a suspicion consistent with the results of the 2006 elections, which seemed to surprise the Republican high

command. Surveying the electoral carnage, one Republican consultant quipped that the problem was not that the turnout operation had failed; the people who were targeted turned out, but they didn’t vote Republican.

The bottom line is that contrasts in individual sociocultural characteristics are not direct indicators of political polarization. Hence, contrasts in such characteristics may or may not constitute evidence of polarization. Analysts must provide additional information about the strength of the links between social characteristics and relevant political variables, as well as information about the stability of such linkages.

Differing World Views or Moral Visions

The culture-war narrative grew out of arguments about conflicting moral visions or “worldviews.” Wuthnow (1989) and especially Hunter (1991) argued that Americans increasingly were dividing into two values camps: the culturally orthodox, who hold a traditional, religious, absolutist view of morality, and the culturally progressive, who hold a modern, secular, relativistic view of morality. In turn, such differing value systems provide fertile ground for political polarization and underlie battles about specific cultural issues such as abortion, gay rights, and now stem cell research (Himmelfarb 2001).

Much of the discussion of this subject is qualitative, with a few statistics cited for illustrative purposes, but several rigorous empirical studies have addressed the subject. Based on an analysis of the 1993 General Social Surveys (GSS), which included worldview measures, Evans (1997) concluded that social group memberships are somewhat more powerful predictors of political attitudes on abortion, gender roles, sexual behavior, and tolerance than are worldviews, although the latter do have independent impact. Less than half the sample had opposing worldviews, however. Hunter (2006) recently has clarified his position, arguing that the proportion of the

³And sometimes they are in the “wrong” direction. For example, commentators have pointed out that red states, where “family values” supposedly reign supreme, have higher rates of divorce, alcoholism, child abuse, and *Playboy* readership than blue states.

population holding polar opposite views is much smaller than his original argument may have suggested.

The most extensive empirical work is by Baker (2005), who analyzes World Values Surveys in a study of two value clusters: traditional versus secular, and survival versus self-expression (Inglehart & Baker 2000). The United States is unique in scoring high on both dimensions—as high on the self-expression dimension as the liberal democracies of old Europe, and as high on the traditional-values dimension as India, Turkey, Brazil, and Mexico. Interestingly, while the US position on the traditional-values dimension remained stable between 1980 and 2000, the country became steadily more progressive on the self-expression dimension, suggesting that these value clusters are not necessarily contradictory. Americans seem capable of holding onto their traditional values even while becoming increasingly postmaterialist.

Focusing specifically on the United States, Baker (2005, pp. 75–77) confirms earlier findings (Davis & Robinson 1997) that Americans are not polarized on the traditional–secular dimension. A dichotomous measure of “moral visions” (absolutist versus relativist) does show a neat bimodal distribution with about equal numbers of Americans in each category in 2000 (Baker 2005, p. 80). Contrary to the arguments in qualitative works (e.g., Himmelfarb 2001, White 2003), however, Baker finds that the relationships between moral visions and social and political attitudes are weak. Whether one is an absolutist or a relativist conveys relatively little information about political positions:

Almost all social attitudes—even about emotionally charged issues such as homosexuality—are not polarized. Moreover, most social attitudes are converging, becoming even more similar over time. The notable exception is attitudes about abortion. . . . There is some evidence of the polarization of moral visions, but this is a tendency, not the basis of two morally

opposed camps, because absolutists and relativists still have a lot in common. (Baker 2005, pp. 103–4)

In summary, the worldviews of Americans, like their sociocultural characteristics, turn out on close inspection to imply less about political polarization than is often assumed. Of course, this is not to claim that differences in moral visions are unimportant, or that they could not become more highly related to political attitudes. We argue only that for at least two decades, while claims to the contrary were being made, changes in worldviews or general moral visions have had little to do with political polarization.

Opposing Positions

The most direct way to measure polarization of political positions is to measure political positions. As we have just pointed out, measuring correlates of positions raises the question of the mapping between the measured variable and political position. Quite a bit of work directly analyzes citizens’ views on political issues, and generally it finds little in the way of polarization. DiMaggio and his collaborators (DiMaggio et al. 1996, Evans 2003) report exhaustive analyses of GSS and NES data through 2002 and conclude, “We find no support for the proposition that the United States has experienced dramatic polarization in public opinion on social issues since the 1970s” (DiMaggio et al. 1996, p. 738). They add, “Most scales and items display no increase in any measure of polarization for any subgroup” (p. 739). Fiorina et al. (2006) report evidence through 2004. We do not revisit these analyses here; we simply highlight some trend data.

Ideology is one of the workhorse variables used by students of mass behavior. NES have included a seven-point scale measure of ideology since 1972. **Figure 3** superimposes the 2004 distribution on the 1972 distribution. Little change is evident. The conservative label was more popular in 2004, but that was less a function of fewer

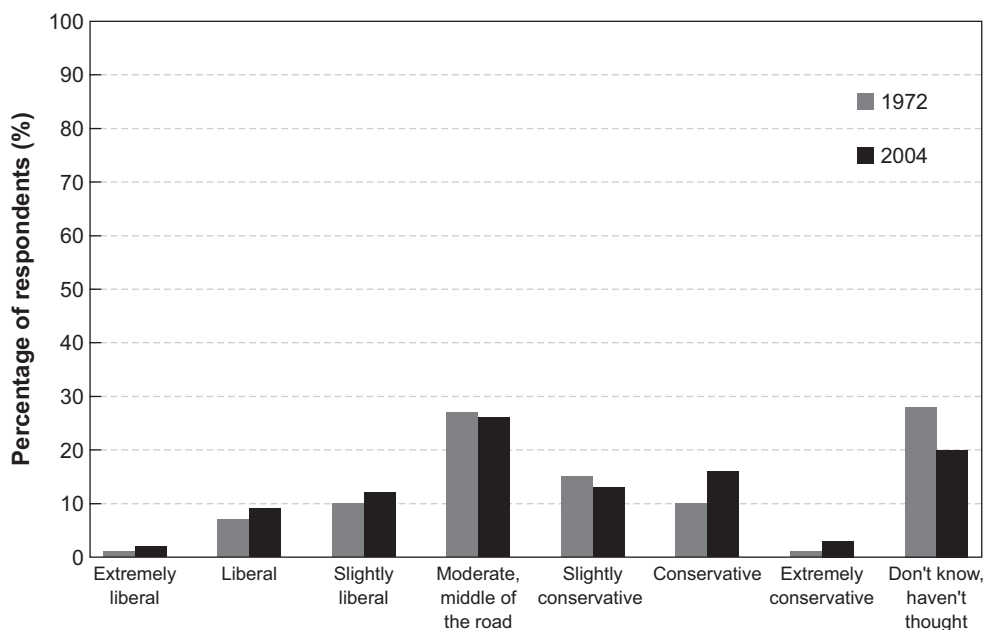


Figure 3

Political ideology: National Election Studies, 1972 versus 2004.

moderates than of fewer people who responded “don’t know/haven’t thought much about it.” More generally, Campbell (2008) reports a statistically significant decline in the proportion of moderates between 1972 and 2004, a finding that largely reflects a temporal decline in the number of “don’t knows,” whom analysts customarily classify as moderates. The percentage of exact-middle-of-the scale placements was 27% in 1972 and 26% in 2004.⁴

In the GSS, the percentage of “don’t knows” is quite a bit lower and the percentage of moderates quite a bit higher than in the NES.⁵ **Figure 4** plots the GSS data se-

ries across four decades. The lines are remarkably flat. In the aggregate, there is virtually no change in the distribution of American ideological identification.

Although less regularly than GSS, Gallup asked a five-category ideology question in the 1970s and again in the 1990s and 2000s. Whereas NES and GSS gave respondents three left-of-center options (extremely liberal, liberal, and slightly liberal) and three corresponding options for conservatives, Gallup offered two options on the left (very liberal and liberal) and two on the right. The proportions of Americans who choose the most extreme categories are actually slightly lower in Gallup polls conducted in the 2000s than in Gallup polls from the 1970s, and as **Figure 5** shows,

⁴Converse (2006) points out that the long-term decline in survey response rates probably means that contemporary samples contain higher proportions of interested and informed citizens than samples did a generation ago. This consideration probably needs attention when analysts compare survey data across long time spans.

⁵Although both survey organizations utilize seven-point scales with identical labels, NES includes the qualifying

clause “or haven’t you thought much about it?” Apparently GSS respondents, who do not have this easy out, tend to head for the middle category, supporting the common practice of classifying them as moderates. We thank Martin Wattenberg for pointing out to us that the GSS ideological data showed some differences from the NES data.

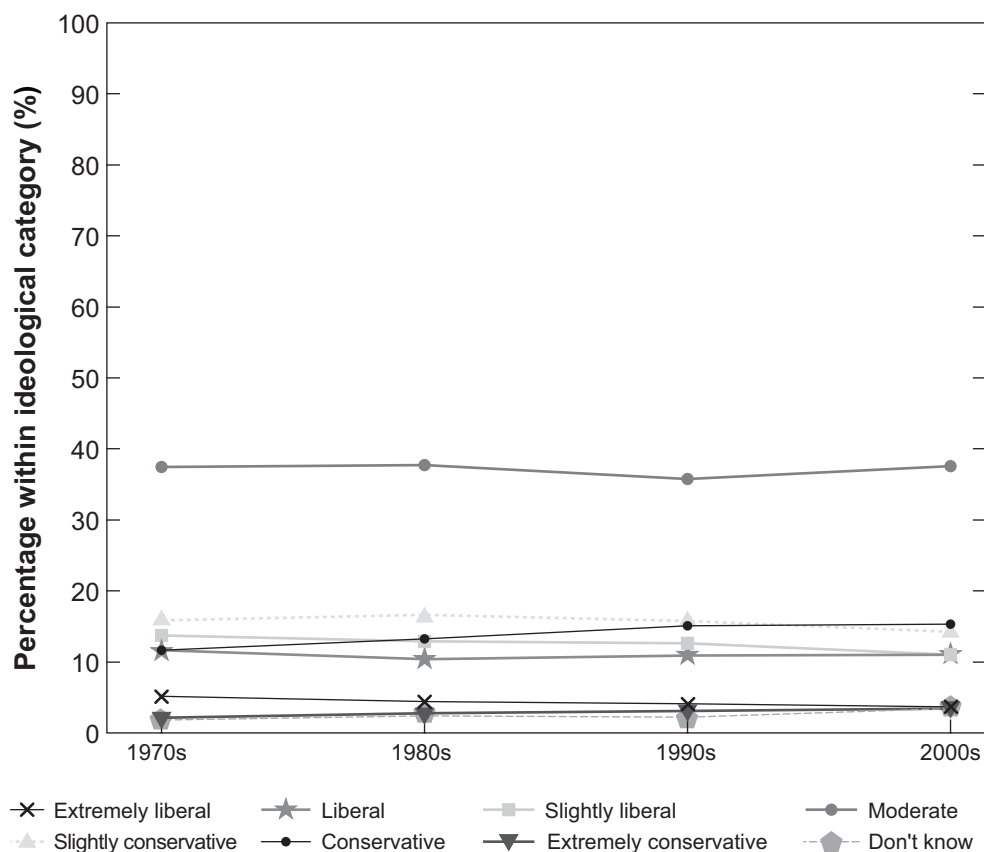


Figure 4

Political ideology: General Social Surveys, 1970s–2000s.

the plurality that prefers the moderate label is about five percentage points larger in the 2000s than it was in the 1970s.⁶

Figure 6 compares the percentages of moderates/don't knows reported by the three survey organizations. Over the course of the past generation, there is either a slight decline in moderates, no change at all, or a slight in-

crease in moderates. It seems reasonable to conclude that the distribution of ideology in the American public has not changed for more than three decades.

Of course, even if ideological positioning of Americans has not changed, that does not preclude their having polarized on particular issues. Research shows that people who call themselves liberals or conservatives (especially the latter) can hold policy views that seem to contradict the label (Ellis & Stimson 2005). Thus, the obvious next step is to examine trends in issue responses. Here analysts encounter the limits imposed by the number of repeated survey items. Abramowitz's (2006) discussion of mass polarization utilizes the NES ideology scale discussed above and six issue scales included in every NES

⁶Gallup did not ask this question in the 1980s, instead asking people to place themselves on an eight-position scale that did not include "moderate" as an option. The result of this attempt to force Americans into liberal and conservative categories was that ~10% of respondents volunteered a "middle-of-the-road" response, and 21% said "don't know," in contrast to the 3%–5% incidence of "don't know" elicited by the survey item reported in **Figure 5**. Even this somewhat strange item shows no trend in the number of liberals and conservatives, however.

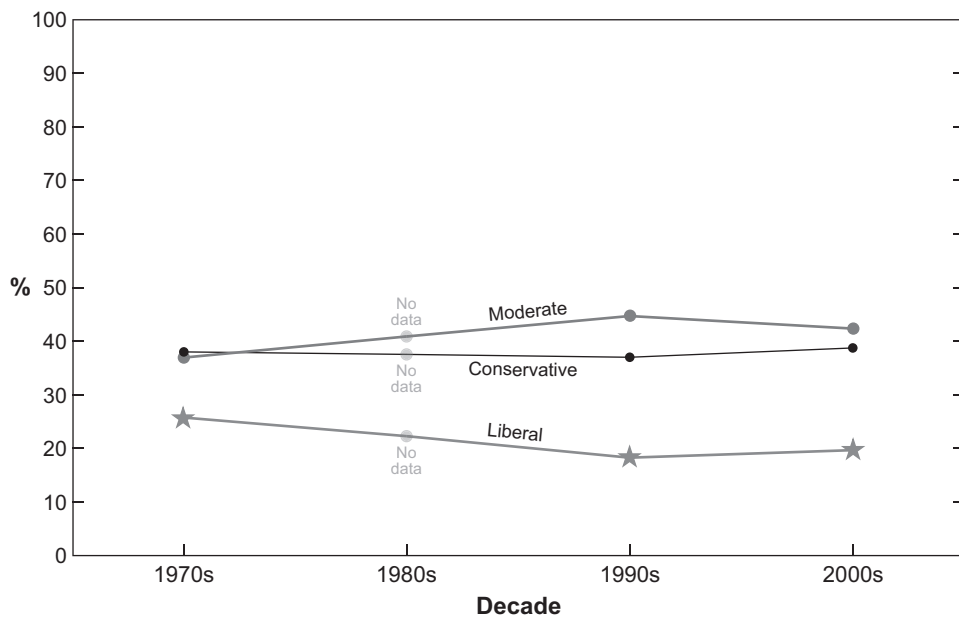


Figure 5

Political ideology: Gallup, 1970s–2000s.

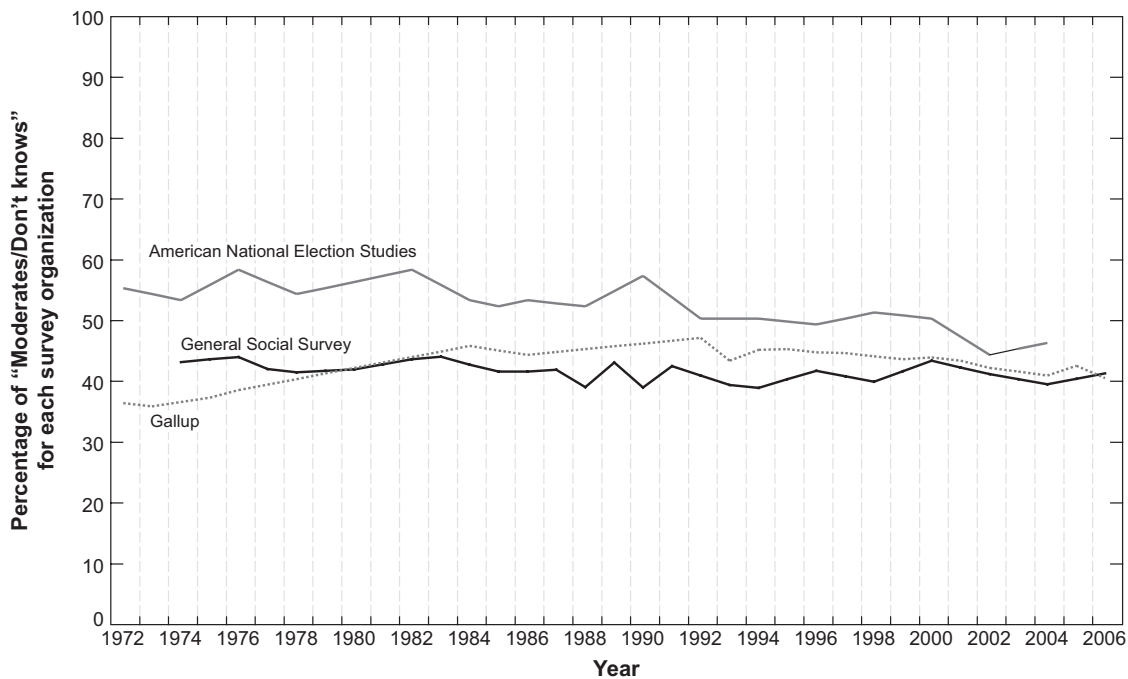


Figure 6

Comparative proportions of moderates/don't knows reported by different survey organizations, 1970s–2000s.

Table 1 No polarization of policy views: 1984–2004 (percentage point changes in seven-point scale position)

Extremely liberal				→ Extremely conservative			
<i>Left shift</i>							
Health insurance	6%	2%	3%	0% (−9) ^a	0%	−2%	−2%
Spending/services	5	4	5	−3 (−5)	−3	−3	−2
<i>Right shift</i>							
Aid to blacks	0	−2	−5	−5 (−7)	−1	6	8
Defense spending	−5	−4	−3	−5 (−4)	8	4	2
<i>Polarization</i>							
Jobs/SOL ^b	2	1	0	−2 (−7)	0	1	3
<i>No change</i>							
Abortion	1	−1			3		−1

^aNumbers in parentheses are changes when “don’t knows” are treated as moderates.

^bSOL, standard of living.

presidential election survey from 1984 through 2004. Five of the scales offer seven positions running from the most liberal to the most conservative stance on the issue:

- More government services/higher spending—fewer services/less spending
- Government health insurance—private health insurance
- More government aid for blacks/minorities—should help themselves
- Greatly decrease military spending—greatly increase
- Government guaranteed job and standard of living—on your own

A sixth question included in each of these studies asks respondents to choose between four positions on abortion ranging from most to least restricted. The text of the questions can be found at <http://electionstudies.org/neguide/gd-index.htm#4>.

Even in the purportedly polarized context of 2004, the general pattern is centrist, with more people placing themselves near the center of the scales than at the extremes. How much have the distributions changed? Not much. **Table 1** contains the percentage-point changes between the 1984 and 2004 response distributions (rows do not sum to zero because of rounding error and different numbers of “don’t know” responses). On only one scale—government responsibility for jobs and stan-

dard of living—does any evidence of polarization appear: Between 1984 and 2004, there is a small decline (two percentage points) in the number of people placing themselves in the exact center of the scale and a marginal increase in the number placing themselves on the left (three percentage points) and the right (four percentage points).

The other five scales do not show even this slight, statistically insignificant rise in polarization. On three of the scales there is a single-digit decline in the number of respondents who choose the exact middle of the scale, but on none of the scales does the middle lose to *both* extremes—the definition of polarization as increasing bimodality. Rather, on two scales the population drifted leftward. In 2004, 11% more Americans favored government health insurance and 4% fewer favored private insurance than in 1984. A similar pattern holds for the choice between more public services versus lower public spending. In 2004, 14% more Americans placed themselves on the liberal side of the scale than in 1984, compared to 8% fewer on the conservative side.

On two other scales, the population drifted rightward between 1984 and 2004. On aid to minorities, the right gained from the left and the middle—14% more Americans favored the two rightmost scale positions (individual initiative and self-help) in 2004 than in 1984.

Military spending shows an even more notable shift. The doves lost 12% and the hawks gained 14%. The four-position abortion scale shows virtually no change in popular opinion over the 20-year period.

Thus, whether the analysis focuses on particular issues or general ideological categorizations, there is little indication of increasing polarization, namely, the middle losing people to both extremes. Rather, we see a largely centrist public drifting slightly rightward on some issues, slightly leftward on others, but with only very small declines (of 2–5 percentage points) in the number of moderates.

Polarized Choices

In the previous section, we considered polarization of “political preferences” where the term referred to the ideological positions individuals hold and where they stand on specific issues. Whether the focus is on general ideology or particular issues, there is no evidence of polarization. But what about another concept of political preference, namely, the preference between two contending candidates? In the 2004 presidential election, the National Election Pool exit poll reported that about 90% of Americans who classified themselves as Republicans voted for George W. Bush, and nearly 90% of Americans who classified themselves as Democrats voted for John Kerry. Are such numbers not strong evidence of popular polarization?

In one sense, yes, the *vote* is polarized. But voting data alone tell us nothing about

whether *voters* are polarized. Votes are choices that people make, and those choices reflect comparisons of voters’ positions with the candidates’ positions. One cannot infer the voter’s position from her decision alone—the platforms of the candidates between whom she is choosing contribute equally to the decision. This simple but critical point is easy to illustrate with a standard spatial model (**Figure 7**). Assume voters are distributed normally over two issue dimensions, economic and moral. If the Republicans nominate an economic conservative and the Democrats an economic liberal, both of whom are social moderates (left panel), then the cutting line that separates voters who are closer to the Democrat than to the Republican is vertical, and each candidate draws support equally from people with traditional and progressive moral positions. An exit poll would find no relationship between moral position and the vote, and journalists would write that pocketbook voting determined the election.

Alternatively, if the Republicans nominate a social conservative and the Democrats a social liberal, both of whom are economic moderates (right panel), then the cutting line that separates voters closer to the Democrat than to the Republican is horizontal, and both candidates draw equally from people with conservative and liberal economic positions. Now an exit poll would find no relationship between economic position and the vote, and the story would be that values voting determined the election. Even with exactly the same voters,

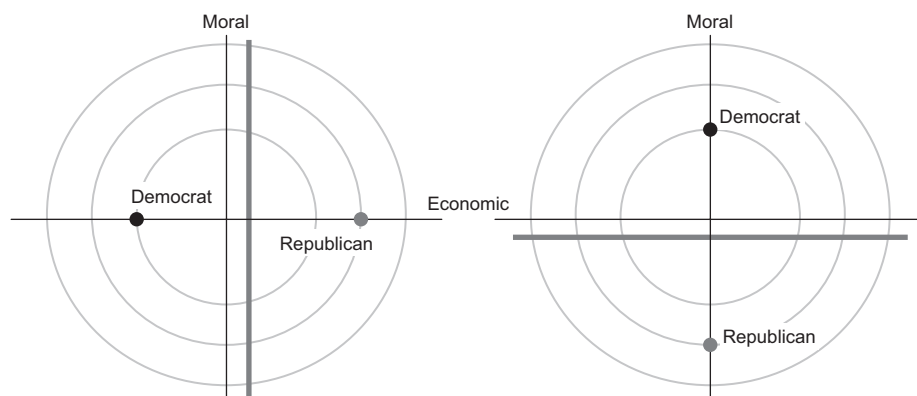


Figure 7

How candidate positions affect voter choices.

different candidate positioning produces different voting patterns.

Approval-rating evidence of polarization suffers from the same flaw. People express approval or disapproval of the president's performance not simply by looking at their own positions, but by comparing what the president has done with what they would have liked him to do. If President Bush had never invaded Iraq, we daresay that his approval ratings would look different today even if Americans' attitudes on the issues had not changed in the slightest. A study by Klinkner (2006) on the way the Iraq War issue affected the 2004 presidential voting illustrates the distinction between voter positions and evaluations. Klinkner contrasts the views of self-classified Democrats and Republicans on US foreign policy *goals* (e.g., to advance human rights, to combat international terrorism) and finds that whereas partisans' views are significantly different in a statistical sense, the differences are not as large substantively as might be expected. Contrasting the views of partisans on the *means* that the United States adopts to carry out foreign policy (e.g., military power versus diplomacy), Klinkner again reports differences that are statistically different but not substantively large. The same is true for partisans' attitudes on specific national defense issues, such as the importance of a strong military, and for their attitudes on values, such as patriotism and national pride. But when it comes to partisan attitudes toward President Bush, a huge partisan divide emerges. Evaluations of Bush are far more divided than the underlying values and positions of Democratic and Republican partisans.

Rauch (2007) reaches a similar conclusion based on 2005–2006 public opinion data. Although clear partisan differences exist, they do not reach a level that justifies claims that foreign policy has become the defining difference between Democrats and Republicans (Continetti 2007). According to Rauch, "America's partisans agree on much more than the conventional wisdom would suggest," and "Questions about *President Bush* send both parties

rushing to their respective corners" (emphasis in original).

Jacobson (2006) amasses the most extensive evidence that approval ratings depend on the actions of public officials as much as the positions of the people who rate them. He contrasts Survey USA approval ratings of President Bush, US Senators, and state governors. Bush is a total polarizer—the distributions of partisan ratings in the states have no overlap. His approval rating among Democrats in the state where they evaluate him most positively is 20 percentage points lower than his rating among Republicans in the state where they evaluate him least positively. In contrast, partisan differences in senatorial and especially in gubernatorial ratings are much lower and have considerable overlap. Thus, the same voters with the same political positions evaluate officials differently depending on the positions the officials hold and the actions they take. Polarized presidential approval ratings reflect the president's positions and actions, not polarized voters.

Although at first glance the vote choices Americans make and the approval ratings they offer may look like the most direct and relevant evidence of polarization, such evidence in fact is the most problematic. When looking at people's values and social characteristics, the problem lies in slippage—political positions are imperfectly correlated with values and social characteristics. But when it comes to vote decisions and approval ratings, candidates' positions and actions are unmeasured variables that contribute as much as the voters' positions to their choices and evaluations. The knife-edge 1960 election (which possibly chose the popular-vote loser) did not generate an interpretation of a country cleaved down the middle, but the knife-edge 2000 election (which chose the popular-vote loser) did greatly contribute to such an interpretation. Was the difference because the distribution of American voters had polarized dramatically in a generation? Or was it because Nixon versus Kennedy was a far less polarizing candidate choice than Bush versus Gore?

Differences in Where We Live

Early in 2004, a series of reports by journalist Bill Bishop (2004) claimed, "Today, most Americans live in communities that are becoming more politically homogeneous and, in effect, diminish dissenting views. And that grouping of like-minded people is feeding the nation's increasingly rancorous and partisan politics." Bishop's county-level analyses opened a new line of discussion and began a lively debate in the literature.

Klinkner (2004a) took issue with the Bishop analyses, pointing out that the number of Americans who lived in landslide (competitive) counties in 2000 was not unusually high (low) by historical standards, the distribution of the vote by county was clearly unimodal, and other measures of county dispersion were well within the historical range. In an exchange with Klinkner (2004b), Bishop & Cushing (2004) qualified their earlier claims, presented some new analyses, and defended their procedures. After the 2004 elections, Klinkner & Hapanowicz (2005) replicated Klinkner's earlier analyses, concluding, "While there may be a slight increase in political segregation, it is still in line with historical trends and is not anything unexpected" (p. 5).⁷

A number of other scholars have joined this debate, providing quite extensive empirical analyses. Nunn & Evans (2006) extend the work Evans did with DiMaggio et al. (1996) looking for evidence of geographic polarization in the GSS database. They find evidence of increasing spatial polarization of party identification, liberal-conservative ideology, and confidence in government institutions, but perhaps surprisingly, in view of Bishop's argument, not in voting behavior. Additionally, and perhaps also

surprisingly, the increased geographic polarization of political attitudes such as party identification and ideology does not correlate with growing polarization on cultural issues.

In a sweeping analysis of the presidential vote between 1840 and 2004, Glaeser & Ward (2006) reject five "myths" (their term) about American electoral geography: (a) that the United States is divided into two homogeneous political sections, (b) that the two parties have become more geographically segregated, (c) that geographic divisions are more stable than in earlier eras, (d) that religio-cultural differences are growing, and (e) that political divisions in general are growing. Despite rejection of these five myths, Glaeser & Ward emphasize that the United States always has shown noteworthy geographic differences in elections (although they are no larger now than in the past), and that geographic divisions have always reflected religion and culture, *except* in the mid-twentieth-century era that today is often viewed as "normal."

We place this debate about geographic polarization last in this section because although much of the research is careful and thorough, each of the difficulties raised earlier in this section appears repeatedly in this discussion. County income inequality has grown significantly in the past three decades (Galbraith & Hale 2006). On the other hand, ethnic and racial segregation of urban neighborhoods has fallen (Berube & Muro 2004). A variety of such economic and sociological differences and trends are readily measurable. But how closely do these social characteristics correlate with political preferences? Similarly, we can plausibly suppose that people who move to the suburbs have different values from those who stay in the cities, but how different, and how closely do they correlate with political positions? And most important, given that the sampling frames of few surveys yield representative samples even of the states, let alone smaller jurisdictions, much of the research on geographic polarization necessarily relies not on survey measures of political positions but

⁷An earlier study of interstate migration by Gimpel & Schuknecht (2001) based on data from the 1950s to the 1990s found that migration had heterogeneous political effects. The current debate focuses more on the political consequences of intrastate moves.

on election returns—citizen choices, not citizen preferences.

Historical research in particular faces an insuperable problem. Scholars have pointed out that contemporary levels of elite polarization look unusual compared to those of the mid twentieth century (Brady & Han 2006) but not compared to those of the late nineteenth century. Do variations in elite polarization reflect variations in voters' positions? Election returns cannot tell us. Consider that even in simultaneous elections, or in elections at most two years apart, with largely the same electorates, a picture of geographic polarization based on the vote for state offices (Map 1) looks very different from the red-blue picture based on the presidential vote. Election returns are not measures of voter positions and cannot be used as indicators of such.

PARTY SORTING (AKA PARTISAN POLARIZATION)

Except for a contested finding about abortion (Mouw & Sobel 2001, cf. DiMaggio et al. 2001), the DiMaggio team's examination of opinion distributions produced uniformly negative findings: The political positions of Americans had not become more polarized between the early 1970s and early 2000s. Importantly, however, within the larger population the parties in the electorate had become more distinct. This change was a product of two other senses of polarization that the DiMaggio group identified: constraint ("the more closely associated different social attitudes become...") and consolidation ("...the greater the extent to which social attitudes become correlated with salient individual characteristics or identities") (DiMaggio et al. 1996, p. 693). In the last few decades of the twentieth century, inter-issue correlations were increasing, and partisans were becoming more closely associated with one or the other of the increasingly interconnected clusters.

The relevance of these findings to mass polarization becomes clearer when they are translated into the older social science terminology of cross-cutting cleavages and cross-pressures (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944, Lipset & Rokkan 1967). Imagine a polity in which there are four important issues. The citizenry is polarized on each issue, but the issues are completely independent, so that any randomly chosen citizen is expected to be extremely liberal on two issues and extremely conservative on the other two. Democratic theorists argued that the prospects for political conflict were much lower in that case than if the issue cleavages were perfectly correlated, in which case half the population was extremely liberal and the other half extremely conservative. Even where subgroups are only mildly polarized on a series of issues, say slightly left of center versus slightly right of center, if the issues are highly related, the differences will cumulate and result in greater polarization than if the issues are independent.

The extent to which increases in attitudinal constraint cumulate within subgroups and make them more distinct depends on how much subgroup members are cross-pressured. For example, if half the Democrats are northern, urban, and Catholic, and the other half southern, rural, and Evangelical, increases in attitudinal constraint might well create larger intraparty differences rather than interparty differences. But if subgroups become more homogeneous, cross-pressures diminish. In that case, increases in constraint will cumulate in a way that makes subgroup political positions more internally homogeneous and externally distinct.⁸

⁸An unpublished analysis by Baldassarri & Gelman (2007) finds that statistically speaking, increases in the correlations between issue attitudes are much smaller than increases in the correlations between issue attitudes and partisanship and between issue attitudes and ideology. This finding suggests that a decline in cross-pressures is a more important component of party sorting than increasingly ideological voters.

Researchers first argued in the 1970s that Americans' policy positions were becoming more closely correlated (Nie et al. 1976). Arguments that issues and partisanship were aligning more closely followed somewhat later. In a major study Carmines & Stimson (1989) developed the concept of "issue evolution," using as their vehicle the increasing partisan differences on racial issues that followed the influx of liberal northern Democrats into Congress after the 1958 elections. Abramowitz & Saunders (1998) argued that mid-1990s election outcomes were the culmination of an ideological realignment that began in the Reagan era and brought partisan and ideological identifications into a close relationship (the correlation between the NES seven-point party identification and liberal-conservative scales increased from the 0.3 range to the 0.6 range during this period). In more focused studies, Adams (1997) traces partisan separation on abortion after party platforms diverged, and Sanbonmatsu (2002) examines the extent to which various women's issues have become associated with partisanship.

Although some authors refer to this development as party polarization and distinguish it from aggregate or popular polarization, we prefer the term party sorting.⁹ While the overall population shows little or no change, subpopulations can sort themselves out in ways that heighten their differences. People may move to neighborhoods or join churches where others have similar political views, changing their partisan identifications to match their ideological and issue positions (Abramowitz & Saunders 1998, Putz 2002, Killian & Wilcox 2008), or vice versa (Carsey & Layman 2006). In these ways and others, inter-item correlations and item-group correlations can change while population distributions remain unchanged.

⁹An alternative possibility would be to agree that the term polarization should never appear without a clarifying modifier—aggregate, party, geographic, religious, etc.

Attempts to enforce terminological uniformity invariably fail, so we will continue to use our term, party sorting, to discuss research others put under the heading of partisan polarization and recognize that different scholars will make different choices.¹⁰ As for the substance of the discussion, here the question is not whether, but how much? We know of no one who denies that some degree of party sorting has occurred. Indeed, given macrodevelopments such as the realignment of the South, if survey data did not show evidence of party sorting, it would be good reason to doubt the validity of the data.

Abramowitz (2006) defines one pole of the discussion. He recodes the ideology scale and the other six NES scales previously discussed, sums them, and recodes again to produce a picture of deep partisan differences.¹¹ In contrast, the The Pew Research Center For The People & The Press (2007) reports that the average difference between Republicans and Democrats on 40 survey items asked repeatedly between 1987 and 2007 increased by only four percentage points (from 10% to 14%), as shown in **Figure 8**. In view of macrodevelopments, this seems like a surprisingly small increase.

More disaggregated analyses report more conditional findings. Levendusky (2006, 2007) tracks individual NES issue items spanning the social welfare, cultural, and racial domains. The temporal patterns vary. On some issues there appears to have been little sorting, and on other issues the sorting appears largely limited to one party while the other party remains unchanged or even becomes less well-sorted. Aggregating individual issue items into four general clusters (New Deal, social/cultural, racial, defense/foreign policy), Levendusky reports that (*a*) some sorting has

¹⁰Galston & Kamarck (2005) discuss "The Great Sorting-Out." Layman et al. (2006) use the term conflict extension to differentiate party sorting on multiple issues from the presumption generally made in the historical literature that the sorting occurs on a single dominant issue.

¹¹Fiorina & Levendusky (2006a) contend that these data manipulations exaggerate the extent of partisan differences.

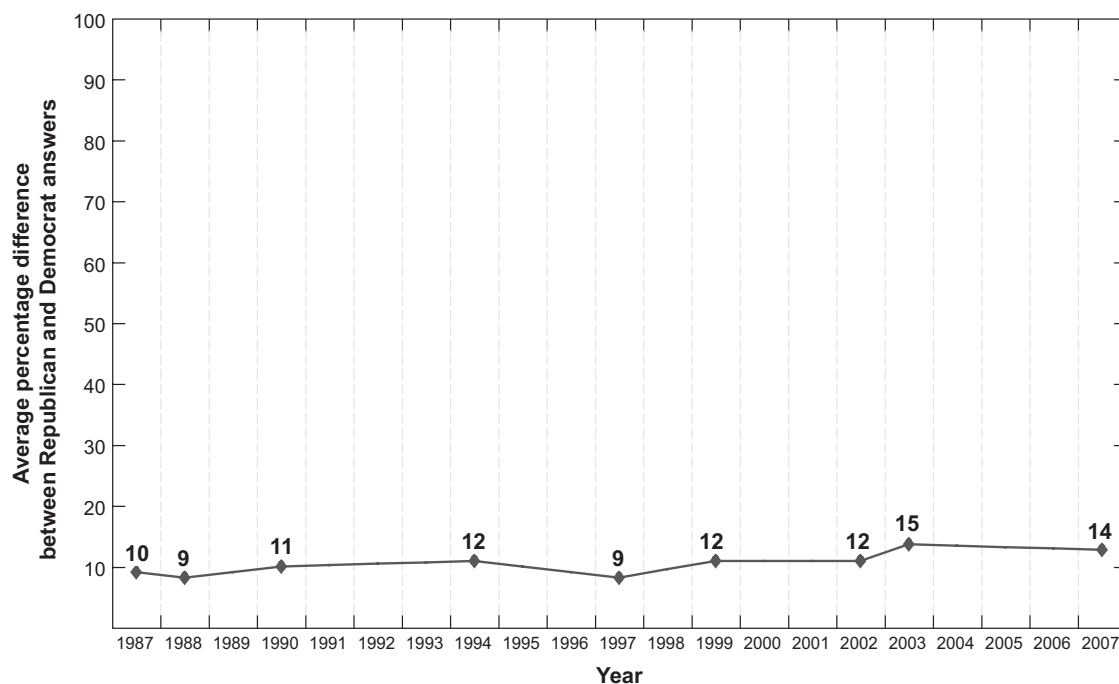


Figure 8

Mass party differences have increased slightly. Source: The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2007. Key: Average percentage difference between the answers of Republicans and Democrats on 40 questions asked consistently through 20 years of interviewing.

occurred on all four issue clusters, although not until 2004 on defense and foreign policy issues, (b) over the entire 30-year period the correlations between party identification and New Deal issues are stronger than those between party identification and other issue categories, and (c) the correlation between party identification and New Deal issues has grown stronger rather than weaker, in contrast to claims that cultural issues override people's material interests in contemporary elections.

Contrary to popular commentary like the bestseller *What's the Matter with Kansas?* (Frank 2004), the continued primacy of economic issues for distinguishing Democrats and Republicans is a consistent finding of recent research. Stonecash (2005) shows that since the 1960s, income differences in voting have increased, not decreased. Gelman et al. (2005) confirm that finding and show furthermore that it is precisely in poorer

states like Kansas where the relationship between income and voting is strongest. In an explicit critique of Frank's argument that Republicans have used social issues to get white working-class voters to vote against their economic interests, Bartels (2006, p. 224) concludes that "Frank's white working-class voters continue to attach less weight to social and cultural issues than to bread-and-butter economic issues in deciding how to vote. Indeed, there is no evidence that economic issues have diminished in electoral significance over the past 20 years" (cf. T. Frank, unpublished manuscript, <http://www.tcfrank.com/dismissed.pdf>). Ansolabehere et al. (2006) concur, based on NES and GSS data: "Even for red state, rural and religious voters, economic policy choices have much greater weight in electoral decisions than moral issues do" (p. 110). Similarly, McCarty et al. (2006) report that "born again

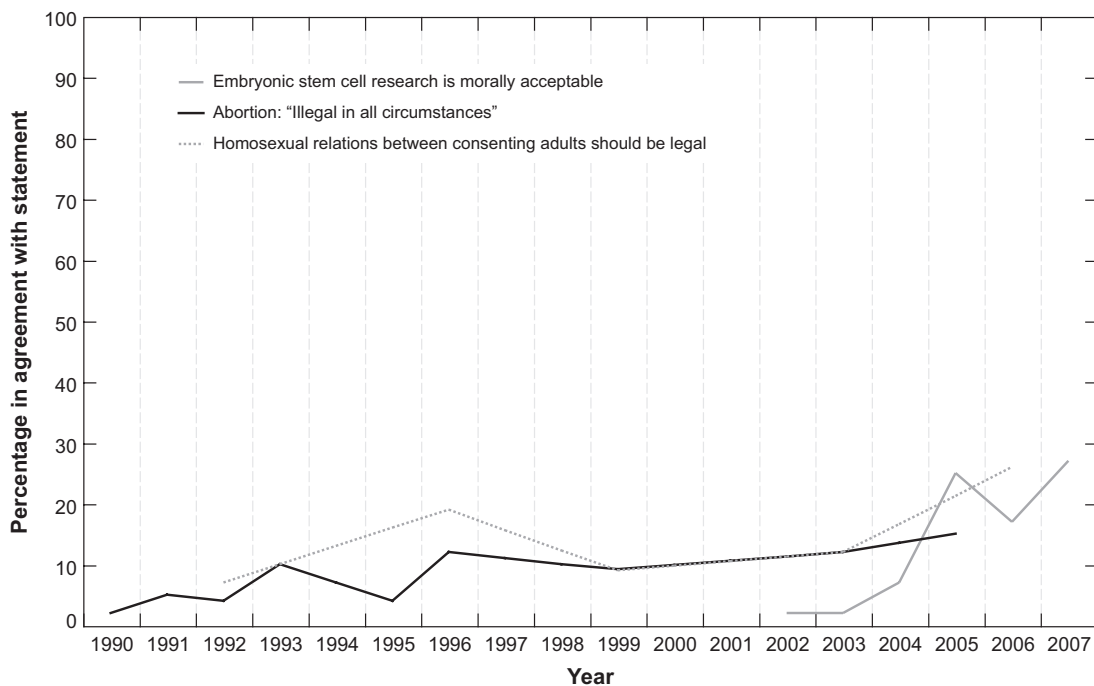


Figure 9

Mass party differences on cultural issues are smaller than national platforms would suggest. Source: The Gallup Organization.

and evangelical Christians are particularly sensitive to income effects on political preferences” (pp. 107–8). Remember, however, that estimates of what is most important to voters depend on the candidates’ positions as well as the voters’ positions (**Figure 7**), and none of these studies control for candidate position.

To be sure, the parties have become better sorted on moral and cultural issues, the increasing importance of economic issues notwithstanding. About ten years after the Republican and Democratic Party platforms diverged on abortion, Democrats and Republicans in the electorate began to differ (Adams 1997). Democrats and Republicans have sorted out on issues relating to homosexuality and more recently on stem cell research. But identifiers with the two parties remain less differentiated than the public statements of party elites would suggest (**Figure 9**).

Finally, another major issue area where party sorting has occurred is foreign policy

and defense. In our discussion of the problem with using approval ratings to measure polarization, we noted that research consistently finds Democrats and Republicans less divided in their positions than in their evaluations of President Bush. Nevertheless, a temporal perspective shows that Americans are clearly more divided in their positions than they were in the past, especially compared with the post–World War II period of relative consensus (Holsti 2004). Focused studies by Shapiro & Bloch-Elkon (2006, 2007) based on Chicago Council on Foreign Relations Surveys show a sharp increase in the relationship between partisanship and a wide array of foreign policy and defense issues between 2002 and 2004. Qualifying earlier findings of bipartisan consensus (both elite and mass) on foreign policy (Kull et al. 2005), Shapiro & Bloch-Elkon report that in the early 2000s foreign policy views became much more closely related to partisan and

ideological positions; they now compare to the relationships found in other issue domains such as culture, economics, and race. They note that whether this development is a product of President Bush specifically, or of a more fundamental change in Republican Party ideology, is a question that cannot be answered until Bush departs the scene.

One problem in evaluating the implications of party sorting is that issue differences are more readily measured than issue importance. For example, if mass partisans sorted a moderate amount on one overarching issue, it might be more politically consequential than if they sorted a considerable amount on a large number of relatively minor issues. Thus, what might look like a little (or a lot) of party sorting might be more (or less) important empirically. Hillygus & Shields (2008) report that in 2004, almost two thirds of strong partisans were cross-pressured on at least one issue (of ten), and one third were cross-pressured on more than one issue.¹² Even this seemingly mild degree of cross-pressure is significantly associated with vote volatility, late decisions, and party defections.

There seems to be general agreement that party sorting is largely a top-down process wherein the more visible and active members of a party, especially its elected officials and party activists, sort first and provide cues to voters that party positions are evolving (Carmines & Stimson 1989, ch. 7; Aldrich & Rohde 2001; Hetherington 2001; Layman et al. 2006; Shapiro & Bloch-Elkon 2007). But separation of party elites does not guarantee that separation at the mass level will follow—some issues do not evolve (Lindaman & Haider-Markel 2002), or at least take considerable time to do so. In addition, the possibility surely remains that exogenous events

IS PARTY IDENTIFICATION MORE IMPORTANT NOW THAN A GENERATION AGO?

If you accept that significant partisan sorting has occurred, you cannot logically accept at face value findings that party identification exerts a stronger influence on the vote now than several decades ago (Miller 1991, Bartels 2000, Bafumi & Shapiro 2007). Party sorting means that party ID today is more closely related to issue positions and ideological position than it was a generation ago. Thus, in any bivariate analysis of the relationship between party ID and the vote, party ID in later years' proxies omitted issue and ideological influences that previously were independent of (or even worked in opposition to) partisanship. Party ID *may* be a stronger influence now than previously, but such bivariate analyses provide no grounds for believing so.

(wars, depressions, social changes) could impact a party's mass base and force party elites to change. In the political world, causation seldom runs in one direction only; there is usually at least the possibility of reciprocal effects.

Summing up, the consensus in the research community is that macro-level changes¹³ in American politics and society led to greater homogenization of party elites and activists, a process that reinforced itself as more distinct parties sent clearer cues to the electorate, which gradually sorted itself out more neatly than it had been sorted at mid-century. The remaining disagreement concerns the extent to which mass party sorting has occurred and how important it is. Some, like Abramowitz & Saunders (2008), believe that the process of partisan sorting has proceeded so far that it is accurate to speak of a polarized America, and Bafumi & Shapiro (2007) write of "a new partisan voter" (see sidebar, Is Party Identification More Important Now Than a

¹²A cross-pressured respondent disagreed with his party's position, agreed with the other party's position, and considered the issue important. Interestingly, there is no trend in these figures since 1984: "The relatively flat trend line stands in contrast, for instance, to the strengthening relationship between self-reported ideology and party identification" (2008).

¹³Such changes include the migration of African-Americans to the north, the rise of the Sunbelt, the spread of suburbanization, the advocacy explosion, and several others. For a more detailed discussion, see Fiorina & Abrams (2008, chs. 6–7).

DOES POLARIZATION PRODUCE OFF-CENTER POLICIES?

Scholars who have worked on the gridlock question generally disagree with Hacker & Pierson (2006) that policies adopted during the Bush administration were generally “off center,” arguing that the picture was more complex (Jacobs & Shapiro 2008) or even showing that when gridlock was overcome, the policies adopted were crafted to receive the support of median members of the House and Senate (e.g., Brady & Volden 2006). Of course, the relationship between the chamber medians and the median in the electorate generally is indeterminate, so that even if policies were not off-center in the Congress, they possibly might have been off-center relative to the electorate.

Generation Ago?). Other scholars are more guarded in their conclusions. The case for massive party sorting that resulted in electoral polarization looked stronger after the 2004 elections than after the 2006 elections, and if the 2008 campaigns were to result in candidates like John McCain and Barack Obama, who do not fit the mold of recent Republican and Democratic nominees, newer data may lead to changes in scholarly conclusions.

MASS CONSEQUENCES OF ELITE POLARIZATION

How do ordinary citizens who remain generally moderate and nonideological respond to a more polarized elite politics? The hypothesized consequences of elite polarization are numerous, but for the most part, research is still in its early stages and conclusions remain tentative. As noted above, it is clear that elite polarization has led to increased recognition of party differences and a heightened sense that the outcome matters (Jacobson 2000, Hetherington 2001). One obvious concern then is that elite polarization would gradually produce popular polarization. Although voters indeed have been moving toward their appropriate partisan homes, the process is a slow and imperfect one and may

well be interrupted by changes in the behavior of political elites, such as Republicans nominating a prochoice, pro-gay rights presidential candidate, or a generational changing of the guard—which appears to be happening in the evangelical community (Pinsky 2006).

Previous research has found that Americans do not like political confrontation, preferring that public officials cooperate to solve generally recognized problems (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse 1995). Some authors hypothesize that moderate voters are especially likely to become disgusted with partisan warfare and policy gridlock (e.g., Galston & Nivola 2007). Participation, trust in government, and other democratic “goods” will decline as voters increasingly see politics as ideological self-expression rather than an effort to solve problems important to them. In the early stages of the 2008 presidential campaign, there seemed to be a presumption in the Obama and Bloomberg camps that Americans—particularly moderates—are put off by the partisanship and polarization of recent years. As yet, however, there is no consensus among scholars that elite polarization leads to gridlock (Nivola & Brady 2007; see sidebar, Does Polarization Produce Off-Center Policies?).

Still, even if government acts as much as it acts in less polarized times, the process may be more repugnant to voters than in less polarized times. In an innovative experimental study, Mutz & Reeves (2005) show that subjects are not bothered by political disagreement itself but by the style in which disagreement is expressed. People who view ersatz candidate debates in which disagreement is civil show increased trust in government and Congress, whereas those who view debates featuring incivil disagreement—in which the debaters sigh, roll their eyes, interrupt, and otherwise behave as Al Gore did in the first 2000 presidential debate—show lowered trust. In another experimental study, Brooks & Geer (2007) refine this finding and show that it is not even incivility that offends people but incivility directed at personal traits

rather than political positions. Contrary to the Mutz & Reeves finding, however, even incivility directed at a candidate's person does not lead to lower trust or efficacy.

Hetherington (2007) conducts an extensive analysis of the NES external efficacy and government responsiveness indexes (see sidebar, External Efficacy). External efficacy has generally declined as elite politics has become more polarized, although it has risen among self-identified conservatives since 1996. In contrast, perceptions of government responsiveness generally have risen as national polarization has increased, although liberals and conservatives moved in opposite directions in 2004. As for political trust, it was actually higher in the 2000 and 2004 elections than in the supposedly less polarized 1992 and 1996 elections. Consistent with Hibbing & Smith (2004), moderates show no signs of losing faith in government responsiveness, but Hetherington reports one twist in 2004: Although trust is unrelated to ideology in most years, in 2004 trust rose among conservatives but fell among liberals and moderates.

One of the more prominent features of polarized elite politics has been vicious judicial confirmation fights. Binder (2007) and Brady et al. (2007) have examined the political trust hypothesis as it applies to judges. Binder reports a survey experiment in which trust in a judge varies significantly with whether respondents are told that his confirmation vote was conflictual or unanimous. The effect is particularly strong among independents, whose trust drops twice as much as that of Democrats (among Republicans trust actually increases with a conflictual vote, probably reflecting the contemporary pattern in Congress, where conservative nominees provoke the fights). Brady et al. relate confidence in political institutions to congressional polarization as measured by Poole-Rosenthal scores. Confidence in Congress has a slight negative relationship to polarization, but confidence in the Supreme Court has a significantly positive relationship—the institution perceived as least partisan fares better during

EXTERNAL EFFICACY

External efficacy is an index composed from the items “People like me don’t have any say about what the government does” and “I don’t think public officials care much what people like me think.” Government responsiveness is an index composed from the items “Over the years, how much attention do you feel the government pays to what the people think when it decides what to do?” and “How much do you feel that having elections makes the government pay attention to what the people think?” The classic political trust scale is built from items asking how much of the time “you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right,” whether the government is “run by a few big interests looking out for themselves” or “for the benefit of all the people,” how much tax money people in government waste, and how many of the people in government are crooked.

a highly partisan period. In a broader study, Gibson (2007) reports that support for the Supreme Court is largely unrelated to partisan and ideological considerations and has not declined between 1987 and 2005.

Contrary to research hypothesizing that elite polarization has negative impacts on mass attitudes and behavior, a few authors have claimed positive impacts. In particular, Abramowitz (2006) argues that the polarized 2004 contest engaged citizens and produced record numbers of “active citizens.” But a closer look suggests that such claims are exaggerated, and an alternative explanation—a sharp increase in party mobilization—may well account for much of the spike in voter turnout (Fiorina & Levendusky 2006b, Hetherington 2007). Still, as yet there is no evidence of significant demobilization of the citizenry because of polarized elite politics, possibly because most Americans are not aware that politics has become more polarized (Hetherington 2007)!

All in all, the existing literature provides little evidence that the hypothesized dire consequences of polarized politics (or, for that matter, *any* consequences of polarized politics) are showing up in the American public.

Research is in an early stage, however, and no firm conclusions are warranted.

SUMMARY

In recent years, the study of polarization in the mass public has made great progress, but a number of analytical problems have produced misinterpretations and misconceptions. Chief among these is the use of indicators that have limited (e.g., social characteristics) or no (e.g., voting decisions) value as measures of polarization. Another is the conflation of a changing distribution (polarization) with changing relationships within subgroups of the larger distributions (sorting). In the natural progression of research, these problems are being recognized and addressed. The literature indicates that the American public as a whole is no more polarized today than it was a generation ago, whether we focus on general ideological orientations or positions on specific issues. A significant degree of sorting has occurred,

however—most clearly between members of the two parties, but also along lines of religion and possibly geographic location. In these cases, however, the contribution of changing party and candidate positions may well dominate changes in voter positions, although research generally fails to take adequate account of the party and candidate side of the equation.

Most recently, scholars have begun to study the potential consequences of increased elite polarization (the existence of which is largely noncontroversial) on popular attitudes toward the political system and popular inclinations to participate in politics. A number of interesting studies have been reported, but firm conclusions await additional study. This is an important subject for future research. Scholars have devoted considerable attention to elite polarization on the assumption that it affects political variables of interest. If that turns out not to be true, the question turns first to why, and then to other questions entirely.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors are not aware of any biases that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

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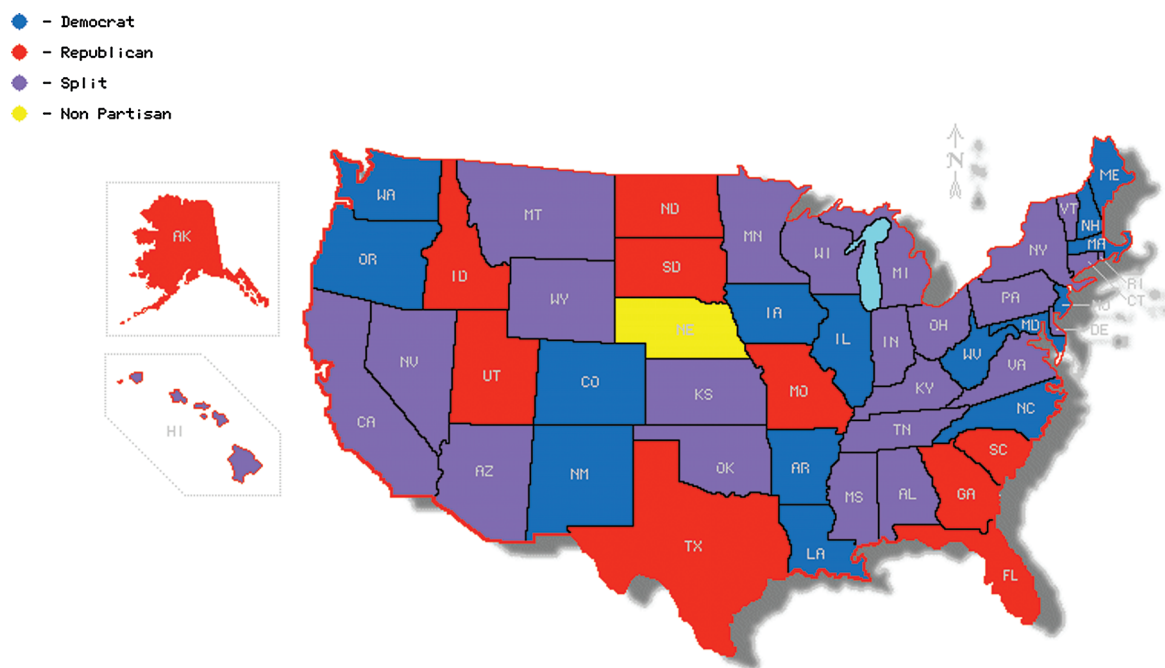
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Map 1

Party control of state governments, post-2006 elections. The United States is mostly purple.



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