Political persuasion and extremism

Political elites and masses in the United States are increasingly polarized. Research offers account of both issue polarization (Abramovitz and Saunders, 2008) and social polarization (Mason 2018; Iyengar and Westwood 2015). I investigate the origins of issue polarization. Under what conditions do voters adopt extremist political views? Dominant theories of public opinion would argue that issue polarization among the masses is caused by elite polarization (Converse 1964; Lenz 2012). However, this top-down theoretical account faces an endogeneity issue that is difficult to test. By extension, bottom-up explanations suffer from the same difficulty.

In this article, I argue that issue polarization among the masses is explained by the persuasiveness of extremist politics.

Is extremist politics more persuasive to voters than moderate politics?

The persuasion of extremist views is puzzling because it bears

for two reasons. First, adopting extremist views has a high cost because it is further from the status quo. Voters should prefer adopting views closer to the median voter since it is where they expect representatives to converge.