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. Recently, researchers have attempted to solve endogeneity with new empirical approaches (Barberá et al., 2019). However, these approaches are hardly applicable to understand the origins of issue polarization. We observe the first traces of polarization in the early 1970s, but it is difficult to identify a precise starting point (McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal, 2006). The task of situating which group led the other in polarizing attitudes is problematic without the knowledge of when the phenomenon commenced.

In this article, I argue that issue polarization among the masses can be explained by the persuasiveness of extremist politics. I go beyond the cue-taking debate in the opinion formation literature to avoid issues outlined above. I present evidence on the level of persuasiveness of extremist political behavior on Twitter. My goal in demonstrating the high persuasion of extremism is to offer insight into why voters have become more polarized on issues. The polarization on issues has led voters to become more extreme.

Why is investigating whether extremist politics can persuade voters a worthwhile topic? It is not at face evident that extremist politics should persuade voters. Adopting political behavior is costly (source). When an individual must choose between moderate or extremist policy, the moderate is less costly than the extremist. 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.

The implications of my research challenges spatial theories of position-taking. These theories predict that voters should adopt positions closer to the median. I attempt to offer empirical evidence showing that extremist behavior is more persuasive than moderate behavior. When we take persuasion into account, voters should not choose the policy closer to the median, but closer to the extreme.

In the first section, I describe my empirical approach. I use data from Twitter to model persuasion as complex contagion. I calculate the number of exposures a user requires before adopting extremist political behavior. In the second section, I offer a portrait of the persuasiveness of extremism among Liberals and Republicans. Preliminary results suggest that Liberal users are more likely to adopt extremist behavior. In other words, liberal require less exposure to extremist liberal views before adopting them. This result does not hold for Republicans.

I conclude with untested mechanisms that can explain my results. These include the emotional valence of extremist politics, the personality traits of extremists, and the precision and quality of extremist signals.

*Issue or social polarization?*

The American public has been polarizing since the 1970s (McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2006). There is an active debate in the literature on whether the public is polarized on *issues* (Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008) or on *social identity* (Mason 2018). Some empirical accounts do in fact fail to observe an electorate that has become more extreme on policy issues (Fiorina et al. 2005). However, making inferences over time on attitudes towards issues is a laborious and problematic task. The fact of the matter is that issues have changed since the 1970s. For example, debate on civil rights in the 1960s was focused on provided fundamental rights to Black Americans. Today, debate on race is situated in a much more complex and nuanced context. How can we compare issue extremity when the nature of politics has changed so dramatically?

In light of the absence of answer to this question, it is necessary to take a step back and question the origins of both arguments. What are the origins of polarization? In this manuscript, I focus on the sources of issue polarization. How is it that voters have become more extreme on issues?

As I note above, it is a delicate task to measure attitudes toward issues over decades. To overcome this difficulty, I focus on the role of persuasion. Persuasion allows me to study extremity of views using cross-sections. Before providing evidence of issue polarization, we must testify to the ability of voters to be persuaded by extremist views. If voters are more likely to be persuaded by moderate issues, issue polarization is unlikely to explain ideological sorting among the masses. However, by demonstrating the persuasiveness of extremist politics, we provide empirical precedent that voters may indeed be polarized on issues.

*Extremist Persuasion and the costly nature of political behavior adoption*

Adopting behavior is costly. Adopting extremist behavior is most costly. MORE HERE ON COSTLY BEHAVIOR ADOPTION

Following spatial models of ideology and median voter theories, we should expect voters to prefer moderate politics over extremist politics. Accounts of issue polarization contradict this long-standing theory. Voters seem to hold increasingly extremist views on policy. I address this theoretical debate by asking: Are voters more likely to be persuaded by extremist or moderate politics? If voters are more likely to adopt extremist behavior, theories of the median voter should be revisited.

What does it mean if extremist behavior is more likely to be adopted *despite* its high cost? I argue that this is a manifestation of voters’ tendency to prefer extremist politics.

To summarize, I seek to demonstrate if extremist politics is persuasive. If extremist politics is persuasive, voters may be inclined to adopt extremist views on policy. This gives precedence to the argument that masses have polarized on issues, or at least have the potential to be if persuaded.

*Empirical strategy*

*Results*

*Discussion*

I offer several explanations for why extremist political behavior is more persuasive. These explanations are the reasons why extremist behavior adoption become less costly.

First, emotional valence can reduce the cost of extremist behavior adoption.

Second, the personality traits of extremists can increase the likelihood of cue-taking from voters.

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Finally, the ideological signal expressed by political extremists is precise.