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.

But 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 (…). 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. 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.