*Political persuasion and extremism*

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Political elites and masses in the United States are increasingly polarized, and scholars have found this to be true for both issue polarization (Abramovitz and Saunders, 2008) and social polarization (Mason 2018; Iyengar and Westwood 2015). In this paper, I focus on the origins of issue polarization and attempt to better understand why voters have increasingly adopted more polarized views. Dominant theories of public opinion would argue that issue polarization among the masses is caused by elite polarization (Converse 1964; Lenz 2012), whereas other work has shown that elites strategically adopt increasingly polarized views to attract the electorate (CITE). However, both of these theoretical approaches face endogeneity issues that are difficult to measure. Recent, studies have attempted to account for these issues using new empirical approaches (Barberá et al., 2019). Although valuable, this work fails to establish the true origins of issue polarization. ~~The first traces of polarization in the United States in the early 1970s (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 occurs due to the persuasiveness of extremist politics, which tend to be emotionally charged, precise and delivered by individuals with particular traits. I go beyond the cue-taking debate in the opinion formation literature to avoid the issues outlined above, and present evidence of the persuasion effects of extremist political behavior on Twitter..

Why is investigating the persuasiveness of extremist discourse on voters a worthwhile topic? It is not at face evident that extremist politics are more persuasive. In fact, the literature shows that most voters adopt moderate views (cite). Adopting extremist views involve a higher cost for voters as these views are further from the status quo. Rational voters should adopt more moderate views in order to be better represented by political elites that converge toward the median voter.

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 level of exposure needed before individuals adopt 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, liberals require less exposure to extremist liberal views before adopting them. This result does not hold for Republicans.

I conclude by introducing potential mechanisms that may 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 adopted more extreme views?

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*

Many theories of political science indicate that voters are more likely to be persuaded by moderate rather than extremist views (*sources*). This presents an important puzzle for the issue polarization argument. How could voters become more polarized on issues while inherently preferring moderate views?

Spatial models of ideology and median voters theory contend that extremist views are less likely to be adopted by masses relative to moderate views. *Expand here…*

Adopting behavior is costly. Adopting extremist behavior is most costly. *Expand here…*

Accounts of issue polarization contradict these theoretical accounts. 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 not more likely to adopt extremist views, they are unlikely to polarize on issues. If voters *are* more likely to e persuaded by extremism, we provide the necessary empirical conditions for issue polarization argument.

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*

My goal is to provide evidence for extremist persuasiveness.

*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.

Chen et al. (2021, Psychological science)

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