*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; Iyengar et al. 2019) and social polarization (Mason 2018; Iyengar and Westwood 2015). The former, however, is still debated among political scientists over its relevance, implications, and more importantly its origins (Fiorina, Abrams and Pope 2005; Mason 2015; Lelkes 2018; Webster and Abramovitz 2018; Abramovitz 2006, 2007, 2010, 2021).

Dominant theories of public opinion would argue that issue polarization among the masses is caused by elite polarization (Converse 1964; Lenz 2012; Callander and Carbajal 2021), whereas other work has shown that elites strategically adopt increasingly polarized views to attract the electorate (CITE). However, these approaches face endogeneity issues leading to measurement issues. Recently, studies have attempted to account for these issues using novel machine learning approaches (Barberá et al., 2019).

These research are useful to understand why have the masses polarized. However, we have yet to know whether voters *can* be polarized. Issue polarization argues that the masses have adopted increasingly extreme views on policy. What remains an assumption is whether voters *can* be extreme. Albeit a simple question, we must question whether if this is possible. Theoretical work based on the median voter theory would predict that voters, as do elites, converge to the median. Given this foundational work, how is it possible that voters have tended towards the extreme over time?

To answer this question, we must pose a more fundamental one: Can extremist politics persuade voters? Whether the mass public is more likely to be persuaded by extremist or moderate politics is a relatively unexplored topic. In this manuscript, I offer empirical evidence on this theoretical puzzle. I posit that the issue polarization argument is tenable insofar as voters can be persuaded by extremist views.

To measure the persuasiveness of extremism, I analyze political behavior adoption on Twitter during the 2020 presidential campaign. My findings present an interesting puzzle: Liberal users are more likely to adopt extremist views, but Republicans are not. I contextualize these results with possible mechanisms that explain extremist persuasion: emotion, extremists’ personality traits and signaling.

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*

The theoretical debate between issue polarization and the median voter theory is largely ignored in political science (Serra 2015; Jones et al. 2021).

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.

* Defining issue polarization
* Define extreme/extremism
* Take out the who leads who follows debate in the intro. Or rather, be explicit than I’m not solving these issues.

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