*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).

Despite the breadth of work on the levels of polarization, less work has examined the mechanisms behind mass polarization (Levendusky 2009). 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).

In this article, I focus on a largely ignored mechanism behind mass polarization: persuasion. Indeed, 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. The median voter theory posits that voters, as do elites, converge to the median rather than diverge to the extreme. Given this foundational work, how is it possible that voters have tended towards the extreme?

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 debate. The argument for issue polarization 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 preliminary findings offer insight into a novel 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 approach persuasion with a novel method using network data from Twitter to model behavior as a process of complex contagion. I calculate the level of exposure needed before individuals adopt extremist political behavior. 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.

*Mass polarization*

The United States has been polarizing since the 1970s (McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2006). Although we find widespread agreement on the polarization of elites, scholars actively debate on whether the public is polarized on *issues and policy* (see Evans 2003; Hetherington 2009; Levendusky 2009; Mason 2018).

Notwithstanding slight operational differences, definitions of issue polarization are in tolerably agreement. Issue polarization is described as a bimodal distribution of voter preferences with two peaks at the poles and a valley at the median. In other words, voters are more populated on the extremes and are less moderate (DiMaggio, Evans and Bryson 1996).

I relax the above definition following Hetherington (2009). Issue polarization does not require absolute extremity, but rather the relative extremity of preferences. Absolute extremity assumes that the peaks are at the poles of the left-right dimension. However, the peaks can be relatively extreme where they are indeed separated by a plain, but not necessarily at the far-ends of the dimension. The peaks need not to have substantive difference of means, but only be bimodal. This is an important conceptual adjustment because it makes no assumptions on the meaning of extremity. How different do the means of the peaks need to be to claim mass polarization? There is indeed a lack of agreement among scholars on how *extreme* voters need to be to contend mass polarization. This is a difficult conceptual decision to make and partially explains the empirical disagreement on whether the masses have become polarized.

In brief, mass polarization contends that the electorate has followed elites in growing disagreement about policy issues. I now turn to the empirical debate over the level and measure of polarization.

*Empirical disagreement: Measurement and time*

Ample scholarship provides empirical evidence that the mass electorate has grown apart on political issues. They find that Americans are drifting away from the center to the poles of the ideological distribution. The electorate is populated by more ‘strong liberals’ and ‘strong conservatives’ at the expense of moderates (Abramowitz 2006, 2010; Campbell 2006).

Contrary to these work, we also find strong evidence of limited mass polarization. Fiorina, Abrams and Pope (2005) find that on key topics such as civil right issues and taxation Americans have preferences centered at the median. DiMaggio, Evans and Bryson (1996) provide evidence to the opposite to that of Abramowitz and others: not only is mass polarization limited, but Americans have grown *less* polarized over time.

The debate on issue polarization is monopolized by disagreements on measurement and operationalization. However, there are other implications to the empirical discussion on measures that make time-series analyses difficult. Making inferences over time on attitudes towards issues is a laborious and problematic task. The fact of the matter is that issues have dramatically evolved 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?

*Theoretical disagreement: Spatial theory and single-peaked preferences*

Although Converse (1964) notably writes that ideology hardly guides the views of the electorate, we do observe structure in mass preferences. One derivation of the spatial theory of politics outlined by Downs (1957) is the single-peak postulate. The preferences of a voter are said single-peaked if we find ordering of preferences along a left-right dimension such that ranking of preferences decreases as they move away from their ideal point (Austen-Smith and Banks 1999). The most preferred policy is at the peak of the ordering, the median preference thus prevailing (Penn, Patty and Gailmard 2011). This postulate is frequently examined on an individual level (Niemi 1969; Rowley 1984; Feld and Grofman 1986; Niemi and Wright 1987; Radcliff 1993).

If we shift the logic of single-peakedness on an aggregate level, we observe a normal distribution of mass preferences that is unimodal. Although this distribution is rarely examined in the literature, it is particularly salient to describe the electorate as centered at the median. Corroborating with the principal that voters hold normally distributed preferences, a large literature finds that moderate candidates perform better during elections (Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001; Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002; Hall 2015; Hall and Thomson 2018).

The theoretical debate between single-peaked preferences and issue polarization is largely ignored in political science (Hetherington 2009; Serra 2015; Jones et al. 2021). The literature on single-peakedness has largely focused on voting cycles, coalitions and majority-rule, ignoring the recent terrain of behavioral political science (Black 1958; Arrow 1963; Riker 1961, 1980; Brams, Jones and Kilgour 2002; Penn, Patty and Gailmard 2011; List et al. 2013). Yet, the notion that the electorate is polarized and unimodal in preferences is fundamentally contradictory.

Single-peakedness and issue polarization offer conflicting predictions of the distribution of political preferences. The median voter theory would view the distribution as a normal where most voters have preferences around the mean. If the electorate is polarized on issues, the distribution of preferences would be bimodal with peaks at the extremes. I illustrate this contrast in distributions in Figure 1.

***[Figure 1 about here]***

The issue polarization argument contradicts single-peakedness for two reasons. First, much of the electorate seems to prefer centrist candidates over extremist candidates (Hall 2015; Hall and Thompson 2018). How could voters become more polarized on issues while inherently preferring moderate views?

Second, taking extremist positions on policy issues is significantly more costly than adopting moderate views.

Egan (2013) establishes the conditions under which individual preferences are double-peaked. These conditions, however, describe an electorate who prefer *both* liberal and conservative policies. The distribution does not describe a polarized electorate, but ironically a bipartisan one.

To summarize, issue polarization is faced with both explicit and implicit opposition. Theoretically, it implicitly contradicts one of the core tenets of spatial theories of ideology and preferences, single peakedness. Empirically, it is explicitly met with resistance on its magnitude, notwithstanding the issues related to measurement and time. To demonstrate the existence of issue polarization, it is necessary to go beyond these debates and test its underlying mechanism.

In the next section, I provide direction on these issues by testing an overarching mechanism of issue polarization: political persuasion.

*Bridging the gap: Persuasion as a mechanism for mass polarization*

In the previous section, I detail some empirical and theoretical debates that question the validity of mass polarization. In light of these concerns, it is important to address the *fundamental underpinnings* of polarization to move beyond unsuccessful disputes.

To question the foundational plausibility of issue polarization, we must turn towards mechanisms. Whatever the causes of polarization, how are the effects exerted? In this manuscript, I probe what I consider to be an underlying mechanism of issue polarization: persuasion.

Issue polarization is not possible without voters being persuaded by more extremist policy. Naturally, the masses should be more likely to prefer extremist policies if they have grown increasingly extremist.

Persuasion is not only a plausible mechanism but is the ideal mechanism to test issue polarization. Any cause previously identified in the literature that explains issue polarization *must* be exerted through persuasion. The logic sustaining issue polarization argues that the electorate have changed their views to become more extremist. I argue that

Persuasion may be seen as an obvious catch-all mechanism. This is true, and is not a bug, but a feature. Given that all causes of issue polarization must go through persuasion in order to reach the masses, its test will determine the underlying validity of the issue polarization argument.

Empirically, testing the persuasion mechanism will either give or remove precedence to the empirical observation of issue polarization. Theoretically, I seek to show whether it is possible the that unimodal distribution be split into two peaks, as arrows *a* and *b* show in Figure 1.

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.

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 be 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.

*Measurement of persuasion*

The use of hashtags measures the adoption of extremist political behavior. It may however not measure extremism on issues, which is supposed to capture issue polarization. *Important to think of this…*

Measuring issue polarization with online persuasion presents several advantages relative to survey measures. First, theories of public opinion demonstrate that survey data will be artificially centered around the mean because of lack of sophistication (Zaller 1992). Indeed, the literature on political behavior consistently demonstrates inconsistent self-reports of opinion (Campbell et al. 1960; Miller and Stokes 1963; Converse 1964; Lenz 2012; Broockman 2016)

*See Hetherington (2009) p. 433 first paragraph*

*Results*

*Discussion*

This manuscript seeks to provide empirical evidence for a mechanism causing issue polarization. But what are the mechanisms behind the mechanism? That is, why does extremist politics persuade voters? I offer several explanations for why extremist political behavior is more persuasive than moderate politics. These explanations are the reasons why extremist behavior adoption become less costly.

1. The Emotional Connection

https://www.pnas.org/content/pnas/118/37/e2114484118.full.pdf

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

*See: The Influence of Emotions on Trust (Myers and Tingley 2011).*

*“Our findings suggest that negative emotions can decrease trust, but only if those negative emotions produce low certainty appraisals. Anxiety, a low certainty emotion, has a negative impact on trust while Anger and Guilt, two emotions that differ in their control-appraisals but induce the same high level of certainty, appear to have no clear effect on trusting behavior.”*

*This relates to more than emotions, but the overarching reason for why extremism is persuasive. There is low amount of uncertainty in extremists behavior (as individuals they are confident)*

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.

‘’Regardless of which of these views is correct, nearly all the published work argues implicitly or explicitly that conversion—individual voters becoming more extreme over time—is an important source of any observed polarization (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Layman and Carsey 2002a; Levendusky 2008).2 These works argue that ordinary Democrats and Republicans become more liberal and conservative (respectively) in response to changing elite positions. In short, as elite parties become more divided, they send voters more homogeneously liberal or conservative cues, thereby making it easier for ordinary voters to adopt their party’s position on the issues. These changes move voters away from the center and toward the ideological extremes, thereby increasing polarization. This less centrist and more divided distribution of mass opinion would have profound implications for elite behavior (Jacobson 2006b).’’

See *The Electoral Implications of Candidate Ambiguity (Tomz and Van Houwelling, 2009)*

* 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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