

The Polarization of the American Electorate: Which side are you on, boys?¹

“Politics is more polarized.” It's a sentiment you'll hear from everyone from John Dingell, the longest serving member of Congress ever, to a forecaster straight out of college. Something is happening here. But what it is is not exactly clear.² I'll start with the data we have³, and then consider some theories that try to explain it.⁴ I'll first consider a social sorting hypothesis caused by values shifts, move on to consider the elite polarization hypothesis (with some time spent on the false specter of gerrymandering), move on to the economic divergence story, and lastly consider an array of smaller hypotheses with less complex scholarly frameworks. I'll end with a summary of the results. Polarization is important because it helps us understand the extent to which American political gridlock is caused by conflicting goals between voters and a system with many veto points.

The data does not look pretty. In congress, the parties have diverged rapidly, and bipartisan collaboration has the heartbeat of a jellyfish. In elections, while Republican primary voters are instructed to vote for the “most conservative electable candidate”, we see a steady drive towards voting for individuals based on the D or R next to the name, not any knowledge or quality about the individual in question. The citizens themselves, meanwhile, view those of differing political parties as hostile enemies. I'll focus on each of these in a little more depth. While there is many a colorful example of congressional history⁵, there is universal agreement that the situation has deteriorated since 1990. There is a widespread sense that a culture of compromise, of working together, of genuinely trying to govern the country together, and most importantly of recognizing that even someone you thought of as an opponent might have a good idea, has been lost. The Tuesday-Thursday club rules, and leadership imposes strict rules and harsh discipline to keep members voting in line, while bills are given sarcastic titles by the opposition like the “regrettably another partisan ideological distraction act” in official correspondence.⁶

- 1 I've literally sung this song at a rally, while trying to increase the polarization of the American electorate. In my defense, it was Scott Brown, and you saw how that turned out. I actually opposed Scott Brown before it was cool: I was volunteering for a campaign to beat him when he was still in the General Court. We didn't do a very good job courting the general public, I'm sad to say, and he won despite our efforts. It's not the only one that comes to mind: I grew up singing left-wing songs, from things my grandparents sung as they marched for civil rights to James Taylor's Millworker, and swing dancing taught me more. Just about any lindy hopper worth their shoes knows Sixteen Tons, and a lot of blues dancers will pick up parts of Hadestown. This is officially getting into a “trade union music” footnote, which it wasn't really supposed to be. Point is, as I make points about how obviously partisan polarization is increasing, I'm going to sprinkle in song lyrics from when things were much much worse.
- 2 If I'm going to write an essay on the polarization of the American electorate, and I know that I can't talk in depth about how this is cyclical, I'm at least going to nod and wink at the obvious truth, and point out that the current derivative is not a constant. Anyone who is familiar with the Reynolds Pamphlet should be able to say this much, at least. While protest songs are not necessarily left wing, they tend to be so, for much the reasons Alinsky puts forward in *Rules for Radicals*.
- 3 What I want to do with this question: actually answer it by cutting it into some answerable questions, considering the data and arguments, and then answer the question. I'd reread Gelman from the reading list (I read the man's blog, getting to go over *Red State, Blue State* for an assignment would be a treat). What I will do with this question: consider three theories that could be relevant to this question, say that I think one of them applies because I say so (I'll toss in a semblance of an argument, but nothing that could convince me on a subject I was somewhat ignorant about, let alone convince an Oxford professor who specializes in the field).
- 4 At least some of the theories will have actually been in the reading!
- 5 Beatings, guns, armed escorts to ensure attendance, the normal things professionals use while interacting with each other.
- 6 Daily Whip, by whoever it is on Steny Hoyer's staff who actually sends them out, sometime this summer. Yes, I read the House Minority Whip's emails. It's a good way to keep abreast of what's going on in Congress, what the rhythm is like, how it functions.

In elections, there is strong evidence of a falling incumbency advantage and a rising impact of national party results on candidate vote outcomes. At the same time, voter ticket splitting has increased.⁷ It is seen as increasingly important that the President have good coattails to help elect a member of congress from the “right” party.

It's not hard to look back at a time in the recent past when people perceived members of the other party as being generally similar. Polite people don't talk about politics or religion at a party. It's an interesting rule: religion is something you are generally perceived to be born with⁸, it is unlikely to be changed, and should be respected. It doesn't really affect anyone else. Perhaps it used to be that politics was a similar sort of thing. Your politics would influence how you voted, perhaps where you moved and how you donated money, it probably shaped your worldview, but it was unlikely to cause people to be incapable of being friends if they avoided political issues. And that was central to this division: a difference between political and non-political issues. Yet political has come to connect everything.

People view their political opponents, not as friends who happen to have been brought up with different beliefs, but as enemies who need to be defeated.⁹ This has increased over the past four decades, as people view fellow “democrats” increasingly positively and enemy republicans increasingly negative, or the reverse.¹⁰ Increasing hatred of the enemy group could plausibly result in partisans rewarding extremists who refuse to compromise, though of course it is completely implausible to imagine the leadership of a party openly declaring that their primary goal as leaders of the nation and the legislature was to ensure that a political official was not reelected. Such a thing would be completely contrary to the spirit of American politics, unless, of course, such a leader was an illegitimate holder of the office who is secretly a muslim, or at the very least 53% of one's constituents believed that and one was willing to abandon the role of leader for the more popular role of poll-follower. But what could explain this increasing hatred?

¹¹One theory is that, in and only in modern politics, the personal is political. It was the rallying cry of the second wave feminist movement, and it has influenced much of the modern socially focused left. Perhaps this was what led to the polarization of America: Americans suddenly felt that political divides affected their personal lives. If you didn't support same sex marriage, it must be because you were a homophobic bigot, and therefore were actively unsafe to gay or bi people to interact with. If you weren't a feminist, it must be because of misogyny, and you should be locked away from interacting with women. If you questioned why the term “male gaze” was specifically male, when it seemed like gay women could also do the same behaviors and the existence of trans people complicates the matter, it must be because of transphobia.¹² As Morris Fiorina argues,¹³ the connection of personal and political could only be achieved by having the public sector enforce personal principles, and personal principles are grounds for social separation. When politics intersects with social interactions in this way, people are forced to self-segregate. Once this has occurred, the firehouse effect takes hold and people radicalize quickly.¹⁴

7 Polarized America, Poole and Rosenthal, pg 194, citing Fiorina 1996.

8 Not really true, Putnam's American Grace has some wonderful data on this, but I really don't have the space to get into it, and I think the perception is that religion is largely a fixed matter.

9 *Red and Blue States of Mind: Partisan Hostility and Voting in the United States*, Miller and Conover.

10 (Haidt and Hetherington 2012; Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012), as cited in the Iyengar paper. It was nice to reread this one.

11 A fun thought I picked up from a fantastics web serial author a few years back is that, as the medium is the message, you can modify the structure of a document to reflect the content and give a statement power.

12 This one is actually about a friend of mine, who asked this question for much the same reason, as she dislikes being told “when men do this thing it's evil, but as a queer woman obviously you're exempt.” She was told she was transphobic and to never talk with a trans woman again. One of the communal responses was a reblog saying “but...but...I like it when my girlfriend talks to me.”

13 Which is a rather generous word for the assertion in page 193 of *Culture Wars*?

14 There is almost nothing a sufficiently creative individual can't blame on feminism, I felt the need for an extra paragraph, and I was bored. The 18th amendment is trivial: I'm convinced if you gave me a day I could probably come up with a quarter-plausible argument for the 16th or the 17th as well. The falling behind of America in modern space capacity is fairly easy (the science wars of the 90s comes from the political influence of the post-modern third wave feminisms), and I'm fairly convinced I can do the genocides of native americans if I put some thought into it.

This is far from claiming that the left can be uniquely blamed for the personalization of politics. Theda Skocpol has amply demonstrated the radicalism of the modern tea party, and in particular their hostility towards, not merely the democratic party, but all Democrats.¹⁵ Democrats are seen uniformly as moochers,¹⁶ government employees and welfare cheats who want to extract the tax dollars of hard-working Americans.

Another theory is that it's not the radicalization of politics per se that we're seeing, and instead this is merely the radicalization of Congress caused by Newt Gingrich. When he arrived in the House in '94, he was young, scrappy and hungry, and he was not going to miss his shot to change the face of American politics by turning the new Republican majority into a disciplined fighting force.¹⁷ No more of this "on each end of the rifle, we're the same" nonsense: The Republicans would rule. "The Senate's polarization can be explained, almost entirely, by the replacement of moderate Republicans with junior brethren who won election from the House and were "baptized" during Gingrich's reign."¹⁸ Some will claim that gerrymandering is the cause of political polarization. Poole and Rosenthal argue that the senate's rising polarization can't be explained by gerrymandering, but as we've seen, house membership could be a fully mediating variable. However, they also point out that polarization doesn't immediately follow from reapportionment, which does make their argument more convincing.

A theory that accepts this elite focus, which is sensible as elites demonstrably are much more likely to see their views enacted than the median voter is, but broadens slightly draws on Poole and Rosenthal's research to conclude that inequality is the problem. Washington is a bourgeois town, and if the alliance is the bankers and preachers against the working people,¹⁹ rising inequality could explain the problem. Indeed, the two are closely linked, as Poole and Rosenthal have demonstrated. It's a sweet story, where the rapidly rising wealth of the richest Americans cause are connected. If you just do the thing you already wanted to do (decrease wealth inequality), then you can expect this other benefit (moderation of the recently radicalized opposition party). However, this sweet scent masks a rotting dead horse that has already been thoroughly beaten in American and non-American history. We didn't see great wealth disparity shortly before the Civil War, and it didn't fall immediately afterwards.²⁰ Gatsby didn't live through impotent government bound by conflicting parties that refused to yield. I'll leave off the question of whether political polarization effectively causes wealth disparities, and any speculation as to how that operates, as besides the point.²¹

There are many other partial theories that, though they lack full operationalizability, fail to explain the majority of variance, or otherwise suffer, attempt to offer partial explanations. Fiorina points to the decline of material rewards for political participation,²² but fails to explain how the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act of 1883 suddenly affected national politics in 1983. A somewhat

This is also partially me making the point that the argument quality is so bad in this essay that I can toss in something that is completely ridiculous and it fits in fine.

15 Relying on memories from a book I read three years ago and a talk at my school four years ago? What, like it's hard? (I'm a showoff by nature, forgive me. I'm no Elle Woods.)

16 What, me, use dog whistles? That sounds like exactly my style.

17 This is not, I admit, technically a reference to an old song. It is, however, what I am currently listening to non-stop at the moment, and while I write like I'm running out of time I'm going to happily include it.

18 Partisan Cohorts, Polarization, and the Gingrich Senators by Ragusa (not yet published) is not technically on the reading list, but it's a good paper and Rule 22 is a good blog when it updates. I could have done a paraphrase of this, but frankly, what would be the point? I like the sentence as is.

19 Was there any chance I'd get through this essay without a single Woodie Guthrie song? Nobody died for this song, but it is a song about dying because of politics, under sufficiently generous interpretations of 'dying' and 'politics'. It was really all about legal reform.

20 Unless you count freeing slaves in a very particular way.

21 By which I mean I'll stick it in a footnote. The liberal hypothesis is that elites can accomplish more theft when the popular will can't be brought to bear on particular targets. The libertarian one is that a divided government can do no harm to protect incumbents, and what we see during periods of conflict is natural wealth creation unrestrained by government.

22 *Culture War?* Fiorina, page 190

neater theory ties in with some of presidential candidate Lawrence Lessig's concerns.²³ In this story, the increasing importance of money has driven political battles towards the concerns of the wealthy: the concerns of the wealthy, which tend to be disagreements over values, not material distributions, so those have begun to define us.²⁴

In conclusion, I've looked at several theories that try to explain out data about rising political fighting and inability to compromise. While divided government is quite common in American history, paralyzed government is not. The argument of Iyengar that there is a large social aspect to the problem, and that political party membership is increasingly becoming a core identity that leads to positive affect towards fellow members of the group and negative affect towards members of the other group, it fails to explain what has caused this and what might end it. The elite-focused theories may have a role to play in explaining the current governmental system, but they don't address the apparent increasing polarization. It would be quite strange if the institutional shifts Gingrich brought in just happened to coincide with American political extremism. Lastly, while a historical analysis would certainly suggest that this is not peak polarization, we are at higher than historical levels. The American electorate is becoming more polarized, but we're not sure why.

23 Lawrence Lessig is a Democratic candidate for president, in much the same way that I am a respected international scholar.

24 *Culture War?* Fiorina, page 191