

Introduction to the American Political Process

Class 18: Polarization

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MIT

Reading

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McCarty, “Polarization: What Everyone Needs to Know”

Overview

1. Defining terms:
 - Polarization
 - Partisanship
 - Partisan divergence
 - Partisan sorting
 - Belief constraint
2. How polarized are elites?
3. How polarized is the mass public?
4. What are the causes of polarization?
5. How bad is polarization?

McCarty, *Polarization*

McCarty, *Polarization*

Defining Terms

Definitions

Polarization: the increasing support for extreme political views relative to the support for centrist or moderate views

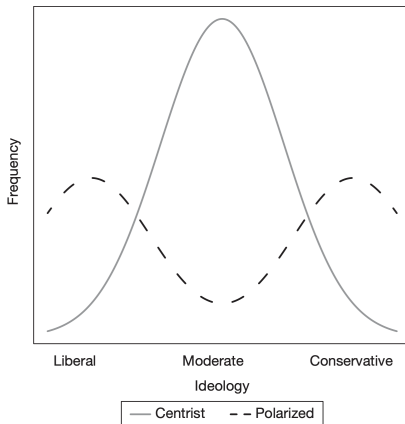
Partisanship: a strong bias in favor of one's party and strong dislike or prejudice against other parties

Polarization: Example 1

Abortion: 1 = abortion is legal in all circumstances; 2 = abortion legal in some cases and restricted in others; 3 = complete ban on abortion



Polarization: Example 2



Note that **polarization** has nothing to do with partisan attachment.

Partisan Divergence

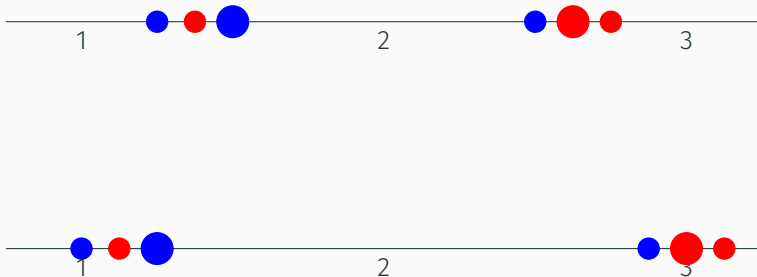
Partisan divergence: The distance from the median/average Democrat to the median/average Republican

There are two possible causes of partisan divergence:

1. Polarization
2. Partisan sorting

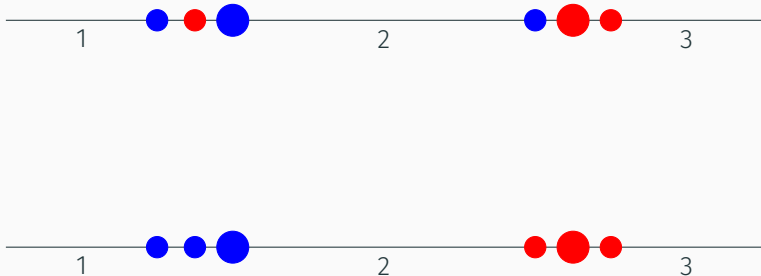
Causes of partisan divergence

1. Polarization



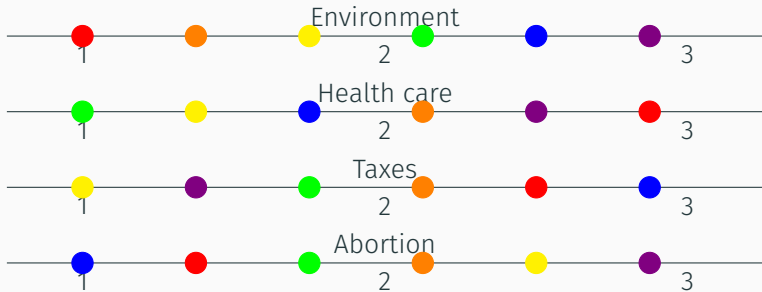
Causes of partisan divergence

2. Partisan sorting



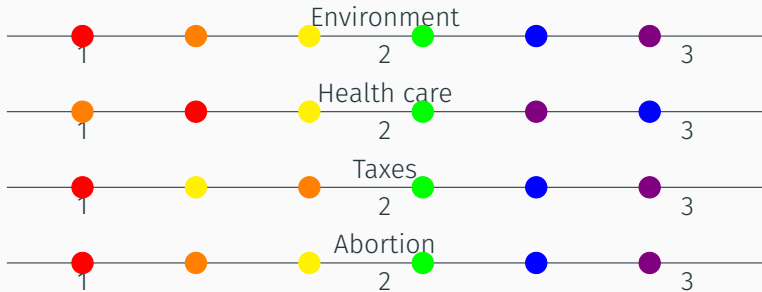
Belief constraint

Example: low constraint



Belief constraint

Example: high constraint



McCarty, *Polarization*

Elite Polarization

Mass vs. Elite Polarization

Mass: voters and citizens

Elite: officeholders, donors, activists, public intellectuals, party officials...

Note that mass and elite opinion do not always move in tandem:

- **Abortion:** mass more moderate
- **Vietnam War:** mass stopped supporting war before elites

Polarization in the U.S. House

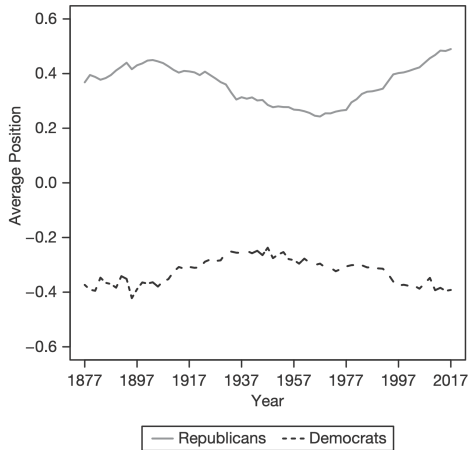


Figure 3.3: Party Positions in the US House 1877–2014 Figure shows average DW-NOMINATE scores by party.

Three Notes on Elite Polarization

1. Current era: mid-1970s to the present
2. Common patterns in both chambers of Congress (\Rightarrow common cause?)
3. Asymmetry
 - Republican party consistently and uniformly moving right
 - Average position of Democrats has not moved substantially; most leftward movement driven by Black and Latinx representatives

McCarty, *Polarization*

Mass Polarization

Three Notes on Mass Polarization

1. Seems to have come *after* elite polarization began
2. Differences in **economic/redistributive** attitudes seem to be most predictive of partisanship
 - Though evidence of racial divisions also being a key factor
3. **Affective** polarization is increasing
 - Negative attitudes toward out-party even in the absence of strong policy disagreement

Is the public polarized?

- Surprisingly, no survey evidence that average policy views have become more extreme since 1970
- Individuals *are* better sorted into parties (more ideological constraint) (Fiorina)
 - Implication: elite polarization came first and forced voters to choose between extremes
 - Elite polarization not inconsistent with mass disengagement
- *But* evidence that more politically engaged publics are more polarized (Abramowitz)
 - Implication: mass polarization could have come first, and elites followed

What is the nature of mass partisan sorting?

1. Ideology-driven sorting

- E.g. a conservative Democrat changes party label to Republican

2. Party-driven sorting

- E.g. a conservative Democrat changes his policy views to more liberal ones

Empirical evidence (Levendusky):

- Same voters interviewed in 1992, 1994, 1996
- Those who sorted were mostly **party-driven**, with two important exceptions:
 - Abortion
 - Southern Democrats

What issues has the public sorted on?

1. **Social welfare issues:** support for government spending and government health insurance, tax rates
 - From 1972-2000, no evidence of increased divergence over time; parties were divergent and remain divergent
2. **Cultural issues:** Abortion, sexuality, gender roles, drug legalization
 - Significant sorting over time: no divergence in 1972 and significant divergence now
3. **Racial issues:** Support for civil rights, racial equality, integration, fair housing, affirmative action
 - Some divergence in 1972 and more divergence now

Conflict extension: The *number* of issues where parties have staked a clear position is growing.

McCarty, *Polarization*

Causes of Polarization

Causes of polarization

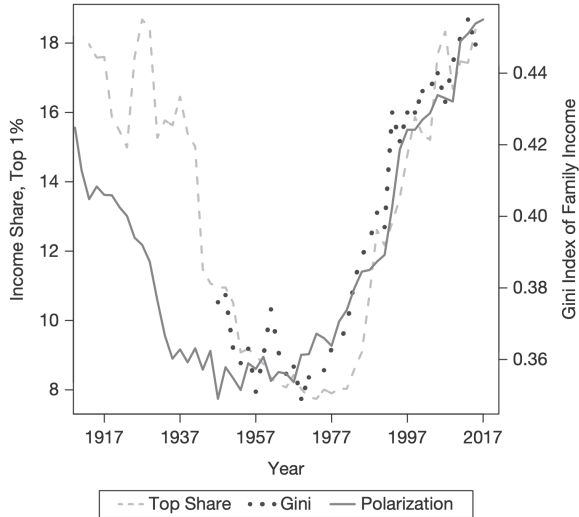
By “cause” we mean that without X, there would be no Y. Can be understood in (at least) two ways:

1. **An initial cause:** without X, polarization would never have occurred
2. **A precipitating factor:** X caused polarization, but Z made it worse than it would have been otherwise

Initial causes

1. Southern Realignment
2. Economic inequality

Polarization and inequality



By what mechanism could rising inequality increase polarization?

How can rising polarization increase inequality?

Precipitating factors

1. Extreme leaders
2. Changes in the media environment (TV → cable news)
 - Selective exposure
 - Persuasion
 - Disengagement of less political viewers
3. Social media
 - “Echo chamber” effect may be overstated
 - Politically extreme content accounts for relatively little online consumption
 - Most people get news from moderate sources

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How bad is polarization?

Is polarization a serious problem for democracy?

Arguments in favor of some polarization:

1. Consensus may mean representation failure
2. Deep disagreements may have been buried
3. “Responsible Party Theory”: distinct choices are good for democracy

What are the arguments for and against:

1. partisan sorting?
2. partisan divergence?
3. affective partisanship?
4. elite polarization?
5. mass polarization?