Polarization and (Un)civil Political Discourse

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Introduction

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Background:

1. From Sacramento, California
2. Graduated Stanford University in ‘22
   - BA in Political Science
   - BAH in Communication
   - ~ 3yrs working for Political Psychology Research Group
   - ~ 2 yrs with the Media & Personality Lab
3. PhD Political Science at Duke University
   - Study political behavior, communication, and methodology
   - Polarization Lab
   - Broad interests:
     - *Communication:* polarization, social media, text-as-data
     - *Book project:* Attitudes and Preferences of the Socioeconomically Mobile

Quick thoughts

Take ~5 minutes to write down response to one (or more) of the following prompts:

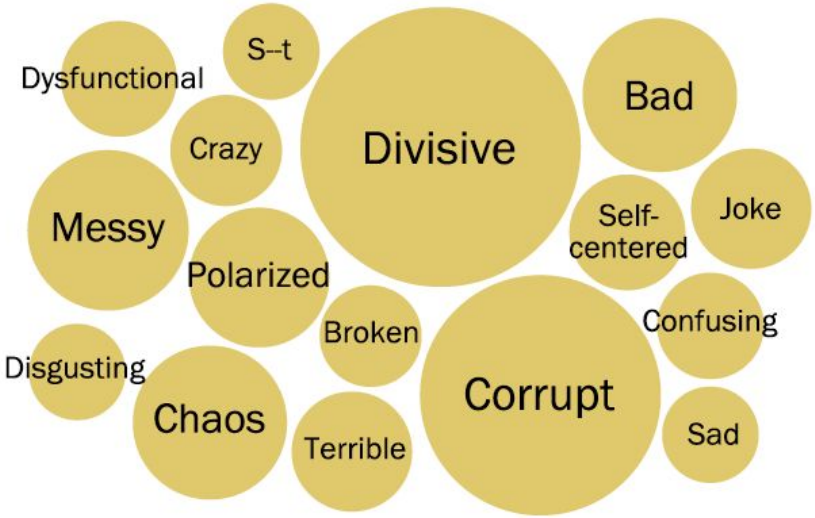
1. **What positive or negative experiences have you had discussing politics?**

2. **Have you noticed signs of polarization online or in person? If yes, what examples stand out?**

3. **What strategies do you think could help reduce polarization?**

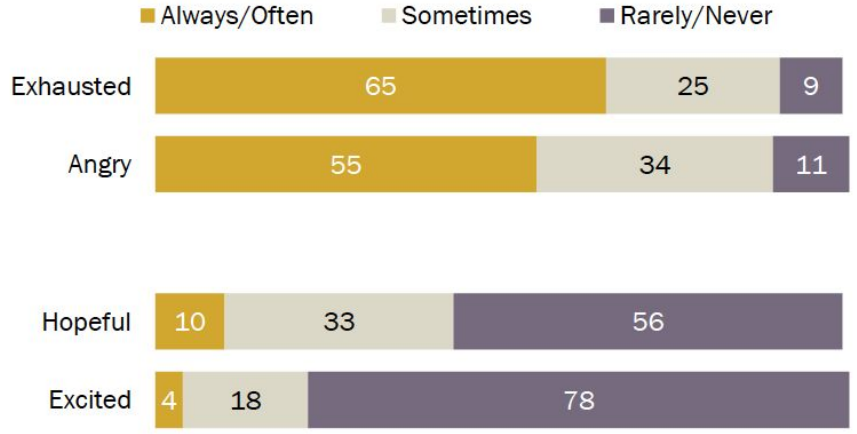
Americans' top descriptions of the current state of politics

What one word or phrase would you use to describe politics in the U.S. these days? ***[open end]***



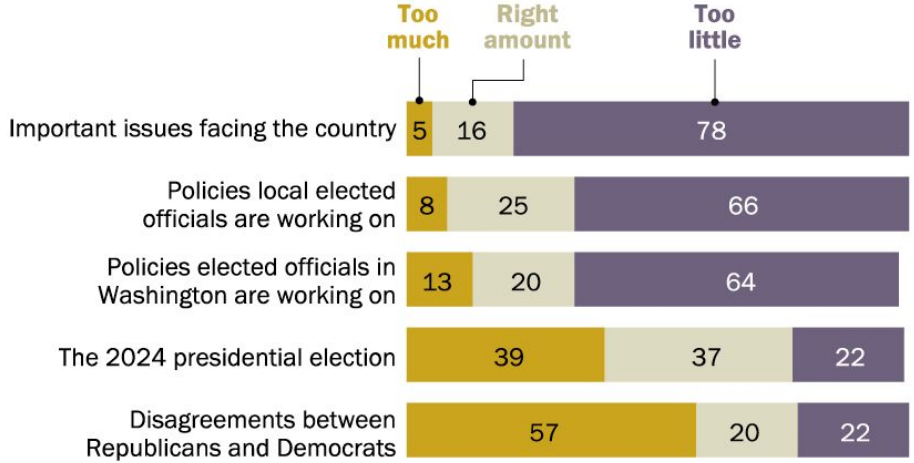
How Americans feel when they think about politics

% who ____ feel each of the following when thinking about politics these days

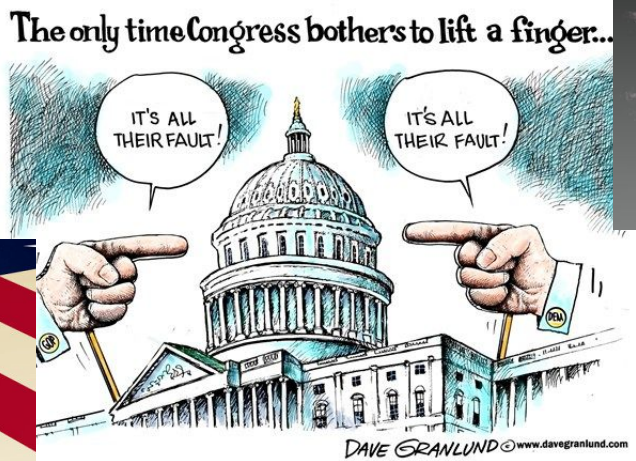


Majorities of Americans say partisan fighting gets too much attention, while issues and policy get too little

% who say there is ____ (of) attention paid to each of the following in our country these days



Is America Coming Apart?



Elite Polarization

History of Elite Polarization

1950s: Scholars argued that America needed more polarization

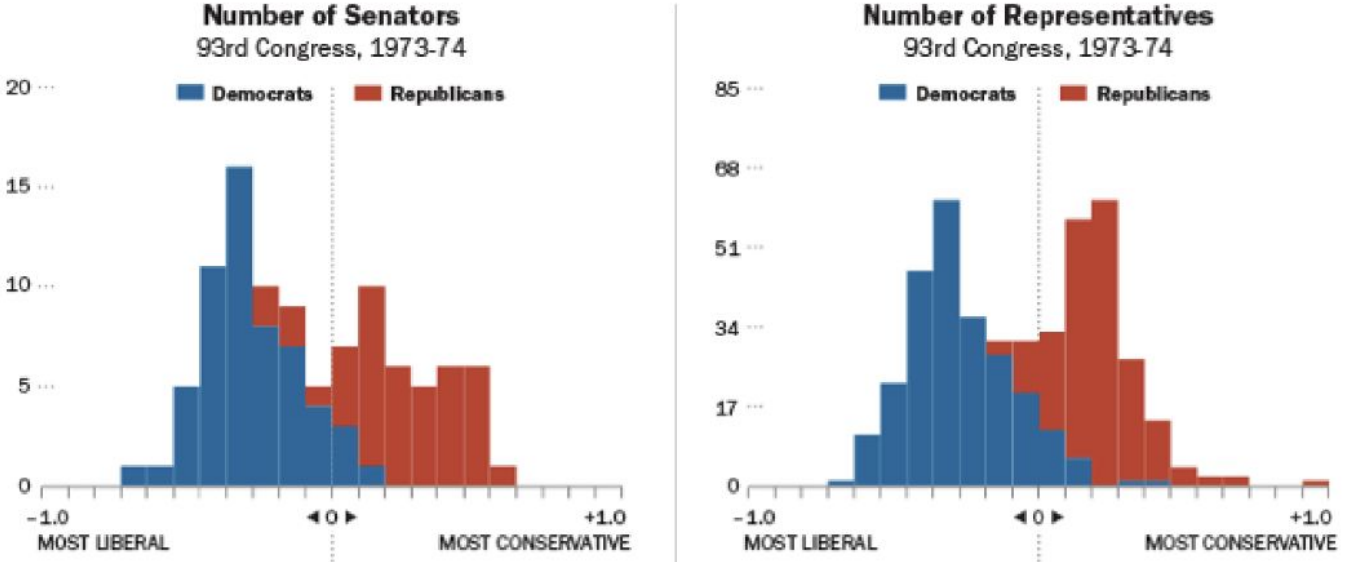
1960s-1980s:

- Civil Rights Movement:
  - The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prompted former Southern Democrats to join the Republican Party.
  - This shift accelerated ideological party sorting, heavily influenced by racial prejudice.
- Cultural Cleavages:
  - Issues surrounding women's rights, gay rights, and environmental concerns contributed to ideological divisions.
  - Polarization intensified over the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal.

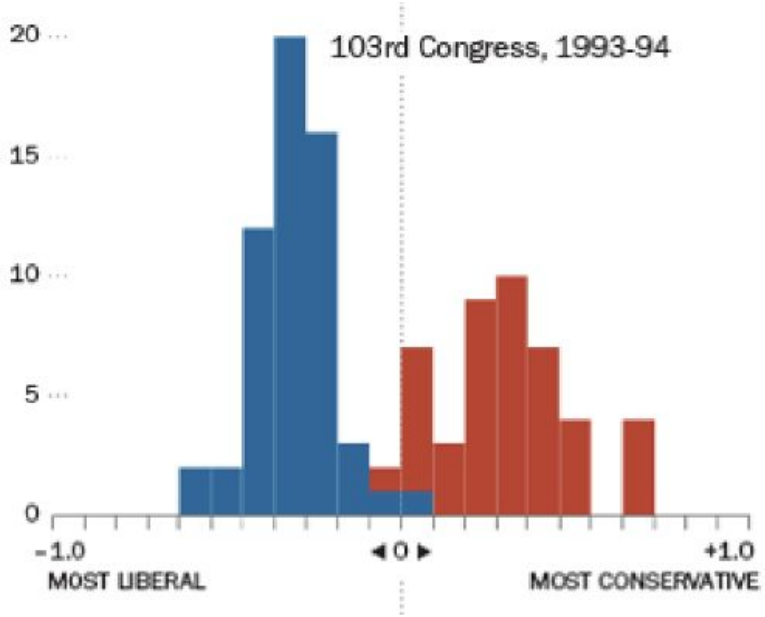
1990s-2000s: Scholars argue that polarization may be a problem

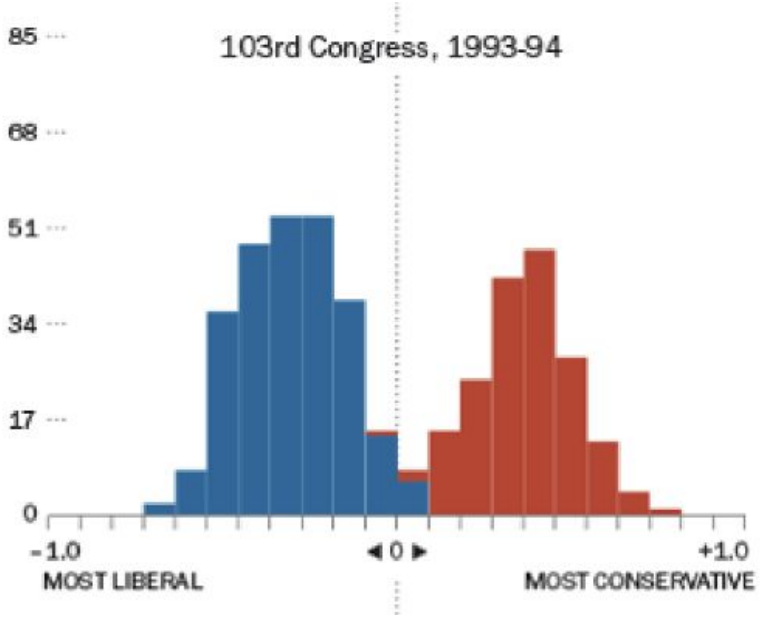
Elite polarization… The consensus = it exists!

represent liberal views and positive numbers conservative views



Elite polarization… consensus = it exists!





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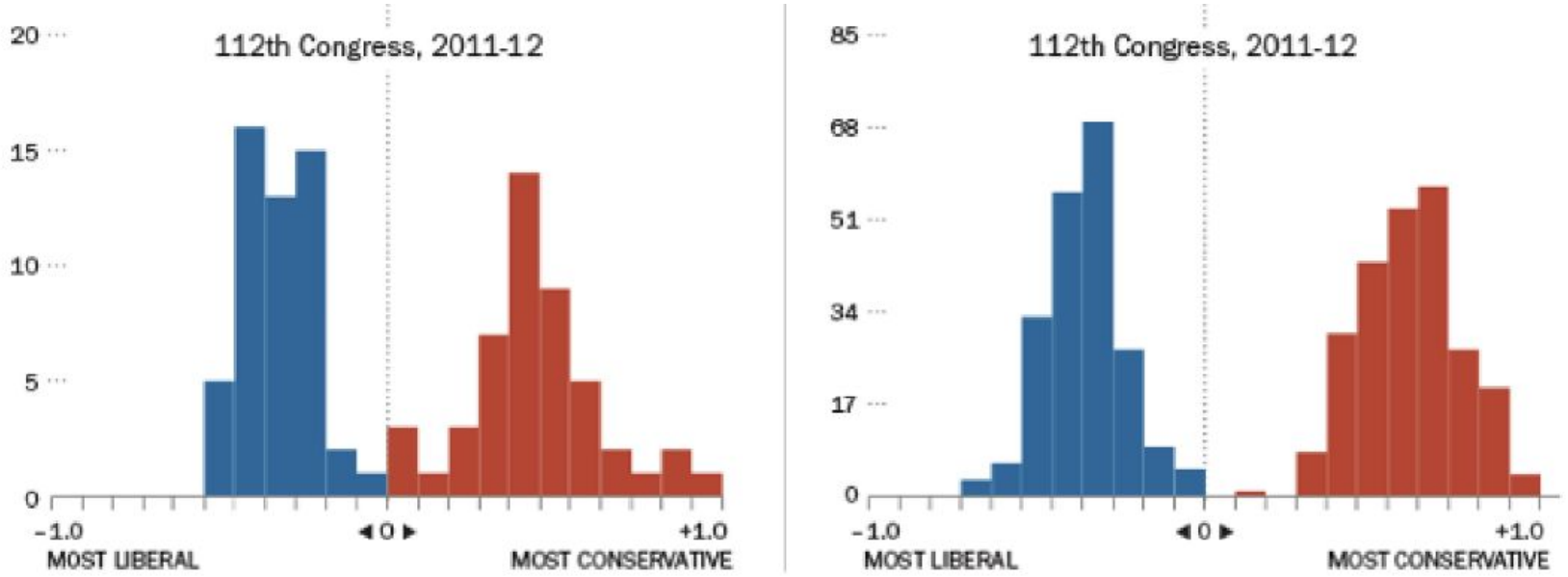
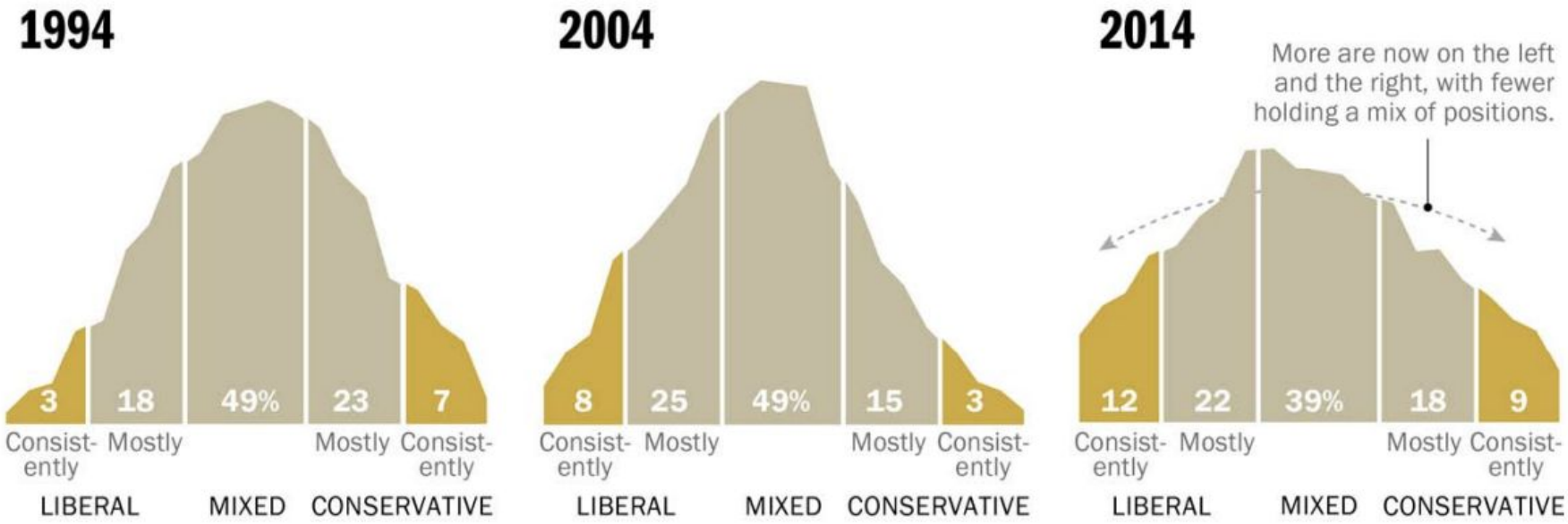
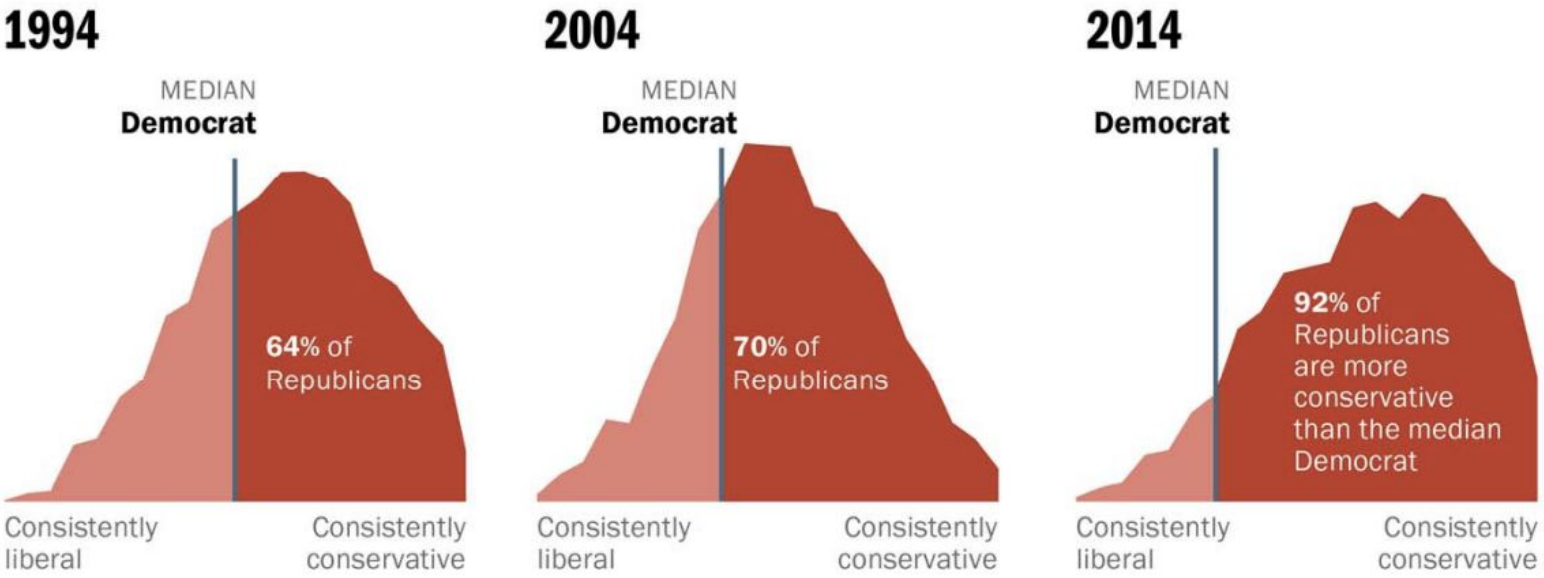


Mass Polarization

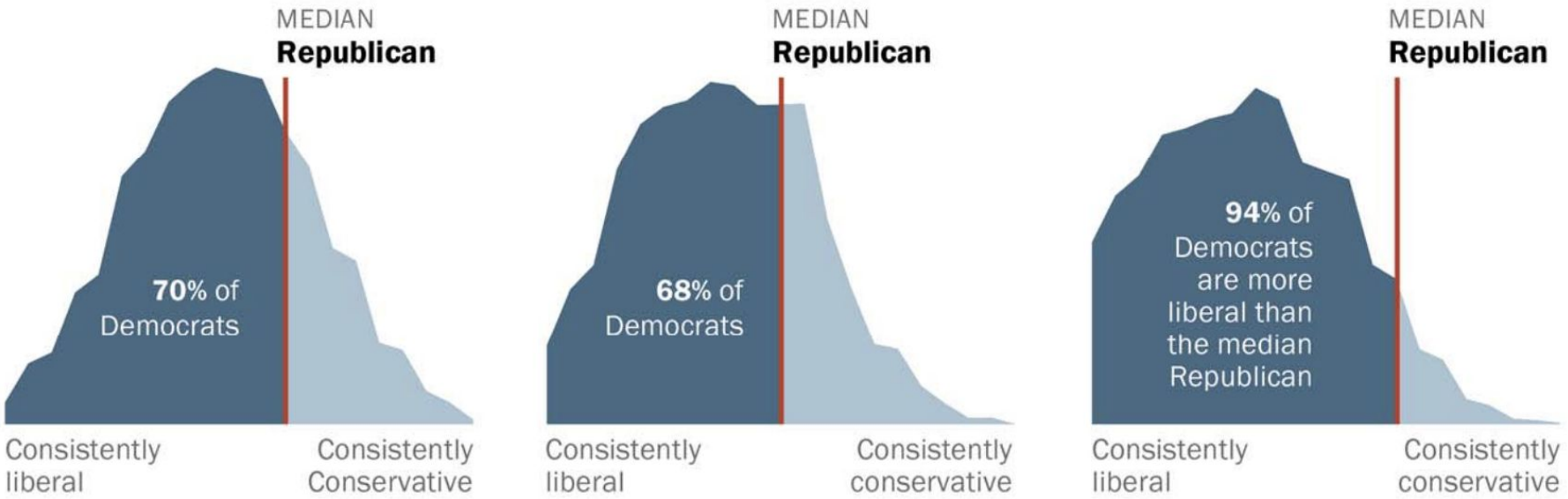
Mass Polarization

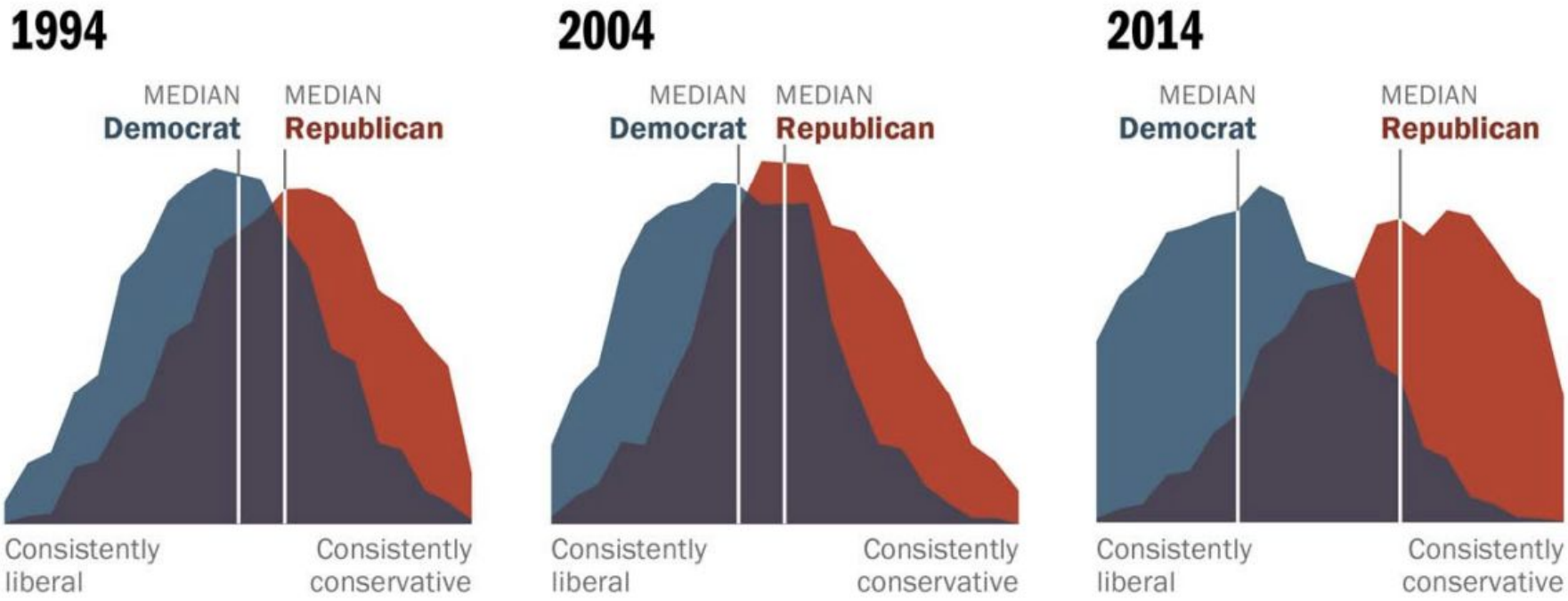


Republicans Shift to the Right

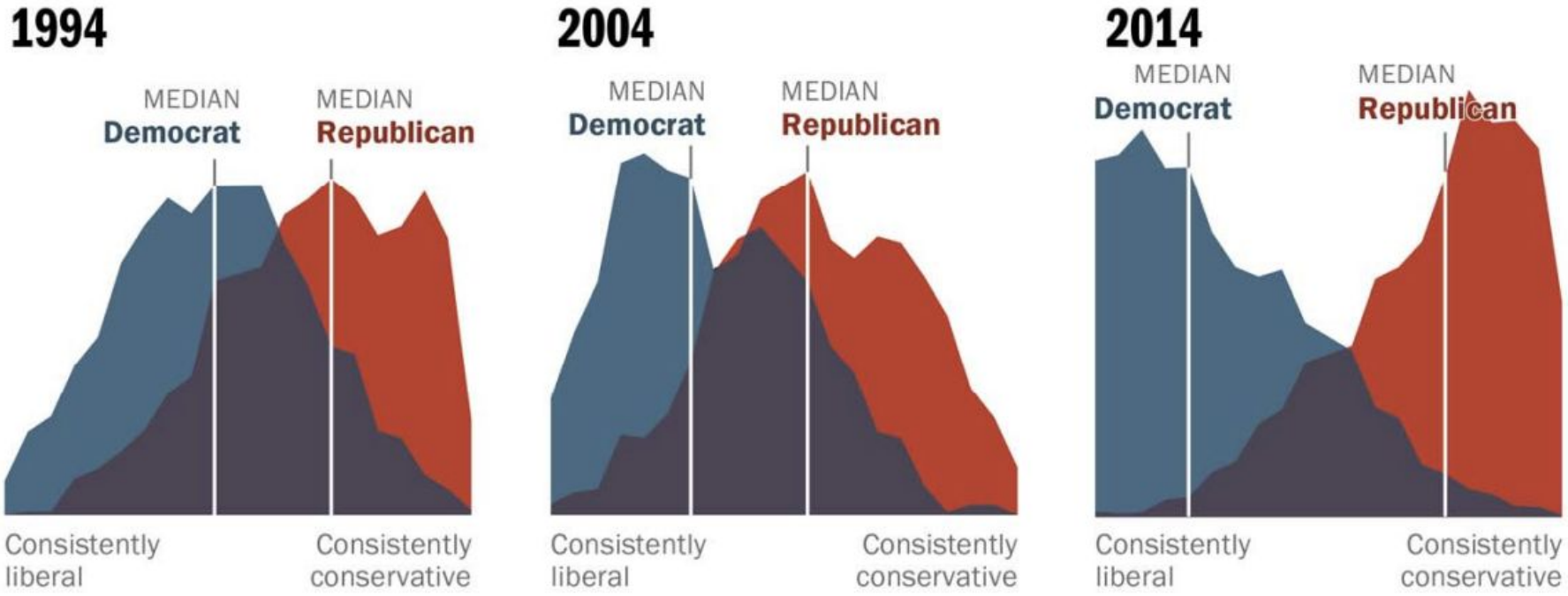


Democrats Shift to the Left




1994
MEDIAN
Democrat
MEDIAN
Republican
Consistently liberal
Consistently conservative
2004
MEDIAN
Democrat
MEDIAN
Republican
Consistently liberal
Consistently conservative
2014
MEDIAN
Democrat
MEDIAN
Republican
Consistently liberal
Consistently conservative

Even more pronounced among the politically engaged



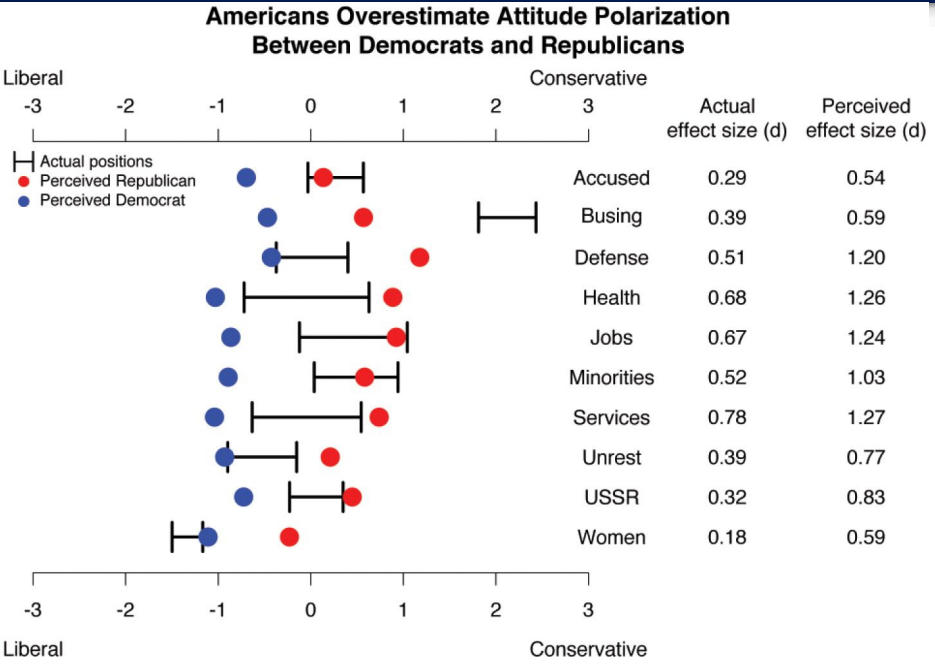
Are we (the public) actually *that* polarized?

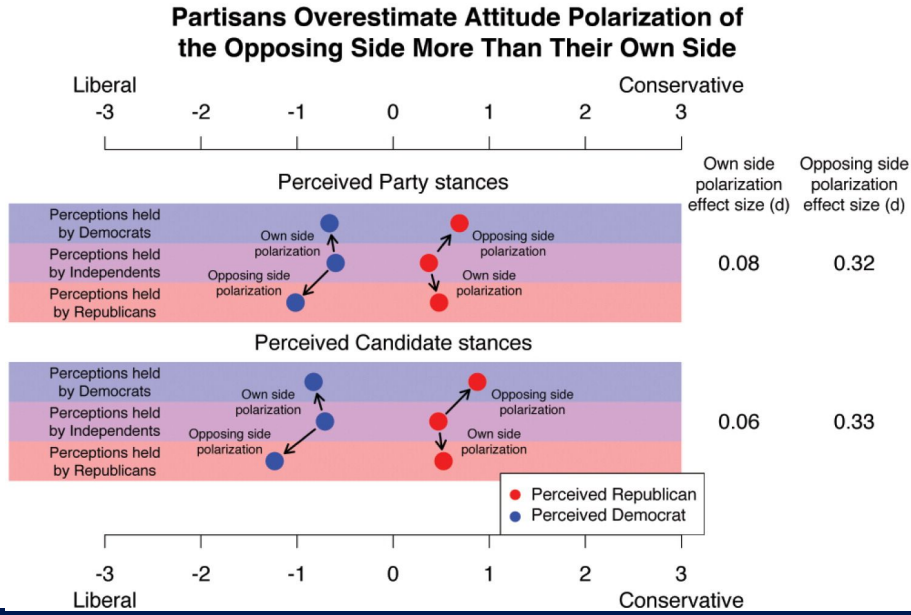
While Americans tend to be ideologically polarized… they actually agree many issues…

1. Increased spending on public housing
2. Government should offer medical-debt forgiveness
3. Inflation is the number on issue in politics today
4. Most Americans have favorable views towards:
    - Medicare, SNAP benefits, Social Security, Welfare, Law enforcement
5. Abortion should be legal in many cases
6. The United States Flag is a positive symbol
7. Climate change exists
8. The President should unite the country

Link

No! But we think we are….

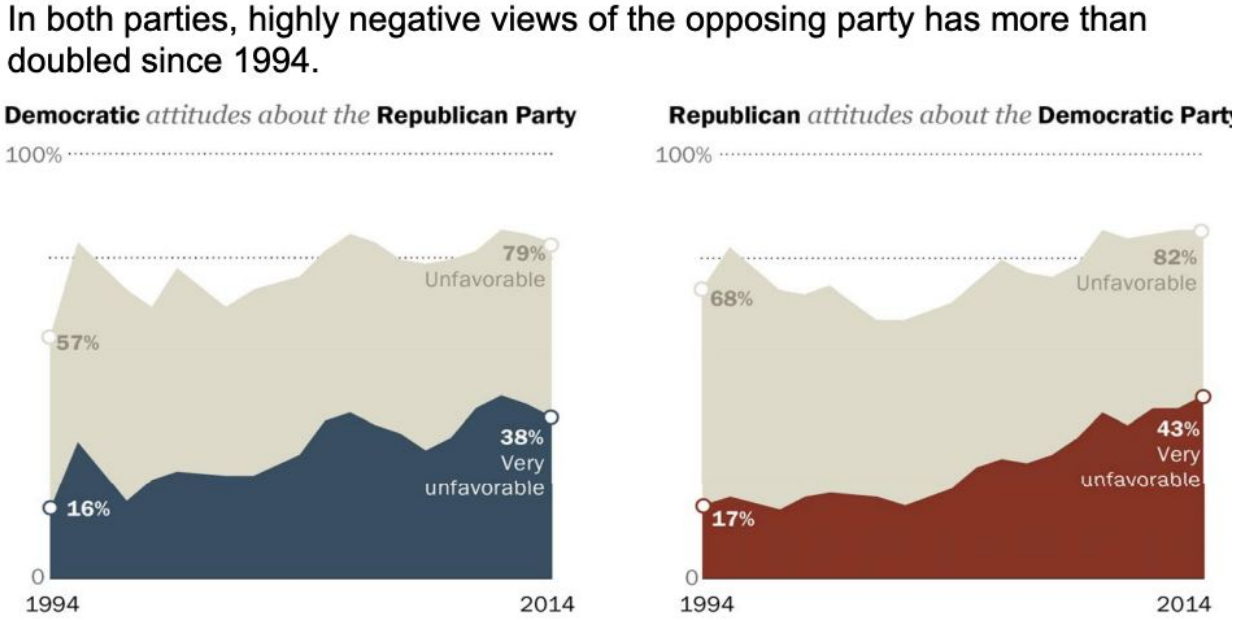




Affective Polarization

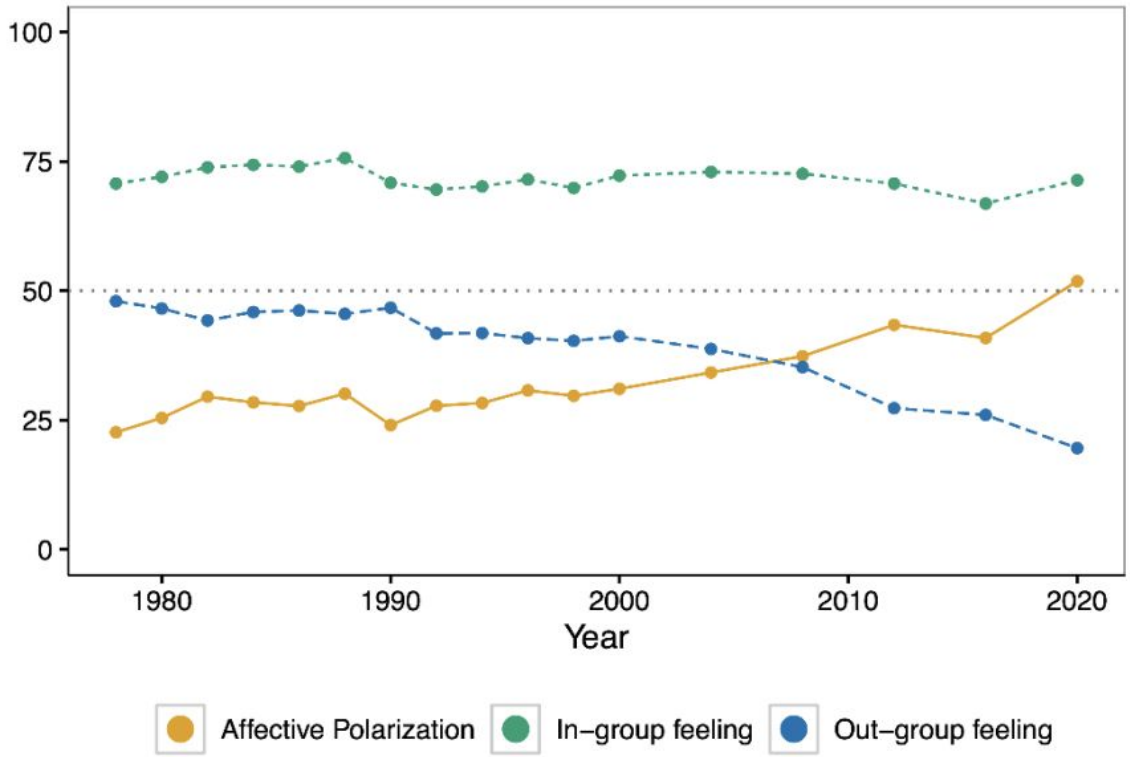
Affective Polarization

Americans are not as ideologically polarized as they believe themselves to be, they *are* emotionally polarized. In other words, they do not like members of the other party.



Measuring affective polarization

Thermometers… how warm do you feel towards the other side on scale of 0-100?



Measuring affective polarization

Social distance measures … how comfortable would you be if…

1. **Your child married an opposing party member**
2. **Your neighbor was an opposing party member**
3. **Your friend was an opposing party member**

- In **1960**, **4% of Republicans** and **4% of Democrats** said they would be displeased if their son or daughter married someone of the opposite party.[11]

- In **2019**, **45% of Democrats** said they would be unhappy if their child married a Republican and **35% of Republicans** said they would be unhappy if their child married a Democrat.[12]

Measuring affective polarization

Traits…

How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	Strongly agree	Moderately agree	Slightly agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly disagree	Moderately disagree	Strongly disagree
Democrats are intelligent	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Democrats are generous	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Democrats are open-minded	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Democrats are hypocritical	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Democrats are mean	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Democrats are selfish	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

What have we shown so far:

1. Elites have polarized over time in terms of their partisan and ideological affiliations

2. American public has polarized over time in terms of their partisan and ideological affiliations

3. There is more consensus on political issues among the American public than most Americans perceive

4. American public has increased negative feelings towards the other side over time… how does this affect us?

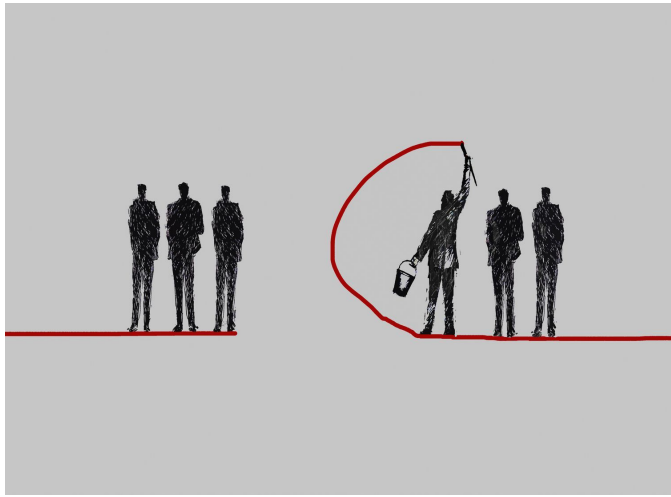
Causes of Affective Polarization

US vs THEM

- Brains are wired to form in-groups for safety and use shortcuts based on shared values, symbols, and language to define membership.

- Brains are constantly scanning for threats to in-groups.

- Polarization leads us to form “us” vs. “them” mentalities in which we will:
  - Hold exaggerated beliefs about the other side
  - Follow in-group normative behaviors (group conformity)
  - Discount any new evidence about the other group because we want our beliefs about yourself and others to be maintained



Geographic sorting

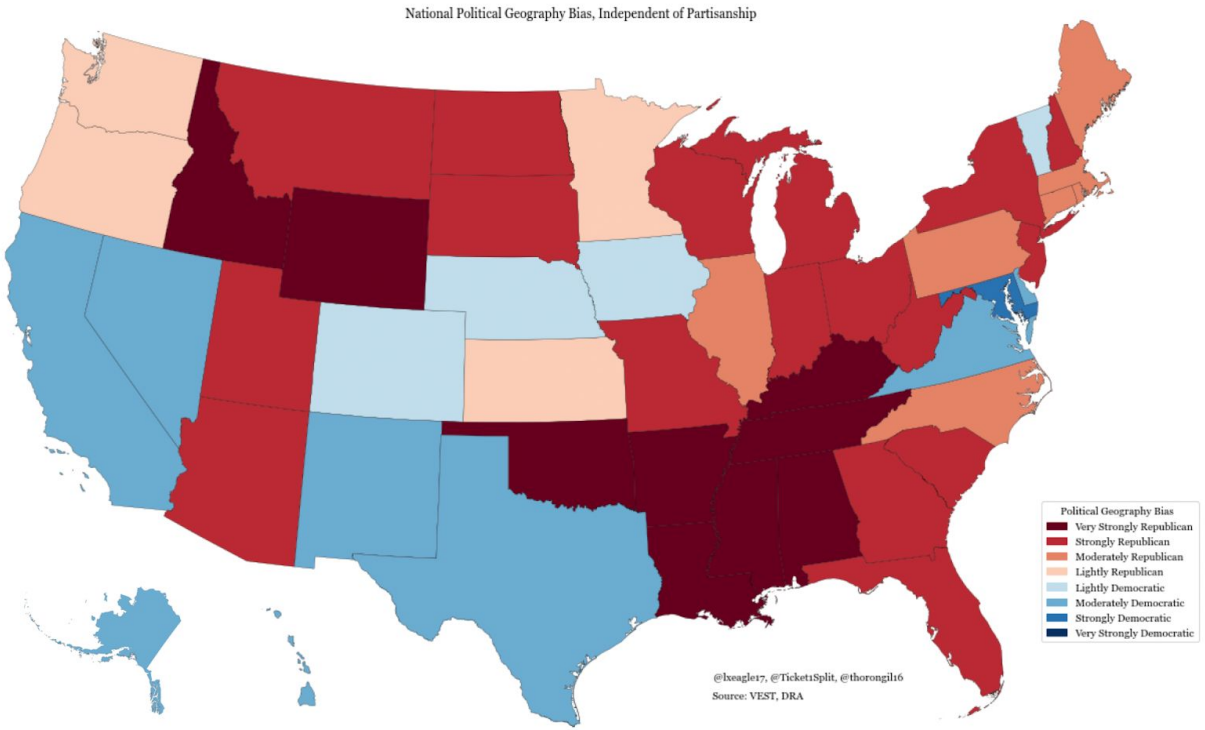
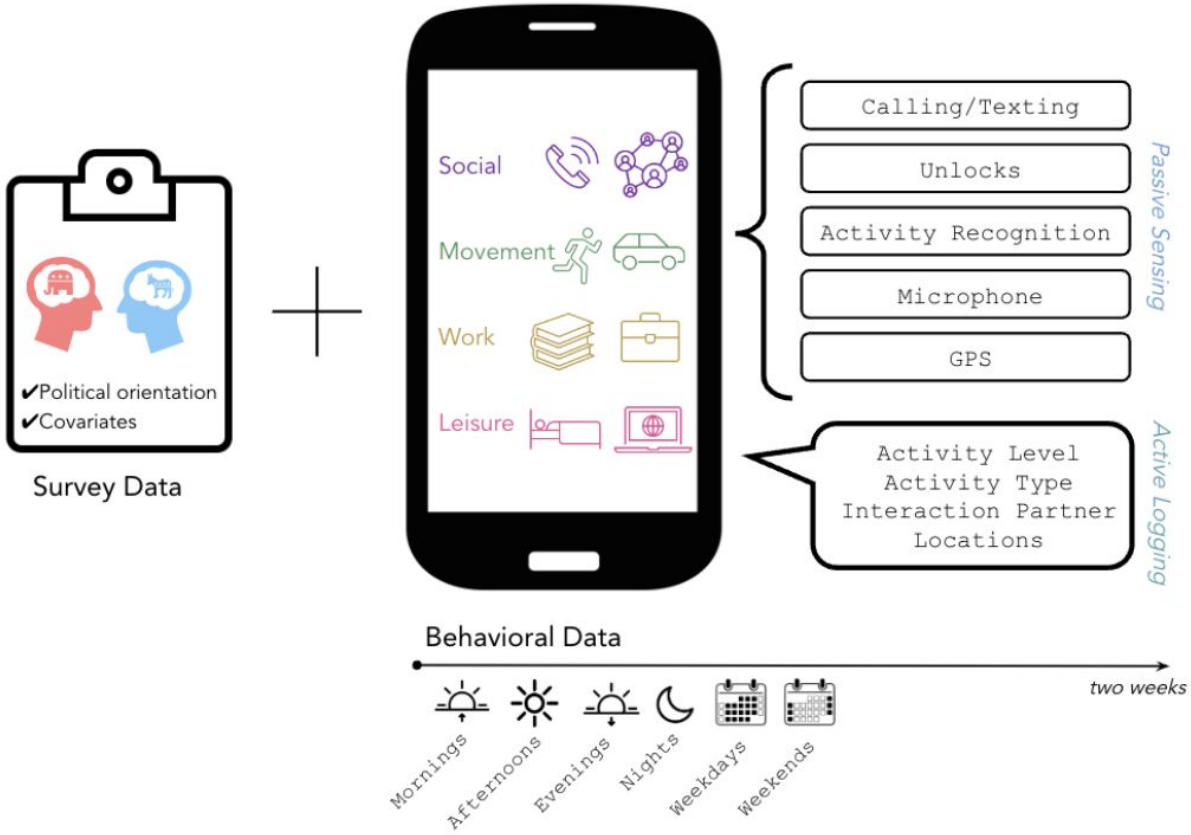
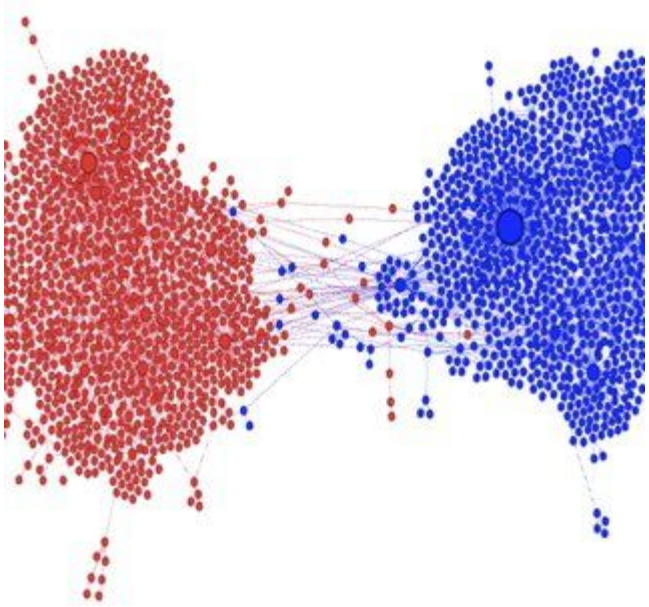


Figure 1. Measuring Lifestyle Polarization with Smartphones



Talaifar. S., Jordan, D., Gosling, S. D., & Harari, G. *"Lifestyle Polarization: A Smartphone-Based Study of Liberal and Conservative Students' Everyday Behavior"*.

Echo Chambers



Addressing Affective Polarization

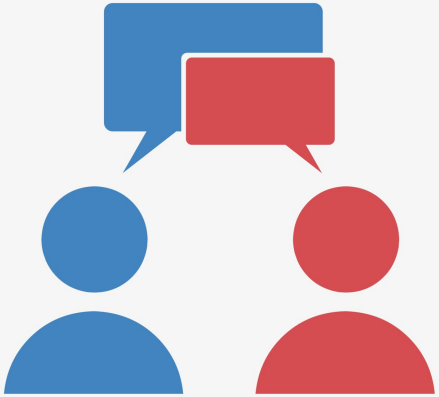
Cross-cutting Interactions

We are now less likely to have social relationships or discuss, political or non-political topics with the other side.

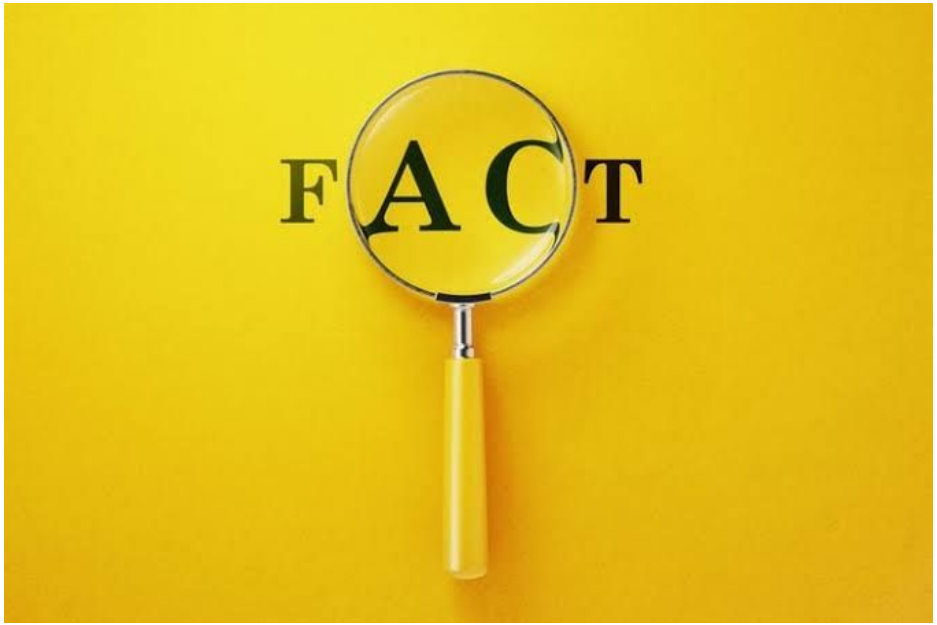
Less contact -> more stereotypes/misbeliefs about the other side

Researchers intervene by:

- Online/In-person exposure to information about the other side
- Increasing common identities
- Deliberation between members
- Non-political contact with the other side
- Political discussions between both sides.



Correcting Misperceptions



Researchers can exposure individuals to the facts:

1. Real…
    a. Group demographics
    b. Policy beliefs
    c. Second order beliefs (what others think about me)

Which reduce misperceptions about the other side and then decrease dislike towards the other side.

Role of Social Media

1. Surface positive interparty contact
2. Prioritize popular content among disparate groups
3. Correct misconceptions
4. Collaborate with researchers

Structural changes to government

Time for Discussion

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THE POLARIZATION LAB

1. Which solutions do you think are most feasible or effective?

2. In what ways can these solutions backfire?

3. Is it the role of social media companies or government to try to fix polarization?

4. What happens if we do nothing?

https://consumerfed.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/CA15-Keeter.pdf
https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/09/polarization-democracy-and-political-violence-in-the-united-states-what-the-research-says?lang=en
https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/political-polarization-united-states
https://sites.bu.edu/pardeeatlas/advancing-human-progress-initiative/back2school/how-the-american-media-landscape-is-polarizing-the-country/
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