Introduction to the American Political Process

Class 19: Polarization

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Overview

1. Reading

    McCarty, “Polarization: What Everyone Needs to Know”

Reading

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

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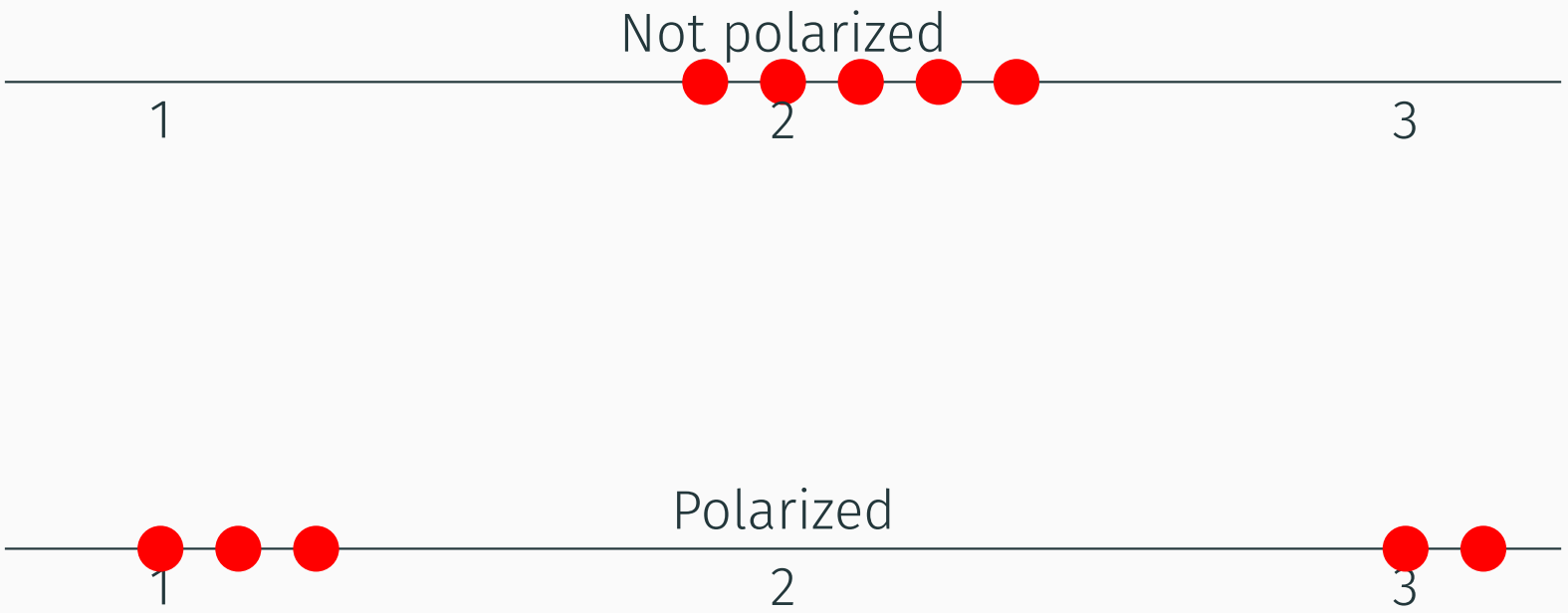
Polarization

Example: Abortion

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



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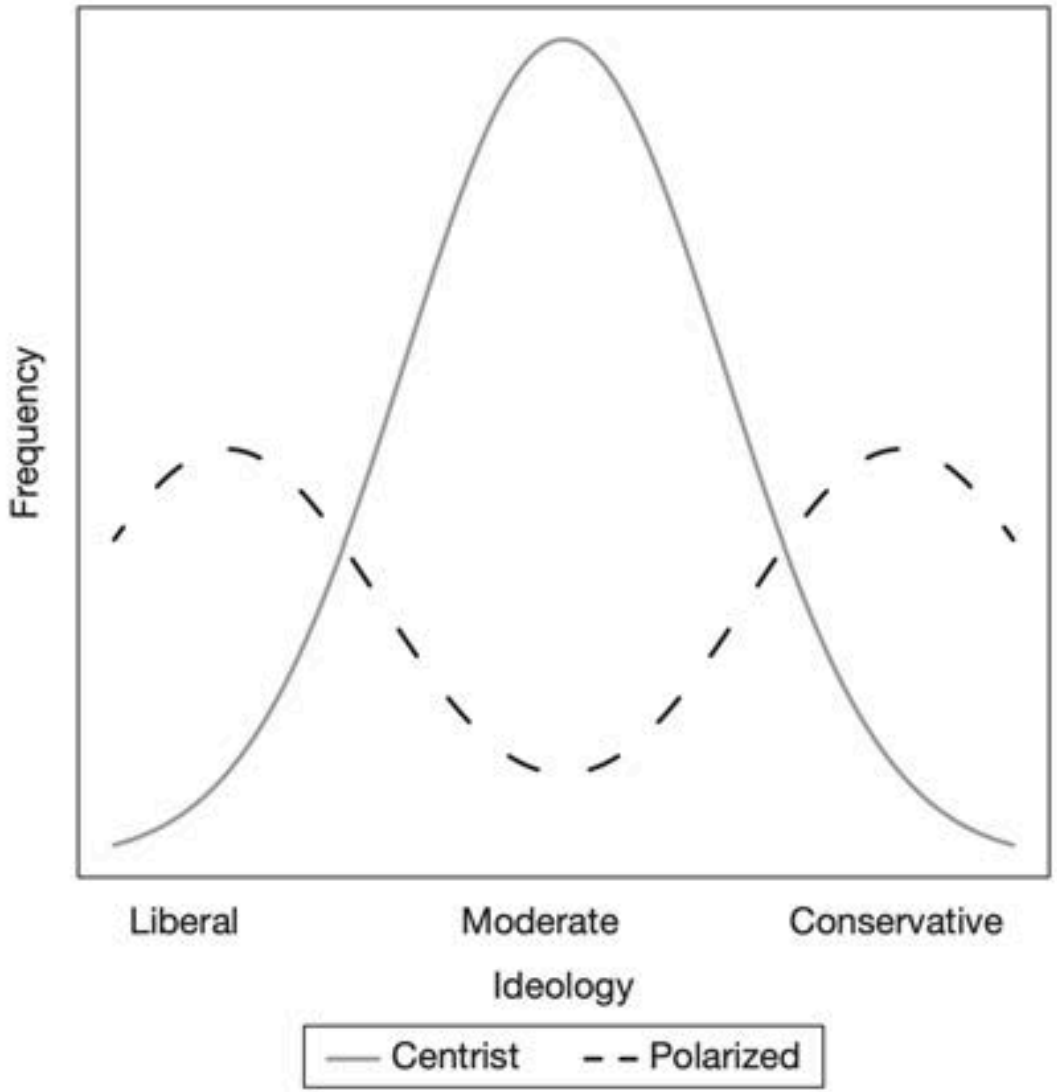
Polarization



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Polarization

Note that this definition has nothing to do with partisan attachment.

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: mass stopped supporting war before elites

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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

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Is polarization bad?

Arguments in favor of some polarization:

1. Consensus may mean representation failure
2. “Responsible Party Theory”: distinct choices are good for democracy

But near universal agreement that current levels are too high.

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Are elites polarized?

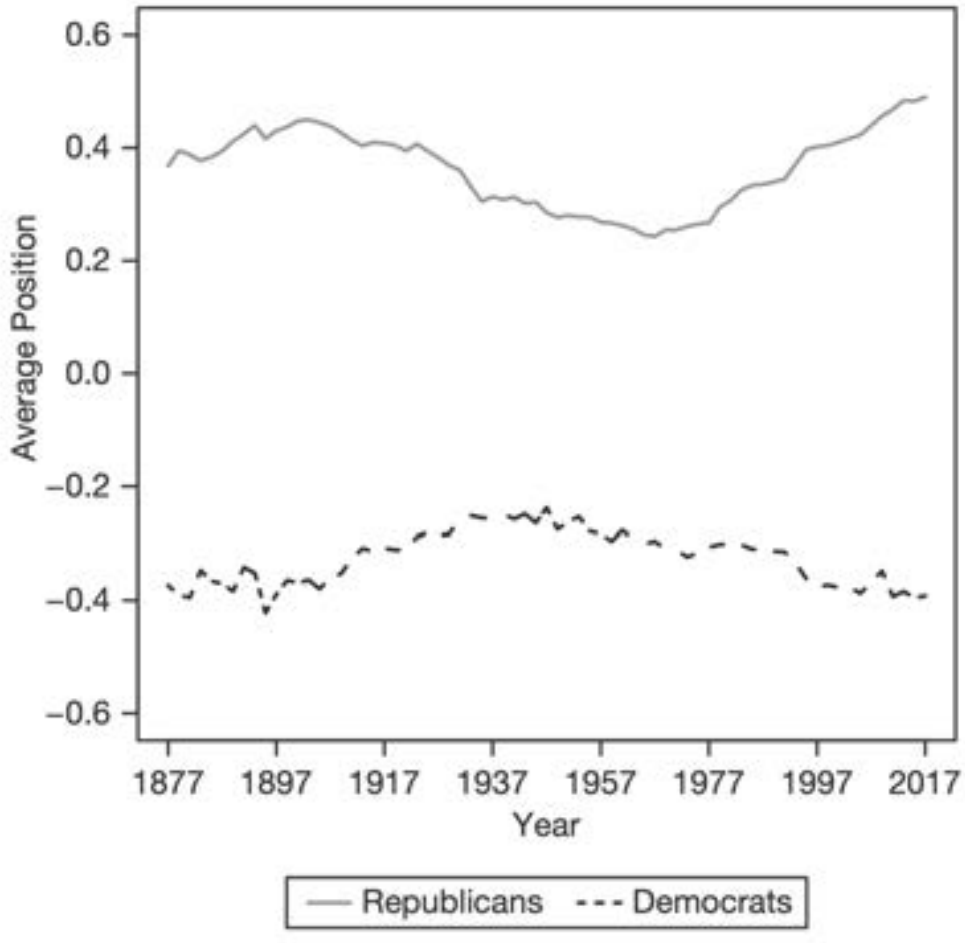

Figure 3.3: Party Positions in the US House 1877–2014 Figure shows average DW-NOMINATE scores by party.

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Is the public polarized?

- No evidence that average policy views have become more extreme since 1970
- Individuals *are* better sorted into parties (more ideological constraint) (Fiorina)
    - Suggests that elite polarization came first
- *But* evidence that more politically engaged publics are more polarized (Abramowitz)
    - Suggests that mass polarization could have come first

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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:

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

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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.

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Causes of polarization

By “cause” we mean that without *X*, there would be no *Y*. Understood in 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

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Possible causes

1. Southern Realignment
2. Economic inequality

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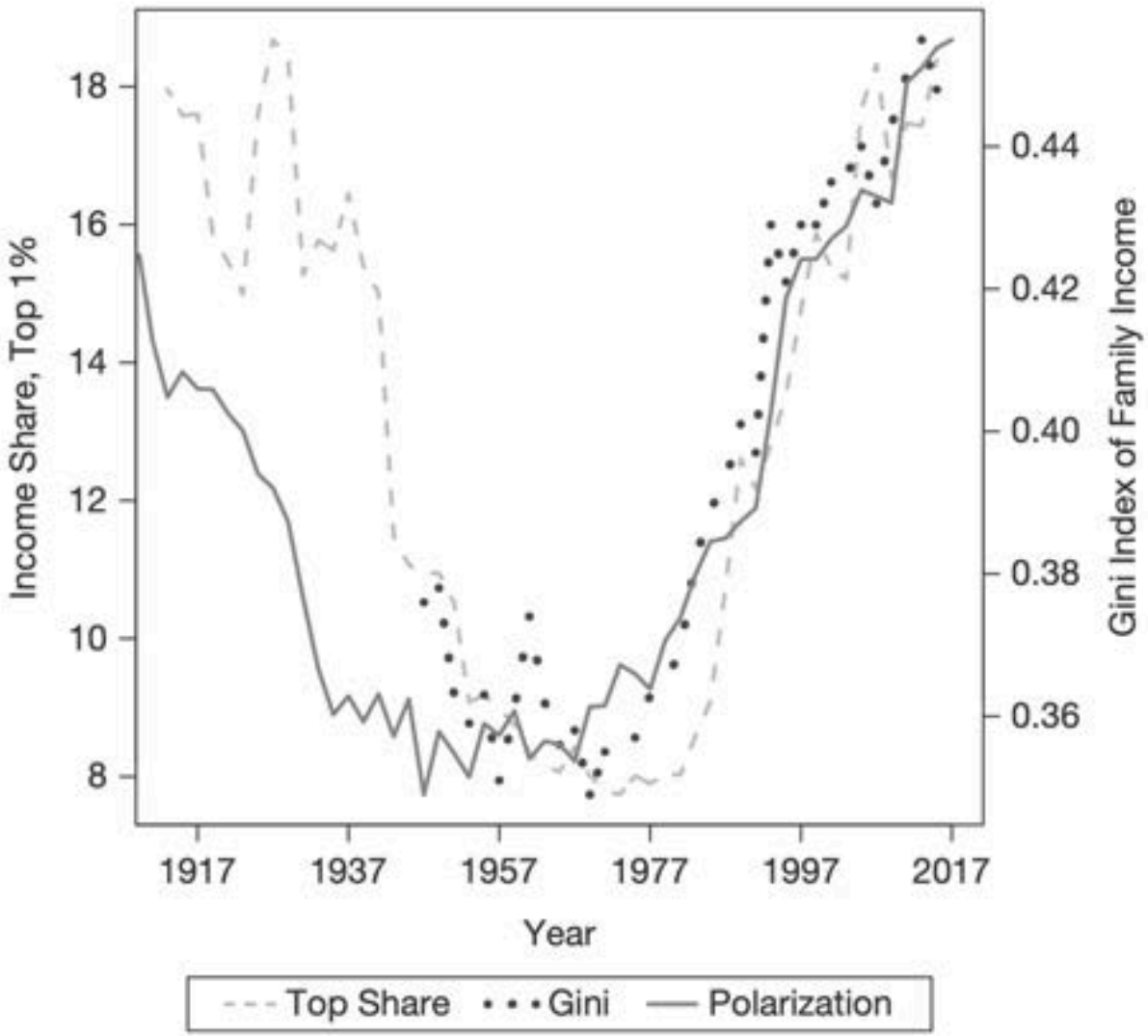
Polarization and inequality



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Precipitating factors

1. Extreme leaders
2. The media
    - Selective exposure
    - Persuasion
    - Disengagement of less political viewers
3. Social media
    - "Echo chamber" effect may be overstated: most people get news from moderate sources

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