

# Rational Voter Learning, Issue Alignment, and Polarization

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Voter ideology in the United States displays two puzzling features. First, one can predict a voter’s position on most policy issues remarkably well by knowing just their location on a one-dimensional liberal-conservative scale. As a consequence, positions on different issues are strongly aligned, which is surprising given the wide variety of issues, such as taxation, gun control, abortion, and the environment. Second, some evidence suggests that voter ideology is polarized, in the sense of a bimodal distribution, on the liberal-conservative scale.

This paper gives a novel explanation for issue alignment and ideological polarization based on rational voter learning. In the existing literature as well as the public discourse, voter clustering in one-dimensional ideological camps is often attributed to social learning effects such as echo chambers, to voter biases such as confirmation or partisan bias, or to media providing slanted political news. By contrast, we show issue alignment and polarized ideology naturally result from *individual* (no social learning) and *rational* (no voter biases) voter learning, when voters themselves decide what information to acquire (no media effects). Central to the mechanism is that voters learn about their political opinion by flexible yet costly information acquisition for the purpose of deciding between two parties.

We illustrate our mechanism in a model of voter learning and electoral competition between two parties under a multidimensional policy space. The novel feature of our model is that voters can learn flexibly by acquiring any information about their ideal points subject to an information cost, in the style of rational inattention (Sims, 1998, 2003). In equilibrium, learning creates aligned and polarized political preferences even when the true distribution of ideal points is independent across policy issues and unimodal. When party platforms are strategically chosen, voter and platform polarization are mutually reinforcing, and both increase as information becomes less costly.

Our results have policy implications regarding how to address issue alignment and polarized ideology insofar as they are seen as a problem. If issue alignment and polarized ideology result from rational voter learning, tackling them via addressing network effects (e.g., breaking up echo chambers) or voter biases (e.g., political education), or providing unbiased media may not be effective. Instead, changing voters’ *choice set* would be necessary because only this change gave the necessary incentives to learn in a multidimensional and more than binary way. Examples of such reforms are increasing the number of parties, for example, by changing the electoral system from plurality elections to proportional representation, or strengthening other forms of political participation that allow for expressing one’s preference intensity.