Political Disagreement and Competition for Dominance in American Politics

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To what extent does political disagreement reflect sincere differences of belief, and to what extent does it reflect competition for dominance? Pick the answer that you find most convincing, but if you think there are good reasons for either position, explain them. Answer this question for both political disagreement among politicians and political disagreement among the public.

Before tackling this question, we must analyze if the public has consistent opinions in order to discuss whether their differences in beliefs are genuine. We only examine the public because the elite is recognized for having a coherent belief system. Two prominent scholars who discuss this subject are Walter Lippman and Philip Converse. In his work, *The Phantom Public* (1925), Lippman declares that voters are unaware of public affairs. In his view, private citizens are unfamiliar with public issues occurring around them, where they are being managed, or who is addressing them (Lippman 1925, 383). Later, Philip Converse, in *The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics* (1964), concluded that the majority of the electorate did not have a coherent belief system, even on significant issues that had been contentious among the political elite, for instance, the government's role on electric power and housing. Furthermore, he indicated that the general public did not possess the liberal-conservative ideological framework that was prevalent among the political elite" (Converse 1964, 243-245). He named this mass public distinct fact "nonattitudes" (Page & Shapiro 1992, 6).

In contrast to Lippman and Converse, Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro offer a different theory. In their book, *The Rational Public* (1992), the scholars establish that mass public opinion is stable but as a collective opinion. They do not disregard that most individuals are politically ignorant and have unstable policy preferences. Yet, the mass public,

collectively, is rational, able to make distinctions, coherent, reasonable on the best available information, and adapted to new information. The authors introduce a concept in their theory suggesting that aggregating the opinions of many individuals into a collective entity could neutralize their random shifts in opinions (Page & Shapiro 1992, 14-15). In addition, they posit that individuals have a “long term preference”, which can be averaged by aggregating their opinions at various times. Even if the opinions shift for a while, the long-term preferences remain stable despite the temporary fluctuations. Hence, the mass public has collective policy preferences, understood as “majority-preferred policy choices, or average positions on attitudes scales, or proportions of the public choosing particular policy alternatives over others” (Page & Shapiro 1992, 16).

Suppose we consider Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro’s theory that the public is rational and capable of making reasonable distinctions on available political information. In that case, we can infer they likely have political conflict. Political disagreement among the public involves a complex relationship of genuine ideological differences and strategic competition for dominance. According to Delia Baldassarri and Andrew Gelman, in *Partisans without Constraint: Political Polarization and Trends in American Public Opinion* (2008), there is an agreement among scholars that political parties and politicians have recently adopted more extreme positions on various political subjects. This trend has spread to public opinion but only on specific issues such as abortion and sexual morality. However, polarization is more extreme in politically active individuals or identify with a party ideology (Baldassarri & Gelman 2008, 410). One group that tends to have more radical views is political activists, who have become essential in selecting party nominees. Hence, party leaders emphasize ideological appeals to attract ideologically motivated

activists (Baldassarri & Gelman 2008, 413). This dynamic represents strategic competition for dominance from politicians and the political activists' sector of the mass public. Furthermore, Baldassarri and Gelman state that the wealthier group of the American public has political disagreements that reflect on the competition for dominance when they conduct lobbying activity and campaign financing (Baldassarri & Gelman 2008, 441).

From this study, we can assume that the public has genuinely different beliefs. Suppose we divide the public in subgroups, like some scholars do to examine this phenomenon. In that case, we notice that there are extreme views on party affiliates and ideologues, who are split on issues such as abortion, gay rights, the role of religion, race, and civil rights (Fiorina et al. 2005, Baldassarri & Gelman 2008, 415). The situation is different for the political elite, which has genuine political differences but simultaneously is interested in preserving its constituency (Riker 1982, 9-11. Therefore, they use party voters' political disagreement as a target to maintain their support (Baldassarri & Gelman 2008, 415). But why does the political elite need to preserve their constituency? The public's primary security lies in the politicians' dependence on the people. In other words, when the electorate is dissatisfied or expects a better performance by politicians, citizens can change elected officials if many consider so (Riker 1982, 9-11).

Frances E. Lee, in his book *The Insecure Majorities* (2016), confirms the abovementioned view. The author's work focuses on politicians and their fight to maintain or obtain a majority in Congress. The need to reach or keep the majority status in Congress comes from charring all the committees in Congress. The committee chair plays the essential role of deciding what issues will be further discussed and receive hearings. Even when

there is political bipartisan on various subjects, Congress members seek this type of power (Lee 2016, 43). In order to accomplish this, the majority of members of Congress resort to messaging. This tool has become an established responsibility for congressional party leaders and staffers in both the House and the Senate to the extent of being constantly pressured by members when the party faces an electoral setback. The goal behind messaging is for voters to choose the member's political party rather than the opposition's. Thus, voters need to be persuaded that political parties are different and that the party in power matters even when members of Congress agree on many issues (Lee 2016, 44). Politicians require voters to elect or reelect them or donate to their political campaigns. However, they must create a distinct contrast between the political parties.

In conclusion, politicians have genuine differences of beliefs; otherwise, political parties would hardly exist. Yet, they agree on more issues than what the public believes. The politicians' polarization, in this particular case, serves the goal of a competition for dominance. In Lee's words: "if an issue is to serve as a reason for voters to prefer one party to the other, it cannot be a question on which there is bipartisan consensus" (Lee 2016, 45).

Liliana Mason offers an interesting and distinctive perspective on the public political disagreement in her article *Ideologues Without Issues: The Polarizing Consequences of Ideological Identities* (2018). First, she divides the term ideology in the American electorate into two dimensions: identity-based and issue-based ideology. The latter refers to the public's political opinion about policies, whereas the former is connected to group identity (liberal and conservative). This type of identity has a psychological and emotional background that explains why liberals and conservatives in the mass public dislike each

other even when, for some scholars like Philip Converse and Walter Lipman, they have "nonattitude" or consistent political beliefs (Lippman 1925, 383, Converse 1964, 243-245, Page & Shapiro 1992, 6, Mason 2018, 282).

From the psychological perspective, identity-based ideology offers inclusion ("being part of the group'') and exclusion ("distinguishing oneself from others"). Besides, the terms liberal and conservative serve as markers of social identity. In accordance with social identity theory, ingroups are implicitly deemed superior to outgroups, and emotional attachments to them surpass rational thinking (Mason 2018, 283). This phenomenon creates affective and social polarization, where partisans dislike each other independently to issue-based ideological disagreements. Affective polarization is guided by social identities more than issue opinions because they lead to "ingroup privilege and outgroup derogation" (Mason 2018, 284). But how does identity-based ideology reflect in the American public nowadays? According to Mason's study, identity-based ideology heightens preferences for forming friendships within the ideological group, spending social time within the ideological circle, and residing near a co-ideologue. Consequently, Americans are socially separating themselves based on liberal or conservative labels, irrespective of their actual policy differences (Mason 2018, 292).

Even though Mason's work only grasps one of the effects of identity-based ideology (political polarization in the public), we can infer that identity-based ideology can lead to a group competition for dominance. As we just saw, individuals in society usually identify with social, partisan, or ideological groups that become part of their social identity by shaping their values, beliefs, and attitudes. Individuals may also adopt political positions that align with the dominant views within their social or partisan group. This strategic

behavior aims to enhance their influence, acceptance, or status within the group. This search for enhancement can make the individual's views more extreme in order to compete for dominance within the group as they align with the majority or leadership within the group. These are the individuals that Delia Baldassarri and Andrew Gelman describe as politically active (political activists, ideologues).

Conclusion

To summarize, I have found that the public has a genuine issue-based ideological political disagreement on moral, religious, racial, and civil issues. However, there is also an identity-based ideology disagreement used by subgroups like political activists and the more affluent sector of the American public to compete for dominance. Similarly, the political elite has honest political differences, but at the same time, the elite is interested in preserving its constituency. Therefore, through messaging, politicians use party voters' political conflict as a target to maintain their support.

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