

POLARIZATION

WHAT EVERYONE NEEDS TO KNOW®

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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INTRODUCTION

The months following the election and inauguration of Donald J. Trump have been a time for reflection about the state of American politics and its deep ideological, cultural, racial, regional, and economic divisions. But one aspect that contemporary discussions often miss is that these fissures have been opening over several decades and are deeply rooted in the structure of American politics and society. Indeed long before the historically divisive presidential election of 2016, the polarization of American politics has been an important concern of scholars, journalists, and elected officials.

Unfortunately, there have been few, if any, efforts to synthesize these debates in ways that are accessible to the general public. A few monographs on polarization such as Morris Fiorina's *Culture War?* and Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein's *It's Even Worse Than It Looks* have directed their arguments about specific aspects of polarization to the general public.¹ A number of edited volumes have been published that cover the range of issues related to political polarization, but the target audiences have been researchers in the social sciences and law. There have been few attempts to explain what social scientists know and don't know about the origins, development, and implications of our rising political conflicts to a general audience. This volume is intended to fill this gap.

The second chapter begins with foundational questions, such as “What is polarization?” and “How is it different than partisanship?” I define polarization as the increasing support for extreme political views relative to the support for centrist or moderate views. Partisanship, on the other hand, is reflected as a strong bias in favor of one’s party and strong dislike or prejudice against other parties. Although polarization can contribute to partisanship, and possibly vice versa, the two concepts are clearly distinct. Yet they are often conflated in the popular discourse. I argue that these distinctions are not purely “academic” but have important implications for how we understand and evaluate the performance of our political system. While I primarily focus on polarization, I address issues related specifically to partisanship throughout the book.

In chapter 3, I discuss what we know about the extent to which political elites such as elected officials, judges, and the media have polarized. The bulk of this examination focuses on the US Congress, both because its polarization has been the most studied and is arguably the most consequential. A very important part of that discussion focuses on how political scientists measure polarization. Specifically, I explain in non-technical terms how the polarization of Congress can be measured using a variety of data including roll-call votes, legislative text, and bill co-sponsorship. I also discuss how polarization of the general public is computed using public opinion polls. Importantly, I provide the necessary caveats related to the interpretation of these measures. Because some of the details are technical in nature, I include an appendix that goes into considerably more depth.

Chapter 3 establishes several important findings about elite polarization. The first is that the current era of polarization in Congress began in the middle-to-late 1970s. After several decades in which the average ideological differences between the parties were relatively stable, partisan disagreement in Congress has increased almost every term since 1978. The current period is almost the mirror opposite of the period from the

1920s to the 1950s when partisan polarization fell dramatically. Second, the trends in the US House and the Senate since the late 1800s are extremely similar. This pattern suggests that many of the forces that have generated polarization are common to both chambers of Congress. A third important finding about polarization is the extent to which the trends have been asymmetric across the parties. During the period of increased polarization, the main driver has been the increasing conservatism of the Republican party. Since the 1970s, almost every new class of GOP legislators has compiled a more conservative voting record than the party’s returning members. The pattern for the Democratic party has been quite different. Almost all leftward movement in the party can be attributed to an increased number of black and Latino/a representatives who tend to have positions located on the left wing of the party. The average position of other Democrats has not moved substantially. Finally, the chapter provides evidence that other elites have polarized as well. Studies similar to those conducted on Congress show that state legislatures, judges, and news media outlets have all polarized to some extent.

Chapter 4 evaluates the extent to which regular citizens and voters are as polarized as the elites discussed in chapter 3. Here we will see that the evidence is more mixed. It is true that there is much more disagreement on policy issues between voters who identify with the Democratic party and those who identify with the Republican party. But how to interpret that fact is open to considerable disagreement. Many scholars argue that it is indeed evidence that voters have polarized in the sense of adopting more extreme views. But other scholars are equally insistent that it reflects the fact that voters are simply better *sorted* into parties so that most conservative voters are now Republican and most liberal voters are now Democratic—something that was far from true in earlier eras. This chapter unpacks those debates and explores their implications for the debate about whether it is the elites or the voters that are to blame for polarization.² Several conclusions about voters

are noteworthy. The first is that the partisan polarization or sorting of voters occurred considerably later than the polarization of the political elites and activists. This suggests that the polarization we observe from the elites is probably not a simple reaction to changes among the electorate. Indeed it is more plausible that the positions and partisanship of the voters are a reaction to the polarization of elected officials and other elite actors. Second, despite the widely held belief that voters are polarized along a set of hot button social issues, such as abortion and gay rights, political scientists have routinely found that positions on economic and social welfare issues better predict the partisanship of voters. There are sharp disagreements, however, to the extent to which preferences on social welfare issues are in turn derived from differences in racial attitudes. Finally, I discuss the related concept of *affective polarization* that focuses on the increased salience of partisanship as a social identity. As a consequence of heightened party identification, citizens now show considerably more animus to supporters of the other party. I discuss the roles of ideological and policy polarization as well as the partisan sorting on other social identities in the rise of affective polarization.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the possible causes of congressional polarization. In doing so, I try to distinguish those causes that might have plausibly triggered the initial rise in polarization in the late 1970s from those factors that may have exacerbated or amplified those trends once polarization began. The causes discussed in chapter 5 include several of what we might call “macro” explanations. The most prominent of these is the realignment of southern white voters from the Democratic party to the Republican party in the decades following the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. I explain about how the racial politics in the pre-Civil Rights era reduced polarization on many issues, while the racial politics in the post-Civil Rights era have worked to reinforce it. Then I consider large-scale economic and social change as explanations as well as important developments

in the media environment, including cable television, the Internet, and social media. In particular, I discuss how these changes might have upset the less polarized political system as it existed in the middle of the twentieth century, and in some cases how those explanations might help us to understand the earlier era of polarization from the 1870s to the 1920s. Finally, I also discuss the role of legislative institutions and leadership in creating and exacerbating polarization. Of particular interest are the effects of the intense competition for majority control of Congress.

Chapter 6 engages prominent debates about how certain features of our electoral system, such as gerrymandered legislative districts, partisan primary nomination systems, and the private campaign finance system, may increase polarization in Congress and state legislatures. The evidence I present, however, largely rejects the idea that these institutional features are major triggers of increased polarization. Importantly, districting was less legally constrained, primaries were more partisan, and campaign finance was less regulated during the era of low polarization than today. But I give careful consideration of the extent to which these electoral features may have exacerbated some of the trends we have seen. The evidence of exacerbation, however, is not very strong in the case of redistricting and primaries, but there is mounting evidence of a substantial effect of campaign finance. But contrary to common concerns about the role of business and corporate contributions in the aftermath of the *Citizens United* decision, the real culprits are ideologically-minded individual donors whose numbers have increased dramatically over the past couple of decades. I also tackle whether major reforms, such as proportional representation or single-transferable voting, would mitigate the polarization of elected officials. While such reforms merit serious consideration, we should beware of unintended consequences related to how such reforms would work with other parts of our constitutional system.

Chapter 7 delves into questions related to the impact of polarization on policy outcomes and governance. The focus is on how polarization has affected the level and quality of policymaking in the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. The heart of the problem, I argue, is a decline in the capacity of Congress and other legislative bodies to solve problems. While Congress's decline might create opportunities for other actors, such as presidents and judges, to assert influence and power, good policymaking in our constitutional system requires a well-functioning lawmaking and oversight body.

The volume concludes with a discussion of the 2016 election and the Trump presidency. In many ways, Donald Trump's ascendancy seems to contradict many of the trends outlined in this book. His election campaign was anything but that of an orthodox conservative. He ran on rewriting trade deals long supported by Republican presidents and legislators. He promised to protect Medicare and Social Security from the sorts of reforms that have been staples of the GOP agenda for decades. One of his signature proposals was a massive increase in spending on infrastructure, despite his party's long-voiced opposition to larger deficits. Even his tough-on-immigration stance and support for the "Wall" challenged the orthodoxy of establishment Republicans, including the party's previous president and nominees. On many of these issues (but not immigration), President Trump might have found common ground with congressional Democrats. Yet as of this writing, nothing remotely bipartisan has happened since Trump was inaugurated.³

Instead, the outcomes of the Trump era have been entirely Republican orthodoxy. The major legislative achievement was a large tax bill. While a revenue-neutral restructuring of the corporate tax system would have garnered significant Democratic support, the bill morphed into an exercise in tax cutting and deficit increasing. The "reform" part of the bill meant the elimination of deductions relied on by Democratic constituencies, such as the deduction for state and local taxes. The other major

achievements of Trump's first two years in office were the successful confirmations of Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court after the GOP-led Senate eliminated the filibuster on Supreme Court nominations. But Gorsuch and Kavanaugh are the sort of Federalist Society-backed jurists that would have been on the shortlist of any Republican president. And the GOP Senate's refusal to hold hearings on President Obama's nomination of Merrick Garland in 2016 shows that they certainly did not need Donald Trump to stiffen their spine to play hardball on Supreme Court nominations. So in the end, the Trump presidency may be an example of the more things change the more they stay the same.

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WHAT IS POLITICAL POLARIZATION?

Commentators use few words to describe the American political scene as frequently as they use the word “polarized.” But unfortunately, the terms polarized and polarization have taken on such a wide variety of meanings among journalists, politicians, and scholars that they often confuse, rather than clarify, the problems that our political system faces. So one of my main tasks in this volume is to be more precise in the terminology in hopes of better explaining contemporary American politics. The formal definition of polarization is derived from that of *polarity*, which is the “state of having two opposite or contradictory tendencies, opinions, and aspects.”¹ There are usages of polarization that span almost all possible political “tendencies, opinions, and aspects.” The public has variously been described as polarized over cultural norms and practices, religion, attitudes toward subgroups, policy preferences, and partisan attachments. In some cases, the definition is stretched to encompass social and political divisions involving more than two groups—such as when polarization is used to describe conflicts among social, ethnic, and racial identities.

This book, however, focuses on a much narrower set of definitions of polarization. I focus on those political phenomena where the public and its leaders have become increasingly divided. These areas include preferences over public policy, ideological orientations, and partisan attachments. The

primary reason for this narrowing is that policy, ideological, and partisan polarization are those areas that have received far more attention from political and other social scientists and therefore have a set of arguments and findings that I believe “everyone needs to know.” Of course, there are links between cultural and social polarization that are important for understanding political polarization so I do not completely neglect these other forms of conflict.

Let me unpack the various forms of polarization: policy, ideological, and partisan. I start with policy polarization. A simple definition of *policy polarization* is a process where extreme views on some matter of public policy have become more common over time. As an example, consider attitudes toward government policies related to abortion. To simplify the discussion, let’s assume that voters are asked to evaluate three distinct policies related to abortion access. Under policy 1, abortion is legal under all circumstances and is not restricted in any way. Under policy 2, abortion is legal in most circumstances but restricted in some others. Policy 3 holds that abortion is illegal under all circumstances. We would say that policy preferences over abortion were polarizing if support for the two most extreme policies (policies 1 and 3) were growing over time relative to the centrist policy 2. Thus, polarization is distinct from uniform movements of attitudes in either a pro- or anti-abortion direction. We would not say opinion is polarizing if support for policy 3 was increasing while support for policy 1 was decreasing. Another implication of this example concerns how we measure polarization. When policy preferences are very polarized, the two extreme attitudes will have more support than the middle one. In the terminology of statistics, the distribution of polarized opinion is *bimodal*, as there are two distinctive, most common answers. Alternatively, we say opinion is unpolarized or centrist if it is *unimodal*, in that the centrist policy 2 is the single most common position. Polarization may also be related to how much *variation* there is in policy positions. In statistical terms, the variance of opinions

represents the typical deviation of individual opinions from the average (or mean) opinion. In a situation of low polarization, most voters choose the same policy position and so the statistical variance is low. In the extreme case, where voters are equally divided between policies 1 and 3, the variance is quite large.

In addition to analyzing polarization on specific policies, political scientists often discuss it in terms of broader ideological differences among voters. For now, let us think of ideology as a general orientation to politics and governance. In the United States, we often imagine ideological orientations falling on a continuum from liberal positions to conservative ones and orient them so that they range from “left” to “right.”² Conceptually, ideological polarization is similar to policy polarization. If most voters fall toward the ideological center, we’d say there is little ideological polarization. But to the extent to which liberal and conservative ideologies become more common relative to those of the center, we’d call that polarization. As before, we can identify polarization statistically by looking to see whether ideologies have become more bimodal or more variant in the population.

Figure 2.1 may be helpful in understanding what political scientists mean by polarization. The figure shows two curves representing different distributions of ideological orientations. The solid line represents what we might call a centrist distribution of preferences. In this case, the most typical position is one of moderation. Extreme liberal or conservative views are quite rare. The dashed line, however, represents a more polarized distribution. It is clearly bimodal in that the most common positions are distinctly conservative or liberal. Now moderate views are relatively less likely and extreme liberal or conservative views are no longer rare.

While these figures present polarization solely in terms of the distribution of ideological preferences, researchers often focus on how the positions of voters and politicians vary across political parties. Consequently, we can use *partisan polarization*

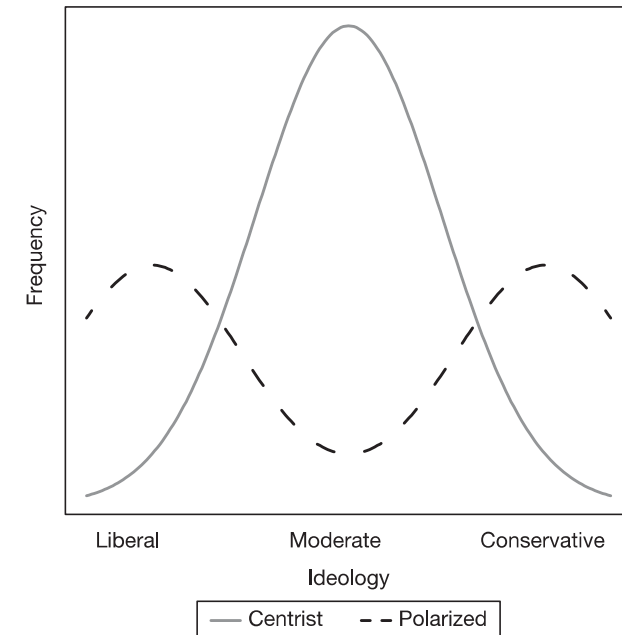


Figure 2.1: Centrist and Polarized Distributions of Preferences Solid figure shows a hypothetical centrist or unimodal distribution of ideological orientations. The dashed line shows a polarized or bimodal distribution.

to refer to situations where polarization is organized around parties. Most often, scholars use party polarization to describe situations where the policy and ideological differences between members of the Democratic and Republican parties have grown. However, as I soon discuss, this usage is controversial because it conflates two distinct trends about voters. Partisan ideological differences may grow either because there is ideological polarization between the liberals who tend to be Democrats and the conservatives who tend to be Republicans. Or partisan differences could increase without ideological polarization if there is a tendency over time for liberals to move into the Democratic party as conservatives move into the Republican party. These different trends and

patterns have important implications for how we interpret the increased divergence of opinions across the parties and the likely consequences of those changes.

2.1 What is the difference between partisanship and polarization?

The terms *polarization* and *partisanship* are often used interchangeably, but such usage often obscures important differences. As discussed earlier, polarization generally refers to differences on policy issues, ideological orientations, or value systems, while partisan polarization may refer to these differences across members of different parties. Partisanship, however, can be more general in that it may refer to any partiality one feels toward one's own party regardless of whether polarized preferences and attitudes are the source. In recent years, many scholars have argued that the rise in partisan conflict is best thought of as a rise in general partisanship that is unrelated to rising ideological or policy polarization. Many explanations have been offered as to why high levels of partisanship can persist even without underlying polarization. With respect to Congress and political elites, Frances Lee argues that the intense competition for majority control of the US House and Senate induces high levels of intra-party competition and inter-party conflict, which she dubs "teamship."³ Given the importance of majority control in setting policy and allocating patronage, this instrumental form of partisanship has been an important feature of American politics throughout its history. But in the current era of partisan parity, it has become much more salient.

Others have argued that partisanship at the mass level is less instrumental and is instead based on strong psychological attachments and social identification.⁴ From this perspective, the observed rise in political conflict in the United States is a reflection of the strengthening of "in-group" loyalties and "out-group" animosities. While partisan polarization might

underpin these rising animosities, many scholars argue that differences on policy positions across the parties are caused by partisanship, as party loyalists adopt the positions favored by their own party.⁵ In chapter 4, I report on the research that has sought to explain the rising salience of partisanship and partisan identities.

2.2 What is the difference between mass and elite polarization?

Any discussion of polarization, its sources, and its consequences should distinguish between *elite* and *mass* polarization. Social scientists use elite polarization to refer to divisions among office holders, party officials, policy intellectuals, and activists. Alternatively, mass polarization refers to that associated with normal voters and citizens. While most people assume that elite and mass polarization are closely related, that is often not the case. As long as the political elites are not perfectly representative of the electorate or not responsive to ordinary voters, we could observe increasing political conflicts among elites that are not mirrored in the broader public. The politics of abortion are a good example of this pattern. Elected politicians tend to take polarized views on the subject. Most Republican leaders have adopted a pro-life position that provides for abortions only in exceptional circumstances, such as when the life of the mother is in jeopardy.⁶ Many Democratic officeholders take the near-opposite position that there should not only be few if any restrictions on the practice but that abortion services for the poor should be supported by tax dollars. A plurality of voters reject these positions, however, preferring instead that abortion be available in most circumstances but accepting restrictions based on term. Support for public funding is low.⁷ While voters' views on abortion correlate with their partisan identification, large numbers of Democratic voters are pro-life while many Republican voters are pro-choice.⁸

Alternatively, society could become quite divided, but an elite consensus could persevere. A good example of this might

be the Vietnam War. Attitudes about the continued conflict in Vietnam became polarized in the public well before the bipartisan elite consensus in favor of US involvement broke down. By May 1967, the American public was evenly divided over the question of whether it was a “mistake” to send troops to Vietnam, but the leadership of both parties remained committed to the war until after the Tet Offensive in 1968.⁹

As I discuss in chapters 3 and 4, polarization of political elites and the masses began at very different times and have followed distinct trajectories. Specifically, the current era of elite polarization appears to have begun in the mid-to-late 1970s, while similar changes in the mass public do not emerge clearly until the 1990s. Given these differences, distinguishing between elite and mass polarization is crucial for understanding the underlying causes and the likely consequences.

2.3 *What is partisan sorting and is it different from polarization?*

In discussions about polarization, it is often noted that Democratic and Republican voters have increasingly divergent opinions on many matters of public policy. For example, in a recent report, the Pew Research Center notes that the gap between Democrats and Republicans on the value of open immigration has grown markedly.¹⁰ Eighty-four percent of Democrats agreed that “immigrants strengthen the country with their hard work and talents,” whereas only 42% of Republicans shared this view. This 42-point gap grew from only a 2-point gap in 1994.

There are two logical ways in which such a partisan gap in views on immigration can emerge. The first is voter polarization. It might be the case that partisans have increasingly taken the extreme positions. Democrats may have increasingly adopted very pro-immigrant positions while Republican voters have become much more anti-immigrant. These changes of voter attitudes lead to the large partisan gap on the question about the contributions of immigrants.

But it is also possible that opinions about immigration have not polarized. Perhaps voters have just sorted into parties so that voters with pro-immigration attitudes now overwhelmingly identify as Democrats while immigration restrictionists have migrated into the Republican party. Such a pattern of *party sorting* can account for the increased differences across partisans even if the distribution of immigration attitudes in the population remains unchanged or moves uniformly in one direction or the other. In this case, it is clear that attitudes have shifted in a pro-immigration direction. Roughly 30% agreed that immigrants strengthened the country in 1994. In the 2017 survey, 65% did. So the most likely cause of the partisan gap is sorting.

Partisan sorting can arise in two different ways. First, voters can choose parties based on their agreement with the party’s position on salient issues. In the immigration example, an anti-immigrant Democrat might recognize that the Republican party has increasingly adopted positions closer to her own, and therefore she decides to switch her party allegiance. I call this *ideology-driven* sorting. Since party switching is relatively rare,¹¹ ideology-based sorting is probably most pronounced for new voters entering the electorate. A new anti-immigrant voter in 1994 may not have recognized an important difference between the parties on immigration, but one entering the electorate in 2017 clearly would. Those who see immigration as a sufficiently important issue might use these differences in deciding which party to support.

The second mechanism is that partisans may decide to adopt the policy positions of their preferred party. So an anti-immigrant Democrat might alter her views about immigration to correspond to the dominant viewpoint of her party. The same might be true for pro-immigrant Republicans. This *party-driven* sorting mechanism is probably most pronounced in those cases where voters do not have strong views about immigration and are therefore susceptible to persuasion and social pressure from other partisans and party elites. To the extent

party is an important social identity, many voters may simply decide that maintaining that identity requires supporting their party's dominant view.

Throughout the remainder of the book, I try to distinguish between conclusions related to voter polarization and those related to sorting. But in many cases, it is not clear which of the mechanisms is responsible for the diverging views of partisans. I describe such findings as *partisan divergence*, which of course can be caused by either polarization or sorting.

2.4 What is belief constraint and ideological consistency?

Many scholars of public opinion are interested in another concept closely related to polarization. *Ideological consistency* is the propensity of a voter to have either all liberal, all moderate, or all conservative views. Since the seminal work of Philip Converse, this phenomenon is also called *belief constraint*, which Converse defines as "the success we would have in predicting, given initial knowledge that an individual holds a specified attitude, that he holds certain further ideas and attitudes." For example, if we could predict a person's position on tax cuts from her position on free trade or from that on gay rights, we'd say that those beliefs exhibit constraint and that the voter is ideologically consistent.

While the concepts are distinct, increases in ideological consistency and belief constraint have manifestations that are similar to polarization and sorting. A consistent liberal is not only likely to have liberal views across the board but is also likely to only support liberal politicians and is therefore likely to join the Democratic party. They disagree strongly with consistent conservatives. However, if beliefs were less constrained and consistent, the typical voter might support liberal positions sometimes and conservative ones at others. She might be likely to split her votes between Democratic and Republican politicians. Moreover, pairs of opposed partisans are more likely to agree on at least some issues.

Chapter 4 reviews the evidence about the ideological consistency of voters and how it has changed over time.

2.5 Who is polarized—the public or the politicians?

As I stressed earlier, it is important to distinguish between mass and elite polarization. This is true not only because they are distinct phenomena, but because the evidence points to a much weaker relationship between polarization at the two levels than many people presume. The academic consensus that political elites have polarized over the past forty years is quite strong and is bolstered by both qualitative and quantitative evidence. Noteworthy are qualitative accounts, which often combine historical research and participant observation.¹² There are also several excellent histories of the intra-party battles among partisan elites that culminated in our polarized party system.¹³

As I explain in some detail in chapter 3, the starting point for many quantitative studies of polarization is the robust observation of rising partisan differences in roll-call voting behavior in Congress. The bipartisan coalitions of the 1950s and 1960s have given way to the party-line voting of the twenty-first century. Also discussed in chapter 3, similar patterns of elite polarization have been documented for state legislatures, the judiciary, and large campaign donors. Both the quantitative and qualitative evidence suggest that the late 1970s were a turning point. To be sure portents of the intra- and inter-party conflicts that led to polarization and sorting were in play much earlier, but the predominance of the liberal wing of the Democratic party and the conservative wing of the Republican party was not cemented until the late 1970s.¹⁴

The extent to which the mass public is polarized is a topic of somewhat more vigorous academic debate that is taken up in detail in chapter 4. Longitudinal studies of voter opinion generally do not provide much evidence of polarization or significant sorting until the 1990s.¹⁵ Consequently, it is hard to

sustain claims that mass polarization is the primary cause of elite polarization given that elite polarization precedes it by about fifteen years. Yet it does not appear that the centrist, unsorted electorate placed too many constraints on the efforts of the parties to reorganize themselves along ideological lines. The comparison of the 1964 and 1980 presidential elections is instructive, if imperfect. In both cases, a very conservative Republican candidate challenged a Democratic president from the moderate wing of the party. In the first instance, Barry Goldwater lost forty-four states plus the District of Columbia. In the second, Ronald Reagan won forty-four states. While there are many differences in the context of the two elections, it seems clear that the electorate was far more tolerant of a conservative message in 1980, despite the apparent lack of polarized public opinion.¹⁶

The debates about the magnitude and timing of mass polarization focus on how to interpret the increased difference between Republican and Democratic voters in terms of general ideological orientations and specific policy preferences. One school of thought, led by Morris Fiorina, argues that these differences can be explained almost entirely by the ideological sorting of voters into the parties.¹⁷ Fiorina and his coauthors often point to the fact that most voters remain fairly moderate in their expressed policy positions.¹⁸ Moreover in studies that produce estimates of voter issue positions that are comparable to legislator positions, representatives are generally found to take positions that are considerably more extreme than those of their constituents.¹⁹ Since voters do not seem to increasingly take on extreme positions, the partisan differences are likely caused by sorting, with liberal voters aligning with the Democratic party and conservative voters aligning with the Republican party.

This sorting interpretation has been challenged by Alan Abramowitz who observes that while many citizens are moderate, those most likely to participate in politics increasingly take extreme policy positions.²⁰ The greater the level of

engagement the more polarized are the preferences. Highly informed voters also appear to be polarized. While some moderate voters have chosen middle-of-the-road positions for substantive policy reasons, many others are uninformed, unengaged, or apathetic, checking off the middle position on surveys due to the lack of an opinion. Of course, at very high levels of voter engagement and sophistication, the lines between elite and mass begin to blur.

Despite the lack of evidence that voter polarization causes elite polarization, it is clear that both voter sorting and the polarization of the engaged electorate can reinforce if not exacerbate elite party divisions. Even if voters are merely sorted into parties, the incentives for parties to take positions that appeal to supporters of the other party will diminish—leading to greater partisan polarization and greater incentives for voters to sort.

2.6 *Why is polarization bad?*

Very few people use the word “polarization” to describe a healthy state of political affairs. It is almost always used as a near-synonym for dysfunctional conflict. But at the same time, we might imagine situations in which polarization were too low. If there is little polarization among the public, we might worry about the costs of conformity. Few citizens will challenge current practices and conventions, and there would be little impetus for social progress and reform. For example, the American electorate of the 1950s demonstrated a very high degree of consensus on the issues that were on the public agenda, but this consensus left issues related to the rights of African Americans, ethnic minorities, women, immigrants, and the LGBTQ community largely unaddressed.

Polarization among political elites and the parties is also not unambiguously bad. Indeed, the consensus among political scientists is that democracy works best when parties provide the voters with distinct menus of policy positions. Some degree of polarization is necessary for political representation and

accountability. When the parties do not take distinctive positions, voters lack a clear choice with regard to policy. Moreover, heterodox parties reduce the usefulness of partisan cues as to which candidates to support. But when parties are distinct and coherent, voters can better register their views through their vote. Additionally, when parties push different policies, voters know who to hold accountable when a policy approach fails. These arguments, known as Responsible Party Theory, were summed up nicely in the American Political Science Association's report from its Committee on Political Parties in 1950:

In a two-party system, when both parties are weakened or confused by internal divisions or ineffective organization it is the nation that suffers. When the parties are unable to reach and pursue responsible decisions, difficulties accumulate and cynicism about all democratic institutions grows. An effective party system requires, first, that the parties are able to bring forth programs to which they commit themselves and, second, that the parties possess sufficient internal cohesion to carry out these programs . . .

On the other hand, . . . a coalition that cuts across party lines, as a regular thing, tends to deprive the public of a meaningful alternative. When such coalitions are formed after the elections are over, the public usually finds it difficult to understand the new situation and to reconcile it with the purpose of the ballot. Moreover, on that basis it is next to impossible to hold either party responsible for its political record. This is a serious source of public discontent.²¹

In sum, without some differentiation of the political parties, it would be almost impossible for the typical voter to have any influence over the direction of public policy. But as I discuss in chapter 7, there is considerable evidence that the level of polarization among the elites and the public is well to the warm side of the Goldilocks point.

2.7 What have we learned?

Polarization has become a catch-all word used to describe almost any form of political conflict and disagreement. But understanding the causes of political dissensus requires distinguishing polarization from many other sources of partisan conflict. While partisanship, partisan sorting, and ideological consistency may be closely related to polarization, it is important to identify them as distinct phenomena. For example, the extent to which conflict reflects polarization or sorting has implications for the extent to which conflict is bottom-up from the voters or top-down from the elites.

It is equally important to consider who is polarized—elites and elected officials or regular ordinary voters. It is entirely possible that one group but not the other is polarized. The question of the extent to which elites are polarized is taken up in the next chapter, while voter polarization is considered in chapter 4.

Finally, it is important to remember that polarization is not always a bad thing. If the parties did not offer distinctive public policy positions, voters could hardly be in a position to influence public policy through their votes. We might also be wary of those calls to reduce polarization in the public that would involve repressing certain viewpoints. To riff on Madison in *Federalist 10*, there are two methods of removing the causes of polarization: the one, by destroying the liberty which is essential to its existence; the other, by giving to every citizen the same opinions, the same passions, and the same interests. Clearly, the first is worse than the disease, and the second is unlikely to happen given the diversity of American public life. But unfortunately, as I discuss in chapter 7, Madison's constitution may not provide the needed relief in controlling polarization's effects.

3

ARE PARTISAN ELITES POLARIZED?

One of the signature achievements of Barack Obama's presidency was the passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) in 2010. Because the bill received almost no Republican support, its passage required a very complicated set of parliamentary maneuvers to get through the House and the Senate and onto the president's desk. The Republicans did not accept this defeat lightly. They immediately began calling for the "root and branch" repeal of the ACA and supported challenges to its provisions in court. After taking control of the House in 2011, the GOP voted dozens of times for repeal despite the fact that the repeal could not pass the Senate and would have been vetoed by President Obama.

That the Affordable Care Act would become such an object of partisan division is somewhat ironic. Its most prominent provision was the so-called Individual Mandate, which required all citizens to buy insurance or pay a fine. This proposal, however, had originated at the Heritage Foundation, a right-of-center think tank. Moreover, it had been the centerpiece of GOP presidential candidate Mitt Romney's health insurance reforms in Massachusetts.

Following the Republican takeover of the Senate in 2014 and Donald Trump's election in 2016, the Republicans finally had an opportunity to repeal the ACA. But it was also an opportunity for the Democrats to withhold any support for reform and

force the Republicans to push their legislation through the eye of a procedural needle. When GOP unity broke and Senator John McCain went famously "thumbs down" on the ACA repeal, the GOP had to settle for removing the mandate through its tax cut/reform legislation. This partial repeal was expected to lead to higher premiums and lower rates of coverage.¹

The response to the demise of the individual mandate of many Democratic activists and officials has not been to campaign for the restoration, strengthening, and other improvements to the ACA. Instead, increasing numbers of progressives now want to replace the ACA with a single-payer health plan similar to Medicare—the so-called Medicare-for-All option.²

The saga of the ACA contains many of the elements that have marked the polarization of American political and policy elites: bitter partisan division, the willingness to play procedural hardball rather than negotiate, and the abandonment of centrist policy ideas such as the individual mandate. And the end result of this clash—like so many others—may be ineffectual and counterproductive policies.

Yet it is reasonable to question whether such conflicts are unique to our time and reflect anything other than the normal give-and-take of American politics. One can always point to some intense ideological or partisan struggle of the past to argue that American politics has always been rough and tumble and divisive. While these episodes undoubtedly show that there was never a time in our history that we were governed by cool, dispassionate deliberation among citizen-scholar-statesmen, argument by example is not very helpful in establishing broader historical patterns and developments. To capture those trends, we require much more systematic evidence.

Unlike voters who have been regularly asked questions about their policy views and partisanship, the lack of such information precludes direct assessment of the polarization of the views of elite partisan actors. Thus, scholars have had

to use a wide variety of other data to learn about elite partisan conflict and its sources. One important source of information is legislative roll-call voting that has the advantage of covering thousands of legislators over large swaths of history. But the inferences from roll-call voting are not always direct, so some claims about elite polarization remain somewhat contested. Recent efforts, however, to measure elite polarization from other sources have been very helpful in clarifying some arguments and dispelling others.

Because the use of roll-call votes to measure polarization raises a wide variety of methodological issues, I dedicate a substantial part of this chapter to discussing the strengths and weakness of various measures. Because no measure of elite polarization is perfect, I highlight those results that hold up across a wide variety of measures. A slightly more technical discussion of some of the issues raised appears in Appendix A.

3.1 How do we measure elite polarization?

As previously noted in chapter 2, congressional roll-call voting has been a very important source of measuring elite polarization. Given that every member of the US House and Senate casts hundreds of public roll-call votes per year on a wide variety of public policy matters, the congressional voting record provides a window into how partisan and regional political conflicts have evolved over time.

One of the simplest ways in which roll-call votes can be used to measure polarization is to compute *party voting scores*. A legislator's party voting score is simply the percentage of votes she casts that agree with those of a majority of her party. At an aggregate level, a party vote is a roll call in which a majority of one party votes against a majority of the other party. Thus, a plausible measure of congressional polarization is the percentage of roll calls that can be classified as party votes.

Figure 3.1 shows the percentage of roll-call votes in each congressional term where one party voted against another.

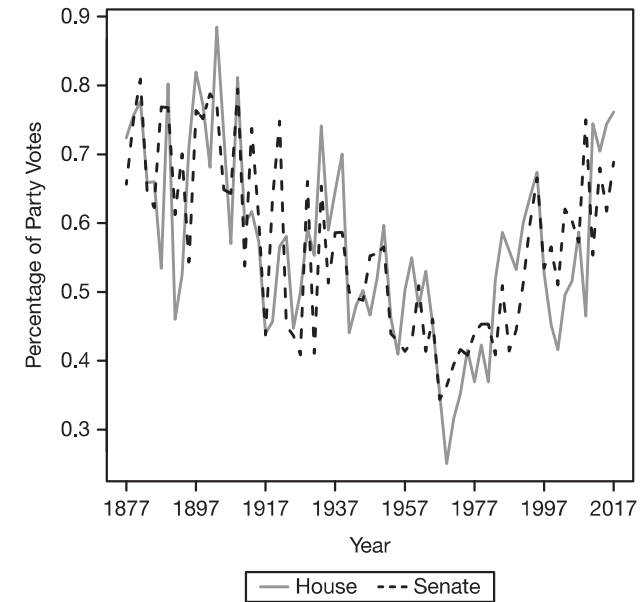


Figure 3.1: Party Voting in the US Congress Figure shows for each term and chamber the percentage of roll calls in which a majority of one party voted against a majority of the other.

These measures go back to 1877, the first congressional term after Reconstruction following the Civil War.³ Although the party voting measures are noisy and bounce around from term to term, some clear patterns and trends are evident. First, levels of partisan voting are highly correlated across the House and the Senate. As party voting rises in one chamber, it also tends to rise in the other. Second, party voting rates were high in the late nineteenth century and then began falling through much of the twentieth century. But party voting turned sharply upward in the mid-to-late 1970s—the period in which political scientists generally agree that our contemporary polarized party system emerged.

While figure 3.1 reveals much about the history of polarization in Congress, a significant limitation of party voting measures is that they are hard to decompose into each individual

legislator's contribution to polarization. Consider an example from recent years. The current Republican conference in the House has roughly three factions—a moderate one, a mainstream conservative one, and an extremely conservative Tea Party faction. Sometimes the moderates and mainstream conservatives vote against the Tea Party. Sometimes the Tea Party and the mainstream conservatives vote against the moderates, but we rarely see the moderates and the Tea Party gang up on the mainstreamers. The result might be that a moderate and a Tea Party member have the same party voting score. Yet clearly, the Tea Party member contributes much more to the polarization of Congress as a whole than does the Republican moderate. A second concern with party voting measures are that they may be heavily influenced by the composition of the roll-call vote agenda. For example, if a particular congressional term witnesses a lot of procedural party-line votes, it may appear more partisan, even if there is a substantial amount of bipartisanship on more substantive votes.

Given these concerns with party voting measures, political scientists have developed many other measures of roll-call voting behavior to assess polarization. The earliest alternative approach involved the use of interest group ratings. Interest group ratings of legislators have been compiled by a very diverse set of advocacy groups, most notably the Americans for Democratic Action, the American Conservative Union, and the League of Conservation Voters. Many of these ratings go back a long time. Though precise details differ across interest groups, these ratings are generally constructed in the following way:

1. An interest group identifies a set of roll calls that are important to the group's legislative agenda.
2. The group identifies the position on the roll call that supports the group's agenda.
3. A rating is computed by dividing the number of votes in support of the group's agenda by the total number of votes identified by the group.

For example, suppose an interest group chooses twenty votes. A legislator who votes favorably eighteen times gets a 90% rating, and one who supports the group five times gets a 25% rating. From these ratings, it is straightforward to compute polarization by comparing the average score of Democrats with the average score of Republicans.

Clearly, the use of interest group ratings has many advantages. First, the scores directly relate to the policy concerns of the groups that compile them. The League of Conservation Voters scores are based on environmental votes while the National Right to Life Committee chooses votes on abortion, euthanasia, and stem cell research. Second, groups often focus on substantively and politically important votes. By contrast, the party vote measures and the statistical models discussed next use all or almost all votes. Clearly, the expertise of the interest group in identifying key amendment or procedural votes adds considerable value to the measures. Third, interest group ratings can distinguish between party extremists and party moderates in a way that party vote scores cannot.⁴ Finally, interest group ratings are easy to understand. A rating of p means that legislator x supported group y 's position p percent of the time.

But the use of interest group ratings to measure legislative polarization has a number of drawbacks:

1. The ratings can be lumpy. Since relatively few votes are used, scores can only take on a relatively small number of values. For example, if a group only uses twenty votes, there are only twenty-one unique scores. So legislators with very different policy preferences may end up with the same score.
2. It is difficult to compare interest group ratings over time. The scales of any interest group rating depend on the exact votes chosen over any legislative session. Since the nature of the congressional agenda changes, we should

not confidently conclude that a score of 80% in one year is the same as a score of 80% in another year.⁵

3. Interest groups often choose votes to create the appearance of polarization.⁶ The goal of many groups is to create interest group ratings that clearly distinguish between their friends and their enemies. Thus, they will not choose votes where those two groups agree. The result is an “artificial extremism” that amplifies any measure of polarization.

One of the first important studies of congressional polarization was conducted by Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal. They used a statistical model designed to incorporate multiple interest group ratings and address some of the problems listed above.⁷ Poole and Rosenthal found that beginning in the mid-1970s, American politics at the congressional level became much more divisive. More Democrats staked out consistently liberal positions, and more Republicans supported the menu of conservative ones. The primary evidence in that study, which focused exclusively on the Senate, were the ratings issued by interest groups such as the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), the League of Conservation Voters (LCV), and the United States Chamber of Commerce.

To overcome some of the limitations of interest group ratings, political scientists have developed methods to estimate the positions of legislators on an ideological scale. These methods assume that legislators make their choices in accordance with the *spatial model of voting*. In the spatial model, each legislator is assumed to have a position on a liberal-conservative dimension. This position is termed the *ideal point*. The ideal point is directly analogous to a rating if the interest group is either more liberal or more conservative than all of the legislators.

Just as the 435 representatives and 100 senators are assumed to have ideal points, analysts allow each roll call to be represented by *yea* and *nay* positions on the liberal-conservative scale. For example, a proposal to move the minimum wage

to fifteen dollars per hour from its current seven dollars and twenty-five cents would plot a liberal *yea* position against a conservative *nay* position. A proposal to unwind banking regulation would pit a conservative *yea* position against a liberal *nay*. The underlying assumption of the spatial model is that each legislator votes *yea* or *nay* depending on which outcome location is closer to his ideal point. Any legislator whose ideal point is closer to a \$15 minimum wage than to a \$7.25 one would vote *yea*. The legislators whose ideal points align better with the point representing the proposal for banking deregulation will support it.

Of course, the legislator may make “mistakes” and depart from the predicted vote. Such deviations may be the result of pressures from campaign contributors, constituents, convictions, or other factors. For example, a legislator who might have been expected to vote against banking deregulation might have been persuaded by a lobbyist just before the vote, resulting in support for the measure. Since the analyst cannot possibly observe all such encounters, we model them as “random errors.” Using the assumptions of spatial voting with error, one can estimate the ideal points of the members of Congress directly from the hundreds or thousands of roll-call choices made by each legislator. Moreover, one can also estimate the positions of the *yea* and *nay* outcomes.

I discuss the logic of ideal point estimation in more detail in Appendix A, but its underlying intuition is straightforward. From the roll-call voting record, we can easily see who votes with whom and how often. Those who vote together with a very high frequency are assumed to have similar ideal points. As a pair of legislators vote together less frequently, the algorithm moves their ideal points further apart. This logic allows one to estimate ideal points on a left-right scale. Liberals are those who often vote with liberals against moderates and conservatives. Conservatives are those who frequently vote with other conservatives against moderates and liberals. Moderates vote with both liberals and conservatives on a

regular basis. An iterative computer algorithm sorts all of this out. Although there are a large variety of approaches to ideal point estimation, I focus primarily on results of the DW-NOMINATE algorithm.⁸ As I discuss later, other approaches reveal very similar findings with regard to polarization.

Once we estimate the ideal points on the liberal-conservative scale, measuring polarization is straightforward. One need only compute the differences in the typical position of Democratic and Republican legislators. While some scholars prefer to measure the difference in party medians, I focus on the difference in mean (average) party positions. There are a number of other options for measuring polarization such as the average difference between members of opposite parties or the axiomatic measures of Joan-Maria Esteban and Debraj Ray.⁹ Two other common measures are the partisan overlap and the percentage of moderates. The partisan overlap is a measure that counts the number of members whose ideal point lies between the most liberal Republican member and the most conservative Democratic member. During the 1960s and 1970s, the partisan overlap was large as some of Congress's most liberal members were Republicans and some of its most conservative members were Democrats. Today the partisan overlap in the US House and Senate is zero as the most liberal Republican is positioned to the right of the most conservative Democrat. Similarly, the percentage of moderates is a count of the number of members who fall within a prespecified range of ideal points, say from -0.2 to 0.2. The percentages of moderates in the House and the Senate have fallen when measured across a wide variety of ranges. Ultimately, the use of these different metrics has very little impact on the basic story of legislative polarization in the United States. Figure 3.2 shows the levels of polarization as measured by the difference in party means on the DW-NOMINATE scale since the end of the Reconstruction era.

Let me note several important takeaways. First, polarization as measured by DW-NOMINATE shows the same broad patterns as the level of party voting illustrated in Figure 3.1.

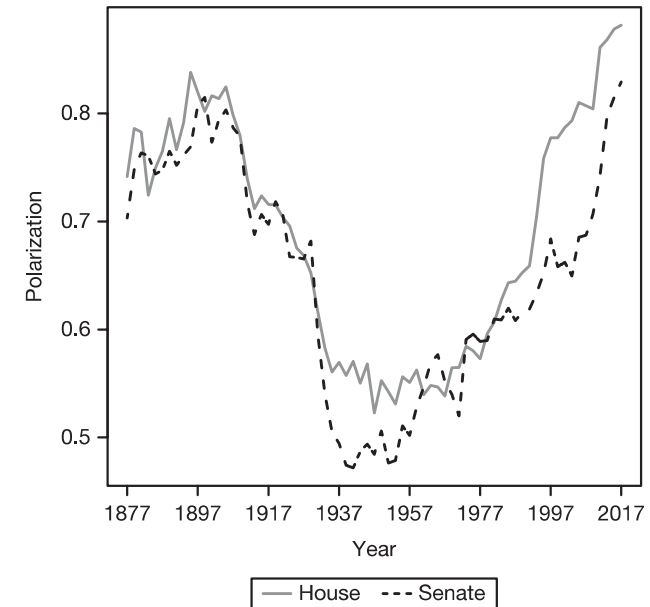


Figure 3.2: Polarization in the US Congress Figure shows the mean differences between Republicans and Democrats on the DW-NOMINATE scale.

There is considerably less short-term fluctuation in the yearly DW-NOMINATE measures, however. This is because the DW-NOMINATE measure is less influenced by year-to-year changes in the content of the congressional agenda. As we saw with party voting, polarization was high in the nineteenth century and then fell from the 1910s to the 1930s. It remained relatively low through the 1970s before growing to all-time highs by the 2000s. Second, given that there is less year-to-year fluctuation, it is easier to see that there are few true breakpoints in the polarization trends. Polarization tends to be either stable, continuously falling, or continuously rising. As I discuss later, this fact has important implications for evaluating plausible explanations for rising polarization.

Third, as we saw with party voting, there are no important differences in the trends of the House and the Senate. While

currently the House is more polarized than the Senate, there is no general pattern. In earlier periods, the Senate was the more polarized. Most importantly, however, polarization in the House and the Senate turned sharply upward at approximately the same time in the middle of the 1970s. As I discuss later, polarization is also evident in state legislative bodies over the past twenty years. Thus, any explanations for polarization that depend on House versus Senate differences or federal versus state differences will not take us very far.

3.2 *Why do you assume legislative voting occurs only on the liberal-conservative dimension?*

In principle, the voting behavior of a legislator may vary dramatically from one issue to another. A legislator might take a pro-intervention position on environmental regulation and a pro-market position on financial regulation. There may be little or no correlation of her voting on abortion and her voting on agricultural subsidies. But empirically this is not the case. The liberal-conservative ideal point models previously discussed do a very good job explaining congressional voting. Legislators tend to exhibit what Philip Converse calls *belief constraint*.¹⁰ In the context of contemporary congressional politics, examples of belief constraint abound. If we know a legislator's position on the minimum wage, we can be fairly confident about her views about income tax rates, financial regulation, and labor unions. We can also make reasonable predictions about her positions on gay marriage, abortion, defense policy, and affirmative action.

Roll-call analyses such as DW-NOMINATE can be very helpful in assessing the degree of belief constraint in Congress. If there is little or no constraint, we would need to estimate different ideal points for each distinct policy area. If abortion preferences and tax preferences were completely different, votes on abortion would have no explanatory power for votes on tax rates. Consequently, many issue dimensions would be

required to explain congressional voting. But suppose constraint were high so that abortion views perfectly predict tax preferences. Then we would need to estimate only one set of ideal points. These ideal points would do an equally good job predicting votes on both issues. Politics would be "one dimensional."

Studies of congressional voting typically conclude that voting is very low dimensional. It can largely be explained by two or fewer dimensions of ideal points. As Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal have documented, the bulk of congressional voting can be explained by a dimension that corresponds to the liberal to conservative continuum. The liberals on this dimension support higher minimum wages, more progressive taxation, tighter regulations, liberalized abortion policies, and gay marriage.¹¹ Conservatives support lower minimum wages, lower taxes and regulation, banning abortion, and oppose same-sex marriage. But Poole and Rosenthal also note that during specific historical periods, a second dimension helps explain voting patterns that are not well captured by the liberal-conservative scale. This second dimension generally explains regional conflicts, such as those centered on slavery and civil rights for African Americans.

One of the most prominent features of our current era is that polarization has gone hand-in-hand with a decline in the importance of this second dimension. In the 1950s and 1960s, the two dimensional version of DW-NOMINATE explained from 5% to 6% more roll-call voting decisions than the one-dimensional version. By the 2000s, the second dimension contributed less than 0.5% to the explanatory power of the model. The explanatory power of the one-dimensional model grew from about 80% to well over 90% over the same period.¹² Thus, almost every vote was one where a conservative coalition voted against a liberal coalition, and few individual legislators cast votes that defected from this pattern.

This change in the dimensionality of congressional voting is largely the result of changes in the politics of race. Racial

issues that were once distinct from legislators' positions on the liberal-conservative dimension are now well explained by it. In other words, a legislator's position on civil rights in the 1960s was distinct from his position on taxes and government regulation. By the 1990s, the positions of legislators on affirmative action were highly correlated with their position on economic issues. Moreover, issues such as welfare and redistribution were highly racialized.¹³

In chapter 7, I consider the role of polarization in producing legislative gridlock. It is important to note that low dimensionality might also be an important constraint on the legislative process. Low dimensionality substantially limits the types of coalitions that we can expect to form, making it harder to construct a winning majority of legislators.

3.3 Are there other sources of data for measuring congressional polarization?

Indicators and measures of polarization based on information other than roll-call voting have also been developed. One example is the National Political Awareness Test (NPAT), a survey of state and federal legislative candidates, administered by Project Vote Smart, a non-partisan organization. The questions asked by Project Vote Smart cover a wide range of policy matters, including foreign policy, national security, international affairs, social issues, fiscal policy, environmentalism, criminal justice, and many more. Most of the survey questions are asked in a yes or no format so that the data have a form very similar to that of roll-call voting. Stephen Ansolobehere and his colleagues use these surveys to study candidate positioning in US House elections and to disentangle the effects of party and preferences in roll-call voting.¹⁴ Most importantly, these studies observe considerably more polarization in member roll-call voting records than in their survey responses. They interpret this pattern as evidence that party leaders and party constituencies pressure members into more

extreme positions than those based on their true preferences. But because the NPAT survey responses are disseminated to the media and voters, it is not clear a priori that the survey response is a better measure of true legislative preferences than the roll-call voting record. Moreover, Boris Shor and I do not find systematic evidence of greater polarization in roll calls than survey responses in our study of state legislatures.¹⁵ While NPAT surveys have been very useful in the study of polarization, they have two limitations. The first is that they are only available back through the middle of the 1990s, so they do not provide the coverage needed to understand the first part of the current rise in polarization. Second, the response rates are modest and declining over time, so scholars have to worry about the possibility of response biases. If extreme members are less likely to answer surveys than moderate members, polarization would be underestimated.

Another valuable source of data on polarization comes from campaign contributions. Since the 1980s, all federal candidates have been required to report all contributions exceeding two hundred dollars to the Federal Elections Commissions. Many states and cities have similar reporting requirements for their elections. By examining which interest groups and which individuals give to which candidates, we can apply a logic similar to that of roll-call voting analysis to recover estimates of the candidates and those of the contributors. One of the earliest attempts to use campaign finance data for this purpose was my work with Keith Poole where we estimated the positions of House candidates and political action committees (PACs).¹⁶ More recently, Adam Bonica has improved on these methods to estimate the ideological positions of candidates for all federal and state elections as well as the positions of PACs and individual contributors.¹⁷ Bonica has dubbed these measures *CFscores* (short for "campaign finance scores"). Polarization measures based on the *CFscores* of US House members and senators have grown markedly since the 1980s, just as we find in the roll-call voting measures.

Legislative polarization may also be measured by examining the patterns of sponsorship and co-sponsorship of legislation. As part of the legislative process, legislators often add their names to pending pieces of legislation as indications of support. In general, patterns of co-sponsorship of legislation are considerably less partisan than roll-call voting. Laurel Harbridge reports that the percentage of bills with bipartisan co-sponsorship coalitions fell only 20% from the early 1970s to 1995 as compared to the 50% increase in party voting on roll calls, while Nathan Canen and colleagues report that House members are only about 8–10% less likely to join a cosponsorship network with a cross-partisan.¹⁸ But there are a number of reasons why we might expect less partisanship on co-sponsorship coalitions than on roll calls, survey responses, or campaign contributions. First, successful legislation generally requires bipartisan coalitions because of the supermajority requirements associated with bicameralism, the filibuster, and the presidential veto.¹⁹ James Curry and Frances Lee have documented that, despite polarization, some bipartisanship tends to be the norm on enacted legislation.²⁰ So co-sponsors from the other party will generally be helpful in building a successful coalition. Second, opposition partisans may be overrepresented in co-sponsorship coalitions relative to their party's support of the bill. Consider a Republican bill sponsor. If she understands that a modest amount of Democratic support is needed for the bill to pass, a Democratic co-sponsor may be more valuable than an additional Republican. So the sponsor may target those Democrats who might plausibly support the bill. Harbridge defines a bipartisan co-sponsorship coalition as one where 20% of the members are from the opposite party from the original sponsor. She also reports that in recent years the median bill with co-sponsors had around 10 co-sponsors. Thus, targeting two or three opposition party members would be sufficient to classify the median co-sponsored bill as bipartisan given her scheme.

In recent years, several scholars have been using the text from congressional speeches and bills to improve the estimation of ideal points. The logic of using text to estimate ideal points is very similar to that of using roll-call votes. In the roll-call setting, ideological allies are those who vote together. In text analysis, allies are those who talk alike. The ideological content of speeches is identifiable from the fact that liberals and conservatives tend to emphasize distinct phrases and arguments. Conservatives talk about “death taxes,” while liberals refer to “estate taxes.” Conservatives distinguish between “pro-life” and “pro-abortion,” while liberals classify views as “pro-choice” and “anti-abortion.”

While one can plausibly estimate ideal points based on text alone, many applications use roll calls and text together to improve upon estimates based on one source or the other. Sean Gerrish and David Blei use roll-call data to help orient and interpret preference estimates based on text, while In Song Kim and coauthors develop procedures to estimate ideal points using text and ideal points together.²¹

Another use of text analysis is to use the text of bills or expert descriptions to help identify the dimensionality of voting. Sean Gerrish and David Blei use a procedure known as topic modeling to estimate the probability that a given bill is related to a particular topic (e.g., foreign policy, regulation, and the like). They then estimate a model where every member has an overall liberal-conservative ideal point that may shift to the left or the right on a given topic.²² They observe that the level of polarization in the baseline ideal points is greater than polarization from a model that ignores the topic-specific effects. They find, however, considerable variation in polarization and party overlap across topics.²³

One advantage of incorporating text and speech into ideal point estimates is that ideal point and polarization measures can be extended to news organizations, think tanks, and policy intellectuals.²⁴ Given the network structure and ideological content of social media usage, data from platforms such as

Facebook and Twitter have emerged as useful sources of information about the preferences of politicians, voters, and other political actors. Pablo Barberá, for example, uses data from Twitter on who follows whom. His statistical model is similar to a roll-call model where “following” is the rough equivalent of “voting for.” From the set of members of Congress with Twitter accounts, he is able to produce ideal point measures that correlate very highly with DW-NOMINATE estimates. Importantly, he observes a substantial partisan gap in the Twitter ideal points in the House and very minimal preference overlap in the Senate.²⁵

In summary, with the possible exception of analyses of co-sponsorship networks, findings of high and growing polarization are borne out in a very large number of quantitative indicators. While any single measure is subject to many caveats and criticisms, the collection of evidence across a wide variety of data tells almost the same story about the increasing polarization of legislators over the past forty years.

3.4 Do roll-call ideal points really reflect congressional ideology?

A very important question about ideal points, whether measured by roll-call votes, campaign contributions, or speeches, is what exactly they measure. While we often use the shorthand of calling them ideology measures, it is hard to argue for the proposition that DW-NOMINATE or other ideal points are pure measures of legislator ideology. Clearly, partisanship, constituency interests, and regionalism impact the estimates of legislator positions on these scales. It is equally clear that even if the scores were purged of these other factors, the resulting ideological scales would not pass a political philosophy seminar. But this is also true of the “ideologies” that constitute much of the public discourse, or at least the part that goes on outside of elite political magazines.

Nevertheless, I contend that DW-NOMINATE scores largely reflect an ideology-like substance. Let’s call this substance *ideo-lite*. Ideo-lite shares two features with ideology. First, ideo-lite shares the ability to link choices across different issues together. Unlike full-strength, political-theory-seminar ideology this requires that the linkage be born of logical deductions from first principles, the issue linkages in ideo-lite may be largely politically and socially constructed. Second, ideo-lite generates consistency across legislative behavior over time, just as we would expect of the full-strength version. Finally, ideo-lite is not reducible to party or constituency. Like ideology, we would expect to see correlations due to the selection effects related to the processes of party affiliation and elections, but ideo-lite has explanatory power even when those factors are accounted for.

There is a substantial amount of evidence that DW-NOMINATE ideal points contain ideo-lite. First, DW-NOMINATE ideal points clearly have significant explanatory power for votes across a wide variety of substantive issues. That DW-NOMINATE is also very successful in capturing intra-party divisions suggests that the issue linkages that it uncovers do not simply reflect partisan agendas. Second, ideal point estimates are quite stable for politicians throughout their career. Of course, there are a few prominent examples of politicians whose positions did change, such as John McCain and Kirsten Gillibrand. But for the most part, legislators’ ideal points only move significantly if they switch parties (and, of course, party switching is quite rare).²⁶ Even a member whose constituency changes quite dramatically, either by elevation to the Senate or through major redistricting, rarely changes positions in a significant way. In a very careful study, Keith Poole shows that the assumption that legislators maintain the same ideological position throughout their careers performs just as well statistically as the assumption that legislators are able to change positions in each biennial term.²⁷

The second piece of evidence in favor of ideo-lite is that the behavior of legislators deviates in large and systematic ways

from the preferences of their average or median constituent. This conclusion persists even when the mismeasurement of constituency interests or preferences is not a concern. For example, senators from the same state rarely vote identically. Most obviously, senators from the same state but different parties, such as Sherrod Brown and Rob Portman of Ohio, vote very differently, and the difference is picked up in their polarized ideal point estimates.

If the two senators are from the same party, they are, of course, more similar. Even here, however, there are differences. Consider California Democrats Diane Feinstein and Barbara Boxer. They not only represented the same state but were first elected by exactly the same electorate on the same day in 1992. In the 113th Senate term, Boxer has a DW-NOMINATE score of -0.486 making her the fifteenth most liberal member of the US Senate. Conversely, Dianne Feinstein's ideal point is just -0.351 making her the thirty-third most liberal.²⁸ Moreover, there is nothing unusual about this California duo. Seven other states have pairs of senators from the same party whose NOMINATE scores differ at least as much.²⁹

House districts, being single-member, do not allow the same natural experiment that is possible for the Senate. It is possible, however, to compare the voting behavior of a member to his or her successor. The same-party replacements of House members can have ideal points that are very different from those of their predecessors. True, a relatively liberal Democrat is likely to be replaced by another liberal Democrat, but the variation in the scores of the same-party replacements is very large. It is about half as large as the total variation of positions within the party.³⁰ In other words, the ideal point of the outgoing incumbent is at best a crude predictor of the position of the new member even if they are in the same party.

The evidence that ideo-lite is not simply partisanship is also fairly well established. DW-NOMINATE has become widely applied in large part because it has considerable explanatory

power beyond simple party indicators. It also does a very good job of explaining internal divisions within the parties. This feature is hard to reconcile with the notion that the DW-NOMINATE dimension reflects "party-ness." Indeed if that were the case, Bernie Sanders would be the pillar of Democrat-ness while Rand Paul and Mike Lee would anchor Republican-ness. But in reality, the reason that these senators have extreme DW-NOMINATE scores is that they vote quite often against their partisan colleagues.

3.5 What issues divide Congress the most?

One of the advantages of measuring polarization with DW-NOMINATE as in Figure 3.2 is that the measures provide a summary of the average ideological divisions across all issues. But, of course, this is a bug as well. There is little reason to believe that partisan and ideological differences are equally strong across all issues. Differences in the political context, interest group environment, and the technical details of policy might promote more or less partisan cooperation.

To assess the extent to which polarization has varied over time across issues, John Lapinski undertakes a massive effort to code each roll call from the House for 1877–2010 according to its policy content.³¹ He codes bills according to a three-tiered scheme where each top-tier category is divided into subcategories. His top-tier categories and major subcategories were:

1. Sovereignty: immigration, naturalization, civil rights
2. Organization and scope of federal government: government organization, constitutional amendments
3. International affairs: defense, international political economy
4. Domestic affairs: agriculture and food, social policy, planning and resources
5. Miscellaneous

To assess how polarization has varied across these categories, he estimates issue-specific ideal points for all House members serving between 1877 and 2010. From these estimates, he is able to calculate the issue-specific level of polarization for each congressional term.³²

Across all of his major issues categories, Lapinski reproduces the “U-shape” evident in Figure 3.2. But there is considerable variation in the levels of polarization as well as the magnitude of the recent upward trends. He observes the most pronounced variation in polarization in two of his categories: sovereignty and international affairs. Each of these issue clusters were either bipartisan or organized by cross-partisan coalitions in the middle of the twentieth century, but have become more partisan at a rapid rate since the 1960s. The pattern for domestic affairs is somewhat different. That issue cluster has long been the most partisan and party-defining. So the gaps between the parties were already substantial when they started growing even larger in the 1970s. Because the base level of polarization was already so high, the growth rate has been slower than that in the other areas. As of 2010, Lapinski reports very little difference in the level of polarization across his four non-miscellaneous top-tier categories.

So the answer to what divides Congress seems to be “all of the above.”

3.6 Are both parties responsible for polarization?

Figure 3.3 presents a third historical fact about polarization that is important to keep in mind when discussing reform. Rather than a case of both parties moving toward the extremes, polarization over the past forty years has been very asymmetric. It is overwhelmingly associated with the increased movement of Republican legislators to the right. Each new Republican cohort has compiled a more conservative record than the returning cohort. Importantly this has been the case since the

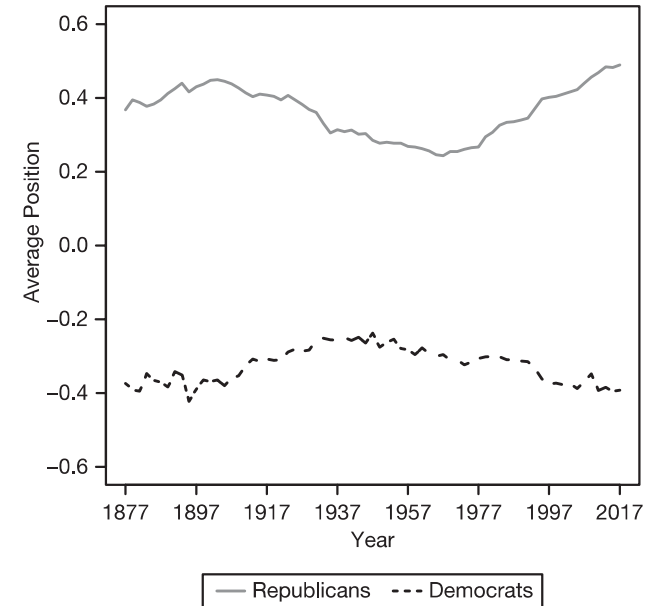


Figure 3.3: Party Positions in the US House 1877–2014 Figure shows average DW-NOMINATE scores by party.

1970s; it is not a reflection of the emergence of the “Tea Party” movement.³³

The Democratic party has not followed a similar pattern. While some new cohorts are more liberal than the caucus on average, many are more moderate. The slight movement of the Democratic party to the left can be accounted for by the increase of African American, Latino/a, and female legislators in its caucus. From 1971 to 2018, the number of African American Democrats in the House has increased from thirteen to forty-three, the Democratic Latino/a members have grown from four to twenty-nine, and the number of Democratic women went from ten to sixty-two.³⁴ The liberalism of the representatives of these groups has pushed the average position of the Democrats to the left.³⁵ The relative position of white, male Democratic party legislators has changed very little.³⁶

3.7 Are state legislatures polarized?

The methods cited above can easily be used to estimate the ideal points of state legislators within a specific state.³⁷ But measurement of polarization in state legislatures has been limited by two important factors. The first is the lack of roll-call voting data across all fifty states for an extended period of time. The second is that ideal point estimates are not generally comparable across states or even chambers within a state. The source of this incomparability follows directly from the discussion of ideal point estimation above.³⁸ We can determine the relative ideal points of two legislators only to the extent to which we see them voting on the same bills. We identify a legislator as a conservative because he is observed voting with other conservatives more frequently than he is observed voting with moderates, which he does more often than he votes with liberals. But when two legislators serve in different bodies, we cannot make such comparisons. A conservative in the Alabama House is quite different from a conservative in the Massachusetts Senate.

Recently, Boris Shor and I tackled both of these problems to produce measures of state legislative polarization.³⁹ First, we used a combination of state legislative journals and online records to acquire the roll-call voting record from every state from the 1990s to the present. But because of the incomparability problem, these data are useful only in tracking polarization within particular states, but not its variation across states. To make cross-state comparisons, we use the NPAT.⁴⁰ While the NPAT survey could have been used to estimate the ideal points of all respondents, the response rate of the survey is fairly low and thus provides ideal points for only a fraction of state legislators. Consequently, we combine the NPAT data with roll-call voting data. Under the assumption that each legislator's survey responses and roll-call voting reflect the same underlying political preferences, we are able to estimate

a common ideological scale for almost all state legislators serving since the 1990s. Since members of Congress also answer the NPAT, our scores can also be compared with those of federal legislators.

Although the Shor-McCarty measures only cover the past twenty-five years, the trajectory of polarization at the state and national levels has been remarkably consistent over that period. Aggregate trends and patterns of polarization at the state level tend to match those of the US House and Senate. Figure 3.4 shows the average difference between Republican and Democratic state legislators for each year on the NPAT scale. The first takeaway is that just like in the US Congress, partisan differences have been growing steadily. Second, the patterns for members of state lower chambers are essentially identical to those of state senators. That state senators have

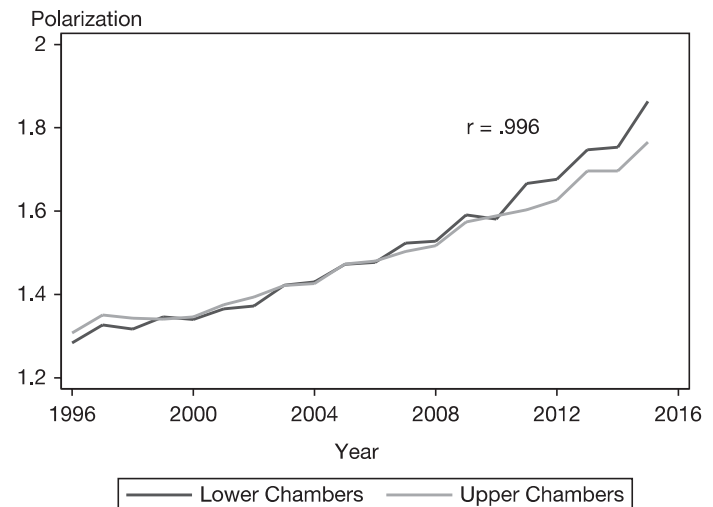


Figure 3.4: Polarization in the US States 1996–2015 Computed from NPAT Common Space Scores scores (Shor and McCarty 2011). The polarization measure is the difference in the mean score for Republicans and the mean score for Democrats for all state legislators by chamber.

larger and presumably more heterogeneous constituencies does not seem to lead to a measurable diminution in the polarization in those bodies.

But importantly, there is significant variation in the levels and trends in polarization across states and regions. Figure 3.5 plots polarization of lower chamber legislators across the four US census regions for the 1996–2015 period. The figure indicates that polarization tends to be lowest in the South (due to more moderate Democratic parties) and the Northeast (due to more moderate Republican parties). The West and North Central regions have the most polarized parties. Until very recently, the Northeast and the North Central region have witnessed more modest increases in polarization than the South and West.

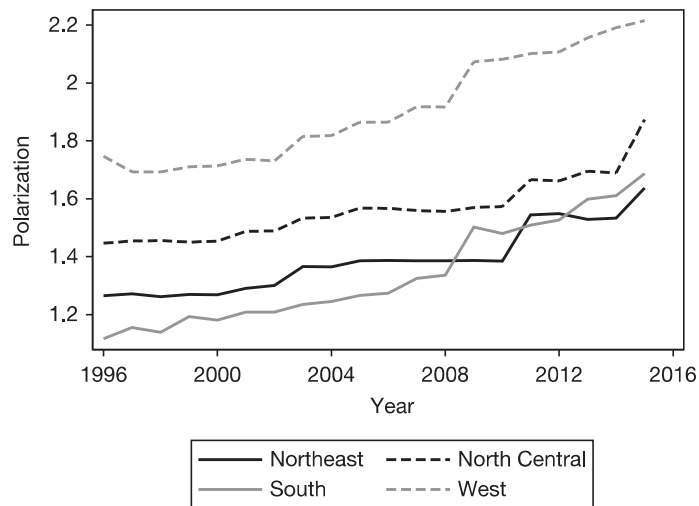


Figure 3.5: Polarization across US Census Regions 1996–2015 Computed from NPAT Common Space Scores scores (Shor and McCarty 2011). The polarization measure is the difference in the mean score for Republicans and the mean score for Democrats for all state legislators serving in lower chambers.

3.8 Are the courts polarized?

Tom Clark applies a polarization measure developed by Joan-Maria Esteban and Debraj Ray to the *judicial common space* Supreme Court justices' ideal points from 1953 to 2004.⁴¹ These scores shows a rise in polarization during the 1950s before falling in the 1960s. There was a dramatic rise in the Nixon Administration following the appointments of Warren Burger, William Rehnquist, and Lewis Powell. Polarization was relatively stable during the 1980s with the appointments of “swing justices” Sandra Day O'Connor and Anthony Kennedy. But polarization returned in the late 1980s and 1990s when Antonin Scalia replaced Burger and Clarence Thomas replaced Thurgood Marshall.⁴² These measures show a slight decline in the 2000s.⁴³

Other scholars have utilized different metrics for evaluating polarization on the Supreme Court. Brandon Bartels considers trends in margins on disposition votes. Consistent with polarization, his data show an increase in the number of five to four decisions on the court. Yet at the same time, he notes an increase in the number of unanimous votes, indicating what he calls the “polarization paradox.”⁴⁴ It is this increase in unanimous votes that accounts for the slight decline in Clark's polarization measure. Bartels also provides evidence that fewer justices split votes evenly between liberal and conservative dispositions when they happen to be the swing justice on a case, suggesting an increase in ideological consistency.

Importantly, Supreme Court polarization is both a cause and a consequence of more general polarization. Congressional polarization has resulted in much more ideological conflict over Supreme Court nominations and increased the incentive to appoint ideologically consistent judges. The resulting increased judicial polarization raises the stakes for ideological conflicts over open seats. I take up questions related to these consequences in chapter 7.

3.9 *And the media?*

In recent years, social scientists have paid substantial attention to measuring so-called media bias. The study of media bias is conceptually tricky as none has yet proposed an objective, workable definition of “unbiased” media. As a result most work has centered on the measurement of the partisan or ideological *slant* of various media outlets. In an early study, Jeff Milyo and Tim Groseclose exploit the fact that both members of Congress and journalists cite the research of think tank scholars.⁴⁵ Their key finding is that most media organizations have citation patterns that look much more like those of Democratic legislators than those of Republican legislators. Indeed, only two media outlets had citation patterns that were reflective of legislators that were more conservative than the median, *Fox News Special Report* and the *Washington Times*. Alternatively, *CBS News* and the *New York Times* had citations close to the average Democrat.

Similarly, Matthew Gentzkow and Jesse Shapiro use newspaper articles and congressional speeches to measure the partisan positioning of newspapers.⁴⁶ Their estimates come from an analysis of the propensity of newspapers and legislators to use partisan words or phrases such as the use of “death tax” as a description of the estate tax. By assuming that a legislator and newspaper who use the same set of partisan phrases share an ideology, Gentzkow and Shapiro measure the ideology of newspapers on the same scale as legislators. The authors use the 2004 Bush presidential vote in each district as a measure of legislator ideology.⁴⁷ Thus, their newspaper ideology ratings are denominated in 2004 Bush vote shares as well. Among large newspapers, these scores range from around 0.38 for the *Atlanta Constitution* to 0.52 for the *Daily Oklahoman*. In terms of the 2004 Bush vote, this is the difference between Vermont’s at-large congressional district and Peter King’s Long Island congressional district. So there are clear differences across newspapers, but the ideological range is small compared to

that of Congress. It is tempting of course to interpret Gentzkow and Shapiro’s estimates as evidence that newspapers lean to the left. The fact that a newspaper article reads more like a Democratic speech than a Republican speech does not need imply that such a slant arises through some sort of bias. If Republicans were to use more ideologically loaded terms in their speech, a news outlet that used neutral terminology would appear left wing.

3.10 *What have we learned?*

The evidence that the political parties have polarized over the past forty years is quite strong. Whether one considers measures related to roll-call voting, campaign contributions, the discourse of congressional speeches, or social media usage, there is strong evidence of greater and greater distinctiveness of the parties. Moreover, these divisions seem to have permeated political elites at all levels. We find considerable evidence of polarization in state legislatures, courts, and the media.

A second important finding is that polarization has coincided with a large drop in the dimensionality of voting in Congress. At one time, different public policy issues could produce very different support coalitions in Congress. Now almost all political conflicts pit liberals versus conservatives with moderates playing the pivotal role of determining which side is bigger.

Finally, the evidence suggests that polarization has been asymmetric with the Republicans shifting to the right at a rate greater than the Democrats moving to the left.

4

IS THE PUBLIC POLARIZED?

Given the widespread belief that the American public is deeply divided into Red and Blue camps who view each other with disdain and distrust, many readers may be surprised to learn that there is still a vigorous academic debate as to whether the public is nearly as polarized as the political elites.

At the heart of this continuing debate is how best to interpret two very well-established facts about the American electorate. The first fact is that the frequency at which Americans express extreme public policy positions on surveys has not budged over the past four decades. In fact, most Americans still indicate moderate or centrist positions, even on very divisive issues such as abortion and sexuality.¹ In other words, there is very little survey evidence of overall voter polarization as it was defined in chapter 2.

The second fact, however, is that the expressed policy preferences of voters are increasingly associated with their partisan identifications (PID). If we know the PID of a voter today, we can much better predict her positions on economic policy, abortion, guns, and a whole host of other issues. A generation ago this would not have been the case. As a consequence of this high association between party identification and policy positions, the average position of a Democratic voter increasingly diverges from that of a Republican on most issue areas. But as Morris Fiorina has stressed, such changes

may not be driven primarily through polarization but simply be the response of the voters to polarized parties. As voters observe increasingly polarized parties, they may adjust their partisan loyalties (or their issue positions) to be better *sorted* in partisan terms.

This interpretation is not without its critics, most notably Alan Abramowitz.² Abramowitz concedes that many voters still choose moderate positions on surveys but stresses that such voters are typically not very informed about or engaged in politics. Those voters who are more engaged in politics tend increasingly to choose relatively extreme positions and to identify with the party that supports those views. This polarization of the politically active contributes to the polarization of the elites.

The distinctions between the Fiorina and Abramowitz accounts can be a little subtle at times. Fiorina's sorting story is not inconsistent with the observation that those voters who express moderate views are disengaged from politics. He would argue that this disengagement is itself another voter reaction to elite polarization. When moderate voters see that no party is representing their views, disengagement may be a reasonable response. Abramowitz's argument is more consistent with the view that disengaged voters give moderate responses because they are disengaged. So, as we will see, the proper resolution of the debate revolves around how we interpret "moderate" survey responses.³

4.1 How is it even plausible that the public is not polarized?

In one of the first systematic studies of the polarization of public opinion, the sociologist Paul DiMaggio and his collaborators examine responses to regularly repeated policy and attitude questions from the American National Election Study and the General Social Survey.⁴ These data allow the researchers to assess whether public opinions and attitudes have become more polarized in the sense of increasing the variance or bimodality

of responses. The study considers a number of policy and social attitudes as well as feeling thermometers toward groups such as blacks, the poor, liberals, and conservatives. They observe very little evidence for polarization within the general population. Indeed on general measures of ideology, they find a downward trend in the variation and no trend in the bimodality of responses. When they examined issues separately, they found few examples of polarization. In fact, they find that Americans have become more united on issues related to the role of women, racial integration, and views on crime and justice. The only issues that had become more divisive were abortion and feelings toward the poor.

The authors also examined whether opinion differences across groups were growing. They encountered no such evidence. They report that attitudes were converging across age groups, education levels, racial groups, and religious affiliations. The only groups that were clearly diverging were the adherents of the two parties.⁵

Morris Fiorina also provides a number of important pieces of evidence that run counter to the mass polarization narrative.⁶ First, he notes that public opinion and cultural values do not differ greatly between Red and Blue states. He also notes that the level of issue disagreements between Republican and Democratic voters, while growing, is quite small.

In one of his more compelling demonstrations, he shows that even abortion views have been very stable for many decades. Since 1972, the General Social Survey (GSS) has asked respondents about the situations under which they would find an abortion morally acceptable.⁷ Voters have long been supportive of abortion when the health of the women is seriously jeopardized. Approximately 90% of respondents have supported it in every GSS survey since 1972. Support for more controversial exceptions, such as those based on the marital status or income of the mother, have garnered a consistent 40–50% support since the 1970s. Were attitudes polarizing we would have expected more support for the extreme

positions—a total ban or unrestricted access—to increase. That has not happened.

A recent study by Seth Hill and Chris Tausanovitch bolsters Fiorina's main claim. Using methods similar to those used to calculate legislative ideal points to compute voter ideal points based on data from the American National Election Study (ANES), Hill and Tausanovitch produce very little evidence that variance in voter ideology increased substantially from 1956 to 2012. In fact, they find that the standard deviation of voter ideal points was lower in the 2000s than it was in the late 1960s and early 1970s.⁸

Scholars have also explored other phenomena related to polarization in the general public. One such manifestation is Philip Converse's notion of belief constraint.⁹ Recall that beliefs are considered constrained to the extent that holding a position on one issue is correlated with holding positions on other issues. Delia Baldassarri and Andrew Gelman argue that increased belief constraint can produce a form of polarization.¹⁰ Assume there are two issues: taxes and guns. Suppose that on each issue there is little polarization: most voters prefer a moderate position while a smaller number support more extreme policies. As long as preferences on taxes and guns are not correlated, the overall polarization across issues is quite low in that the number of citizens that are extreme on both issues is very low. Now assume that issue positions are more constrained so that positions on taxes and guns are highly correlated. Now a tax extremist is likely to be a gun extremist and vice versa. So the increase in constraint increases the percentage of consistent extremists, which Baldassari and Gelman argue is a form of polarization.

The authors use the data from the ANES to assess changes in the measured constraint in individual issue positions. They measure constraint as the correlation of issue positions with other issue positions and with party and ideological identification. They find little evidence that correlations of positions across pairs of issues have grown.¹¹

As previously noted, this evidence and its interpretations have been challenged by Alan Abramowitz.¹² He emphasizes that while the overall public appears moderate, those citizens most engaged in politics are quite polarized. He presents considerable evidence that when one focuses on the most engaged voters—those who vote and are interested in politics, the responses to many policy questions and ideological scales are more bimodal. He does not, however, demonstrate that the bimodality of engaged voters has increased.¹³ Abramowitz also observes considerably higher levels of issue constraint among more engaged voters. Not surprisingly, these more sophisticated voters have a better understanding of what issue positions go together. Evidence of trends is provided in the work of Baldassari and Gelman who show that the issue consistency of highly engaged voters has increased substantially more than that of those who are disengaged. Clearly, that the voters most likely to vote and to contribute to campaigns are polarized can be an important source of the polarization of elected officials.

But Abramowitz's main focus is on the increasingly divergent policy views of partisan voters. He notes the large increase in the correlation of party identification (party ID) and ideological self-placement, which almost doubled between 1972 and 2004.¹⁴ Correlations between party ID and positions on several individual issues grew as well. But as I previously noted, increases in such an association may not reflect voter polarization but rather be a response of voters to increasingly polarized parties. So it is necessary to drill down into the data much deeper to determine whether these patterns reflect polarization or partisan sorting.

4.2 *Is the public moderate?*

One of the arguments against voter polarization is based on the fact that the number of people responding “moderate or middle of the road” on the ANES has not declined over time. If

you interpret such voters to be true political centrists, it would be hard to conclude that voters have polarized very much.

But there are reasons to be suspicious of whether these self-identified moderates are committed centrists. Donald Kinder and Nathan Kalmoe analyze the responses to the 1965 and 1973 waves of the Youth-Parent Socialization Panel Study that asks a battery of questions designed to measure political information in addition to the standard ideology self-placement question.¹⁵ Kinder and Kalmoe classify voters into three groups based on their responses to the ideological identification scale. The three categories included (1) those who considered themselves liberals or conservatives, (2) moderates, and (3) those who did not think of themselves in these terms. They find that in terms of political information, political involvement, and education, moderates are not statistically distinguishable from the non-ideological group. The most straightforward interpretation of these observations is that most if not all moderate respondents are non-ideological rather than committed devotees of the middle way. As Kinder and Kalmoe put it, “all things considered, the ‘moderate’ categories seems less an ideological destination than a refuge for the innocent and confused.” If this interpretation is correct, we should take far less comfort in findings such as Fiorina's showing high and persistent support for moderate positions.

4.3 *What is the evidence in favor of increased voter sorting?*

Unfortunately, there is no simple way of settling the polarization versus sorting argument definitively. But many scholars have tackled the question in a variety of ways. Recall that there are two possible ways in which voters can become better sorted into the parties. First, there is ideology-driven sorting in which voters choose a new party affiliation that better aligns with their issues preferences. Second, there is party-driven sorting where voters switch their issue positions to correspond with those of their party. In a prominent study,

Matthew Levendusky uses panel data to identify both types of sorting.¹⁶ In his data, the same voters are interviewed in 1992, 1994, and 1996. He isolates those voters who became sorted between 1992 and 1996 and assess whether it was ideology-driven or party-driven. For example, a Democratic voter with a conservative opinion can become sorted either by becoming a Republican or by changing the opinion to a liberal one. With the exception of abortion attitudes, he finds considerably more evidence for party-driven than ideology-driven sorting. Another exception to this pattern is white southerners who did overwhelmingly abandon the Democratic party for a Republican party more consonant with their views. These observations may, however, underestimate the role of ideology-driven sorting. Since the study was based on people who were already eligible to vote in 1992, it cannot capture the ideology-driven sorting of new voters. Second, it does not address the issue of salience. Voters are likely to switch parties only when it will bring them into better alignment with their party on very important issues.

Levendusky also uses the 1992–1994–1996 ANES panel study to assess polarization.¹⁷ In a panel study, polarization would be observed when Democrats became more liberal from one election to another while Republicans became more conservative. He finds very limited evidence of such effects. Between 1992 and 1996, only 7% of Democrats became more liberal than could be accounted for by measurement error. But 4% became more conservative. More Republicans moved in a measurably liberal direction (4%) than moved in a conservative direction (3%).

Thomas Carsey and Geoffrey Layman use the same panel study to better understand the conditions under which voters engage in party-driven or ideology-driven sorting.¹⁸ They argue that ideology- or issue-driven sorting should occur when voters are aware that the party diverges from their position on some issue that the individual finds important. Conversely, party-driven sorting can occur when voters are

aware of partisan differences on an issue but do not attach much importance to them. In such cases, voters will be more inclined to bring their issue preferences in line with their partisan commitments.

In support of this argument, Carsey and Layman estimate a statistical model where issue positions in 1994 are associated with issue positions and partisanship in 1992. Similarly, partisanship in 1994 is assumed to also be related to past issue positions and partisanship. Consistent with their expectations, they conclude that voters who are unaware of partisan issue differences exhibit stable partisanship but less stable issue preferences. Moreover, they show no signs of party- or issue-driven sorting. Those who are aware of non-salient differences have greater stability in issue preferences than the unaware but are somewhat more likely to move their positions to be better aligned with their party. The final group, those aware of salient difference, engage in party- and issue-driven sorting at roughly equal rates.

Other scholars have addressed the question of sorting by examining trends in issue consistency and constraint. Baldassarri and Gelman argue that an increase in pair-wise issue position correlations unrelated to party ID would be evidence of a polarization effect.¹⁹ On the other hand, if issue positions were to become correlated only because individual positions were increasingly tied to partisanship, sorting would be implicated. Consistent with the sorting hypothesis, they estimate that the average correlations of issue positions and party ID have grown substantially since the 1970s. This is also true of the correlations between issues and ideological self-placement. They interpret the growing correlations as evidence that the changes in issue constraint should be “interpreted as an illusory adjustment of citizens to the rejuvenated partisanship of the political elite” (p. 441).

Recall that Hill and Tausanovitch found little evidence of overall voter polarization between the 1950s and today. But consistent with sorting, they did find that partisan attachments

explain an increasing amount of the variance in their voter ideal point measures.²⁰

4.4 Why does it matter whether voters are sorted but not polarized?

In many ways it doesn't. Later when I discuss some of the implications of sorting, we will see that the effects may be exactly what we would expect from polarization. But the differences matter for two very important reasons. Recall that a key distinction between sorting and polarization involves the direction of causality between elite and mass behavior. One claim is that mass polarization is a very important cause for the increased conflict at the elite level. But sorting suggests that voters are responding somewhat predictably given the polarized set of choices that the parties have placed before them.

4.5 Is sorting a good thing or a bad thing?

Yes.

Clearly, some level of voter sorting is a precondition for political parties to play their representative function. A true Big Tent party cannot put firm programmatic commitments before the voter. At best it can promise, "elect us and we'll sort it out among our factions." Thus, a party that represents all viewpoints represents none.

But too much sorting can be problematic. In a sorted electorate, there are fewer issue positions that can gain bipartisan support. Consequently, partisan politicians will find it much harder to form cross-party coalitions. Second, while sorting and polarization are different, sorting can clearly contribute to elite polarization. Politicians who must garner support from a partisan constituency for nomination will struggle to maintain moderate or heterodox positions. Finally, to the extent to which

partisanship has become a salient social identity, social and policy sorting can induce higher levels of partisan animus.²¹

4.6 What issues are the public sorted on?

In a study using the ANES, Geoffrey Layman and Thomas Carsey use a technique called factor analysis to generate estimates of voter conservatism on distinctive clusters of issues.²² They identify three clusters of issues:

- Social welfare issues: support for government spending, government health insurance, tax rates, and the like.
- Racial issues: Support for civil rights, racial equality, integration, fair housing, affirmative action
- Cultural issues: Abortion, sexuality, gender roles, drug legalization

With estimates of voter positions on these three scales, Layman and Carsey are able to assess distinctive trends in partisan ideological divergence from 1972 to 2000. The difference in the conservatism of partisans on social welfare issues was much higher than that for the other two issue groups. But there was no trend toward greater divergence on that issue. On cultural issues, there was no divergence in the 1970s but substantial divergence by the 2000s. Racial issues represent a middle case. Republicans were more conservative on these issues in 1972 and that gap has grown.

Consistent with the studies previously discussed, Layman and Carsey observe that the correlation between individual positions on these scales grew rapidly among strong partisans. Thus, they argue that the macro changes in partisan divergence are best captured by a model of "conflict extension," where the parties stake out distinctive positions on a larger number of issues rather than seeking to replace old issue cleavages with new ones.

4.7 *Is it the economy, stupid?*

Devin Caughey, James Dunham, and Christopher Warshaw use responses to almost all national survey questions on economic issues. They use a statistical procedure to estimate the ideological positions of defined subpopulations of voters.²³ In their study, these groups are defined by party and state of residence. Thus, they generate estimates of the liberalism of Texas Democrats, California Republicans, New York independents, and so on in each year since 1946. With proper weighting, these estimates can be aggregated up to a measure of the liberalism of national Democrats, Republicans, and independents. They find that sorting has produced a party ideological gap that is now four times larger than the one observed in 1946. Consistent with other studies, however, they encounter little evidence of a clear trend toward polarization. Their estimated variance of ideology in the mass public is lower in 2012 than it was in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

4.8 *Does polarization reflect a “culture war”?*

It is hard not to notice the sharp partisan divisions over issues such as abortion, homosexuality, and gun rights. The intensity of these conflicts has led many to speculate that they represent the primary axis of conflict in American politics as well as the drivers of polarization. Stephen Ansolabehere, Jonathan Rodden, and James Snyder assess the claims that moral and cultural issues have come to define the partisan cleavage.²⁴ They use the ANES and the GSS to measure issue scales for voters from 1977 to 2004. Echoing findings of Fiorina, they observe little polarization on either of these issues. The distribution of economic preferences is bell-shaped while the moral issues dimension is somewhat more bimodal, indicating a slight overrepresentation of extreme views.

To measure the relative salience of the two issues, these authors conduct a regression model to determine which issue

scale is most closely associated with voting for a Republican candidate or identifying with the Republican party. Based on this analysis, they conclude that voters place more than twice as much weight on economic issues as moral and cultural issues when casting their ballots and identifying with a party. While the importance of moral issues has clearly been growing over time, they do not come close to supplanting economic issues as the primary consideration. Perhaps more surprising is that the relative weight of economic and social issues does not vary across social groups. All voters, even religious and rural voters, place more weight on economic issues than moral ones. Similarly, Larry Bartels concludes that voter preferences on government spending are much more predictive of presidential votes between 1984 and 2004 than are preferences on abortion or on women’s role in society.²⁵ Importantly, he observes that this is true of both college-educated voters and voters without such degrees. This evidence stands against a commonly-held view that downscale voters are especially driven by cultural issues. In a detailed analysis of the 2004 election, he finds that it is college-educated voters that place approximately equal weight on economic and cultural issues.

While the role of the “hot button” issues in policy polarization of the voters may be modest, there is evidence of a much greater role of these concerns in the affective polarization of voters that I discuss next. Not surprisingly, when voters perceive the out-party as having morally repugnant views or overrepresenting out-social groups, partisan animosity increases.²⁶ Furthermore, as Dan Hopkins has argued, preferences on social issues tend to exhibit more geographical variation, which may in turn heighten their electoral salience given our reliance on geographically based first-past-the-post elections.²⁷

4.9 *What is affective polarization?*

While much of the debate about mass polarization has focused on whether voters’ policy preferences and ideological

orientations have become more extreme, another group of scholars have focused on whether parties and partisanship have become more salient markers of social identity and whether this has resulted in greater levels of partisan conflict. These scholars have stressed that “affect, not ideology” is responsible for high levels of party conflict.

The literature on affective polarization has generally drawn on the Social Identity Theory (SIT) developed by Henri Tajfel.²⁸ SIT is based on the following precepts:

1. Individuals want to maintain or enhance their self-esteem.
2. Social groups are associated with negative or positive connotations.
3. The evaluation of one’s own group is determined by comparisons with reference groups. Positive discrepancy in the comparisons between the in-group and the out-group generate high self-esteem; negative ones lower self-esteem.

From these principles, SIT predicts that “pressures to evaluate one’s own group positively through in-group/out-group comparisons lead groups to attempt to differentiate themselves from one another.”²⁹ In the application to political parties, scholars have postulated that political parties are salient social identities and that citizens derive self-esteem and satisfaction from the relative success and status of their party compared to that of the other. It is further postulated that voters will be biased in the process of political information focusing on interpretations that favor their own party and disfavor the out-party. The combination of these strong identities and formation of biased beliefs is hypothesized to generate affective polarization between the parties.³⁰

In an influential study, Shanto Iyengar, Gaurav Sood, and Yphtach Lelkes empirically examine the implications of SIT on affective polarization and suggest that affective polarization

is a more proximate source of partisan conflict in the United States than policy or ideological polarization.³¹ They argue that “partisan affect is inconsistently related to policy preferences and that the relationship between partisan affect and policy attitudes hasn’t notably strengthened over time.”

Among their most memorable findings is that support of partisans for inter-party marriages of their offspring have fallen dramatically over the past several decades. In 2008, almost 50% of Republicans and over 30% of Democrats reported that they would be upset if their children married some one from the other party. These numbers were negligible in 1960.

The primary analysis of Iyengar et al. focuses on partisan feeling thermometers as measures of partisan affect.³² Using these thermometer scores for each party from the American National Election Study, they show that the average rating for the respondents’ own party hovered from seventy to seventy-five since the 1970s. The Democrats have viewed their party slightly more warmly than have Republicans. The major change over time is how partisans evaluate members of the other party. In the 1970s, the average evaluation of opposite party members was in the high forties. By 2008, these numbers had dropped to the mid-thirties. There is very little difference across parties. Democrats rate Republicans as coolly as Republicans rate Democrats. To support their argument of increasing affective polarization, Iyengar et al. estimate a statistical model that predicts the net (own party minus out-party) thermometer rating on a set of variables related to partisanship and issue preferences. After controlling for a set of other variables, they show that the correlation between an individual’s strength of party identification and the net thermometer rating increased modestly between 1988 and 2004. But the percentage of strong partisans did not budge over this time. The percentage of strong Democrats was 18% in 1988 and 17% in 2004. For Republicans those numbers were 14% and 16% respectively.³³ So strong partisan ID can only account for a relatively small part of the trend in affective polarization.

They also estimate correlations between the net thermometer rating and issue scales they constructed for voters' preferences on economic and cultural issues. The economic scales include questions about spending on social security and other government services, government-provided health insurance, and the government's role in guaranteeing jobs and living standards. The cultural scales cover abortion, gay rights, and gender equality. Surprisingly, Iyengar et al. observe almost no correlation between the cultural scale and affective polarization. They do find, however, that economic policy preferences correlated with the net thermometer ratings. In 1988, the most economically liberal Democrats rated the Democratic party twenty points better against the Republican party than the most conservative Democrats. The equivalent gap between economically conservative and liberal Republicans was twelve points. In 2004, both of the predicted effects were nineteen thermometer points. Iyengar et al. downplay the role of ideology in the increase in affective polarization since the correlations did not increase as significantly as those for strong party identification. But they do not account for any trends in economic policy preferences that might account for increased affective polarization. While they do not report the trend in their economic conservatism measure, their scales are similar to those used by Layman and Carsey who document a very large increase in economic conservatism among Republican voters.³⁴ Thus, it is plausible that a substantial share of the increase in affective party polarization among Republicans can be attributed to an increase in economic conservatism.³⁵

In follow-up work with Sean Westwood, Iyengar demonstrates that the effects of affective polarization are not simply attitudinal.³⁶ Partisans exhibit discriminatory behavior against opposing partisans at levels exceeding discrimination based on race. Moreover, this discrimination is manifest on nonpolitical behaviors. For example, the authors report the results of an experiment where respondents were asked to rate job candidates based on their resume. In the experiment,

the partisanship, race, and qualifications of the applicant were randomized.³⁷ Partisanship played a very decisive role in which job candidate was preferred. Partisan subjects chose a co-partisan candidate 80% of the time. But partisanship was not simply a tiebreaker. Subjects chose the co-partisan at very high rates even when he was the less qualified candidate. Race played a much smaller role in the resume evaluations. Both white and African American subjects chose the black candidates more often than the white candidate, with African Americans choosing the in-group candidate 18 percentage points more often.³⁸

Not all the evidence about affective polarization is consistent with accounts based solely on partisan identification. Yphtach Lelkes conducted a survey experiment where respondents were randomly assigned to learn about a political candidate's ideology (and its extremity) or partisanship or both.³⁹ Importantly, the information about ideology was communicated through the policy positions of the candidate rather than ideological labels. Lelkes finds that a respondent's evaluations are much more affected by the candidate's ideology than her party affiliation. Information on party affiliation changed the thermometer evaluations about nine points on a hundred-point scale. But learning that a candidate was an ideological extremist moved the thermometers twenty-three points.

Respondents tended to reward extremists and punish moderate candidates of their own party. But the biggest negative affect was against extremists of the other party. Interestingly, learning that an out-party was a moderate had no effect on the thermometer ratings. Finally, the effects of policy positions are not reduced when respondents are also provided information about party. So respondents appear not to be using ideology as a proxy for party.

Lelkes's findings are consistent with several other studies. For example, using the ANES, Steven Webster and Alan Abramowitz show that opinions on social welfare issues have

polarized, and opinions on those issues are increasingly predictive of affective evaluations of each party and its presidential candidates.⁴⁰ Preferences about abortion and gay rights had considerably less effect on these evaluations. Their own survey experiments show that ideological distance influences feelings of the out-party and its candidates. Respondents were shown to prefer an out-party moderate over an out-party candidate with unknown ideology, who in turn was preferred to an out-party extremist. The Webster and Abramowitz experiment differs from that of Lelkes in that they randomize ideological labels in addition to policy positions. Jon Rogowski and Joseph Sutherland get similar results from an experiment that uses only ideological labels.⁴¹ These authors also provide non-experimental evidence that ideology is related to affective polarization from data on evaluations of US senators. There are considerably larger differences in the thermometer rating of opposite party senators when they have large differences in their DW-NOMINATE scores. Taken together these results seem to suggest that affective partisan polarization is largely driven by evaluations of the ideologies associated with the parties rather than *partisan* social identification.

Of course, these results do not necessarily rule out a role for other social identities in driving affective polarization. Lilliana Mason embraces the notion that affective polarization is driven by both social and ideological factors.⁴² The primary dynamic in her story is the process of party sorting. As partisans become more sorted, the social and ideological differentiation of the parties is heightened, inducing greater levels of inter-party dislike. She tests this argument by demonstrating that partisans who are correctly sorted in ideological terms (i.e., conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats) report higher net thermometer ratings. She also observes that sorted partisans report greater numbers of likes and fewer numbers of dislikes for their own party relative to the out-party, engage in more political activism, and feel more anger toward the out-party presidential candidate. In a subsequent study with Julie Wronski, Mason

shows that partisans who identify strongly with the constituent groups (e.g., racial and ethnic minorities and liberals for Democrats, and whites, Christians, and conservatives for Republicans) of their party exhibit higher levels of partisanship and report higher own-party thermometer ratings.⁴³

4.10 What have we learned?

While it may come as a surprise to many readers, there is no strong consensus on whether there has been any meaningful polarization among ordinary voters. Moderate responses to survey questions continue to be quite common as does self-identification as an ideological moderate. But these optimistic findings are somewhat undercut by the research that questions whether these “moderate” voters are centrist in any principled sense, or are just simply confused and disengaged. When one looks at the more engaged and sophisticated electorate, there is considerably more evidence of polarizing trends.

While debates over polarization continue, there is little doubt about the extent to which voters have become much better sorted along ideological and social identity lines. Conservatives are increasingly identified as Republicans and liberals identified as Democrats. Groups such as African Americans, Latinos, evangelicals, and working-class men are increasingly aligned with parties. As a result, both parties’ constituencies are more homogeneous.

While there is a tendency to view sorting as far less pernicious than polarization, it has been associated with a number of detrimental changes to American politics. No longer do elected officials face the diverse partisan constituencies that might give them leeway to make important cross-party concessions and compromises. Ideologically sorted partisan activists, donors, and primary voters stand ready to sanction any such transgressions. Second, while early research stressed partisanship as the fundamental identity underlying affective partisanship, more recent work by Lelkes, Mason,

Abramowitz, and others suggests that social and ideological sorting is the proximate cause of cross-partisan hostility. While partisanship may be emerging as an important social identity, it is one built upon a large number of other group and ideological conflicts.