

Has Growing Income Inequality Polarized the American Electorate? Class, Party, and Ideological Polarization*

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Objectives. We investigate whether growing income inequality has heightened differences in economic interests between “the haves” and “the have nots” and if this class polarization has increased ideological polarization in the electorate. *Methods.* We examine the trend in ideological orientation among low- and high-income voters from 1972 to 2008. *Results.* While both income inequality and ideological polarization have increased in recent years, this analysis indicates that the growth in ideological polarization is not the result of growing income inequality. The well-off have not become significantly more conservative and less liberal nor have those on the lower rungs of the economic ladder become significantly more liberal and less conservative. *Conclusion.* The analysis indicates that ideological polarization is the result of the increased polarization of the political parties, not class polarization.

Among causal agents of political behavior, economics ranks very near the top of the heap. Long before Clinton strategist James Carville posted the slogan “It’s the economy, stupid” as a blunt reminder to campaign workers to stay on message and even before Karl Marx called on the workers of the world to unite, James Madison in the tenth *Federalist* traced the seeds of political factions to economic differences: “the most common and durable source of factions has been the various [sic] and unequal distribution of property.” The political potency of economic disparities has been repeatedly demonstrated in presidential elections. In 2008, for instance, claims about redistributive policies and tax cuts for the wealthy occupied a good deal of the presidential campaign. It should come as no surprise that economic motives are a suspected cause of the increased polarization of the American electorate. The importance and potential link between economics and political polarization may well have increased with the growing economic inequality in the United States.

In this article we address the relationship between income inequality and polarization. We focus, at least initially, on ideological polarization rather than voter preference or partisan polarization. We specifically examine changes in

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important ideological and income subgroups of the electorate (high-income liberals, high-income conservatives, low-income liberals, and low-income conservatives) to address whether the empirical evidence is consistent with the thesis that income inequality has been a cause of polarization. Overall, our results indicate that despite the increases in both income inequality and polarization in recent years, income inequality does not appear to have been a significant cause of growing polarization, including ideological polarization, among the mass electorate.

Background

While political polarization has increased in the United States (Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008; but see Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope, 2006), little consensus exists on the causal mechanism for the bifurcation in American politics. The most comprehensive case for linking polarization to economics is made in *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches*. McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2006) forward the theory (henceforth, the class polarization theory) that the American electorate has become increasingly polarized politically, at least in part, because of a growing chasm between “the haves” and “the have nots.” While the class polarization theory suggests that the relationship between polarization and economics is somewhat endogenous with inequality both a cause and effect of polarization, the class polarization theory is clear that changes in income inequality are at least a partial cause of growing polarization. Growing income inequality is alleged to have deepened differences in economic interests between upper and lower classes, driving higher income Americans into the arms of a more homogeneously conservative Republican Party and lower income Americans into the arms of a more homogeneously liberal Democratic Party. Based on their examination of National Election Studies (NES) data, McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2006) conclude that “high-income Americans have consistently, over the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, been more prone to identify and vote with the Republican Party than have low-income Americans, who have sided with the Democrats Moreover, there has been a rather substantial transformation in the economic basis of the American party system. Today, income is far more important than it was in the 1950s” (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, 2006:106–07). Their conclusions, however, rest on an analysis of the economic cleavage in *partisanship* rather than *voting* behavior or *ideological* polarization in the electorate. Gelman, Kenworthy, and Su (2010:1203) address the relationship between income inequality and polarized voting behavior and find little evidence to support a causal effect: “We find no clear relation between income inequality and class-based voting.” In this article, we investigate ideological polarization to complement the previous studies that use partisanship and voting behavior as the measure of polarization. While ideology is arguably a broader concept than partisanship or voting behavior,

economic considerations do play a strong role in ideological differences. This is especially true in the context of economic inequality where one ideology actively promotes more deference to the free market and less intervention by government and the other ideology adopts the opposite position. We investigate whether the political behavior of subgroups is consistent with the class polarization theory. The linkage between inequality and polarization is specific in its expectations for groups within the electorate and we use this subgroup analysis, rather than relying exclusively on aggregated analysis, to assist in sorting out correlation and causation between inequality and polarization.

Data

The data for this analysis are drawn from two sources and span the period from 1972 to 2008. This covers the period in which the increase in ideological polarization is supposed to have taken place and in which continuously collected survey data on the electorate's ideological inclinations are available. Income inequality data are annual data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey. The Census reports the annual distribution of aggregate household income in quintiles. In examining the Census data, the bottom two quintiles and the top quintile are designated, respectively, as the low- and high-income categories. This classification follows the earlier analyses of income distributions both by Hibbs and Dennis (1988) and by Kelly (2005). One advantage of including the bottom 40 percent of the income distribution among the have nots (rather than just the bottom 20 percent) is that it compensates for the lower turnout rates at this end of the income spectrum. The analysis was also conducted with only the bottom quintile as the low-income category. There were no substantive differences in these findings.

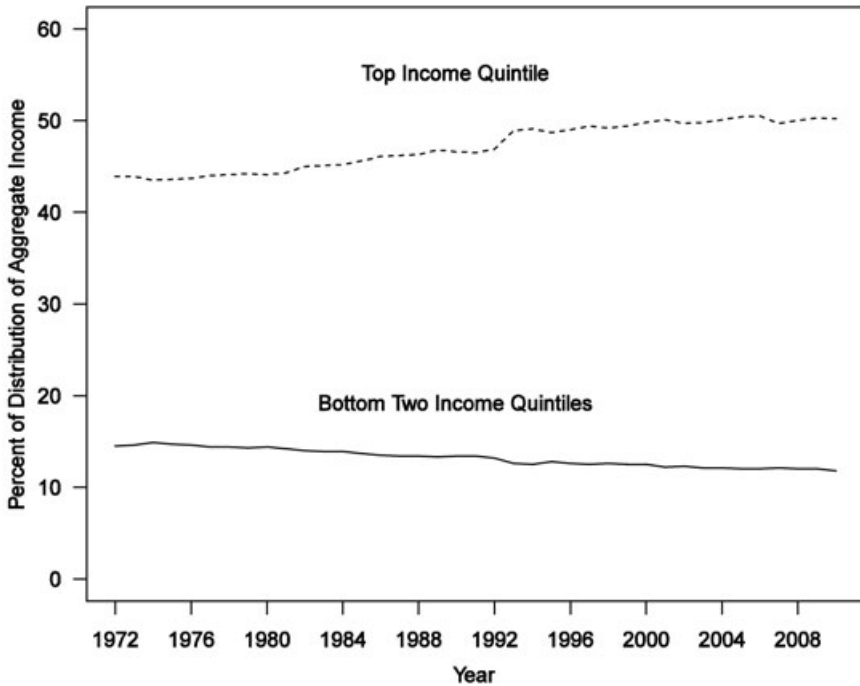
The class polarization and general polarization data are from the cumulative file of the NES. The NES reports family income distributions (VCF0114) in five categories: 0 to 16 percentile, 17 to 33 percentile, 34 to 67 percentile, 68 to 95 percentile, and the 96 to 100 percentile. In examining the NES data, respondents in the bottom and top thirds of the family income are designated, respectively, as low- and high-income respondents. This coding was also used by Stonecash (2000). The analysis examines only those who reported voting in the election, since the views of these respondents are the most politically important in the process and the increase in polarization is most evident among reported voters.

Have Income Inequality and Ideological Polarization Increased?

The plausibility of the thesis that growing income inequality has caused an increase in ideological polarization rests on both having occurred. Have they? Yes, they have.

FIGURE 1

The Growth in Income Inequality, 1972–2010



SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement Table H-2, Share of Aggregate Income Received by Each Fifth and Top 5 Percent of Races: 1967–2010 (households as of March of the following year).

The growth in income inequality in American households since 1972 is well documented and is tracked annually in Figure 1 (Danzinger and Gottschalk, 1995; Bartels, 2008). The figure plots the percentage of aggregate household income generated by the top 20 percent of income earning households and by the bottom 40 percent. Two facts jump out from this plot. First, income inequality has been great between those at the top and those at the bottom of the income ladder throughout this entire period. It is nothing new. Those in the top 20 percent of households have accounted for about 44 percent to 50 percent of aggregate income while those in the bottom 40 percent of households have had less than 15 percent of aggregate income. The second fact that emerges from this figure is that the income gap has gradually widened over the last several decades. Income in the bottom two quintiles has slipped from almost 15 percent to about 12 percent while the upper strata has increased its share from less than 44 percent to about 50 percent. An income ratio between the bottom two quintiles and the top quintile started out the 1970s at about

three to one and increased to more than four to one by 2004. The income gap, the simple difference in shares of aggregate income, increased from less than 30 percentage points to nearly 40 percentage points.

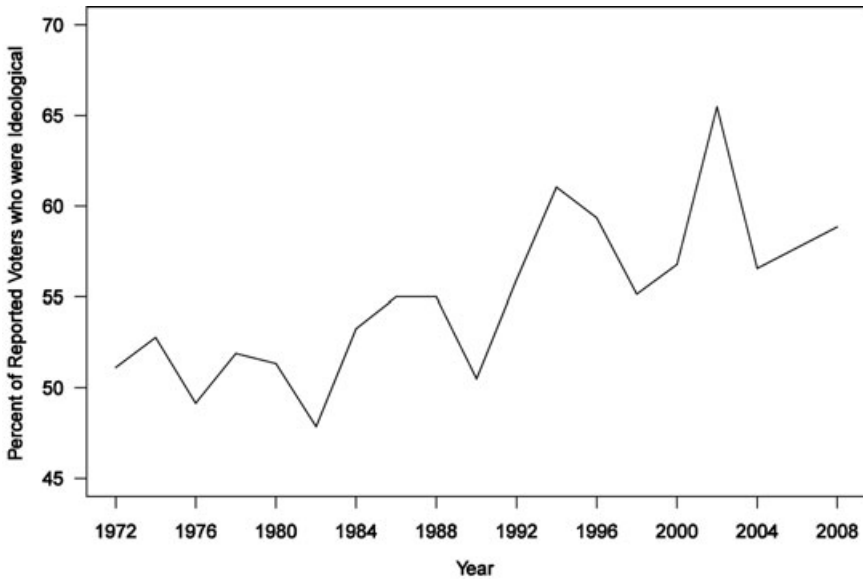
While income inequality increased between the top and the bottom two income quintiles, the more dramatic growth in the disparity of incomes, as Bartels documents, has been between those at the very top percentiles (95th and above) and everybody else (Bartels, 2008:6–13). From one standpoint, this concentration of income would seem to undermine the link of self-interested class politics and ideological polarization. It is plausible that those moderately well-off would focus their attention upward against the hyper-rich rather than defensively downward at the poor and working class. If so, given the small number of hyper-rich, the growth of income inequality might provide a better basis for a groundswell of populism than for polarization—as those in the near rich category might join with those of lower income against the interests of the hyper-rich. Nevertheless, as the theory of class polarization contends, income inequality has definitely increased in recent decades.

While the income inequality gap was increasing, so was the ideological polarization of the electorate. A good deal of controversy has surrounded the question of whether the American electorate has become more politically polarized on the issues, but there is no doubt that significantly more American voters are now willing to declare that they have a liberal or a conservative political perspective than was the case in the 1970s (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope, 2005; Nivola and Brady, 2006; Evans, 2003; Abramowitz, 2006; Campbell, 2006). The number of voters claiming to be moderates or not willing or able to identify their political perspectives has suffered a commensurate decline.

Figure 2 plots the percentage of reported voters who reported that they had a liberal or conservative political perspective in elections from 1972 to 2008. Two points emerge. First, even in the 1970s, at least half of voters claimed a liberal or conservative political inclination. Among these ideological voters, self-identified conservatives held an edge. Slightly more than 30 percent indicated a conservative perspective and about 20 percent indicated a liberal perspective. This, of course, does not mean that they all meant exactly the same thing by these designations, or that this structured all of their thinking on issues, candidates, or the parties, or that others would classify them similarly (Stimson, 2004). However, it does suggest that an ideological label held a certain amount of attraction to these voters and that they felt comfortable revealing their association with that perspective. The second point evident in the figure is that the percentage of reported voters indicating an ideological perspective increased significantly since the early 1990s. Since 1992, almost 60 percent of reported voters have indicated liberal or conservative inclinations. Again, self-identified conservatives have outnumbered self-identified liberals. From 1972 to 1992, about one-third of all voters indicated that they had a conservative perspective and almost one-fifth a liberal perspective. Since 1994, conservative numbers increased by about 6 percentage points.

FIGURE 2

Growth in Ideological Polarization Among Reported Voters, 1972–2008



NOTE: NES data weighted by VCF009A. The extent of ideological polarization is calculated using variable VCF0803 for those reporting having voted. Polarization is the percentage of reported voters who were not moderate or don't knows (DKs). This includes the three categories of conservatives and the three categories of liberals.

Since 2000, liberal numbers have also increased by about 4 percentage points. Though these numbers may seem small, in the aggregate they constitute an important change in the nation's political climate.

Indirect evidence of ideological polarization corroborates the direct evidence. The indirect evidence of polarization flows from the broad consensus that the political parties have become more ideologically distinctive and homogenous in recent decades (Abramowitz and Saunders, 1998). How have voters responded to this change? They have become more partisan, their turnout rates have increased, and split-ticket voting has declined (Bartels, 2000; Hetherington, 2001; McDonald, 2004; Campbell, 2008). These are exactly the reactions to greater party polarization that one would expect from a polarized electorate and precisely the opposite of what would be expected from a largely moderate or nonideological electorate. A moderate electorate would be alienated from highly polarized parties. Its members would be less likely to identify with the parties and less likely to bother to vote. According to the policy balancing models of split-ticket voting, as the parties diverge more from centrist politics, more moderates split-ticket vote to force partisan compromise (Fiorina, 1996). None of this happened. To the contrary, the

evidence is consistent with a polarized electorate that *increased* its identifications with the polarized parties, turned out to vote in *greater* numbers, and cast *fewer* split-tickets. The bottom line is that the American electorate in the last several decades has become more ideologically polarized than it was. Moderates are now a minority among American voters. As Abramowitz and Saunders as well as others have shown, the sorting out of this more ideological electorate was part of the realignment to a more competitively balanced party system (Abramowitz and Saunders, 1998).

While it is clear from Figures 1 and 2 that ideological polarization increased over the same period that income inequality increased, the question remains whether the growth in income inequality *caused* the increase in ideological polarization? If income inequality was the driving force behind ideological polarization, it should have been evident in a combination of four trends. Among higher income reported voters we should have seen: (1) an increase in conservative inclinations and (2) a decline in liberal inclinations. Lower income voters should have been moving in the opposite direction. Among lower income reported voters, we should have seen: (3) an increase in liberal inclinations and (4) a decline in conservative inclinations. Essentially, with increasing income inequality, the thesis expects that higher income voters should have become on balance more conservative and lower income voters should have become on balance more liberal. The conservative-higher income and liberal-lower income associations should have become more pronounced with greater income inequality.

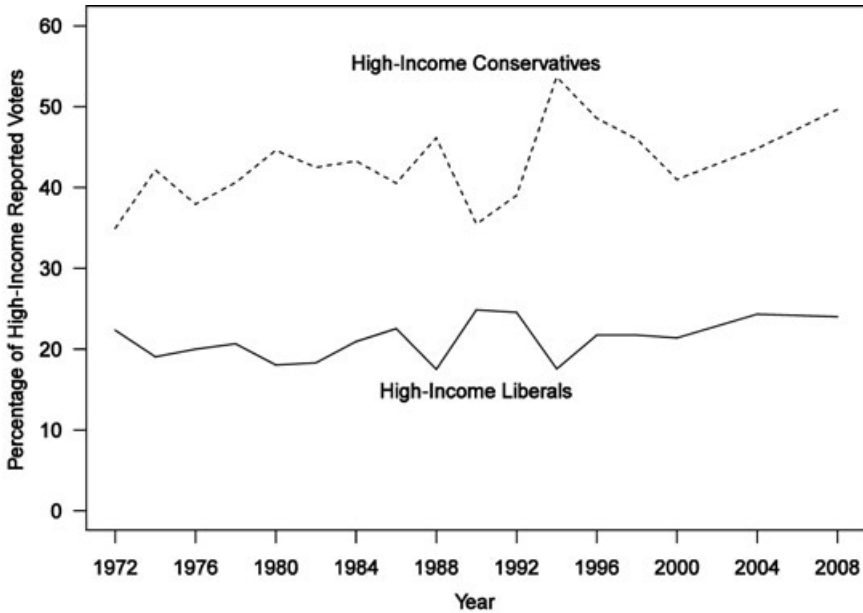
The Trend in Class Polarization

While there is no question that lower income voters have tilted less to the conservatives than have higher income voters, the ideological makeup of the lower and higher income stratas are fairly complex. Though some trends are as the theory expects, some run counter to the expected, and the evidence in general does not comport with the theory's expectations that rising income inequality has increased the ideological polarization between the haves and the have nots.

The trend in the ideological inclinations of higher income voters are displayed in Figure 3. The theory of class polarization expects that the gap between the percentage of high-income conservatives and liberals would widen over time—either by an increase in the conservative well-to-do, a decline in the liberal well-to-do, or both. While a general increase in the percentage of higher income voters professing a conservative inclination is noticeable in the figure ($b = 0.53$, $SE = 0.21$ with the election counter), the ideological gap among higher income voters did *not* increase over this period ($b = 0.32$, $SE = 0.31$). Among the well-off, conservatives outnumber liberals, but not any more so than they have for some time. This is true even if you set aside

FIGURE 3

Polarization Among High-Income Reported Voters, 1972–2008

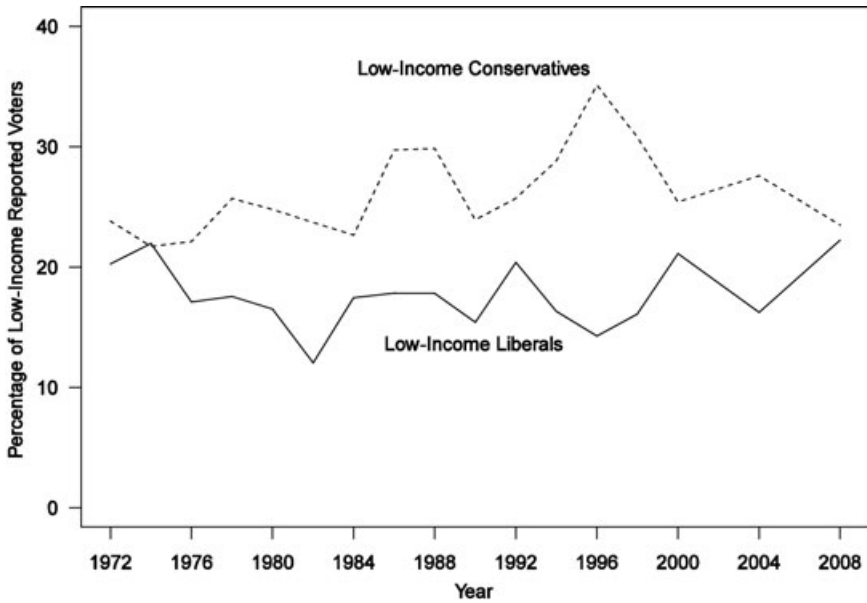


NOTE: NES data, weighted by variable VCF009A. The analysis includes only reported voters. The ideological categories include the three categories of conservatives and the three categories of liberals. Self-described moderates and “don’t knows” are included in the denominator.

the 2004 election in which there was a considerable increase in the number of liberals among higher income voters.

Figure 4 displays the ideological inclinations of lower income voters. The first point to note here is that a much smaller percentage of lower income voters claim either a conservative or a liberal perspective. Whereas 60 percent to as many as 75 percent of higher income voters claim a liberal or conservative political perspective, only 35 percent to 50 percent of lower income voters are willing or able to claim a liberal or conservative inclination. The second point of note is that even among the lower income strata of voters, those professing a conservative perspective often outnumber those claiming liberal convictions. The third point, and the point most important to the class polarization thesis, is that there is no evidence of the expected trend toward greater liberalism or diminished conservatism among lower income voters. If anything, the percentage of self-identified conservatives among lower income voters increased over this period ($b = 0.35$, $SE = 0.16$) without an appreciable increase in the number of lower income liberals ($b = -0.00$, $SE = 0.14$). In

FIGURE 4
Polarization Among Low-Income Reported Voters, 1972–2008



NOTE: NES data, weighted by variable VCF009A. The analysis includes only reported voters. The ideological categories include the three categories of conservatives and the three categories of liberals. Self-described moderates and “don’t knows” are included in the denominator.

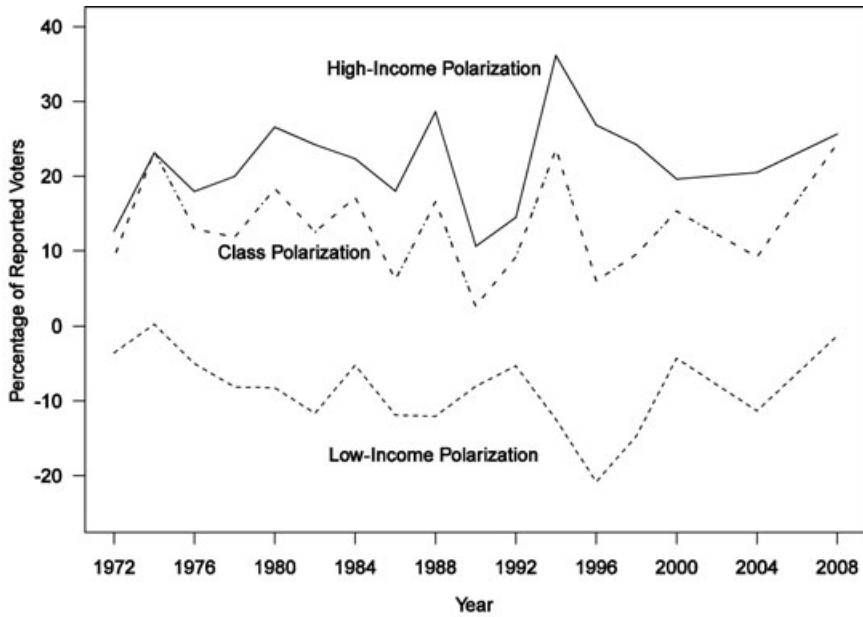
sum, conservatives gained a small amount of ground among both low- and high-income voters while self-identification with liberalism remained steady among both high- and low-income voters.

To obtain an overview of income polarization and its trend, the four measures of ideological inclinations by income levels are combined into a single index of class polarization in Figure 5. The index is the sum of two differences: the percentage of high-income conservatives minus the high-income liberals plus the percentage of low-income liberals minus low-income conservatives. In more formal terms,

$$CP = (HC - HL) + (LL - LC),$$

where CP is class polarization, HC is the percentage of higher income voters who are conservatives, HL is the percentage of higher income voters who are liberals, LL is the percentage of lower income voters who are liberals, and LC is the percentage of lower income voters who are conservatives.

FIGURE 5
Class Polarization, 1972–2008



NOTE: NES data, weighted by VCF009A. Class polarization = $(HC - HL) + (LL - LC)$, where HC is the percentage of higher income voters who are conservatives, HL is the percentage of higher income voters who are liberals, LL is the percentage of lower income voters who are liberals, and LC is the percentage of lower income voters who are conservative. Higher income polarization is $(HC - HL)$. Lower income polarization is $(LL - LC)$.

The extent of polarization in the higher and lower income stratas are also plotted separately in Figure 5. The possible range of the index is from 200 (all high-income conservatives and low-income liberals) to negative 200 (all high-income liberals and low-income conservatives).

While the extent of class polarization increased over the decade of the 1970s, it then generally declined a bit in the 1980s, shot up in the 1990s, then receded in recent years. In short, contrary to the expectations of the theory of class polarization, there appears to be no evidence of a strong and consistent increase in income-inequality-related ideological polarization in recent decades. There were some years in which class polarization was stronger than in others, but there was no discernable general increase in class polarization over this period. Throughout most of the period, conservatives actually outnumbered liberals among those with lower incomes and, while conservatives outnumbered liberals among those with higher incomes, those with higher incomes were not particularly more likely to be conservative than liberal in recent years.

TABLE 1

The Effect of Income Disparity on Class Polarization, 1972–2008

Dependent Variable: Class Polarization				
Independent variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Election trend (Year of election)	0.02 (0.31)	–	–	0.21 (1.76)
Income disparity _{<i>t</i>}	–	–0.03 (0.50)	–	–3.82 (5.22)
Income disparity _{<i>t</i> – 1}	–	–	–0.80 (0.55)	3.51 (4.70)
Constant	13.28* (3.30)	14.30 (16.56)	16.40 (18.21)	22.64 (73.30)
<i>N</i>	17	17	16	16
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Standard error of estimate	6.71	6.71	6.84	7.20
Durbin-Watson	2.15	2.15	1.92	1.82

NOTE: Class polarization is computed from the self-reports of the ideological inclinations of reported voters in the lowest and highest thirds of family incomes. It is computed as the percentage of voting low-income voters who were liberal and high-income voters who were conservative minus the percentage of low-income voters who were conservatives and high-income voters who were liberals. Income disparity is the difference between the percentage of aggregate income of the highest quintile and the lowest two quintiles as reported by the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey. **p* < 0.05 (one-tailed). Standard errors are in parentheses.

SOURCE: Calculated by the author using data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey and the American National Election Study's cumulative file.

Income Inequality and Class Polarization

The questions of whether there has been a trend in class polarization and whether class polarization reflects the actual growth in the inequality of household incomes over time is addressed in the regression results in Table 1. The dependent variable is the index of class polarization described above and plotted in Figure 5. The first regression indicates that there was no significant linear trend in class polarization over this period. The second equation examines whether the actual disparity in household incomes, as measured by the U.S. Census, affected class polarization. It did not. The third equation tests the possibility that there might be a lag in the impact of income inequality on class polarization. Again, there was no effect. All three of these possibilities are examined in the fourth equation with continued null results. The overall message of the analysis of Table 1 is that the ideological polarization between upper and lower income groups has not systematically increased over time (as the general level of ideological polarization has) and has been remarkably independent of real changes in income inequality. In both respects, these findings fail to support the expectations of the theory of class polarization.

TABLE 2

The Effect of Class Polarization on Ideological Polarization, 1972–2008

Independent variable	Dependent Variable: Ideological Polarization			
	(1) OLS	(2) OLS	(3) Cochrane-Orcutt	(4) OLS
Election trend (Year of election)	0.61* (0.14)	–	–	0.51* (0.12)
Class polarization (<i>CP</i>)	–	0.14 (0.14)	0.19* (0.08)	0.14 (0.10)
Constant	49.00* (1.49)	53.00* (2.09)	52.24* (2.70)	47.70 (1.75)
<i>N</i>	18	17	16	17
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	0.56	0.00	0.28	0.55
Standard error of estimate	3.06	3.70	2.61	2.47
Durbin-Watson	2.14	0.58	1.50	1.38

NOTE: Ideological polarization is the percentage of reported voters who are nonmoderates. Nonmoderates include those indicating that they are slightly liberal, liberal, or extremely liberal or slightly conservative, conservative, or extremely conservative. Moderates include those indicating that they are moderate or do not know how to describe their ideological inclination. See the note to Table 1 for the measurement of class polarization. The 2002 election is omitted because of the lack of comparable income data. OLS indicates estimation by "ordinary least squares" regression analysis. The weight used in the Cochrane-Orcutt partial difference estimation was 0.61. * $p < 0.05$ (one-tailed), standard errors are in parentheses. SOURCE: Calculated by the author using data from the American National Election Study's cumulative file.

Has Class Polarization Caused the Increase in Ideological Polarization?

As was evident in Figure 2, ideological polarization in the American electorate increased since the early 1970s; the question is to what extent, if any, did polarization between the haves and the have nots increase ideological polarization among voters generally? Table 2 presents the regression analyses of ideological polarization in the electorate. The first equation reaffirms the findings of Figure 2 that the American electorate has become more ideological. The linear trend is statistically significant and indicates that the electorate typically became 2.4 percentage points more ideological (the combined growth in liberalism and conservatism) and less moderate or unaware of an ideological inclination between each election ($4 \times 0.61 = 2.44$ percentage points). Over the 36-year period or 18 elections between 1972 and 2008, this amounts to almost an 11 percentage point growth in voters claiming a liberal or conservative inclination and an equal decline of those lacking an ideological perspective ($18 \times 0.61 = 10.98$). At least with respect to self-professed ideology, American voters are clearly more ideological and less moderate than they were in the 1970s.

The second equation in Table 2 examines the impact of class polarization on ideological polarization. Although the estimated effect of class polarization is not statistically different from zero and the overall fit of the equation fails

to account for any variance in ideological polarization, the Durbin-Watson statistic indicates that there is substantial autocorrelation in the analysis. Equation (3) reports a correction for this autocorrelation problem. The third equation reports a partial differencing of the variables in a first-order Cochrane-Orcutt analysis of the data (Ostrom, 1978; Kutner et al., 2005). This amounts to examining the effects of the change in class polarization between elections on the change in ideological polarization between elections. After the autocorrelation treatment is applied, the estimate of the effect of class polarization on ideological polarization is statistically significant. For about every 5 percentage points of class polarization (higher income voters moving toward conservatism, away from liberalism and the opposite for lower income voters) 1 additional percentage point of the electorate became liberal or conservative rather than moderate or unaware of their ideology.

Though the impact of class polarization is consistent with the theory, the results of the fifth equation in Table 2 indicate that the general increase in ideological polarization in the electorate had little to do with class polarization. When the higher and lower income strata were more polarized, the electorate became more ideological, but this was over and above the general trend of increased ideological polarization. The trend of increasing ideological polarization is evident even after controlling for class polarization in Equation (4). Based on the estimated trend effect in the equation, after taking class polarization into account, ideological polarization increased by about 9 percentage points from 1972 to 2008 ($18 \text{ elections} \times 0.51 = 9.18$). Comparing the trend-related extent of ideological polarization in Equations (1) and (4) indicates that class polarization failed to account for any of the ideological trend. The trend in the growth of ideological polarization appeared somewhat consistent when class polarization was taken into account (0.51 in Equation (4) as opposed to 0.61 in Equation (1)), though the difference is not statistically significant. In short, the growing ideological polarization of the American electorate appears not to be a product of growing income inequality and diverging political perspectives of those at the bottom and top of the economic ladder.

Not Class Polarization, Party Polarization

There is no question that the American electorate has become more ideological, more polarized, over the last three decades. It was fairly well polarized to begin with, but has become more so. There is also no question that income inequality has grown over this same period. For whatever reason, whether illegal immigration, a change in the manufacturing-service base of the economy, especially high-income growth in a few occupations, or economic policies, the higher income segment of the economy accounts for a greater portion of aggregate incomes than it did 30 years ago. However, the analysis indicates

that these two trends are coincidental rather than causal. American voters have not become more ideological because of growing income disparities.

The Impact of Party Polarization

So, if increasing income inequality is not behind the growth of ideological polarization in the electorate, what is? The most plausible cause of increased ideological polarization is the realignment of the political parties along a single left-right ideological dimension: party polarization. As Carmines and Stimson carefully documented, until the early 1960s American partisan politics was structured along two separate conflicts: one the New Deal activist welfare state dimension and a second racial policy dimension (Carmines and Stimson, 1989). As a result, the political parties were ideologically heterogeneous. Liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats were not the rare species they are today. With the displacement of liberal Republicans by liberal Democrats in the early 1960s, particularly in northeastern states, the parties began the lengthy process of sorting themselves out or realigning into a predominantly liberal Democratic Party and a predominantly conservative Republican Party (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope, 2006; Abramowitz and Saunders, 1998, 2008). The process was unusually drawn out because the growth of a conservative Republican Party met resistance in the formerly solid Democratic south where Republicans of any stripe had been unwelcome since the days of reconstruction (Black and Black, 2002; Campbell, 2006).

The increase in ideological polarization in the electorate was a consequence of the transformation of the party system from two ideologically heterogeneous parties to two ideologically homogeneous parties. It is in the interest of parties to emphasize what unites them and de-emphasize what divides them. In the era in which ideology divided the parties internally (pitting southern conservative Democrats against their nonsouthern liberal Democrats, for instance), the parties muted and downplayed ideology. They needed to keep their coalitions together for elections. They sent mixed messages to their partisans.

Since the realignment, the more ideologically homogeneous parties emphasize and accentuate ideological conflict. Rather than being divisive internally to the parties, ideological messages are unifying and rallying messages. The parties are now revealing and accentuating their ideological differences and those who take cues from the parties are getting a clearer signal than in the past. Our argument on this point is similar to Levendusky (2010:124), where elite polarization causes cue clarity, which in turn increases consistency in mass political behavior: "The fact that elites are polarized across issues is enough to cue voters to adopt more consistent positions."

To test the proposition that the realignment or, in Fiorina's terms, the ideological sorting of the political parties has stimulated the increase in ideological polarization, a party polarization index was constructed. The party polarization measure is constructed along the same lines as the class polarization

index. The index is the sum of two differences: the percentage of Republican conservatives minus Republican liberals plus the percentage of Democratic liberals minus Democratic conservatives. In more formal terms,

$$PP = (RC - RL) + (DL - DC),$$

where *PP* is party polarization, *RC* is the percentage of voting Republican Party identifiers who are conservatives, *RL* is the percentage of voting Republican Party identifiers who are liberals, *DL* is the percentage of voting Democratic Party identifiers who are liberals, and *DC* is the percentage of voting Democratic Party identifiers who are conservatives.

This is the difference between ideologically consistent party identifiers (*RC* and *DL*) and ideologically inconsistent party identifiers (*RL* and *DC*). The possible range of the index is from 200 (all Republican conservatives and Democratic liberals) to negative 200 (all Republican liberals and Democratic conservatives).

Figure 6 displays how the parties have become substantially more polarized, particularly since the early 1990s. As a number of previous analyses have reported, Democrats have become increasingly liberal and Republicans increasingly conservative (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope, 2006; Abramowitz and Saunders, 1998). In the 1970s, about 30 percent of Democratic Party identifiers who voted identified themselves as liberal. A little more than half of Republican Party identifiers labeled themselves as conservative. Since then, both liberal ranks among Democrats and conservative ranks among Republicans increased. In elections between 1996 and 2008, nearly 40 percent of voting Democrats claimed to be liberal and about two-thirds of voting Republicans claimed to be conservative.

These increased levels of party polarization precipitated an overall increase in ideological polarization. What it meant to be a good Democrat or a good Republican has become more narrowly ideological than it once was. As a result, some partisans have been pulled by their party's orthodoxies into an ideological camp. As the regressions in Table 3 make plain, party polarization has been strongly associated with ideological polarization and the increasing level of party polarization accounts for the increase in ideological polarization. Every additional 4 percentage points of ideological homogeneity in one of the parties has typically increased polarization by a percentage point. As a comparison of Equations (1) and (3) in Table 3 shows, the increase in party polarization over the years accounts completely for the general increase in ideological polarization. Once party polarization is introduced in Equation (3), the election trend is no longer statistically significant. Party polarization explains the polarization trend.

There is one final possible link worth exploring between growing income inequality and polarization. Is class polarization the basis for party polarization? Has the growth in income inequality and class polarization contributed to party polarization and, therefore, indirectly to the increase in ideological

FIGURE 6
Party Polarization, 1972–2008



NOTE: NES data, weighted by VCF009A. Party polarization = $(RC - RL) + (DL - DC)$, where RC is the percentage of Republican identifying voters who are conservatives, RL is the percentage of Republican identifying voters who are liberals, DL is the percentage of Democrat identifying voters who are liberals, and DC is the percentage of Democrat identifying voters who are conservative.

polarization? Perhaps a bit at the margins, but basically no. Figure 7 displays the percentages of voters whose partisanship, ideological perspectives, and incomes are consistent, inconsistent, or indeterminate in elections from 1972 to 2008. Those classified as consistent are higher income conservative Republicans or lower income liberal Democrats. Those classified as indeterminate are in the middle in terms of partisanship (independents), ideology (moderates or don't knows), or income (middle income). Those grouped as inconsistent have incomes, ideologies, and party identifications that are unexpected from the class polarization perspective. This would include high-income liberal Democrats and low-income conservative Republicans as well as other deviations from the expected political profile. If growing income inequality and class polarization had significantly contributed to party and ideological polarization, we should see a growing number of voters with party identifications and ideological perspectives consistent with their incomes and a shrinking number with inconsistent party and ideological associations.

TABLE 3

The Effect of Party Polarization on Ideological Polarization, 1972–2008

Dependent Variable: Ideological Polarization			
Independent variable	(1)	(2)	(3)
Election trend	0.61*	–	–0.13
(Year of election)	(0.14)		(0.30)
Party polarization (<i>PP</i>)	–	0.25*	0.30*
		(0.04)	(0.12)
Constant	49.00*	37.20*	35.30*
	(1.49)	(3.08)	(5.70)
<i>N</i>	18	18	18
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	0.56	0.66	0.65
Standard error of estimate	3.06	2.60	2.67
Durbin-Watson	2.14	1.77	1.66

NOTE: See Table 2 for the measure of ideological polarization. See the text for the description of the party polarization measure. **p* < 0.05 (one-tailed), standard errors are in parentheses. Estimation is OLS.
SOURCE: Calculated by the author using data from the American National Election Study's cumulative file.

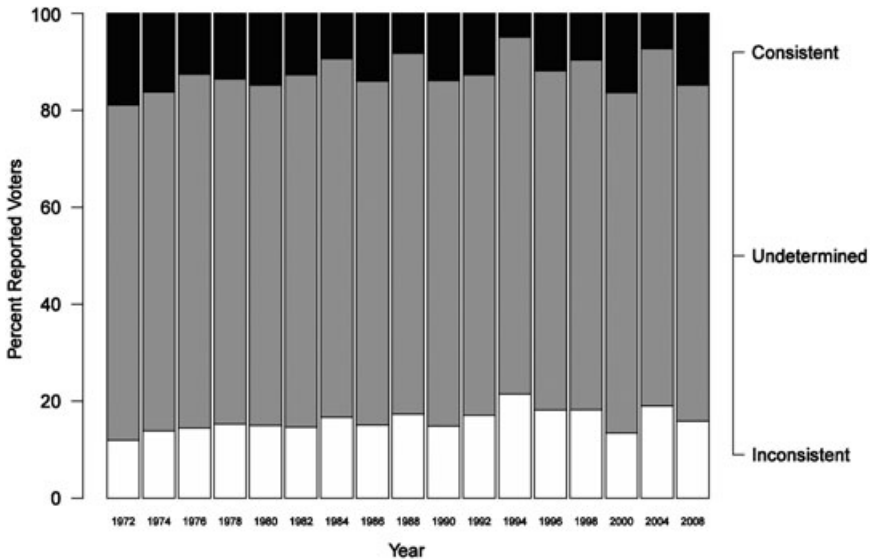
As Figure 7 indicates, though the percentage of consistent income-party-ideology voters increased in recent years to about 20 percent of all voters, the association remains muddled for most voters (being middle-class, independent, and/or moderate) and there remains about as many inconsistent voters as consistent voters. Even with the increased levels of income inequality, there is a good deal of ideological and partisan diversity even at the extremes of the income distribution. In 2004, among the poorest segment of the electorate (the bottom 16 percent of family incomes, the bottom 12 percent of incomes among those voting), about 20 percent called themselves conservatives and nearly 35 percent were Republicans. There was similar diversity in the highest income category (the top 5 percent of family incomes, the top 12 percent of incomes among those voting). Contrary to their supposed class interests, nearly one-third of the best-off claimed to be liberals and 40 percent identified themselves as Democrats. In short, though economic interests matter, most Americans go well beyond looking into their wallets in their thinking about politics.

Why Party But Not Class Polarization?

As Louis Hartz documented over 60 years ago, American political culture developed without a class system (Hartz, 1955). Economics is important to our politics, but its importance can be easily exaggerated. Despite a large and growing disparity in the distribution of income in the economy, there are a great many in the lower strata of the income distribution who do not associate

FIGURE 7

Consistency of Ideology, Partisanship, and Income, 1972–2008



NOTE: Includes reported voters. The top segment of each bar is consistent on party identification, ideology, income level (low-income liberal Democrats and high-income conservative Republicans). The middle segment is undetermined (independents, middle-income voters, or moderates). The lower segments are inconsistent (e.g., high-income conservative Democrats, low-income conservative Republicans, high-income liberal Democrats).

themselves with liberalism. The class polarization thesis suggests that low-income voters would increasingly find their interests best reflected in liberal political perspectives. In fact, many of these voters not only do not declare themselves to be liberals, but do declare themselves to be conservatives. Some of these voters, no doubt, are confused in applying these labels, but it is hard to imagine that this confusion has grown over time. Even after 1990 and the growth in income inequality, more than a quarter of lower income voters (27 percent) claimed to be conservatives and less than a fifth (19 percent) claimed to be liberals. This discrepancy between the economic circumstances and the conservative political perspectives of many lower income voters is regarded by some as a “derangement” of the natural political-economic order. It inspired Thomas Frank to ruminate at length in *What’s the Matter with Kansas?* about how the relatively poor state of Kansas has come to consistently vote for conservative Republicans (Frank, 2004).

The supposed disconnect of income and self-interested ideological perspectives, however, is by no means confined to the lowest part of the income scale. It is also evident in the political views of the upper income strata (and perhaps even among some of those who forward the class polarization thesis).

Three decades ago, Everett Ladd documented the fairly common support for liberalism among the affluent since the 1960s (Ladd, 1976–1977). While the class polarization theory suggests that growing income inequality is supposed to drive high-income earners toward self-serving conservative views, this has not happened for a majority of voters in the higher income category. Since 1990, among higher income voters, fewer than half (46 percent) claimed a conservative inclination and nearly a quarter (23 percent) of all higher income voters claimed a liberal political perspective. As long as we are asking about Kansas, perhaps, as Andrew Gelman and his colleagues have asked, we should ask what's the matter with Connecticut (Gelman et al., 2007). Or what's the matter with Maryland (another wealthy but liberal state)? Maybe even what's the matter with Manhattan and Hollywood, two hotbeds of wealthy liberals?

How do you explain the frequent adherence to political ideologies and symbols that appear to contradict economic self-interests and the even more common failure to adhere to ideologies and symbols that are supposed to reflect economic self-interests? Perhaps one might discount the conservatism of lower income voters as “false-consciousness,” the misguided views of those who are not very politically sophisticated and easily led astray by the cacophony of politics. Perhaps one might claim that liberalism among higher income voters reflects some “enlightened” self-interest or some benign altruistic sensibilities—a modern day *noblesse oblige*.

A general explanation, however, might be more complicated and less sinister. First, some voters may be more motivated by general principles than myopic economic self-interest. These general principles or values might range from commitments to individual liberties, meritocracy, respect for tradition, religious values, social justice and equality, or any number of primary values transmitted by socialization, inculcated by social institutions, or developed independently through experience. Whether from experience or through socialization, those guided by principle may come to regard activist government either as benign or as a threat to the public interest whether or not it is believed to serve their personal economic interests.

Second, voters may care about personal and social conditions other than the economy.

Voters are not cash registers. They care about social issues, law and order, education, the environment, immigration, national defense, and many other issues as well as the economy. These interests may pull voters one way, while their economic self-interests pull them another.

Third, to the extent that the economy is at the center of their interests, the concerns of voters are not necessarily limited to their personal circumstances. A good deal of research indicates that many voters adopt a sociotropic view of the economy, looking at what might be best for the larger community rather than their own pocketbooks (Kinder and Kiewiet, 1981; Lewis-Beck, 1988).

Finally, even to the extent that voters focus narrowly on their own pocketbooks, this does not inexorably lead them to adopt a particular political

perspective. They may have different ideas about which political perspective has the better track record of economic performance and which is likely to lead to better economic futures. While many of the well-off may find their narrow self-interests served by the smaller government demands advocated by conservatives, some may see economic benefits springing from the public investments in social welfare and human capital promoted by liberals. A well-trained and healthy workforce and a clean environment may be good for business and profits. Conversely, while many lower income voters may see their bread buttered by liberal social welfare programs, others may see these programs as simply feeding a bloated and self-serving government bureaucracy, derelicts, and slackers. They might well conclude that their interests would be better served from a robust and expanding productive private sector nurtured by lower taxes and conservative public policies.

Beyond differences in policy outlooks, voters may also differ in how they see their own position in the economy. Just about everybody has both those above them and those below them on the economic ladder and this means they have a choice about their outlook. No matter what their economic circumstance, voters have the choice to focus upwards in either aspiration or envy or to focus downward in either compassion or concern. As a result, where you stand politically is not neatly determined by where you stand on the economic ladder.

In examining the economic basis of the self-declared ideologies of voters, it is clear that reactions to income inequalities do not take us very far in understanding American mass politics.

The weakness in the association is evident, but often not acknowledged, in past work. What Everett Ladd detected as complicated curvilinear inversion of the class-ideological alignment and what Thomas Frank saw as a derangement of class interests may just reflect the fact that many Americans are not purely economic animals driven by greed and envy (Frank, 2004; Ladd, 1976–1977). Economics matters, but ideas matter a lot more.

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