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# Polarization in the American Public: Misconceptions and Misreadings

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Although we are surprised that Abramowitz and Saunders continue to advance arguments that we have rebutted in other publications, we are grateful to the *Journal* for providing another opportunity to address some misconceptions in the study of popular polarization. We will reply point-by-point to the Abramowitz and Saunders critique, but given that our responses have been elaborated at length elsewhere, we refer interested readers to these sources for more detailed discussions (Fiorina and Abrams 2008; Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2006; Fiorina and Levendusky 2006;).

Before proceeding, we emphasize one observation that partially vitiates several of the Abramowitz and Saunders criticisms. Much of the data they view as contradicting our conclusions consists of vote reports, election returns, and approval ratings. These variables obviously are of paramount political concern, but they can not be used as evidence of polarization—for or against. As explained in *Culture War?* centrist voters can register polarized choices, and even if the beliefs and positions of voters remain constant, their voting decisions and political evaluations will appear more polarized when the positions candidates adopt and the actions elected officials take become more extreme.<sup>1</sup> When statistical relationships change, students of voting behavior have a tendency to locate the source of the change in voter attitudes, but unchanging voters may simply be responding to

changes in candidate strategy and behavior. Abramowitz and Saunders exemplify this tendency and much of their critique goes astray as a result.

*Abramowitz and Saunders Criticism 1: The American public is less moderate than we argue and has become even less so in recent years.*

Fiorina and Levendusky (2006) have explained how the coding and aggregating procedures in Abramowitz and Saunders exaggerate attitudinal polarization. For present purposes, consider two types of raw data. First, the distribution of liberal-conservative self-identification shows little change between the 1970s and the present. The NES 7-point measure shows a slight drop in “don’t knows” who are usually classified as moderates.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the GSS 7-point measure (which does not offer “or haven’t you thought much about it?” as a response option) shows no change at all. A Gallup 5-point measure shows *more* moderates in the 2000s than in the 1970s.<sup>3</sup> While to some extent polarization is in the eye of the beholder, either the American population is not more ideologically polarized today than a generation ago, or it was already polarized a generation ago but no one noticed.

Second, consider the same NES issue measures used by Abramowitz and Saunders. Table 1 lists the percentage point decline in each response category between 1984 and 2004—the end-point years for

<sup>1</sup>See especially (2006, 25–32, 170–82). The opposite is true as well, of course, voter beliefs and positions could change but their votes and evaluations might not change if the parties and candidates acted in such a way as to offset the voter changes. The general point is that the interpretation of votes and evaluations requires information on both the voters and the candidates/parties.

<sup>2</sup>As Converse (2006) notes, declining response rates may result in somewhat more informed samples today compared to earlier decades.

<sup>3</sup>For graphs of the data see Fiorina and Abrams (2008).

**TABLE 1 No Polarization of Policy Views: 1984-2004 (Percentage Point Changes in Seven-Point Scale Position, 1984 to 2004)**

	Extremely Liberal → Extremely Conservative						
<i>Left Shift</i>							
Health Insurance	6%	2	3	0(-9)*	0	-2	-2
Spending/Services	5	4	5	-3(-5)	-3	-3	-2
<i>Right Shift</i>							
Aid to Blacks	0	-2	-5	-5(-7)	-1	6	8
Defense Spending	-5	-4	-3	-5(-4)	8	4	2
<i>Polarization</i>							
Jobs/SoL	2	1	0	-2(-7)	0	1	3
<i>No Change</i>							
Abortion	1	-1			3	-1	

\*numbers in ( ) are changes when "don't knows" are treated as moderates

their measures of change.<sup>4</sup> Five scales offer seven positions running from the most liberal to the most conservative stance on the issue:

- More government services/higher spending—fewer services/less spending
- Government health insurance—private health insurance
- More government aid for blacks—blacks should help themselves
- Greatly decrease military spending—greatly increase spending
- Government guaranteed job and standard of living—get ahead on your own

A sixth item asks respondents to choose between four positions on abortion ranging from most to least restricted.

How much have the distributions changed? Not much. And what little change there is hardly suggests polarization. The standard deviations of the distributions tend to diminish slightly over time, and adopting the common sense notion of polarization as a movement from the center toward the extremes, one searches in vain for evidence of increasing bimodality. On only one scale—government responsibility for jobs and standard of living—is there any evidence of polarization. Between 1984 and 2004

<sup>4</sup>As pointed out by Fiorina and Levendusky (2006), most of the change between 1984 and 2004 comes between 2000 and 2004. While journalists often take the results of one election as indicative of the arrival of a new political world, political scientists should be more cautious.

there is a small decline (two percentage points) in the number of people placing themselves in the exact center of the scale and a marginal increase in the number placing themselves on the left (three percentage points) and the right (four percentage points).

The other five issues do not show even this insignificant degree of rising polarization. On three of the scales there is a single-digit decline in the number of respondents who choose the exact middle of the scale, but on none of the scales does the middle lose to *both* extremes. Rather, on two scales the population shifted leftward. In 2004 11% more Americans favored government health insurance and 4% fewer favored private insurance than in 1984. A similar pattern holds for the choice between more public services versus lower public spending. In 2004 14% more Americans placed themselves on the liberal side of the scale than in 1984 compared to 8% fewer on the conservative side.

On two other scales the population shifted rightward. On aid to minorities the right gained from the left and the middle—14% more Americans favor the two rightmost scale positions (individual initiative and self-help) in 2004 than in 1984. Military spending shows an even more notable shift. The doves lost 12% and the hawks gained 14%. Finally, the 4-position abortion scale shows virtually no change in popular opinion over the 20-year period. When Abramowitz and Saunders recode this raw data, aggregate it into an index, and recode again, they report a great deal of polarization, but the results clearly have little or no basis in the raw data.

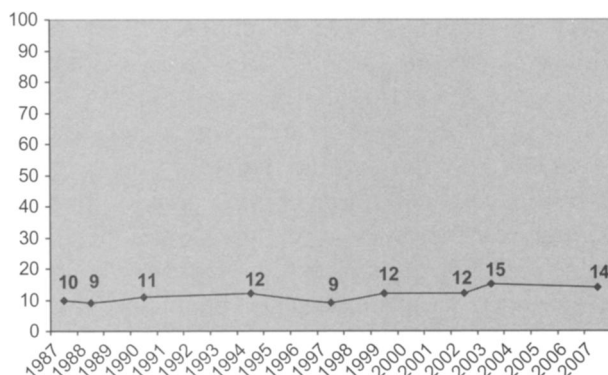
*Abramowitz and Saunders Criticism 2. Partisan polarization is greater and extends more deeply into the general public than we claim.*

In recent decades some party polarization (or party sorting as we prefer to term it) certainly has occurred. That is, while population opinion distributions have changed little, party subpopulations have become more distinct as conservative identification declined among Democrats and liberal identification declined among Republicans (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998). Current discussion in the literature centers around the breadth (across issue domains) and depth (how deeply it extends into the population) of the sorting. There is general agreement that party elites have become significantly more distinct over the course of the past several decades—Democrats and Republicans in Congress show little or no overlap, for example. The picture for the general public is less clear. At one pole Abramowitz and Saunders construct an index that shows very

highly differentiated parties. At another pole the Pew Center reports that between 1987 and 2007 the average difference between Republican and Democratic identifiers on 40 political and social issues increased from 10% to 14%, a surprisingly small difference (Figure 1).

We think the truth lies somewhere in between. The most detailed work is by Levendusky (2006) who analyzes party sorting on an issue-by-issue basis, finding a considerable amount of variability. Party sorting has proceeded far on some issues, less on others, and on some issues one party has become more homogeneous, while the other has not changed. Moreover, party sorting has proceeded much less in the general public than among party elites. The abortion issue is a striking example of the limits of party sorting. For two decades the issue has served as an unofficial litmus test for presidential nominees. And sorting has clearly occurred among party identifiers (Adams 1997), although it took two decades after Roe for partisan majorities to get on their party's side of the issue. But consider the responses of *strong* Democrats and *strong* Republicans to the NES abortion question in 2004: 10% of strong Democrats believe abortion should never be legal and another 23% only in cases of rape, incest, or threats to the mother's life—one-third of strong Democrats are seriously out of step with their party's platform. The picture is even more striking for strong Republicans: 23% believe abortion should *always* be legal and another 18% legal anytime there is a clear need. More than two-fifths of strong Republicans are pro-choice in the ordinary meaning of the term. Democratic elites may dance to the tune called by NARAL and Republican elites to the tune called by Focus on the Family, but one-third to two-fifths of their strongest adherents appear to be tone-deaf.

FIGURE 1 Mass Party Differences Have Increased Slightly



*Abramowitz and Saunders Criticism 3.* “Fiorina claims that there has been little increase in geographical polarization in recent decades and the differences between red states and blue states have been greatly exaggerated.”

Of the second assertion there can be no doubt: when the red-blue map first appeared in 2000 the media grossly exaggerated the differences between red and blue states. Contrary to claims of a country split down the middle, in 2004 on only one of the many policy issues included in the NES did majorities in red and blue states disagree—on the newer and somewhat esoteric issue of homosexual adoption (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2006, 49). We stand by our demonstration that red-blue difference were and continue to be exaggerations.

In their objection, Abramowitz and Saunders adopt a scattershot approach, throwing out numerous variables and hoping that readers will find something convincing (see their Table 6). The usual sociological factoids appear—gun ownership, union membership, Evangelical self-classification, and so on. But the correlations between most such measures and political positions are weaker than usually presumed. For example, in 2004 more than one-third of gun owners voted for John Kerry, as did slightly less than one-third of white evangelicals. Political differences are generally much smaller than sociological differences might suggest. Other evidence Abramowitz and Saunders present consists of election returns and performance ratings, which, as we have indicated, can not be used to measure polarization.

In *Culture War?*, we did not take a position on the argument that Americans have become *increasingly* geographically sorted, although we took brief note of that argument and its critics (Bishop 2004; cf. Klinkner 2004). Several more recent studies report little or no evidence of increasing geographic polarization (Glaeser and Ward 2006; Klinkner and Hapanowicz 2005; Nunn and Evans 2006). We still have no position in this debate although it does seem to us unlikely that Massachusetts and Mississippi voters differed less before the jet plane, broadcast TV, and the internet than they do today.

Finally, if red-blue polarization was as deep as Abramowitz and Saunders believe it to be, why would voting patterns for other offices not produce exactly the same red-blue map that presidential voting does? But blue states elect Republican governors and red states elect Democratic governors. And half the states have divided party control of state government. Such differing voting patterns indicate that when the parties offer different candidates who emphasize different issues and take different

positions, the same voters vote differently (Fiorina and Abrams 2008).

*Abramowitz and Saunders Criticism 4: Fiorina claims “that economic cleavages remain as important or more important than religious cleavages . . . Among white voters in the United States, the religious divide is now much deeper than the class divide.”*

On the contrary, what we actually wrote was “We do not wish to draw any firm conclusions about the relative importance of income and religious differences in contemporary elections. Such an estimate of relative importance would require a far more elaborate analysis than we have carried out . . .” (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2006, 137). Abramowitz and Saunders do not provide such an analysis. Their logistic regression analysis completely ignores our demonstration (2006, 177–79) that the coefficients in such an analysis can reflect the positions of the candidates, not any change in the relative importance the voters attach to the issues.

As for more elaborate analyses than we carried out, some have since been reported (Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder 2006; Bartels 2006), the findings of which contradict Abramowitz and Saunders on the relative importance of economics and religion.<sup>5</sup> The more general point to keep in mind is that the importance of an issue depends both on a voter’s concern about that issue and the choice that the candidates offer her. As we asked in *Culture War?* (2006, 179–81) in 1992 did tens of millions of voters suddenly decide that religion was more important to them than they had previously realized, or did the increasing secularization of the Democratic Party and the capture of the Republican Party by social conservatives lead voters to see religion and morality as more relevant than when Michael Dukakis, Walter Mondale, and Jimmy Carter were Democratic nominees and Bush 41, Reagan, and Ford were their Republican opponents?

*Abramowitz and Saunders Criticism 5: “Americans were more engaged in the 2004 presidential election than in any presidential contest in the past 50 years.”*

Let’s not get carried away here. Yes, turnout in 2004 surged to levels not seen since the 1960s. Perceptions of party differences and concern over the outcome both increased—a natural consequence of more polarized candidate choices. There was an increase in low cost activity such as talking about the

election and wearing a button or displaying a bumper sticker. But by other NES measures 2004 looks little different from other presidential elections of the past generation. Time-intensive activities like working for a party or candidate and attending a meeting or rally were at perfectly normal single digit levels, and the financial sacrifice entailed by writing a check increased only a little (Fiorina and Levendusky 2006).

Moreover, in arguing for a record level of engagement Abramowitz and Saunders completely ignore an obvious alternative hypothesis: mobilization. In recent presidential elections the parties have implemented a much more intensive “ground game.” Their activities are reflected in NES reports about party contacts which jumped in the past two elections—eight percentage points between 2000 and 2004. Note that interest in the campaign was well within normal levels. Increases in undemanding campaign activities without corresponding increases in campaign interest are consistent with a mobilization hypothesis. Rather than a record number of newly engaged Americans jumping into the 2004 campaign, more of them than usual may have been pushed.

We are perfectly willing—indeed happy—to recognize that our fear that polarized politics will demobilize the more reasonable portions of the electorate, does not seem to be occurring, a salutary development should it continue. But to confidently assert the opposite, as Abramowitz and Saunders do, is at the very least, highly premature.

## Summary

Abramowitz and Saunders contend that the electorate as a whole is less moderate than we believe and that partisans are far more deeply polarized than we believe. If one examines the data without resort to multiple recodings and aggregations, their case disappears. Regarding geographic polarization, Abramowitz and Saunders argue that we have understated its extent and that such polarization is increasing. We continue to believe that the red-blue divide is a misleading exaggeration, and we note that recent research on changes in geographic polarization indicates that they are wrong. Regarding religious polarization, Abramowitz and Saunders claim that our claim that economic differences are deeper than religious differences is wrong. We made no such claim, and again, recent research indicates that their claim is wrong. Finally, Abramowitz and Saunders argue that polarization enhances citizen engagement.

<sup>5</sup>Indeed, McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal report that “born again and evangelical Christians are particularly sensitive to income effects on political preferences” (2006, 107–108).

Their evidence is based on one election, and it neglects to consider an obvious alternative hypothesis. All in all, their critique provides no reason to revise the conclusions of *Culture War?*

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