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Polarization Then and Now: A Historical Perspective

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In political media, in academic journals, and at cocktail parties across the country, members of the political infotainment community have been debating how polarized the country really is. Pundits and scholars alike assert the polarization of contemporary politics, portraying an ever widening chasm between Democrats and Republicans:

When George W. Bush took office half the country cheered and the other half seethed.
The red states get redder, the blue states get bluer, and the political map of the United States takes on the coloration of the Civil War.

Politics in the United States can now be characterized as an ideologically polarized party system.¹

¹ The authors would like to thank Joseph Cooper, Charles Jones, Pietro Nivola, and Jeremy C. Pope for their very helpful comments.

Yet interpreting the meaning of polarization is problematic without having some benchmarks with which to assess it. There is a certain irony underlying all of the debate about polarization because the primary function of political parties is, by definition, to organize differences between factions in the political system. The Oxford English Dictionary offers three related definitions of a political party:

(a) A group of people on one side in a contest, battle, etc., or united in maintaining a cause, policy, or opinion in opposition to others; a faction; (b) spec. a formally constituted political group, usually organized on a national basis, which contests elections and aims to form or take part in a government; (c) the policy or system of taking sides on public questions; attachment to or support for a particular party; party feeling or spirit; partisanship, esp. in political matters.

In some sense, political parties exist in order to be polarized. So what is all the fuss? When we say parties are polarized, what does that really mean?

In this chapter we draw on history to provide benchmarks that can be used to better understand and interpret polarization in the present era. The analysis is based on the presumption that any discussion of polarization is inherently a comparative discussion. To say simply that parties are polarized is to define what parties are. Likewise, when we say American politics today are polarized, we are making an implicit comparison with another place, another type of government, or another time period. An attempt to establish the level of polarization—whether the difference between parties is high, medium, or low—implies some comparative metric that establishes what “high” levels of polarization are relative to “low” levels of polarization. The two-party system in American history is a natural metric to use in establishing benchmarks for evaluating polarization today. By examining historical patterns of polarization, we can assess how polarization today compares with polarization in the past, but also identify consistencies and inconsistencies with the past.

At the broadest level, perhaps the first key point to make is that polarization in American politics is nothing new. For many years, our political institutions and policymaking processes have witnessed sharp divisions between the parties. In fact, the early history of the two-party political system in the United States exhibited much more colorful anecdotes about polarization. Party leaders during the founding era sought to settle debates with lethal duels, and Representative Preston Brooks famously caned Senator Charles Sumner in the antebellum Congress. In the late nineteenth century, the aptly named sergeant at arms busily disarmed members on the House floor, and the two parties used their platforms to exchange slurs. In their 1880 platform, Republicans charged Democrats with exhibiting “sacrifice of patriotism and justice to supreme and insatiable lust for office.” In 1884, Democrats countered by claiming that Republicans have “steadily decayed in moral character and political capacity.” For much of American history, the two parties have been distant from each other in the policy positions they took, and the party coalitions have been relatively cohesive in acting out their party platforms.3

Yet beneath this broad characterization there are historical differences in how—and how much—politics have been polarized. To better understand these nuances, we examine two key dimensions of polarization. The first dimension is the breadth and depth of polarization, or the degree to which parties are both distant from each other and cohesive in their actions, and the extent to which polarization pervades the political system. How large are the ideological disparities between parties and how cohesive are parties in their behavior? Are both elites and masses polarized, or is polarization limited to certain segments of the population? In examining the breadth and depth of polarization, we thus ask what characterizes a polarized party system and who should reflect those characteristics. The second dimension is the character and intensity of issue divisions between the parties. Because parties are usually differentiated by their stances on key questions of public policy or government philosophy, we examine the kinds of issues that divide the parties and the fervor surrounding politics on each issue.

The historical analysis focuses on two major periods of polarization: the transition from an essentially agricultural economy to a modern industrialized economy at the turn of the twentieth century, and the class-based debate over responses to the Great Depression. We chose these periods because historians and political scientists generally agree that these were two major political “crises” that divided Republicans and Democrats.4 At the turn of the twentieth century, American society was shifting from a rural to an industrial economy, and from a parochialized society to a more national community. Managers and businessmen benefiting from the rise of industrialization battled disaffected groups of laborers, agrarians, and immigrants uncertain of their place in a changing society. Parties

3. Our understanding of polarization in the past is not limited to these anecdotes. A number of studies find quantifiable evidence substantiating the idea that polarization has long been a norm in American politics. For example, see Jacobson (2003); Schickler (2000); Han and Brady (forthcoming); Poole and Rosenthal (1991); Brady, Cooper, and Hurley (1979); Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart (2001); Ansolabehere and Snyder (2002); McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2006).
divided over questions about the role of government in growing and expanding the national economy (particularly the debate over tariffs and monetary standards), and the appropriate role of the United States in world affairs. Similarly, after the stock market collapse in 1929, Democrats painted President Herbert Hoover and the Republicans as woefully ineffective on the issue of economic recovery and swept themselves into office in 1932. As historian David Kennedy has written, Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal for economic recovery led to a period in which Americans were made “free from fear.”

To examine the breadth and depth of polarization during these historical time periods, we have to be creative in our search for data. Reliable public opinion data are not available for the entire historical period, so instead we rely on electoral data and the historical record to develop a richer understanding of polarization in elections and in the electorate. These data sources have their limitations. Because the best available data are not as good as we might hope, we seek to substantiate our findings (wherever possible) by comparing several different indicators (see footnotes throughout the chapter). Overall, we find the patterns in the data to be consistent. Thus, even without perfect data, we can examine these historical eras to develop benchmarks for polarization and better understand polarization in American politics today.

We begin by more thoroughly defining what a polarized party system is in terms of the breadth and depth of polarization and the character and intensity of the issues involved. The Civil War era provides a framework for this discussion, since it is the only period in American history when existing political institutions were unable to accommodate the polarized divide between parties. An examination of the Civil War era thus allows us to delineate more clearly the criteria we are using to define what a polarized party system is. We then examine the economic and political transitions of 1890–1910 and the New Deal era relative to the present period of polarization. A close look at polarization during these three periods reveals nuanced similarities and differences that are difficult to summarize neatly. However, we do find that the present period is more similar to the 1890s than it is to the New Deal era. The final section of the chapter draws on this analysis to speculate about how polarization today will be resolved. We compare the way issues were resolved in the 1890s and during the New Deal era and argue that, as in the 1890s, resolution of polarized issues today will happen in more incremental fashion than during the New Deal.


Establishing Benchmarks for Polarization

The Civil War era was the only period in American history when polarization rendered political institutions unable to achieve compromise and adapt to shifting preferences. An examination of politics during this era reveals what it means to have a truly polarized political system. During the Civil War era, party coalitions differed clearly in their ideological views and displayed high levels of party unity around those views. In addition, polarization was present not only in elite politics, but also among the masses who expressed their views in elections. Polarization during this era, in other words, was broad and deep. Moreover, the issue divisions of the Civil War era were characterized by intense moral fervor, as partisans divided bitterly over issues of slavery, secession, and civil rights.

A simple definition of a polarized party system is one in which one party is very liberal and the other party is very conservative. The further apart the two parties are on a liberal-conservative spectrum, the more polarized they are. By this definition, we could measure polarization by identifying the median Democrat and the median Republican and simply seeing how far apart they are from each other. But this definition would be too simple.

First, polarization is not only a matter of how far apart the parties are from each other in their views, but also how cohesive the party coalitions are. Consider, for instance, the two hypothetical situations depicted in figure 3-1. In both situations the party medians are approximately the same and are relatively distant from each other. The parties in the top figure are also relatively cohesive, such that all the members of one party are relatively close to the median member. In other words, Republicans are relatively similar to each other and distinct from Democrats, while Democrats are similar to other Democrats and very different from Republicans. In the bottom figure, the parties are much more dispersed, such that some Democrats and some Republicans are indistinguishable from each other in their views. The more conservative Democrats are hard to distinguish from some Republicans, and the more liberal Republicans vote like many Democrats. Even if the median members of each party are relatively distant from each other in their views, it is still possible that a considerable number of Democrats and Republicans are not polarized. Thus, it is important to examine not only the distance between the parties, but also the cohesiveness of the party coalitions.

Second, in examining the disparity and strength of party coalitions, how do we define who constitutes the party? Like leaders in most organizations, party leaders are usually the most visible indicators of their party’s stance on a given issue.
The rhetoric and actions of elected officials and party activists usually outweigh the behavior of voters in determining public perceptions of the party. Yet as the political scientist V. O. Key Jr. argued in *Politics, Parties, and Pressure Groups*, parties should be understood at three different levels: party-in-government, party-as-organization, and party-in-the-electorate. Mass partisans are as important to defining the party as party elites. In large part, this is because mass party voters either enable party elites to behave in a polarized fashion or constrain them from doing so. Low levels of polarization in the electorate constrain the ability of party elites to legislate in a polarized fashion. When the electorate is not very polarized, legislators are not necessarily rewarded electorally for polarized behavior. On the contrary, when the electorate is very polarized—in the sense that disparities between the parties are large and party voters are cohesive—legislators will seek to satisfy their party base through more polarized behavior. In other words, the breadth and depth of polarization depends not only on the disparity and strength of party coalitions, but also on the extent to which this is realized in both elite and mass party politics.

During the Civil War era, both party elites and party masses were ideologically distant from each other and relatively cohesive in their voting behavior (see table 3-1). Using roll-call voting scores, scholars have examined the ideological distance between the median Democrat and the median Republican in Congress over time, showing that congressional parties during the Civil War era had clear ideological disparities between them that were relatively high in comparison with other periods in American history.

A similar pattern emerges in an examination of the cohesiveness of party coalitions. A relatively common way to examine the cohesiveness of party coalitions is to study the level of party voting, or the percentage of votes on which a

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8. Key (1956).

9. Note that this depends on the disparity and the cohesiveness of party coalitions in the electorate. For example, when the average Democrat and the average Republican are very distant from each other in their ideology but the party coalitions in the electorate are relatively weak, then there is still a considerable amount of overlap among voters in the middle of the ideological distribution. (This is depicted in the bottom half of figure 3-1.) In a situation like this, legislators seeking to win swing voters will be more constrained in their ability to vote in a polarized fashion.

10. See, for example, Schickler (2000); Poole and Rosenthal (1984).
majority of Democrats opposed a majority of Republicans. In more polarized

times, the sharp distinctions between parties should create greater cohesion as
fewer members of Congress are able to straddle a middle line. An examination of
historical voting patterns in Congress around the Civil War demonstrates relatively
high levels of party voting and cohesion, as expected. Before the Republican


takeover of Congress in 1857, 68 percent of all votes were party votes. From
1857 to 1873, the number rose to 75 percent—almost 10 percentage points
higher than the subsequent period from the 1870s to the 1890s. It is more difficult to demonstrate the disparity and cohesiveness of party
cohesion among mass partisans during the Civil War era. Historical data on
turnout preferences during this period are obviously very limited. Nonetheless, we
can examine elements of the historical record, which reveal evidence of deep
and heartfelt divisions among voters. Nothing evinces how deeply the divisions
over slavery penetrated mass party politics better than the electoral reaction to
the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854. This act was particularly
significant in the lead-up to the Civil War because it fundamentally changed the
nature of both politics and policy. The act represented a strategic move by political
leaders to broaden the slavery issue to encompass not only the moral cause
of abolition, but also economic freedom and prosperity.

The strategy was successful—voters were highly activated. Voter turnout in
House elections in 1854 shows how the act generated intense voter interest. In
general, turnout in off-year elections is much lower than turnout in presidential
election years. In 1858, for example, turnout in northeastern and midwestern states
dropped about 18 percent from 1856, only to increase again in 1860. In the
off-year elections of 1854, however, voter turnout actually increased in the midwestern states over the turnout for the 1852 presidential elections. As a comparison
point, we can examine turnout in the northern states that held elections in 1853
before the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and we find that turnout follows
the normal pattern of decline. This exceedingly unusual increase in voter turnout
in a midterm election year demonstrates the extreme impact of the Kansas-
Nebraska Act on voters. Both of the dominant parties at the time—Democrats


and Whigs—felt the impact. The increase in turnout yielded a strong pro-
Republican Party vote, which persisted through the Civil War era. As a result,
Republicans went from virtual nonexistence in 1852 to become a large minority
party in the House of Representatives by 1855—and the majority party by 1860.

The unprecedented intensity of public reaction to the Kansas-Nebraska Act demonstrates the degree to which the fight over slavery and economic freedom
penetrated all levels of politics—not just political elites. When party elites pursued
a policy anentebellum voters disliked, they reacted strongly at the polls, leading to
the creation of a new majority party. Once these voters were able to carry the
Republican Party to victory in the presidential election of 1860, southern voters
reacted equally strongly, leading to the rapid secession of southern states from the
union. Mass party politics, in other words, appears to have been as bitterly
divided as elite politics during the Civil War era. Importantly, the fact that mass
party politics was as polarized as elite party politics enabled the creation of a new
majority party—the Republican Party—which took a clear, polarizing stance on
slavery. The behavior of mass partisans in elections enabled greater polarization
among elites. The key linking mechanisms were elections, which reflected the
passion of voters on key national issues.

The second dimension of polarization that we examine is the character and
intensity of the issue divisions between the parties. The Civil War era was unique
not only for the breadth and depth of its polarization, but also because the
polarization of the era resulted from a fundamentally moral issue. We distinguish
moral issues from economic issues on the basis of whether an agreement exists
about what the "right" outcome is. In some cases, the parties may agree on the
goal they are trying to achieve, but disagree on how to achieve it. For example,
during the New Deal era, the shared goal of the parties was to pull the nation
economic depression, but the parties polarized over how best to do it. In
other cases—on moral issues, as we define them—parties do not even agree on
what the goal is. Should the country abolish slavery or keep it? This distinction
between moral and economic issues is important, since moral issues are more
difficult to resolve. When parties agree on the goal they are seeking to achieve, it
is easier to compromise on questions of how to achieve the goal. When parties
do not even agree on the goal they are seeking to achieve, it is more difficult to
achieve collective action around a compromise.

Consider, for instance, the search for a compromise on abolition. Was there
acentral solution to slavery among the general antebellum public? One prominent
proposed compromise was popular sovereignty, giving each state the right to
decided whether to allow slavery. Yet this compromise offered no resolution to

11. See, for example, Hurley and Wilson (1989); Cooper and Young (2002).
12. The results are the same even if we adopt a more stringent criterion and examine only the
voters where at least 90 percent of Democrats opposed at least 90 percent of Republicans. For
instance, before 1857, only 8.9 percent of all votes met the 90-90 criteria, but after 1857, 20.9 per-
cent of votes did. For more detailed depictions of the data, see Hurley and Wilson (1989); Cooper
and Young (2002); Brady (1988).
the fundamental question of whether slavery should be abolished. As such, it was untenable over time, since both pro- and anti-slavery factions continued to disagree passionately over that fundamental question. When issues such as how to handle fugitive slaves emerged, the weaknesses of popular sovereignty as a long-term solution became evident. Because they did not agree on the fundamental goals they were trying to achieve, pro- and anti-slavery camps could not achieve widespread collective action around fugitive slaves to preserve popular sovereignty.

On moral issues, each side thus sees its own goals as the "moral" or "right" alternative, while the other side supports the "wrong" alternative. When defined in these terms, it is very difficult to achieve collective action around a compromise, and, ultimately, one side has to resoundingly defeat the other.

Although political leaders recast the issue in different ways over time, the root of the divisions in the antebellum period was a moral fight over slavery. Scholars examining the polarization of issues during this period have shown that from the first publication of William Lloyd Garrison's abolitionist newsletter The Liberator, in 1831, to Reconstruction in the 1870s, issues of slavery, then secession, and finally civil rights divided the country along a unidimensional axis. During the antebellum period, these issues were largely defined in binary terms—one camp was pro-slavery, while the other was anti-slavery—and a strong moral element defined the debate. The battle over slavery was not merely a political battle for power; it was a values-based battle for a moral view of the world.

The centrality of moral issues to polarization in the Civil War era is also reflected in the effect of the Panic of 1857 on Civil War politics. Usually, as with the Panic of 1893 and the stock market collapse of 1929, an economic downturn severely hurts the incumbent party. While the Panic of 1857 did not help Democratic president James Buchanan and incumbent Democrats, its effect was not as strong as the effect of other economic crises. This is because concern over economic depression was embedded in the broader debate over slavery. The Panic of 1857 initiated a dialogue between free traders and protectionists over the fate of the workingman, but positions in this debate were defined by views on slavery, not trade. Even after the economic downturn of 1857, southerners objected to high tariffs and free land in the West because neither economic policy would serve the slave economy. This stance married economic issues created by the panic to the slavery issues, thus providing additional support for the Free Men, Free Soil, and Free Labor movement that eventually won a majority in the North for Republicans. Slavery issues, in other words, dominated the debate over economic crises.

The Civil War era thus provides clear benchmarks to use in examining polarization in later periods. Polarization is most acute when party divisions evoke clear ideological disparities and party coalitions behave cohesively around those views—as they did during the Civil War. In addition, both party elites and mass partisans should demonstrate high levels of polarization, so that elections act as linking mechanisms between elite politics and mass politics. Finally, polarization around moral issues in which parties disagree about the fundamental outcome to achieve is more potent than polarization around economic issues in which parties agree on economic or other policy goals.

Examining the Breadth and Depth of Polarization

These benchmarks provide a framework for better understanding polarization today in light of the past. During the 1890s and the early twentieth century, American political parties struggled with the transition from an agrarian to an industrial economy and with the role of government in a changing international order. During the New Deal era, a hot debate about the appropriate role of government in the economy characterized party politics. In both periods, we can examine the degree to which party coalitions were distinct and cohesive in both elite and mass party politics. Thus, we can compare today's struggle for partisan definition in a changing nation to similar struggles in our historical past.

In terms of the ideological disparity between party elites, the present period of polarization is more similar to the period at the turn of the twentieth century than to the New Deal era. As noted earlier, a simple way to examine ideological

17. In a recent work, historian Michael F. Holt argues that the coming of the Civil War was not inevitable. He claims that compromise was possible since majority opinion in both the North and the South was that slavery could never flourish in western expansion states. This implicitly contrasts with our argument that the Civil War period seems to be the one most deeply polarized, where parties from top to bottom are morally divided over issues of slavery. Without historical public opinion data, it is difficult to know where the public really was on this issue. It seems limiting to claim, however, that election-minded politicians were solely to blame for an avoidable war. Holt himself tempers this argument at certain points. In short, we hold to our view that with such deep divisions over a moral issue defined in absolutist terms, it seems that compromise was unlikely, and the ultimate recourse to war was almost unavoidable. See Holt (2004).
differences between party elites is to examine the distance between the median Democrat and the median Republican in Congress. An examination of the difference in party medians from 1867 to 2003 shows that since the Civil War and the advent of the modern two-party system, political parties in Congress have been polarized for much of the time.

Coming out of the Civil War, parties were highly polarized in 1867, and the distance between them grew slightly and peaked around the turn of the century in response to the battle over industrialization in the 1890s. After the turn of the century, the ideological distance between the parties began to decline slightly until the mid-1930s, when it leveled off until approximately the late 1950s. It then began to rise slowly through the 1960s and started to grow sharply in the mid-1970s. In the present era, the distance between the median Democrat and the median Republican has been steadily increasing since the 1970s. The difference between the parties today is less than the difference between parties in the 1890s, but greater than it was during the New Deal era.

The New Deal era stands out as unique in terms of the ideological disparity between party elites. Relative to the turn of the twentieth century and the present period of polarization, the ideological differences between parties in the 1930s were less prevalent. In large part, this is because our measure of ideological distance takes all issues into account, but polarization during this period focused solely on economic issues. After the stock market collapse of 1929 and its attendant ills, the parties divided over the appropriate role of government in the economy. The sweeping political success of the Democratic New Deal plan ousted anti-New Deal Republicans from office in 1932, and both congressional parties largely accepted the outlines of the New Deal after the 1930s. This was possible only because the parties sidelined any real discussion of race and civil rights. The tenuous regional compromises within the Democratic Party, which were essential to pass New Deal legislation, depended on ignoring any issue having to do with race. Thus, although polarization around economic issues was quite high, polarization on other issues was much lower.

If we examine the cohesiveness of party elites, however, polarization in the New Deal era and other periods of American history were similar, and the current period presents more anomalies. For example, in the 107th Congress (2001–02), a majority of Democrats opposed a majority of Republicans on only 51 percent of votes in the Senate and 42 percent of votes in the House. This is much lower than the 1890s, when the 55th Congress (elected in 1896) had party votes 76 percent of the time in the Senate and 79 percent of the time in the House. Similarly, the 73rd Congress (elected in 1932) had party votes 69 percent of the time in the Senate and 73 percent of the time in the House. In other words, during the New Deal era and the 1890s, parties voted cohesively in Congress much more than they do in today’s Congress.

Looking at the opposite side of the coin, however, we see that the level of bipartisan unity is much higher today than it was in previous periods of history. Bipartisan unity indicates the percentage of partisans who vote with the majority of their party when it is not a party vote. In other words, in instances when a majority of Democrats vote with a majority of Republicans, how large are the majorities in each party voting with the opposite party? These data are displayed in figure 3-2. In the Senate, the bipartisan unity score is higher now than it has ever been. Among the three periods, the New Deal era has the lowest bipartisan unity score in the Senate, and the 1890s score is between the present period and the New Deal era. Similarly, the bipartisan unity score in the House is lowest during the New Deal, and also extremely low after the 1896 elections. It had risen by the early twentieth century, but today’s level of bipartisan unity is close to as high as it has ever been.

These patterns of party voting and bipartisan unity tell an interesting story about party cohesion in Congress over time. In both the 1890s and during the New Deal era, party voting scores during intense periods of partisan struggle are higher than in the periods immediately preceding or following them. Overall, party cohesion appears to have been strongest in the period from 1890 to 1910, since the level of party voting was relatively high and party discipline was high even on bipartisan votes. During the New Deal era, however, there was a relat-

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18. A commonly used measure relies on DW-nominate scores, a measure of legislator ideology based on roll-call voting behavior. The measures are scaled to make them comparable over time and range from approximately –1 to 1, with –1 indicating an extremely liberal member.
19. For the data, see Jacobson (2003); Schickler (2000).
20. We thank Joseph Cooper of the University of Maryland for the data on this point.
21. On this point we are indebted to Joseph Cooper and work in Cooper and Young (2002).
22. These votes can cover a wide variety of issues, but pork barrel issues (such as federal spending on local rivers and harbors and road improvements) are prominent across all eras.
23. Obviously, it is possible that the rate of bipartisan unity has increased simply because Congress is publicly recording more votes on noncontroversial issues now than it did in the past. Analysis of the increase in the number of roll-call votes by Smith (1989) and Evans (2005, p. 509), however, show that procedural reforms in the early 1970s prompted an increase in the number of roll-call votes—but that parties used these votes as a way of forcing each other to take positions on controversial issues. Thus, it seems unlikely that the number of noncontroversial roll-call votes is much higher than in the past.
Figure 3-2. Bipartisan Unity in the House of Representatives and in the Senate, 1867–2001

Republican

Year


90 -
80 -
70 -

Democrats

Senate

Year


90 -
80 -
70 -

Democrats

Republican

Source: Cooper and Young (1997, 2002).
Data compiled by Joseph Cooper and Garry Young and available at http://home.gwu.edu/~youngg/research/index.html.

...atively high number of partisan votes, but on bipartisan votes the level of party unity was much lower. This mainly reflects an internally divided Democratic Party on the question of race. Although party cohesion was high around issues concerning the New Deal, it was much lower on issues that tapped into the regional divides within the parties. The present era is distinct from both previous periods, however. The level of party voting is relatively low, indicating that there are not as many votes in which the two parties oppose each other. The level of bipartisan unity, however, is relatively high. That is, parties are cohesive, but they are using their cohesiveness toward more bipartisan and cross-partisan ends.

Thus, at the elite level, parties today are relatively distinct ideologically and cohesive, but they are applying their cohesiveness toward bipartisan votes more often than before. How do we interpret this? Historically, this pattern is an anomaly, and identifying its precise causes is a complex undertaking. We believe, however, that part of it can be understood to be a function of the patterns of polarization in the electorate. Examining partisan disparities and cohesion in the electorate is naturally more difficult than at the elite level. Systematic public opinion data did not become available until the birth of modern polling systems in the early to mid-twentieth century. To understand the depth of polarization within the electorate, we must rely primarily on the historical record, from which we can paint a picture of the nature of the divide between voters in each period. In addition, electoral data, while not perfect, allow us to make comparisons about change over time. In general, this evidence shows that polarization in the electorate today is more similar to mass polarization in the 1890s than in the New Deal era.

To start with a broad overview, we examine the degree to which one party dominated the vote in each congressional district over time. By examining a distribution of presidential vote in congressional districts, we can understand one aspect of polarization in the electorate: interdistrict polarization, or how much polarization exists between congressional districts. The distribution of presidential vote shows the number of districts in which voters were closely divided—choosing a presidential candidate with narrow majorities around 50 percent—and the number of districts in which a large majority of voters

24. Although they are not perfect indicators of voter preferences, electoral data give us some sense of the patterns in voter behavior and the changes over time. As such, scholars have previously used the data (particularly presidential vote data) in a range of different ways as measures of electorate preferences. See, for example, Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart (2000); Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan (2002); Erikson and Wright (1993, 1997, 2005); Jacobson (2001); Levendusky, Pope, and Jackman (2005).
supported either the Democratic or the Republican candidate. Imagine the difference between red and blue states such as Massachusetts and Texas, which were solidly in favor of one party in the 2004 election, and centrist (or "purple") states such as Ohio or Florida, where one party won with only a narrow majority. In more polarized times, we should see more states—or, in this case, congressional districts—that support one party with large percentages of the vote and fewer districts split around 50 percent. If interdistrict polarization is high, then we expect to see more districts at the extremes of the distribution during polarized periods, and more districts in the middle during periods of lower polarization.25 Figure 3-3 displays the distribution of presidential vote across congressional districts for the periods 1892 to 1900, 1928 to 1936, and 1996 to 2004.

Today’s period appears to be similar to the 1890s in that a relatively small shift of voters could swing elections from one party to another. Roughly speaking, the data show that the New Deal era had the highest number of solidly red or blue districts. In 1928 a large number of districts voted strongly Republican for Herbert Hoover, while the data after 1932 show a large shift toward Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Democrats. In the 1890s, on the other hand, a solid number of districts voted at the extremes, but there were also a large number of purple districts. This means that in the 1920s a massive shift of voters across congressional districts was necessary to move an election from Republicans to Democrats; likewise in the 1930s, a massive shift from Democrats to Republicans was necessary to shift partisan control. In contrast, a relatively small number of voter shifts within districts could swing an election from one party to the other in the 1890s, reflecting the relatively close divisions between voters. Similarly, the majority of congressional districts today are still purple in that sweeping majorities do not support one party or the other. Although the number of red and blue districts has increased since the 1960s, the distribution

25. This measure has the advantage of providing a comparable measure of polarization in the electorate over time, but unfortunately does not extend back to the Civil War. In examining the distribution of presidential vote over time, it is important to note the institutional changes in electoral procedures that have occurred between 1876 and the present era. Some key changes include the introduction of the Australian ballot, the growing prevalence of primary elections, and the growth of "incumbency protection" in redistricting. See Cox and Katz (2002). Although these changes limit our ability to make strong comparisons over time, we can use the data to get some sense of how electoral patterns in House elections have been changing and to better understand the contours of each historical era relative to the others.
of districts is still a bell-shaped curve in which the largest number of districts is still in the purple middle.

The electoral data thus give us a good sense of interdistrict polarization, but what about intradistrict polarization, or polarization within congressional districts? Here we turn to the historical record for a more thorough understanding of the differences between mass partisans. We find that polarization within the electorate in the 1890s was characterized by high levels of partisan cohesion and that polarization among voters in the New Deal era was characterized more by ideological disparities.

In the 1890s, when mass media and sports did not dominate popular attention, people turned to politics as a form of recreation and used party identification as means of forming group attachments. Historian Robert H. Wiebe argued that by the 1890s people of all ages and backgrounds had joined the movement of community protests and “generated their own nationwide crisis.” Living in a time of high economic, social, and political uncertainty, people felt they had no alternative but to “select an enemy and fight.” Local communities and neighborhoods formed the basis of partisanship, and individuals were often highly attuned to political happenings. As such, partisanship was not isolated to party-in-government and party-as-organization; instead, individuals joined local party organizations all over the nation in an effort to bring order and definition to their rapidly changing lives.

Partisanship in the 1890s thus seems to be as much a social as an ideological phenomenon. There was, however, important overlap between these social groupings and their political attitudes. While people may have joined the groups to find meaning in a changing society, these groups often became vehicles for distinct political views on the key issues of the day. In this way, the ideological disparities between parties in the electorate seem to have been rooted in a strong sense of partisan cohesion.

In contrast to voters at the turn of the twentieth century, New Deal voters had strong policy-based reasons for selecting their party. The redefinition of political parties based on their views about the role of government in the welfare state was reflected in the class-based divisions of the party bases. From 1930 to the mid-1940s, voters from different socioeconomic classes selected different parties. In *The People's Choice*, a study of voters in Erie County, Ohio, in 1940, sociologists Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet found that “the poor, urban residents, and the Catholics are more likely to vote the Democratic ticket, while the well-to-do, the Protestants, and the rural dwellers are more frequently found in the Republican camp.” Robert R. Alford used Michigan Survey Research Center data and Gallup and Roper polls to analyze class voting from 1936 to 1960. His findings showed that, from 1936 to the 1950s, voting differences between classes were consistently high. Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and William N. McPhee found in their study of Elmira, New York, that the swing to Harry Truman, who won him the 1948 election over Thomas E. Dewey, came from those to whom class issues were salient. Political scientist Judson L. James concluded that “this fifth party system [1932–68] not only reversed the majority/minority party roles of the Republicans and Democrats, but also more nearly than any previous two-party system, it had a basis in class conflict.”

The New Deal system that characterized parties before and through World War II was thus undoubtedly defined in the electorate along class lines. There were, in other words, clear distinctions between voters that translated into partisan choices and defined the distance between Democratic and Republican voters. In addition, insofar as the New Deal dominated national politics (and ignored issues of race), the class-based divisions made each party’s base relatively cohesive around protecting their economic interests.

Although scholars continue to debate the degree of mass party polarization in the present era, we believe that it is more similar to the 1890s than to the New Deal era. This is particularly true since the level of ideological disparity between mass parties remains more ambiguous than levels of partisan cohesion, which seem to be rising. Measures of partisanship in the electorate indicate that it has been increasing since the 1970s. By some demographic measures, for instance, Republicans today are more like other Republicans and unlike Democrats, and some measures of party affiliation show an increase over time.

29. For example, factory workers in the 1896 election voted for McKinley, as did northern farmers.
35. See the essays in this volume by William A. Galston and Pietro S. Nivola, Alan I. Abramowitz, and James E. Campbell. While there do appear to be slight increases in measures of partisan identification since the 1970s, we cannot compare the level of identification to the previous historical periods because such survey data are unavailable.
The debate about the ideological disparity between voters is less clear. Many studies indicate that most voters are still ideologically moderate. These studies find that despite all the rhetoric today about red states and blue states, a close examination of public opinion demonstrates that voters are not nearly as polarized as some academics and journalists might believe. They argue that while party leaders are seemingly constantly at loggerheads on issues ranging from abortion to the war in Iraq to Social Security reform, Democratic and Republican voters are better sorted, but not nearly as divided. Although the question of how much polarization exists in the electorate is still a matter of contention, our view is that the evidence favors an interpretation that the present era is much more similar to the 1890s than to the New Deal era. As in the 1890s, high levels of partisan cohesion dominate polarization in the electorate.

Putting all the pieces together, when we examine the breadth and depth of polarization in today’s politics relative to the past, we find an interesting pattern of behavior. While elite party politics can be characterized by relatively high levels of ideological disparity between the parties and high levels of cohesion, parties in Congress direct that cohesion toward more bipartisan behavior than in the past. Levels of party discipline are high in the sense that the parties often vote together, but there are fewer votes in which a majority of Democrats oppose a majority of Republicans relative to the historical past. In addition, on the votes in which majorities from both parties vote together, the majorities tend to be much larger than ever before.

When we examine mass party politics, however, we find different trends. Levels of partisanship, or party cohesion, appear to be increasing even though we cannot say precisely how high they are relative to the past. The levels of ideological disparity, however, remain ambiguous, although there is much evidence showing that they are not as high as people may think. This analysis is summa-

rized in table 3-1. This pattern of results resembles the politics of the 1890s more closely than it does the New Deal. But it is also historically unique, particularly in the pattern of bipartisan unity in elite politics, as well as seemingly low levels of ideological disparity between mass partisans. So how did these unique patterns of polarization emerge? Examining these patterns in their historical context, we discern a distinctive feature of today’s politics: it follows on the heels of one of the most bipartisan eras in American political history. This has important implications for today’s polarization, particularly in the way that mass party politics is linked to elite party politics. Elections are the primary mechanism that knits voters to elected officials. In the Civil War, the intensity of polarization among mass partisans was expressed through elections, in which party elites were rewarded and punished in a polarized manner.

But what is going on in today’s elections? Unlike in previous eras of polarization, congressional elections today are not as nationalized as they were in the past. In the lead-up to the Civil War, the Republican takeover in the 1890s, and the implementation of the New Deal in the 1930s, elections became national affairs. The fate of candidates across congressional districts was determined by common national factors. Current congressional elections are slightly more complicated, however. Although congressional elections today are becoming more nationalized, nationalization comes much later than the increase in polarization. Electoral dynamics emerging from the bipartisan period immediately after World War II created a set of conditions that constrained the ability of elections to link mass polarization to elite polarization more closely.

The unique features of the immediate postwar era become particularly clear if we examine the partisan overlap among elites, or how many Democrats in Congress voted with Republicans, and vice versa. This measure captures both the ideological distance between the parties and the level of party cohesion. The overlapping region is shaded in the bottom of figure 3-1. There we depict the hypothetical placement of the 10 percent most liberal Republican member of Congress. To the left of that hypothetical Republican is the most liberal 10 percent of the Republican Party. To determine the degree of overlap, we simply count the number of Democrats who were more conservative than—or to the right of—the 10 percent most liberal Republican. After identifying the 10 percent, 25 percent, and 50 percent most liberal Republicans, we can count the number of Democrats who are more conservative than the Republicans at each of those points. To determine the number of Republicans in the overlapping region, we identify the 10 percent, 25 percent, and 50 percent most conservative
Democrats and count the number of Republicans who are more liberal than they are. Figure 3-4 shows how many members of each party were in the overlap region in each Congress from 1867 to 2003.39

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was no overlap between congressional parties. The parties were both distant from each other and cohesive in their voting patterns. This was not true in the mid-twentieth century, however. In the Senate, a slight rise in overlapping voting occurred with the rise of the bipartisan farm movement in the 1920s—but it dropped to zero again after the New Deal in the 1930s. Both the House and the Senate witnessed an unprecedented rise in overlapping voting in the 1940s that persisted until the 1970s, when it began to decline. In the House in 1967, for instance, 13 percent of House Democrats were more conservative than the 10 percent most liberal House Republican, and 15 percent of Republicans were more liberal than the 10 percent most conservative Democrat. In the Senate in 1969, 19 percent of Democrats were more conservative than the 10 percent most liberal Republican, and 19 percent of Republicans were more liberal than the 10 percent most conservative Democrat.40 Historically, this was an unprecedented level of bipartisanship in elite American politics.

The bipartisanship of the 1950s eventually gave way to the social movements of the 1960s, however, once it became impossible for the parties to continue ignoring issues of race and civil rights. Right after World War II, the distinctions between parties on key national issues such as race, national defense, and the role of government were not very clear. Republicans had largely accepted the outlines

39. We created these overlap graphs using DW-nominate and standardized Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) (available from 1947 to the present) measures of legislator ideology. ADA scores rate the liberalism (and conservatism) of elected officials based on their roll-call voting records. DW-nominate scores do the same thing, using a larger number of roll-call votes. The DW-nominate scale runs roughly from −1 to 1, with more negative numbers indicating a more liberal member of Congress and more positive numbers indicating a more conservative member of Congress. We use these scores to identify how liberal or conservative members were relative to other members of their party. As an example, in 1947 the most conservative 10 percent of Democrats had DW-nominate scores higher than 0.10. To identify the degree of overlap with Republicans, we count the number of Republicans who had DW-nominate scores lower than 0.10. For purposes of brevity, we only show the distribution using DW-nominate scores here. Our findings do not change in any measurable way using ADA scores.

40. We perform the same analysis looking only at non-southern states to see if the partisan overlap was merely an artifact of one-party politics dominant in the South before the 1970s. We find that although the degree of overlap decreases among Democrats, the mid-twentieth century still emerges as a unique period of high partisan overlap. Among Republicans, we find that high levels of partisan overlap persist because there were few Republicans in the South.
of the New Deal, and class-based voting declined after the war. Similarly, Kennedy Democrats took the same hard line as Republicans on the cold war. Until the early 1960s, it was not clear whether Republicans or Democrats would be more supportive of civil rights. With the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, however, southerners divorced themselves from the Democratic Party, and a redefinition of partisan politics at the national level reemerged. The transformation of the political South was one of the most striking changes in twentieth-century politics, and it undoubtedly played a significant role in redefining—and thus repolarizing—the parties at the national level.

Importantly, however, as national party politics repolarized after 1964, congressional party politics did not. Polarization in Congress did not reemerge until the late 1970s because congressional elections had become insulated from national partisan tides. The bipartisanship of the immediate postwar era gave rise to the personal incumbency advantage and the development of structures that supported the domination of congressional elections by local electoral forces. These factors were rooted in high levels of cross-party voting in elections. Without clear distinctions between the parties on key national issues, people with liberal or conservative views on the issues could vote for either party. Between the end of World War II and the 1964 contest between Barry Goldwater and Lyndon Johnson, a large number of voters with relatively liberal views voted for Republican presidential and congressional candidates, while many voters with conservative views voted for Democratic candidates. The national parties, in other words, were no longer the sole—or even the major—determinant of election results. As a result, candidates learned to win reelection independent of the national parties as they became more responsible for their own electoral fate.

Thus we see the rise of the “personal vote” in the 1950s. As the personal vote and the incumbency advantage increased, the impact of partisanship in determining electoral outcomes declined. This was also reflected in the percentage

41. See Campbell and others (1960); Key (1959); Alford (1964).
42. Black and Black (2002); Carmines and Stimson (1981).
43. Rohde (1991); Schaff and Johnston (2006); Black and Black (2002).
44. For empirical evidence on this point, see Han and Brady (forthcoming).
45. The rise of the “personal vote” is well documented in political science scholarship through studies of the incumbency advantage. See Erikson (1972); Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart (2000); Gelman and King (1990); Alford and Brady (1993); Jacobson (1987); Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina (1987).
of districts with split partisan results at the presidential and congressional levels, which was zero at the start of the twentieth century and rose dramatically between 1948 and 1972.\textsuperscript{47} The personal vote and localized factors became so important in congressional elections that even in the 1960s—as issues like civil rights, the Vietnam War, and the environment emerged as polarizing factors in national politics—voters continued to exhibit high levels of cross-party voting in congressional elections.\textsuperscript{48} National forces did not become potent in congressional elections again until the 1990s.\textsuperscript{49}

The disparities between elite and mass party polarization in the present era become somewhat clearer in light of this delinking of congressional elections and national party politics. The blurring of party lines in the immediate post–World War II era and the subsequent localization of congressional elections created a kind of “unsorting” of voters and elite partisans that was symbiotically “resorted” after the 1960s. In other words, the murkiness of party lines caused a number of congressional seats to be improperly sorted into parties—with some conservative districts represented by Democratic members and some liberal districts represented by Republican members. Small bands of activists forced the redefinition of elite parties in the 1960s, creating more polarization between the national parties. Slowly, this redefinition prompted voters to become less willing (or less able) to vote for congressional candidates of the opposite party, and congressional districts and representatives came back into partisan alignment.\textsuperscript{50} This naturally led to a redefinition of congressional parties and to the high levels of ideological disparity and party cohesiveness that we see today. The sources of this elite polarization, however, depend in large part on sorting districts (or states) and their representatives into the appropriate parties, after they had become “unsorted” during previous periods.

The sorting of legislators and constituencies into the appropriate party, when combined with institutional forces that magnify partisan effects in elite politics, enables the historically anomalous levels of polarization in today’s politics. The ideological distance between mass partisans remains ambiguous, but partisanship appears to be increasing as partisans sort themselves into the appropriate

\begin{equation}
\text{Polarization Then and Now}
\end{equation}

parties. In Congress, however, sorting creates ideologically distant party coalitions, since the dynamics of partisan forces within our political institutions pulls legislators toward ideological extremes.\textsuperscript{51} In addition, reforms in Congress in the 1970s strengthened the power of party leaders, making it easier (and more profitable) for parties to act as cohesive voting blocs.\textsuperscript{52} Thus, although levels of party cohesion are high, there is simultaneously more bipartisan unity, since legislators are constrained by the lack of clarity around levels of ideological disparity in the electorate. In other words, there is a constant give and take between elite and mass party politics that shapes the contours of the polarization we witness today. The outcomes of this give and take, however, become clear only in light of a historical look at the present period of polarization.

\section{Examining the Character of Issue Divisions}

Finally, we turn to an examination of the second dimension of polarization: the character of issue divisions. Do moral or economic issues determine the partisan divide? When the parties disagree about what the “right” outcome on a set of moral issues is, it is more difficult to achieve compromise. Thus, the strong moral debate about slavery that characterized the Civil War era was ultimately resolved by war. Alternatively, when the parties agree about the ultimate goal, but disagree about how to achieve that goal, collective action around a set of compromises is more likely. The nature of the issues dividing the parties is crucial because it determines, in part, the extent to which political compromise is possible. We argue that while the New Deal era focused more on economic issues, polarization in the 1890s—as in the present era—represented a blend of both moral and economic issues.

Polarization in the New Deal era focused solely on whether the government should ameliorate economic woes created by the Great Depression. Other issues (such as race) were ignored. Both parties agreed that the economic depression was “bad” and that the primary objective of government should be to lift the

\begin{equation}
51. \text{There is a broad literature discussing why the Median Voter Theorem does not always hold. This literature shows how institutional forces can magnify small shifts in the electorate to create greater polarization in elite politics than in mass politics. See Fiorina (1999) for an excellent summary. The literature also shows that party elites generally tend to be more polarized than party masses, and even among elites, party leaders are more polarized than rank-and-file members. See Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart (2000); Coleman (1971).
}
\end{equation}

\begin{equation}
52. \text{See Rohde (1991); Van Houweling (2003); Jacobson (forthcoming 2007); Roberts and Smith (2003).
}
\end{equation}
country into greater prosperity. The questions defining the polarization of this era were about how best to achieve that prosperity—not whether prosperity was the appropriate outcome. Thus, the parties debated how much social welfare, agricultural assistance, and governmental management there should be.

The difference between the defining issues of the Civil War era and this period becomes clear through an examination of the effect of the economy on the elections. Models of retrospective voting contend that election results follow the economic fortunes of the country—a good economy means that the president’s party gets reelected, while a bad economy results in a switch in party governance. Studies of economic voting show that the New Deal era clearly fits a retrospective voting model. As a comparison point, consider the Civil War era. Although we could not precisely replicate standard economic voting models for the Civil War period because the data are unavailable that far back, we could look broadly at the relationship between economic conditions and voting over the entire period by drawing on the number of business failures as an indicator of economic conditions. These data are consistently available from 1840 to the present. The results show that economic conditions are a relatively accurate gauge of presidential voting during the New Deal era, but not during the Civil War era. The New Deal era, in sum, turned more on economic issues than on moral issues.

Although economic issues such as the tariff and the gold standard were central to the 1890s, polarization in this period also focused on a set of moral issues. Questions about the appropriate role of government in a changing economy manifested themselves in battles over the tariff and the gold standard. Models of retrospective voting show that economic issues were the primary determinants of vote choice in the 1890s. But they were by no means the only determinants. The late nineteenth century was also a period of enormous social and international change, and parties were not able to relegate burgeoning moral issues to the sidelines as they would in the New Deal era. Questions about U.S. expansionism abroad, Progressivism, Darwinism, and urbanization also played a major role in politics of the time. The debate over the appropriate role of the United States in the world often focused on questions of the country’s moral responsibility, and Progressives in the early twentieth century were driven by a desire to make government more ethical and responsible. The debates between the parties on these issues were moralistic in the sense that the parties were not in agreement about what responsibility the United States had for protecting human rights abroad, or whether Darwinism should be accepted. Debates over the tariff and the gold standard thus melded with debates about social questions to create a politics torn between moral and economic questions.

In that regard, the present era appears more similar to the 1890s than to the New Deal era. The combination of prospective and retrospective issues the country faces at the turn of the twenty-first century are similar, in many ways, to the issues faced at the turn of the twentieth century. Without the benefit of hindsight, it is more difficult to identify the key issues that define partisan differences in the present day. However, it is clear that, as in the 1890s (and in the New Deal era), broad economic changes characterize this period, and the national government is redefining its role in a changing global economy and a new global order.

Questions today about how aggressive the United States should be in promoting democracy in places like Iraq, or what responsibility the nation has in situations like the Rwandan genocide in 1994, are not unlike questions about the Spanish-American War and the “New Imperialism” in American foreign policy in the late 1890s. Questions about how government should respond to changes in the flow of labor and capital, economic outsourcing, and the displacement of manufacturing sector workers in the new information economy parallel questions at the turn of the twentieth century about how to confront the loss of a primarily agrarian economy and the shift to a more industrialized system. All of these questions, like the questions at the turn of the twentieth century, are prospective and retrospective reflections on American national identity. As the economy and the international order change, what kind of country is America?

In today’s politics, as in the late nineteenth century, economic questions occur alongside moral debates. In fact, perhaps even more than in the 1890s, a strong faction of each party today defines the debate moralistically. The rise of the Christian right as a powerful force within the Republican Party, and the rise of single-issue interest groups after the social movements of the 1960s, forced a range of new social issues—including abortion, women’s rights, gay marriage, and school prayer—to the forefront of the political agenda. Despite the prevalence of these issues in the media, however, each party’s stance on these issues has not always been clear. (Consider President Bill Clinton’s “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy on gays in the military, or President George W. Bush’s compromise on stem-cell research.) In this sense, moralistic undertones pervade politics at the turn of the twenty-first century as they did at the turn of the twentieth century.


century— but the parties still find ways to sidestep or compromise on the issues before them.

Yet because these are moral issues, compromises do not resolve them. Questions about the sanctity of life and whether government should protect the right of same-sex partners to marry continues to plague current politics. As in the 1890s, it is not clear today if economic or moral questions divide the two parties. While it seems that moral issues are often at the forefront of politics, some research shows that class voting is on the rise, and subsets of each party continue to define their partisan commitments through economic issues.55

The character of issue divisions between parties in the present era therefore remains somewhat more ambiguous. It is clear that historically resonant battles between labor and capital are present, but there are also strong debates about values.56 These values-laden debates arise naturally from a changing society and economic order. As such, the parties themselves are still struggling to define their stances on many of these issues. Thus, in terms of both the breadth and depth of polarization and the character of issue divisions, the present period combines a historically unique complex of characteristics.

Resolving Polarization

How do polarizing issues get resolved? The processes by which political issues and disputes move on and off the national agenda are complex and multifaceted— and too complicated for a full treatment here. However, one commonality that does seem to exist in democratic politics is that the resolution of polarizing issues usually involves electoral change and, subsequently, shifts within parties. As a polarizing issue comes to dominate the political agenda and the two parties take opposing sides, one party usually experiences dramatic electoral loss, or the party loses a series of elections over time by increasing margins. The losing party often experiences a period of factionalism, in which different voices within the party battle for control. Continued electoral loss can prompt a faction within the party willing to shift its opinion on crucial issues in order to emerge victorious.

This phenomenon seems to occur across democratic systems; it is not limited to the United States. For instance, the fractured and conflicted history of Ireland's Sinn Fein party demonstrates the way factionalism over issues within a party can result in changing definitions of the party itself. Eamon de Valera, after a series

of consecutively greater electoral losses, eliminated Sinn Fein as the party for a united Ireland to lead Fianna Fail to dominance in Irish politics. In essence, the United-Ireland issue was resolved when the major parties implicitly accepted the division and fought elections over domestic and social issues in the lower twenty-six counties.57 Similarly, throughout twentieth-century British politics, parties have shifted policies as different internal factions gained control as a result of electoral fortunes. Margaret Thatcher purged the "wets" from the Conservative Party before she and the Conservatives regained control of government in the late 1970s. Similarly, Tony Blair moved the Labour Party away from its traditional views so that it could win again. Although these are very broad characterizations of complicated political periods, they demonstrate how disputes between parties—and subsequent electoral shifts—can prompt in-fighting within the losing party to minimize the effect of a previously polarizing issue, or change the debate on a set of issues.

In the case of the United States at the turn of the twentieth century, a series of incremental electoral shifts ended the debate between parties about key domestic and international policy issues. Would the United States join the European economic and global trade systems? Would it accept an economic system largely financed by British banks and adopt the gold standard as its monetary system? Drawing on popular unrest created by economic changes, Populists slowly gained momentum within the Democratic Party by taking an anti-gold, anti-tariff stance that opposed U.S. involvement in the global economy. In 1892 the Populist Party received 9 percent of the three-party vote and finally gained a majority within the Democratic Party in 1896. Party elites polarized sharply around economic issues in 1896, with pre-gold Democrats (including President Grover Cleveland) getting booted at the Democratic convention and pro-silver Republicans literally being chased from the Republican convention. Once the parties took clear stances on these issues, voters had clearer choices to make. In 1896 the Democrats' presidential candidate, William Jennings Bryan, narrowly lost, and Republicans took control of a unified government. Republicans continued winning election after election, even as Democrats nominated Bryan two more times for president. Finally, after Bryan lost a third time (to William Howard Taft in 1908), the Populist faction within the Democratic Party died away, and the party shifted its policy on the new economic order.

In the New Deal era, the tables turned as Republicans became the minority party. The fundamental polarizing issue of the 1930s concerned government's

57. For more on this point, see Brady, Bullock, and Maisel (1988).
reaction to the Great Depression. Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Democrats swept to victory in 1932 on the idea that “the federal government had not merely a role, but a major responsibility, in ensuring the health of the economy and the welfare of citizens. That simple but momentous shift in perception was the newest thing in all the New Deal, and the most consequential too.” The Republicans first responded by arguing that Roosevelt’s policies were imperiling the country by killing free enterprise, disregarding the Constitution, and destroying the morale of the people by making them dependent on government.

Despite this opposition, Democrats continued to win, prompting Republicans to nominate the moderate Wendell Willkie for president in 1940, who lost. After a third consecutive loss to Roosevelt, the moderate wing of the Republican Party gained full control of the party in 1944 and nominated Thomas E. Dewey on the first ballot. For the first time, the 1944 Republican platform accepted the broad outlines of the New Deal. It pledged support for “extension of the existing old-age insurance systems to all employees not already covered” and “a careful study of Federal-State programs for maternal and child health, dependent children, and assistance to the blind, with a view to strengthening these programs.” In the face of continued electoral loss, Republicans eventually shifted policy on the New Deal.

Thus, both the New Deal era and the turn of the twentieth century “resolved” polarization through a series of electoral shifts. Electoral change during the New Deal era was much more abrupt, however, given that the clarity of a single issue defined the divide between the parties. Change in the 1980s was more incremental since more complicated issues were on the partisan agenda.

So what does this imply for the present era? Although the breadth and depth of polarization in the present period is unique, we view it as more similar to the 1890s than to the New Deal era. Both eras are characterized by a melding of moral and economic issues on the partisan agenda. The key difference between the New Deal era and the global transformations at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is that everyone could agree that the Depression was a “bad” thing. In contrast, there continues to be disagreement over the normative implications of the global changes occurring now and in the past, and the ongoing battle between labor and capital. As economic transitions alter traditional life patterns, accompanying social and cultural changes raise questions about our most fundamental values. Thus, the present era (like the 1890s) has witnessed a resurgence in religious activity, and debates between the parties are laden with moral overtones.

In terms of the breadth and depth of polarization, party elites in the present era have clear ideological differences, and parties themselves are more cohesive than parties in the 1890s and the New Deal era. Interestingly, however, there is more bipartisan action in Congress now than in the past—possibly because of the ambiguity of polarization in the mass electorate. The blurring of party lines after World War II created a disjuncture between congressional elections and national party politics that led to heterogeneous party coalitions. The sorting of voters and elites into parties after the 1960s, however, created increasing cohesion among partisans as party coalitions became more homogeneous. At the elite level, institutional forces magnified these partisan effects, creating more polarization. At the mass level, however, the extent of ideological disparity remains unclear.

This is likely to make the resolution of polarization in the current era more incremental than in the New Deal era and more similar to the slow shift around the turn of the twentieth century. The disparity between mass partisans is more ambiguous than disparities between elites, and party elites engage in far more bipartisan action than in the past. Given the low cost of information and improvements in polling technology, elites are much more likely now than in the past to have an accurate sense of public opinion. In the 1890s and the New Deal era, parties were forced to take a stand on the issues without having much information about where voters were. Small shifts in opinion can thus spark more polarizing shifts in elite behavior today, but the difficulty of interpreting polarization in the electorate ultimately constrains elites. The lines between the parties on key issues of polarization therefore remain somewhat murky, and the responses of the electorate are challenging to interpret. Nonetheless, examining the present day in light of the past sheds some light on the ways in which today’s politics is unique, and the ways in which it is a mirror of the past.

60. Friedman (2006).
61. We thank David Plotz of Slate.com on this point.
Polarization Runs Deep, Even by Yesterday’s Standards

COMMENT

James E. Campbell

Is America politically polarized? As David W. Brady and Hahrie H. Han remind us, politics is about differences over what government should do and who should do it. Political parties are organized around those differences, so there will always be some degree of polarization in a democracy. The real question is, how much? American politics are neither entirely and viciously polarized, nor blandly and homogeneously moderate. So where do we stand between harmony and vitriol? Is the polarization glass half empty or half full? Or more precisely, is it one-quarter full or three-quarters full? It is certainly not completely empty.

To get a sense of the current level of polarization in American politics, some historical perspective is useful. In reviewing three periods of intense partisan realignment in U.S. history (the Civil War, the 1890s, and the New Deal era of the 1930s), Brady and Han attempt to provide us with some much-needed benchmarks for comparison. Though observing “a historically unique complex of characteristics” in the present era, they conclude that polarization is now more limited in its breadth and depth than in the past.

Brady and Han find similarities between politics in the current era and the era from 1890 to 1910 (particularly in regard to the moral, as opposed to economic, issues). However, they also suggest that current politics may not be as polarized as in the 1890s, observing a “pattern of bipartisan unity in elite politics, as well as seemingly low levels of ideological disparity between mass partisans.” And while current politics may seem especially contentious against the backdrop of the post–World War II era (when there were unusual numbers of liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats), Brady and Han believe that, put in perspective, polarization today is no big deal and that most voters are still ideologically moderate.

Undoubtedly, political polarization is not at its upper bounds today. (The nation is nowhere near the brink of another civil war.) And it is true that, all other things equal, political leaders and activists will always be more ideologically polarized than the general public. But Brady and Han significantly under-


state the current level of polarization. American politics are highly polarized—and that is true not just for political leaders and party elites, but for the public and the electorate as well.

The public has been significantly polarized for some time and in recent years has become more so. The unusual heterogeneity of the political parties in the mid- to late twentieth century masked the extent of this polarization. It was difficult to see the real extent of liberal and conservative differences when the political parties represented mixtures of the two. But as the Republican Party became more clearly the party of conservatives and the Democratic Party the party of liberals, the polarization of the electorate was revealed. In addition to this party sorting or realignment (and perhaps partly as a result of it), there has been some real growth in the polarization of the electorate—mostly in the number of conservatives, but a small increase in the number of liberals as well. Contrary to Brady and Han’s assertion, moderates are now a political minority among American voters.

Conceptual and Measurement Concerns

If political leadership and the public are highly polarized, why do Brady and Han reach the opposite conclusion? Part of the problem is conceptual. Brady and Han implicitly equate polarization, whether at the mass or elite level, with polarization between the political parties—and the polarization measurements in their analysis are all party measurements.

While Brady and Han’s concentration of party measures may reflect unavoidable data limitations of examining the politics of the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it must be recognized that polarization may not always be well represented by the parties. During the 1950s and 1960s, for instance, many conservative voters in the South voted for Democrats, while many liberal voters in states outside the South voted for Republicans. In such eras, the parties may fail to reflect much of the nation’s political conflict. Because the parties were heterogeneous in the mid-twentieth century does not necessarily mean that the public was less politically divided, only that the divisions that were present did not line up neatly along national partisan lines.

A second conceptual concern is the distinction that Brady and Han draw between moral and economic issues. They claim that moral issues are more polarizing than economic issues because compromise is more difficult on moral issues. Lacking a workable midway position to move to, both sides dig in for a bitter fight. The pre–Civil War issue of slavery is an example.
The idea that moral issues are particularly polarizing appears reasonable, but there may be less to it than meets the eye. Take Brady and Han’s suggestion that there was no workable centrist position on the issue of slavery. Rather than taking out the extremes, both major parties of the day framed the debate in compromised or centrist positions. Democrats advocated “popular sovereignty,” a policy that would permit the expansion of slavery if states voted to allow it. Even future Republican president Abraham Lincoln, the “Great Emancipator,” took a middle-ground position in 1860 by opposing the extension of slavery in new territories—a position well short of abolition. Moreover, the post–Civil War resolution of the issue was effectively a compromised position. For several generations after the Civil War, African Americans were neither slaves nor accorded the full rights of citizenship. A reasonable reading of this history is that the nation reached a de facto middle position on the slavery issue, a position that survived until the civil rights era of the 1950s and 1960s.

It could be argued that virtually every issue involves moral values—and that all issues are subject to compromise, if there is enough support for it. Morris P. Fiorina, with coauthors Samuel J. Abrams and Jeremy C. Pope, argues that on the abortion issue, one of the most heated moral issues of our day, there is considerable middle ground and that a majority of Americans occupy a centrist position on the issue.² Looking at the economic side of the dichotomy, it is easy to think of appropriations bills or tax bills in which a compromise can be achieved by shifting a few percentage points one way or the other. But it should be recalled that for much of the twentieth century some of the most intense polarization in nations around the world centered on the economic and political philosophy of Marxism. The extent to which an issue is polarizing, then, depends on how intensely people feel about their positions—and no particular subject matter is off limits to strong feelings.

In addition to these conceptual issues, Brady and Han’s conclusion that the electorate and Congress are not very polarized in comparison with the past is based on faulty measures of polarization. There is abundant evidence that the parties in Congress have become quite polarized since the 1970s. Average party unity scores (the percentage of members voting with a majority of their party on votes in which a majority of Democrats opposed a majority of Republicans) for both parties in both chambers hovered in the low 70 percent region in the 1970s. In more recent years, these party unity scores have been in the vicin-

ity of 90 percent.³ This is corroborated by Brady and Han’s examination of DW-nominate scores (ideological roll-call scores). Although Brady and Han emphasize the lack of party polarization in Congress until the late 1970s (though this largely reflected a lag in the realignment due to the slow growth of a Republican Party in the solidly Democratic South), their data also reveal the absence of ideological overlap between the congressional parties since 1994, when the Republicans took control of the U.S. House after forty years of Democratic Party dominance. In short, the parties in congressional politics have been about as polarized as ever for at least a decade now.

Despite this evidence, Brady and Han’s examination of bipartisan unity roll-call scores leads them to conclude that polarization in Congress is mild. They define bipartisan unity as the “percentage of partisans who vote with the majority of their party when it is not a party vote” (that is, when majorities in both parties join together to pass legislation). They find that “today’s level of bipartisan unity is close to as high as it has ever been.” But how can this high level of bipartisan unity be reconciled with the strong polarization witnessed on roll-call party votes?

The problem lies in the bipartisan unity measure. To get a sense of what this measure entails, I examined a number of bipartisan roll-call votes in the House of Representatives from the 109th Congress, second session (2006). Of the sixty-six roll calls on nonprocedural matters that passed the House through May 11, 2006, fifty-three passed with bipartisan majorities. With very few exceptions (for example, HR 4954, Security and Accountability for Every Port Act), these roll calls were either noncontroversial (such as reprimanding Iran for its threatening behavior, designating the birthplace of former President Bill Clinton a National Historic Site, extending a normal trade agreement with Ukraine, and reauthorizing the Office of National Drug Policy Control) or congratulatory (such as celebrating the Pittsburgh Steelers for winning the Super Bowl, honoring the contributions of Catholic schools, recognizing the anniversary of Israel’s independence, and “supporting the goals and ideals of World Water Day”).

Is Congress any less polarized if there is greater unity on these types of votes or if there are more of these types of votes? Of course not. Bipartisanship on important issues is meaningful, but bipartisanship on noncontroversial issues is not. Extreme liberals and extreme conservatives can agree on many noncontroversial matters (for example, celebrating World Water Day), but this does

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² Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope (2006). They refer to this centrist position as “pro-choice, but.”

³ See Stanley and Niemi (2005); Fleisher and Bond (2000a, 2000b).
not mean that they are any less fiercely opposed on a wide range of important issues.\(^4\)

Brady and Han’s conclusion that the electorate is not now highly polarized is also based on a problematic measurement: the distribution of the presidential vote at the congressional district level.\(^5\) They assert that “in more polarized times, we should see more states—or, in this case, congressional districts—that support one party with large percentages of the vote and fewer districts split around 50 percent. If interdistrict polarization is high, then, we expect to see more districts at the extremes of the distribution during polarized periods, and more districts in the middle during periods of lower polarization.”

Their analysis suggests that in recent years a large number of congressional districts have been competitive in presidential elections, which they interpret as a sign of tempered or modest polarization.\(^6\) Unfortunately, this measure bears no necessary relationship to mass polarization. Whether presidential votes are evenly or lopsidedly divided in congressional districts reflects the organization of the votes (the sorting of votes into districts, in Fiorina’s terms), not the polarization of the views motivating these votes. Equally polarized or unpolarized districts can have all 50–50 or all 100–0 vote divisions. The implication is that presidential candidates can win lopsidedly or narrowly in districts with either polarized or moderate electorates. Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope’s observation about national vote divisions thus applies to district vote divisions: “By themselves, close election outcomes cannot tell us whether half the electorate hates the other half or whether everyone is flipping coins.”\(^7\) Competition (or the lack of it) does not indicate polarization.

4. Brady and Han’s examination of the percentage of party votes is subject to a similar criticism. They observe that in 2001–02 a majority of Republicans opposed a majority of Democrats in the House on only 51 percent of the roll-call votes. But this is less meaningful if the percentages of party roll-call votes are lowered by a lot of votes on congratulatory and noncontroversial issues.

5. Brady and Han also observe a “delinking of congressional elections and national party politics” and that “national forces did not become potent in congressional elections again until the 1990s.” This apparent delinking is often overstated and is attributable to the huge campaign financing advantage of incumbents, which dampens all other influences on the congressional vote. See Campbell (2003); Campbell and Jurek (2003).

6. In fact, it does not appear that the majority of districts have been competitive in presidential voting. Only 26 percent of districts in 2000 and 23 percent in 2004 were decided in the 55 percent to 45 percent range. Bare majorities of districts were competitive if the definition is extended to the 60 percent to 40 percent range, but this margin is generally designated as a landslide when applied to the national vote. In addition, one would expect more competitive districts if the parties are competitive nationally, as they are today and as they were not after 1896 or 1932. The 1896 and 1932 eras may have had fewer competitive districts not because they were more polarized, but because they were less competitive nationally.


Evidence of a Polarized Public

There is an abundance of direct and indirect evidence to support the conclusion that the American public is substantially polarized and has become more so in recent years. The direct evidence of polarization comes from the National Election Studies (NES) data on self-described ideological orientations.

Since 1972, the NES has asked a national sample of Americans to classify their ideological perspectives on a seven-point scale (extremely liberal, liberal, slightly liberal, moderate, slightly conservative, conservative, and extremely conservative).\(^8\) Respondents could also indicate that they did not have a specific ideology or that they did not know how to classify their political views. To simplify matters for presentation, this scale has been collapsed to those with or without an ideological orientation so that we are left with two groups: moderates and nonmoderates.\(^9\) Those who said that they did not know how to classify themselves ideologically are included along with the nonideologicals in the moderate group.\(^10\) Tracking the level and change in the percentage of moderates over time allows us to assess directly whether the public is polarized and whether polarization has increased.

Figure 3-5 displays the percentage of self-declared moderates (plus “don’t knows”) since 1972 among all NES respondents and among reported voters.

8. Some may prefer to examine specific issue positions of respondents rather than general ideological perspectives. On any given issue, however, some ideologies may depart from those with whom they are generally like-minded. Moreover, issues can be thought of by voters in many ways other than as asked on surveys. As Fiorina and Levendusky observe in this volume, “individual issue items vary in question format and (therefore) reliability.” While conservatives and liberals may differ among themselves as to the precise meaning of their labels, their reactions to the labels (the NES thermometer questions, for example) are consistent, and ideological dispositions have strong general effects on the positions taken on a variety of issues and on the presidential vote. The General Social Survey (GSS) has also asked the ideology question over this period. The trends observed in NES ideology data are corroborated by the GSS ideology data. Because of space limitations, only the NES data are presented here.

9. It can be argued that “slightly liberal” and “slightly conservative” respondents should be counted as moderates. My analysis of the thermometer scales, various issues, and the presidential vote indicates that the slightly ideological behave differently than either moderates or the outright ideological. Including them with the declared liberals and conservatives may inflate these categories, but including the “don’t knows” with the moderates probably inflates that category even more. In any case, using either treatment, the share of moderates declined over time.

10. Grouping the “don’t knows,” who represent anywhere from 20 to 36 percent of the sample, with self-professed nonideologicals produces a very generous count of moderates. Certainly some of the “don’t knows” had ideological leanings but did not know what label appropriately described them. Still, the lack of awareness of their ideological label suggests a lack of its salience to these respondents.
The evidence indicates somewhat greater polarization among reported voters. During the 1970s and 1980s, about half of reported voters were in some sense moderates; half were not. Since then, however, the moderates’ share of the vote has declined—and the percentage of voters with an ideological perspective has increased. Before 1992, moderates had not dipped below 45 percent of voters. Since 1992, they have not reached 45 percent. There is no mistaking the conclusion: moderates are now a minority of voters.\(^\text{12}\)

There is also compelling indirect or circumstantial evidence that the American electorate was substantially polarized and has become more so. This evidence is drawn from how the public has reacted to the polarization of the political parties. Numerous studies, including Brady and Han’s analysis of DW-Nominate scores, have documented the increased polarization of the political parties in recent years.\(^\text{13}\) Political scientists Nolan McCarty, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal’s analysis of ideological roll-call voting indicates that, after a decline to unusually low levels for much of the twentieth century, party polarization in Congress has increased steadily since the late 1970s and in recent years is about as great as it was in the late nineteenth century.\(^\text{14}\)

The public’s reaction to greater polarization in the political parties should depend on whether the public itself is moderate and relatively unpolarized or quite ideological and highly polarized. If the political parties became more polarized but the public remained moderate, we should be able to detect three measurable responses among the public. First, the percentage of strong party identifiers should decline. If the parties adopted strong ideological positions that were out of step with a moderate electorate, the electorate should have less reason to identify strongly with these parties. Second, turnout should decline because of greater public indifference and alienation from the extreme candidate choices. The American public should turn away from political leadership that misrepresents them. Third, more voters should split their tickets. As Fiorina’s policy-balancing theory claims, moderates should split their tickets to counterbalance a too liberal Democratic Party against a too conservative Republican

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11. As the nonideological moderates and “don’t knows” lost ground in the 1990s, conservatives gained. Conservatives had been in the mid to high 30 percent range in the 1970s and 1980s. They have been at least 30 percent of respondents since 1992. Liberals also may have gained some ground in the last couple of years, but this is not as clear.

12. The finding that moderates have declined is robust and both statistically and substantively significant. Besides being corroborated by General Social Survey data, the decline is evident and statistically significant regardless of whether more or less inclusive classifications of moderates are examined. The decline is also substantively significant. The median percentage of moderates dropped 7 percentage points (48 percent to 41 percent) in the 1990s. This would be of realignment proportions if we were examining partisan identification rather than ideology.


Party. As the parties move further away from the center, this logic should become more persuasive with a larger number of centrist voters.

We should expect exactly the opposite reactions if the electorate is highly polarized. Party polarization should strengthen party identifications in a polarized electorate. A conservative might be lukewarm about a wishy-washy Republican Party, but might have real enthusiasm for a staunchly conservative Republican Party. Similarly, a liberal might not care too much about a center-left Democratic Party, but could become strongly committed to an unabashedly liberal Democratic Party. Polarized voters should also be more likely to turn out to vote for (and against) candidates of polarized parties. Fewer potential voters should be indifferent to the parties' candidates. Finally, if both voters and the political parties are polarized, split-ticket voting should decline. To the extent that voters are liberals or conservatives and the candidates of the parties are the same, there should be less reason to split their votes between parties.16

What do these indirect tests indicate? In each instance, the indirect evidence is unambiguously consistent with a polarized American electorate and unambiguously inconsistent with a moderate, relatively unpolarized American electorate. First, there has been an increase in strong party identifiers in recent years. The percentage of NES respondents who were strong party identifiers increased from an average of 25 percent between 1972 and 1980 to 31 percent between 1994 and 2004. In 2004, strong party identifiers were fully a third of respondents, more than in any election since 1964. Second, turnout in recent elections has increased. As a percentage of the voting-eligible population in the 1970s, turnout was in the mid-50 percent range. In 2004 it exceeded 60 percent. Third, ticket splitting is on the decline. According to NES data, among those who cast votes for candidates of the major parties, split-ticket voting for presidential and U.S. House candidates dropped from an average of 26 percent between 1972 and 1992 to 18 percent since 1992. There is just too much that does not fit the idea of a moderate public and polarized parties.

The indirect evidence also suggests that, in accord with the direct evidence, Americans have been fairly polarized for some time. Consider what politics would look like if the public were fairly polarized while the parties failed to reflect this polarization. The public would be expected to turn away from unresponsive politics, party identification would weaken, voters would be more inclined to split their tickets, and turnout would remain low or decline further. Once the parties better reflected the long-standing polarization of the public, party identification would pick up, turnout would rise, and split-ticket voting would decline. This is exactly what has happened in the post–World War II years, during which the parties lagged behind the public in polarization.

The reason why polarization of the public preceded polarization of the parties is that the New Deal party system overlaid two sets of issues (racial issues and economic issues), and this caused a good deal of ideological heterogeneity within the parties. As political scientists Edward G. Carmines and James A. Stimson observed, in contrast to the parties' relative positions on New Deal economic issues, Democrats were the more conservative party on racial issues (because of their large southern conservative contingent) as late as the 1960s.19 Between 1958 and 1964, a number of liberal Democrats defeated a number of liberal Republicans in northern states, shifting the balance of power within the Democratic Party to the liberals. The sorting process, however, was staggered over many years in congressional voting, in part because of the campaign finance advantages of incumbents but also because of the absence of a viable Republican Party across the South.20 Southern conservatives began voting right away for Republican presidential candidates (a sign of their polarization), but the absence of strong Republican congressional candidates in the South delayed the completion of the realignment. The delay ended with the Republican breakthrough election of 1994, allowing the polarization of the parties to catch up with the polarization of the electorate. Party polarization, in turn, fueled additional polarization in the electorate.

16. There are several virtues to these indirect tests of polarization. First, they offer quite clear expectations. Whether a polarized public feels better represented by polarized parties or whether a moderate public feels disconnected from polarized parties produces precisely the opposite expectations about partisanship, turnout, and ticket splitting. Multiple tests also provide greater reliability. Forces other than polarization may cause turnout to rise or fall, partisanship to strengthen or weaken, and ticket splitting to increase or decrease. But for all three to move in an expected direction is less easily explained away. Finally, the reliability of the measurements of partisanship, turnout, and ticket splitting is a virtue. There is little question about these increasing or decreasing in recent years.
17. See Abramowitz and Saunders (1998); Hetherington (2001).
Back to Benchmarks

Based on this reanalysis, how does the current level of polarization compare with that in past eras? The only relevant hard data to turn to are the ideological scores of congressional roll-call voting, which indicate that the congressional parties are more polarized in the current era than they were during the New Deal era. This makes sense, given Carmines and Stimson’s insight that the race issue complicated politics through the early 1960s by cutting across the economic issues of the New Deal era.

As James Madison suggested in *The Federalist No. 10*, multiple cross-cutting cleavages complicate and dampen conflict, while single or multiple reinforcing cleavages simplify and intensify conflict. The politics of both the 1890s and the New Deal era were complicated by the racial issues cutting across or at odds with economic issues. This is not the case in current politics. The Democratic Party is on the liberal side and the Republican Party is on the conservative side of all political issues. This should intensify polarization.

The intensity of polarization may also be affected by the competitive balance between the two sides. Polarized politics with an even division should be quite a bit different than polarized politics with a clearly dominant side. In both the 1890s and during the New Deal era, one side of the conflict clearly dominated the political landscape—the Republicans after 1896 and the Democrats after 1932. Decisive numbers may draw some of the heat out of polarization. The minority side may be resigned to opposition and the majority side may be less threatened by the opposition.

But when politics are polarized and the divisions are nearly even, as they were at the time of the Civil War and as they are today, polarization may have quite different consequences. With an increase in the need for bipartisanship and a decrease in its likelihood, the prospects for major policy change through normal political processes may diminish and frustrations grow. Political conflict should heat up.

Although the paucity of data makes historical assessments of polarization difficult, some impressionistic comparisons are possible. On the one hand, current levels of polarization, though substantial among both the parties and in the electorate, fall well short of what they were at the time of the Civil War. On the other hand, because of the relatively simple cleavage lines of current politics and the closeness of the political divisions, it seems plausible to suspect that our politics will be far more heated than those at the turn of the last century or in the New Deal era. Future political historians may look back at our political era as the era of bad feelings.

COMMENT

Carl M. Cannon

In his May 1956 mea culpa for his early writings romanticizing the South’s agrarian history, poet Robert Penn Warren observed that “the past is always a rebuke to the present.” Fifty years later almost to the day, political scientists David W. Brady and Habric C. Han, after analyzing the patterns of long-forgotten U.S. voting records, have produced a lengthy essay to remind us fretting good-government types that the fictional turn-of-the-century bartender Martin J. Dooley had it right when he quipped that in America “politics ain’t beanbag”—and never has been.

While a degree in statistics would be helpful to fully comprehend Brady and Han’s research, the gist of their argument is not complicated: “For many years, our political institutions and policymaking processes have withstood sharp divisions between the parties. . . . For much of American history, the two parties have been distant from each other in the policy positions they took, and the party coalitions have been relatively cohesive in acting out their party platforms.”

I have left it to my co-respondent, James E. Campbell of the University of Buffalo, to get into the weeds with Brady and Han on their social science. But this card-carrying member of the “political infotainment community” (Brady and Han’s phrase) does have some thoughts regarding their broader contention. The essence of their argument is not that things are going swimmingly in American politics today; it is that we have seen such days before—and the Republic survived. Because we have gotten through such times before, the authors imply, we can do so again.

I have no doubt about that. But I would like to raise some questions that might chip away at their sanguinity. In doing so, I am reminded of another, lesser known, observation made by Mr. Dooley’s creator, Finley Peter Dunne: “The past always looks better than it was: it’s only pleasant because it isn’t here.”

Well, the past is upon us again—in the form of political polarization. My question is whether there is any escaping it.

22. Dooley was a creation of legendary Chicago columnist Finley Peter Dunne. According to William Safire’s *New Political Dictionary*, Dooley’s “beanbag” quip first appeared in the *Chicago Evening Post* on October 5, 1895.
Why Now?

In recent years, political polarization has been the subject of countless journalistic articles, numerous academic papers, and several academic conferences. And one remarkable feature of these discussions is how fungible the phrase “political polarization” has become. Many social scientists use the term technically to characterize the self-sorting of the two major parties along strict ideological lines. Others use it to describe the intense partisanship in Congress these days and the lousy personal relations among its members. Still others employ more poetic terms, taking aim at “the politics of personal destruction,” or the ad hominem attacks, personal invective, and generally low level of discourse found in modern political campaigns. Some look with a wider lens at the culture as a whole, focusing on the self-segregation going on in everything from military enlistment and higher education enrollment to where Americans choose to live, worship, and get their news.

Actually, all these phenomena are evidence of polarization, just as they are all interlocking—and reinforcing. Brady and Han are not interested in these kinds of nuance. They focus instead on two quantifiable indicators: the disparities over time between the political parties and the cohesiveness of party coalitions—measuring both party elites and mass voters. Their conclusion is that today’s America is not politically polarized. By their criteria we are indeed polarized. What they prove is that the country has been there at least twice before, first in the years around the turn of the twentieth century, and again in the years at the beginning of the Great Depression. (They discuss but do not compare the present era to the Civil War, a period in which political polarization grew to an entirely different magnitude.) “These benchmarks provide a framework for better understanding polarization today in light of the past,” the authors assert. “During the 1890s and the early twentieth century, American political parties struggled with the transition from an agrarian to an industrial economy, and with the role of the government in a changing international order. During the New Deal era, a hot debate about the appropriate role of government in the economy characterized party politics.” But once this has been established, a series of other questions arise. I’ll pose three of them. First, what is the source of the social upheaval today that generates the same level of political ill-will and ideological segregation that characterized the Great Depression? How did previous periods of polarization resolve themselves? And if the conditions that existed at the turn of the century and in the 1930s do not exist now, is there any kind of roadmap available to reformers who want to fix the broken politics of today?

When the United States entered World War II, Franklin Roosevelt presided over a nation in which 25 percent of able-bodied adults could not find employment (when most households had just one breadwinner), and where crops rotted in the fields because it cost more to harvest them than they would fetch at market. Half a million homeowners, many of them family farmers, defaulted on their mortgages, thousands of banks failed, the stock market lost 75 percent of its value, and the gross national product was cut in half. In the 1930s the United States realized negative immigration for the first time in its history. The nation’s marriage rate declined, as did its birthrate. The question on the table in those years—at least on some tables—was as basic as whether capitalism itself should survive.

The very fact that the United States would be as politically polarized today as it was in times such as those suggests that politics itself is what is broken in America, and that our national discourse is what is sick. Certainly the economy isn’t; nor are our government or social institutions.

As of May 2006, with President Bush’s job approval numbers hovering just above 30 percent and historians asserting with straight faces that he is the worst president in U.S. history, the unemployment rate was just 4.7 percent. Inflation was a modest 3.5 percent, and the Dow Jones Industrial Average had climbed back to 11,000. Crime rates had continued their decade-long drop, homeownership was at record levels, and the infant mortality rate was at an all-time low. Oh yes, and one more thing: The political parties were barely speaking to each other, and those approval ratings of President Bush were lower than that of any occupant of the White House since Jimmy Carter—when the economic numbers were really a horror show.

Something is wrong with this picture.

In Franklin Roosevelt’s era, certain country-club Republicans felt a class betrayal by the economic policies of the high-born president—so much so that they could barely bring themselves to utter the name of “that man in the White House.” But that kind of implacable (and dare I say irrational) hatred of FDR was, until recently, viewed as an aberration—and hardly the fault of Roosevelt himself.

Today President Bush and his predecessor, Bill Clinton, are routinely described in the press and academia as “polarizing” presidents, as if this is entirely their fault. But what war did Bill Clinton start? And why is Hillary Clinton, a prospective 2008 presidential candidate, routinely derided (within

her own party!) as “the most polarizing” Democrat in the country? An alternate explanation suggests itself: that the last two presidents inhabited a polarized political environment—and that instead of being its architects, they were its victims.

The Factors—Some Old, Some New

This response to Brady and Han’s study is not the place to examine all of the conditions that brought about America’s current state of polarization. But a short list of culprits would include the following:

—The sorting out of liberals into the national Democratic Party and conservatives into the GOP.
—The wane of southern Democrats, who constituted a de facto (and temporarily) third party in American political life.
—The decline of regionalism as a source of political identity, which has resulted in there being few conservative Democrats from Dixie left in Congress and an ever dwindling band of liberal Republicans from the East.
—Social issues such as abortion and gay marriage that elude compromise (especially when the courts get involved) because they essentially pit two incompatible ideologies against each other.
—Gerrymandered districts that squeeze centrists out of the House of Representatives.
—Incivility by members of Congress, who no longer socialize (or even converse) across party aisles.
—The 1994 Republican takeover of Congress, which by dramatically ending forty years of Democratic control made every election seem potentially cataclysmic.
—The impeachment of President Clinton on charges of perjury and obstruction of justice relating to the Monica Lewinsky affair, an issue most voters considered trivial.
—The 2000 presidential election and Florida recount controversy, which for the first time in more than a hundred years put a president in the White House who lost the nationwide popular vote.
—The shout-fest journalism of cable television and talk radio, which helps fragment audiences along ideological lines.
—The Internet, which has democratized political communication and made it easier to raise political money, but also created an echo chamber of intolerant and often ill-informed partisan commentary.

“The Internet fosters community, but also fragmentation,” says futurist Esther Dyson. “You are far more likely to find people who share your passion for Hungarian folk music on the Net, but that leaves you less time to speak with your neighbors, who might have different perspectives on a lot of things. Like everything else, there’s a good side and a bad side.”

This fragmentation is part of a larger national phenomenon that Georgetown University linguist Deborah Tannen has called “the argument culture.”

To be sure, not all of this is new. As Brady and Han note in passing, politics—especially presidential politics—has always had a bruising quality to it. Of the forty-two men who have held the office of president of the United States, two (Andrew Johnson and Bill Clinton) were impeached, and a third (Richard Nixon) resigned one step ahead of the posse. Four U.S. presidents (Abraham Lincoln, James A. Garfield, William McKinley, and John F. Kennedy) were assassinated in office, and six others (Andrew Jackson, Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, Gerald Ford, and Ronald Reagan) were shot at—it happened to Ford twice. Teddy Roosevelt and Reagan were hit.

In such a milieu, verbal assaults seem mild. But even the best of presidents can feel their sting. Thomas Jefferson was christened “Mad Tom” by his political opponents, and Lincoln was routinely characterized by Democratic Party newspapers as an ape. During the Vietnam War, Lyndon Johnson’s daughter Luci recalled hearing demonstrators chant “LBJ, LBJ, how many boys have you killed today?” from her bedroom in the White House.

Wartime Partisanship

But the Vietnam era, which included the civil rights struggle, has nothing on our own when it comes to polarization—and this is disquieting. Vietnam was a far larger undertaking than Iraq, with much greater carnage, heartbreak, expense, and loss of American military lives. Yet the war in Iraq has engendered a partisan antipathy to President Bush so pervasive that pollsters know the answers to most questions about the president and his policies by the time they ask the first survey question—the one in which respondents identify their political party affiliation.

Consider these sobering numbers from a February 2006 CBS News poll:\footnote{26}

"Looking back, do you think the United States did the right thing in taking military action in Iraq or should the U.S. have stayed out?"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Democrat</th>
<th>Republican</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Right thing</td>
<td>19 percent</td>
<td>71 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stayed out</td>
<td>76 percent</td>
<td>25 percent</td>
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</table>

Contrast those findings with polls taken by the Gallup Organization during the Vietnam and Korean wars.\footnote{27}

"Was the Vietnam War a mistake?"

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<th></th>
<th>Democrat</th>
<th>Republican</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not a mistake</td>
<td>37 percent</td>
<td>34 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mistake</td>
<td>51 percent</td>
<td>56 percent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

"Was the Korean War a mistake?"

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<th>Democrat</th>
<th>Republican</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not a mistake</td>
<td>45 percent</td>
<td>37 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mistake</td>
<td>43 percent</td>
<td>55 percent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These are not isolated findings. Questions seeking to ascertain Americans' feelings about the wisdom, efficacy, and likely success of the U.S. invasion of Iraq suggest that Republicans and Democrats are talking about different wars.

Asked by CBS News in February 2006 whether Iraq was "worth the loss of American life and other costs," 58 percent of Republicans answered yes while 82 percent of Democrats said no. Asked if things were going "very well" or "somewhat well" in Iraq, 65 percent of Republicans said yes, while 81 percent of Democrats said no—including an eye-opening 48 percent who said the war was going "very badly."

No gaps like these even remotely existed during the supposedly cataclysmic Vietnam era. At its most partisan divide (in the presidential election year of 1952), the gap between Democrats and Republicans on the Korean War was 17 percentage points (61 percent of Republicans and 44 percent of Democrats considered Korea a mistake). A year earlier, the gap was only 12 points.

That this is a potentially ominous development seems obvious, even though it has generated little public discussion. If support for the Iraq war is partisan, does that make Iraq a Republican Party war? How do the troops feel about that? The taxpayers? "We have reached a situation that, were the partisan composition of the White House and Congress reversed, spokesmen for both parties would change positions on a dime," said Al Felzenberg, a former Reagan administration official who served on the staff of the 9/11 Commission.\footnote{28}

This dichotomy is not limited to views on Iraq, however. It exists on nearly every issue, ranging from right-track/wrong-track polls to the state of the economy and views on immigration policy, race relations, and Social Security reform. Some of that is understandable, as the two parties have differing ideologies. But the closer one looks at polling data on attitudes and perceptions of American life, the more it becomes apparent that partisanship is interfering with Americans' ability to process factual information.

A National Election Studies survey conducted by the University of Michigan in 1988 sought to determine how voters thought the country had progressed during the Reagan administration. Party affiliation had a lot to do with it—far too much, an objective person would say. Asked, for example, whether inflation had increased or decreased during Reagan's two-term presidency, Democrats could not even bring themselves to acknowledge basic facts. When Reagan took office in 1981, inflation was running at almost 14 percent. By the time he flew back home to California in retirement, it was less than 4 percent. But less than a quarter of self-described Democrats allowed that there had been an improvement in inflation under Reagan. Half of all Democrats said inflation had worsened.\footnote{29}

Larry Bartels of Princeton University drew attention to these findings at a December 2004 polarization conference he cohosted at his university. "So that's the way in which partisanship operates both to maintain and to exacerbate differences in people's political views," he said, "by presenting a kind of partisan filter on all sorts of events."\footnote{30}

30. From a transcript of a panel discussion, "The Polarization of American Politics: Myth or Reality?" at the Center for the Study of Democratic Polisics, Princeton University, December 3, 2004 (www.princeton.edu/~csdp/events/pdfs/Panel1.pdf).}
Let's put it more bluntly: excess partisanship literally inhibits Americans from processing information that challenges their biases. This is no small matter. This nation must soon come to some kind of judgment about the war effort in Iraq. It is an issue that is simply too important for political leanings.

At a recent reception of the Scoop Jackson Foundation honoring Senators John McCain and Joe Lieberman (it was a very small reception), American Enterprise Institute scholar Norman Ornstein put it this way: “We've gotten so polarized that you can take the president’s job approval rating, by party, and simply move it, to an opinion over something as profound as war and get the same numbers. Whoa, there's nothing good about that.”

Partisanship has always played some role in how Americans view foreign wars, just nothing like it does today. “This is totally unprecedented,” said Ohio State University political scientist John Mueller, who has studied how public opinion shifted on Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq. “It's so extreme, it's really off the charts. We're in a new era.”

References

Polarization Then and Now


Polarized by God? American Politics and the Religious Divide

E.J. Dionne Jr.

As religious commitment become the most important factor in determining the outcome of American elections? Can the bitter polarization so evident in so many aspects of our politics be explained by Pat Buchanan’s famous claim in his 1992 speech at the Republican National Convention that we are in the middle of both “a cultural war” and “a religious war”?

If that’s true, politics is inevitably bitter because it becomes a battle over the most fundamental questions between individuals and groups who do not understand each other and, often, can’t stand each other. Have the traditional drivers of political choice—class, race, region, economic circumstances, and views on foreign policy and on government’s role at home—withered in their explanatory power when faced with the power of faith? The short answer is no. Race, especially, but also class and region, still matter greatly in our elections. One would not know that, however, from the current obsession with the role of religion and “moral values” in American politics.

Yet there is good reason to focus on religion’s role in our political life. Religion has always been influential in American elections, and there is a new

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