

EDITORIAL FOREWORD

E PLURIBUS PLURIBUS, OR DIVIDED WE STAND

On the eve of the 2016 presidential election, American politics is hyperpolarized. The extreme level of party polarization is a relatively new phenomenon. In 1965, the difference between the two parties on the left-right dimension, as measured by the DW-Nominate score (a measure of ideological distance), was approximately 0.5 in both the House of Representatives and Senate. By 2013, the corresponding distance between the parties had nearly doubled.¹ Other indicators of ideological extremity, including the content of the party platforms (Layman 1999), interest group ratings of legislators (Stonecash, Brewer, and Mariani 2003), and surveys of party activists (Layman, Carsey, and Horowitz 2006), all show a similar pattern of intensified polarization.

As we have seen repeatedly in recent years, ideologically divided parties are an impediment to policymaking. Routine legislative measures such as extending the debt ceiling have become opportunities for political brinksmanship and games of chicken, with one party waiting until the last minute to “blink.” Senate confirmation of cabinet members and judicial nominees drags on interminably (Goldman 2003). Laws are enacted only when one party imposes its will on the other, with the losing side then engaging in “relentless delegitimization” (Mann and Ornstein 2013) of policies that pass. On balance, it is clear that ideological polarization has contributed to dysfunctional leadership. It is not surprising that public trust in governmental institutions has sunk to an all-time low.

At the level of the electorate, signs of ideological polarization are more subtle. On the one hand, partisans are better “sorted,” in the sense that their partisan and ideological leanings are consistent with dominant liberal-Democrat and conservative-Republican pairings (Levendusky 2009). On the other hand, partisans position themselves closer to the center on issues than are their elected representatives (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2005; Hill and Tausanovitch 2014; Sood and Iyengar 2014). Despite some centrifugal movement in the views of

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1. DW-Nominate is a measure based on roll call votes, which range from the liberal extreme of -1 to the conservative extreme of 1 (Poole and Rosenthal 1997). In 1965, the inter-party difference in the score was .47 in the House of Representatives and .56 in the Senate. In 2013, the corresponding ideological distance was 1.1 in the House and .98 in the Senate.

partisans and a corresponding increase in the distance between preferences of Democrats and Republicans (Campbell 2008; Abramowitz 2010), it is clear that mass polarization has not kept pace with elite polarization.

Ideology is one standard for assessing party polarization. Another standard is the extent to which partisans treat each other as a disliked outgroup. From early work on social distance (Bogardus 1947) to more recent theorizing on social identity (Tajfel 1970; Tajfel and Turner 1979), group conflict is defined in terms of diverging sentiment for in- and outgroup members. Group polarization occurs when individuals express not only positive sentiment for their own group, but also negative sentiments toward those affiliated with opposing groups. So, to the extent that party identification elicits group polarization, partisans would be expected to express animus toward their opponents.

In contrast to the ongoing debates over whether voters are ideologically polarized, there is unequivocal evidence that partisans have become more polarized in terms of affect. Beginning in the mid-1980s, data from the American National Election Surveys show that Democrats and Republicans not only increasingly dislike the opposing party, but also impute negative qualities to supporters of the out party (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012). Outgroup prejudice based on party identity exceeds the comparable bias based on race, religion, gender, or other significant social cleavages (Muste 2014; Iyengar and Westwood 2015).

Partisan affect has strengthened to the point where party identity is now a litmus test for interpersonal relations. People prefer to associate with fellow partisans and are less trusting of partisan opponents (Iyengar and Westwood 2015). The most vivid evidence of increased social distance across the party divide concerns interparty marriage. In the early 1960s, the percentage of partisans concerned over the prospect of their son or daughter marrying someone from the opposition party was in the single digits, but some forty-five years later it had risen to more than twenty-five percent (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012). Data from online dating sites and national voter files confirm that partisanship is a key attribute underlying the selection of long-term partners (Huber and Malhotra 2012; Iyengar, Konitzer, and Tedin 2015).

The transformation in party polarization, at both the elite and mass levels, cries out for explanation. The period in question (1965–2015) coincides with any number of major societal changes, including the increased enfranchisement and mobilization of African Americans, the migration of whites from urban areas to the suburbs, the emergence of the South as a staunch Republican region, a significant increase in the Latino and Asian American population, and the politicization of evangelical Christians. These social and demographic cleavages have contributed to polarization by reinforcing individuals' partisan identities. Today, Democrats and Republicans differ not only in their politics, but also in terms of their ethnic, religious, and regional identities.

Polarization is also attributable to institutional change. The adoption of primary elections in the 1970s accelerated the ideological separation of the parties by altering the composition of the activist pool toward the most ideologically extreme voters at the expense of pragmatists more interested in electoral victory than ideology. Frequent and strategically motivated alteration of the electoral map (gerrymandering) eliminated competitive districts. The centrist incumbents representing these districts were ousted by challengers with more extreme agendas (for a recent analysis, see [Hall \[2015\]](#)). As campaigns became more professionalized and reliant on television advertising, the costs of running for office soared. Candidates were obliged to raise large war chests, making them dependent on a small number of wealthy donors and political action committees.

One institution singled out as a potential causal actor is the news media. With the revolution in information technology and the emergence of thousands of news providers, what was once a national audience has fragmented into multiple niche audiences. The availability of cable television in the 1970s provided partisans with the first opportunity to obtain their news from a “friendly” source (Fox News first and later MSNBC). The development of the Internet and the active blogosphere provided a much greater range of media choices, which not only facilitated partisans’ ability to seek out information and commentary consistent with their leanings, but also enabled the apolitical strata to tune out all things political ([Prior 2007, 2013](#)).

The papers featured in this special issue represent many of the themes and arguments described above. In “Representing the Preferences of Donors, Partisans, and Voters in the US Senate,” Michael Barber examines the ideological extremity of US Senators in relation to their constituents and individuals who fund their campaigns. Using joint ideological scaling, he finds that senators’ ideology more closely mirrors the preferences of donors than co-partisan voters. In fact, senators and donors have far more extreme views than voters. Strikingly, the average ideological distance between senators and their voters is no different than the average distance when voters in the state are *randomly assigned* to senators.

Three of the papers address the ongoing debate over the potentially polarizing effects of media consumption. For partisan news sources to be implicated as causes of polarization, it is necessary to demonstrate first that partisan content is widely available. In “Fair and Balanced? Quantifying Media Bias through Crowdsourced Content Analysis,” Ceren Budak et al. use large-scale text analysis of news reports to show that the vast majority of news organizations remain committed to the norms of professional, nonpartisan journalism. Their findings apply to both issue selection and ideological slant. If there is bias in the news, it is manifested in coverage that is disproportionately critical of politicians from both parties.

A second assumption underlying the polarization-by-media hypothesis is that partisans selectively attend to agreeable or sympathetic providers. To date, the

evidence on the extent of such selective news consumption is mixed, with experimental and survey studies showing considerable self-selection and audience segregation (see, for instance, [Iyengar and Hahn \[2009\]](#); [Stroud \[2010\]](#)), while more large-scale and generalizable web-browsing studies typically uncover only modest or negligible traces of one-sided news consumption (e.g., [Gentzkow and Shapiro 2011](#)). “Filter Bubbles, Echo Chambers, and Online News Consumption,” by Seth Flaxman et al., advances the literature on selective exposure by tracking news readers’ web-browsing behavior. Although the authors detect clear evidence of biased search, in the sense that partisans rarely visit “unfriendly” sites, the audience for most news providers is ideologically diverse. A major contribution of the paper is to compare audience segregation under different routes to encountering the news. Search engines and links from social media, both of which feature personalized algorithms, result in slightly greater partisan segregation.

The polarizing potential of exposure to partisan news sites is taken up in “Party Polarization, Media Choice, and Mass Partisan-Ideological Sorting.” Using an indicator of sorting (consistency across party identification and ideology) as their outcome measure, Johanna Dunaway and Nicholas Davis show that the increased availability of media choices brought about by diffusion of the Internet does not directly impact sorting; instead, the effects of the enhanced media environment are limited to the activist strata.

Two of the papers bear on affective polarization (or three, if one counts Yphtach Lelkes’s overview essay on mass polarization). “Revisiting the Myth: New Evidence of a Polarized Electorate,” by Marc Hetherington et al., applies the in- and outgroup logic to candidate trait ratings. Over time, the trait ratings of the opposition candidate have soured to the point that the number of partisans falling into the most negative response categories exceeds those at the center. The authors show that changes in core predispositions—increased racial resentment for Republicans and less traditional moral values among Democrats—help explain the emergence of trait polarization.

Liliana Mason’s “A Cross-Cutting Calm: How Socio-Partisan Sorting Drives Affective Polarization” investigates whether well-aligned multiple identities make partisans more likely to react with anger or enthusiasm after encountering messages unfavorable or favorable to their party. Sorted Democrats are those who also identify as liberal, secular, and Black, while sorted Republicans identify as conservative, evangelical, and members of the Tea Party movement. As anticipated, partisans with sorted identities respond affectively, while those with cross-cutting affiliations (a declining number) tend to be less emotionally volatile.

Finally, two of the papers touch on mass ideological polarization. “Mass Polarization: Manifestations and Measurements” provides an overview of the different indicators scholars use to track polarization in the electorate. These include ideological divergence and consistency, perceived polarization, and affective polarization. “(Mis)perceptions of Partisan Polarization in the American Public” focuses on perceived polarization. Matthew Levendusky

and Neil Malhotra show that partisans systematically distort the positions held by opposing partisans, placing them closer to the extreme than they really are. What is especially revealing here is that partisans' perceptions of their own party are much less biased, suggesting that this is very much an exercise in motivated reasoning (Lodge and Taber 2013).

As these papers indicate, the phenomenon of party polarization is multifaceted, with varying effects at the level of mass and elite politics. At this juncture, researchers need to turn from what has been primarily a descriptive mission, that is, documenting different forms of polarization, to the more challenging task of identifying the mechanisms that have caused this country to polarize so dramatically over the recent past.

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