THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

What Drives Mass Polarization in the United States?

By

Gary L. Hull

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Faculty Advisor: Jon C. Rogowski
Preceptor: David Cantor-Echols

Introduction

Political polarization has attracted the attention of scholars of American Politics and Political Behavior for several decades, leading to significant progress in our understanding of what drives the observed divides in the attitudes and identities of partisans. In that pursuit, partisan sorting (Fiorina and Abrams 2008), ideological polarization (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008), and out-party animus, or affective polarization (Iyengar et al. 2019), have emerged as three central areas most involved in explaining how and to what degree Americans are divided politically. Each of these bodies of literature have developed significant internal debates and established important consensus to propel future research, with some work tying these concepts together (or reiterating their distinctions) to advance our understanding of polarization in the public. Today, the study of mass polarization has reached the public's own view through media consumption and discussion, causing concern for many as nearly three in ten Americans cite polarization as a top political issue for the country (Skelley and Fuong 2022). While high levels of partisan animus have created concerns about excessive discord that at best may limit room for agreement and at worst may lead to outward hostility (Pew Research Center 2019a), misconceptions and stereotyping of how the 'typical partisan' thinks and behaves has caused individuals to largely overestimate the degree of mass polarization, further exacerbating antagonistic attitudes (Druckman et al. 2022). These trends have raised the stakes of investigating and analyzing mass polarization as an academic endeavor, tying the health of our democratic institutions and continuation of civil political discussion to our understanding of polarization, what affects it, how we might seek to influence it, as well as how we provide an accurate description of it to the public.

In this thesis, I put these literatures on mass polarization in direct conversation in order to construct a more complete and precise depiction of the current political divide in the American public. In doing so, I explore the evolving relationship between party and ideological identification along with their development and connection to factors such as elite polarization, political sophistication, and media consumption. I also investigate a more recent, 'alternative' angle of political divergence which focuses on partisan affect, or the tendency to (dis)like and (dis)trust others based on partisan allegiance, and identify where this emerging body of research connects with traditional studies on partisanship and ideology. Subsequently, I evaluate the evidence for mass polarization in the United States today, identifying changes over time regarding the central areas of polarization outlined in the literature with a particular emphasis on the most recent years where I find some of the most significant shifts to have occurred. I also highlight where recent trends have perhaps reversed or modified conventional thinking in some of these areas, such as in the ideological consistency of the public where an enhanced degree of observed constraint has in turn coincided with and helped produce additional affective outcomes. I perform this analysis with a single, large-scale dataset, consisting of several decades of survey data from the American National Election Studies (ANES). Understanding polarization is central to its reduction from a severe and potentially harmful level, and I accordingly close this paper by considering what steps academics, media, policymakers, and individuals might take to reintroduce a degree of moderation and encourage tolerance and civility in our political environment.

Mass Polarization in Academic Literature

Political polarization may be defined as the increased presence of extreme and conflicting principles and positions in comparison to more moderate views among a population. Along a

liberal-conservative dimension, a polarized population would appear as bimodally distributed, with greater distance between the two modes indicating a higher degree of polarization. The study of mass polarization in the U.S., then, takes the American electorate as its population and studies the extremity of its attitudes and principles. This research has advanced in several distinct yet connected directions, analyzing the shifts in the ideology of the electorate (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008), the degree of party sorting and its effects on the public (Fiorina and Abrams 2008), and recently the extent to which affect and partisan identity drives perceived political division and negative evaluations (Iyengar et al. 2019).

Before evaluating whether and how Americans have become polarized ideologically, affectively, or have become sorted partisans, it is important to first consider what drives political awareness and partisan or ideological thinking originally, how politically sophisticated the American public is, and how that degree of understanding affects political attitudes and behavior. *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960) and Converse's "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics" (1964) are foundational to this subject, asserting that the vast majority of the American public does not possess coherent, internal ideologies or belief structures. For most, political attitudes are instead largely related to party identification which is established through socialization early in life and inherited from one's parents (Campbell et al. 1960). Voters will select a candidate based on how a group they associate with is perceived to benefit from a candidate or party's policies, how they feel about recent outcomes caused by a party's actions, and sometimes ignoring issue content altogether in favor of a candidate's personal qualities or party affiliation without understanding that party's platform (Converse 1964).

The extent to which these conditions of political sophistication in the public have persisted over time has been subject to considerable debate. Some of the observed lack of

consistency in political attitudes has been argued as arising from vague survey questions (Achen 1975). While some scholars posited that significant events and changes in the political environment (particularly during the election of 1964 and unrest in 1968, along with their respective media coverage) augmented the salience of politics in the decades following the 1950s and subsequently led to an increase in measured ideological and sophisticated political thinking, others rebut that these differences were impacted by changes in survey questions over time (Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 1976; Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus 1978). Converse's thesis has been endorsed in more recent decades by significant research such as that of Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope (2006), but the debate has persisted as others posit that the American public, particularly well-informed partisans, have become increasingly polarized and ideological, and in turn are becoming more active in their political participation (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008). However, the observed changes in responses may more so indicate voters reflecting the options provided to them by polarized elites rather than an actual shift in ideological preferences (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2008).

Accordingly, the study of mass polarization has become connected to the growing divide observed among America's political elites and the discussion of whether and how this division impacts the public. In 1950, the American Political Science Association's Committee on Political Parties called for, among several recommendations, greater distinction between the national platforms of the two major American political parties to offer more clear alternatives to voters. The authors warned of "an unbridgeable political cleavage" should the parties fail to adequately set the boundaries of America's political discourse and maintain ordered conflict. Since then, the parties have become considerably more distinguished. There has been no ideological overlap between the least conservative Republican and least liberal Democrat in the House in the past

two decades and in the Senate since 2004 (DeSilver 2022). We may observe the widening ideological gap in Congress using DW-NOMINATE, a scaling procedure for legislators based on voting behavior (Poole and Rosenthal 1997). Figure 1, depicting the distribution of dimension 1 (economic liberalism-conservatism, with more liberal at -1 and more conservative at 1) of DW-NOMINATE for the 116th Congress (2019-2021), is bimodal with peaks that are much further apart than figure 2, which examines the same metric for the 81st Congress (1949-1951). The ideological homogeneity within the parties and growing distinction between them that we observe today began in the 1970s and has persisted into more recent years (Poole and Rosenthal 1984; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006). Moreover, these scholars claim that the issue space in Congress is largely unidimensional in recent decades, causing the voting behavior of legislators to be more predictable and consistent across issues (Poole and Rosenthal 2007). Others have contested these conclusions, however, arguing that high polarization has caused a downward bias in the measure of dimensionality and that there may be additional significant dimensions of conflict within each party (Aldrich, Montgomery, and Sparks 2014) and on most individual pieces of legislation (Roberts, Smith, and Haptonstahl 2016).

Figure 1

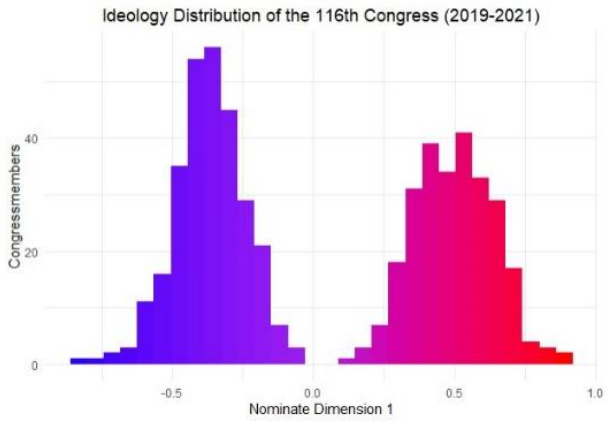
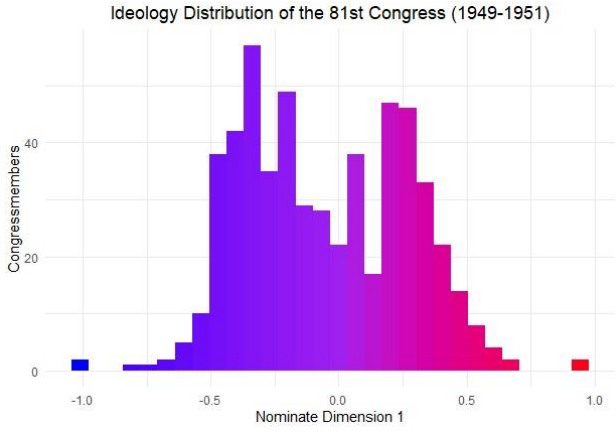


Figure 2



Data provided by Voteview: Congressional Roll-Call Votes Database, Lewis et al. 2022. Created with RStudio.

While it is relatively settled that some degree of polarization has occurred among legislators, the effort to determine how and to what degree elite polarization affects mass behavior is an ongoing endeavor. Zaller (1992) finds that voters take cues from political elites which shapes their understanding of political affairs, which as explained previously is traditionally understood as otherwise very limited and strongly tied to party identification (Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964). A similar conclusion can be reached from a rational choice perspective, as voters will regularly rely on more informed and influential figures, including political elites, to subsidize their lack of understanding as to what policies currently affect them and which positions might serve them better (Downs 1957; Popkin 1994). Lenz (2012) extends our understanding of 'cue-taking' by clarifying that when evaluating elected officials, rather than shift their preferences to the officials who best match their issue positions, oftentimes voters will adjust their positions to fit with the leader they like based on their performance, party, or even appearance. Increasing polarization among elites affects the cues they send, making them clearer to voters and therefore easier to follow (Levendusky 2009; 2010), and perpetual campaigning spawned by more competitive elections since the 1980s has led to elites sending these signals constantly (Lee 2016). Individuals who have stronger partisan identities in polarized environments have been shown to follow their party's endorsements with increased confidence regardless of the type of appeal made or how convincing the party's argument is (Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013).

The resulting shifts observed in the public has been labeled 'party sorting' (Fiorina and Abrams 2008). Levendusky (2009) provides evidence of sorting, first by displaying voters' increasing awareness of party differences across six issue items (to varying degrees) as well as by examining a general increase over time of partisans shifting their positions into alignment

with the views of their respective party's elites. The size of the increase in issue polarization varies by issue area and party, and other analyses have suggested that the overall change in difference between Republican and Democrat identifiers' issue positions over time has been relatively small (Fiorina and Abrams 2008). The measured downstream effects of this divide remain significant, however. Mason (2016) finds that sorting can increase social polarization, altering political evaluations and emotions, even without a similar increase observed in issue polarization. Sorting can also create a positive feedback loop, whereas better sorted voters more clearly emphasize the differences between the parties, inviting a larger proportion of the electorate into increasingly fierce partisan competition (Hare 2021).

Many factors besides elites can have a significant impact on how individuals form political opinions as well and may produce polarizing effects in the public. 'Opinion leaders' who play an important role in shaping beliefs can exist in the form of various trusted sources of information, such as a friend, interest groups, a local religious leader, and political commentators (Lupia and McCubbins 1998). The role of the media has gained special attention by scholars of political behavior and polarization as well for its influential position in informing voters and influencing their perceptions. Popkin (1994) explains how voters manage to achieve 'low information rationality' and form opinions based on information they receive through the media they consume and discuss with friends. Experimental results suggest that partisan media has a polarizing effect on its viewers, who already tend to be more extreme and politically engaged, and that these effects can extend to nonviewers through interpersonal discussion (Levendusky 2013; Druckman, Levendusky, and McLain 2018). Political television may also negatively impact viewers' perceptions of opposing partisans without necessarily changing their issue positions (Mutz 2007). Even many local television news stations, which are traditionally

considered to be trusted sources of locally-focused and largely nonpartisan reporting, have shifted in a manner that now produces measurable impacts on the political attitudes of its viewers, often adopting a more national focus and clearer ideological slant that coincides with their acquisition by large media conglomerates like the Sinclair Broadcasting Group (Levendusky 2021).

Increasingly, scholars studying polarization in the American public are observing changes in behaviors, evaluations, and attitudes that draw Republicans and Democrats apart based on their feelings about each other without necessarily needing to know their stances on issues or their ideological positioning. This literature on *affective* polarization focuses on partisans developing a dislike or distrust of the opposing party and its members (Iyengar et al. 2019; Pew Research Center 2019a) and has been treated as an "alternative definition of polarization" (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012, 405). Central to this phenomenon is identity and group-based attachments, as partisans develop positive feelings towards one's own party along with negative sentiments directed at the opposition (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe 2015). Survey research by Pew Research Center (2019a) finds a majority of partisans viewing the opposition as 'close-minded' or 'immoral' and stating that they do not agree on basic facts or share political or nonpolitical goals and values with their partisan rivals. The proportion of partisans providing a negative evaluation of opposing partisans has risen steadily since the 1990s (Pew Research Center 2014).

While some scholars suggest that current evidence points to voting behavior being better explained by policy positions than partisan emotion (Fowler 2020), a nascent body of literature linking affective polarization to changes in political beliefs remains significant. This research suggests that voters with a high degree of partisan animus will politicize otherwise apolitical or

neutral issues, such as the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, even with weak elite cues (Druckman et al. 2021). Though here it is worth immediately considering whether issues such as public health crises, while apolitical in the ideal, could accurately be characterized as neutral based on their connection to the political process via the presidentially appointed CDC director and direct executive actions aimed at managing the problem. A host of studies have found evidence that increasing partisan antipathy may influence a host of non-political actions and judgments as well, such as who individuals form friendships with and marry, where they prefer to live, who employers prefer to hire, and even how people conduct business when dealing with other partisans (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Gift and Gift 2015; Gimpel and Hui 2015; Huber and Malhotra 2017; McConnell et al. 2018). As evidence mounts as to the effects of rising partisan animosity on behavior, a debate over whether such affect is driven by policy (Orr and Huber 2020), or social identities (Mason 2016), is ongoing.

Like the other types of polarization discussed here, how affective polarization is measured plays a significant role in the results found in its research. Generally, the tools used to measure these outcomes include feeling thermometers, ratings of trait associations, ratings of trust in parties to do the right thing, and social-distance measures (Druckman and Levendusky 2019). While the first three are heavily related, social-distance measures appear to capture not only partisan animus but also a willingness to interact with opposing partisans, which may differ from dislike in the abstract (Druckman and Levendusky 2019), as well as represent an expression of general aversion towards political discussion with politically charged partisans (Klar, Krupnikov, and Ryan 2018). Moreover, in surveys asking voters to evaluate the opposing party, a standard approach to measuring affective polarization, respondents tend to imagine and base their response on political elites and the most ideologically extreme members of the opposition

rather than an average party member, resulting in the negative evaluations often found in these studies (Druckman and Levendusky 2019). When directly asked to evaluate a typical member of the opposing party once misconceptions about extreme ideological disposition and political engagement are addressed, most partisans are less hostile and more indifferent while only a small proportion maintain a strong level of animosity (Druckman et al. 2022).

Few studies have managed to connect this recent and 'alternative' take on polarization centered around affect to the more traditionally established divides in ideology and partisanship. In one example of such work, Rogowski and Sutherland (2016) find that ideological polarization among political elites contributes to increasingly divergent affective evaluations of those elites. Webster and Abramowitz (2017) extend this argument further, asserting that ideological divergence in the public itself has emerged as the primary driver of affective polarization. Moreover, as explored previously, based on the tendency for affectively polarized individuals to politicize issues that shape their beliefs, there appears to be a reciprocal connection between partisan animus and ideological polarization (Druckman et al. 2021). In the following section, I will primarily draw from survey data from the American National Election Studies (ANES) to explore the shifts over time in the different culprits of mass polarization. Acknowledging each of these areas and how they may impact each other is critical to better understanding what divides the American electorate today. Moreover, while the political landscape has continuously evolved, significant changes have been observed in the past several years that warrant investigation of the most recent updates to how individuals identify, think, and feel in politics today that generates the level of division and animus purported by scholars and media alike.

Evaluating the Evidence of Polarization with ANES Data

The rising political polarization of the American electorate can best be characterized by and attributed to three central areas, including party sorting, shifting ideological positioning, and growing negative sentiments resulting from political tribalism. The exact extent to which each of these exist and impact political behaviors and attitudes has been demonstrated by some scholars and contested by the work of others. Using survey data from the American National Election Studies (ANES), we are able to more directly observe changes in measurements of partisan identity, ideology, and affect over time.

Partisan Polarization

Over the last several decades, the American electorate has undergone a considerable transformation in how most individuals identify with America's major political parties. In 1972*, a plurality of respondents self-identified as a 'Weak Democrat'. 'Strong Democrats' were about as equally present as pure Independents, and the distribution overall is clearly unimodal (see Figure 3). By 2020, 'Strong Democrats' and 'Strong Republicans' together make up about 44% of the sample (compared to 25% in 1972). The latter has peaked at an all-time high since the ANES first probed this 7-point party ID question in 1952, while the current level of strong Democratic identity is only matched at certain points during the 1950s and 60s. The previously leading group of 'Weak Democrat' has receded to a level nearly equal to its 'Weak Republican' counterpart and each type of Independent. These five identities form a valley between the clearly bimodal distribution of respondents who now strongly identify with one of the major parties (see Figure 4). Throughout those near five decades, the degree of strong partisan identification has fluctuated but made much of the gains to its current levels in the most recent years of measurement. Republicans matched their 1972 measurement of strong identifiers in the public as

recently as 1998 (at 10%), a figure which doubled in the following 22 years. Similarly, 'Strong Democrats' matched their 1972 standing in 1994 (at 15%) and have gradually risen since. Independents and Independent-leaners together make up a third of the total sample in 2020, only three percentage points less than the proportion observed five decades ago when the three groups of Independents outnumbered strong partisan identifiers. These individuals tend to be less politically engaged and active compared to more firmly partisan individuals, and Independents leaning towards one party may differ in some ways in their attitudes and issue positions compared to the majority view of that party, such as Republican-leaning Independents breaking from Republicans on issues like same-sex marriage (Pope 2012; Pew Research Center 2019b). Still, it is clear that leaning Independents will typically more closely follow the majority view of their party on the most salient issues, distinguishing them from Independents leaning towards the opposing party (Magleby and Nelson 2012; Pew Research Center 2019b).

Figure 3

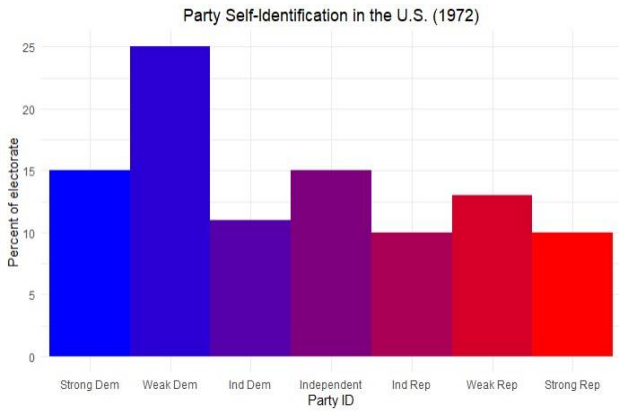
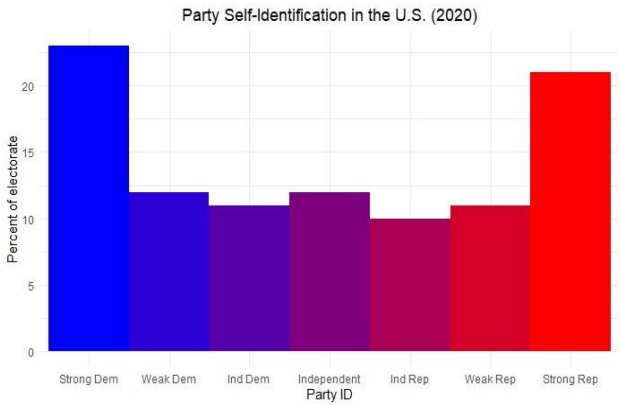


Figure 4



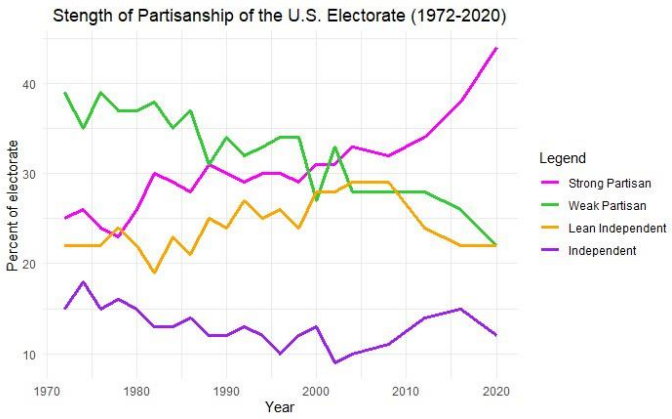
Data provided by the ANES Cumulative Data File dataset, VCF0301; Created in RStudio

**There are various ANES items that began measurement in 1972, so I default to this date here despite having earlier data to maintain consistency across measures where this is possible.*

Change in partisan strength is another measure that can help confirm the notion that Americans are becoming increasingly divided over strengthening partisan allegiances. Partisan

strength is a collapsed measure from the seven-point party ID measure outlined above, offering a more simple and direct account of the degree of partisanship in the electorate as reported by American adults themselves. Trends since the 1970s confirm that more individuals are identifying as 'strong partisans', which has risen steadily and expanded from a quarter of respondents in 1972 to 34% in 2012 (see Figure 5). However, in the mere eight years between 2012 and 2020, a rapid increase representing a larger gain in percentage points than what occurred in the forty years prior (a 10-point increase vs 9) has boosted the most recent measured total of strong partisans to an all-time high at 44%. The opposite trend has occurred in 'Weak Partisans', gradually falling along with a more sharp decline starting in 2012. While the decline in 'Pure Independents' has been relatively modest, individuals identifying as 'Lean Independent' were trending upwards since the early 1980s only to reverse after 2008. The recent rise in 'Strong Partisans' would thus appear to come from individuals who identified as a 'Weak Partisan' or 'Lean Independent'. Some might argue this change could be considered a positive one since these groups have been observed as sharing similar policy attitudes with the strong partisans of the party they lean towards (Magleby and Nelson 2012; Pew Research Center 2019b), with this shifting partisan identities closer in line with measured partisan attitudes.

Figure 5



Data provided by the ANES Cumulative Data File dataset, VCF0305; Created in RStudio

To gain a better understanding of the factors that might contribute to partisanship, I regress reported partisan strength, as explored above, with education level (Table 1) and political media consumption (Table 2), specifically whether the respondent watched television and has watched programming about the election or a campaign. Due to the most recent inclusion of the latter item being in 2012 and the former in 2020, I regress them separately in order to analyze each relationship with the most recent data, which is particularly important given the rapidly changing distribution of partisan strength in the last decade (Fig. 5). Education appears to be positively correlated with partisan strength, although a McFadden's R-squared of .089 suggests that education alone is not a strong predictor of partisan strength. It is also important to note that education does not necessarily correspond perfectly with 'political sophistication', however voters with a higher level of education are more likely to hold more ideologically consistent views (Pew Research Center 2016). This suggests some connection between higher education and reaching a higher degree of political sophistication.

Table 1

	Estimate	Std. Error	Statistic	P value	Conf. Low	Conf. High
Intercept	3.093	.319	9.697	0.000	2.508	3.764
Education	0.906	0.136	6.676	0.000	0.639	1.173

Source: ANES Cumulative Data File dataset, VCF0305 and VCF0110; 2020.

Meanwhile, there does not appear to be a meaningful relationship between consuming some amount of political programming from watching television and being a stronger partisan. This test may have failed for several reasons. First, this survey item does not differentiate between an individual who may have passively viewed a brief segment discussing the election and one who actively sought out several programs about a campaign. It could be the case that the second type of person would indeed be consistently more partisan than the first type, although

this measure does not speak to this possibility. Moreover, this may also reveal the prevalence of political media, as 72.9% of those surveyed reported watching some political programming on television. It is highly probable that less partisan individuals and even nonvoters have at some point during an election cycle viewed a program discussing the campaigns. Such a high proportion of respondents viewing this content, and a greater amount of such content in general, could potentially 'desensitize' voters to the effects of political programming.

Table 2

	Estimate	Std. Error	Statistic	P value	Conf. Low	Conf. High
Intercept	5.475	0.448	12.216	0.000	4.707	6.502
Television	0.118	0.513	0.229	0.819	-1.002	1.057

Source: ANES Cumulative Data File dataset, VCF0724 and VCF0110; 2012.

Ideological Polarization

Ideological polarization among the public has been historically contested in academic literature. First, many scholars have asserted that only a small fraction of the public think ideologically and posses a reasonable degree of ideological constraint across issues (Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964; Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2006; 2008). Instead, party identification and cues from elected officials have been shown to have a significant impact on guiding the issue positions taken by partisans (Zaller 1992; Levendusky 2009). Even when partisans choose which leader to follow, that decision appears to be less ideological and more centered on performance or party (Lenz 2012). Elite polarization has thus been argued as playing a significant role in creating the cleavages we observe in the public on various issues (Levendusky 2010; Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013). Survey data confirms this perspective to a degree. Compared to the change over time observed in party self-identification in the public as well as the ideological polarization of Congress, the shift in ideological self-identification of the public while important

is less dramatic. Moderates have maintained their position as the largest group among respondents who could place themselves ideologically from its first inclusion in the ANES survey to the most recent installment (see Figures 6 and 7). The proportion of self-identified moderates is just slightly lower today (22%) than the average across all 21 surveys in the near five decades of available data (25%).

Figure 6

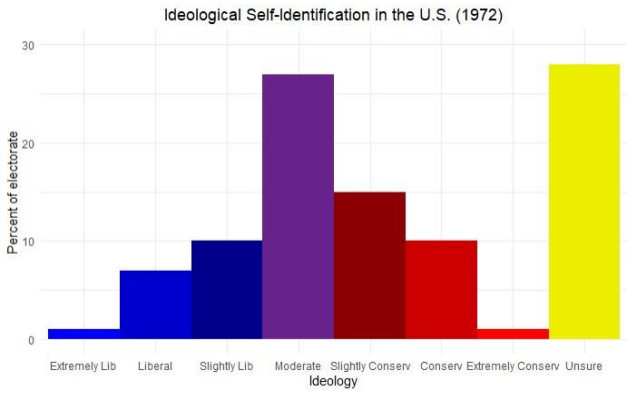
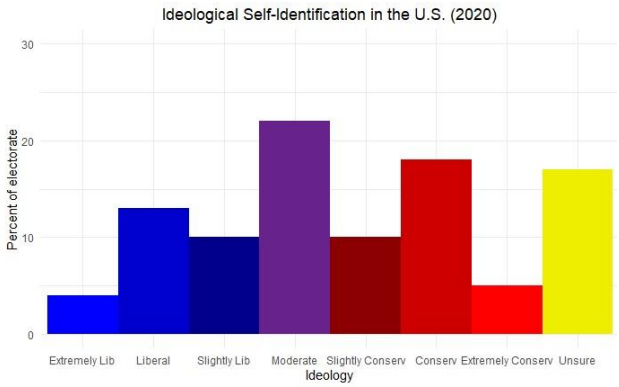


Figure 7

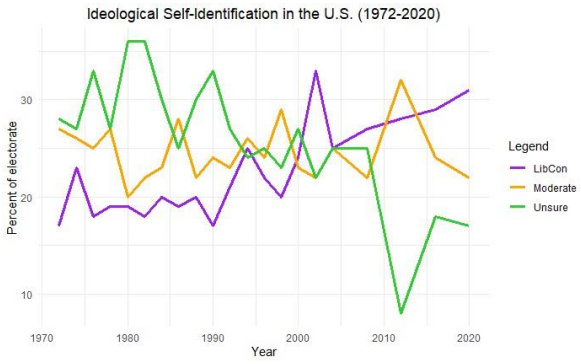


Data provided by the ANES Cumulative Data File dataset, VCF0803; Created in RStudio

Conversely, corroborating the argument advanced by some scholars that the American public is becoming ideologically polarized (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Webster and Abramowitz 2017), an increasingly large share of Americans today identifies as 'Liberal' or 'Conservative' (see Figure 8). The sum of the proportions of self-identified Liberals and Conservatives averaged across the time series data (24%) is lower than the proportion today (31%). This would suggest a currently higher than standard level of individuals placing themselves firmly as Liberals or Conservatives compared to the past five decades. Moreover, the proportion of "Don't Know/Haven't Thought" responses have fallen over the same period, down from it's average of 26% to today's proportion of 17%. More partisans being capable of placing themselves ideologically paired with a slightly lower share of self-identified moderates might suggest an augmented degree of ideological constraint among the mass public. Contrarily, it

could merely reflect a larger proportion of partisans better understanding which party houses each side of the ideological spectrum and thus shifting their self-identity according to their preferred party's disposition.

Figure 8



Data provided by the ANES Cumulative Data File dataset, VCF0803; Created in RStudio. "LibCon" represents the summed proportions of Liberal and Conservative respondents for each year (does not include slight or extreme); "Unsure" corresponds to the "Don't Know/Haven't Thought" category of responses.

It should also be considered whether a single ideological scale can properly characterize the beliefs of the public. At the elite level, while some have demonstrated that a unidimensional scale is sufficient to accurately place officials ideologically (Poole and Rosenthal 2007), others have contested that depending on the issue and especially between copartisans cleavages can arise that reveal the need for a multidimensional look at ideology in Congress (Aldrich, Montgomery, and Sparks 2014; Roberts, Smith, and Haptonstahl 2016). The opposite trend is true of the mass public, whereas scholars have traditionally argued that the attitudes of the public are multidimensional, largely due to a lower degree of political sophistication compared to elites (Treier and Hillygus 2009; Lupton, Myers, and Thornton 2015). Only very recently has some work began to suggest that the public has shifted enough for its ideological structure to be well-captured by a single dimension (Hare 2021). The drop in self-identified moderates and unsure respondents could support this thesis, indicating a lower proportion of

cross-pressured individuals who hold a mix of conservative and liberal beliefs that place them in a multidimensional issue space, since those responses are common among this type of partisan (Treier and Hillygus 2009).

Affective Polarization

While a major scholarly debate on affective polarization centers around whether it is driven by social identities (Mason 2016) or policy differences (Orr and Huber 2020), it is largely an academic consensus that partisan animus is rising among the American electorate. As noted by Druckman and Levendusky (2019), there are a few different popular ways to measure affective polarization, and oftentimes when surveys ask partisans to evaluate the parties, respondents will imagine party elites who represent the most politically active and ideologically extreme section of the opposition compared to average partisan voters. Even survey items which more directly probe for evaluations of the typical opposing member will trigger respondents to overestimate the degree of engagement and ideological extremity of that member, biasing their responses towards negative attitudes (Druckman et al. 2022). Drawing again on ANES time series survey data, we can confirm that out-party animosity is indeed rising as well as that the electorate today tends to rate the opposing party lower than members of their ideological opposition although both are rapidly declining. In both cases, the ratings in 2020 that Liberals and Conservatives have given the opposing party (both at 19) and their ideological opposition (27 for the Conservative rating of Liberals and 32 for the Liberal rating of Conservatives) are at all-time lows since each were added to the ANES survey in the 1970s. The lower rating of parties perhaps agrees with the notion that partisans perceive opposing elites, who they imagine when evaluating the parties, in an especially negative manner. Based on the very sharp drop in evaluations of members of the opposite ideology observed from both sides since 2008, it is

possible that the combination of individuals becoming better sorted (Fig. 3 and 4), more heavily partisan (Fig. 5), and somewhat more ideologically polarized (Fig 6-8), has all led to individuals associating opposing Liberals and Conservatives with the opposing party who they now more closely mirror than in the past. This would suggest that regardless of whether individuals may be becoming more ideologically constrained like elites, individuals are perceiving their ideological inverse as thinking this way.

Figure 9

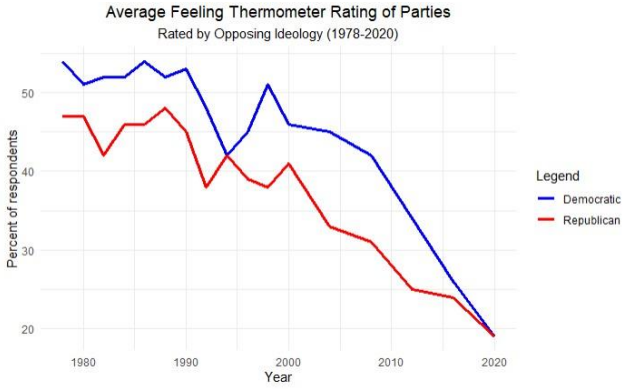
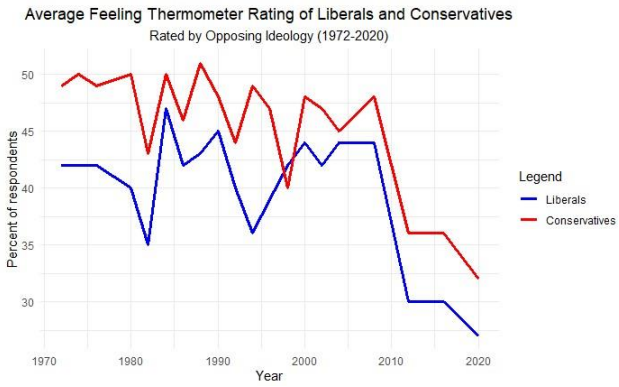


Figure 10



Data provided by the ANES Cumulative Data File dataset, VCF0218, VCF0224, VCF0291, VCF0290, VCF0222 ; Created in RStudio.

The difference in ratings between parties and Liberals and Conservatives could also be affected by a general negative trend in evaluations of both parties. Since its high at 60 during the 1980s, the average feeling thermometer rating of 'both parties' has fallen today to its lowest point measured at 45. Most of that decline has occurred since 2008 when the average rating stood at 54. In 2016, the ANES asked its respondents whether the Democratic and Republican parties adequately represent the American people, or if they do such a poor job that a third party is necessary. A majority (55%) agreed that the parties were doing so poorly that a third party is needed, with only 43% stating that they do an adequate job. While confounding these negative sentiments towards both parties with out-party animus should be avoided, the rising level of

dissatisfaction with both parties and its connection to the types of polarization discussed here could bring interesting results in a separate analysis.

Discussion

Partisan sorting driven by division among elites, ideological polarization, and out-party animus have to differing degrees but in connected ways contributed to the increasing divide observed between partisans in the American electorate. The share of individuals identifying themselves as strong partisans and strong Republicans and Democrats as well as ideological Liberals and Conservatives are at unprecedented levels. Meanwhile weak partisans, ideological moderates, and those unsure how to define themselves ideologically are well below the average proportion observed across the past five decades. Simultaneously, evaluations of the opposing party and members of the opposite ideological disposition are at all-time lows. In many ways, these trends feed back into themselves, as better sorted partisans translate to clearer divisions for other partisans to sort themselves by (Hare 2021) and enhanced affective polarization begets an emotionally-charged environment of incivility that often draws divisions around previously nonpolitical issues (Druckman et al. 2021). These phenomena also interact with each other, as some scholars have asserted that polarization at the elite level subsequently drives partisan divisions through sorting (Levendusky 2009, 2010; Lenz 2012) and can have important effects on how the public forms its political opinions (Levendusky 2010; Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013). Amidst very recent shifts in ideological self-identification along with the appearance of increased ideological constraint and consistency in the public (Figs. 6-8; Hare 2021), Liberals and Conservatives' evaluations of each other have dropped sharply in the past decade and approaches the level of negative sentiment expressed towards opposing parties and

elites (Fig. 9 and 10), perhaps suggesting that partisans perceive each other as similarly ideological to constrained elites.

Identifying these trends in political polarization and investigating what contributes to it and how its different variables interact with each other is paramount to the task of reducing the divide and mitigating its effects. Some scholars have emphasized the silver linings of polarization where they might exist, such as the policy choices presented to voters being more distinct and clear (Levendusky 2010) especially compared to the 1950s and prior when the APSA urged parties to better distinguish themselves for the benefit of voters. Shifts in partisan identification for leaning Independents may have been overdue based on their tendency to share attitudes with the partisans of their preferred party on many of the most salient issues (Magleby and Nelson 2012). Such a change stands to enhance the clarity in measurements of partisanship and resulting attitudes and behaviors. However, many observers would agree that particularly in the most recent decade we have progressed beyond a healthy level of distinction and now face serious threats where incivility has become more violent, partisan gridlock produces harmful outcomes, and the institutions of American democracy are being strained to a breaking point.

Reducing polarization to a healthier level will likely require a multi-faceted approach where various actors play an important role. While much of this paper has been dedicated to noting the great extent of polarization, overestimating its prevalence can play a crucial role in producing undue antagonism towards the out-party (Druckman et al. 2022). Academics should continue to work towards clarifying the causes and extent of polarization, rechecking measurements for bias and updating our analysis based on the quickly evolving trends. Political media and journalism share an important responsibility as well in their reporting of political division and incivility which may contribute to such overestimations and stereotyping for

viewers and subsequently nonviewers via discussion (Levendusky 2013; Levendusky and Malhotra 2016; Druckman, Levendusky, and McLain 2018). Moreover, as policymakers are increasingly active themselves in communicating directly to the public through social media, it is important for these elites to be cognizant of the cues they send given the potential for partisans' attitudes to be shaped by them. Finally, cross-cutting relationships play a central role in creating an understanding and tolerance of political opposition (Mutz 2002), and interpersonal interaction is essential to clarifying misconceptions and combatting harmful stereotypes (Druckman et al. 2022). For each individual, personally engaging with opposing partisans may ultimately be the most effective path to eliminating harmful misconceptions and moderating negative attitudes directed towards political opponents.

One area of research which might warrant further inquiry regards how electoral and party systems may influence elite polarization which in turn contributes to mass polarization. The case for whether the number of effective parties has a positive or negative relationship on party polarization is supported in some studies (Andrews and Money 2009; Matakos, Troumpounis, and Xefteris 2016), rejected in others (Dow 2011), and is sometimes found to be largely dependent upon other variables such as cabinet-coalition habits, whereas there has been a change in the coalition composition over four legislatures or a minority government or split control (in Presidential systems) over that time period (Curini and Hino 2012). The notion that electoral systems with less proportionality, and therefore higher thresholds for winning office, motivates parties to moderate their platforms and appeal to larger shares of voters similarly has mixed empirical support (Dow 2011; Curini and Hino 2012). And while idiosyncratic explanations may be given for why a particular country observes an increase in polarization, there has been a general increase in polarization across a large number of democracies in the past two to three

decades that might suggest that more common explanations could exist (Dalton 2021). The global recession and financial crisis in 2008, for example, may have contributed to rising polarization by changing vote shares (Dassonneville and Hooghe 2017) and subsequently altering party platforms (Dalton 2021). Thus, it is not only unclear whether the degree of polarization at the elite level in the U.S. is greater than we might expect based on these institutional variables (due to disagreement over how those factors affect polarization), but also what recent economic and cultural events might have shaped and diverged party offerings. Moreover, the relationship between elite and mass level polarization and how each may influence the other deserves greater attention as well, especially as partisans more closely mirror the opinions of elites today in an increasingly polarized environment (Lenz 2012). Perhaps an electorate of better sorted partisans acts as a centrifugal force, eliminating parties' incentive to appeal towards a declining population of undecided, truly independent voters and instead focus their efforts on solidifying and mobilizing their respective bases.

Finally, as affective polarization continues to emerge in the academic literature, additional empirical testing on the differences between out-party animus and in-party favorability and their independent effects on attitudes and behavior is important for a more robust understanding of this angle of polarization. Affective polarization is commonly referenced as an aversion towards the opposing party (Iyengar et al. 2019) in part due to outgroup animosity having a stronger impact on behavior than ingroup favoritism in existing studies (Iyengar and Westwood 2015). However, some recent work has demonstrated key differences in how these two components of affective polarization operate and predict different attitudes and behaviors. For example, Bankert (2021) demonstrates how high in-group favoritism correlates more closely with political participation in the 2016 election than high out-group animosity, and conversely

how attitudes of anti-bipartisanship are more prevalent in individuals expressing high out-party animus than those with high in-party favorability. If these two components manifest in political outcomes differently, or at least unevenly, it is still unclear whether they are developed jointly or independently, and raises questions as to whether a reduction in affective polarization might occur unevenly as well.

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