Polarization in the Mass Public

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Polarization in the Mass Public

- Last lecture we found that in the last 70 years in Congress,
  - The spread of the distribution has increased
  - The parties have increasingly sorted (there is no overlap between Democrats and Republicans)
  - The parties have moved further apart
  - A higher percentage of votes are explained by a single left-right dimension
Polarization in the Mass Public

“Purple America has all but disappeared. Counties are increasingly super red or super blue, with less and less in between.”—FiveThirtyEight
Polarization in the Mass Public

▶ “Purple America has all but disappeared. Counties are increasingly super red or super blue, with less and less in between.”—FiveThirtyEight

▶ “Political polarization in the American public: How increasing ideological uniformity and partisan antipathy affect politics, compromise and everyday life.”—Pew
Polarization in the Mass Public

“Purple America has all but disappeared. Counties are increasingly super red or super blue, with less and less in between.”—FiveThirtyEight

“Political polarization in the American public: How increasing ideological uniformity and partisan antipathy affect politics, compromise and everyday life.”—Pew

“You’ve got 80 percent to 90 percent of the country that look at each other like they are on separate planets.”—Matthew Dowd (strategist for George W. Bush)
Polarization in the Mass Public

- Are voters polarized?
Polarization in the Mass Public

- Are voters polarized?
- Have voters become more polarized?
Polarization in the Mass Public

- Are voters polarized?
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- Have voters polarized as much as Congress?
Polarization in the Mass Public

- Are voters polarized?
- Have voters become more polarized?
- Have voters polarized as much as Congress?
- Does voter polarization explain polarization in Congress?
Polarization in the Mass Public

- Measuring voter ideology:
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Measuring voter ideology:
- Liberal-conservative scale
- Issue scales (abortion, defense spending, etc.)
- Combined issue scales (similar to counting up the number of issues where each voter holds the conservative position)
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Liberal-conservative scale:
Polarization in the Mass Public

Issue scales (support for government-provided health insurance):
Polarization in the Mass Public

Issue scales (support for defense spending):
Polarization in the Mass Public

Issue scales (women’s role):

Years
Proportion
Extreme
Somewhat Extreme
Moderate
Polarization in the Mass Public

Issue scales (abortion):
Polarization in the Mass Public

Issue scales (support for prayer in public schools):
Polarization in the Mass Public

Combined issue scale:
Polarization in the Mass Public

Combined issue scale:
Polarization in the Mass Public

► Summary:
  • Most voters are moderate
Polarization in the Mass Public

Summary:

- Most voters are moderate
- Very weak evidence for increasing voter extremity
Polarization in the Mass Public

Liberal-conservative scale:

![Graph showing polarization over years](image-url)
Polarization in the Mass Public

Liberal-conservative scale:

Difference between Dem. and Rep. Identifiers
Polarization in the Mass Public

Issue scales (support for government-provided health insurance):
Polarization in the Mass Public

Issue scales (support for defense spending):
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Polarization in the Mass Public

Issue scales (abortion):
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Issue scales (support for prayer in public schools):
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Combined issue scale:
Polarization in the Mass Public

Combined issue scale:

![Graph showing the party difference in ideology from 1970 to 2020. The graph indicates an overall increase in polarization over time.](chart.png)
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Summary:
- Most voters are moderate
- Very weak evidence for increasing voter extremity
- Substantial evidence for sorting by party
Polarization in the Mass Public

Summary:

- Most voters are moderate
- Very weak evidence for increasing voter extremity
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- Members of Congress are more ideologically sorted by party than voters
Polarization in the Mass Public

How ideologically consistent are voters?

Percent of Responses Correctly Predicted

Year

Polarization in the Mass Public

Summary:

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- Members of Congress are more ideologically sorted by party than voters
- No evidence for increasing ideological consistency
Polarization in the Mass Public

Voters vs. Congress (data from 2012):
Polarization in the Mass Public

Voters vs. Congress (individual votes):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bridge Vote</th>
<th>Support Ryan budget (c)</th>
<th>Support US/Korea Free Trade Agreement (c)</th>
<th>Support ObamaCare (l)</th>
<th>Support ending Don’t Ask/Don’t Tell (l)</th>
<th>Support extending Bush middle class tax Cut (l)</th>
<th>Support extending Bush tax cuts for all incomes (c)</th>
<th>Support exemption that allows employers to not pay for birth control (c)</th>
<th>Support Keystone Pipeline (c)</th>
<th>Oppose Simpson–Bowles budget plan (n/a)</th>
<th>Support repealing ObamaCare (c)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>V</td>
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<td>S</td>
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Polarization in the Mass Public

Summary:

- Most voters are moderate
- Very weak evidence for increasing voter extremity
- Substantial evidence for voters sorting into parties
- Members of Congress are more ideologically sorted by party than voters
- No evidence for increasing ideological consistency
- Voters are less extreme than members of Congress
Polarization in the Mass Public

- Why do so many journalists and pundits think the public has polarized?
Polarization in the Mass Public

Why do so many journalists and pundits think the public has polarized?

- They can’t differentiate between voters and elites
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- They can’t differentiate between voters and elites
- Stereotyping
Polarization in the Mass Public

Washington Post:

Tom Harrison, 62, is a union official. Maryanne Harrison, 60, runs an after-school program. Heather Harrison, 29, is a teacher. Matthew Harrison, 28, is an electrician. . . . Their neighborhood is filled with restaurants that are cafes, and stores that are boutiques, and their neighbors include straight people, gay people, rich people, homeless people, married people, single people, and the House minority leader, Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) . . . .18
He lives in a house that has six guns in the closets and 21 crosses in the main hallway. His wife cuts his hair with electric clippers. His three daughters aren't embarrassed when he kisses them on their cheeks. He loves his family, hamburger and his dog. He believes in God, prays daily and goes to church weekly. He has a jumbo smoker in his back yard and a 40-foot tree he has climbed to hang Christmas lights. He has a pickup truck that he has filled with water for the Fourth of July parade, driving splashing kids around a community where Boy Scouts plant American flags in the yards. His truck is a Chevy. His beer is Bud Light. His savior is Jesus Christ. His neighbors include Rep. Tom DeLay (R-Tex.) the House majority leader . . .
Polarization in the Mass Public

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  - Mistaking consequences of elite polarization for polarization in the mass public
Polarization in the Mass Public

- Imagine a congressional district with a very moderate Democrat running against a very moderate Republican
- Given that they are similar ideologically, many left wing and right wing voters would consider voting for both candidates

- Arguably yes
- Arguably no, since the polarized voting behavior is caused by the polarized positions of the candidates
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- We would observe liberals overwhelmingly voting for the Democrat and conservatives overwhelmingly voting for the Republican
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- Extreme candidates cause partisan sorting in the mass public
Polarization in the Mass Public

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- Extreme candidates cause partisan sorting in the mass public
- Partisan sorting in the mass public cannot explain polarization in Congress
Polarization in the Mass Public

Party identification over time:

![Graph showing party identification over time from 1950 to 2020. The graph includes lines for Democratic Party ID, Republican Party ID, and Independent. The trend shows an increase in polarization over time.]
Polarization in the Mass Public

Why do so many journalists and pundits think the public has polarized?

- They can’t differentiate between voters and elites
- Stereotyping
- Mistaking consequences of elite polarization for polarization in the mass public
- Different definitions of polarization
Polarization in the Mass Public

FiveThirtyEight (polarized counties):

More and more counties are uncompetitive

Counties where presidential candidates won the two-party popular vote by more than 20 percentage points


Polarization in the Mass Public

FiveThirtyEight (polarized congressional districts):
Polarization in the Mass Public

How many congressional districts had close presidential races?

% of CDs with a Close Pres. Race

- **Within 5%**
- **Within 10%**
- **Within 20%**

Years


0.0 0.2 0.4 0.6 0.8 1.0

Within 5%
Within 10%
Within 20%
Polarization in the Mass Public

How many congressional districts had close presidential races?

% of CDs with a Close Pres. Race

Years

Within 5%
Within 10%
Within 20%
Within 5%
Within 10%
Within 20%
How many congressional districts close to the national presidential result?

% of CDs that were Close to the National Pres. Result

- Within 5%
- Within 10%
- Within 20%
Polarization in the Mass Public

How many congressional districts close to the national presidential result?

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Polarization in the Mass Public

How many congressional races were close?

% of Districts with a Close House Race

Years

1900 1920 1940 1960 1980 2000 2020

0.0 0.2 0.4 0.6 0.8 1.0

% of Districts with a Close House Race

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Polarization in the Mass Public

- Geographic polarization (or geographic sorting by party) does seem to be increasing
- This does not seem to be related to redistricting
Polarization in the Mass Public

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- This does not seem to be related to redistricting
- Can geographic polarization by voters explain polarization in Congress?
Polarization in the Mass Public

The average voter in each congressional district vs. members of Congress (2012 data):
Polarization in the Mass Public

- Geographic polarization (or geographic sorting by party) does seem to be increasing
- This does not seem to be related to redistricting
- Can geographic polarization by voters explain polarization in Congress?
  - No, members of congress are much more polarized than the average voter in their district
Polarization in the Mass Public

Pew (polarized voters?):

Democrats and Republicans More Ideologically Divided than in the Past

Distribution of Democrats and Republicans on a 10-item scale of political values

1994 | 2004 | 2014
---|---|---
**MEDIAN Democrat** | **MEDIAN Republican** | **MEDIAN Democrat** | **MEDIAN Republican** | **MEDIAN Democrat** | **MEDIAN Republican**
Consistently liberal | Consistently conservative | Consistently liberal | Consistently conservative | Consistently liberal | Consistently conservative
Polarization in the Mass Public

Pew (polarized voters?):

Beyond Dislike: Viewing the Other Party as a ‘Threat to the Nation’s Well-Being’

Democratic attitudes about the Republican Party

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Democrats viewing Republican Party as Threat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>38% Very unfavorable</td>
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Republican attitudes about the Democratic Party

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<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>43% Very unfavorable</td>
</tr>
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</table>

27% of Democrats see the Republican Party as a threat to the nation’s well-being.

36% of Republicans see the Democratic Party as a threat to the nation’s well-being.
Polarization in the Mass Public

Pew (polarized voters?):

A Rising Tide of Mutual Antipathy

Democratic attitudes about the Republican Party

100%

16%

57%

79%

38%

Very unfavorable

1994

2014

Republican attitudes about the Democratic Party

100%

17%

68%

82%

43%

Very unfavorable

1994

2014
Polarization in the Mass Public

Pew (polarized voters?):

**Liberals Most Likely to Favor No Restrictions on Abortion**

*Abortion should be ...*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Legal in All or Most Cases</th>
<th>Illegal in All or Most Cases</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Restricted in certain situations</td>
<td>No restrictions at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>51% TOTAL</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistently conservative</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mostly conservative</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mostly liberal</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistently liberal</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
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- Have voters become more polarized?

They have sorted by party, but most voters are moderate, they have not become more extreme, and have not become more ideologically consistent.

- Have voters polarized as much as Congress?
  No, Congress is much more polarized than the mass public.

- Does voter polarization explain polarization in Congress?
  No.
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Polarization in the Mass Public

Why has Congress polarized?

- Increased party pressure ("whipping")
- Voters have polarized
- Elite polarization
- Campaign spending
- Geography/Redistricting
- Primaries
- Turnout
Polarization in the Mass Public

- Today we found that voters are not the force pushing members of Congress away from the political center.
- Many members of Congress win their election handily while taking positions that are more extreme than their constituents.
Polarization in the Mass Public

- Today we found that voters are not the force pushing members of Congress away from the political center
- Many members of Congress win their election handily while taking positions that are more extreme than their constituents
- How important is ideological voting in Congressional elections?
Today we found that voters are not the force pushing members of Congress away from the political center.

Many members of Congress win their election handily while taking positions that are more extreme than their constituents.

How important is ideological voting in Congressional elections?

What are the other factors that determine the outcomes of Congressional elections?
Polarization in the Mass Public

- Next lecture: We will discuss congressional elections