Culture wars, voting, and polarization: divisions and unities in modern American politics

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The “polarization” story

• First, the good old days of partisanship . . .
• Then, the unraveling of the consensus . . .
“The Party’s Over”
THE SELLING OF THE PRESIDENT

THE CLASSIC ACCOUNT OF THE PACKAGING OF A CANDIDATE
• Now, the new polarization . . .
WASHINGTON, DC—Mere days from assuming the presidency and closing the door on eight years of Bill Clinton, president-elect George W. Bush assured the nation in a televised address Tuesday that "our long national nightmare of peace and prosperity is finally over."

"My fellow Americans," Bush said, "at long last, we have reached the end of the dark period in American history that will come to be known as the Clinton Era, eight long years characterized by unprecedented economic expansion, a sharp decrease in crime, and sustained peace overseas. The time has come to put all of that behind us."

President-elect Bush vows that "together, we can put the triumphs of the recent past behind us."
Then . . .
• And now . . .
• Then . . .
And now . . .
Polarization and politics

• From the left: focus on economic polarization ("two Americas")

• From the right: focus on cultural polarization ("red America vs. blue America")

• "Polarization" as a loser's cry
How can we study polarization?

- Voting patterns of rich and poor in different states
- Polarization in issue attitudes
- Social networks
That map
Things were different 30 years ago . . .

Republican vote by state in 1976

vote share for Gerald Ford

average income within state

$15,000  $20,000
The pundits speak
“Like upscale areas everywhere, from Silicon Valley to Chicago's North Shore to suburban Connecticut, Montgomery County [Maryland] supported the Democratic ticket in last year's presidential election, by a margin of 63 percent to 34 percent.”

– David Brooks, 2001
Income and voting in Maryland counties

vote share for George Bush

0% 25% 50% 75% 100%

average income within county

Montgomery
Income and voting in Texas counties

vote share for George Bush

average income within county

Collin

Zavala
Different polarizations in different places

Income and voting in Maryland counties

Income and voting in Texas counties

vote share for George Bush

average income within county

0% 25% 50% 75% 100%

$20,000 $40,000 $60,000 $80,000

Montgomery

Collin

Zavala
Bush vote in 2004 by income and relig attendance

- Attend church more than once/week
- Attend once or twice/month
- Never attend church

Vote share for Bush

- Poor
- Middle-income
- Rich
The pundits speak
“We have had upper-class conservatives since the dawn of the Republic; by themselves they can't win elections to any office other than treasurer of the country club.”

– Thomas Frank, 2005
Kansas

Vote for Bush

Income category

low  mid  high

2004  2000
The red-state, blue-state paradox

- Richer *states* support the Democrats (latte vs. Nascar)

- But richer *voters* support the Republicans (working class vs. fat cats)

- ???
The paradox is no paradox
What really happened was . . .
Polarized parties with voters in the middle
TIME
KING OF THE HILL
Exclusive: How Newt Gingrich plans to pull off his revolution
Partisan polarization in Congress
On individual issues, Americans have not become more polarized.
Correlations in issue attitudes

Correlation matrices showing the relationship between self-perceived attitudes and opinions of President Bush on economic and social policies.
But... correlation in issue attitudes can yield clustering and polarization.
Trends: issue attitudes and political party (correlations increase by about 5% per decade)

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Trends: issue attitudes and political party (correlations increase by about 5% per decade)
Republican and Democratic congressmembers in 1994
The moderate benefits of moderation
Learning about social and political polarization using “How many X’s do you know?” surveys

Scale-up method:
- On average, you knew 0.6 Nicoles
- 0.13% of Americans are named Nicole
- Assume 0.13% of your acquaintances are Nicoles
- Estimate: on average, you know 0.6/0.0013=450 people

Estimating group sizes:
- On average, you know 2.6 lawyers
- Assume average network size is 450 people
- Estimate: lawyers represent 2.6/450=0.58% of the network
- Estimate: 0.0058 * 290 million = 1.7 million lawyers in the U.S.

Overdispersion:
- Estimating social structure by comparing the distribution of “How many Jaycees do you know?” to the distribution of names
How many **Nicole**s do you know?  

![Histogram](image1)

Data

How many **Jaycees** do you know?  

![Histogram](image2)

Erdos–Renyi model

![Histogram](image3)

Null model

![Histogram](image4)

Overdispersed model

![Histogram](image5)
Statistical methods:

- Multilevel modeling
- The secret weapon
- Graphical display of data and inferences
Culture wars and polarization

• “Sometimes I think this country would be better off if we could just saw off the Eastern Seaboard and let it float out to sea.”
  – Barry Goldwater, 1961

• “People, I just want to say, you know, can we all get along?”
  – Rodney King, 1992
Thanks to . . .