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 . . .
Ordinary Americans

• “Pat doesn’t have a mink coat. But she does have a respectable Republican cloth coat.” —vice presidential candidate Richard Nixon, 1952

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."
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”)

• “The common lament over the recent rise in political partisanship is often nothing more than a veiled complaint instead about the recent rise of political conservatism.”

—former House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, 2006
How can we study polarization?

- Economic differences and voting patterns of rich and poor in different places
- Polarization in issue attitudes
- Polarization in social networks
Some stylized facts: voting

• National elections (usually) depend on the economy
• Uniform partisan swing—now more than ever
• National elections are closer
• Local elections are less close
Some stylized facts: vote by groups

- Persistent class polarization in U.S. political parties and voting—more than in Europe
- Rich and poor vote more differently in poor states: the Northeast is like Europe, the South is like Mexico
- Religious/social issues matter more for the rich
- New pattern of Dem. strength among the young
- All of this occurs in the context of increasing inequality (McCarty/Bartels/Krugman story)
Income and voting

McCain vote by income in red, purple, and blue states

- Republican states
- Battleground states
- Democratic states

Probability of voting for McCain

(poor) - (rich)

Voter's income
Some stylized facts: ideology

- Political elites have become more polarized
- Voters remain (mostly) non-ideological . . . but have strong feelings about the parties
Some stylized facts: networks

• The average American “knows” 750 people and “trusts” 100 people
• Dems know mostly Dems, Reps know mostly Reps, regardless of whether you live in a “red” or “blue” state
• People overestimate how much their friends agree with them
Increasing inequality in America
Inequality within U.S. states
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Trends in income of 10th percentile in each state, 1981–2004

Trends in income of 90th percentile in each state, 1981–2004
Rich and poor states in the 20th century

Average income in each state, divided by the U.S. average income

Connecticut
Ohio
Mississippi
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
How America voted in 2008
2008 election: McCain share of the two-party vote in each income category within each state among all voters (black) and non-Hispanic whites (green)
Rich and poor in Red and Blue America

Average ideologies of different groups of voters

Republican States

Battleground States

Democratic States

Average score on economic issues

Average score on social issues

liberal

moderate

conservative
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
Voting trends by occupation
Polarized parties with voters in the middle
The image contains two political logos: an elephant representing the Republican Party and a donkey representing the Democratic Party. The elephant is wearing a red jacket with the word "REPUBLICANS" and looking determined, while the donkey is colored in the traditional blue, red, and white of the Democratic Party.
TIME
KING OF THE HILL
Exclusive: How Newt Gingrich plans to pull off his revolution
Partisan polarization in Congress
Republican and Democratic congressmembers in 1994
The moderate benefits of moderation

Estimated benefit from being a moderate

Decade

1950s 1960s 1970s 1980s 1990s 2000s

0% 2% 4%
On individual issues, Americans have not become more polarized
Correlations in issue attitudes
But . . . correlation in issue attitudes can yield clustering and polarization.
Partisanship of abortion views

Polarization on abortion by party

- Democrats
- Independents
- Republicans

1980 1990 2000
Trends: issue attitudes and political party (correlations increase by about 5% per decade)
Trends: issue attitudes and political party (correlations increase by about 5% per decade)
Perceptions and reality

- Political pundits misunderstand income and voting
- Ordinary Americans are biased in views of the economy
- Misperceptions about demographics, foreign policy . . .
- Increasing partisanship on foreign policy
Actual and estimated percent of immigrants in several countries

- Switzerland
- United States
- Germany
- Ireland
- France
- United Kingdom
- Spain
- Italy
- Poland

Percent foreign born: average guess in gray, actual in black
Religious and nonreligious countries
Religious and nonreligious states

Average religious attendance within state vs. Average income within state for different states.
Religion and income within states

[Graph showing correlation between within-state religion and religious attendance with average income within state for different states.]
Alternative scenarios of income and voting
Statistical methods:

- Multilevel modeling
- The secret weapon
- Graphical display of data \textit{and inferences}
Thanks to . . .
Putting it all together

- Politics is polarized between rich and poor more in the U.S. (especially the South) than in Europe
- Voters are aligned more by partisanship than by issue constraints
- Your friends agree with you less than you might think
- States’ political leanings are now mostly decided by the preferences of the upper middle class