

Chapter Three

Are American Voters Polarized?

The divide in American politics is about more than the ideological distance between the two parties. Right now, red staters and blue staters live in two different political universes.

—E. J. Dionne, *Washington Post*, March 14, 2006

WHILE AMERICAN VOTERS EXPRESS CONSIDERABLE DISDAIN FOR the two-party political system, they are still fairly loyal members to their respective parties, as we show in Chapter 2. And while popular election commentary pays relatively little attention to the enduring importance of party identification, journalists and pundits are nonetheless (and somewhat paradoxically) fascinated by the notion that the American electorate has become polarized. Polarization is a hot topic in the media because, from their perspective, it often entails political conflict of the most visceral kind. The Red state-Blue state metaphor that has become so popular among political commentators involves more than partisan disagreement; in its most extreme incarnation, it represents a clash of values and worldviews pitting traditional religious and moral beliefs against modernism and moral relativism. Given the

frequency with which polarization is depicted as an epic battle between good and evil, it is not terribly surprising that it has captured the imagination of journalists, consultants, and scholars alike.

In this chapter we take a closer look at the question of mass polarization. On the one hand, there is much credible evidence that Republicans and Democrats have become more distinctive in their political views over the past three decades. On the other, we show that the opinion differences between rank-and-file party members are still fairly slight; partisans continue to be more moderate than party elites and also tend to agree with one another more often than they disagree. Polarization exists, but its magnitude is greatly exaggerated and represents a description of American voters that deserves significant clarification.

Responsible Parties: A Double-Edged Sword

In 1950, the American Political Science Association produced an influential report that called for more responsible political parties.¹ According to this report, the two major parties lacked discipline and programmatic coherence, and in the absence of responsible parties, our democracy was presumably at risk.² In the wake of this report there was considerable hand-wringing over the lack of a vital party system. Strong, ideologically coherent parties were viewed as an essential component of a good democracy, and their absence led many political observers to lament the programmatic incoherence of the Democrats and Republicans and the overall impotence of the political system.

Parties, however, began to demonstrate greater institutional strength beginning in the late 1970s, and elites in both parties became more ideologically divided.³ Nowhere was this more pronounced than in the chambers of the Congress where straight-line party voting increased at exceptional rates.⁴ Even at the level of the mass electorate, ordinary citizens (long noted for their general lack of political sophistication) became more partisan in their vote choices⁵ and showed growing levels of ideological consistency.⁶

The much-anticipated emergence of strong parties, however, was not uniformly hailed. In fact, following the ascendance of the Republican majority in the Congress after the 1994 elections, pundits and scholars voiced increasing concern over the lack of compromise and harsh partisan rhetoric that accompanied reinvigorated party organizations. After the bitter resolution of the 2000 presidential election, political commentators frequently used the phrase “polarization” to describe the new state of American politics.

By this account, the American public had become increasingly divided into warring camps that could be identified as much by geography as by politics.⁷ The popular “Red state–Blue state” metaphor suggested that liberals and conservatives not only disagreed on political matters but that they also had organized themselves on competing terrains.⁸ The unspoken (but often implied) subtext to this story was that the political divide between Republicans and Democrats was so palpable and personal that partisans chose to physically segregate themselves from all but their ideological brethren.

Polarization: Definitions and Debates

Popular emphasis on polarization is a relatively new phenomenon, emerging from the closely contested 2000 and 2004 presidential elections. Media descriptions of it evoke notions of intransigent rival groups who live in different states and hold vastly different views on a wide range of political matters. Furthermore, the pundits and academics who apply the notion of a “polarized public” to the mass electorate seem to imply a citizenry who increasingly hold extreme views. Especially during election years, Americans are routinely described as polarized, suggesting that not only is the public much less moderate than in years past but that centrist politicians will not be able to satisfy the ever more ideologically distinct opinions of Republican and Democratic identifiers.

Some political scientists have been quick to point out that the public, *per se*, is not polarized. On most issues of the day, they have found public opinion to be quite centrist and moderate.⁹ By their reckoning, party leaders, officeholders, and activists are the polarization culprits. The Republican and Democratic parties take increasingly noncentrist positions on many important issues, creating ideologically extreme choices for a generally moderate voter base. Moreover, when parties take unyielding, lopsided positions on salient political issues of the day (e.g., abortion, immigration, foreign policy, taxes, gay marriage, etc.), attentive partisans adjust their political orientations to mirror their increasingly divergent elite cue-givers.¹⁰

While most political scientists are well aware that the public at large is not polarized, many still argue that *party identifiers* (especially *strong identifiers*) have become more polarized across a variety of issue domains. Dividing the electorate into competing camps of partisans, studies suggest that the attitudes of the Republican and Democratic rank and file have become both more internally consistent with party platforms and progressively divergent from one another over time.¹¹

Longitudinal analyses of party identifiers and their views provide sound evidence that, on average, Republicans and Democrats are farther apart on many issues than they were two or three decades ago. Some of this change can be attributed to the realignment in the South; as conservative white southerners, once mainstays of the Democratic Party, systematically moved into the Republican Party, the ideological coherence of the Republican and Democratic parties improved.¹² But the effect appears to be more than a by-product of party realignment. The opinions of party adherents also changed in response to polarizing elites.¹³

This chapter blends these emphases into a more complete portrait of policy divides among Americans. Our finding is straightforward: mass partisan polarization on most political issues remains modest. Taking both the averages and the distributions of partisan views into account, we find considerable overlap in opinion between Republicans and Democrats on a vast array of issues. Where Republicans and Democrats differ most is not on questions of abortion, social welfare spending, defense spending, or taxes. They are most polarized with regard to their feelings about the political parties and their candidates. From 1988 to 2004, partisans increasingly held strong aversions to their competitors in spite of overlapping opinions on most political issues. To the extent that policy views remain largely centrist while feelings about parties and candidates continue to be ever more distinctive between partisan camps, polarization in the American setting is largely an affective phenomenon. Republicans and Democrats perceive one another in an increasingly adversarial light, but amid all the overheated rhetoric, partisans generally fail to notice that their opinions on most political issues are more similar to one another than they are different. The hyperbolic debate associated with contemporary U.S. politics often conflates good and evil with Red states and Blue states, with Republicans and Democrats, and particularly with Republican and Democratic leaders. Moderates within both parties are decried on talk radio and cable television as traitors to the cause. Yet, ironically, moderate legislators and executives are arguably more in tune with mass opinion than are the evangelists on the Right and the Left.

Measuring Polarization

In its most common use, the term *polarization* is invoked when parties or their members take opposing sides on an issue or an election.

When the majority of voters in southern states choose Bush and the majority of voters in northeastern states choose Kerry, the media and political commentators see polarization. When the nation gives the popular vote to one candidate and the electoral college goes to another, this too is reported as evidence of mass polarization. Polarization has become the catchphrase for all sorts of partisan disagreement and for heightened electoral competitiveness, but these characterizations are simply too broad.

On the one hand, mass polarization points to the divergence of party identifiers on important political issues. When Democrats and Republicans become ever more dissimilar and their respective views trend toward the extremes, this pattern reflects parties that are polarizing. Popular agreement may exist because party members are middle-of-the-roaders, with most clustering at some midpoint between an extreme liberal and extreme conservative viewpoint. But extreme preferences, in and of themselves, are not the equivalent of polarization. Polarization is rooted in the notion of partisan disagreement, not necessarily extremism. For example, Americans are not polarized on the question of whether abortions should be legal in the case of rape (87 percent support abortion in this circumstance).¹⁴ Democrats are slightly more supportive (91 percent versus 83 percent of Republicans), but the vast majority of both party's members support legal abortions under some set of circumstances. The percentage of Democrats and Republicans who oppose abortion under all circumstances is relatively small—9 percent and 17 percent, respectively. And while the minority of Americans who oppose abortion in all circumstances may feel strongly about their views and may be greatly irritated that so many of their fellow citizens disagree, their minority viewpoint (or opinion intensity) does not define polarization. Polarization describes a distribution of partisan opinion, and on these issues—and many others—Americans are not polarized.

The proponents of polarization, especially those in the popular culture, ignore these distinctions. Polarization may describe the views of political activists, but the mass public is almost never polarized. There are differences, but they are not huge; and on most matters, public opinion does rest in the middle of the policy spectrum. In terms of self-professed ideology, for example, moderates make up almost one half of the population; conservatives constitute approximately 30 percent and self-identified liberals about 15 percent. The same basic pattern of centrist opinion can be seen on a wide array of public issues. Whether abortion

rights, domestic spending, prayer in school, or civil rights, a plurality of Democrats and Republicans will pick middle-of-the-road positions to the extent they are offered as an option.

Nor are election results automatic indicators of polarization. If one candidate is slightly preferred to another and wins by a slim margin, this points to *competition* but not necessarily to polarization. Candidates may represent extreme choices, but close electoral outcomes do not tell us whether the nation is polarized. It is not entirely clear what a polarized electoral outcome would look like inasmuch as in most national elections voters choose between two major party candidates and often pick the one they perceive to be the most moderate.¹⁵ In fact, the best evidence indicates that when voters are given a “choice not an echo,” they opt for the echo.¹⁶ If voters tend toward moderation and if candidates actively temper their campaign messages in an effort to “play to the middle,” then the notion of a polarized electorate is counterintuitive indeed. In multi-party systems one might argue that a polarized electorate is one where a majority of votes are cast for the most ideologically strident parties. In the context of American politics, however, there are few opportunities to really assess the ideological extremism of the voting public.

Patterns in Issue Polarization

Most political science accounts of public opinion conclude that the average issue positions of Democrats and Republicans have diverged in recent decades, particularly on those issues most associated with the parties and their governing agendas.¹⁷ According to Layman and Carsey (2002a), the increasing prominence of cultural issues in the political realm has resulted in growing party polarization on a number of issues. Their theory of “conflict extension” argues that even as the parties’ coalitions grow increasingly divided on the relatively new cultural issues such as abortion and gay rights, party polarization on older policy agendas such as social welfare and race may also increase. From this perspective increasing ideological coherence among political elites (such as the president and members of Congress) is communicated to the mass public, and attentive partisans are those most likely to adjust their views to conform to new party orthodoxy. Less sophisticated partisans and political independents exhibit lower levels of political knowledge and less ideological consistency in their issue positions.¹⁸

Layman and Carsey's studies, and others like it, focus on the individual-level processes that lead to partisan change. They offer important contributions to our understanding of political communication and how it affects the views of mass partisans, but in general, political science has had little say about the real magnitude of these changes. Even if party members are moving apart on certain issues, does this really mean that parties are polarized and that citizens have much less centrist views than before?

While most political scientists have not grappled with this question directly, Abramowitz and Saunders (2005) are an important exception in making an explicit case for why polarization is politically consequential. Looking largely at data from the 2004 presidential election, they argued that "active partisans" make up approximately 28 percent of voters and that active partisans are indeed polarizing. It is clearly beyond the scope of our expertise to say whether 28 percent of voters is a lot (or a little), but it does seem that if 28 percent are polarizing a great deal, then another 72 percent are polarizing a little bit or not at all. In fact, the general consensus among most political scientists is that knowledgeable and active partisans are polarizing to a much greater degree than the remainder of voters. Our analyses corroborate this insight and go further to suggest that overall levels of polarization, especially as characterized by the popular media, are greatly exaggerated.

The patterns in Figure 3.1 clearly show that shifts in mean partisan opinion over time have been quite small and that popular claims regarding mass polarization have been overstated. The charts show trend data for six survey questions that pertain to public opinion on race, abortion, the proper scope of government, defense spending, and the role of women in U.S. society. The trend lines illustrate the average opinion on these six issues for Democrats and Republicans spanning the time period from 1980 to 2004.¹⁹ The data come from the ANES conducted during presidential election years. All of the questions that we use to construct these time series are identical; thus, changes in opinion cannot be attributed to changes in the questions. Finally, all of the questions are scored from most liberal to most conservative so that higher scores reflect more conservative views.

A number of features are immediately clear. First, the average Republican or Democrat holds fairly centrist views. While Republicans are consistently more conservative than Democrats, both sets of partisans hold views close to the middle. For example, on the question regarding

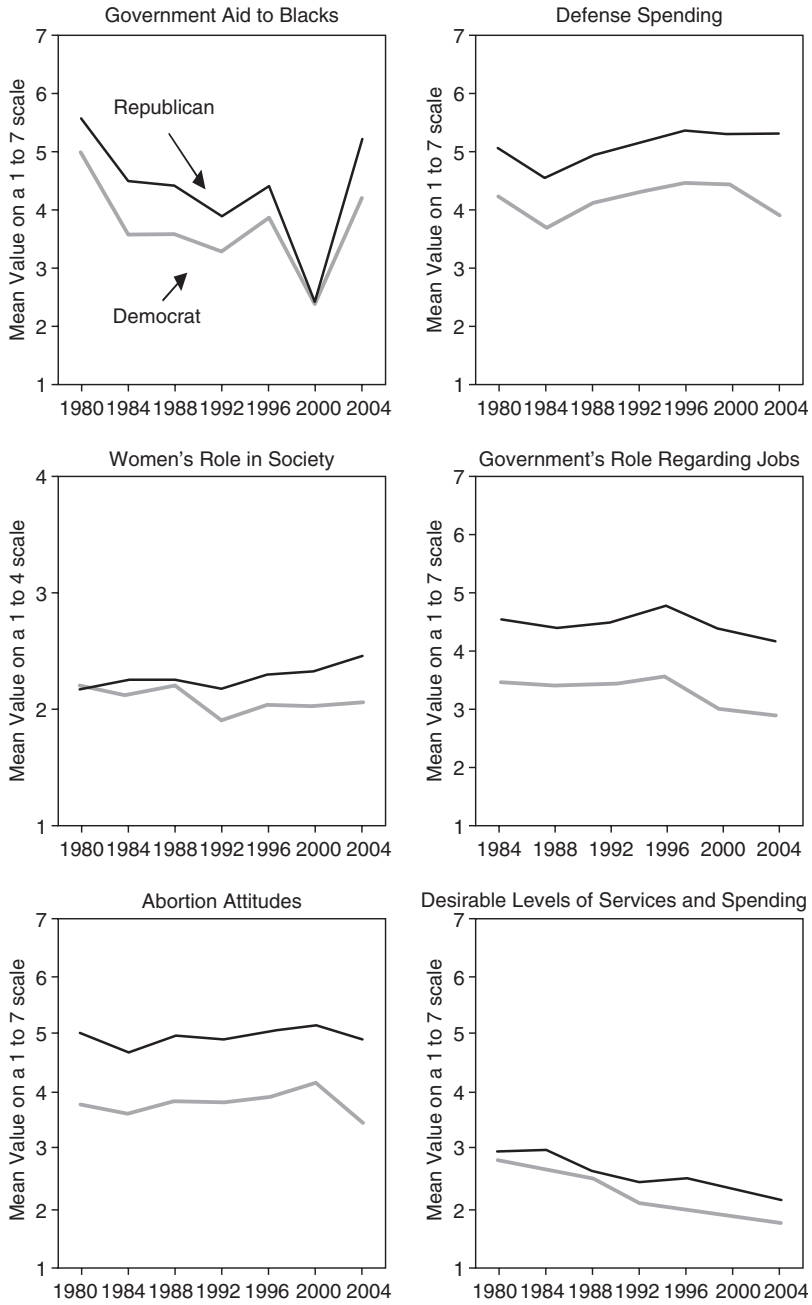


FIGURE 3.1. Mean Partisan Opinion on Various Political Issues.

Note: Lines represent mean values for Democratic and Republican respondents. Each graph is scaled to reflect the range of possible answers. Partisan respondents include self-identified strong party identifiers, weak party identifiers, and those who lean toward one party or the other. Source: ANES from presidential election years 1980–2004.

whether the government should ensure that all Americans have jobs, Democratic responses fall close to the midpoint (“4”) of the 7-point scale for the entire time series up to and including the year 2000. Predictably, Republicans are consistently more conservative and score in and around “5” for the entire series. To the extent that partisans have become appreciably more polarized on this issue, it appears to have been a rather recent phenomenon with Democrats moving to the left in 2004.

Over the course of this time series, Republicans and Democrats tended to differ most on questions that pertain to the size and role of the federal government; yet, even in the case with the largest partisan difference—desired levels of services and spending—the mean scores for both groups hover around the center of the scale. There is little evidence that partisans “polarized” on questions of the social welfare state; Democrats and Republicans became ever so slightly more liberal in 2004, but the trend for both parties was nearly identical. The abortion issue illustrates the largest change between Republicans and Democrats. Even so, there remain substantial numbers of moderates in both camps. The notion of a polarized electorate, as described in popular commentary, evokes visions of extremely conservative Republicans and similarly liberal Democrats, but the respective views of party identifiers do not appear to cluster at the extremes of these scales. Even when Republicans and Democrats disagree, the difference between them is certainly not the gulf that popular rhetoric implies.

These trend lines emphasize how modest the changes in partisan attitudes really have been over this twenty-four-year time period. In spite of the heated rhetoric about partisans and their unyielding extremism, Republican and Democratic party identifiers have not become polarized camps when it comes to their general policy sentiments. This is not to say that political scientists who promote the polarization thesis are wrong; we readily concede that partisan changes across time are statistically significant and that sophisticated partisans drove this phenomenon. Our point is that these changes are not necessarily *politically* significant, especially when taking into account that neither set of partisans strayed too far from the center. If legislators mirrored the general views of the American public, political debates should be between those in the center and those sitting center left or center right. To the extent that political struggles are played out between the far left and the far right, this is an elite phenomenon somewhat unrelated to the typical views of American voters.

Polarization and Political Symbols

While partisans are not sharply divided over matters of policy, they are divided on their feelings about the parties and their candidates. As illustrated in Figure 3.2, party labels and party candidates evoke much larger partisan differences than do policy issues. The charts in Figure 3.2 were generated using party and candidate thermometer ratings over the same 1980 to 2004 time period.²⁰ Unlike policy questions that require considerable political sophistication to answer, thermometer scores ask for people's feelings, and they are typically interpreted as a measure of affect. The patterns demonstrate predictable results. Republicans like the Republican Party and the Republican presidential candidate more than Democrats; Democrats similarly favor their own. The Democratic Party thermometer ratings are fairly consistent over this time period with the Republicans hovering at the 40-degree mark and the Democrats staying around 70 degrees. By contrast, the Republican Party thermometer ratings showed a rather clear pattern of increased polarization between 2000 and 2004, with Republican ratings creeping up while Democratic ratings dropped. The patterns for candidate ratings are quite comparable to the party ratings. Of particular note, George W. Bush appears to have generated considerable movement in the mean thermometer scores, with a Republican increase of almost 10 degrees and an equivalent decline among Democrats. Across all of the thermometer ratings, feelings about Bush have generated the greatest amount of party polarization.

The relative distance between Republicans and Democrats in their evaluations of parties and candidates is considerably greater than their respective policy views. At one level, this should be expected because the policy questions used in these surveys do not explicitly mention party positions. Knowledgeable voters are more aware of party orthodoxy and, as a result, are most likely to reflect the values of party elites. The relative policy distance between well-informed Republicans and Democrats is always greater than the distance between average citizens who pay much less attention to politics. The thermometer ratings clearly primed partisanship as a basis for evaluation, enabling less-aware partisans to pick sides; but even here, strong partisans were more likely to hold extreme views than weak partisans.

Comparing the partisan gap in policy views to the relative difference in affect toward political parties and their candidates illustrates an important point about polarization. To the extent that the American

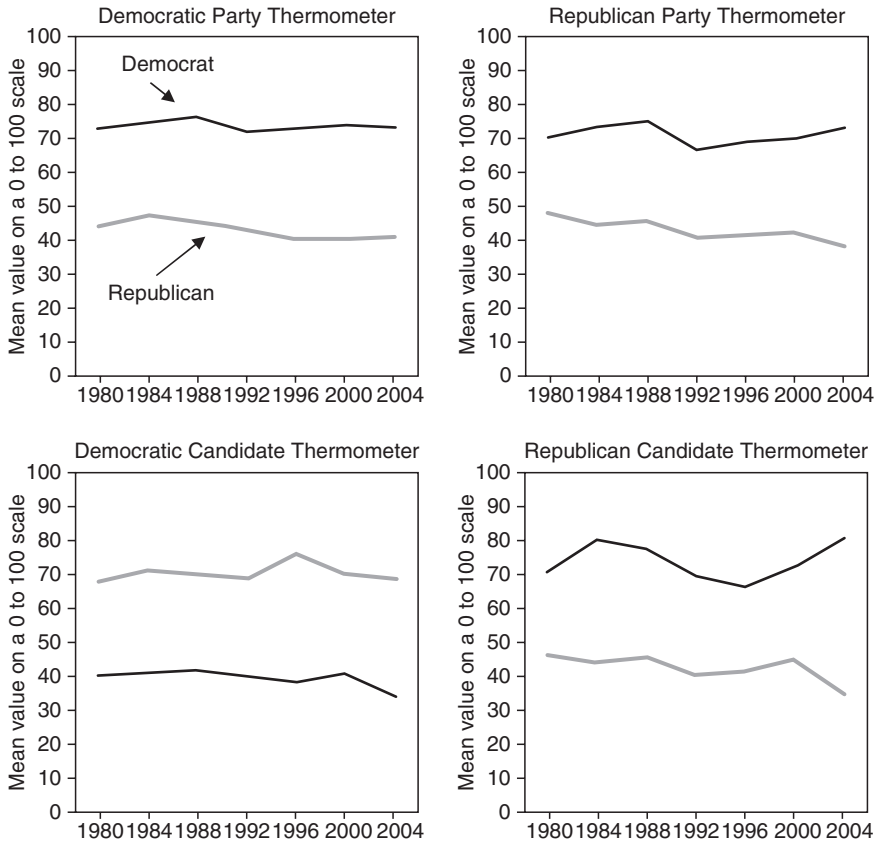


FIGURE 3.2. Mean Party and Presidential Candidate Thermometer Ratings over Time.

Note: Lines represent mean values for Democratic and Republican respondents. Each graph is scaled to reflect the range of possible answers. Partisan respondents include self-identified strong party identifiers, weak party identifiers and those who lean toward one party or the other. Source: ANES from selected years.

public is polarized, they are more influenced by the symbols than they are by the substance of political life. Polarization is not really a function of policy disagreement but rather a demonstration of increasing partisan intensity, consistent with the trends in voting behavior we discuss in Chapter 2. Beyond this, it seems quite clear that polarization—the concurrent movement of Republicans and Democrats toward more extreme views—is a very recent phenomenon. It is really between 2000 and 2004 that partisans appear to have polarized, and while this may foreshadow

future polarization, the movement is far too short-lived to be considered a trend.

A Different Perspective on Polarization

While it is common practice in political science to compare means as a measure of group differences, relying on averages alone may not paint a complete picture. If public attitudes are evenly arrayed across the range of opinion, the mean will be the midpoint of the distribution. If public opinion is clustered around the midpoint, with relatively few extreme views, the mean will still be in the middle. In these two examples, the means will be similar, but their standard deviations will be quite different. The standard deviation is the statistic that tells us how tightly clustered opinions are around the average. It provides important information about how public opinion is distributed and the extent to which party identifiers largely agree or disagree with one another. The following section looks at the question of polarization from a somewhat different vantage point using the distribution of partisan opinion to explore the extent to which Democrats and Republicans overlap in their political views from 1980 to 2004. By incorporating the variance associated with partisan policy views into the prior analysis, Figure 3.3 shows a good deal of similarity in the political viewpoints of Republicans and Democrats.

The bar diagrams in Figure 3.3 compare the overlap in Republican and Democratic policy views. Each bar takes the average opinion (for Republicans or Democrats on a given issue) and adds one standard deviation on either side of the mean to illustrate the range of views found within a large majority of partisans.²¹ By placing Republicans and Democrats side by side, it is easy to see how much the policy views of most partisans overlap. On average, Democrats are a little more liberal and Republicans a bit more conservative, but on questions of abortion and defense spending far more partisans overlap than disagree. Even on the social welfare issues where mean differences were the greatest, considerable partisan overlap weakens popular claims of a polarized public. While partisan elites may struggle to find common ground in their legislative lives, the American public suffers no similar fate. This analysis clearly shows that public views are neither extreme nor diametrically opposed. Simply, Americans are generally moderate (even when grouped by party) and not particularly divided on most political issues.

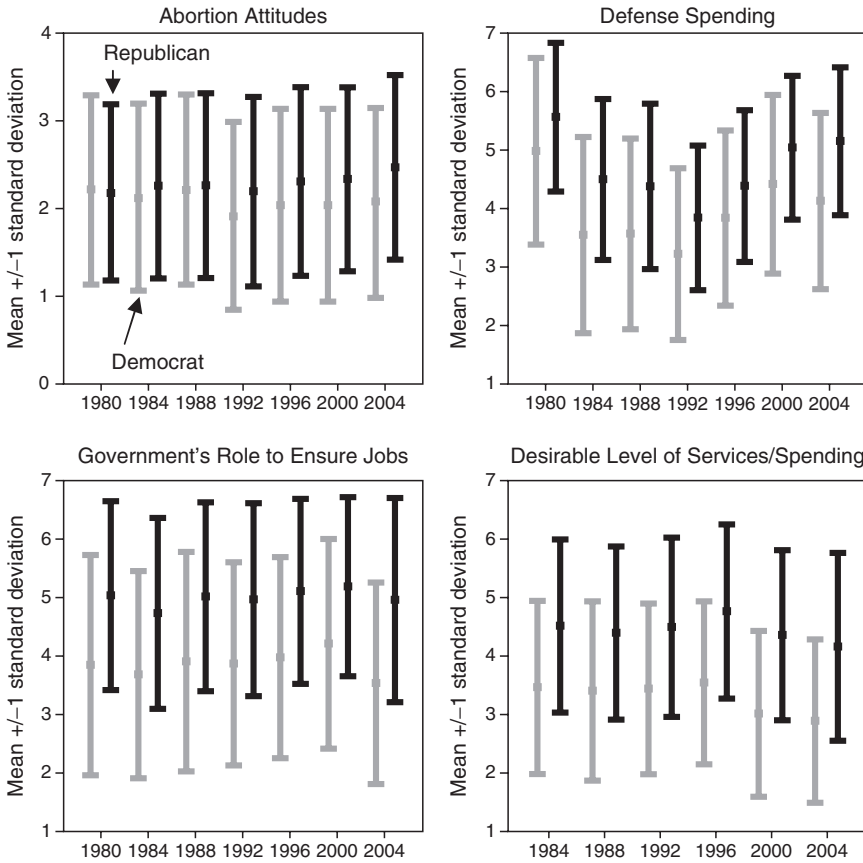


FIGURE 3.3. Public Opinion Overlap between Democrats and Republicans over Time.

Note: Bars indicate mean values with one standard deviation on each side of the mean.

Source: ANES from selected years.

While Americans may find ample common ground in the realm of political attitudes, they are considerably more at odds over their feelings about the parties and their candidates. Using the same basic method employed in Figure 3.3, the bar charts in Figure 3.4 assess the overlap in positive or negative feelings that Republicans and Democrats hold toward the parties and their respective presidential candidates. Taking the distribution of candidate and party thermometer ratings into account, it is clear that Democrats and Republicans have divergent views. In contrast to the notable common ground in the policy views of Republicans and Democrats, there is relatively little overlap over the course of the entire

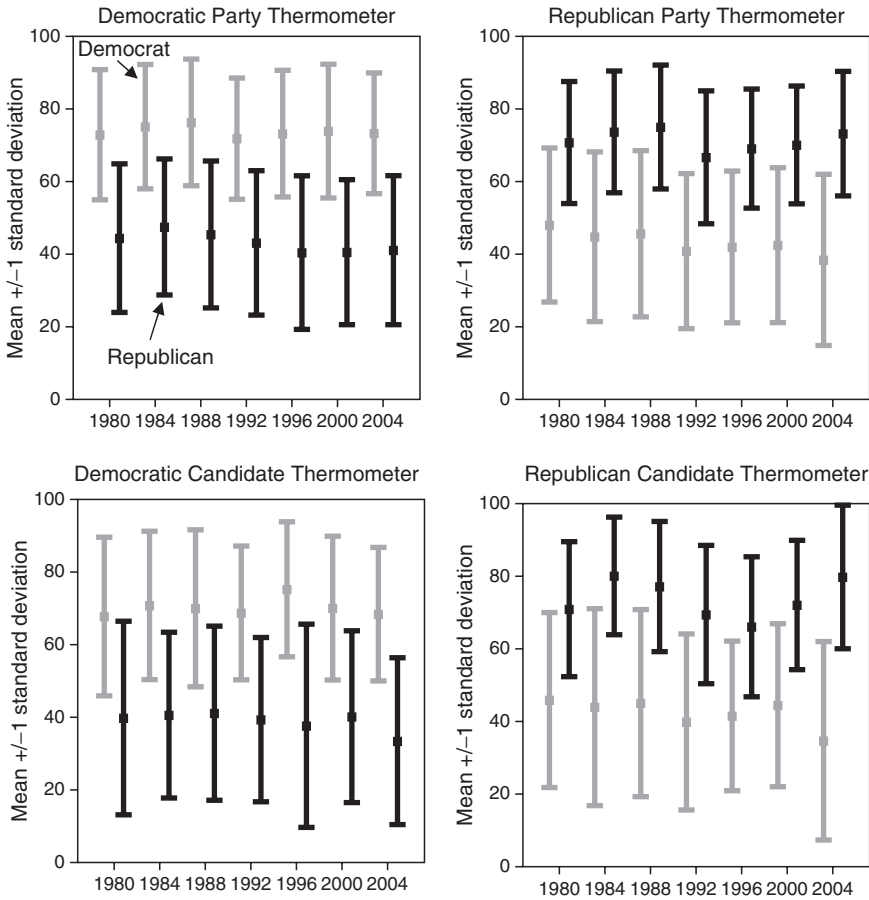


FIGURE 3.4. Partisan Overlap in Party and Candidate Evaluations over Time.
 Note: Bars indicate mean values with one standard deviation on each side of the mean.
 Source: ANES from selected years.

time series when it comes to party and candidate thermometer ratings; this is especially true with respect to the Democratic Party thermometer. From the Reagan era to the Clinton era, Republicans found little to like about the Democratic Party. Democrats and Republicans showed a bit more commonality in their feelings about the Republican Party, although by the end of the time series Democrats became more negative toward the Republicans, and the overlap diminished.

The trends in the candidate thermometer scores provide the strongest evidence in support of polarization; there was virtually no overlap

between Democratic and Republican opinions regarding George W. Bush in 2004 and only slightly more regarding John Kerry. This suggests that among a large majority of Democratic and Republican identifiers, almost none shared similar views about the two major party candidates. For most of the time series the overlap between Republicans and Democrats is small. During the 1980s, Republicans were closer to Democrats on their opinions of Democratic candidates, and during the 1990s Democrats were more aligned with Republicans on their evaluations of Republican candidates. There was little evidence of overlapping opinion in 2004, and, as mentioned earlier, this appears to have been an exceptional year in terms of party-based voter polarization. History may render this election epiphenomenal or, alternatively, it may represent the beginning of brave new world in American politics. In either case, recent evidence of polarization is really limited to the affective orientations of American voters. The antipathy that partisans feel toward one another powerfully overshadows the underlying mass consensus on most issues, even those thought to be most divisive.

Sources of Polarization

Popular wisdom and scholarly analysis agree that voters are polarizing in response to elite cues. By this account, as party elites stake out ever more distinctive and intractable policy positions, politically aware voters increasingly come to adopt more extreme issue attitudes, hold more aversive feelings toward their partisan competitors, and become progressively more partisan in their voting behavior. While the overall magnitude of issue polarization is dampened by the fact that less aware partisans remain largely unmoved by elite policy cues, party members—even the less politically sophisticated ones—still demonstrate considerable polarization in their feelings toward the parties themselves and their respective candidates.

We can examine this by using the 2000 and 2004 ANES to explore potential explanations for polarization. In particular, we can determine whether polarization is being driven by issue opinion differences between party members or by more general affective orientations toward the groups that make up the Republican and Democratic parties. Using thermometer ratings, we measure individual-level polarization by taking the mathematical difference between how party identifiers rate their own

parties versus how they rate their political opposition. For example, one Republican may give her party a score of 90 and give the Democrats a 10, yielding a difference of 80 degrees between the two. If another Republican were to give his party a 60 and the Democrats a 40, this constitutes a smaller difference—only 20 degrees. Our analysis (reported in Table 3.1) equates higher difference scores with more polarized views.²²

We begin with the assumption that strength of partisanship will likely be a strong predictor of polarized views toward the candidates and parties. Strong partisans, by definition, have more intense ties to the parties and their candidates than do weak and leaning partisans. Given the strong affective basis of partisanship,²³ we expect to find a positive correspondence between polarized feelings and partisan intensity. Simply put, we expect self-identified strong partisans to have more polarized views of the parties (and their relative merits) than do weak and leaning partisans. All the same, we consider the possibility that even strong partisans who hold extremely favorable views of their own party may not necessarily have extremely unfavorable views of their political rivals.

Because we believe that polarization is predominantly rooted in affective orientations toward the parties that are largely devoid of issue content, we also investigate the extent to which individual feelings toward liberals, conservatives, and the various constituent groups associated with the Republican and Democratic parties may be strongly connected to polarized views of parties and candidates.²⁴ In particular, we expect that partisans who feel particularly close to the groups highly associated with their own party (or who feel hostile toward those in the opposing party) are more likely to hold polarized views than are those who do not.

Finally, given the contention that partisan policy views have become more polarized over time, we investigate whether extreme political opinions on questions of social welfare, race, abortion, and gay marriage predict polarized ratings of the parties. In light of the prominence that the Iraq War played in the 2004 election, we also explore the extent to which strong approval or disapproval of the war may have influenced voter polarization by including it in our list of 2004 issues.

Findings

The findings from our analysis of Democrats and Republicans are reported in Table 3.1. Our primary test is whether polarized views

TABLE 3.1. Explaining Polarized Views toward Political Parties—2000 and 2004

	2000		2004	
	Democrats	Republicans	Democrats	Republicans
Uniquelue influence of:*				
Issue attitudes	4%	3%	6%	4%
Affect measures	14	21	19	17
Shared effects	3	6	11	18
Total variance explained by all 3 sets of factors**				
	21%	30%	36%	39%

Note: Table entries are the percentage of variance in individual-level party polarization explained by issue attitudes and measures of affect. The percentages were generated using the data from the statistical models in Appendix Table 8.1.

**The unique influence of issue attitudes and affect toward parties is the unique variance explained by each set of factors independently from one another.*

***Total variance refers to the total explained variance in each of the models.*

toward the political parties are a function of conflicting issue positions, partisan intensity and strong feelings about the groups that make up the parties, or both. The data in Table 3.1 detail the unique influence that issue opinions and affective orientations toward the parties have on whether one is polarized. We report the percentage of variance in party polarization that is explained by each set of factors. Larger percentages indicate stronger relationships to polarized attitudes.

For example, the 2000 analysis (shown on the left side of table) provides considerable support for our argument. Among Democrats, only 4 percent of party polarization was explained by issues whereas 14 percent was explained by feelings toward the groups that make up the Republican and Democratic parties. The pattern was even more pronounced among Republicans with issues explaining 3 percent of the variance in party polarization compared to 21 percent explained by affective orientations.

A similar pattern was found in 2004; among Democrats, issue positions explained 6 percent of the variance in party polarization, while affect explained a much larger 19 percent. For Republicans, issue opinions explained only 4 percent of the total variance in party polarization whereas affective orientations toward the parties (partisan intensity and feelings toward Democratic and Republican constituent groups) explained 17 percent.

On balance, these findings validate our general thesis that issues matter less to polarization than do more general group attachments and aversions. Popular accounts of party polarization seem to give too much weight to abstract ideologies and policy views. Polarization is partly an issue and ideological phenomenon—but not for most Americans. Their feelings about the candidates and parties are not dictated by ideas about the relative merits of individualism and egalitarianism or small government versus large government. Polarization, rather, results from the intensity of feelings that voters have for groups and symbols associated with the parties and candidates. Issues matter to some voters and to some degree for many voters, but, in general, the role that issues play in generating polarization pales in relation to more general affective orientations toward the parties and their candidates.

Increasing partisan intensity—even if it has little basis in policy opinion—has very real implications for how voters behave. Party loyalty at the ballot box has increased over the past two election cycles, most likely as a direct result of this affect-based polarization. All the same, popular accounts of voters as polarized camps who share little in the way of values and policy preferences are off the mark. Republicans and Democrats may hold each other's parties in low regard, but they nonetheless share similar views about important public policies. This underlying consensus is what gets lost in the heated rhetoric about polarization.

Are Americans Becoming More Polarized?

The preponderance of scholarly evidence demonstrates that the distance between the average policy views of Democrats and Republicans has grown over the past three decades. Partisan voting behavior is also on the rise. However, while we are certainly *becoming* more polarized in a relative sense, it is less clear that we *are* polarized, especially when it

comes to our political views. On balance, most partisans have centrist views; Republicans are still more conservative than Democrats on most political issues, but neither party's mass base holds extreme viewpoints. If anything, the data we present in this chapter suggest that as of 2004, partisans were still fairly moderate and that they agreed more often than they disagreed.

The reciprocal ill will that Republicans and Democrats have for one another's candidates and parties constitutes the strongest evidence for polarization. Partisans have become ever more divided in their assessments of themselves and their political competition. Differences over policy explain some of this divide. Polarization, however, is not simply a reasoned difference of opinion. Positive feelings toward one's party brethren and strong negative affect directed toward political rivals are at the root of partisan polarization.

Demonizing one's political opponents is nothing new to American politics, but in the information age, where we have almost limitless bandwidth and a near infinite number of political commentators to fan the flames of popular discord, the American public's growing disregard for its political adversaries casts a contentious shadow over the future. At its core, American voters remain firmly grounded in the center of the policy spectrum, yet political compromise often remains evasive. It would be naïve to believe that strident political rhetoric will become more conciliatory over time. All the same, the "politics as blood sport" frame that has become so pervasive ignores a simple fact: on most things political, Americans hold a broad and largely moderate consensus.

