Partisan Polarization in U.S. Politics

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June 11, 2018
Introduction

Partisan polarization, one of most important political dynamics of our times

Partisans = Democrats and Republicans (excluding independents, third party identifiers)

Partisan polarization = divisions between Democrats and Republicans (it takes two to polarize!)

Today will focus on

• polarization among politicians and voters, today and in comparison with past and other countries
• why it has emerged
• what are its consequences
• how it might be decreased
Polarized Politicians

Federal Courts: life-time appointments
• Judges/justices selected more along party and ideological lines
• Partisan divisions over confirmations more frequent
• Supreme Court clerks increasingly partisan/ideological

U.S. Congress: deeply divided along partisan lines
• Procedurally: majority party controls voting agenda in Senate and especially House
• Roll call votes good measure of polarization
  o In 2015-16 roll calls, Republicans to right, Democrats to left, no one in middle (Figure 1, with earlier Senate votes of Clinton, Obama, Biden added)
  o In 2017-18, congressional polarization continued:
    □ Tax reform: House, 227 R’s vs. 192 D’s + 12 R’s; Senate, 51 R’s vs. 48 D’s
    □ ACA (ObamaCare) repeal: House, 217 R’s vs. 193 D’s + 20 R’s; Senate, 49 R’s vs. 48 D’s + 3 R’s

State legislatures: as polarized as Congress, though mostly one party controlled
Figure 1
Partisan Divisions in Roll Call Voting, 2015-16 Congress
House D=blue, Senate D=dark blue, House R=red, Senate R=dark red
(source: Poole, voteview.com/blog, 12/18/16)
Increased Party Polarization in Congress: 1879 to present

Party ideological polarization
- Most roll call votes have fallen along a single liberal-conservative continuum since 1879, increasingly in recent years
- Partisan polarization = difference between parties in voting on liberal vs. conservative issues

Congressional partisan polarization, 1879-2016, measured along left-right ideological dimension on roll calls (Figure 2)
- 2016 highest for House and almost highest for Senate in its entire history
- House and Senate polarization go up and down in tandem (correlation = .92)
- Recent rise in polarization mainly result of increasing Republican conservatism

Crossover voting (= % who vote with members of opposing party on liberal vs. conservative issues) high in 3 decades after WWII, rare since

Party polarization in voting has continued in 2017-18: e.g., tax reform, Obamacare repeal, confirmations of nominees
Figure 2
Partisan Divisions Deeper than Before in Congressional Roll Call Votes, 1879-2016
(source: Poole, voteview.com/blog, 12/18/16)
Weapons of Partisan Polarization Beyond Roll Call Votes

Congressional agenda control:
• Hastert rule: bills do not go to floor if majority of House GOP opposes
• Senate Majority Leader fails to bring divisive votes for his party to floor

Senate filibusters: any Senator can object to having floor vote; 60 Senators have to vote for cloture to move to a vote:
• Use by minority party has increased since early 1970s, especially post-1995
• “Nuclear option,” approved by Democratic majority for lower federal courts and executive positions in 2013, then for Supreme Court by Republican majority in 2017:
  o Only majority now required for cloture on all presidential nominations
  o Reconciliation (budget) bills cannot be filibustered: e.g., ACA repeal
  o Regular legislation can be filibustered
  o Cloture rule can be changed by majority vote

Campaign combat tactics, position taking rather than policy making:
• “Gotcha” votes: Gingrich strategy, first adopted in mid-1980s
• Symbolic positioning for policy distinctiveness

Heightened use of parliamentary tactics to delay confirmation of presidential nominees
Sources of Greater Polarization among Politicians

1. “Selection bias”
   - Heightened relationship between ideology and party, with demise of Democratic South
   - More safe Republican and Democratic seats due to gerrymandering and population shifts
     o → more ideologically extreme representatives selected via primaries
     o Tea party Freedom Caucus in House, using Hastert rule, pushes Republicans to right
   - Moderates less inclined to seek/retain congressional positions

2. Demise of powerful independent committee positions, allocated by party loyalty + term limited

3. Heightened external pressures
   - Increased negative campaigning, fueled by outside groups
   - Growing influence of campaign contributions, especially from ideologically-driven groups/individuals
   - Unprecedented interest group and activist pressures to punish defections

4. Decreased inter-party social “bonding” among members
Polarized Voters

Partisanship among Americans
• About 40% of Americans neither Democrats nor Republicans, and are not polarized
• Remaining 60% of partisans slightly more Democratic than Republican
• Partisans more likely to vote, especially in non-presidential elections

Democrats and Republicans deeply divided in voting and views of political world
• Partisans divided in preferences on policy issues, though less than might be expected
• Partisanship as “tribalism”: support for their side no matter what
  o Voter support follows their party’s leadership, including on issues
  o Partisans divided in support for party leaders
    □ 2016 election: 89% D’s voted for Clinton, 88% R’s for Trump
    □ Sharply disagree in approval of Trump job (Gallup, 5/21-27/18): 85% Republicans vs. 8% Democrats approve
    □ Sharply disagree in perceptions of Trump as “moral leader”: 22%/55% of Republicans see him as very/somewhat strong moral leader versus 2%/5% of Democrats

• Partisan motivated reasoning = partisans see world thru’ partisan lenses, with their political preferences “coloring” their perceptions of reality, including facts
Greater Partisan Polarization among Voters than Ever?

Partisan polarization higher today than in history of polling
• Growing polarization in presidential approval since 1950s (Figure 3)
• Growing polarization in evaluations of party’s presidential nominees (Figure 4)
• Possibly higher at times in 19th century, probably not in lead up to Civil War but perhaps in post-war period?

Americans more polarized over major party nominees than in other countries in democratic world (Figure 5)
Figure 3
Presidential Averages in Approval by Party Identification, 1953-2018
Source: Gallup Poll
Figure 4
Partisans Increasingly Divided (0-30 vs. 70-100) in Evaluations of Opposing Presidential Candidates
(source: American National Election Study Surveys)
Figure 5
Polarized Evaluations of Party Leaders
(Absolute difference > 7 between rating of government party leader and opposition party leader on 0-10 scales)
Source: Comparative National Election Project surveys, 1992-2017
Why Are Partisan Voters So Polarized?

1. Party identifications and issue positions increasingly reinforcing (Figure 6)
   • Realignment in South, where conservatives change to Republicans
   • Rise of harder-to-compromise issues: religious values, no-tax positions, racial issues

2. Political discourse more partisan and polarized
   • Pressure from growing number of ideological interest groups
   • Increased “toxicity” of campaigning (negative, personalistic attacks), especially by independent groups → harder to see opposition positively
   • Increased partisan “spin” and “fake news”

4. *Echo Chamber*: partisans more inclined to seek and find reinforcing sources of political information
   • Media: more sources available for partisan/ideological information and partisans turning more to them
   • Discussants: partisans more inclined to have like-minded friends (Figure 7)

5. Parties nominate more extreme candidates in primaries, forcing voters to choose between extremes

6. “Tribalism”: voters follow leaders into more partisan stances: e.g., greater partisan divide on abortion, foreign policy; even reversal of positions when leaders change (Figure 8)
Figure 6
Democrats and Republicans Increasingly Ideologically Divided on Issues
Source: Pew Surveys

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

Source: 2014 Political Polarization in the American Public
Notes: Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see Appendix A). The blue area in this chart represents the ideological distribution of Democrats; the red area of Republicans. The overlap of these two distributions is shaded purple. Republicans include Republican-leaning independents; Democrats include Democratic-leaning independents (see Appendix B).
Figure 7
Close Friendships Re-enforce Polarization
Source: Pew Research Center survey of registered voters, June 7 to July 5, 2016

![Bar chart showing the distribution of support for opposing candidates among different groups.](chart.png)
Figure 8
Change in Partisan Issue Positions

Sources: Gallup (warming), Pew (immigration), ANES (abortion), YouGov (other) Polls

Note: Good/Bad = Favorable/unfavorable views
What Are Consequences of Increased Partisan Polarization?

Benefits:
• Party differences easier to identify → more issue-based voting and accountability
• Politics matters more → higher turnout and political involvement – among partisans

Costs:
• For governance and policy-making:
  o Hard for opposite sides to agree on common policies → more difficult for representative institutions to address problems, which require bipartisan solutions
  o Change in party control of government → sharp changes in policy
  o Disagreement on facts makes agreement on solutions difficult
• For democracy:
  o Shrillness of partisan debate → more disaffected voters → greater distrust in government and other institutions
  o Parties and politicians increasingly seen in negative terms → less ability of them to be credible leaders
• Leads to rise of anti-establishment “outsiders”, who are speaking to voters’ dissatisfaction with mainstream leaders

Costs > Benefits
Conclusion: What Can Be Done?

Partisan polarization will subside when/if:
• Voters:
  o are less tribal, less engaged in motivated reasoning
  o punish extremists in primaries and general elections
  o punish governing parties that emphasize winning over governing
  o are better able to distinguish “fake” from real news
• Leaders:
  • Opposing parties prioritize issues on which they agree (e.g., FY19 budget, debt ceiling, Russia sanctions, infrastructure, immigration reform, protection of political norms)
  • Politicians’ rhetoric is more civil, less vituperative
  • Presidents reach across party lines to fulfill campaign promises

Would political reforms help?
• Redistricting to decrease number of gerrymandered districts and “safe” seats
• Top two primaries? less selection of extreme candidates?
• Reduced role of money in campaigns, especially “dark money”

Voters and their choices among candidates are the key