CONTROVERSIES IN VOTING BEHAVIOR

Fifth Edition

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16. The 2008 Election: Polarization Continues

Alan I. Abramowitz

On November 4, 2008, in one of the most remarkable elections in American history, Barack Obama, the son of a white mother from Kansas and a black father from Kenya, was chosen to be the forty-fourth president of the United States. On his way to becoming the nation’s first African-American president, the junior senator from Illinois had to overcome not just racial prejudice but persistent rumors that he was a Muslim and widespread doubts about his readiness for national office. Despite these concerns, a nation in the throes of a severe economic crisis and fighting two prolonged and costly wars voted decisively for a candidate who promised major changes in both domestic and foreign policy. Barack Obama would become not just the first African-American president, but the first non-Southern Democratic president in almost half a century. The election results reflected the dire condition of the U.S. economy and widespread discontent with the incumbent Republican president but also deep divisions in American society—divisions based on geography, age, race, and above all, partisanship.

A Deepening Red-Blue Divide

At precisely 11 p.m. Eastern Standard Time on November 4, just as the polls closed in California, Oregon, and Washington, all of the major television networks and news services declared Barack Obama to be the winner of the 2008 presidential election. After more than a year of campaigning, it took only a few hours of vote-counting to determine that Obama would have the 270 electoral votes that he needed to become the forty-fourth president of the United States. In fact, he would eventually receive 365 electoral votes, the largest total since Bill Clinton in 1996. It was an impressive victory, but a close examination of the 2008 electoral map reveals that the Democratic tide was far from uniform.

In Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America, Morris Fiorina and his collaborators (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2006, chapter 3) argue that political differences between the red and blue states are often exaggerated by pundits and academics. But the evidence from the 2008 election shows that with regard to presidential candidate preference, the red-blue divide was larger than at any time in the past half-century. The Obama-Biden ticket carried many states by landslide or near-landslide margins, including several of the most populous states. The Democrats carried California by 24 points, New York by 27 points, Illinois...

Source: This piece is an original essay commissioned for this volume.
by 25 points, Michigan by 16 points, and New Jersey by 16 points. Of the twenty-eight states carried by the Democrats, the margin of victory was greater than 10 points in twenty-two states and less than 5 points in only four states. Yet despite the decisive Democratic victory in the election, many states voted for the Republican ticket by landslide or near-landslide margins. Of the twenty-two states carried by John McCain, the margin of victory was greater than 10 points in fifteen states and less than 5 points in only two states. And while the nation as a whole was moving in a Democratic direction between 2004 and 2008, Republicans managed to increase their margin of victory in Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Tennessee.

The overall picture that emerges from an examination of the 2008 electoral map is one of a country that had moved decisively in a Democratic direction since 2004 but that remained deeply divided. There were more blue states and fewer red states, but the divide between the two was even deeper than in 2004. Across all fifty states, the average margin of victory for the winning presidential candidate increased from 13.9 points in 2004 to 16.2 points in 2008: the average margin of victory for Obama was 16.8 points, while the average margin of victory for McCain was 15.4 points. There were more landslide and near-landslide states and fewer closely contested states: the number of states in which the winning candidate’s margin of victory was greater than 15 points increased from twenty-one to twenty-six, while the number in which the winning candidate’s margin of victory was less than 5 points decreased from eleven to six. Of the seven most populous states, only Florida and Ohio were decided by less than 5 points while New York, California, and Illinois were decided by more than 20 points.

There was wide divergence in support for the presidential candidates across states and regions of the country. Although Obama made inroads into the Republican Party’s Southern base by carrying Virginia, North Carolina, and Florida, McCain carried the other eight states of the old Confederacy along with the border states of Kentucky, West Virginia, and Oklahoma, winning most of them by double-digit margins. Altogether, McCain won 54 percent of the vote in the South while Obama won 57 percent of the vote in the rest of the country. The election was a landslide for Obama outside of the South and a near-landslide for McCain in the South.

The high degree of geographic polarization in 2008 is consistent with the pattern evident in other recent presidential elections, including the 2004 election, but it represents a dramatic change from the voting patterns of the 1960s and 1970s as the evidence in Table 16-1 demonstrates. In the competitive 1960 and 1976 elections, for example, there were far more closely contested states and far fewer landslide states than in recent presidential elections. In 1960, twenty states were decided by less than 5 points and only nine by more than 15 points; in 1976, twenty states were decided by less than 5 points and only ten by more than 15 points. And in both of those elections, all of the most populous states were closely contested, including California, New York, Illinois, and Texas. The divisions between red states and blue states are far deeper today than they were.
The 2008 Election: Polarization Continues

Table 16-1 Geographic Polarization in 1960, 1976, 2004, and 2008 Presidential Elections

<table>
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<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0–4.99%</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5–9.99%</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10–14.99%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15%+</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swing-State Electoral Votes</td>
<td>256</td>
<td>298</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landslide-State Electoral Votes</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>274</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


thirty or forty years ago. As a result, far fewer states and far fewer electoral votes are actually in play in presidential elections.

Growing Generational and Racial Divides and a Continuing Religious Divide

Geography was not the only major divide in the 2008 election. The choice between Obama and McCain also divided Americans along generational, racial, and religious lines. Contrary to the claim made by Fiorina and his collaborators that demographic divisions have been diminishing over time (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2006, 58–61), the generational and racial divides in candidate preference were both the largest in recent history and the religious divide among white voters was at least as large as in 2004 despite a Republican nominee who generated little enthusiasm among evangelical voters.

Data from national exit polls indicate that Obama did better than the Democrats’ 2004 nominee, John Kerry, among many voting groups, including men and women, college graduates and nongraduates, and lower- and upper-income voters. However, Obama’s gains were much greater among some groups than others. While nonwhites and younger voters of all races flocked to Obama’s banner, older whites found Obama’s message much less compelling. Obama carried voters under the age of thirty by a margin of 34 points versus only 9 points for Kerry. However, he did slightly worse than Kerry among voters over the age of sixty-five, losing that group by 8 points versus 6 points for Kerry. As a result, the generation gap in candidate preference was much larger in 2008 than in 2004. In fact, the difference between the youngest and oldest age groups was by far the largest in the history of national exit polls going back to 1972. The youth vote was a major factor in Obama’s decisive victory: based on the national exit poll results, we can estimate that voters under the age of thirty provided Obama with a plurality of almost 8 million votes which was more than 80 percent of his overall popular vote margin.
Obama also made much larger gains among African-American and Hispanic voters than among white voters. In addition to increasing African-American turnout, Obama won a substantially larger share of the African-American vote than did Kerry—95 percent versus 88 percent. However, the most dramatic improvement in Democratic performance between 2004 and 2008 occurred among Hispanic voters. According to the exit poll data, Obama won 66 percent of the Hispanic vote versus Kerry’s 54 percent. In contrast, the improvement in Democratic performance among white voters was much smaller. Obama received 43 percent of the white vote versus Kerry’s 41 percent. The 52 point difference in candidate preference between whites and blacks in 2008 was the largest since 1984.

No Democratic presidential candidate since Lyndon Johnson has won a majority of the white vote, so the fact that Obama lost the white vote was hardly surprising. Obama’s 12-point deficit among white voters was identical to that of Al Gore in 2000. However, the fact that white voters favored the Republican presidential candidate by a double-digit margin in 2008 despite the poor condition of the economy and the extraordinary unpopularity of the incumbent Republican president suggests that racial attitudes had an impact on the level of white support for the Democratic candidate.

White support for Obama varied dramatically across regions and states, ranging from a low of around 10 percent in the Deep South to close to 60 percent in parts of the Northeast and West. In many states outside the South, Obama did substantially better than Kerry among white voters. Between 2004 and 2008, the Democratic share of the white vote increased by 5 points in California and Washington, 7 points in Michigan and Wisconsin, 8 points in Colorado, 9 points in Oregon, and 11 points in Indiana. In many Southern and border South states, however, Obama did no better or worse than Kerry among white voters. Between 2004 and 2008, the Democratic share of the white vote fell by 4 points in Mississippi, 6 points in Arkansas, 9 points in Alabama, and 10 points in Louisiana. More than forty years after the passage of the Voting Rights Act, the racial divide in much of the South remained enormous, with blacks overwhelmingly Democratic and whites overwhelmingly Republican.

There is little doubt that discomfort with the idea of an African-American president played a role in limiting white support for Obama, especially in the Deep South and in some of the Border South states. Otherwise it is difficult to understand why Obama did worse than Kerry among white voters in these states. But Obama’s losses among whites in the South and Border South were offset by gains among white voters in other parts of the country and by extraordinary turnout and support for Obama among nonwhites. Based on the National Exit Poll results, we can estimate that white voters gave McCain a plurality of close to twelve million votes in 2008. While this was somewhat smaller than George W. Bush’s plurality among white voters in 2004, it was more than a million votes larger than Bush’s plurality among white voters in 2000. Yet Obama won the national popular vote by more than 9.5 million votes while Gore only won the
national popular vote by about half a million votes in 2000. The difference between 2000 and 2008 was that Obama's margin among nonwhites was more than ten million votes larger than Gore's margin among nonwhites.

The 2008 results also revealed a continuing religious divide among white voters. According to data from the American National Election Studies (ANES), Obama won 56 percent of the vote among whites who reported that they seldom or never attended religious services, a slight improvement over the 52 percent that Kerry received from this group. But Obama won only 27 percent of the vote among whites who reported attending religious services every week or almost every week, a 5-point decline from the 32 percent that Kerry received from this group. As a result, the gap in candidate preference between these two groups grew from 20 points in 2004 to 29 points in 2008. And this occurred despite widespread dissatisfaction with McCain among conservative evangelicals and a high-profile effort by Obama to reach out to the evangelical community.

Evolving Party Coalitions and Deepening Partisan Divisions

I ideological realignment and the growth of the nonwhite electorate have dramatically altered the composition of the Democratic and Republican electoral coalitions over the past three decades. A comparison of exit poll data from the 1976, 1992, and 2008 elections shows that the coalition that elected Obama was very different from the coalition that elected Clinton and even more different from the coalition that elected Jimmy Carter. And while the changes in the composition of the Republican electoral coalition have not been as great, it is also clear that the coalition that supported McCain was quite different from the coalitions that supported George H. W. Bush and Gerald Ford.

The racial and ideological divisions between the parties in the electorate are far deeper today than they were in the 1970s or even the 1990s. On the Democratic side, the proportion of moderate-to-conservative whites has decreased considerably while the contributions of liberal whites and especially nonwhites have increased. While moderate-to-conservative whites made up a majority of those who voted for Carter, they comprised barely a quarter of those who voted for Obama. Nonwhites, who made up less than a fifth of Carter's voters, comprised more than a third of Obama's voters. On the Republican side, the proportion of conservative whites has risen from 58 percent in 1976 to 70 percent in 2008 while the proportion of moderate-to-liberal whites has fallen from 38 percent in 1976 to 25 percent in 2008. And despite the dramatic growth of the nonwhite electorate over the past three decades, the nonwhite share of the Republican vote has been stagnant, going from 4 percent in 1976 and 9 percent in 1992 to 6 percent in 2008.

As a result of these trends, the electoral base of the Democratic Party is now dominated by white liberals and nonwhites. In 2008, these two groups made up 73 percent of Democratic voters but only 11 percent of Republican voters. On the other hand, the electoral base of the Republican Party is now dominated by white
conservatives. In 2008 this group made up 70 percent of Republican voters but only 9 percent of Democratic voters. Fiorina and his collaborators refer to the transformation of the party coalitions over the past several decades as "sorting" and claim that it is different from polarization, but this transformation has been one of the most important drivers of polarization in the public. In fact, the partisan divide underlies almost all of the other divisions within the public including the gender gap, the marriage gap, the generation gap, and the religious gap.

Explaining the Deep Partisan Divide: Polared Choices or Polarized Preferences?

According to Fiorina and his collaborators, the intense partisanship that has characterized the American electorate in recent years was not caused by deep ideological divisions within the public but by Democratic and Republican politicians presenting the electorate with polarized choices that made it appear that the electorate was deeply divided (Fiorina et al., 2006, chapter 9). The politicians and their activist supporters were polarized, not the voters. So when the 2008 Democratic and Republican presidential candidates both promised to campaign in red states and blue states and to seek support from Democrats, Republicans, and independents, one might have expected these partisan divisions to diminish.

An examination of voting patterns in 2008 indicates that this did not occur, however. Even without George W. Bush on the ballot, the partisan divide within the electorate was as large in 2008 as in 2004. According to the 2008 ANES, 91 percent of Democratic identifiers and leaners voted for Obama while 90 percent of Republican identifiers and leaners voted for McCain. Moreover, evidence from other national surveys shows that the partisan divide within the electorate was not just a result of polarized choices. This evidence shows that the voters themselves were sharply divided on major issues in the election including the war in Iraq, health care, abortion, and gay marriage.

In a *Time* magazine poll conducted October 3-6, 2008, approximately one thousand likely voters were asked for their opinions on ten policy issues including abortion, gay marriage, the war in Iraq, climate change, and health care. On each issue, respondents were asked to place themselves on a 0-10 scale with 0 indicating strong opposition and 10 indicating strong support for a specific position. Table 16-2 displays the distribution of opinion on nine issues on which the liberal and conservative positions could be identified. The results indicate that on some of the most important issues in the election, public opinion was highly polarized, with far more likely voters placing themselves near the extremes (0-1 or 9-10) than near the center (4-6). Those with extreme views outnumbered those with centrist views by 41 percent to 28 percent on the issue of climate change, 50 percent to 22 percent on the issue of health care, 52 percent to 19 percent on the issue of Iraq, 70 percent to 16 percent on the issue of abortion, and 72 percent to 14 percent on the issue of gay marriage. There were only two issues—business tax
The 2008 Election: Polarization Continues

Table 16-2 Distribution of Public Opinion on Nine Policy Issues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Strongly Liberal (0–1)</th>
<th>Liberal (2–3)</th>
<th>Centrist (4–6)</th>
<th>Conservative (7–8)</th>
<th>Strongly Conservative (9–10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gay Marriage</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abortion</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq War</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offshore Drilling</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>47</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Care</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Regulation</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Climate Change</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Tax Cuts</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mortgage Assistance</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average of 9 Issues</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Note: Likely voters only.

The high degree of polarization of public opinion on some of the major issues in the 2008 election reflected the existence of deep divisions between supporters of the two parties. For example, only 12 percent of Obama supporters favored keeping U.S. troops in Iraq without a withdrawal timetable versus 77 percent of McCain supporters. Similarly, 84 percent of Obama supporters favored a government guarantee of health insurance for all Americans versus only 19 percent of McCain supporters, 76 percent of Obama supporters favored a woman’s unrestricted right to choose an abortion during the first three months of pregnancy versus only 29 percent of McCain voters, 84 percent of Obama supporters favored stronger policies to reduce the threat of climate change even if the economic costs were high versus 36 percent of McCain voters, and 64 percent of Obama supporters favored legalizing same-sex marriage versus only 14 percent of McCain voters.

Moreover, opinions on many of these issues were closely connected. For example, opinions on climate change were strongly related to opinions on health care: the correlation between opinions on these two issues was a robust .59. Seventy-one percent of those who took a liberal position on climate change also took a liberal position on health care, while 72 percent of those who took a conservative position on climate change also took a conservative position on health care. As a result, these opinions tended to reinforce each other, pushing voters in the same partisan direction.
As Philip Converse (1964) first noted in his seminal article, “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics,” the degree of consistency or constraint in opinions across issues is an important indicator of ideological thinking in the electorate. Converse found little evidence of such ideological thinking in the electorate of the 1950s, and according to Fiorina and his collaborators not much has changed in the decades since then: despite rising education levels and a growing ideological divide at the elite level, they claim that Americans today “are not very well-informed about politics, do not hold many of their views very strongly, and are not ideological” (Fiorina et al., 2006, 19). However, the evidence from the *Time* poll does not support this conclusion. This evidence shows that there was actually a high degree of constraint in opinions across many of the key issues in the 2008 election, indicating that a large proportion of voters were responding to these issues on the basis of an underlying liberal or conservative ideology.

Opinions on seven policy issues in the *Time* poll were correlated strongly enough to create a coherent liberal-conservative issues scale. The seven issues included in the scale were abortion, gay marriage, health insurance, offshore oil drilling, global warming, the war in Iraq, and regulation of financial institutions. The average correlation among these seven issues is an impressive .43 and the scale has a reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) of .84, which is well above the generally accepted minimum of .70. Scores on the scale ranged from 0 for those who took the most conservative position on all seven issues to 70 for those who took the most liberal position on all seven issues. I then collapsed the scale by combining scores of 0–10, 11–20, 21–30, 31–40, 41–50, 51–60, and 61–70 to form a seven-point scale with 1 the most conservative score and 7 the most liberal score. Nine percent of likely voters were classified as extremely conservative (1), 16 percent as very conservative (2), 12 percent as slightly conservative (3), 16 percent as moderate (4), 17 percent as slightly liberal (5), 19 percent as strongly liberal (6), and 10 percent as extremely liberal (7).

The validity of this seven-point liberal-conservative issues scale is demonstrated by the fact that it strongly predicted presidential candidate preference: 93 percent of those on the liberal side of the scale (5–7) supported Obama, while 92 percent of those on the conservative side of the scale (1–3) supported McCain. The relatively small group of moderates split their support almost evenly between the two candidates with 53 percent favoring McCain and 47 percent favoring Obama. Moreover, the ideological divide between supporters of the two candidates was deepest among the most politically engaged members of the electorate—those whose opinions would be of the greatest concern to candidates and elected officials.

Figure 16–1 shows the distribution of Obama and McCain supporters on the seven-point issues scale for two sets of voters: those with low and high scores on a five-item political knowledge test. Altogether, 36 percent of likely voters in the *Time* poll received low scores (0–2) on this political knowledge test while 64 percent received high scores (3–5). The results in Figure 16–1 show that
Figure 16-1 Ideological Orientations of Obama and McCain Voters by Political Knowledge

The 2008 Election: Polarization Continues

Source: Time Magazine poll, Oct. 3–6, 2008
the better-informed voters were far more polarized along ideological lines than the minority less-informed voters. In the low-information group, there was considerable overlap between supporters of the two candidates. In the high-information group, there was almost no overlap: 88 percent of informed Obama supporters were on the liberal side of the scale compared with only 5 percent of informed McCain supporters; 83 percent of informed McCain supporters were on the conservative side of the scale compared with only 4 percent of informed Obama supporters.

Constraint, Ideological Thinking, and the Rise of Polarization

Fiorina and Abrams (this volume) argue that the fact that there has been little change in the distribution of responses on individual issues in ANES surveys over the past three decades shows that there has been no increase in ideological thinking or polarization in the American public. But this claim ignores one of the most important changes in American public opinion during this time period—the growing consistency of Americans’ opinions across different issues as well as between their issue positions and their party identification. We have already seen striking evidence of constraint in voters’ opinions across a wide range of issues in the 2008 Time Magazine poll. Data from ANES surveys also show clear evidence of growing constraint in voters’ issue positions over time. For example, between 1980 and 2008 the correlation between voters’ opinions on the issues of health insurance and defense spending increased from .04 to .21, the correlation between their opinions on government guaranteed jobs and health insurance increased from .33 to .52, and the correlation between their opinions on abortion and health insurance increased from .40 to .71. Not only are Americans much better “sorted” by party today, but their opinions on different issues are much more consistent today, and greater consistency across issues means greater polarization in the public just as it does in the Congress.

No Disconnect between the Political Elite and the Public: The Case of Health Care Reform

Since January of 2009 a number of political commentators have expressed disappointment at the continued bickering and lack of cooperation between Democratic and Republican leaders in Washington. But calls for bipartisanship ignore the deep ideological divide between the two parties today. And based on the opinions expressed by Democratic and Republican voters in 2008, Democratic and Republican leaders are accurately representing the views of their parties’ supporters—especially their parties’ politically engaged supporters. Nowhere is this more evident than on what has emerged as the most important and contentious policy issue facing the country in 2009 and beyond: health care reform.
Figure 16-2 Opinions of Democratic and Republican Voters on Health Care Reform

![Bar chart showing opinions of Democratic and Republican voters on health care reform.]

Position on Universal Health Care Scale

- Favor a great deal
- Favor moderately
- Favor a little
- Neither favor nor oppose
- Oppose a little
- Oppose moderately
- Oppose a great deal

Legend:
- Democrat
- Republican

Source: 2008 American National Election Study

Figure 16-2 displays the opinions of Democratic and Republican voters on the ANES health care policy scale. The ANES question asked respondents to place themselves on a seven-point scale indicating support or opposition to a plan to have the federal government pay for all of the cost of medical care for Americans. The results demonstrate that even before the debate over health care reform began in earnest in Washington, the American public was deeply divided over this issue with Democratic identifiers and leaners overwhelmingly supporting a universal health care plan and Republican identifiers and leaners overwhelmingly opposing such a plan: almost three-fourths of Democrats placed themselves at 1 or 2 on the scale while almost two-thirds of Republicans placed themselves at 6 or 7. Contrary to the argument of Fiorina and his collaborators, there is no disconnect between the political elite and the public on this issue. The deep partisan divide in Washington reflects a real and deep partisan divide within the American electorate.
Notes

1. For an in-depth analysis of the new regional divisions in American politics, see Black and Black (2007).

2. For this survey, interviews were conducted by landline and cellular telephone with 1,053 registered likely voters. The data and documentation are available at the Roper Center Website: www.ropercenter.uconn.edu, Study USSR812008-4567.

3. It was not clear what the liberal and conservative positions were on the issue of government bailouts of major financial institutions as positions on this issue were uncorrelated with either ideological identification or party identification.
17. Where's the Polarization?

Morris P. Fiorina and Samuel J. Abrams

During the past decade, political commentators repeatedly claimed that the United States had become a polarized nation. More often than not, such claims failed to specify their terms. Polarized relative to what? To other countries? To our own past? What is polarized? American lifestyles? Ideologies? Positions on the issues? Approval ratings and vote choices? And most fundamentally, what, exactly, does polarization mean? In this brief article we seek to clarify the debate, addressing the preceding questions in reverse order.

What Is Polarization?

Polarization is not a synonym for disagreement. The raw material of politics is disagreement; if there were no disagreement about what government should do and how it should do it, politics would be unnecessary. For public opinion to be polarized, two conditions must be met. First, the substance of the disagreement must be major. Second, the public must be closely divided. For example, if 90 percent of the electorate strongly supports Social Security in its present form and the remaining 10 percent wish to abolish the program, that is not polarization: although the substantive disagreement is major, only a small minority holds one of the positions. Or if 50 percent of the electorate thinks that the Social Security retirement age should be 66 and the other 50 percent thinks it should be raised to 67, that is not polarization: although the public is evenly split, the substance of the disagreement is minor.

Figure 17-1 contrasts two hypothetical public opinion distributions that capture the preceding notions. In both panels, the electorate is split down the middle—half left of center, half right of center. But while most people would judge the top panel to be an instance of polarization, few would judge the bottom panel to be an example. In the top panel most of the electorate is clustered at the extremes of the opinion scale, whereas in the bottom panel most of the electorate is clustered in the center.

Does the distribution of American public opinion look like the hypothetical distribution in the top panel of Figure 17-1, as numerous commentators claim? No. Most public opinion distributions look more like the bottom panel than the top panel, including those in the purportedly polarized 2004 and 2008 elections. Consider the familiar seven-point liberal-conservative scale included in the American National Election Studies (ANES) and the General Social Survey

Source: This piece is an original essay commissioned for this volume.
Figure 17-1 Polarized and Nonpolarized Distributions

(GSS). The allowable responses run from extremely conservative to extremely liberal with moderate or middle of the road in between. Political scientists customarily recode “don’t know” responses as moderate. If that convention is followed, Figure 17-2a shows that in 2008, the American public was overwhelmingly centrist according to either survey. If the “don’t know” responses are kept separate, Figure 17-2b shows more variation in ideological responses, but moderate and don’t know are the two largest categories in the ANES and the diagrams clearly resemble the bottom panel in Figure 17-1 more than the top panel.

Of course, political scientists have known for nearly half a century that the American public is not very ideological (Converse 1964) and, as shown in the ANES “haven’t thought much about it” response category, the labels mean little or nothing to a significant fraction of the public. So, alternatively, consider the electorate’s views on specific issues that were included in the 2008 ANES. As shown in Figure 17-3, on a series of important contemporary issues the shape of public opinion looks much closer to the bottom panel in Figure 17-1 than to the top panel, with Americans bunching up near the center rather than clustering at
Partisanship and Issue Preferences

Figure 17-2a No Ideological Polarization in 2008

Iodology: General Social Survey 2008

Iodology: American National Election Studies 2008

Figure 17-2b No Ideological Polarization in 2008

Iodology: General Social Survey 2008

Iodology: American National Election Studies 2008

Only conservative to extremely conservative. Political scientists customarily use median conservatism. If that convention is followed, the public was overwhelmingly conservative. The "Don't Know" responses are kept separate from other responses, but moderate and slightly conservative ANES and the diagrams are more than the top panel.

Nearly half a century that since 1964 and, as shown in this category, the labels mean the same thing. So, alternatively, consider the Clark labeled in the 2008 ANES. As for the temporary issues the shape of Figure 17-1 than to the center rather than clustering at
Figure 17-3a  No Polarization on Policy Issues in 2008*

\[ \text{ANES Policy Views: 2008} \]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>15</th>
<th>20</th>
<th>25</th>
<th>30</th>
<th>35</th>
<th>40</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ideological Position</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- • Services/Spending
- • Insurance
- • Military Spending
- ▲ Aid to Minorities
- ▼ Jobs/SOL

Source: 2008 ANES.

**“Haven't thought much about it” responses recoded as moderates.

opposite extremes. The picture of a centrist electorate is overwhelmingly evident when the convention of coding “don’t knows” as “middle of the roaders” is followed (Figure 17-3a), but it is also clear when these responses are treated separately (Figure 17-3b).

All in all, the available evidence suggests an unambiguous conclusion. Considering their general ideological self-locations, as well as their attitudes on specific public policy issues, the American electorate in 2008 is much better described as centrist than as polarized.

Has Polarization Increased?

Even if public opinion has not yet reached a stage that merits description as polarized, perhaps the claims of journalist and politicos reflect movement of public opinion in that direction. This claim requires that we look at trends over time rather than a snapshot of 2008. Referring back to Figure 17-1, if public opinion is changing away from the shape in the bottom panel toward the shape in the top panel, it would be appropriate to characterize such movement as polarizing even if it still more closely resembled the shape of the bottom panel. Is there evidence of such movement? No.
Consider Figure 17-4, which plots the percentage of respondents choosing “moderate” or “middle-of-the-road” positions on the ideological self-placement items in the ANES and GSS surveys, as well as analogous items in two well-known commercial surveys—Gallup and Harris. Since the 1970s the ANES shows a slight decline in moderates (which mainly reflects a decline in the “haven’t thought much about it” category), Gallup shows a slight increase in moderates, and GSS and Harris show little change. It seems safe to say that there is no evidence that the ideological orientations of Americans have polarized over the course of the past generation.

The same is true for their views on specific issues. Table 17-1 reports the percentage-point changes in each of the seven categories of the ANES policy issue scales from Figure 17-3. These were first asked in the 1984 survey, twenty-four years and seven presidential elections ago. The changes are small for the most part and do not show the kind of consistency one might expect from the 2008 election outcome. On two issues, health care and the trade-off between government spending and government services, we see a shift to the left. On health care the public shows a 17-percentage point net leftward movement between 1984 and 2008, with 12 percent more respondents on the left side of the scale (government insurance plan) and 5 percent fewer respondents on the right side of the scale. On government spending the net shift is 16 percent in favor of...
**Figure 17-4** No Increasing Ideological Polarization: 1968–2008

Percentage of Americans who classify themselves as moderates (or answered "don't know/haven't thought much about it")

Sources: ANES, GSS, The Gallup Organization, Harris Interactive.
Table 17-1 No Increased Policy Polarization, 1984–2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health Insurance</td>
<td>5*</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-8</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spending/Services</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>-6</td>
<td>-6</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aid to minorities</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>-6</td>
<td>-4</td>
<td>-4</td>
<td>-4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military spending</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-4</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobs/SOL</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>-4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abortion</td>
<td>Never Permitted</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rape, Incest, Danger</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Clear Need</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>-4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Always as Personal Choice</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>-4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Don't Know, Other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>-4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 1984 and 2008 ANES

*Each number is the difference between the percentage of 2008 respondents who placed themselves in the scale category compared to the percentage of 1984 respondents who placed themselves in the same scale category. Positive numbers indicate a higher proportion in the category in 2008, negative numbers indicate a higher proportion in 1984.

**Figures in parentheses represent changes when "haven't thought much about it" responses are recoded as moderates.

more government spending for more services. Perhaps surprisingly, on three issues the public shifted rightward between 1984 and 2008, significantly so in the case of government aid to minorities. On defense spending an insignificant move to the right (higher spending) is apparent, and support for a government-guaranteed job and standard of living (not the government's responsibility) shows a similar insignificant shift. Finally, on a four-position abortion scale, there is no significant change between 1984 and 2008. In sum, between the overwhelming reelection of Ronald Reagan and the election of Barack Obama, the positions of the electorate on major national issues changed relatively little, and on no issue did the middle lose to both extremes, the definition of polarization.5

So, in terms of their ideological orientations the American electorate today looks about the same as it did when Democrat Jimmy Carter defeated Republican Gerald Ford in the not-very-polarized 1976 election. And while data on specific issues only goes back to the mid-1980s, the movements in the past quarter-century are not large and do not put one in mind of polarization so much as an electorate slightly adjusting its views as conditions in the world change.

So, Where’s the Polarization?

How do we reconcile the lack of evidence for polarization in a systematic examination of public opinion with the frequent claims that the mass electorate has become more polarized? A close look at such claims reveals that they are often advanced without systematic evidence like that presented in Figures 17-2 and
17-3, or with evidence that lacks any temporal dimension like that presented in Figure 17-4 and Table 17-1. Polarization is a relational concept and all too often no baseline or comparison point is presented.

As we have discussed at length elsewhere (Fiorina and Abrams 2009), there are several other sources of confusion as well. One is a tendency to regard sociocultural differences such as gun ownership, church attendance, and NASCAR interest as perfect reflections of political views, when they are not. For example, according to the national exit poll, nearly 40 percent of gun owners voted for Obama in 2008, as did more than one-quarter of white evangelical Protestants.

Another contributor to the inaccurate perception of polarization is a widespread confusion between polarization and sorting (see, for example, Abramowitz, in this volume). As the data presented above show, there are about the same proportions of liberals, moderates, and conservatives on most issues as a generation ago. But they are more neatly sorted into the parties now—liberals in the Democratic Party, conservatives in the Republican Party—than a generation ago. Thus, partisan differences among voters have increased, but that development obscures the fact that the center in American politics has not diminished; only its representation has. For example, consider the abortion issue, which for a generation has been a litmus test in presidential politics—Democratic candidates must be strongly pro-choice to have any chance to win the nomination and Republican candidates must be strongly pro-life. But consider the views of self-identified Democrats and Republicans in the population in 2008 (Table 17-2). While Democrats and Republicans certainly differ, many political observers would be surprised to learn that one-third of Democratic identifiers are arguably pro-life; certainly they are closer to the announced position of the Republican Party (never, or only in cases of rape, incest, or a threat to the woman's life) than to that of their own. Probably even more surprisingly, one-quarter of Republican identifiers are clearly pro-choice (always available), and arguably nearly half are closer to the announced position of the Democratic Party (always, for a clear need) than to their own. Party sorting has occurred in recent decades, but there is still far more heterogeneity of opinion in the mass bases of the two parties than there is among the party activists and officials.4

Table 17-2: Imperfect Party Sorting on Abortion, 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Circumstances in which abortion should be legal</th>
<th>Democrats</th>
<th>Republicans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only in case of rape, incest, or when the woman's life is in danger</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For a clear need</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always a personal choice</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 2008 ANES.
Partisanship and Issue Preferences

ension like that presented in
ional concept and all too often
rina and Abrams 2009), there
One is a tendency to regard-
ship, church attendance, and
tal views, when they are not,
ad, nearly 40 percent of gun
than one-quarter of white

ion of polarization is a wide-
(see, for example, Abramow-
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Party—than a generation ago.
cased, but that development
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on issue, which for a genera-
Democratic candidates must
omination and Republican
the views of self-identified
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political observers would be
ifiers are arguably pro-life;
the Republican Party (never,
an's life) than to that of their
identified are nearly half are closer to the
ists, for a clear need) than to
ies, but there is still far more
parties than there is among

Where's the Polarization?

Still another source of confusion is the fact that voters' choices have become
more polarized even while their views on political issues have not. That is, in
recent presidential elections, close to 90 percent of partisans have voted for the
candidate of their own party. Republicans have always been that loyal (Fiorina,
Abrams, and Pope 2006, 26–27), but Democrats have become much more
consistent. In part that reflects the sorting noted above—there are not as many
conservative Democrats as there used to be, many of whom regularly defected to
vote for Republican presidential candidates. But in addition, partisan solidarity
in voting reflects the candidates between whom voters choose. In recent decades,
moderate Democrats and Republicans increasingly have faced a choice between
a liberal Democrat and a conservative Republican; naturally they tend to vote
for the candidate on their side of the spectrum, although they might well have
preferred more moderate choices.

In our view, the words and actions of a polarized political class—the can-
didates and elected officials, issue activists, interest group leaders, and infotainment
media—give rise to a greatly exaggerated picture of a polarized America. Thus,
in primary elections only a small proportion of voters disproportionately represen-
ting the extremes of the parties turn out, resulting in inmoderate candidates
defeating more moderate ones. And the media portray the harsh rhetoric and
noisy actions of activists as representative of the broader public when they are not.
In August 2009, cable television and the Internet deluged Americans with pic-
tures of angry and aggressive demonstrators at congressional town hall meetings
called to discuss the health care legislation then pending in Congress. While it is
certainly true that tens of millions of America had concerns and doubts about the
legislation, it is not true that tens of millions of Americans attended the meetings
and behaved like tantrum-throwing children, which is the impression a visitor
from another country might get from watching American TV.

In 1992 Bill Clinton ran as a "new Democrat" who would pull the party away
from its "tax-and-spend" past and reposition it nearer the center of the American
political landscape, but once elected, he deferred to the "permanent" Democratic
majorities in Congress, whose leadership saw no reason to change. The result was
the Republican Revolution of 1994, which by the end of the decade had gone too
far in the view of a majority. In the 2000 campaign, George W. Bush ran as a
compassionate conservative and promised to govern as a uniter not a divider, but
in office he governed as the greatest divider since the availability of modern sur-
vey data (Jacobson 2007). Most recently Barack Obama seemingly adopted a
more centrist stance and promised to overcome the polarized politics of recent
decades. But, despite the rhetoric, the electorate viewed him as virtually identical
to John Kerry in 2004 and slightly left of Al Gore in 2000 (Table 17-3). Evi-
dently his moderate stance was not communicated or not believed. Perhaps the
image of the Democratic Party was too well established for Obama to change in
the short run. Or perhaps well-publicized associations like that with the contro-
versial Reverend Jeremiah Wright offset his centrist rhetoric. Or perhaps the
electorate was correct in its collective perception. In his first year, Obama, like

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Democrats</th>
<th>Republicans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 17-3 Perceived Locations of Presidential Candidates on Seven-Point Liberal-Conservative Scale*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Democrat</th>
<th>Republican</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>3.2**</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


*1 = extremely liberal, 7 = extremely conservative

**First column under a party label is with “haven’t thought much about it” responses recoded as moderates, second number with such responses omitted.

Clinton in 1992, deferred to Democratic congressional majorities that are arguably more liberal than the country as a whole. And at the time of this writing in late summer, his approval numbers have tumbled.

The bottom line is that those who decry the current polarization of American politics should place the blame on public officials, candidates, and the thin stratum of active citizens who constitute the political class. The electorate is not to blame.

Notes

1. The ANES allows respondents to opt out by choosing “haven’t thought much about it” whereas the GSS codes responses as “don’t know” only if they are volunteered. The result is a much higher proportion of “don’t knows” in the ANES. There are correspondingly more moderates in the GSS, suggesting that respondents who really do not know what they are place themselves in the middle, providing some justification for the common practice of combining the two categories.
2. Surveys showed the public shifting back toward the right by late summer of 2009. See, for example, Langer (2009).
3. In a recent paper Mayer (2009) examines trends in fifteen NES seven-point and thermometer scales. He finds increased polarization in one, decreased polarization in three, and no change in eleven. He concludes that “issues and groups that are divisive today were just as divisive in the 1970s and 1980s.”
4. For an extensive treatment of party sorting, see Levendusky (2009b).
5. As shown in the table, McCain was perceived as about the same as Bush in 2000.