Introduction to the American Political Process

Class 19: Polarization

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1. **Reading**

McCarty, “Polarization: What Everyone Needs to Know”
Reading
**Definitions**

**Polarization**: the increasing support for extreme political views relative to the support for centrist or moderate views

**Partisanship**: a strong bias in favor of one’s party and strong dislike or prejudice against other parties

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Example: Abortion
1 = abortion is legal in all circumstances; 2 = abortion legal in some cases and restricted in others; 3 = complete ban on abortion

1 2 3

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Note that this definition has nothing to do with partisan attachment.

**Mass vs. elite** polarization

- **Mass**: voters and citizens
- **Elite**: Officeholders, donors, activists, public intellectuals, party officials...

Note that mass and elite opinion do not always move in tandem:

- Abortion: mass more moderate
- Vietnam: mass stopped supporting war before elites
Partisan divergence: The distance from the median/average Democrat to the median/average Republican

There are two possible causes of partisan divergence:

1. Polarization
2. Partisan sorting
Is polarization bad?

Arguments in favor of some polarization:

1. Consensus may mean representation failure

2. “Responsible Party Theory”: distinct choices are good for democracy

But near universal agreement that current levels are too high.

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Are elites polarized?

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Is the public polarized?

- No evidence that average policy views have become more extreme since 1970
- Individuals are better sorted into parties (more ideological constraint) (Fiorina)
  - Suggests that elite polarization came first
- But evidence that more politically engaged publics are more polarized (Abramowitz)
  - Suggests that mass polarization could have come first

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What is the nature of mass partisan sorting?

1. Ideology-driven sorting
   • E.g. a conservative Democrat changes party label to Republican

2. Party-driven sorting
   • E.g. a conservative Democrat changes his policy views to more liberal ones

Empirical evidence:

• Same voters interviewed in 1992, 1994, 1996

• Those who sorted were mostly party-driven, with two important exceptions:
  • Abortion
  • Southern Democrats
What issues has the public sorted on?

1. **Social welfare issues**: support for government spending and government health insurance, tax rates
   - From 1972-2000, no evidence of increased divergence over time; parties were divergent and remain divergent

2. **Cultural issues**: Abortion, sexuality, gender roles, drug legalization
   - Significant sorting over time: no divergence in 1972 and significant divergence now

3. **Racial issues**: Support for civil rights, racial equality, integration, fair housing, affirmative action
   - Some divergence in 1972 and more divergence now

**Conflict extension**: The *number* of issues where parties have staked a clear position is growing.
By “cause” we mean that without $X$, there would be no $Y$. Understood in two ways:

1. An initial cause: without $X$, polarization would never have occurred

2. A precipitating factor: $X$ caused polarization, but $Z$ made it worse than it would have been otherwise
Possible causes

1. Southern Realignment
2. Economic inequality
Polarization and inequality

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Precipitating factors

1. Extreme leaders

2. The media
   - Selective exposure
   - Persuasion
   - Disengagement of less political viewers

3. Social media
   - “Echo chamber” effect may be overstated: most people get news from moderate sources
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