

# Has the American Public Polarized?

*With the presidential campaigns well under way, talk of polarization once again fills the air. Although Americans think that polarization has increased, that is a misperception. By the standard definition of polarization—the middle loses to the extremes—there is no evidence of increasing polarization among the public at large. In addition to this reassuring negative finding about polarization, current research also allays fears that Americans will segregate themselves into “ideological silos” in which they only receive political news compatible with their preexisting positions. A succeeding essay will discuss the process of party sorting, which is often confused with polarization. Sorting clearly is occurring and has significant negative effects on our politics.*

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Series No. 2

*“The red states get redder, the blue states get bluer, and the political map of the United States takes on the coloration of the Civil War.” —E. J. Dionne Jr.*

*“In the wee small hours of November 3, 2004, a new country appeared on the map of the modern world: The DSA, the Divided States of America. . . . Not since the Civil War has the fault line between its two halves been so glaringly clear.” —Simon Schama*

## What is Polarization?

Claims like those quoted above became commonplace in the early years of the new century. Consequently, anyone who pays even casual attention to discussions of American politics in the media is likely to believe that American politics has polarized.<sup>1</sup> But although assertions about polarization often are made in unconditional form, such claims can be true or false depending on what aspect of American politics we consider. The US Congress, for example, clearly supports the contention that American politics has polarized. Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal have developed a statistical methodology for estimating the ideological positions of

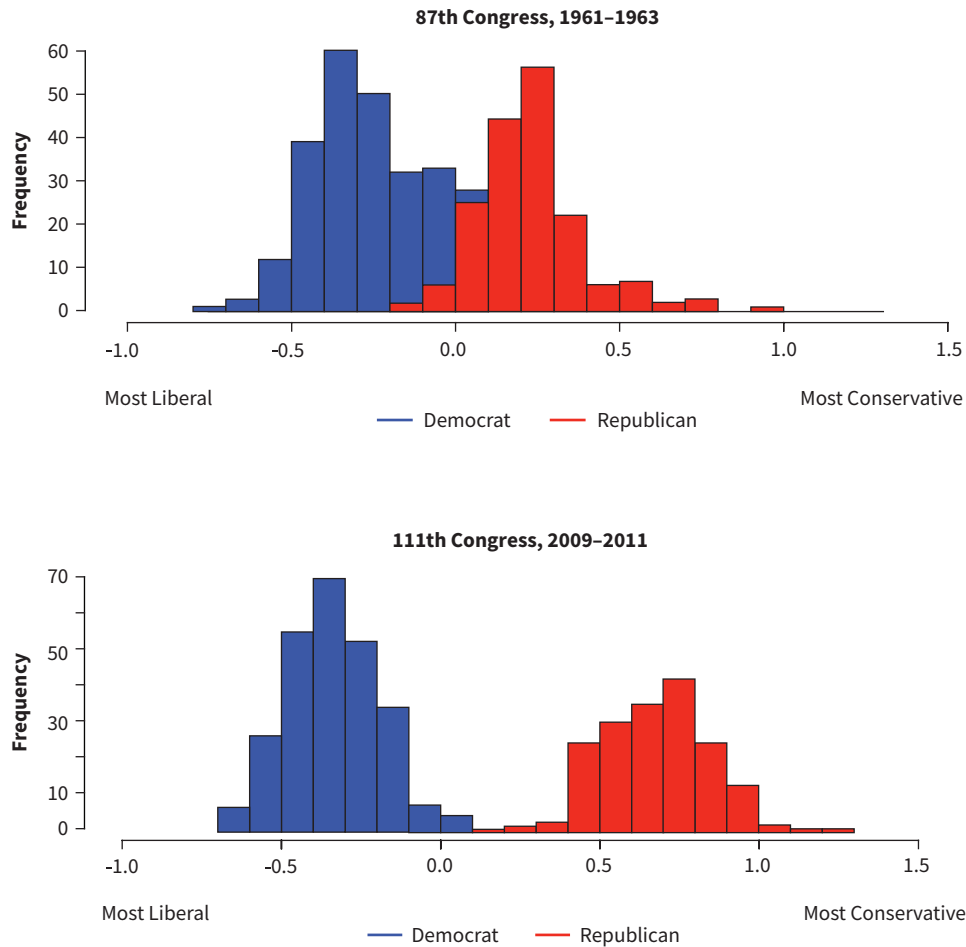
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Quotations from E. J. Dionne Jr., “One Nation Deeply Divided,” *Washington Post*, November 7, 2003, and Simon Schama, “Onward Christian Soldiers,” *The Guardian*, November 5, 2004, <http://renew.com/general59/cche.htm>.

1. On the increasing use of the polarization frame by the media since 2002, see Matthew Levendusky and Neil Malhotra, “Does Media Coverage of Partisan Polarization Affect Political Attitudes?” *Political Communication* 33, no. 2 (2016): 283–301, figure 1.



Figure 1: Parties in the House of Representatives, Then and Now



legislators from their roll call votes.<sup>2</sup> For much of American history, especially in more recent decades, members of Congress can be placed on a single ideological

2. Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal, *Ideology & Congress* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2007), 82. Other scholars have developed alternative methodologies, but the Poole-Rosenthal method is the most well known and widely used. All methodologies that rely on roll call votes as data likely overestimate the extent of actual polarization because party leaders try to prevent issues that divide their party from coming to the floor. In addition, there is some difficulty in differentiating pure partisan “teammanship” from ideological disagreement. See Frances E. Lee, *Beyond Ideology: Politics, Principles, and Partisanship in the U.S. Senate* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); and Laurel Harbridge, *Is Bipartisanship Dead? Policy Agreement and Agenda-Setting in the House of Representatives* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

dimension, generally considered to incorporate economic issues, particularly redistribution. Figure 1 compares the Congress elected in 1960 with that elected in 2008. Evidently the Congress faced by Barack Obama in his first year as president was far more polarized than the one faced a half century earlier by John Kennedy in his first year—more members were on the left and right of the ideological spectrum in 2009–10 than in 1961–62 and fewer were in the middle. Moreover, the partisan distributions have become more distinct. In sharp contrast to Congresses elected a half century ago, in most recent Congresses the party distributions do not overlap: the most liberal Republican falls to the right of the most conservative Democrat. Poole and Rosenthal date the start of this polarizing trend to the early 1970s.

Many American state legislatures show the same polarizing trend.<sup>3</sup> Utah, Washington, and California, for example, are now more polarized than the US House. Other polarized state houses include Colorado, New Mexico, Wisconsin, Michigan, Arizona, Maryland, Texas, and Minnesota. Most state senates are even more polarized than the US Senate. For reasons as yet unknown, a few state legislatures—like Louisiana, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and West Virginia—seem to have bucked the polarizing trend.<sup>4</sup>

Data on other important political actors are less extensive, but figure 2 shows trends similar to those for members of Congress. Party and issue activists, for example, have moved further apart in the past several decades. Here party activists are those who self-identify as a Republican or Democrat and report that they worked for a candidate or party.<sup>5</sup> Such individuals typically make up 5 percent or so of the eligible electorate. In 1972 such activists were 1.53 units apart on the standard seven-point ideological scale included in the American National Election Studies (ANES). As figure 2 shows, that distance had doubled to 3.04 units by 2012.

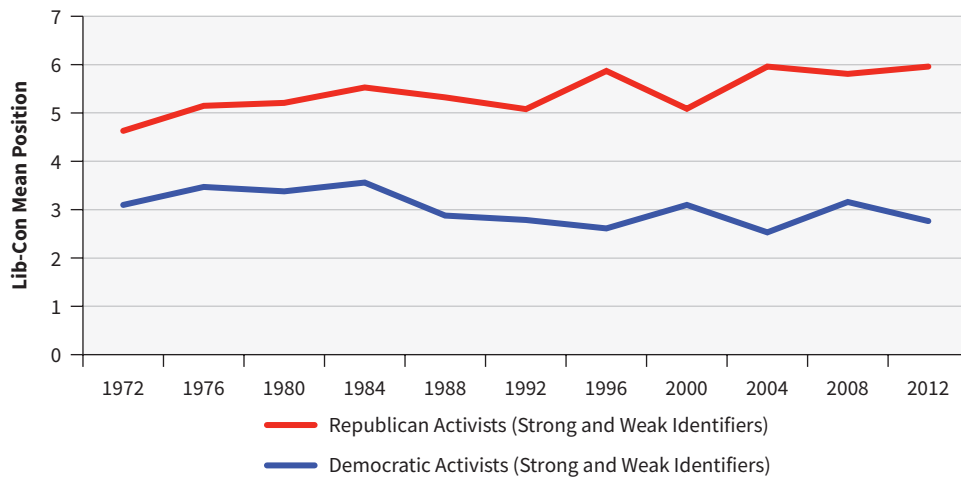
3. Boris Shor and Nolan McCarty have provided the relevant analyses: “New Update of State Legislative Data Released,” July 24, 2014, <https://research.bshor.com/category/ideology/>.

4. Interestingly, some of the least polarized legislatures have a reputation for petty corruption. Possibly, legislators who are skimming off the top are more likely to make bipartisan deals to keep the gravy train running smoothly.

5. As Carmines and Stimson note, working in the campaign “is a close conceptual fit to the ordinary connotation of ‘activist.’” Edward G. Carmines and James A. Stimson, *Issue Evolution: Race and the Transformation of American Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 93.



Figure 2: Partisan Activists Are Polarizing



Source: ANES. Don't knows omitted. All ANES data in this book are from the face-to-face survey mode.

\*Activists are strong and weak partisans who worked for a party or candidate.

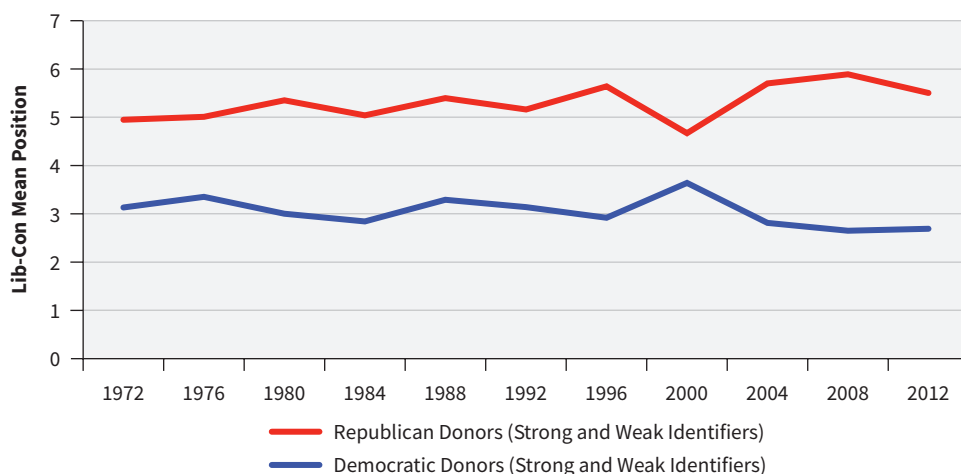
Fewer activists fall in the moderate middle today; more position themselves toward the extremes. The same is true for campaign contributors, another class of important political actors.<sup>6</sup> Generally they make up about 10 percent or so of a national sample. As shown in figure 3, donors too have become more polarized during the past several decades. In both cases, Republicans contribute more to the increase in polarization than Democrats do. The 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study surveyed 35,000 people, a large enough sample to include numerous donors. That survey found that relative to those who do not contribute, donors—whether big or small—tend to come from the ideological poles, a tendency that research indicates is increasing.<sup>7</sup>

The preceding figures capture our intuitive understanding of the concept of polarization: the middle loses to the extremes. There is a great deal of evidence that at the highest levels of political involvement—elected officials and candidates, donors,

6. There is less overlap between donors and those who work in campaigns than one might expect—one-third to two-thirds depending on the election.

7. As demonstrated by an extensive study of polarization in Congress and state legislatures over the past two decades by Raymond J. La Raja and Brian F. Schaffner, *Campaign Finance and Political Polarization: When Purists Prevail* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2015). See also Adam Bonica, “Mapping the Ideological Marketplace,” *American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 2 (April 2014): 367–86.

Figure 3: Partisan Donors Are Polarizing



Source: ANES. DKs omitted.

\*Donors are strong and weak partisans who donated to a campaign.

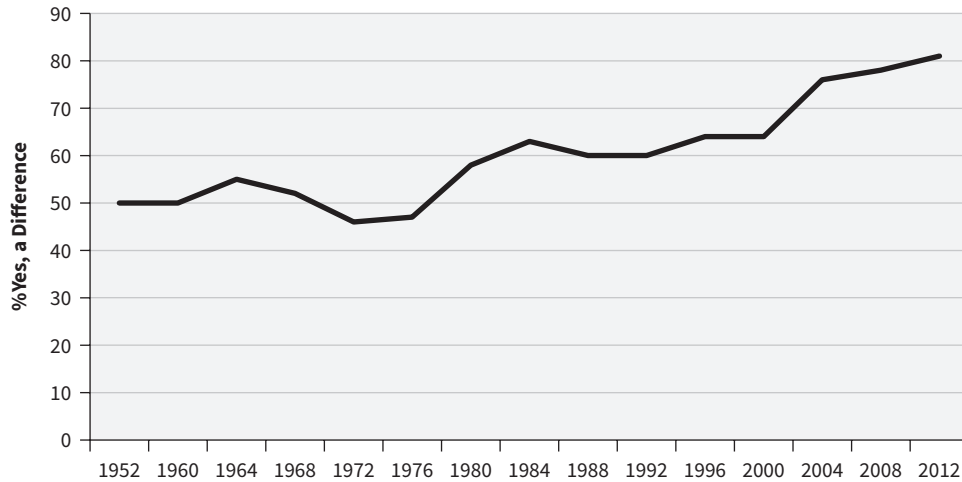
party and issue activists—the claim of increased polarization is accurate. In what follows I will call this rarified stratum of political actors the political class, as compared to the rest of the electorate whom I will refer to as normal people.<sup>8</sup>

Figure 4 indicates that the American people recognize the polarizing trends shown in the preceding figures. The proportion believing that there are important differences between the two parties has risen 30 percentage points in the past half century. In 1968 almost half the electorate agreed with American Independent Party candidate George Wallace when he scoffed that there was not a “dime’s worth of difference” between the Republicans and the Democrats, but a much smaller proportion agrees with such an assertion today. As the parties became more distinct, more and more Americans naturally came to believe that the outcome made a difference to them: more people care about the outcome of elections today than did before the election of Bill Clinton (figure 5). According to the ANES, from Dwight Eisenhower in 1952 through George H. W. Bush in 1988, the proportion of people reporting that they “cared a good deal” about the outcome of the presidential election ranged between

8. The political class numbers 15 percent or so of the American citizenry, meaning that they are abnormal in a statistical sense. James Davison Hunter, “The Culture Wars Reconsidered,” in *Is There a Culture War? A Dialogue on Values and American Public Life*, ed. E. J. Dionne Jr. and Michael Cromartie (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2006), 27.

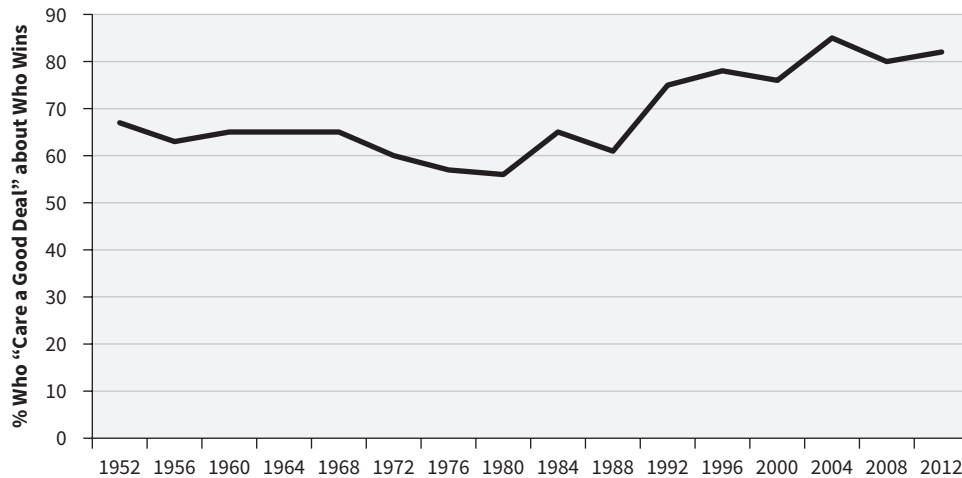


Figure 4: Americans Correctly See That the Parties Have Become More Distinct



Source: ANES. Question not asked in 1956.

Figure 5: Americans Increasingly Care about the Outcome of the Presidential Election

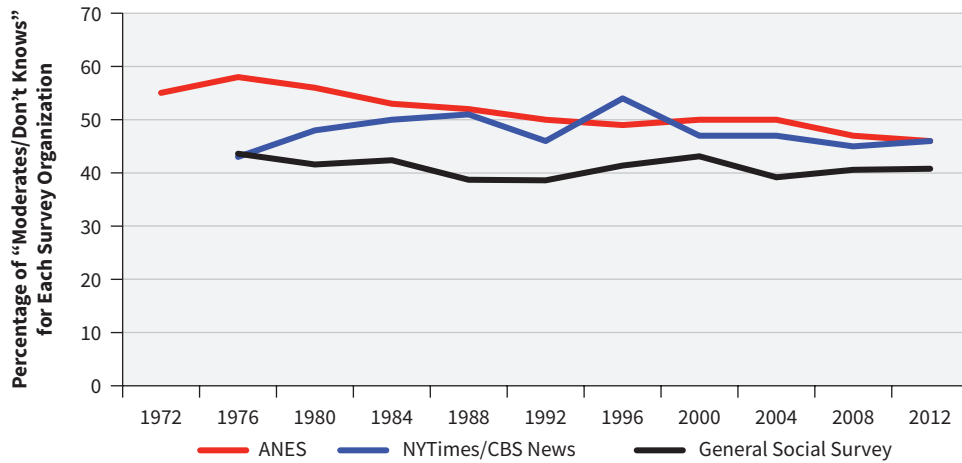


Source: ANES.

56 and 67 percent. Since 1992 it has never fallen below 75 percent and has ranged between 75 and 85 percent.

Given the trends pictured in figures 1–3, many readers will be surprised to learn that we do not see analogous trends when we look at distributions of normal people—typical Americans who are not deeply involved in politics. On the contrary, when Americans are asked to classify themselves ideologically, we do not find them moving

Figure 6: Normal Americans Have Not Polarized Ideologically



away from the middle and lumping up at the liberal and conservative poles. Instead, as figure 6 shows, the way that Americans self-categorize their ideological positions has changed little in four decades.<sup>9</sup> The General Social Survey (GSS) series is flat, showing nothing beyond sampling variability. The CBS News/New York Times series fluctuates more, but the proportion of moderates in the two Obama elections is about the same as in the two Carter elections.<sup>10</sup> The ANES series shows a drop of about 8 percentage points, but “moderate” remains the modal category in the series. Moreover, as political scientist Philip Converse pointed out, even this decline may be more apparent than real—the drop in moderates in the ANES series is due mostly to a drop in “don’t know” responses, which are typically classified as moderate.<sup>11</sup>

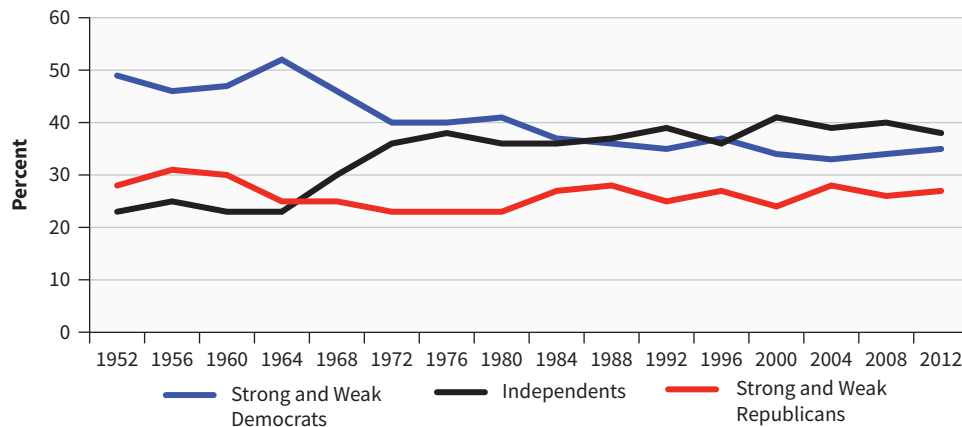
9. “Liberal” has always been the least popular category in the American context. Although more popular, “conservative” typically trails “moderate,” which normally occupies the modal position. On the historical popularity of the conservative label, see Lloyd A. Free and Hadley Cantril, *The Political Beliefs of Americans: A Study of Public Opinion* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1967). Research by Ellis and Stimson shows that liberal is a more precisely defined category than conservative. That is, people who self-classify as liberals have liberal policy preferences, but many of those who self-classify as conservatives fail to hold consistently conservative policy preferences. See Christopher Ellis and James A. Stimson, *Ideology in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

10. The CBS News/New York Times series is based on the poll conducted closest to the election.

11. To explain, survey response rates have declined over the period covered by these time series. Converse cautions that contemporary survey samples capture a more informed and interested slice of the electorate than those taken at the dawn of the survey research era when response rates were over 80 percent, because “one major source of refusal to answer a political questionnaire (or to join a second-wave panel) is lack of interest in, or sense of competence about, the subject matter.” Consistent with his observation, the GSS



Figure 7: Normal Americans Have Not Divided into Two Partisan Camps



Source: ANES.

Knowing that Americans historically have not been particularly ideological, we might conceptualize polarization in partisan rather than ideological terms. If so, over the years independents should have been migrating to the Democratic and Republican camps. But partisanship data are even less kind to the polarization claim than ideological data. Figure 7 shows that it is partisans, not independents, who have lost ground: independents are now the largest single “partisan” category.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Americans increasingly act as they talk. Administrative officials in states with party registration (currently twenty-one states and the District of Columbia) report a sharp rise in the proportion of Americans registering as “decline to state” (DtS) or some other term for independent, despite potential restrictions on their opportunity to vote in semiclosed or closed primaries.<sup>13</sup> Between 1976 and 2008, the average DtS registration increased from 12 to 18 percent across 1,200 counties in party

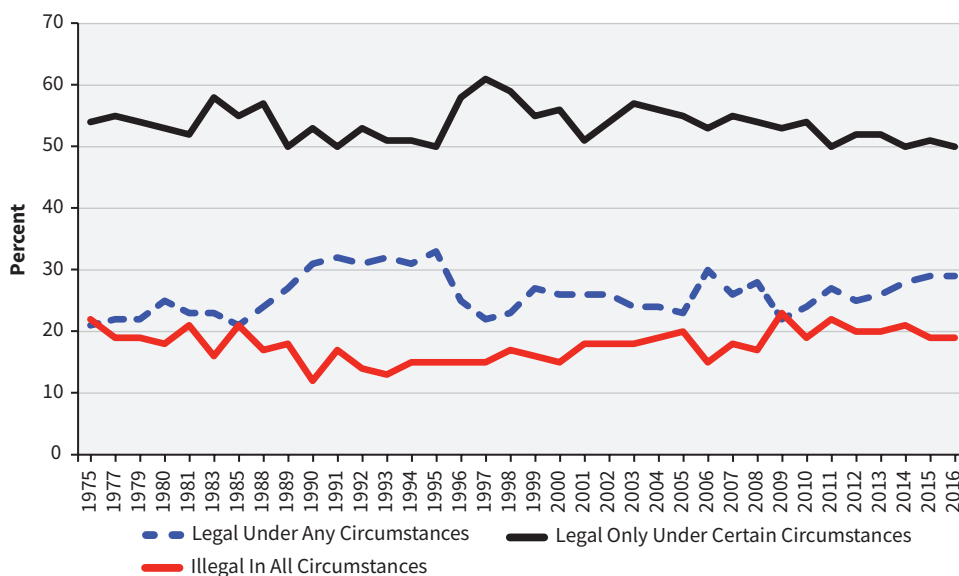
response rate dropped only 5 percentage points between the first and last observations in figure 6 whereas the ANES dropped sharply after 1994 and was 35 percentage points lower in 2012 than in 1972. See Philip Converse, “Democratic Theory and Electoral Reality,” *Critical Review* 18, no. 1–3 (2006): 312–313. *Contra* Converse, James Campbell takes the declines in the time series at face value but even he notes, “Despite the substantial seven percentage point shift away from the center, the 2012 distribution does not look much different from the 1972 distribution and is not remotely close to being bimodal or even flat.” James E. Campbell, *Polarized: Making Sense of a Divided America* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 69.

12. The interpretation of the large increase in independents is controversial in political science. I address this in the sixth essay, “Independents: The Marginal Members of an Electoral Majority.”

13. Eric McGhee and Daniel Krimm, “Party Registration and the Geography of Party Polarization,” *Polity* 41, no. 3 (July 2009): 345–367.



**Figure 8: Most American Believe Abortion Should Be Legal Only in Certain Circumstances, with Little Change in Forty Years**



Source: Gallup Staff, "Abortion," May 2016, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1576/abortion.aspx>.

registration states.<sup>14</sup> The trend is nationwide and shows no sign of abating.<sup>15</sup> Independents constitute a plurality of registrants in twelve states scattered across the country.<sup>16</sup>

Alternatively, if one thinks that despite the negative picture presented by general orientations like ideology and partisanship, Americans have polarized around certain key issues, one again will search in vain for supporting evidence. Consider abortion, an issue that has roiled American politics since the 1970s and again came to the fore in the 2016 presidential primaries. Despite the polar positions advocated by the pro-choice and pro-life groups, the Gallup Poll data plotted in figure 8 indicate that most Americans continue to fall between the two poles. For four decades the majority position in the United States has been that abortion should be legal only under some

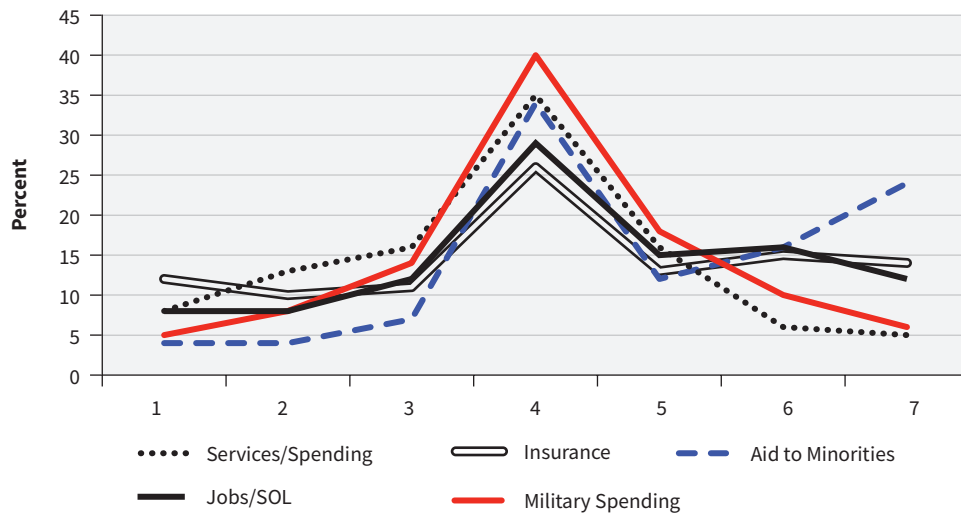
14. Samuel J. Abrams and Morris P. Fiorina, "The Big Sort That Wasn't: A Skeptical Reexamination," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 45, no. 2 (April 2012), [http://journals.cambridge.org/download.php?file=%2FPSC%2FPSC45\\_02%2FS1049096512000017a.pdf&code=9c96835a96127d9728e851f47f408cbf](http://journals.cambridge.org/download.php?file=%2FPSC%2FPSC45_02%2FS1049096512000017a.pdf&code=9c96835a96127d9728e851f47f408cbf).

15. Alex Gauthier, "Independents Exceed Party Registration in Key States," Independent Voter Project, June 18, 2013, <http://ivn.us/2013/06/18/independents-exceed-party-registration-in-5-states/>.

16. As of 2014, these were Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Connecticut, Idaho, Iowa, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, and Rhode Island.



Figure 9: Normal Americans Continue to Be Issue Centrists



Source: 2012 ANES.

\*“Haven’t thought much about it” responses are recoded as position 4.

circumstances. Moreover, the proportions who truly believe that abortion should always or never be legal are actually significantly fewer than the proportions reported in the Gallup data.<sup>17</sup>

By no means is the abortion issue unrepresentative. In every presidential year since 1984 the ANES has measured respondents’ positions on five policy issues: private insurance versus government-provided health insurance, lower government spending versus more government services, more or less government aid to minorities, lower or higher defense spending, and whether or not government should guarantee jobs and living standards. For each issue respondents are asked to place themselves on a seven-point scale running from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. As depicted in figure 9, the distributions in 2012 maintain the same generally centrist shape as they did in 1984. Although there are somewhat fewer people in the center on several issues in 2012, it is not because they shifted to both extremes. On the contrary, there is a notable rightward shift on aid to minorities and a smaller one on defense spending but leftward shifts on health

17. Morris P. Fiorina with Samuel J. Abrams, *Disconnect: The Breakdown of Representation in American Politics* (Norman, OK: Oklahoma University Press, 2009), 35; Lynn Vavreck, “Candidates Fight Over Abortion, but Public Has Surprising Level of Harmony,” *New York Times*, May 6, 2015, [www.nytimes.com/2015/05/06/upshot/candidates-disagree-on-abortion-but-public-is-in-surprising-harmony.html?ref=upshot&abt=0002&abg=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/06/upshot/candidates-disagree-on-abortion-but-public-is-in-surprising-harmony.html?ref=upshot&abt=0002&abg=1).

insurance and more government spending versus fewer services.<sup>18</sup> Public opinion on specific issues changes in response to real-world developments, but it changes gradually and inconsistently and shows no polarizing trend comparable to those shown by members of the political class.

Finally, since 1987 the Pew Research Center has been conducting major surveys of forty-eight political beliefs and values held by Americans. Here is the summary statement from the most recent (2012) release:

The way that the public thinks about poverty, opportunity, business, unions, religion, civic duty, foreign affairs and many other subjects is, to a large extent, the same today as in 1987. The values that unified Americans 25 years ago remain areas of consensus today, while the values that evenly divide the nation remain split. On most of the questions asked in both 1987 and 2012, the number agreeing is within five percentage points of the number who agreed 25 years ago. And on almost none has the basic balance of opinion tipped from agree to disagree or vice versa.<sup>19</sup>

All in all, the data compiled by academic and commercial survey organizations indicate that in broad outline the American public has changed little in the past four decades. In the aggregate the public today looks much the same as the one that chose between Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter in 1976, well before the polarization era. This inconvenient fact makes it hard to argue—as some pundits and a few political scientists continue to do so—that polarization in Congress and state legislatures and among party activists and donors has been driven by the polarization of the vast majority of Americans who do not belong to the political class.<sup>20</sup>

### False Polarization

In response to the question “Has the American electorate polarized?” the data presented above clearly answer no.<sup>21</sup> The American public, however, believes that the

18. Cynics might suspect that the rightward shift on aid to minorities was a reaction to Obama’s presidency, but the shift actually began in the mid-’90s.

19. Pew Research Center, “Partisan Polarization Surges in Bush, Obama Years,” June 4, 2012, [www.people-press.org/2012/06/04/partisan-polarization-surges-in-bush-obama-years/](http://www.people-press.org/2012/06/04/partisan-polarization-surges-in-bush-obama-years/).

20. Campbell is one of the few political scientists who reject the scholarly consensus, arguing that “polarization in the electorate preceded the greater polarization of party elites.” Campbell, *Polarized*, 52.

21. Other recent studies that show similarly negative findings are reviewed in Claude S. Fischer and Greggor Mattson, “Is America Fragmenting?” *Annual Review of Sociology* 35 (August 2009): 435–455.



answer is yes. Although normal Americans who are largely uninvolved in politics correctly recognize (figure 4) that the political class has polarized (figures 1–3), they incorrectly believe—contrary to figures 6–9—that they have polarized as well. As the headline on a recent Gallup report read, “Most in U.S. Say Americans Are Divided on Important Values.”<sup>22</sup> A number of academic studies have documented such incorrect beliefs. Moreover, *these studies consistently report that it is the members of the political class who have the least accurate perceptions and beliefs*. Ironically, the great majority of Americans whose lives do not revolve around politics are more accurate in their political perceptions than their more politically involved compatriots who—wrongly—consider themselves well-informed.

In a widely noted line of research, Westfall, Van Boven, Chambers, and Judd show that the more partisan or ideological the respondents, the more they exaggerate the differences between themselves and their political adversaries.<sup>23</sup> The research is based on the ANES conducted between 1970 and 2008. Considering issues like those graphed in figure 9 the researchers compare the actual positions reported by people in specific partisan categories with the perceptions of those positions held by people in other categories. They find systematic exaggeration of polarization: the positions actually held by Republicans, for example, are not as extreme as Democrats think they are, and vice versa. Consistent with various psychological theories, the tendency to push the other side further away is stronger than the tendency to exaggerate the extremity of one’s own side. Not surprisingly, the exaggeration of the extremity of one’s political opponents is positively related to one’s own extremity: stronger partisans are less accurate than weaker partisans who are less accurate than independents. The perceptions held by party activists and donors are the least accurate of all.

Similarly, Graham, Nosek, and Haidt examine the “moral stereotypes” held by liberals and conservatives.<sup>24</sup> Do liberals lack respect for authority and tradition, as conservatives think, and do conservatives lack compassion and a sense of fairness, as

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22. Lydia Saad, “Most in U.S. Say Americans Are Divided on Important Values,” Gallup, December 14, 2012, [www.gallup.com/poll/159257/say-americans-divided-important-values.aspx](http://www.gallup.com/poll/159257/say-americans-divided-important-values.aspx).

23. Jacob Westfall, Leaf Van Boven, John R. Chambers, and Charles M. Judd, “Perceiving Political Polarization in the United States: Party Identity Strength and Attitude Extremity Exacerbate the Perceived Partisan Divide,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 10, no. 2 (March 2015): 145–158.

24. Jesse Graham, Brian Nosek, and Jonathan Haidt, “The Moral Stereotypes of Liberals and Conservatives: Exaggeration of Differences across the Political Divide,” *PLoS ONE* 7, no. 2 (December 2012), [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2027266](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2027266).

liberals think? They report findings consistent with those of Westfall et al. on issue perceptions.<sup>25</sup> Both liberals and conservatives exaggerate the prevalence of moral stereotypes on both their side (the in-group) and the other side (the out-group). Contrary to popular stereotypes, self-identified liberals exaggerate moral differences more than do conservatives. Moderates are the most accurate.

Levendusky and Malhotra investigate false polarization using both surveys and laboratory experiments. The surveys show that Americans believe the country is more polarized than it is, by a factor of two on average.<sup>26</sup> Again, distorted perceptions are most common among party and issue extremists. People with extreme positions on issues are the most likely to exaggerate polarization, especially in regard to the positions of people on the other side of the issue, compared to those on their side. Additionally, the laboratory experiments Levendusky and Malhotra perform indicate that media coverage contributes to such false polarization, which in turn is associated with “affective polarization”—the tendency to dislike the other side over and above their policy differences.<sup>27</sup> (Essay no. 3 will consider the subject of affective polarization.)

Finally, Ahler reports findings from two California surveys that are similar to the preceding findings based on national samples in surveys and laboratory experiments.<sup>28</sup> Both liberals and conservatives exaggerate the extremity of the positions held by members of their own group as well as those held by the opposing group. Again, moderates have the most accurate perceptions.

All in all, the evidence indicates that those most psychologically involved in politics have the least accurate perceptions of the views held by their fellow citizens. False polarization is widespread. The most recent contribution to this area of research suggests a mechanism to explain the prevalence of this false polarization. Ahler and Sood asked a representative national sample to estimate the social characteristics of

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25. See Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon, 2012).

26. Matthew Levendusky and Neil Malhotra, “(Mis)Perceptions of Partisan Polarization in the American Public,” special issue, *Public Opinion Quarterly* 80 (2016): 378–391.

27. Levendusky and Malhotra, “Media Coverage of Partisan Polarization.”

28. Douglas J. Ahler, “Self-Fulfilling Misperceptions of Public Polarization,” *The Journal of Politics* 76, no. 3 (July 2014): 607–620.



people in the two parties.<sup>29</sup> To wit, what proportion of Republicans are senior citizens, Southern or evangelical, or earn upward of \$250,000? What proportion of Democrats are black, atheists or agnostics, union members, or LGBT? The results are mind-boggling. Misperception is massive. For example, Democrats think that 44 percent of Republicans make more than \$250,000 per year, when the actual percentage is 2, and that 44 percent of Republicans are senior citizens, when the actual percentage is 21. For their part, Republicans think that 36 percent of Democrats are atheists or agnostics, when the actual percentage is about 9, and that 38 percent of Democrats are LGBT, when the true percentage is about 6. Once again, the more politically involved the respondent, the greater the misperception. The tendency of political media to highlight the most colorful and controversial personalities in the two parties (“exemplification”) likely contributes to this state of extreme misperception of the social composition of the parties.<sup>30</sup> The very vocal and visible activist groups who shape the parties’ agendas are another likely contributor.<sup>31</sup>

In sum, Americans believe that the country is polarized even though the same studies and others reviewed above show that the perception of polarization far outstrips the reality. It is disconcerting to learn that the members of the political class, who dominate politics in America not only are representative of the country at large, but also have the most distorted view of their country.

### **False Consensus**

Not only do partisans and ideologues misperceive the extremity of the other side, resulting in a much larger perceptual gap than the one that objectively exists (false polarization), they similarly misperceive how typical they are of their own side (false

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29. Douglas J. Ahler and Gaurav Sood, “The Parties in Our Heads: Misperceptions about Party Composition and Their Consequences,” May 22, 2016, [http://www.dougahler.com/uploads/2/4/6/9/24697799/ahlersood\\_partycomposition.pdf](http://www.dougahler.com/uploads/2/4/6/9/24697799/ahlersood_partycomposition.pdf).

30. Dolf Zillmann and Hans-Bernd Brosius, *Exemplification in Communication: The Influence of Case Reports on the Perception of Issues* (London: Routledge, 2000); and Michael McCluskey and Young Mie Kim, “Moderatism or Polarization? Representation of Advocacy Groups’ Ideology in Newspapers,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 89 (September 6, 2012): 565–84.

31. After viewing these figures on misperception at one of my talks, a recently defeated Blue Dog Democratic congressman commented (paraphrasing from memory) that it was perfectly rational for people to infer that most Republicans were rich since Republicans spent so much time talking about tax rates, and it was perfectly rational for people to infer that a large proportion of Democrats must be gay because Democrats put so much emphasis on LGBT issues.

consensus). Some decades ago Noelle-Neumann wrote of the Spiral of Silence.<sup>32</sup> People who believe they are in the minority in their group often refrain from expressing their disagreement for fear of being shunned or otherwise sanctioned by the group. Left unchecked, this dynamic leads the majority to believe that there are no dissidents, whereas those in the minority believe that they are alone in their views.<sup>33</sup> As a result, both majority and minority members of a group come to believe—erroneously—that the group is politically homogeneous. This finding is consistent with the persuasive research of Diana Mutz.<sup>34</sup> Unlike political junkies, normal Americans get little pleasure out of political argument. On hearing an argument in the workplace with which they disagree, for example, they are likely to avoid the argument.

An online study by Yahoo! researchers illustrates the results of this process. In early 2008, approximately 2,500 Facebook users were surveyed about issues using questions adapted from the General Social Survey (GSS). They were also asked about how their Facebook friends felt about these issues. Not surprisingly, friends agreed more than nonfriends—by an average of 17 percentage points. But even close friends disagreed nearly 30 percent of the time, although they did not perceive this level of disagreement: “[I]t appears that much of the diversity of opinions that exists in social networks is not apparent to their members.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, surveys reporting that Americans have homogeneous friendship networks should not be taken at face value. People *think* their friends agree with them more than they actually do.

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32. Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, *The Spiral of Silence*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

33. On several occasions after giving a public lecture I have been contacted by Republicans who express disbelief that one-fifth of strong Republicans believe that abortion should always be a woman’s choice or that 40 percent of strong Republicans believe that federal gun control laws should be stronger (both were facts in 2008 according to the ANES). “I don’t know *any* Republicans who believe that,” they write. In all likelihood, Republicans out of step with their fellow partisans on abortion or gun control do not advertise that fact.

34. “[P]eople entrenched in politically heterogeneous social networks retreat from political activity mainly out of a desire to avoid putting their social relationships at risk.” Diana Mutz, *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

35. Shared Goel, Winter Mason, and Duncan J. Watts, “Real and Perceived Attitude Agreement in Social Networks,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 99 (October 2010): 611–621. Consistent with these results, a more recent study of Facebook users reported that more than 20 percent of users’ friends were from a different party. Eytan Bakshy, Solomon Messing, and Lada Adamic, “Exposure to Ideologically Diverse News and Opinion on Facebook,” *Science* 348 (May 7, 2015): 1130–1132.



## Maybe We're Not Polarized Yet

On digesting the negative evidence about polarization presented above, some believers in the polarization narrative suggest that the public just has not polarized *yet*. Surely, they say, the polarization of the political class eventually will produce a reflection in the electorate. Contributing to that expectation is the vast increase in partisan and ideological programming on cable television and, more recently, the explosion of Internet sites that allow individuals to monitor only those news sources compatible with their political biases—if they so desire.<sup>36</sup> As social media, personalized search, and other technological “advances” proliferate, concerned observers have expressed the fear that Americans will isolate themselves in “ideological silos” or “echo chambers” that reinforce their views and insulate them from the views of the other side.<sup>37</sup> Given these technological trends, is there a serious danger that Americans will balkanize into two non-overlapping universes, each of which has its own facts and its own interpretations of reality?

Such questions fall under the rubric of what is known as the segregation hypothesis, which in this context has nothing to do with race. Rather, the hypothesis addresses biased information sources and their consequences for democratic societies. The concerns incorporated in the segregation hypothesis are real and the hypothesis intuitively plausible. Moreover, in laboratory experiments the effect is usually demonstrable. Studies like those of Iyengar and Hahn report that, in controlled conditions, subjects show a preference for information that is consistent with their prior political attitudes.<sup>38</sup> Levendusky’s experiments show that partisan media make those who hold extreme views even more extreme.<sup>39</sup> Other laboratory studies report conflicting results, however, particularly when people are given the option of avoiding political news altogether.<sup>40</sup> Fortunately for American politics, studies undertaken in

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36. According to some analysts, such “motivated reasoning” is not only common but biologically automatic. See Milton Lodge and Charles S. Taber, *The Rationalizing Voter* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

37. Cass Sunstein, *Republic.com* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You* (New York: Penguin, 2011).

38. Shanto Iyengar and Kyu S. Hahn, “Red Media, Blue Media: Evidence of Ideological Selectivity in Media Use,” *Journal of Communication* 59 (2009): 19–39.

39. Matthew Levendusky, “Why Do Partisan Media Polarize Voters?” *American Journal of Political Science* 57, no. 3 (February 26, 2013): 611–623.

40. Kevin Arceneaux and Martin Johnson, *Changing Minds or Changing Channels? Partisan News in an Age of Choice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).



real-world conditions provide much more limited support for the segregation hypothesis than do some laboratory studies.<sup>41</sup>

Those who write about the dangers of ideological segregation are generally themselves well informed and highly interested in public affairs. They have a natural inclination to assume that most people are like them. But that assumption seriously overestimates the extent to which normal Americans follow politics. Historically, many social scientists have worried less about Americans getting their political information from biased sources than about them not getting any information at all. Research finds that despite the increase in educational levels in recent decades, and despite the explosion of information sources, Americans are at best no worse informed than they were a generation ago, a conclusion that especially holds for younger people.<sup>42</sup> The simple fact is that most Americans do not follow politics closely, and surveys overestimate the proportion that does: Markus Prior points out that Americans claim to follow public affairs at much higher rates than objective measures show.<sup>43</sup> Table 1 provides some data on actual media usage by the contemporary American public.

There are about 230 million eligible voters in the United States. On average, a bit less than 2 percent of the electorate tunes in to *Meet the Press* on Sunday mornings. The circulation of the top national newspapers is between 1 and 2 percent of the national electorate. Liberals gnash their teeth about Fox News and *The O'Reilly Factor* (the top-rated political show on cable television), probably an overreaction given that the

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41. Laboratory experiments in political science have exploded in popularity in recent years. The methodology has undeniable strengths, especially the capacity to pin down causal relationships. But problems of external validity are often severe. Effects that can be produced in tightly controlled conditions with strong manipulations may not generalize to complex and confusing real-world contexts when numerous forces are at work simultaneously.

42. Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996); Markus Prior, *Post-Broadcast Democracy: How Media Choice Increases Inequality in Political Involvement and Polarizes Elections* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Martin P. Wattenberg, *Is Voting for Young People?* chap. 3 (New York: Pearson, 2012); Jennifer L. Lawless and Richard L. Fox, *Running from Office: Why Young Americans Are Turned Off to Politics*, chap. 4 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

43. Markus Prior, "The Immensely Inflated News Audience: Assessing Bias in Self-Reported News," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 73, no. 1 (March 18, 2009): 130–43. John Sides notes that according to a 2008 Pew survey, one-third of the American public regularly watches cable news, but Nielsen reports that only 6 percent of the public actually watches cable news one hour in total each week. John Sides, "Can Partisan Media Contribute to Healthy Politics?" *The Monkey Cage*, March 10, 2013, <http://themonkeycage.org/2013/03/can-partisan-media-contribute-to-healthy-politics/>.



**Table 1: The Public's Interest**

	<i>Millions of Viewers/Readers</i>
NBC Nightly News	7.6
Meet the Press	3.9
USA Today	4.1
Wall Street Journal	2.2
New York Times	1.8
O'Reilly	3.3
Fox News	2.3
Rachel Maddow	1.2
PBS NewsHour	1.1
AC 360	1.0
Summer Olympics	28.8
Sunday Night Football	23.6
Big Bang Theory	18.3
Dancing with the Stars	10.3

Source: Nielsen Media Research, August 2016.

viewing audience of these shows is less than 2 percent of the electorate.<sup>44</sup> Some conservatives think that Rachel Maddow should be tried for treason (or at least have her Stanford degree revoked), surely an overreaction given that her viewing audience falls far short of 1 percent of the electorate. In contrast to these small numbers, sports and pop culture have audiences that are orders of magnitude larger.

Given these numbers, it is not surprising that studies of the segregation hypothesis based on real-world data rather than laboratory experiments offer a more reassuring picture. Beginning with the oldest of the new media, cable television, Webster notes, "Dystopian portrayals of the new media environment often envision the mass audience disaggregating into more or less self-contained communities of interest: The common public sphere is broken into many 'sphericules' or 'enclaves.'"<sup>45</sup> He analyzes Nielsen Media Research data on the audiences and viewing habits of sixty-two top television networks and finds that although the television audience is highly fragmented,

44. Liberals are finally beginning to realize this. See Frank Rich, "Stop Beating a Dead Fox," *New York* magazine, January 26, 2014, <http://nymag.com/news/frank-rich/fox-news-2014-2/>; Jack Shafer, "What Liberals Still Don't Understand about Fox News," *Politico*, May 25, 2015, [www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/05/fox-news-liberals-118235.html#.VWT-Bc-6eUk](http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/05/fox-news-liberals-118235.html#.VWT-Bc-6eUk).

45. James G. Webster, "Beneath the Veneer of Fragmentation: Television Audience Polarization in a Multichannel World," *Journal of Communication* 55, no. 2 (2005): 379, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2005.tb02677.x/epdf>.

evidence of polarization is modest. Consider Fox News, an indisputably conservative outlet with a “modestly sized audience.” “Even the audience for Fox News, with its high TSV [time spent viewing], spends 92.5% of its [viewing] time watching something else on television. The rest of their time is widely distributed across the channels they have available.”<sup>46</sup>

The strongest evidence that ideologically slanted news can affect citizens’ opinions that I have found in the literature is a complex study by Martin and Yurukoglu.<sup>47</sup> They estimate that someone who watched Fox News for four additional minutes per week increased her or his probability of voting Republican in 2000 by 0.9 of a percentage point; someone who watched MSNBC for four additional minutes increased his probability of voting Democratic by 0.7 of a percentage point. Although these are small numbers, particularly in view of the small audiences for those shows, the authors note that in extremely close elections they can make a difference. According to their estimates, for example, if Fox News had been removed from cable TV in 2000, it would have reduced the vote for George W. Bush in the average county by 1.6 percentage points, other things being equal. The electoral impact of such an effect would depend on the population of the county and whether the changes would have changed the winner in a state.

Political blogs have proliferated in the past decade or so. Most blogs have small readerships—the vast majority of Americans never click on a political blog.<sup>48</sup> But one study finds that blog readers do focus their attention on blogs that are congenial with their prior political commitments.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, direct readership is not the only way that blogs could be influential. Farrell and Drezner conducted an online survey in the winter of 2003–4 and found that more than 80 percent of media employees report using blogs, more than 40 percent of them every week.<sup>50</sup> So blogs could indirectly affect a larger proportion of the population through stories and columns that later

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46. *Ibid.*, 380.

47. Gregory J. Martin and Ali Yurukoglu, “Bias in Cable News: Persuasion and Polarization,” NBER Working Paper 20798, December 2014, [www.nber.org/papers/w20798](http://www.nber.org/papers/w20798).

48. The 2006 Comparative Congressional Election Study (CCES) reported that 14 percent of the respondents in a large Internet panel read political blogs. Eric Lawrence, John Sides, and Henry Farrell, “Self-Segregation or Deliberation? Blog Readership, Participation, and Polarization in American Politics,” *Perspectives on Politics* 8, no. 1 (March 2010): 145.

49. *Ibid.*

50. Henry Farrell and Daniel W. Drezner, “The Power and Politics of Blogs,” *Public Choice* 134 (2008): 15–30.



appear in the media. Liberal and conservative blogs link to others within their ideological camps (conservative blogs more so than liberal blogs), suggesting that blogs could have an echo chamber effect.<sup>51</sup>

Still, a study by Gentzkow and Shapiro again suggests that such effects are limited.<sup>52</sup> The authors investigate the ideological segregation of the audiences of 119 of the largest national news sites, a sample that includes important blogs as well as mainstream sites like the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, Yahoo!, and so forth. They report that although ideological segregation on the Internet is higher than in offline media, it remains low in absolute terms and is considerably lower than in people's face-to-face networks. Part of the reason for the failure of the segregation hypothesis is that people with extreme views "tend to consume more of everything, including centrist sites and occasionally sites with conflicting ideology. Their omnivorousness outweighs their ideological extremity, preventing their overall news diet from becoming too skewed."<sup>53</sup> Reassuringly, the researchers find that, if anything, segregation is lessening as the Internet news audience expands.

One of the exciting features of some of the studies discussed in this section is their exploitation of research designs that were unimaginable scarcely a decade ago. More data than ever are now available on the Internet, computing power has multiplied exponentially, and powerful new statistical techniques have been developed. Microsoft researchers provide another illustration in a study that touches on several of the points made in the previous discussion. The researchers monitored the search behavior of 1.2 million users of the Bing toolbar over a three-month period (March–May) in 2013.<sup>54</sup> The original database consisted of 2.3 billion page views of the top one hundred news sites, a median of 992 per user. This suggests an impressive appetite for news among these Bing toolbar users, but on closer examination the vast majority of the pages visited concerned sports, weather, entertainment, and other subjects that are

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51. Lada Adamic and Natalie Glance, "The Political Blogosphere and the 2004 U.S. Election: Divided They Blog," Proceedings of the 3rd international workshop on Link discovery, 2005, [www.maths.tcd.ie/~mnl/store/AdamicGlance2004a.pdf](http://www.maths.tcd.ie/~mnl/store/AdamicGlance2004a.pdf).

52. Matthew Gentzkow and Jesse M. Shapiro, "Ideological Segregation Online and Offline," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 126, no. 4 (November 2011): 1799–1839.

53. *Ibid.*, 1832.

54. The Bing users had given consent. Seth Flaxman, Sharad Goel, and Justin M. Rao, "Ideological Segregation and the Effects of Social Media on News Consumption," 2013. <https://bfi.uchicago.edu/research/working-paper/ideological-segregation-and-effects-social-media-news-consumption>

irrelevant to the segregation hypothesis. So the researchers developed a machine learning algorithm to identify page views of what is sometimes referred to as “hard” news: government, economics, foreign affairs, and so on. Only 14 percent of the sample clicked on as many as ten such news articles during the three-month period—less than one such visit a week, on average. Moreover, since the focus was the segregation hypothesis, people would have to visit “opinion” sites for their views to be affected. Only 4 percent of the sample that was tracked clicked on at least two such sites in the ninety-day period; that is, 96 percent of the sample read zero or only one opinion piece in three months. Only a few Americans are even occasional readers of a Paul Krugman or George Will column. Although the trace element of those who visit opinion sites does show ideological segregation, the researchers conclude that the numbers are so small that the fears encapsulated in the segregation hypothesis are largely unwarranted.

Along similar lines Barbera reports the results of an extensive study of Twitter users in the United States, Germany, and Spain.<sup>55</sup> Network diversity is correlated with political moderation—those with more diverse networks become more moderate over time and, importantly, Twitter networks tend to be fairly heterogeneous politically, in part because many of those in them are connected by only “weak ties.”<sup>56</sup> Contrary to the fears expressed by those worried about ideological segregation, social media actually may lessen people’s tendency to live in echo chambers: “Citizens are now exposed not only to their close friends’ opinions, but also to political content shared by their co-workers, childhood friends, distant relatives, and other people with whom they form weak ties.”<sup>57</sup> Research in this area has only begun, to be sure, but thus far careful empirical studies suggest that the worst fears about the consequences of the media revolution are not coming to pass.<sup>58</sup>

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55. According to Barbera, Twitter is the leading social media source of political news, slightly exceeding Facebook. Pablo Barbera, “How Social Media Reduces Mass Political Polarization: Evidence from Germany, Spain, and the U.S.,” paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, 2015.

56. Mark Granovetter, “The Strength of Weak Ties,” *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 6 (May 1973): 1360–1380.

57. Barbera, 4.

58. This negative conclusion echoes that of studies of media influence on elections. As Diana Mutz comments, “Public perceptions of the power of media in elections, and the academic evidence of its influence, could not be further apart.” Diana Mutz, “The Great Divide: Campaign Media in the American Mind,” *Daedalus* 141, no. 4 (2012): 83.



In a recent review, Prior characterizes the rapidly expanding research in this area as follows: “Ideologically one-sided news exposure may be largely confined to a small, but highly involved and influential, segment of the population. There is no firm evidence that partisan media are making ordinary Americans more partisan.”<sup>59</sup> To which one can add, no firm evidence exists that ideological media are making ordinary Americans more extreme.

All in all, contrary to clear trends in the political class, the American public is not polarized, and there is no sign as yet that it will become so.

### **Next: The Political Parties Have Sorted**

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59. Markus Prior, “Media and Political Polarization,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 16 (May 2013): 101–127.

## *Essay Series*

*An Era of Tenuous Majorities: A Historical Context*

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## About the Author



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Morris Fiorina is the Wendt Family Professor of Political Science at Stanford University and a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution. For more than four decades he has written on American politics with particular emphasis on elections and public opinion. Fiorina has written or edited twelve books and more than 100 articles, served as chairman of the Board of the American National Election Studies, and received the Warren E. Miller Career Achievement Award from the American Political Science Association Section on Elections, Public Opinion, and Voting Behavior. His widely noted book *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* (with Samuel Abrams and Jeremy Pope) is thought to have influenced then-Illinois state senator Barack Obama's keynote speech to the 2004 Democratic National Convention ("We coach Little League in the blue states, and, yes, we've got some gay friends in the red states").

## Series Overview

In contrast to most of modern American political history, partisan control of our national elective institutions has been unusually tenuous during the past several decades. This essay series argues that the ideologically sorted parties that contest elections today face strong internal pressures to overreach, by which I mean emphasizing issues and advocating positions strongly supported by the party base but which cause the marginal members of their electoral coalitions to defect. Thus, electoral losses predictably follow electoral victories. Institutional control is fleeting.

The first group of essays describes the contemporary American electorate. Despite myriad claims to the contrary, the data show that the electorate is no more polarized now than it was in the later decades of the twentieth century. What has happened is that the parties have sorted so that each party is more homogeneous than in the twentieth century; liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats have largely passed from the political scene. The muddled middle is as large as ever but has no home in either party. The growth in the proportion of self-identified independents may be a reflection of the limited appeal of today's sorted parties.

The second group of essays develops the overreach argument, discusses the role of independents as the marginal members of an electoral majority, and explains how party sorting produces less split-ticket voting. Rather than most voters being more set in their partisan allegiances than a generation ago, they may simply have less reason to split their tickets when almost all Democratic candidates are liberals and all Republican candidates are conservatives.

The third group of essays embeds contemporary American politics in two other contexts. First, in a comparative context, developments in the European democracies are the mirror image of those in the United States: the major European parties have depolarized or de-sorted or both, whereas their national electorates show little change. The rise of anti-immigrant parties may have some as yet not well-understood role in these developments. Second, in a historical context, the instability of American majorities today resembles that of the late nineteenth century, when similar significant social and economic changes were occurring.

A final postelection essay will wrap up the series.

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