

# The Political Parties Have Sorted

*Although the American public at large has not polarized, it is better sorted than a generation ago. Whereas the parties were once “big tents,” they are now ideologically more homogeneous: liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats have largely disappeared. Thus, although popular polarization has not increased, partisan polarization has. Some skeptics contend that the distinction between sorting and polarization is unimportant, but, on the contrary, it is a critical difference. Contra polarization, with sorting the middle still exists, but it is not welcome in either party. Importantly, although the political class is well sorted, ordinary voters, even partisans, are much less so, as frustrated Republican intellectuals learned when Republican primary voters in 2016 nominated a presidential candidate whose ideology is at best muddled.*

**MORRIS P. FIORINA**

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*“When we speak of political polarization, it is more a matter of Democrats and Republicans becoming more homogeneous in their lives and basic beliefs than it is of the nation as a whole becoming fundamentally divided.” —Andrew Kohut*

*“I’m here to insist that we are not as divided as we seem. And I know that because I know America.”  
—President Barack Obama*

The previous essay noted that the American public believes that it has polarized despite evidence that in the aggregate the public looks much as it did in the 1970s and 1980s, long before polarization became a staple of political commentary.<sup>1</sup> Such perceptions are not surprising. Although many Americans are not interested in politics and make little effort to consume political news and commentary, it is hard to avoid getting some exposure to the polarization narrative. Even if only in passing, ordinary citizens are likely to hear the extreme and uncivil remarks of members of the political class.<sup>2</sup> After all, that sort of

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Quotations are from Andrew Kohut, “The Political Middle Still Matters,” Pew Research Center, August 1, 2014, [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/08/01/the-political-middle-still-matters/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/08/01/the-political-middle-still-matters/); and President Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President at Memorial Service for Fallen Dallas Police Officers,” July 12, 2016, [www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/07/12/remarks-president-memorial-service-fallen-dallas-police-officers](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/07/12/remarks-president-memorial-service-fallen-dallas-police-officers).

1. Even some sophisticated observers share this misconception. An important reason is failure to consider the candidates. Partisan and ideological divisions will be much less apparent in an election featuring a moderate midwestern Republican and a born-again Southern Democrat (1976) than in an election contested by a liberal Democrat and a conservative Republican (2000–2012).

2. Matthew Levendusky and Neil Malhotra, “Does Media Coverage of Partisan Polarization Affect Political Attitudes?” *Political Communication* 33, no. 2 (2016): 283–301.



rhetoric is what the media consider newsworthy. Moreover, the media regularly report the dysfunctional behavior of some of the people who participate in politics and serve in governmental positions—opposition for opposition’s sake, refusal to compromise, threats to shut down the government or take the country over a “fiscal cliff.”<sup>3</sup> Although negative political rhetoric and actions are not as common as media treatments make them seem, there is certainly plenty of reason for ordinary citizens to believe that the country has polarized.

### The Difference between Sorting and Polarization

What people are actually seeing, however, is different, albeit real and important: the consequences of *partisan sorting* that has been going on for nearly five decades.<sup>4</sup> This sorting process flies in the face of long-standing political science generalizations about parties in countries like the United States that have single-member districts and majoritarian electoral rules, contrasted with parties in countries that have proportional electoral rules, like most European democracies. For decades, both theory and empirical research concluded that countries with majoritarian electoral rules tended to have two broad-based parties, often termed “catch-all” parties, whereas countries with proportional electoral rules tended to have more than two parties, all of which had clear ideological hues.<sup>5</sup> As Clinton Rossiter wrote about the United States in a standard 1960s political parties textbook, “[T]here is and can be no real difference between the Democrats and the Republicans, because the unwritten laws of American politics demand that the parties overlap substantially in principle, policy, character, appeal, and purpose—or cease to be parties with any hope of winning a national election.”<sup>6</sup> The validity of this conventional wisdom was shown by the electoral drubbings suffered by Republican Barry Goldwater, who gave the country “a choice, not an echo” in 1964, and Democrat George McGovern, who did the same with a similar result in 1972.

By the turn of the century, however, a new conventional wisdom had taken hold, one which asserted that the public had polarized and elections were now about maximizing the turnout of the “base,” not about appealing to centrist voters—because the latter had virtually disappeared. As the previous essay showed, that conclusion is unwarranted. We can argue about the size of the middle, which depends on how we define it (whether in

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3. As Mutz writes, “One might say that mass media may not be particularly influential in telling people what to think, or perhaps even what to think about, but media are tremendously influential in telling people what others are thinking about and experiencing.” Diana Mutz, *Impersonal Influence: How Perceptions of Mass Collectives Affect Political Attitudes* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 5.

4. Matthew Levendusky, *The Partisan Sort: How Liberals Became Democrats and Conservatives Became Republicans* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

5. The *locus classicus* is Maurice Duverger, *Political Parties: Their Organization and Activity in the Modern State* (New York: Wiley, 1954), 216–28, 245–55, *passim*. For a contemporary treatment, see Gary Cox, *Making Votes Count: Strategic Coordination in the World’s Electoral Systems* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

6. Clinton Rossiter, *Parties and Politics in America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1960), 108.

terms of ideology, partisanship, or specific issues), but, however defined, once we settle on a definition the data do not show any decline in its size. Rather, what is true today is that the middle has no home in either party. Political parties in the United States have come to resemble parties in proportional electoral systems. A process of sorting during the past several decades has resulted in a Democratic Party that is clearly liberal and a Republican Party that is clearly conservative.

In a 1998 article Alan Abramowitz and Kyle Saunders showed that the American electorate was undergoing an “ideological realignment.”<sup>7</sup> In an earlier, highly influential work, Carmines and Stimson demonstrated that Democrats and Republicans in Congress began to polarize after the election of a large class of liberal Democrats in the 1958 elections, with racial issues being the apparent cause.<sup>8</sup> Abramowitz and Saunders concluded, however, that in the general electorate, “this process did not begin until the 1980s and that Civil Rights was only one of a host of issues involved in the realignment.”<sup>9</sup> Whereas partisanship was only loosely correlated with ideology and issue positions for much of American history (as the mid-twentieth-century conventional wisdom held), the correlations increased dramatically between the late 1970s and the mid-1990s.

As electoral majorities have become more short-lived, the realignment concept has fallen out of favor, so it is more common today to use the term “party sorting” to describe the changes that Abramowitz and Saunders identified. Sorting and polarization are logically independent processes, although they may be empirically related. To illustrate, here is an example of pure polarization:

<b>Time 1</b>	<i>Democrats</i>	<i>Independents</i>	<i>Republicans</i>
	70 liberals	100 moderates	30 liberals
	30 conservatives		70 conservatives
<b>Time 2</b>	<i>Democrats</i>	<i>Independents</i>	<i>Republicans</i>
	105 liberals	—	45 liberals
	45 conservatives		105 conservatives

7. Alan I. Abramowitz and Kyle L. Saunders, “Ideological Realignment in the U.S. Electorate,” *Journal of Politics* 60, no. 3 (August 1998): 634–52.

8. Edward G. Carmines and James A. Stimson, *Issue Evolution: Race and the Transformation of American Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

9. Abramowitz and Saunders, “Ideological Realignment,” 649. Using a different methodology, Hill and Tausanovitch confirm that sorting in the public first became apparent in the early 1980s. In another paper they report that the process began earlier with sorting of primary electorates in the South that spread beyond the South. Seth J. Hill and Chris Tausanovitch, “A Disconnect in Representation? Comparison of Trends in Congressional and Public Polarization,” *Journal of Politics* 77, no. 4 (October 2015): 1058–1075. Hill and Tausanovitch, “Southern Realignment, Party Sorting, and the Polarization of American Primary Electorates, 1958–2012,” unpublished paper, June 3, 2016, [http://sjhill.ucsd.edu/HillTausanovitch\\_Primaryes.pdf](http://sjhill.ucsd.edu/HillTausanovitch_Primaryes.pdf).



Between time 1 and time 2 the electorate polarizes, both ideologically (as all moderates move to the liberal and conservative camps) and in partisan terms (as all independents become partisans). As figures 5 and 6 in the previous essay show, this has *not* happened in the United States.

The preceding example shows polarization without sorting: although the middle has vanished (polarization), the parties are no better sorted at time 2 than at time 1—each party still has an ideological minority wing consisting of 30 percent of the party. Consider an alternative time 2\*:

Time 2*	<i>Democrats</i>	<i>Independents</i>	<i>Republicans</i>
	100 liberals	100 moderates	100 conservatives

This alternative time 2\* shows pure sorting: there are the same numbers of liberals, moderates, and conservatives as at time 1 and the same numbers of Democrats, independents, and Republicans as at time 1, but now the parties are perfectly sorted—all liberals are in the Democratic camp, all conservatives in the Republican camp, and all moderates remain as independents.

Of course, the two processes are not mutually exclusive. Consider another alternative time 2\*\*. If at time 2 above, conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans realize that they are hopelessly in the minority in their parties and migrate to the party in which their views predominate, we would have polarization *and* sorting:

Time 2**	<i>Democrats</i>	<i>Independents</i>	<i>Republicans</i>
	150 liberals	—	150 conservatives

To a less extreme degree this is the case in Congress, where we clearly observe sorting (resulting from the replacement of conservative Southern Democrats by Republicans and liberal northeastern Republicans by Democrats) and polarization (reflecting the disappearance of the moderates).

Obviously sorting produces *partisan* polarization—when conservative Democrats leave the Democratic Party, the party becomes more liberal. When liberal Republicans leave the Republican Party, the party becomes more conservative. The problem with using the term “partisan polarization” is that in common usage the modifier “partisan” often gets omitted and then forgotten. Given that as much as 40 percent of the electorate claims not to be partisan, casual references to polarization exaggerate the divide in public opinion. (This brings up the whole question of what are independents, leaning and otherwise, which is considered in a later essay.) The term “sorting” helps us keep in mind that we are focusing only on the two-thirds of the electorate that claims to have a partisan identity.

Different individual-level processes can produce both sorting and polarization.<sup>10</sup> One way is conversion, which in turn can occur in either of two ways. If partisan identity is extremely strong, people can change their ideological positions: liberal Republicans can become conservative Republicans and conservative Democrats can become liberal Democrats. Alternatively, if ideologies are strongly held, people can change their partisanship: liberal Republicans can become Democrats and conservative Democrats can become Republicans.<sup>11</sup> In addition, sorting may occur through population replacement without any individuals changing at all: during the course of several decades, liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats die off and younger voters with more consistent views replace them. Especially when viewed over generation-long periods, each of these processes is probably at work to some extent.

According to Poole and Rosenthal, there is little evidence of conversion in the Congress: individual-level stability is the rule in congressional voting.<sup>12</sup> Thus, replacement is the dominant process in both party sorting and polarization in Congress. Republicans have replaced conservative Democrats and Democrats have replaced liberal Republicans (sorting), but in addition more extreme members have replaced less extreme ones, resulting in a loss of moderates in both parties (polarization). In contrast, as figures 1–3 of the second essay of this series show, in the public there is little or no increase in polarization; rather, sorting is the dominant process underlying the increased partisan conflict in recent decades, and both conversion and replacement appear to be at work.<sup>13</sup> As Andrew Kohut, former director of the Pew Research Center, commented, “[W]hen we speak

10. Levendusky, *The Partisan Sort*, chaps. 4–6.

11. The empirical evidence thus far suggests that the first possibility is more common—people change their issue and ideological positions rather than their partisanship. See Levendusky, *The Partisan Sort*, chap. 6; Thomas M. Carsey and Geoffrey Layman, “Party Polarization and Party Structuring of Policy Attitudes: A Comparison of Three NES Panel Studies,” *Political Behavior* 24, no. 3 (2002): 199–236; Geoffrey Layman and Thomas Carsey, “Party Polarization and ‘Conflict Extension’ in the American Electorate,” *American Journal of Political Science* 46, no. 4 (October 2002): 786–802. Killian and Wilcox, however, report that on abortion people were more likely to switch parties than switch their positions on the issue. Mitchell Killian and Clyde Wilcox, “Do Abortion Attitudes Lead to Party Switching?” *Political Research Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (December 2008): 561–573.

12. Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal, *Ideology and Congress*, chap. 4 (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2011).

13. After an intensive and extensive statistical analysis, Baldassarri and Gelman conclude that sorting is the primary explanation for changes in public opinion between 1972 and 2008. Krasa and Polborn concur that sorting is the dominant mechanism between 1976 and 2004, but find somewhat surprisingly that sorting and polarization are of about equal importance in 2008. Delia Baldassarri and Andrew Gelman, “Partisans without Constraint: Political Polarization and Trends in American Public Opinion,” *American Journal of Sociology* 114, no. 2 (September 2008): 408–446; Stefan Krasa and Mattias Polborn, “Policy Divergence and Voter Polarization in a Structural Model of Elections,” *Journal of Law and Economics* 57, no. 1 (2014): 31–76.



of political polarization, it is more a matter of Democrats and Republicans becoming more homogeneous in their lives and basic beliefs than it is of the nation as a whole becoming fundamentally divided.”<sup>14</sup>

### Three Features of Party Sorting in the United States

Research to date identifies three propositions that we can accept with some confidence. First, members of the political class initiate the process—they do not sort as a response to popular demand; rather, they sort first and the (attentive) public takes note and sorts later.<sup>15</sup> Second, sorting increases with the level of political involvement—the higher the level of political activism, the more distinct (better sorted) are Republicans and Democrats.<sup>16</sup> Third, related to the second proposition, among typical partisans in the public sorting, has increased but remains far below the levels exhibited by those in the political class. Consider the abortion issue on which the party platforms are polar opposites.

The General Social Survey (GSS) carried out by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago has been asking the same abortion question since 1972. The question reads:

Please tell me whether or not you think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion if

1. The woman’s health is seriously endangered
2. She became pregnant as a result of rape
3. There is a strong chance of serious defect in the baby

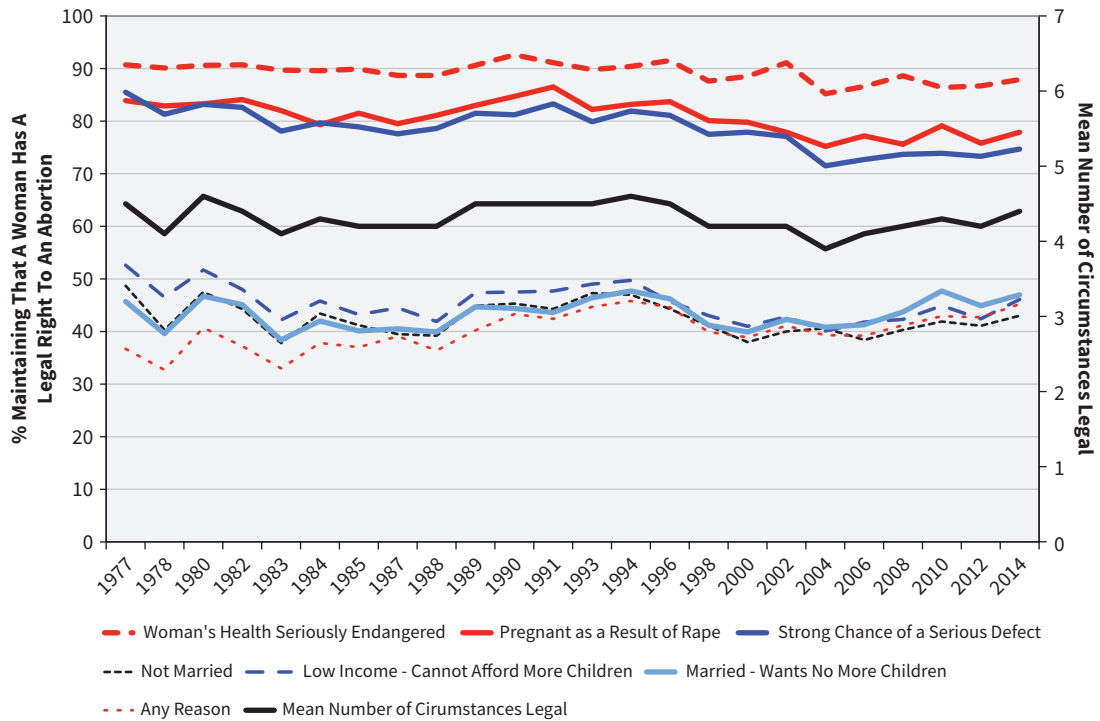
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14. Andrew Kohut, “The Political Middle Still Matters,” Pew Research Center, August 1, 2014, [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/08/01/the-political-middle-still-matters/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/08/01/the-political-middle-still-matters/).

15. Carmines and Stimson, *Issue Evolution*; Abramowitz and Saunders, “Ideological Realignment”; Levendusky, *The Partisan Sort*. Cf. James Campbell’s “revealed polarization theory” in *Polarized: Making Sense of a Divided America* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

16. “No knowledgeable observer doubts that the American public is less divided than the political agitators and vocal elective office-seekers who claim to represent it.” William A. Galston and Pietro S. Nivola, “Delineating the Problem,” in *Red and Blue Nation*, vol. 1, ed. Pietro S. Nivola and David W. Brady (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2006). See also John H. Aldrich and Melanie Freeze, “Political Participation, Polarization, and Public Opinion: Activism and the Merging of Partisan and Ideological Polarization,” in *Facing the Challenge of Democracy: Explorations in the Analysis of Public Opinion and Political Participation*, ed. Paul M. Sniderman and Benjamin Highton (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 185–206. Most recently Hill and Huber conclude, “Thus we observe increasing extremism and homogeneity within each party as participation increases (from vote to general election voting to primary voting to contributing).” Seth J. Hill and Gregory A. Huber, “Representativeness and Motivations of the Contemporary Donorate: Results from Merged Survey and Administrative Records,” *Political Behavior*, 2016, <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11109-016-9343-y>.

Figure 1. Abortion Should Be Legal When



Source: General Social Survey

4. The family has low income and cannot afford any more children
5. She is not married and does not want to marry the man
6. She is married and does not want any more children<sup>17</sup>

This survey item avoids emotionally and politically charged oversimplifications like “pro-life” and “pro-choice” and asks directly about the specifics of people’s views. As shown in figure 1, in the aggregate Americans’ views have changed little during the course of more than forty years. Large majorities favor legal abortion in the three cases of fetal birth defects, pregnancies resulting from rape, and dangers to the mother’s health (the so-called traumatic circumstances).<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, the population is closely divided in the three cases of single motherhood, low income, and enough children already (the so-called

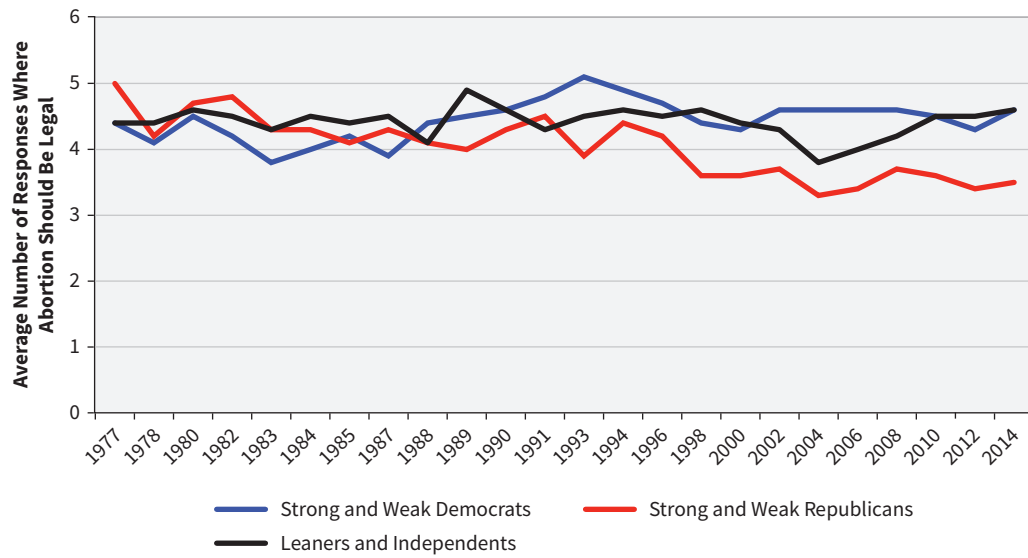
17. In 1977 the GSS added a seventh option, “The woman wants it for any reason.” This option lacks the specificity of the previous six, and ANES data show that about a third of those who choose this option reject it when asked about gender selection. Thus, I omit this option from the analysis.

18. The terms “traumatic” and “elective” are not used in any evaluative sense. These terms are commonly used in the literature.





Figure 2. Partisans Eventually Sorted on Abortion



Source: General Social Survey

elective circumstances). On average the public believes in legal abortion in four of the six circumstances (the heavy middle line in the figure), with little change over the course of four decades.<sup>19</sup>

Figure 2 plots the average number of circumstances in which Democrats, independents, and Republicans favor legal abortion. The Supreme Court decided *Roe v. Wade* in 1973. The delegates to the presidential nominating conventions had begun to diverge even earlier,<sup>20</sup> but it took nearly two decades for Democrats and Republicans in the public to get on the “correct” side of the issue. Republicans and Democrats, who began to separate after 1992, continue to do so. This illustrates the first proposition: that the political class sorts first, the public follows.

With the addition of some background information, figure 2 also illustrates the third proposition: that although better sorted than they used to be, ordinary partisans are still imperfectly sorted. In 2012 the national platforms adopted by the two presidential nominating conventions could not have been more different on the subject of abortion.

19. A small recent downturn is evident in the figure. Some analysts attribute it to the controversy over intact dilation and extraction, or “partial birth abortion.” Descriptions of the procedure are graphic and gruesome and may have led some people to modify their views.

20. Kira Sanbonmatsu, *Democrats, Republicans, and the Politics of Women’s Place* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 96–97.



The Republican platform said, essentially, “never, no exceptions.”<sup>21</sup> The Democratic platform said, essentially, “at any time, for any reason.” Thus, it seems reasonable to conclude that a majority of Republican convention delegates would have answered the General Social Survey question “none of these circumstances,” and a majority of Democratic convention delegates “all of these circumstances.” But self-identified Democrats in the public are only at 4.5 circumstances, not 6, and self-identified Republicans at 3.5 circumstances are nowhere near the 0 circumstances position that a majority of Republican convention delegates presumably holds. Put another way, after more than two decades of sorting, the gap between partisans on this issue is only one of the six circumstances whereas the gap between majorities of convention delegates arguably is six circumstances.

To illustrate the second proposition with its finer gradation of comparisons, consider an abortion item included on the quadrennial American National Election Studies. This item reads “Which one of the opinions on this page best agrees with your view?”

1. By law, abortion should never be permitted.
2. The law should permit abortion only in case of rape, incest, or when the woman’s life is in danger.
3. The law should permit abortion for reasons other than rape, incest, or danger to the woman’s life, but only after the need for the abortion has been clearly established.
4. By law, a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice.

Figure 3 contains the responses to the unconditional pro-choice category for different levels of political involvement. In 1980 the differences between weak partisans, strong partisans, and members of the political class (donors and activists) were ten percentage points or less. By the early 1990s larger differences were apparent, and these have continued to grow in the years since. But weakly committed Republicans and Democrats have sorted much less than strongly committed ones—a 20 percentage point difference in 2012 in the former category versus a 40 percentage point difference in the latter category, and the donors and activist categories of each party have sorted even more than strong partisans.

Like the GSS data in figure 2, the data underlying figure 3 also provide an illustration of the third proposition. Even at the level of strong partisans, the lack of sorting may surprise some. As table 1 shows, in 2012 one out of four strong Democrats believed abortion should never be permitted or only permitted in the cases of rape, incest, or a threat to the mother’s

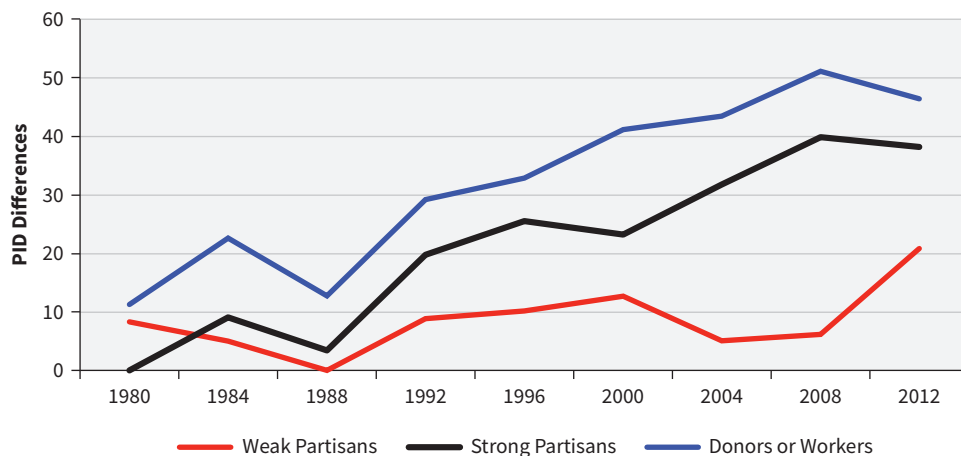
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21. Even “to save the life of the mother” is not explicitly included.



**Figure 3. When Should Abortion Be Permitted?**

*“Always as a Matter of Personal Choice”*



Source: ANES

Workers are strong and weak partisans who worked for a party or candidate. Donors are strong and weak partisans who donated to a party or candidate.

life, a position closer to the Republican position than that of their own party. Perhaps even more surprising, one out of five strong Republicans believed that abortion should always be allowed as the personal choice of the mother, a figure that rises to more than one out of three when the ambiguous “for a clear need” response is added. Such positions obviously are very distant from that stated in the Republican platform.<sup>22</sup> Why do such “unsorted” Republicans and Democrats stay in their respective parties given their views on the issue? Part of the answer is that contrary to widespread impressions from media coverage of politics, most Americans do not consider abortion (and other social issues) to be nearly as important as activist groups in the two parties do, a matter discussed in a later essay.

Studies that measure constituent preferences on a single left-right dimension generally report “asymmetric polarization”: both parties have moved toward the poles since the 1970s, but Republicans have moved further right than Democrats have moved left.<sup>23</sup> Opinion on specific issues, however, shows more variation. On same-sex marriage,

22. It may surprise some readers to learn that in 2004, at least, abortion was the issue on which most partisans were out of line with their parties. Hillygus and Shields reported that in 2004 nearly half of all partisans disagreed with their parties’ positions on one or more issues. Abortion led the list. D. Sunshine Hillygus and Todd G. Shields, *The Persuadable Voter: Wedge Issues in Presidential Campaigns*, chap. 3 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

23. A longer time perspective offers a somewhat more complex picture. Democrats began moving left in the 1950s as the South realigned. Republicans actually moved in a more centrist direction before making a sharp right turn in more recent decades. See Campbell, *Polarized*, chap. 7; Devin Caughey, James Dunham, and Christopher Warshaw, “Polarization and Partisan Divergence in the American Public, 1946–2012,” unpublished paper, 2016.

**Table 1. When Should Abortion Be Permitted?**

	<i>Strong Democrats</i>	<i>Strong Republicans</i>
Never permitted	9%	21%
Only in case of rape, incest, or the woman's life is in danger	17	40
For a clear need	14	18
Always as a personal choice	60	22

Source: 2012 ANES

for example, sorting appears to be due primarily to Democrats adopting a more liberal stance, although both parties have become more accepting (figure 4). On gun control, sorting seems to be entirely a matter of Republicans becoming more supportive of gun rights (figure 5); Democrats have scarcely moved at all. To complicate matters, sometimes survey items on the same subject support contradictory conclusions. On the Gallup survey item graphed in figure 2, for example, the sorting seems to be primarily created by Republicans moving to a more restrictive stance. But as figure 6 shows, on the ANES item reported in figure 3, Democrats' support for abortion always being a matter of personal choice has nearly doubled, whereas Republicans have become only slightly less opposed to that position. The one thing we can say for sure is that partisans are further apart on most issues today than they were a generation ago.

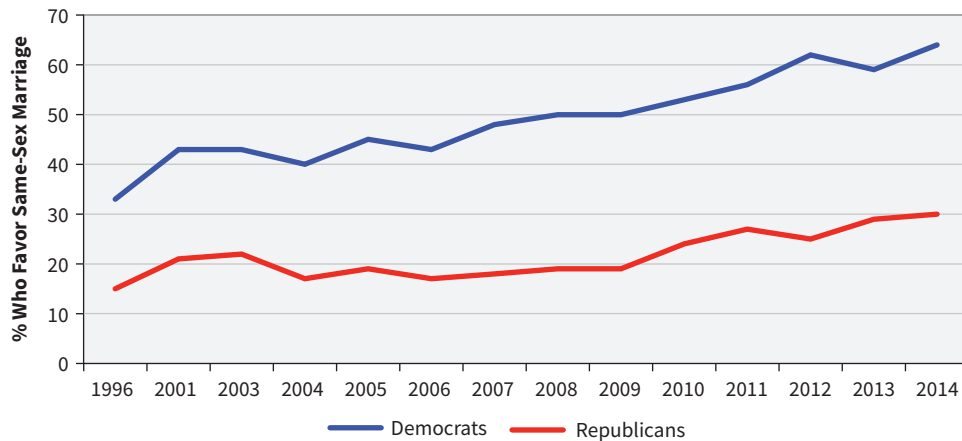
A great deal of public opinion research shows that what has happened in the case of the issues examined above is the rule, not the exception. On issue after issue, Republicans increasingly find themselves united on one side and Democrats find themselves united on the other side, although the extent of disagreement often is not great. Sorting has significantly increased; but among typical Americans, even strong partisans, it remains far from perfect. A recent Pew Research Center report provided a wealth of information in support of this conclusion.<sup>24</sup> During the past two decades, partisans have increasingly sorted. Looking at opinions on ten issues, the researchers found that the proportion of extremely consistent Americans doubled from 10 percent to 21 percent and the proportion of mixed or inconsistent Americans declined from 49 percent in 1994 to 39 percent in 2014.<sup>25</sup> But as the authors cautioned, "These sentiments [those of uncompromising ideologues] are not shared by all—or even most—Americans.

24. Pew Research Center, "Political Polarization in the American Public: How Increasing Ideological Uniformity and Partisan Antipathy Affect Politics, Compromise and Everyday Life," June 12, 2014, [www.people-press.org/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/](http://www.people-press.org/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/).

25. The report was widely misinterpreted as showing that partisans had become more extreme, when the actual finding was that they had become more consistent. See Morris Fiorina, "Americans Have Not Become More Politically Polarized," *Washington Post*, June 23, 2014, [www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/06/23/americans-have-not-become-more-politically-polarized/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/06/23/americans-have-not-become-more-politically-polarized/).

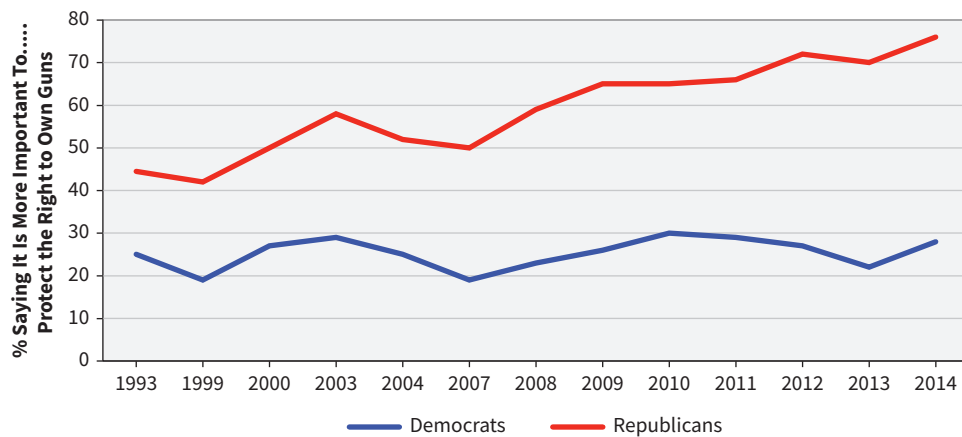


Figure 4. Party Sorting on Same-Sex Marriage: Democrats Move More



Source: Pew Research Center

Figure 5. Party Sorting on Gun Ownership: Republicans Move More



Source: Pew Research Center

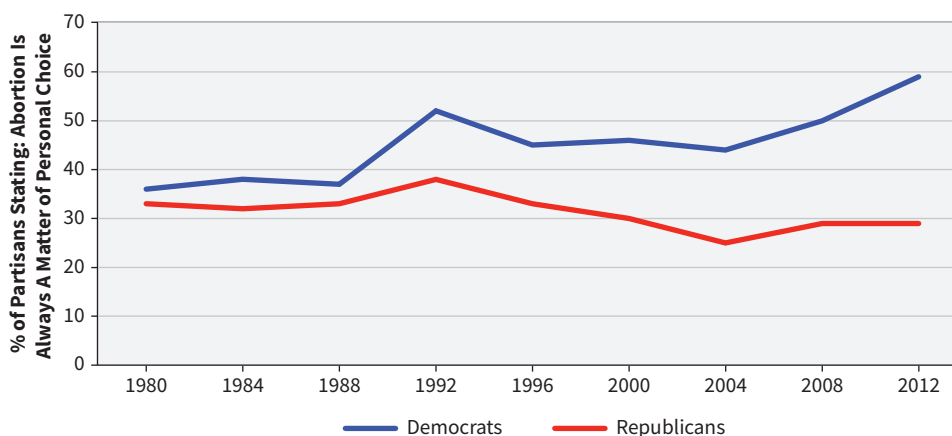
The majority do not have uniformly conservative or liberal views. Most do not see either party as a threat to the nation. And more believe their representatives in government should meet halfway to resolve contentious disputes rather than hold out for more of what they want."<sup>26</sup>

### Party Sorting and Affective Polarization

*Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* took note of Samuel Popkin's suggestion that even if there were little evidence of increased polarization on the issues, perhaps

26. Pew Research Center, "Political Polarization," 7.

Figure 6. Partisan Sorting on Abortion: Democrats Move More



Source: ANES

voters on opposite sides had come to dislike each other more.<sup>27</sup> At that time there was only a modicum of evidence consistent with Popkin’s suggestion, but research since then indicates that such “affective” partisan polarization has increased: over and above policy considerations, Democrats and Republicans dislike each other more than they did a generation ago.<sup>28</sup>

Cognitive and affective polarization are not mutually exclusive, of course. If human beings dislike others the more they disagree with them, a reasonable supposition, *ceteris paribus*, which is standard spatial models would predict an increase in affective polarization. That is, the further the average Democrat is from the average Republican, the greater the dislike.<sup>29</sup> Clearly, however, citizens do not vote solely on the basis of ideological or policy distance as assumed in the spatial model. Their votes are a reflection of numerous considerations—beyond ideology and issues, there are partisanship, conditions in the country, cultural images of the other party, the personal qualities of the competing candidates, and still others. So let us think about affective polarization more broadly.

27. Morris Fiorina, with Samuel J. Abrams and Jeremy C. Pope, 68. *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* (New York: Longman, 2011), 68–69.

28. Daron Shaw, “If Everyone Votes Their Party, Why Do Presidential Election Outcomes Vary So Much?” *The Forum* 10, no. 3 (October 2012), [www.degruyter.com/view/j/for.2012.10.issue-3/1540-8884.1519/1540-8884.1519.xml](http://www.degruyter.com/view/j/for.2012.10.issue-3/1540-8884.1519/1540-8884.1519.xml); Alan I. Abramowitz, “The New American Electorate,” in *American Gridlock: The Sources, Character, and Impact of Political Polarization*, ed. James A. Thurber and Antoine Yoshinaka (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

29. Alan I. Abramowitz and Steven Webster, “The Angry American Voter,” *Sabato’s Crystal Ball* 13, no. 30 (August 6, 2015): figure 2, [www.centerforpolitics.org/crystalball/articles/the-angry-american-voter/](http://www.centerforpolitics.org/crystalball/articles/the-angry-american-voter/).



In a finding widely discussed in the media, partisans are now less likely to want to date or marry someone from the other party than they were in 1960.<sup>30</sup> As Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes summarize,

Democrats and Republicans not only increasingly dislike the opposing party, but also impute negative traits to the rank-and-file of the out-party. We further demonstrate that affective polarization has permeated judgments about interpersonal relations, exceeds polarization based on other prominent social cleavages, and that levels of partisan affect are significantly higher in America, compared to the United Kingdom.<sup>31</sup>

Not all data are consistent with such findings—a study comparing how Americans ranked the importance of eighteen traits in a marriage partner in 1939 compared to 2008 found that “similar political background” increased from eighteenth (dead last) only to seventeenth.<sup>32</sup> Still, if the findings of Iyengar and his collaborators are accepted at face value, party sorting provides a plausible explanation.

In 1964, what if a daughter came home from college and told her Democratic parents that she was engaged to a Republican? How might they have responded? They probably would have thought, “What kind of Republican?” A western conservative like Barry Goldwater? A northeastern liberal like Nelson Rockefeller? A midwestern moderate like George Romney? Similarly, had a son come home from college and told his Republican parents that he was engaged to a Democrat, they likely would have wondered, “What kind of Democrat?” A union stalwart? An urban liberal? A Southern conservative? A western pragmatist? In the unsorted parties of that time, no matter what kind of person you were, there were probably people with similar social characteristics and political views in the other party.

In the better-sorted parties of today (reinforced by the crude stereotypes so common in political debate), it is unsurprising that some parents might react very differently. If a son comes home and announces his engagement to a Democrat, his Republican parents might think, “You want to bring an America-hating atheist into our family?” Similarly, Democratic parents might react to their daughter’s engagement to a Republican by asking, “We’re supposed to welcome an evolution-denying homophobe into our family?” In the better-sorted parties of today, it would be surprising if affective partisan polarization has not increased.

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30. Shanto Iyengar, Gaurav Sood, and Yphtach Lelkes, “Affect, Not Ideology: A Social Identity Perspective on Polarization,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (2012): 405–431. On the other hand, Americans were asked to rank eighteen traits in their importance for choosing a marriage partner in 1939 and 2008. For both men and women, “similar political background rose from 18th in importance to 17th.”

31. *Ibid.*, 407.

32. Ana Swanson, “What men and women wanted in a spouse in 1939—and how different it is today,” *Washington Post*, April 19, 2016, [www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/04/19/what-men-and-women-wanted-in-a-spouse-in-1939-and-how-different-it-is-today/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/04/19/what-men-and-women-wanted-in-a-spouse-in-1939-and-how-different-it-is-today/).

Consistent with thought experiments like that above, empirical research shows that party sorting contributes to the rise in affective polarization.<sup>33</sup> But I would not argue that the increase in party and issue alignment is the entire explanation. Adopting a social identity perspective, Mason argues that party sorting has increased the agreement between partisan and ideological identities, resulting in the strengthening of both.<sup>34</sup> “The effect is an electorate whose members are more biased and angry than their issue positions alone can explain.”<sup>35</sup> This line of work is reminiscent of the studies reviewed in the second essay in the series that show distorted perceptions of the actual positions held by members of the opposite party and those at the opposite end of the ideological spectrum, but these findings are stronger in that the inaccurate perceptions appear to increase emotional antagonism. If our present political difficulties have deep psychological roots that have little basis in objective reality, any attempt to overcome the difficulties through institutional reforms will face additional obstacles. As Mason comments, “It may therefore be disturbing to imagine a nation of people driven powerfully by team spirit, but less powerfully by a logical connection of issues to action.”<sup>36</sup> The critical question for the future is whether affective polarization that is evident in some partisans’ attitudes will carry over into actual political behavior. Iyengar and Westwood report experimental evidence that partisan hostility and willingness to discriminate on partisan grounds today may be as pronounced in some respects as racial hostility (or at least that people are less inhibited about expressing the former compared to the latter).<sup>37</sup> A series of experiments reported by Lelkes and Westwood offers a more positive note. They find that affective polarization is associated with acceptance of hostile rhetoric, avoidance of members of the other party, and favoritism toward members of one’s own party, but not with overt discrimination against members of the other party. On the other hand, Miller and Conover report that controlling for issue and ideological distance, affective polarization increases the likelihood of voting and participating in the campaign, which would increase partisan polarization in elections.<sup>38</sup>

33. Lori D. Bougher, “The Origins of Out-Party Dislike: Identity and Ideological Consistency in Polarized America,” paper presented at the 2016 annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, figure 1.

34. Lilliana Mason, “‘I Disrespectfully Agree’: The Differential Effects of Partisan Sorting on Social and Issue Polarization,” *American Journal of Political Science* 59, no. 1 (January 1, 2015): 128–145.

35. *Ibid.*, 140.

36. *Ibid.*, 142.

37. Shanto Iyengar and Sean J. Westwood, “Fear and Loathing Across Party Lines: New Evidence on Group Polarization,” *American Journal of Political Science* 59, no. 3 (2015): 690–707. See also an interesting study of online dating that reports findings consistent with those of Iyengar and Westwood: Gregory Huber and Neil Malhotra, “Social Spillovers of Political Polarization,” unpublished paper, 2015.

38. Yphatch Lelkes and Sean J. Westwood, “The Limits of Partisan Prejudice,” unpublished paper, 2015; Patrick R. Miller and Pamela Johnston Conover, “Red and Blue States of Mind: Partisan Hostility and Voting in the United States,” *Political Research Quarterly* 68 (2015): 225–239.





## Party Sorting and Geographic Polarization

Whereas research on affective polarization delves into mental processes inside the voters' heads, a different area of research examines the physical location of voters' heads. Some years ago a book entitled *The Big Sort* received considerable popular and some scholarly attention.<sup>39</sup> The thesis of the book is that since the 1970s the United States has experienced a process of geographic political segregation:

We have built a country where everyone can choose the neighborhood (and church and news shows) most compatible with his or her lifestyle and beliefs. And we are living with the consequences of this segregation by way of life: pockets of like-minded citizens that have become so ideologically inbred that we don't know, can't understand, and can barely conceive of 'those people' who live just a few miles away.<sup>40</sup>

This argument is another version of the segregation hypothesis discussed in the second essay of the series, except that the hypothesized mechanism of voter homogenization is social pressure from one's neighborhood surroundings rather than the media. The arguments and analyses in *The Big Sort* are flimsy, ranging from anecdotal to impressionistic. Briefly, patterns in the presidential vote that are the basis of the argument often differ from patterns in votes for other offices and especially in party registration, and most Americans don't know their neighbors, let alone feel pressure to conform politically.<sup>41</sup> Studies find that although many people profess a desire to live in politically compatible neighborhoods, their ability to realize those desires is limited by the fact that when making location decisions, liberals and conservatives alike privilege nonpolitical factors like good schools, low crime rates, stable property values, and commuting time, with political considerations ranking much lower.<sup>42</sup> After calculating the 2008 presidential vote for more than 120,000 precincts, Hersh concluded, "In this nationwide collection of precinct data it is clear that most precincts are

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39. Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2008).

40. *Ibid.*, 40.

41. 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)<d>&Ye("Hyperlink7","http://journals.cambridge.org/download.php?file=%2FPSC%2FPSC45\_02%2FS1049096512000017a.pdf&code=9c96835a96127d9728e851f47f408cbf","")>.

42. Iris Hui, "Who is Your Preferred Neighbor? Partisan Residential Preferences and Neighborhood Satisfaction," *American Politics Research* 41, no. 6: 997–1021; James G. Gimpel and Iris S. Hui, "Seeking Politically Compatible Neighbors? The Role of Neighborhood Partisan Composition in Residential Sorting," *Political Geography* 48 (2015): 130–142; Clayton Nall and Jonathan Mummolo, "Why Partisans Don't Sort: The Constraints on Political Segregation," *Journal of Politics*, 2016 (forthcoming).

quite mixed in terms of partisan supporters. Most voters live in neighborhoods that are not lopsidedly partisan.”<sup>43</sup>

Still, since the 1960s there have been significant changes in the geographic locus of party competition in the country. Until the 1960s, Republican presidential candidates were not competitive in most of the South; today Democratic presidential candidates are not competitive in much of the South. That much is more or less a wash, however. More notably, in the mid-twentieth century most northern states were competitive. In particular, both parties had realistic chances of carrying big heterogeneous states such as New York, Pennsylvania, Illinois, and California. Today most of these states vote dependably for Democratic presidential candidates; in recent elections only nine to a dozen states have constituted the Electoral College battleground that decides the presidential winner.

Party sorting very likely makes a significant contribution to this version of geographic polarization. Sixty-five years ago a committee of the American Political Science Association issued a report under the title “Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System.”<sup>44</sup> Among other things, the report called for more ideologically homogeneous parties that have the tools to discipline “heretical” members and force them to toe the party line. As various scholars have pointed out, much of what the committee desired has come to pass.<sup>45</sup> But, as critic Julius Turner predicted sixty-five years ago, one of the consequences of what we now call party sorting is a decline in party competition in many areas of the United States:

The reforms which the Committee proposes would increase the tendency toward one-party districts. If local parties and candidates cannot be insurgent, if they cannot express the basic desires of their constituencies, then those local parties can have no hope of success. Regardless of the organization provided, you cannot give Hubert Humphrey [a liberal Democratic senator from Minnesota] a banjo and expect him to carry Kansas. Only a Democrat who rejects at least a part of the Fair Deal can carry Kansas and only a Republican who moderates the Republican platform can carry Massachusetts.<sup>46</sup>

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43. Eitan D. Hersh, *Hacking the Electorate* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 93.

44. American Political Science Association, “A Report of the Committee on Political Parties: Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System,” *American Political Science Review* 44, no. 2 (September 1950).

45. E.g., Morris P. Fiorina with Samuel J. Abrams, *Disconnect: The Breakdown of Representation in American Politics*, chap. 7 (Norman, OK: Oklahoma University Press, 2009).

46. Julius Turner, “Responsible Parties: A Dissent from the Floor,” *American Political Science Review* 45, no. 1 (March 1951): 143–152. Our sense is that most political scientists, like Turner, believe that catch-all parties are in general electorally advantaged, but there are some dissenters. See, not surprisingly, Bernard Grofman, Samuel Merrill, Thomas L. Brunell, and William Koetzle, “The Potential Electoral Disadvantages of a Catch-All Party,” *Party Politics* 5, no. 2 (1999): 199–210.



Putting this argument in more contemporary terminology, a Democrat who is anti-fossil fuels and pro-gun control has little chance in the Appalachians, the South, and many areas of the Midwest and intermountain West. Similarly, a Republican who is strongly pro-life and opposes gay marriage has little chance in many areas of diverse urban states. Only if the parties nominate people whom Turner called “insurgents” in such areas do they have a chance to win, a fact well-understood by Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (CCC) chair Rahm Emmanuel when he engineered the most recent Democratic House majority in the 2006 elections. To the dismay of progressive Democrats, the CCC backed candidates who fit the district over more liberal rivals who were less likely to win.<sup>47</sup> If the parties were less well sorted than they now are, their candidates would be competitive in more districts and states than they now are.

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47. Naftali Bendavid, *The Thumpin': How Rahm Emanuel and the Democrats Learned to Be Ruthless and Ended the Republican Revolution* (New York: Wiley, 2007).

## *Essay Series*

*An Era of Tenuous Majorities: A Historical Context*

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## About the Author



### MORRIS P. FIORINA

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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