Red State, Blue State, Rich State, Poor State

WHY AMERICANS VOTE THE WAY THEY DO

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CHAPTER 8

Polarized Parties

Sometimes I think this country would be better off if we could just saw off the Eastern Seaboard and let it float out to sea.
—Barry Goldwater, 1961

People, I just want to say, you know, can we all get along?
—Rodney King, 1992

The discussion of red and blue states is not just about political strategy—figuring out which states are needed for an electoral college majority—it’s also motivated by an active debate, in the press and in academia, on whether the division on the maps indicates a fundamental political divide. In a famous poll in 2004, half the people surveyed thought George W. Bush was a “uniter” and half thought he was a “divider.” Similarly, pundits seem divided as to whether the United States is polarized. The pattern of income and voting is important because of what it implies about what the two parties represent.

Red and blue states come up in political discussion as a symbol of partisan divisions that strike at America’s unity and make the country harder to govern. Conservatives’ jokes about partitioning the country, and liberals’ dreams of joining the blue states with Canada (see figure 8.1), reflect real frustration about sharing a country with people who have not only different opinions but also what seems like an entirely different outlook on life. This in turn leads to a worry that polarized, negative politics is contributing to divisive attitudes.

At the same time, polarization serves a useful function insofar as it makes party brand names meaningful, ultimately making elected officials more accountable to relatively uninformed voters. Parties really mean something these days, much more so than they used
to. Our goal is not to label polarization as good or bad, but to assess whether it truly has been increasing.

One way to measure partisan polarization is by using so-called feeling thermometer survey questions in which people are asked how they view each of the major political parties on a 0–100 scale. As figure 8.2 shows, since the 1970s, attitudes have diverged: Republican voters have taken an increasingly negative view of the Democratic Party, and Democrats likewise think less of Republicans.

Our next steps are to see how Democratic and Republican voters differ on specific issues and to see how well represented their views are in Congress. Is it the voters who are polarized, the politicians, or both? But first we step back and consider what people mean when they talk about polarization. How can we measure the political divisions in our society?

Figure 8.2: Feelings (on a 0–100 scale) about the Democratic and Republican parties over the past thirty years from the perspective of the average self-declared Democrat, independent, and Republican. Unsurprisingly, Democrats prefer Democrats and Republicans prefer Republicans (with independents in the middle). What is interesting is that the gap between partisans has widened, with Americans on each side having an increasingly negative view of the other party.

Different Flavors of Polarization

Social scientists who study American political elites have generally concluded that politicians have become substantially more ideologically polarized over time. But what does this polarization consist of? The term conflates three complementary, but conceptually distinct, notions.

First, there is partisan polarization. This refers to a sorting by which ideologues find a political home in one of the two major
parties in the United States. In the past, conservative southern Democrats and liberal northeastern Republicans were commonplace, but nowadays, conservatives typically call themselves Republicans and liberals Democrats. One consequence is that partisans have increasingly negative views about the opposition party, as can be seen in figure 8.2.

A second form of polarization is opinion radicalization, in which people gravitate away from the political center toward more extreme positions on issues. That is, on any given issue, people could come to hold more diverse opinions.

A third form of polarization is issue alignment. To what degree are issue positions correlated with each other, or, equivalently, what constraints exist on the freedom with which people come to a set of beliefs about controversial issues? The more that issue positions correlate with each other, the more we can say that liberals and conservatives are in opposite camps. In contrast, if issue positions are uncorrelated, a set of cross-cutting cleavages exist, and divisions are less clear.

These three aspects of polarization can, at least in theory, combine in different ways. People could be highly polarized on individual issues or correlated on groups of issues, but with meaningless partisan labels. Conversely, partisans can be in strong disagreement in total without having extreme positions on particular issues, so that if we could aggregate each person’s ideological position into a single measure, people would be further apart than ever before.

INCREASING PARTISAN DISAGREEMENT

Democratic and Republican voters differ sharply on particular issues as well, most dramatically in foreign policy, an area where the two parties have always differed but not like they do today. By 2006, the Iraq War was supported by 80% of Republicans and only 20% of Democrats, a widening of a partisan gap that had already been large when the war began in 2003; see figure 8.3.

Figure 8.3: Trends in support for the Iraq War by party. Republicans have consistently supported the war much more than Democrats.

Figure 8.4: Belief that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. Differences between partisans remained large; by 2006, nearly half of Republicans but nearly no Democrats answered “Yes” to the survey question.

Some of this discrepancy can be tracked down to disagreement over the underlying facts, with nearly half of Republicans but almost no Democrats thinking that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction; see figure 8.4. Asking the question in different ways gives similar results. For example, in March 2006, nearly 40% of
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Republicans agreed with the statement, “most experts agree that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction,” over 30% believed there was “clear evidence” that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, and nearly 30% believed that the United States had found such weapons, with very few Democrats assenting.

Thirty to sixty years ago, Americans were divided on many issues, but the divisions cut across, rather than along, partisan lines. For example, the Vietnam War was controversial as early as 1965, when only about 60% of Americans supported the war, and before long, this level fell to less than a third; see figure 8.5. But what is most striking from a modern perspective is how little difference there was between partisans. True, Democrats supported the war more when Lyndon Johnson was in power and Republicans supported the war more when Richard Nixon was in power, but overall the differences between parties were small. Partisan disagreements over the Korean war were larger, especially by the end of Truman’s term in office, but still much less than with Iraq.

Even objective features of the economy are viewed through partisan filters. For example, a survey was conducted in 1988, at the end of Ronald Reagan’s second term, asking various questions about the government and economic conditions, including, “Would you say that compared to 1980, inflation has gotten better, stayed about the same, or gotten worse?” Amazingly, over half of the self-identified strong Democrats in the survey said that inflation had gotten worse and only 8% thought it had gotten much better, even though the actual inflation rate dropped from 13% to 4% during Reagan’s eight years in office.

The concern—and it is a real one—is that ideology has become so strong that it is currently impossible for opposing sides to have a reasoned discussion or even agree on a common set of underlying facts about the world, leading ultimately to policies supported by 50%-plus-one of the voters and considered illegitimate by the other half.

Polarization on Social Issues

In every society, the definition of marriage has not ever to my knowledge included homosexuality. That’s not to pick on homosexuality. It’s not, you know, man on child, man on dog, or whatever the case may be.


Some of the most striking examples of partisan alignment are on moral issues, as we have found in a joint project with political scientist Robert Shapiro. Figure 8.6 shows how attitudes on abortion have diverged between liberals and conservatives and especially between Democrats and Republicans. But we can’t tell the extent to which people have been switching parties or changing their opinions on abortion, or both.

Polarization as a perceptual screen on reality appears ubiquitous. We can see an example of this in a recent survey on 9/11 conspiracy theories. One prominent conspiracy theory about the attacks centers around the claim that President Bush knew about
The country is divided geographically as well as by party. For example, Edward Glaeser and Bryce Ward note that in 2004, “twenty-three percent of respondents in Oregon, Washington and California thought that Saddam Hussein was personally involved in the September 11, 2001, attacks. Forty-seven percent of respondents in Texas, Oklahoma and Arkansas had that view.” Glaeser and Ward also report that “56 percent of Mississippi residents think that AIDS is God’s punishment for immoral sexual behavior. Only 16 percent of Rhode Island residents share that view.”

Looking back a few years, racial integration and specific policies such as school busing and affirmative action have been wedge issues splitting the Democratic Party. Racial issues became increasingly central in twentieth-century American partisan politics after it was clear that the Democratic Party, minus its old southern wing, had become the civil rights party. Disputes in this area have generally shifted to concerns such as welfare and immigration policy, which, like race, have both social and economic dimensions in American politics. On racial issues specifically, survey data show increasing divergence over the past twenty years between conservatives and liberals and between Republicans and Democrats on questions such as whether government intervention is the most appropriate way to ensure equal treatment between blacks and whites.

**The Stubborn American Voter**

Excess partisanship literally inhibits Americans from processing information that challenges their biases.


The Democratic and Republican parties in Congress have moved apart in their voting patterns, and so it is perhaps not surprising that voters have diverged in their perceptions of the parties. Views about Iraq are strikingly partisan—especially compared to
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foreign-policy attitudes during the Korean and Vietnam Wars—but one might attribute these differences to particular characteristics of the wars. Large numbers of troops were first sent into Korea by Truman and to Vietnam by Kennedy and Johnson, whereas Iraq has so far been solely a Republican affair, without the high American death toll of the previous wars. Beyond this, the Iraq War revolved around specific, hard-to-verify claims about Saddam Hussein's threat to the world, whereas Korea and Vietnam fit more smoothly into existing Cold War ideology. Divergence on social issues is also interesting but perhaps merely reflects a shift of attention rather than any fundamental change in the meaning of partisanship.

It makes sense to explore the idea of polarization further by looking at attitudes about the economy, which is generally agreed to be the area most important to people when evaluating politicians and when voting. Here we have found no historical trends in the basic questions on taxes, government spending, and economic welfare: self-declared liberal and conservative voters (or Democrats and Republicans) differ strongly on these issues and have remained in disagreement for decades.

Where we do see changes is in perceptions, of both the national economy and personal finances. Voters are less willing to vote based on past performance but more willing to offer evaluations that, even if inaccurate, fit their partisan predispositions and voting choices. The evidence we present shows that Americans tend to rationalize the state of their personal financial situation over the previous year. They seek to bring their voting preferences and their view of their personal financial situation in sync.

Two sources of survey data support our claim that voters are influenced by their political attitudes when assessing the economy. First, we look at the National Election Study from 1956 to 2004, for each year predicting individuals' views of the economy from partisanship and the party of the incumbent president. We indeed find that voters of the administration's party tend to view the economy more positively, with this pattern increasing in recent decades.

Supporters of the opposition party were most likely to say that their personal financial situation stayed the same. This response serves as a way station for respondents whose situation may have improved but who are unwilling to admit to it given their dislike for the incumbent administration. Slightly more respondents were likely to say that their financial situation had improved rather than worsened, but with a difference of only about 5%. In contrast, members of the president's party were much more upbeat about their personal finances, being more likely to say that things had improved and much less likely to say that they had worsened.

Through 1980, people who supported the president's party were nearly 10% more likely to say their situation had improved as compared to those in the opposition party. Since 1984, partisan differences in economic perceptions have been much larger. This could represent an increasing level of bias and misperception (as indicated by the confusion about economic conditions during the 1980s, as noted on page 117) and also perhaps an increasing ability of administrations to deliver economic rewards to their partisan supporters.

To assess more directly the distinction between perception and reality, we turn to two sets of National Election Studies, 1972–1974–1976 and 1992–1994–1996, in which people were followed up and surveyed three times about their political attitudes and financial situation.

In 1972, Richard Nixon was running for reelection. In that year, the survey found income growth to be associated with a higher propensity to say one's financial situation had improved. Respondents were relying on real, objective retrospection to inform their responses. Closeness to the president's party had no significant impact: there was no evidence that people's responses were distorted by their political positions. In 1992, another Republican incumbent president was seeking reelection, but the story was the reverse. Members of the president's party were more likely to say their financial situation had improved as compared to partisans at the opposite end of the scale, but actual income growth was not strongly associated with reported financial situation. There is no evidence for retrospective thinking in 1992 but strong evidence for rationalization.
The waves of interviewing in 1976 and 1996 tell much the same story. Party was not a significant predictor of one's personal financial situation in 1976, while income growth neared statistical significance at traditional levels. In 1996, party affiliation was a strong predictor: the incumbent president was a Democrat, and as respondents became more Republican in 1996, they were less likely to say their financial situation had improved. In addition, respondents' income growth did not predict their views of their personal financial situations in 1996.

Rather than voting on their objective retrospective evaluation of the economy, voters now seem to be deciding how to vote first and then generating a biased retrospective evaluation second, one that accords with their predetermined partisan allegiance. This in turn may be a product of the relatively mild economic conditions of the past twenty years. A sharp recession could at some point push people back toward more objective perceptions of the economy.

POLARIZATION IN CONGRESS AND AMONG VOTERS

I didn't leave the Democratic Party. The party left me.
—Ronald Reagan, 1962

Each political party has marginalized the political center, because they feel that all they have to do is energize their base.
It's a political strategy. Before, you know, when I was in politics, it was a matter of both parties competing for the center, competing for the independents. That is gone now.
—John Danforth, former U.S. senator from Missouri, 2006

Parties are indeed more polarized, at least when measured by the way Democrats and Republicans vote in Congress. This is evident using the left–right voting scores developed by political scientists Keith Poole, Howard Rosenthal, and Nolan McCarty based on congressional roll-call votes. These scores are similar to the ratings of interest groups such as the Americans for Democratic Action and the American Conservative Union but have the advantage of being based on all the votes in each congressional session (rather than just a select few) and can easily be extended backward in time to make historical comparisons.

When Poole, Rosenthal, and McCarty examined congressmembers' ideological scores over the past century and a half, they found that the Republican Party has consistently been more conservative and the Democrats more liberal on the main left–right dimension of legislative voting, but with major changes over time. Figure 8.7 displays the results for the House of Representatives; the Senate shows similar trends. In the first half of the twentieth century, the two parties moved closer, reaching a minimum distance in the period of economic expansion from the end of World War II to the recession of the mid-1970s. This is the thirty-year period that economists Claudia Goldin and Robert Margo have called the Great Compression, when the country was near full employment and the income gap between rich and poor declined. In his recent book, Paul Krugman associated the Great
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Compression with bipartisan consensus on economic policy. (As Richard Nixon said when implementing wage and price controls, "We are all Keynesians now.")

Starting in the 1970s, however, there has been a change, with congressional Democrats moving in the liberal direction and Republicans becoming much more conservative. This has occurred not so much from individual congressmen changing their ideologies as by replacement due to political and geographic realignment. Moderate Democrats, especially in the South, have retired or been defeated and replaced with conservative Republicans, and, to a lesser extent, moderate Republicans have been replaced by more liberal Democrats. (And a few politicians, such as Texas Congressman, then Senator, Phil Gramm, kept their ideologies but switched parties.) The result is that the two parties overlapped less in their voting patterns. From the 1950s period of domestic consensus on an enlarged American welfare state (compared to the pre-New Deal era) and a Cold War consensus on foreign policy, we have moved to today's more ideologically coherent political parties at the elite and activist level.

How does the American public fit into this? We present here some of the results of a research project in collaboration with political scientist Michael Herron, placing voters and their representatives on a common ideological scale. Just as legislators' positions can be identified using their votes on controversial issues, we can estimate the ideologies of individual voters by surveying them and asking how they would themselves vote on these same issues. We used responses on about forty different topics, including tax cuts, the minimum wage, abortion, stem cell research, immigration, trade, gun control, the environment, and foreign policy, to get a sense of people's ideological leanings relative to their representatives.

When we put voters and congressmen on the same scale, as shown in figure 8.8, we find that the median American voter was well represented by Senate and House medians after the 2006 midterm elections. Looking at the distributions as a whole, we find that congressmen tend to be more extreme than voters. Voters are fairly represented on average, but centrists are few in the House and the Senate. The polarization on issues that has occurred in the electorate is not as strong as the divergence between the two parties in Congress. The relatively extreme ideologies of congressmen—to be more precise, their consistency in issue positions—should not be a surprise because elected representatives are constrained by their political parties, interest groups, and funders in a way that voters are not. In between voters and politicians are political activists, who tend to have ideological positions that are more extreme (that is, internally consistent) positions than the general population but less coherent than those of officeholders.

Evidence for trends in polarization can be seen in political behavior. As shown in figure 8.9, split-ticket voting was rare in the 1950s and 1960s, with only about 15% of voters pulling the lever for a Republican for president and a Democrat for Congress,
or vice versa. Candidates ranging from the broadly popular Eisenhower to the polarizing Goldwater did not induce many voters to split their tickets. Then, in the less partisan era of the 1970s and 1980s, ticket-splitting jumped to over 25% of all ballots. More recently, party identification has become stronger and split-ticket voting more rare, nearly returning to its low point fifty years earlier. This trend is not in itself conclusive evidence of polarization—split-ticket voting can be motivated by views of the roles of Congress and the president—but it is consistent with the other signs we have discussed of partisan divergence on individual attitudes and in perceptions of the parties.

Similar trends have occurred with self-reported political ideology and party identification: the number of voters describing themselves as purely independent (not even leaning toward the Democrats or Republicans) was below 10% in the 1950s, peaked near 15% in the 1970s, and since then has declined to less than 10%. Also during these past thirty years, political ideology has become much more strongly associated with partisanship, with self-described liberal voters leaving the Republican Party and conservatives leaving the Democratic Party.

Another way to see the importance of party cues is to break out the data for each election year, analyzing individual vote choice from party identification and several demographic variables (sex, race, age, education, religion, and income). When we do this, we find that the effect of party identification was fairly high in the 1950s, declined in the 1970s and 1980s, and then has increased dramatically since the 1990s, tracking other measures of the return of partisanship.

**ISSUE ATTITUDES, IDEOLOGY, AND PARTISANSHIP**

The pundits like to slice-and-dice our country into red states and blue states: red states for Republicans, blue states for Democrats. But I've got news for them, too. We worship an awesome God in the blue states, and we don't like federal agents poking around in our libraries in the red states. We coach little league in the blue states and, yes, we've got some gay friends in the red states. There are patriots who opposed the war in Iraq, and patriots who supported the war in Iraq.

---Barack Obama, Democratic National Convention, 2004

Although Americans have become increasingly polarized in their impressions of the Democratic and Republican parties (see, for example, figure 8.2), each person maintains a mix of attitudes within himself or herself. For instance, 40% of Americans in a 2004 survey were self-declared Republicans, but only 23% identified themselves as both Republican and conservative. Almost half of Republicans do not describe themselves as being ideologically conservative. If we also consider issue preferences, the constraint of people's political preferences looks even weaker. Only 6% of respondents are Republicans who think of themselves as conservatives, oppose abortion, and have conservative views on affirmative action and health policy. Fully 85% of self-declared Republicans are nonconservative or take a nonconservative stand on at least one of these three traditional issues.

A similar picture emerges if we look at Democrats. In this case, of the 49% self-declared Democrats in the sample, only 36% call
themselves liberals. Overall, almost 90% of Democrats are nonliberal or have nonliberal views on abortion, affirmative action, or health policy. These numbers should not be surprising, given that in general, the correlation between party identification or ideology and opinion on political issues is low. Knowing somebody’s political identification increases our chances of guessing his or her issue preferences, but not by much. This supports David Brooks’s notion of red and blue America as cultural constructs rather than bundles of issue positions.

The preceding analyses consider five positions (party, ideology, and three issues): if each were determined by a simple coin flip, there would be about 3% of the population (more precisely, 1 in 32), in each of the pure categories; instead, we see about 6% for each: more than would be expected by pure randomness, but far less than if attitudes on the different positions were perfectly correlated.

The picture does not change if we look at correlations among issue preferences alone. For example, consider opinions on health insurance and abortion. Overall, 46% of respondents favored government support for health insurance. Among the people who supported abortion, 51% supported government health insurance. Similarly, 55% of respondents support abortion. Among those supporting health insurance, 62% were also in favor of abortion.

Political polarization is commonly measured using the variation of responses on individual issues. By this measure, research has shown that—despite many commentators’ concerns about increased polarization—Americans’ attitudes have become no more variable in recent decades. What has changed in the electorate is its level of partisanship.

At the elite level, American political history shows that all three kinds of polarization—partisan polarization, opinion radicalization, and issue alignment—have been happening. Officeholders at both the federal and state levels are better sorted in terms of partisan polarization. They are also more distant from each other along the dominant left–right ideological dimension. Finally, political scientists have found that one, or at most two, dimensions explain most of the ideological differences in Congress.

So far, so good, for elites. What about the public at large? Are voters more polarized than ever before? We find a more complex story here. The public has, over the past few decades, definitely become more sorted into partisan labels. Still, the absolute level of this partisan polarization of the electorate is relatively small compared to that of professional politicians. This makes sense, given that most people like to spend their time thinking about things other than political philosophy.

On the other hand, we find that Americans as a whole have not become substantially more polarized on the issues. First, they have not typically moved away from each other on any given issue. Morris Fiorina, in his book *Culture War?*, provides plenty of evidence for this. Second, thanks to our own research, we know that the correlation of issue positions is still low, and thus the implicit complexity high, among the general population.

However, this pattern is different among one important subgroup of the American population. Americans who are wealthier look more like politicians in terms of the ideological consistency of their beliefs, matching what we would expect to see among political activists. The same is not true for those with college degrees as opposed to those without. Nor is it true for southerners versus nonsoutherners, or religiously observant people versus nonobservant people.

Among ordinary Americans, it is true that ideologues are better sorted into Democratic or Republican camps. But those camps are big and not very constraining. The electorate is made up of all sorts of people—liberals, moderates, conservatives, and those difficult to classify with well-known labels—and they don’t seem to be narrowing into extremely coherent ideologies. Hard-core partisans and the wealthy, however, are beginning to look more like the political elites that control the levers of government, rather than regular Americans. And the polarization that pundits decry has definitely occurred among those elites.
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RED AMERICA AND BLUE AMERICA

While most Americans are moderate in their political views, there are sharp divisions between supporters of the two major parties that extend far beyond a narrow sliver of elected officials and activists. Red state voters and blue state voters differ fairly dramatically in their social characteristics and political beliefs.

—Alan Abramowitz and Kyle Saunders, 2005

The partisan divisions implied by the red-blue map are real. Figure 8.10 shows the distribution of political ideologies of voters and congressmembers in Republican, battleground, and Democratic states, as estimated from a combination of roll-call and opinion-poll data. Voters in Republican and Democratic states are slightly more conservative and liberal, respectively, on the issues. Elected representatives are more geographically polarized: winner-take-all elections generally magnify differences that are already there. In a strongly Democratic-leaning state, it is likely that both senators will be Democrats and will be on the left side of the political spectrum. Such a state will also typically have many strongly Democratic congressional districts. The reverse pattern holds in Republican states.

Voters are polarized in different ways within different states. One way to see this is to compare states in terms of average level of religious observance. As discussed at the beginning of chapter 6, Americans as a whole are strikingly observant (especially compared to people in other industrialized countries), but states vary widely in this respect, with much higher church attendance in Mississippi and elsewhere in the deep South compared to states such as New Hampshire, Vermont, and Nevada.

We use survey data to study polarization—comparing the differences in voting patterns between Democratic and Republican identifiers, rich and poor, and religious and secular—within each state. Plate 8 summarizes what we found. In less religious states, which tend to be richer as well, voters are strongly divided along party lines. But in more religious states, party differences are weaker: Democrats are still more liberal than Republicans, but not by so much.

Figure 8.10: Estimated distributions of ideologies of voters (solid lines) and the House of Representatives and Senate (dashed lines) within strongly Republican, battleground, and strongly Democratic states. Voters are slightly more conservative in Republican states and liberal in Democratic states, but the differences in the House and, especially, the Senate, are much larger. Taking national averages, Congress represents the voters reasonably well, but the division between red and blue states is much more dramatic in the legislature than among the voters.

Conversely, class divisions are larger in religious states. There, lower-income voters are more liberal than upper-income voters (although still not as different as Democrats and Republicans). In contrast, rich and poor voters in less religious states do not
differ much in their overall ideological orientations. Higher-income voters in blue states tend to be more conservative on economic issues but more liberal on social issues, compared to poor voters in these states. Finally, states vary in their amount of religious polarization—the extent to which regular churchgoers are more likely to be conservative—but this pattern is not consistently stronger in religious or nonreligious states.

Much of the difference between red and blue America can be explained by the two parties finding coherent positions across many issues. In turn, this helps to explain how the national political map can change, with traditionally conservative voters in Connecticut, for example, switching to the Democrats because of cultural issues and voters in working-class strongholds such as West Virginia going in the opposite direction.

Figure 8.11 shows trends in correlations of issue attitudes with partisanship and ideology and with each other over the past thirty-five years, tracking changes separately in rich and poor states and separately considering issues in the economic, civil rights, moral, and foreign-policy domains.

Issues have become more strongly tied to political party, with the strongest trends being economic issues in poor states—they have long been correlated with party identification in rich states—and civil rights and moral issues in both rich and poor states. Moral issues have also become increasingly correlated with liberal–conservative ideology and with each other, now reaching a coherence comparable to that of economic and civil rights issues. Americans' views are least predictable on general foreign policy.

Democrats and Republicans have moved apart on individual issues, and we attribute this to a divergence between the positions of the elected officeholders of the parties, followed by a sorting of voters. The result of this sorting is some increased ideological consistency of voters—polarization in Congress has affected voters' positions. Nonetheless, Americans—especially those at the low end of income, education, and interest and participation in politics—remain complex in their opinions, often showing incompatibility with clear left–right opinion clusters. Divisions between red and blue America are increasingly ideological. But, distinctions between parties are more important in rich states, and class differences are more important in poor states. We are still far from having consistent national political divisions.

Figure 8.11: Trends in issue partisanship and alignment, comparing rich and poor states in each year. Each box compares the correlation trends in an issue domain for two mutually exclusive subgroups. In each column, the first row reports the model issues interacted with party identification, the second issues interacted with liberal–conservative ideology, and the third is the model for issue pairs. x-axis=time (1972–2004); y-axis=correlation (−5% to 40%). Black and gray lines show the estimates in high- and low-income states, respectively.

The increasing slopes of the lines in the top row of graphs indicate that party identification has become increasingly associated with specific attitudes, most notably with economic issues in poor states and civil rights and moral issues everywhere. The increasing slopes in the second row reveal similar trends in correlation with liberal–conservative self-positioning. Finally, the increasing but gently sloping lines in the third row reveal that attitudes on individual issues have become only slightly more tied together.
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YOUR FRIENDS AND NEIGHBORS

The divisions are so great that we have two parallel universes, the red and blue states, in which people speak to those who are like-minded, thus reinforcing their divisions.
—John Kenneth White, Catholic University of America, 2005

Social networks are indeed politically segregated—surveys find Democrats are more likely to know more Democrats and Republicans more likely to know more Republicans—but it is difficult to know how much is from geography (red or blue states, regions, neighborhoods, and workplaces) and the extent to which polarized social networks cause, or are the product of, polarization in attitudes.

One source of information on polarization in political networks is the 2000 National Election Study, which asked each respondent to give details on up to four people with whom he or she discussed important political matters. On average, people named 1.9 others, of whom about one-quarter were family members. Democrats and people living in Democratic states named more Democrats, and similarly for Republicans. The respondent’s personal party identification was a stronger predictor than the party composition of his or her state; see figure 8.12.

More recently, we put questions on another national study, the 2006 General Social Survey, asking people how many Democrats and Republicans they know, how many they trust, and whether most of the people they trust are Democrats, Republicans, or roughly equal amounts of each. Again, people tend to know and trust more people of their party, and this is especially true of people who live in states where they are in the majority.

These results are hardly shocking, and it is difficult to use them to assess time trends, but they are consistent with the partisan polarization that we have seen in attitudes and with studies of the atomization of American society such as Robert Putnam’s Bowling Alone, in that case focusing on the political implications of people socializing across a narrower range of society, with less direct exposure to diverse points of view.

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Figure 8.12: From a survey of voters in the 2000 election, the estimated percentage of people they talk politics with who supported Bush for president. Each respondent was asked to name up to four contacts. On average, each respondent discussed politics with 0.5 family members and 1.4 others. The two plots show separate estimates for the two groups. The top, middle, and bottom lines on each plot show the results for Gore and Bush voters in strongly Republican, battleground, and strongly Democratic states, respectively.

Unsurprisingly, Gore voters were much more likely to know Gore voters and the reverse for Bush voters. The differences between red, blue, and purple states are tiny among family members (about three-quarters of whom share the political affiliation of the survey respondent) but are larger for friends. On average, Bush voters perceived their nonfamily conversation partners to be more similar to themselves compared to the perceptions of Gore voters.

MODERATE VOTERS IN A POLARIZED WORLD

Most Americans are ideological moderates on both economic and moral issues ... Over the course of the twentieth century—a period of impressive economic and cultural convergence—we have not seen a great political chasm opening between the states, but rather a noteworthy political convergence.
—Stephen Ansolabehere, Jonathan Rodden, and James Snyder, 2006

Can the differences between red and blue states be explained by income levels and attitudes on social issues?
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The superficially intuitive story of political polarization is that voters are moving apart, maybe not on economic issues but in cultural values. As we noted in the previous chapter, the percentage of Americans who don’t go to church keeps going up, but regular church attenders are more Republican than ever. If the country is divided into secular liberals who are becoming disgusted with George W. Bush and the Republicans, and religious conservatives who were unhappy with Bill Clinton and remain distressed about gay rights, immigration, and other changes in American society, and if these liberals and conservatives are living in different parts of the country, get their news from different sources, and don’t talk with each other, then this is a recipe for even more polarization.

Reality is different, however. Looking at one issue after another, pollsters have found that most Americans’ positions are not diverging over time but remain relatively stable. There certainly have been some changes—consider general views on government revenues and spending in the wake of the tax revolts of the late 1970s, or the increasing demand for organized health care, or attitudes about the roles of gays in society. But there is not much evidence for polarization in the sense of half the people moving to one extreme and half to the other.

Scholars generally agree that Americans are mostly near the center in their attitudes on most issues. At the same time, voters are concerned about polarization and are often unsatisfied with the Democratic and Republican parties. A resolution of this puzzle, as articulated by political scientist Morris Fiorina and others, is that the two parties have diverged ideologically, leaving many voters stranded in the center and disillusioned about politics. The partisan polarization that has occurred at the elite level of elected officials has become increasingly evident, to a lesser extent, in the mass electorate.

CHAPTER NINE

Competing to Build a Majority Coalition

Tuesday’s exit polls added to the sense that the red-blue schism might be more intractable than we would have liked to believe. That’s because it is defined less by issues of the day than by battling cultures.
—Los Angeles Times editorial, 2004

The common lament over the recent rise in political partisanship is often nothing more than a veiled complaint instead about the recent rise of political conservatism.
—former House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, 2006

As we have discussed, the red-state, blue-state political divide occurs among the rich, not the poor. Because of this, it makes sense that the cultural differences between the parties are often framed in terms of how people spend their disposable income.

But it helps to put concerns about polarization in recent historical context. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, political scientists and journalists such as David Broder started writing books with titles such as The Party’s Over, worrying about the diminished importance of political organizations in American life, and expressing concern with a more shallow mass-media presentation of politics in books such as Joe McGinniss’s The Selling of the President, written about Richard Nixon’s 1968 presidential campaign.

Why were the increased importance of the media and decreased importance of political parties viewed as such a bad thing? For one thing, political scientists and journalists were more likely to be Democrats than Republicans—as was true of the country as a whole at that time. But Americans continued to vote Republican in presidential elections. Theories of divided government and balancing aside, this would be disturbing to someone who saw the