POST-BROADCAST DEMOCRACY

How Media Choice Increases Inequality in Political Involvement and Polarizes Elections

MARKUS PRIOR
Princeton University

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choices increase, their share among the voting public declines, thereby increasing the proportion of voters with deep partisan and ideological convictions. This process is not elite-driven. Technology simply facilitates participation of the more partisan news-seekers and abstention of the less partisan entertainment-seekers.

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate empirically that the transition to a high-choice media environment increased partisan polarization by changing the composition of the voting public. This explanation of polarization directs more attention to the considerable differences in polarization among voters and the public as a whole. It differs from most other explanations in that it neither rests on individual-level change in political attitudes nor assumes that changes at the elite level prompted the trend toward greater polarization. Explaining polarization without individual-level attitude change is consistent with recent work that emphasizes consensus on many political issues and finds little divergence over time. An account of polarization that does not start with elite-level change is consistent with the absence of a good explanation of why Congress or presidential candidates should have polarized first.¹

In the first part of this chapter, I review what we know about the degree and causes of partisan polarization, both in Congress and in the electorate. Existing research presents a puzzling set of findings that leaves room for another explanation. The analysis that follows then links changes in the media environment to polarization and establishes a causal chain that reaches from an exogenous change—the proliferation of media choice—to polarized elections and finally polarization in Congress. Of course, the fact that both attitude change and influences that directly polarize Congress are not necessary in this causal chain does not demonstrate that they did not occur. In fact, there is some evidence that Americans have become more partisan in recent years and that changes in party positions

¹ The evidence concerning the timing of polarization is ambiguous. According to Poole and Rosenthal’s nominate scores, the recent period of polarization in Congress began in the early 1980s. They conclude that “[e]arly, Reagan was out in front of the transformation of Congress” (Poole and Rosenthal 2001, 17). Roberts and Smith (2003) find a sharp increase in congressional polarization later, beginning only in the mid-1980s. Other measures of polarization reveal a different timing. Party unity voting in Congress picked up earlier—in the mid-1970s (e.g., Fiorina 2002). Differences in congressional support for the president between his party and the opposition had already begun to increase at that point (Jacobson 2003). At the mass level, Jacobson (2000b, 26) finds that “most of the trends among voters... show their largest movement in the 1990s, after the firming up of congressional party lines.” Yet this conclusion is debatable in light of Baracco’s (2000) analysis, which shows the beginning resurgence of partisan voting in the mid- to late-1970s for presidential elections and in the 1980s for congressional elections.
on racial and cultural issues contributed to, rather than followed, this trend. My goal in this chapter is not to argue that greater media choice is the single cause of partisan polarization but to show that it is an important one.

Polarization in Congress

The least controversial element of polarization is evident in Congress. Whereas several Republican members of Congress were ideologically more liberal than the most conservative Democrats two or three decades ago, all Republicans are to the right of all Democrats today (Poole and Rosenthal 2001). Many different measures pick up this trend. Members of Congress are rated as more ideologically split by monitoring interest groups (e.g., Fleisher and Bond 2000) and their roll-call voting reflects the growing ideological divergence (Jacobson 2000c; Poole and Rosenthal 1997; 2001). The percentage of roll-call votes in which a majority of one party opposes a majority of the other party has risen (e.g., Rohde 1991; Sinclair 2000). Evidence for polarization in both the House and the Senate has emerged (e.g., Fleisher and Bond 2004; Jacobson 2003). It is more difficult to determine if other elites have become more polarized as well. Whether President Bush and Senator Kerry offered more ideologically diverse policy proposals in 2004 than, say, Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan in 1980 is not immediately clear (but see Clinton, Jackman, and Rivers 2004; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Poole and Rosenthal 1997).

There are many plausible explanations why Congress may have polarized. First, leaders of the two parties in Congress have created incentives and organized congressional procedures in a way that grants them more influence over individual representatives (Brady, D'Onofrio, and Fiorina 2000; Cox and McCubbins 1993). Cooperation in the drafting of legislation is said to have been discouraged, and intraparty cohesion became stronger. Newt Gingrich is the most frequently mentioned example, but Democratic leadership in the House in the years before 1994 shows signs of comparable tendencies (Roberts and Smith 2003). Second, a more prominent role of the national parties and party activists in the primary process could have led to nomination of more ideological candidates (Aldrich 1995; Fiorina 2002, 99; Fleisher and Bond 2004). Third, partisan gerrymandering has reduced the proportion of ideologically diverse districts that are most likely to produce moderate representatives. Representatives of significantly redrawn districts are more ideologically extreme than their counterparts in districts that were changed only slightly or not at all (Carson et al. 2004).

According to all these explanations, polarization could be confined to the elite level. Organizational change and stronger party leadership in

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Congress, an altered nomination process, and redistricting could all lead to greater ideological divergence between Republicans and Democrats in Congress without any change in the electorate. Yet, the case for an elite-level cause of polarization is less than convincing. If redistricting did it, why do we observe polarization of the Senate and why does polarization in the House occur not in discrete jumps (in years after redistricting), but at a very steady rate (Poole and Rosenthal 2001, 19)? The same argument applies to any explanation that focuses on changes in leadership or procedures in the House of Representatives alone. If polarization occurs because the modern nominations process has made it easier for ideologues to win election, why have sitting members of House and Senate become more partisan as well (Fleisher and Bond 2004; Roberts and Smith 2003)?

Perhaps, then, we have to look for the causes of polarization elsewhere. Several scholars (e.g., Fleisher and Bond 2004; Roberts and Smith 2003) have suggested that changes in the electorate triggered polarization in Congress. According to others (e.g., Hetherington 2001; Jacobson 2000b), causality flows in the opposite direction, and ordinary citizens merely echo elite polarization—which, by that reasoning, must have other causes. Regardless of causal direction, these arguments presume that the electorate (or parts of it) in fact became more polarized. A closer look at the evidence for mass polarization reveals a picture far less clear-cut than for the elite level. To jump ahead in the story, polarization at the mass level has at least as much to do with the changing composition of the voting public as with deepening partisan divisions within the electorate as a whole. Elections have become more partisan, but the strengthening of partisan feelings appears too modest to account for this trend. Before I resolve what might seem like a paradox, it is necessary to examine closely the evidence for polarization at the mass level.

Polarization among Voters

If only a fraction of the endless media coverage of “a nation deeply divided” is accurate, the mass public has become more polarized and partisan in recent years. (Fiorina 2004a) illustrates the zeal with which media outlets follow their story line of a polarized country rife with “culture war.” Increasing polarization and increasing partisanship are not the same thing. It is impossible for an individual to polarize, but an individual can become more partisan, either in her attitudes, in her political

2 For example, the percentage of (strong and weak) partisans in the electorate was 62 percent in the 1970s, 65 percent in the 1980s, and 62 percent in the 1990s. The percentage of Americans who identify themselves as "extremely" conservative or liberal has remained stable at 4 to 5 percent over those decades.
feels, or in her voting behavior. If an individual becomes more partisan, the distance between her and those who identify with the opposite party increases, creating between-party polarization. In this sense, it is helpful to think of the electorate as an institution that—just like Congress—can polarize over time, while individual citizens—just like members of Congress—can become more partisan.

A strengthening of partisanship among voters can thus produce polarized elections in which strong partisans on both sides dominate. But such a strengthening is not a necessary precondition for polarized elections. More polarized elections can occur even when individuals have not become more partisan and the electorate has not polarized. A turnout increase among strong partisans (or a decrease among nonpartisans) can polarize elections even when partisanship in the electorate has not changed.

To understand trends in partisanship and political polarization, Bartels's (2000) analysis of party identification as a predictor of people's vote decisions, which I already described briefly in Chapters 1 and 6, is a useful starting point. Bartels estimates the joint impact of two elements of this relationship, the proportion of voters in each category of party identification (strong partisans, weak partisans, leaners), and the associations between the different categories and vote choice (that is, how likely people in these categories are to vote for their party). Since its modern low point in the 1970s, partisanship has resurged, both in terms of the number of people who consider themselves partisans and in terms of the impact that identification with a party has on vote choice. Combining these two trends, Bartels (2000, 44) concludes that party identification has become a better predictor of vote decisions since the mid-1970s in presidential and, somewhat later, in congressional elections: "The American political system has slipped with remarkably little fanfare into an era of increasingly vibrant partisanship." (Figure 7.2 graphs this trend.) The high volatility of election outcomes in the 1960s and 1970s (Bartels 1998, 295–7) also supports the claim that voting decisions were less rooted in firm partisan identites.

An increasing impact of party identification on vote choice is not the only indication of resurging partisanship in the electorate. The National Election Study has asked many of the same questions about partisanship repeatedly over the course of the last fifty years. As Figure 7.1 shows, respondents' answers leave little doubt that voters have become more partisan and that the voting public has polarized along partisan lines. The five panels in the figure show trends in partisan polarization since the middle of the twentieth century, using different indicators that tap both cognitive and affective elements of partisanship. The first panel plots the percentage of voters who identify strongly with one of the two parties. Through the mid-1960s, about 40 percent of all voters were in this
category. This number dropped to 30 percent in the 1970s before recovering to its 1950s levels in recent elections. The second panel (top row, on the right) adds an ideological dimension of self-identification by graphing the percentage of (weak or strong) partisans whose ideology corresponds to their party identification, that is, the percentage of Democrats who also identify themselves as liberals and Republicans who also call themselves conservatives. By this measure, too, which is only available after 1970, voters have become more polarized recently.

Polarization among voters appears to have a cognitive foundation. As the third panel (middle row, on the left) shows, before the 1980s between 50 and 60 percent of all voters said that there were important differences between the two parties. In the last two decades, this share passed 70 percent. In 2004, 85 percent of all voters saw important differences. Voters have not only become more likely to perceive differences between the parties, they also offer more reasons in support of their own party. In most NES interviews, a series of questions invites respondents to explain what they like and dislike about the two parties. The interviewer records up to five different likes and dislikes about each party. These questions can track how many different reasons a respondent has to support the party with which he or she identifies. The measure used in panel four (middle row, on the right) is a count of the reasons a respondent offers in support of his or her party minus the number of reasons in favor of the other party. (For example, for a Democrat, the sum of favorable mentions about the Republican Party and unfavorable mentions about the Democratic Party is subtracted from the sum of favorable mentions about the Democratic Party and unfavorable mentions about the Republican Party.) Panel four plots this net number of reasons in favor of the respondent’s own party. In the 1960s, voters gave on average more than two more reasons in support of their own party. This number fell to a low point of barely more than one reason in 1978, but has since recovered almost to its 1950s levels.

Because many people do not have well-formed attitudes on more than a few political issues (e.g., Converse 1964; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), it may seem odd to define polarization as a function of attitudes, attitude consistency, and attitude strength. More people have affective attachments to a party or feelings about which side is right. If these feelings have become stronger, polarization may have ensued despite many voters’ shaky grasp of policy details. The fifth panel in Figure 7.1 (bottom row) completes the evidence for partisan polarization by documenting its affective component. The NES uses so-called feeling thermometers to gauge respondents’ affective responses to political groups, candidates, and officeholders. On these thermometers, respondents rate targets on a scale from 0 to 100 degrees, where values below 50 are described as unfavorable and cold and values over 50 as favorable and warm. The

difference between thermometer ratings of the two parties can thus indicate how polarized a respondent’s feelings about the two parties are. The fifth panel graphs this measure of affective partisan polarization over time. It shows the familiar drop in partisanship to a low in the 1970s. Just as for the other measures of partisanship, the trend in affective polarization reverses in the 1980s. In the last years of the twentieth century, voters’ feelings about the two parties were just as polarized as they were at the beginning of the time series.

Together, the five measures plotted in Figure 7.1 illustrate the resurgence of partisanship among voters in all its shades. Americans not only vote more reliably for their own party again, they also think and feel more positively about it (at least relative to the other party).

Polarization in the Electorate?

It is important to note that most of the evidence for partisan polarization at the mass level— including all evidence I have offered so far—comes from analyses of voting behavior or changes in partisan feelings among voters. For example, the correlation between party identification and vote choice has become stronger (Bartels 2000; Jacobson 2000a), and split-ticket voting, less frequent (Hetherington 2001; Mayer 1998). Whether nonvoters too would vote increasingly in line with their partisan leanings is a difficult question, both because it is hypothetical and because nonvoters are less likely to identify with a party. But we can consider those measures of partisanship that are defined regardless of turnout, such as the differences in party thermometer ratings and the reasons people give to explain why they like one party over the other. Plotting the same trends for nonvoters that showed marked increases in partisanship among voters in Figure 7.1 reveals a surprising contrast. The five panels in Figure 7.2 all indicate that nonvoters (shown by the dark lines) are not only less partisan than voters

3 In the late 1970s, the NES changed its thermometer rating questions from asking respondents to rate “Republicans” and “Democrats” to asking about the “Republican Party” and the “Democratic Party.” In 1980 and 1982, both versions of the question were asked. Comparisons reveal that the wording change affected the difference between ratings of the two parties. Under the old wording, the average rating differences were 19.4 in 1980 and 21.3 in 1982. Using the new wording, these differences increased to 24.3 in 1980 and 27.2 in 1982. Thus, the increase due to the new wording averages 5.4 points in those two years. This is a sizable increase in apparent polarization as a result of a wording change. To remove this distortion from the time series, I add 5.4 to the difference in all years that used the old wording. (Because the effect of question wording in 1980 and 1982 is almost the same for voters and nonvoters, I do not apply separate corrections for those two groups of respondents in Figure 7.2.)
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...conditioned on income and education, but that the difference between voters and nonvoters has increased noticeably since the 1970s. The first two panels—graphing the percentage of strong partisans and the percentage of ideologically consistent partisans—reveal no signs of increasing partisanship among nonvoters at all. The share of strongly partisan and ideologically consistent nonvoters remained stable over the last two decades.

The share of nonvoters who see important differences between the two parties (third panel, middle row, on the left) has increased from a low of less than 40 percent in the early 1970s to almost 50 percent by the end of the century and to 58 percent in 2004. Although significant, this increase is clearly less pronounced than the equivalent increase among voters. Furthermore, perception of differences alone does not necessarily indicate polarization. The fourth panel (middle row, on the right) plots the number of reasons that nonvoters offered in support of their own party minus the number of reasons offered in support of the other party. Among nonvoters, it shows not much of a trend at all, hovering right around 1.3 net reasons in their party's favor. (The suspiciously low values for 1978, both among voters and nonvoters, look like measurement error rather than a dramatic drop for just one year.)

Affective polarization—measured as the difference between thermometer ratings of the two parties and shown in the last panel in Figure 7.2—increased slightly in the late 1970s even among nonvoters. Despite some ups and downs, nonvoters' affective evaluations of the parties have not diverged further since then. Voters' feelings, in contrast, have become decidedly stronger in the same time period. Until the mid-1970s, voters and nonvoters were almost equally polarized. Since then, the difference between them has increased to about 15 points.

Figure 7.3 shows this divergence more systematically by graphing the gap between voters and nonvoters for all five measures of partisanship. Each panel plots the differences between voters and nonvoters for each year and a moving average generated by a locally weighted regression of the differences on time. All gaps have substantially increased since the early seventies; in fact they have more than doubled in several instances. While the public as a whole has become somewhat more partisan in recent decades, this trend has been much stronger among voters. Perhaps this growing divergence between voters and nonvoters is often overlooked because exit polls and surveys of likely or registered voters will necessarily miss it. Surveys that do not sample the entire electorate increasingly exaggerate the level of polarization in the American public.

Two mechanisms could possibly account for the growing divergence between voters and nonvoters. Either individual voters became more partisan over time, or partisan members of the electorate became more likely to vote and less partisan Americans correspondingly more likely...
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to abstain. The first mechanism is rooted in individual change. The second mechanism is compositional. When partisans become more likely and moderates less likely to vote, the voting public ends up more partisan even though individuals’ partisanship did not change. The Conditional Political Learning model in its most parsimonious form can only explain the latter, compositional change. It predicts that, during a period in which media choice increased, the voting public should become more polarized because strong partisans become more likely to vote, while moderate or indifferent voters are more likely to abstain. It is clear from Figure 7.2 that, despite increasing divergence between voters and nonvoters, the public as a whole has become somewhat more partisan. Conditional Political Learning cannot explain that part of polarization (unless it incorporates some sort of feedback mechanism whereby greater media choice not only increases the share of partisan voters but also reinforces their partisanship, perhaps by offering more ideologically divergent media content. As I discuss in the conclusion to this chapter, such a content-driven effect, if it exists, is probably small).

The result that partisanship in the public has increased less than partisanship among voters is consistent with other studies. On most issues, Americans take moderate positions and their disagreement has not intensified noticeably in recent decades. In fact, the most thorough examination of attitudes about social issues finds convergence (that is, “depolarization”) on many issues (DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996; Evans 2003). Many opinion distributions have become less dispersed and more centered on one middle position. Polarization has decreased on many social issues not only in the population as a whole but also between people with different levels of education, between people of different races, between frequent churchgoers and those who go to church less frequently or are not religious, and between Southerners and non-Southerners. Opinions of different demographic groups have in fact grown more similar to an extent that leads DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson (1996, 738) to proclaim “dramatic depolarization in intergroup differences.”

4 Because turnout has remained fairly constant over the last thirty years (McDonald and Popkin 2001) – the period of slight polarization even in the electorate as a whole – a tendency for increasingly partisan people to turn out at higher rates cannot be the whole explanation for the diverging trends in Figure 7.2. To maintain constant turnout, a decline in electoral participation in some segments must offset any increase among the more partisan.

5 DiMaggio et al. (1996, 738) do find “striking divergence” between Democrats and Republicans on those same social issues. To reconcile the two sets of empirical observations, it must be true either that different people call themselves “Democrats” and “Republicans” now than in the past, or that roughly the same number of Republicans and Democrats switched their issue position in opposite directions. It is not
CLEAR Which of the two is more common (see, e.g., Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Layman and Carsey 2002a; 2002b; Miller and Hoffman 1999), but the consequence in both cases is that Democrats and Republicans hold increasingly distinct issues positions. What caused this kind of sorting and the extent to which it is more common among voters remains uncertain.

The relationship between entertainment preference and partisanship is evident regardless of how exactly both concepts are measured. As an example, Figure 7.4 plots the association for the combined measure of Relative Entertainment Preference introduced in Chapter 4. I divided the N&E Survey sample into eighths according to their relative liking for entertainment. For each of these eight segments, Figure 7.4 shows the partisan composition. The more strongly respondents prefer news to entertainment, the more partisan they are (and vice versa). At one extreme, almost 40 percent of the people who decidedly prefer news identify strongly with a party, and an additional 26 percent, weakly. Respondents at the other extreme—those who most clearly prefer entertainment—are the least partisan of all. Only 25 percent of them identify strongly with a party. Two-fifths are either independent or completely apolitical, not reporting any party preference. As we move from low to high Relative Entertainment Preference, the share of strong partisans drops by about a third, while the share of apoliticals and independents doubles.

Judging by the strength of people's party affiliations, entertainment fans are indeed less partisan than people who like the news. Some of them are politically attuned independents, but a considerable share is indifferent to politics rather than deliberately moderate. Another measure
of the strength of partisan attitudes is the absolute difference between thermometer ratings of politically opposed groups or individuals, such as liberals and conservatives or the two parties' presidential candidates. The absolute difference between ratings of liberals and conservatives in the N&EE Survey is 35 among strong news fans, but barely half that among avid entertainment fans. News fans' feelings concerning the two parties and George W. Bush and Al Gore are also more than 25 percent more polarized than the respective feelings of entertainment fans. The same negative relationship between Relative Entertainment Preference and the strength of people's partisan feelings is evident in the NES data used in Chapter 4. Entertainment fans express less polarized feelings toward liberals and conservatives and toward Democratic and Republican candidates for office. Compared to strong entertainment fans, strong news fans are 10 to 50 percent more polarized in their assessments (using the same type of thermometer question format). In short, no matter which measure of entertainment preference or partisanship is used, entertainment-seekers are noticeably less partisan than the people motivated to watch the news.

As I already demonstrated, greater media choice reduces turnout among entertainment-seekers but increases it among news fans. Together, the growing turnout gap and the close correlation of entertainment preference and strength of partisanship generate the following prediction: The spread of cable and the Internet increased partisan polarization among voters by changing the composition of the voting public because less partisan entertainment-seekers drop out, while more partisan news fans vote even more reliably than before. Although measures of entertainment preference do not exist for past decades, it is at least possible to verify that the predicted change in turnout patterns occurred. Drawing on the NES time series, Figure 7.5 graphs the turnout rates (in House elections) at different levels of party identification. The upper panel shows turnout rates for presidential election years; the lower panel, for midterm elections. While turnout among strong partisans in presidential elections has remained constant over time, independents and apoliticals have become much less likely to cast a vote. In midterm elections, turnout rates declined most strongly among independents, although the 1994 election put a bump in this trend. Figure 7.5 also makes clear that there is room for a rise in

6 These two groups are pooled here because slight changes in the administration of the party ID questions make it impossible to distinguish them for the whole time series.

7 This trend is slightly exacerbated by the lowering of the voting age to 18 in 1971, but comparing only voters older than 20 yields an almost equally steep decline among independents and apoliticals, and hardly any difference among strong partisans.

8 I do not include estimates from the NES 2002 because it was conducted entirely by phone, which exacerbates the problem of vote overreporting.

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**Figure 7.5. Turnout in House Elections by Strength of Partisan Identification, 1952–2004.**

*Note: Except in 1998 (when not enough face-to-face interviews were conducted), NES respondents interviewed by telephone (in 1984, 1992, 1994, 1996, and 2000) are excluded because overreporting is more severe in phone interviews. The NES 2002 was conducted entirely by phone and is therefore not used here.*

*Source: National Election Study.*