Contemporary United States Polarization in Historical Context:

Defining, Analyzing, and Comparing Manifestations of Party Polarization

(1960 – 1970 and 2000 – 2016)

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Introduction

Party politics in the United States today feels abnormally hostile. The intensifying anger and distrust between the opposing parties is generating a growing sense of division felt across the entire country. Op-eds and presidential tweets referencing civil war forced me to wonder how divided the United States is and what might that mean for US politics in the near-future.[1]

This feeling of division along party lines is well documented and referred to as polarization. However, as the media uses the term "polarizing" and "polarization" to describe everything from elections, to candidates, to the electorate, and even policy-issues, I realized an accurate definition would be critical to discussing polarization coherently. I quickly learned that the phenomenon the US is experiencing – the intense division between the political parties – is party polarization, a specific form of the more general concept of political polarization. In layman's terms, party polarization is the division of the parties into two sharply contrasting groups.[2]

Originally, I wanted to compare party polarization today to party polarization in the years leading up to the Civil War. Unfortunately, I quickly found that it was incredibly difficult to find reasonable and reliable data from that period on the emotions of the electorate. As party polarization today seems driven by extremely negative and intense partisan emotion, I thought it was necessary to have access to data on how the average voter – the electorate – felt about party politics on an emotional level.

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[1] https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1178477539653771264?s=20
[2] Lee, "How Party Polarization Affects Governance", 263

The data needed to study the emotions and anger of the electorate largely isn't available until the mid-1960s to early-1970s. So, I shifted my comparison to party polarization today versus party polarization between roughly 1960 and 1970. I decided this was a worthwhile comparison beyond simply having more available relevant data. The 60s and 70s, like today, are thought of as a period of intense social and political conflict. Understanding party polarization during this time can perhaps aid in understanding the nature of modern U.S. party divisions. This period was bookended by some of the most important and straining conflicts in United States history – the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War, with a shocking number of political and social leaders assassinated throughout.

I came to find that the feeling of intense anger most people associate with modern party politics is actually just one manifestation of party polarization among others. A feeling of anger towards the opposing party is called affective polarization, defined as interparty hostility or the degree to which partisans treat members of the opposing party as a stigmatized out-group.[3] Essentially, affective polarization is a reflection of how negatively opposing partisans feel about each other. Affective polarization is often measured using feeling-thermometer ratings (party and presidential candidate) and surveys (would you let your kid marry an opposing partisan).[4]

Another recognized manifestation of party polarization is ideological divergence. Ideological divergence is often referred to as spatial polarization, as it is defined as the distance between the ideologies of the two parties along the left-right spectrum of political ideology. In

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[3] Lelkes, "Mass Polarization", 401
[4] Iyengar and Krupenkin, "The Strengthening of Partisan Affect", 202

other words, for ideological divergence to increase in US party politics, the Democratic Party would have to shift to the left on policy-preference while the Republican Party remained static or shifted right (the opposite scenario is also increasing ideological divergence). Ideological divergence is also referred to as issue-based polarization or policy-preference polarization because it is measured through actual policy positions among the electorate and policy outcomes/votes among representatives.[5]

The final manifestation of party polarization relevant to this discussion is ideological consistency. Ideological consistency, also referred to as partisan sorting, is defined as the degree of alignment between self-reported ideology and partisan identity. In other words, does everyone who identifies as a liberal belong to the liberal party?[6] Importantly, the parties can increase in ideological consistency – or become better sorted, with liberals confined to the liberal party and conservatives confined to the conservative party – without either party shifting to the left or right ideologically on policy positions. Essentially, ideological consistency can increase independent of ideological divergence Ideological consistency is measured primarily through survey data and voting records.[7]

I believe that any comparison of party polarization across time requires consideration of each of these manifestations of polarization, as the increase of any of them has specific and significant implications for US politics. Conflict among political scientists over the relative level of party polarization today – and there is plenty – seems to stem largely from the refusal to acknowledge each of the discussed manifestations and the differences between them.

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[5] Lee, "How Party Polarization Affects Governance", 263
[6] Lelkes, "Mass Polarization", 395
[7] Lee, "How Party Polarization Affects Governance", 263

I will attempt to illustrate how the data shows definitively that *certain* manifestations of party polarization in the United States have increased dramatically since the 1960s and 1970s alongside radical transformations in the structure of US party politics.

Ideological divergence has produced the most conflicting evidence (primarily because of issues with objectively measuring the ideologies of individual legislators) but does not appear to have increased significantly since the 1960s and 70s, and especially not at the mass level. In fact, recent studies indicate that ideological divergence has likely decreased since 1965 with policy-preferences generally remaining centrist or becoming more liberal over time.[8]

Ideological consistency has increased drastically over the last sixty years. As discussed later in more detail, the Voting Rights Act (VRA) of 1965 may be the single most important piece of legislation in terms of the development of the modern Republican and Democratic Parties. The VRA passing into law catalyzed a monumental party realignment which did not fully mature until the 1990s. The party realignment following the VRA resulted in historically ideologically consistent political parties and a system of competitive party politics not seen in the United States since the beginning of the 20th century.

Affective polarization, in particular, has truly exploded since 1970. Though the growth of interparty hostility was somewhat stagnant until the late 80s, it has increased significantly between the early-1990s and today. Today, partisan identity is a litmus test for everything from friendships, to romantic partners, to the places we choose to live – United States citizens increasingly *cannot stand* members of the opposing party. In fact, in the last two decades opposition-party hostility has become the dominant motivating factor driving political behavior

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[8] Bateman, Clinton, and Lapinksi, "A House Divided?", 698

– more Americans choose to vote and otherwise participate in politics because of their sheer anger towards the opposing party than positive feelings towards one's own party.

My conclusion is that, while ideological divergence has remained stable or even decreased since the 70s, ideological consistency and affective polarization have skyrocketed, largely as a result of party realignment following the passing of the VRA. Their dramatic and, as of yet, unchecked growth has severe implications for US party politics.

Literature Review

Ghosts of the Civil War

A considerable number of political scientists have declared that U.S. party politics are as polarized today as during the eve of the Civil War and the beginning of Reconstruction. These declarations have themselves thrown political science into a slightly-less dramatic Civil War of its own. Many other political scientists seemingly reject these claims outright, arguing that, "not only are [the] contemporary parties relatively less divided than is commonly thought, but the conflict occurs in a smaller, and more liberal, portion of the policy space."[9] What accounts for this discrepancy in measurements of polarization? I believe the culprits are overlapping – and in some sense equally valid – but ultimately incomplete definitions of political polarization.

The Polarization of Contemporary American Politics (Hare, Poole; 2014)

One specific clash within the debate over 21st century U.S. political polarization illustrates this idea particularly well. On the one hand, we have *The Polarization of*

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[9] Bateman, Clinton, and Lapinski, "A House Divided?", 698

Contemporary American Politics, an article by Christopher Hare and Keith Poole published in the Northeastern Political Science Association journal in 2014. Hare and Poole argue that their recent study on polarization between the two parties has produced "unambiguous" results:

> [The Democratic and Republican Parties] are more polarized [now] than at any time since the end of Reconstruction, and a single liberal-conservative dimension explains the vast majority of legislators vote choices, including on a wide array of social/cultural issues. We are now firmly entrenched in a political era that is characterized by the ubiquity of unidimensional, polarized political conflict.[9]

Hare and Poole never seem to explicitly define polarization, per se, but instead define it implicitly through their examination. Hare and Poole never really use a term more specific than "polarization," but, as shown, it is clear that they are referring exclusively to polarization between the Republican and Democratic Parties – this is a study specifically on party polarization. The authors describe polarization as the degree of alignment between political ideology (liberal or conservative) and partisan identity (Democrat or Republican), and argue that the consistency between the two has grown significantly over the past few decades. Hare and Poole cite the lack of "conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans," in both Congress and the electorate as evidence for this argument.[10] The phenomenon Hare and Poole are describing, but do not name independently of polarization, is what I have defined as ideological consistency.

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[9] Hare and Pool, "The Polarization of Contemporary American Politics", 428
[10] Ibid., 411 – 412

Confusingly, Hare and Poole go on to describe polarization again as ideological consistency and then as an entirely different manifestation sentences later, without distinguishing the two. While discussing the characteristics of U.S. polarization, Hare and Poole state that, "Beginning in the mid-1970s . . . More Democrats staked out consistently liberal positions, and more Republicans supported wholly conservative ones. In other words Congress began to polarize."[11] This, of course, is the ideological consistency definition of party polarization Hare and Poole began with. In the same paragraph, however, they describe polarization differently: "since the mid-1970s, polarization has steadily increased as the ideological center has hollowed out and the outer edges of the parties – especially the Republican Party – have moved ever further toward the ideological poles."[12] By this definition, polarization isn't reflective of the degree of the two parties' ideological consistency – how frequently partisan identity aligns with self-identified ideology – but rather of the degree of separation between the ideologies of the two parties. For the Democratic and Republican Parties to be the most polarized they have been since the end of the Civil War by this definition, the Democratic Party would have to have become measurably more liberal, or the Republican Party would have to have become measurably more conservative, or a combination of both.

Critically, Hare and Poole conclude this somewhat ambiguous moment with a bold statement: "Whether we gauge congressional polarization by the difference of party means, the difference between the parties' 10th percentile scores, or any number of alternative measures, Congress is now more polarized than at any time since the end of the Civil War."[13] It

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[11] Hare and Pool, "The Polarization of Contemporary American Politics", 415
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.

is this statement and others like it that have generated so much debate and conflict in political science. Many studies have shown that it is definitively *not* the case that party polarization is at historical levels independent of how it is measured.

A House Divided? Roll Calls, Polarization and Policy Differences in the U.S. House, 1877 – 2011

(Bateman, Clinton, Lapinski; 2017)

In July 2017, The American Journal of Political Science published an article by David Bateman, Joshua Clinton, and John Lapinski entitled *A House Divided? Roll Calls, Polarization and Policy Differences in the U.S. House, 1877 – 2011*. Bateman et. al. take issue with declarations precisely like those made by Hare and Poole and, in fact, reference *The Polarization of Contemporary Politics* (2014) directly in their argument. The authors argue:

> Claims regarding the historical levels of polarization have reached beyond the academy, and the characterization is often featured in the popular press . . . We argue for caution in making such claims, and we demonstrate that it is difficult to reach any conclusion about the meaning of past and contemporary policy disagreements without accounting for how the policy content has changed over time.[14]

The authors dispute the claim made by Hare and Poole, as well as others, that the objective ideologies of the Democratic and Republican Parties have diverged over time. Bateman et. al. specifically criticize NOMINATE, the statistical procedure forming the basis of much of the research showing party ideological divergence.

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[14] Bateman, Clinton, and Lapinski, "A House Divided?", 698

NOMINATE – short for Nominal Three-Step Estimation – is a method of estimating the policy positions of legislators. The procedure estimates how an individual House or Senate member would vote on specific pieces of legislature based on their historical roll voting behavior. Those in the Hare and Poole camp use the estimates generated by NOMINATE, and specifically DW-NOMINATE (dynamic, weighted NOMINATE), to "score" the ideologies of individual legislators, thereby creating a quantitative basis for comparing ideologies over time.[15]

Those, like Hare and Poole, who argue that polarization has increased because the ideologies of the two parties have diverged over time generally base this claim on DW-NOMINATE score comparisons. Hare and Poole explain:

> Moreover, the [DW-NOMINATE] procedure that we employ uses overlapping cohorts of legislators to "bridge" between legislators who have not served together, thus allowing ideological scores to be compared over time. This allows us to make explicit comparisons of the ideological positions of, for example, a freshman Senator [in 2014] with a Senator who last served in the 1960s. These sorts of comparisons are necessary for the study of a dynamic trend like polarization.[16]

Bateman et. al., as well as others in political science, present considerable evidence that DW-NOMINATE does not accurately reflect ideological differences over time, but rather partisan differences.[17] DW-NOMINATE scores fail to account for shifts in policy content, and largely reflect party loyalty rather than ideological loyalty. Bateman et. al. demonstrate this failing by

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[15] Hare and Pool, "The Polarization of Contemporary American Politics", 412
[16] Ibid., 412 – 413
[17] Bateman, Clinton, and Lapinski, "A House Divided?", 701

examining U.S. political polarization between 1877 and 2011, first through DW-NOMINATE, and then through party policy content.

What is thought to be DW-NOMINATE's strength by its advocates is argued by those in the Bateman et. al. camp to instead be its analytical flaw. Hare and Poole proclaim that, "The appeal of using NOMINATE to study the phenomenon of political polarization is that NOMINATE uses legislator's entire roll call voting records to estimate their ideological locations, rather than just a subset of selected votes, as with interest group ratings."[18] Bateman et. al. demonstrate convincingly that the generalized data produced by entire roll call vote records fail to meaningfully account for shifts in policy content, which has serious implications for the application of DW-NOMINATE scores. When issue categories are isolated, according to Bateman et al., an attempt can be made to critically examine individual policies related to a specific issue and grade them on the left-right ideological spectrum. Consequently, legislators' ideologies can be compared over time as you have an idea of how objectively liberally or conservatively they voted.

To demonstrate the problem with DW-NOMINATE, Bateman et. al. controlled for policy content by applying NOMINATE exclusively to legislation related to African American civil rights since 1877. The estimates DW-NOMINATE generated for votes on prohibiting the army from the polls and antilynching legislation are telling:

> It is difficult to imagine that Jack Flynt (D-GA), a signer of the Southern Manifesto, or
> former Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens (D-GA) would be more likely to
> support retaining the authority of the federal government to use the military to ensure

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[18] Hare and Pool, "The Polarization of Contemporary American Politics", 412

black American males' voting rights in the South than would John Lewis (D-GA) or Adam

Clayton Powell (D-NY). The policy content . . . has changed in ways that are not reflected

in the DW-NOMINATE estimates.

The problems go beyond mere shifts of the policy space. That Democrats are always to

the left of Republicans despite their changing first-dimension preferences over race

suggests that DW-NOMINATE estimates reflect partisan rather than ideological

differences . . . Because the estimated dimensions [of conflict] are defined in terms of

interparty versus intraparty voting coalitions rather than the issues involved, it is unclear

how to interpret the policy content if the parties' positions change over time. This is not

a problem that is unique to the issue civil rights, as it will potentially occur whenever the

parties' relative positions on an issue have changed substantially over time (Karol

2009).[19]

The assertion that DW-NOMINATE scores reflect increasingly extreme ideologies in U.S. politics

is very likely flawed. Bateman et. al. are convincing in their argument that claiming Republican

and Democratic policy-preferences are as polarized as they were during the Civil War era,

"dramatically mischaracterize the magnitude of policy change in consequential ways," and that,

"the domain of current political debates is far more limited and liberal."[20]

Crucially, however, Bateman et. al. concede that DW-NOMINATE does accurately reflect

some measure of partisan differences – the increased polarization demonstrated by Hare and

Poole has a basis in reality, and their findings reflect a significant rise in party conflict over the

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[19] Bateman, Clinton, and Lapinski, "A House Divided?", 701
[20] Ibid., 712 and 699, respectively.

last sixty years, marked by a noteworthy increase in party line voting and decrease in bipartisan cooperation and compromise. Indeed, Bateman et. al. conclude that, "the parties in recent decades are more likely to vote against one another on race-related issues," however, "it is implausible that the differences separating racial liberals from conservatives are as great today as they were in the late 19th century, or that there has not been a substantial leftward shift in the policy space since the 1960s."[21]

The conflict between the Bateman et. al. and Hare and Poole camps is rooted primarily in differing understandings of what political polarization is. Both focus on the two political parties, but disagree on what polarization between them looks like. Hare and Poole describe political polarization as the degree of alignment between ideology and partisan identity, as well as the degree of separation between the mean ideologies of the two parties. This definition paints polarization as two distinct manifestations – ideological consistency and ideological divergence. Hare and Poole believe both manifestations are at historical high-water marks, and therefore that the United States is historically polarized.

Bateman et. al. define polarization more rigorously – exclusively as ideological divergence, measured by actual policy preference. According to Bateman et. al., ideological consistency and interparty conflict are growing characteristics of U.S. party politics, but are not truly polarization; thus, because Hare and Poole are incorrect in their claims regarding ideological divergence, they are incorrect that the United States is historically polarized.

An understanding of political polarization as a broader but more regimented concept is critical to making comparisons of polarization over time. Despite the fact that debates on

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[21] Bateman, Clinton, and Lapinski, "A House Divided?", 712

polarization already appear to have political scientists talking past each other, many political

scientists now argue for a more nuanced definition of political polarization – one that has

multiple manifestations, some of which can operate independently of each other. First, party

polarization is a specific form of political polarization and is the focus of much of the literature

surrounding polarization in the United States. Second, party polarization occurs in four distinct

manifestations, three of which will be discussed here in detail – ideological divergence,

ideological consistency, affective polarization, and perceived polarization.[22] With this definition

of polarization, the conflict between the Hare and Poole and Bateman et. al. camps can be

unpacked. Both sides are arguing over the degree of the different manifestations of party

polarization today – Hare and Poole believe ideological consistency and ideological divergence

are at troubling levels, while Bateman et. al. believe ideological consistency is relatively high,

but Hare and Poole mistook *partisan differences* – or increased conflict between the parties –

for increased ideological divergence.

<center>*Defining and Measuring Polarization*</center>

Political polarization is an ambiguous concept and it is confusing, at best, to attempt

relative-polarization comparisons without first giving careful consideration to how the term

itself is defined. Driving confusion is the fact that polarization is multifaceted – it manifests in

different forms which each require specific methods of measurement.

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[22] Lelkes, "Mass Polarization", 392

Party Polarization – In Focus

Political polarization does not inherently imply party polarization. Issues can be highly

politically polarized and instigate significant social unrest without dividing the two major U.S.

political parties. During the 1830s and '40s, before the founding of the Republican Party, slavery

was a political issue and highly polarizing – but not along partisan lines. The two competing

parties at the time, the Whigs and the Democrats, were not clearly divided over slavery. Rather,

until the collapse of the Whig Party and subsequent rise of the Republican party, the leadership

elements of both parties held conflicting views and the two parties straddled the issue of

slavery. The 1830s and 40's is just one historical example (societal conflict during the

Prohibition-era has been compared similarly) of United States society in a highly polarized state

without significant party polarization.[23]

Party polarization in the United States, thus, is the sharp division and differentiation of

the two major political parties. However, not all party polarization is made equal – it too, as a

concept, must be broken down further into its distinct manifestations.

Ideological Divergence – Issue-Based Polarization

The rigorous political science definition of party polarization is derived from the spatial

theory of political ideology, and party polarization is measured by the distance between the

two parties along the left-right spectrum. By this definition, high party polarization is

understood to mean that the ideologies of the two parties are vastly separated, with one party

far more politically liberal than the other, and vice versa with one party much more politically

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[23] Lee, "How Party Polarization Affects Governance", 263

conservative. Party polarization as understood through spatial theory means the degree of

separation between the ideologies of the two parties. [24] However, this definition is just one

manifestation of party polarization – it will be referred to in this paper from here on out as

ideological divergence.[25]

Ideological divergence is inherently issue and policy based – ideological divergence

increases in US party politics when the Democratic party shifts to the left on policy-preference

while the Republican Party remains static or shifts to the right (the opposite scenario would

also increase ideological divergence). The primary way to measure if either of the parties is

more liberal or conservative – in the literal, left-right sense – is through actual policy outcomes

and partisan voter policy-preference.[26]

Affective Polarization – Interparty Hostility

Party polarization has also been studied as an affective or emotional phenomenon – a

manifestation called affective polarization. 21st century U.S. party politics are characterized by

an intensity of emotion that in many ways seems independent of policy or issue disputes.

Affective polarization is defined as interparty hostility, and the difference between affective

polarization and ideological divergence is emotion.

While ideological divergence is strictly ideological – "disagreeing without being

(necessarily) disagreeable," affective polarization is independent of ideology; an example might

be disagreeing with the other party when the adopt a position your party once held. Affective

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[24] Lee, "How Party Polarization Affects Governance", 263
[25] Lelkes, "Mass Polarization", 395
[26] Lee, "How Party Polarization Affects Governance", 263; Bateman, Clinton, and Lapinski, "A House Divided?", 699

polarization is driven by primal psychological group social-dynamics which promote suspicion and hostility from ingroup members towards those they have determined as "other." Importantly, affective polarization does not require ideological divergence – interparty hostility can increase regardless of whether either party moves further in their ideological direction.

Affective polarization has been found to have important effects on the political climate, and its study alongside ideological divergence is critical. Policy differences are not the entire story of polarization. Affective polarization reflects a deterioration in trust and the development of a powerful prejudice. It is, essentially, the degree to which partisans treat each other as a stigmatized outgroup.[27]

Sorting and Affective Polarization: An Intertwined Relationship

Affective polarization has been shown to generate intense partisan emotion independent of issue position, and thus to some degree, ideological divergence. While differing issue-positions between parties certainly reinforce interparty hostility, they are not the only or even primary driver of affective polarization. Again, this is where the discussion of relative polarization becomes somewhat complicated. Affective polarization has been observed to be significantly influenced by the phenomenon of social sorting, which is not necessarily a form of polarization.

Social sorting is a phenomenon in which religious, racial and other social identities become increasingly aligned with one party or the other. As stated, social sorting is not technically polarization, it is a separate concept. However, social sorting is a powerful fuel for

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[27] Iyengar and Krupenkin, "The Strengthening of Partisan Affect", 201

affective polarization. As social and partisan identities align in greater number among the electorate, "well-sorted" partisans become increasingly emotionally engaged in politics. Politics for someone whose social identities are not deeply tied to their partisan identity is just that – politics. Those who are not well-sorted, also referred to as those with cross-cutting identities, can react emotionally to politics, but do so in fewer situations and with less intensity. Politics for those who are well-sorted, those who engage in partisan politics not simply as party-members or "liberals," or "conservatives," but because of a combination of their most treasured values and identities *feels* incredibly high stakes – even if it isn't.

Social sorting is deeply rooted in social identity theory. Social identity theory describes an individual's social identity as a powerful psychological connection to a particular group of people. When an individual's social identity becomes connected to, or defined by, their partisan identity, they react with uniquely intense anger towards perceived threats to their party. This anger is directed, of course, at the "hostile outgroup," – the opposing political party. As powerful social identities increasingly align with certain political parties, the distrust and anger between the two grows in step. Social sorting – the aligning of social identities with partisan identity – causes partisans to view their counterparts as the enemy, instead of as peers with differences in policy-preference.[28]

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[28] Mason, "A Cross-Cutting Calm", 354

Ideological Consistency

Along with ideological divergence and affective polarization, the final manifestation of party polarization we will discuss (though there are arguably others)[29] is ideological consistency. Ideological consistency is, in some ways, similar to social sorting but constrained exclusively ideological identity. Ideological consistency is defined as the degree of alignment between an individual's partisan and ideological identities. Essentially, it is the consistency one displays between the official ideology of the party they belong to and their self-identified ideology.

Perhaps a better way to think about ideological consistency is as a reflection of party distinctiveness. If the self-described liberals among the electorate are increasingly confined to the liberal political party while the self-described conservatives are increasingly confined to the conservative party, each party is becoming more distinct -- meaning that party ideological consistency is increasing. Importantly, party distinction can occur independently of an increase in ideological divergence – liberals and conservatives can organize themselves more distinctly without their policy-preferences becoming more liberal or conservative, and without the parties becoming more ideologically extreme. [30] For the purposes of discussing party polarization, to say that ideological consistency has increased means only that self-described ideology and partisan identity has become more aligned over time.[31]

Though shifts in ideological consistency can occur independently of ideological divergence, it nonetheless has critical consequences. Like social sorting, ideological consistency has been shown to increase affective polarization and general partisan anger. One notable

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[29] Lelkes, "Mass Polarization"
[30] Lee, "How Party Polarization Affects Governance", 263
[31] Lelkes, "Mass Polarization", 394

party polarization study examined American National Election Studies Panel survey data between the 1970s (at the earliest – other utilized forms of data do not become available until the 1980s) and 2016. A striking correlation was discovered between linked partisan and ideological identities and emotional reactivity. 1992 – 1996 was a period of partisan-identity flux, when a notable portion of the electorate transitioned between parties to correctly align their partisan-identities and self-described ideology. The study found that those whose degree of partisan-ideological identity alignment had increased over the panel's four-year duration were far angrier than they had been before their increased ideological consistency. Crucially, those whose ideological consistency increased did not become more ideologically extreme – they were not angrier because they cared more about their issues or because they had adopted new issues, they were angrier because of their increased partisan-ideological identity alignment.[32]

Party Polarization: Then and Now

Ideological Consistency

The Four-Party System

Ideological consistency and party distinctiveness were quite low in at the start of the 1960s relative to the 21st century, and remained so through the rest of the decade and the 70s. This is can largely be explained by the radically different structure of US party politics which lasted for the better part of a century before crumbling apart in 1965.

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[32] Mason, "A Cross-Cutting Calm", 355

From about 1874 to the mid-1960s, the United States arguably operated in what was essentially a four-party system of national politics. Instead of the two internally cohesive parties of today, the Republican Party and Democratic Party in 1965 each featured extensive intraparty regional and ideological divisions. Indeed, these intraparty divisions are a crucial characteristic of U.S. party politics from Reconstruction through to the Johnson administration.[33]

The divisions within the parties stemmed largely from the unique political situation of the South, which will be described momentarily. The consequence, however, was internally divided and ideologically incoherent parties. Partisan loyalty did not correlate cleanly with ideology. The Democratic Party was comprised of a coalition of Southern Democrats – who operated a one-party authoritarian system in the South – and moderate to liberal Democrats spread about the rest of the country. The Southern Democrats were extremely conservative on racial issues – if conservative is even the appropriate term – while remaining relatively liberal on economic issues. The rest of the Democratic party, largely working class and pro-union, were racially liberal-to-moderate and economically quite liberal. The Republican Party was a coalition of rural and Midwest conservatives and Northeastern and West Coast liberals and moderates.[34]

In 1963, political scientist James MacGregor Bums wrote in *The Deadlock of Democracy*, "[t]he consequence of the four-party system is that American political leaders, in order to govern, must manage multi-party coalitions just as the heads of coalitional parliamentary regimes in Europe have traditionally done."[35] This era of U.S. party politics was marked by interparty cooperation and compromise. Because each party's messy ideology and internal

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[33] Pildes, "Why the Center Does Not Hold", 288 – 289
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid., 289 – 290

divisions, crossing the aisle to make compromises was crucial. Subsequently, interparty hostility and conflict was necessarily low. Non-Southern Democrats relied on Republicans to pass civil rights legislature, which Southern Democrats refused to touch, while at the same time bartering with Southern Democrats for vital social welfare programs.[36]

The low level of ideological consistency in the parties resulted in relatively uncompetitive politics. After the New Deal, the Democratic Party was considered the natural majority in Congress. In fact, many political scientists do not regard the Republican Party as a national party until *after* the 1963 – 1974 time period. Competition should not be undervalued as a feature in politics and factor in governance and polarization. Uncompetitive politics weaken political parties by reducing incentives to invest heavily in infrastructure and electioneering. On the other hand, competitive party politics make investment in organization a requirement for survival. Competition breeds well-financed, powerful, and effectively organized parties. The lack of competition notable between the beginning of the 20th century and 1980 and, in many ways, the low ideological consistency that caused it, are the direct consequences of the Southern Democrats' one-party rule over the South.

The Authoritarian South: 1890 – 1965

From approximately 1890 to 1965, the American South was under one-party authoritarian rule. The ruling regime were the Southern Democrats, who built and maintained their monopoly over Southern politics through violent oppression of opposition. Through murder, assault, intimidation, manipulation, and election fraud, the Southern Democrats

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[36] Lee, "How Party Polarization Affects Governance", 264

effectively eliminated African-American electoral participation and drastically reduced lower-class white electoral participation, perhaps by as much as a third.

The establishment of one-party rule in the South was largely racially motivated, of course. It was in many ways designed to subdue class-conflict between whites and focus divisions on racial animus. However, the political system came to built around the Southern Democratic Party specifically, as opposed to purely white supremacist ideology.

The result was party domination by the Southern Democrats, who defined the Southern electorate and destroyed any political competition. Thus, many scholars point to this four-party system period as an "unnatural" expression of U.S. political preferences. A vast swath of the nation's eligible voters were violently shut out of national politics, and instead represented by an authoritarian, white supremacist political party. National party politics were artificial, the manufactured result of Southern Democrats wielding state power to craft a political monopoly.

Voting Rights Act of 1965 and Party Realignment

The importance of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 in the development of the modern Republican and Democratic Parties cannot be understated. The Voting Rights Act (VRA) set in motion a massive process of party realignment that has taken place over generations and dramatically altered the U.S. political landscape. Specifically, the VRA was responsible for catalyzing a drastic increase in partisan ideological consistency – the major divisions that once lay within each party, both regional and ideological, gradually shifted externally – and now lay in between the parties.

The VRA was passed by a coalition of racially liberal Democrats and Republicans, and signed into law by President Johnson, a Democrat. Southern Democrats vehemently opposed the VRA, but liberal Democrats turned their backs on their Southern counterparts in the pursuit of civil rights. Southern white conservatives left the Democratic Party for the GOP in droves in response, while simultaneously hundreds of thousands of new black voters (and white as well, but to a lesser extent) flooded the southern electorate and registered overwhelmingly as Democrats.

Southern U.S. party politics changed radically over the generation following the VRA. The authoritarian rule that Southern Democrats had held over the south could no longer be sustained. As the southern, white, conservative influence in the Democratic Party transitioned into the Republican Party, it was replaced by the new, liberal, black voting block exercising its influence on national politics for the first time. The Democratic Party, for the first time, became known and identified as the party of racial liberalism.[37] The VRA sparked a process of increasing ideological consistency for the Democratic Party as race and region no longer served as sources of internal party division.

The VRA generated a mirrored process in the Republican Party, which gained a growing southern white conservative influence after 1965: "There was, of course, a self- reinforcing feedback dynamic to this whole process as well; as the Democratic Party became more liberal in the South, more conservatives fled; as more conservatives fled, the Democratic Party became even more liberal. At the national level, the progressive strands on racial issues that had existed in the Republican Party diminished, to be replaced by a more conservative stance

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[37] Pildes, "Why the Center Does Not Hold", 290

on racial issues, while the Democratic Party at the national level became the party of racial

liberalism."[38]

For the first time since the 1850's, in 1965 race became a truly partisan issue. It sharply

divided the parties and their constituents. Though the infancy of the massive party realignment

that followed the VRA has been measured as early as the late-60s and early-70s, it took

generations for the modern party system to fully develop. The generational nature of the shift

perhaps reflects its gravity. The United States lacked competitive party politics for the better

part of a century. From 1874 to 1994, the United States did not have two national political

parties. The Republican Party did not hold a majority of the Southern delegation in Congress

until 1994 when, for the first time, it flipped both chambers to hold a majority and marked the

South as a true two-party political system for the first time in a hundred years.[39]

Affective Polarization

The tectonic shifts set off by the VRA have profoundly influenced affective polarization

in US party politics. As partisan identity has grown stronger according to increasing party

distinctiveness, the emotions generated by partisan conflict have become more volatile, and

especially more angry.

Affective polarization among the electorate is shown to be increasing since the mid-

1980s, and its growth is accelerating since the start of the 21st century. It is clear that, over the

last forty years, Democrats and Republicans increasingly dislike each other.

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[38] Pildes, "Why The Center Does Not Hold," 290
[39] Ibid., 292 – 293

Despite this measured increase in interparty hostility, and related social sorting, issue-positions among the electorate have remained relatively centrist. Distrust and anger towards the opposing party have increased independent of the mean ideology of the electorate.

The recent trend of intensifying affective polarization (1980 – today) is widely believed to be fueled by a combination of high ideological consistency and social sorting – animosity between the two parties has risen as social identities increasingly align with newly-powerful partisan identities. Partisan differences now frequently overlap with differences in world view and individual sense of social and cultural identity, raising the emotional-stakes of politics tremendously for well-sorted partisans.

Social Sorting – Cross-Cutting Calming Effect

Though party ideological consistency does reinforce affective polarization it cannot, on its own, account for the significant increase in interparty hostility observed in US politics today. Both ideological consistency and ideological divergence – reflected by partisan identity and policy-preference, respectively – increase emotional volatility among the electorate, and thus raise affective polarization, to a degree. However, importantly, ideological consistency and ideological divergence have been shown to only generate emotional responses to relevant political messages. For example, a non-socially sorted partisan reacts angrily to political messages reporting party defeats, but does generate an emotional response to messages reporting policy-defeat, even if that policy is a part of their party's platform. Similarly, individuals who care deeply about certain issues and policies but are not ideologically consistent in their partisan-ideological identities respond angrily to messages of policy defeat, but not messages of party defeat. Ideological consistency and ideological divergence seem to

generate anger only in response to certain, relevant political messaging.[40] Crucially, social

sorting is shown to be the source of much more potent reactivity:

> Social sorting proves to be a more reliable emotional instigator. For those whose social
>
> identities line up behind their partisan identities, any type of message can generate
>
> increases in emotional response. While partisanship has little effect on generating anger
>
> after reading a message of issue defeat, the highly sorted are significantly angrier than
>
> their cross-cut counterparts when reading the same message . . .
>
> It is therefore possible that mean levels of anger and pride are increasing in the
>
> electorate as a whole not because the angry and proud are growing angrier and
>
> prouder, but because there are fewer Americans who are resisting emotional prods. As
>
> social sorting occurs, there are fewer people who respond to elections and political
>
> discussions without becoming emotionally engaged. The loss of these people moves the
>
> entire electorate into a far more emotionally reactive state.[41]

Social sorting has resulted increased emotional reactivity across the electorate as a whole – not

just in the most partisan or ideologically extreme cohorts. Cross-cutting calming theory is a

convincing attempt at explaining this phenomenon. Cross-cutting identities are defined as

group identities held by voters which conflict with their party. Cross-cutting identities reduce

the strength of partisan identity and dampen political conflict in the individuals who hold them

– this is the cross-cutting calming effect. A higher frequency of cross-cutting identities among

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[40] Mason, "A Cross-Cutting Calm", 363 – 364
[41] Ibid., 363 – 364; 368

the electorate acts as a sort of buffer against interparty hostility, as many voters are able to

remain unengaged and unfazed by politics.[42]

As social sorting has taken effect however, more of the electorate has become highly

emotionally volatile and partisan hostility – affective polarization – has intensified. As the

parties have become more socially as well as ideologically consistent, fewer cross-cutting

identities are spread throughout the electorate. For an increasing number of US voters, party

politics represents consistent, negative emotional instigation.[43]

Enthusiasm and Anger – Interparty Hostility and Political Engagement

Affective polarization has altered the motivational underpinnings of U.S. politics. Since

the mid-1980s, the partisan political participation has exploded, but partisans are increasingly

motivated by outgroup hostility rather than ingroup enthusiasm.

Affective polarization is measured in three ways – feeling thermometers gauging the

respondents' feelings towards the two parties and their presidential candidates; trait ratings of

the presidential candidates; the degree to which each candidate elicits positive and negative

emotional reactions in the respondent.

ANES data ranging from the 1970s to 2016 demonstrates a trend of increasing

interparty hostility which became apparent during the 1980s and has accelerated dramatically

over the last twenty years.[44] Partisans expressed intense negativity towards the opposing party

at far higher rates in 2016 than they did in 2000, and intense partisan negativity in 2000 was

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[42] Mason, "A Cross-Cutting Calm", 355
[43] Ibid., 352
[44] Iyengar and Krupenkin, "The Strengthening of Partisan Affect", 203

much more common than it had been in 1988. A similar trend has been observed in partisan feelings towards the opposing party's presidential candidate – partisan animosity has increased substantially since 1980 and accelerated since 2000.

The growth and acceleration of partisan negativity has been paralleled by a less extreme, but still significant, increase in positive feelings among partisans towards their own party. However, this increase in positive feeling has not kept up with the growth of negative partisan emotion in a critical way. Iyengar et. al. found that:

> As animosity toward the opposing party has intensified, it has taken on a new role as the prime motivator in partisans' political lives. As documented below, the impact of feelings towards the [opposing party] on both vote choice and the decision to participate has increased since 2000; today it is outgroup animus rather than ingroup favoritism that drives political behavior.[45]

Not only has increasing interparty hostility become more impactful since the turn of the century, it has become the dominant force driving political behavior among partisans. From the 1970s to the early-1990s, ingroup favoritism, or positive feelings towards one's own party, was the strongest motive for political participation – according to Iyengar et. al., "In 1980, partisans who felt negatively toward the out-party were actually *less* likely to turn out than those who felt otherwise."[46] Outgroup hostility replaced ingroup favoritism as the dominant political motivator in the early 1990s, and the relative degree of influence between the two has continued to separate since.

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[45] Iyengar and Krupenkin, "The Strengthening of Partisan Affect", 211
[46] Ibid., 212

The shift to affective polarization as the primary motivator of partisan political behavior has had serious consequences for U.S. politics. Iyengar et. al. explain that the motivating force behind partisan political behavior influences a wide range of electoral and institutional processes:

> Citizens have many reasons or motives to become involved in politics. For some, it is the sense of civic duty. For others, it may be dedication to a political cause or the anticipated satisfaction from helping their party win. For still others, the impetus to participate may derive from a desire to contribute to the defeat of a disliked candidate or party. The relative weights assigned to these motivations have important consequences; they determine which groups and politicians attract volunteers, donations, and ultimately, votes. The mix of voter motivations also affects the behavior of candidates by encouraging them to emphasize different aspects of their platform – or to avoid emphasizing their platform at all.[47]

According to Iyengar et. al., as well as others[48], the logic of negative political motivations reduces candidate accountability, and incentivizes even more partisan conflict. As political success comes to be defined as defeating and humiliating the enemy party, policy matters less and less; policy-preference was not the motivation or perceived reward of political engagement. Candidates have no reason to pursue policy outcomes when they can generate more enthusiasm by inciting partisan conflict and engaging with the other party on inflammatory, but unimportant, issues.

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[47] Iyengar and Krupenkin, "The Strengthening of Partisan Affect", 212
[48] Lee, "How Party Polarization Affects Governance", 276

Ideological Divergence

As in the case of Hare and Poole discussed previously, claims that ideological divergence has increased significantly since the 1960s are often based on ambiguous, and sometimes misrepresentative evidence. Conflict in congress is increasingly partisan in nature, the parties are more competitive and more distinct from each other, and interparty hostility has intensified.[49] However, these developments do not necessarily require nor entail the policy-preferences of either party to become more ideologically extreme.

Many political scientists believe that measuring ideological divergence is inherently very difficult because, as Frances Lee explains in *How Party Polarization Affects Governance* (2015):

> Whether the scope of the substantive policy distances between liberals and conservatives in Congress is broader or narrower than in previous periods is much more difficult to gauge . . . Aggregating across the wide and changing range of issues facing the federal government to arrive at a single summary measure of ideological polarization raises thorny methodological questions. In short, it is clear that US national party politics is polarized in the layman's definition of the term. The evidence for increased party distinctiveness is unequivocal and ubiquitous, as well as highly consequential for the operation of the US political system. But whether the parties have polarized in the spatial sense of the term is far more ambiguous.[50]

Comparing ideology across time is a problematic venture. Widely-accepted socially-conservative positions from sixty or seventy years ago are inconceivable in Congress today. The

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[49] Lee, "How Party Polarization Affects Governance", 267
[50] Ibid.

data seem to show that though partisans increasingly dislike each other and the parties are highly distinct, the policy-preferences of the electorate and the parties have remained generally centrist since the 1970s, and in some ways narrowed into a more liberal arena.[51]

In regards to the parties, ideological divergence is frequently measured through actual public policy outcomes. By this measurement, the increasingly cohesive and competitive parties have not separated ideologically. The ideological shift of public policy, if there has been any, is characterized as a, "drift."[52] Policy outcomes have not become more ideologically extreme as polarization has increased, and the substantive nature of policy has, if anything, been de-emphasized. Policy differences are exaggerated when it suits either party, and ignored or forgotten when they are not beneficial. The parties have shown a recent trend towards hypocrisy, as Lee describes:

> [Many] controversial recent policies that were harshly criticized at the time of their passage were subsequently acquiesced in after a change of party majorities. Democrats enjoying unified party control in the 111th Congress, for example, did not attempt to undo Medicare Part D, No Child Left Behind, expanded National Security Agency surveillance, or the partial-birth abortion ban, even though, when they were in the minority, they forcefully criticized all these policies at the time of adoption. Overall, it is difficult to make the case that party polarization has promoted extremism in policy outcomes (Brady et al. 2008).[53]

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[51] Iyengar and Krupenkin, "The Strengthening of Partisan Affect", 201; Bateman, Clinton, and Lapinksi, "A House Divided?", 712
[52] Lee, "How Party Polarization Affects Governance", 262
[53] Ibid., 275

As discussed previously, this may be a result of negative political motivations among the electorate reducing representative accountability. Despite this influence and the increased strength of partisan identity, studies show that US voters at the mass-level, like Congress, have not become more ideologically extreme since the 1970s. The latent ideology – or subconscious ideology, distinct from self-described ideology – of large portions of the electorate was extracted from policy items in the ANES dating back to the 1950s. Between 1972 and 2016, latent ideology among the mass public did not shift significantly.[54]

Conclusion

Comparisons of polarization across time are fraught with definitional pitfalls. Much of the debate circling around the level of party polarization in the US today is centered on advocating for or rejecting the inclusion of various combinations of the manifestations of polarization we have outlined. I believe it is most illuminating to consider each of them equally, as they all influence the political climate in important ways.[55]

Thus, a retrospective comparison of party polarization the United States is, in many ways, a comparison of the different manifestations of polarization. The individual analysis of ideological divergence, ideological consistency, and affective polarization confirms that the political parties of the United States are both more and less polarized in the 21st century than during the 1960s and 70s.

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[54] Lelkes, "Mass Polarization", 398
[55] Ibid., 394

The degree of ideological consistency of US party politics has risen significantly since the 60s and 70s as a result of the massive party realignment set in motion by the VRA (1965). It is difficult to overstate the importance of the VRA on the development of the modern Republican and Democratic parties. The authoritarian rule of the Southern Democrats was crushed and replaced with two-party competition for the first time in nearly a century. Though it would take another three decades, the United States was in the process of developing two nationally-competitive parties, the likes of which had not existed since the 1830s and 40s. Divisions that had split the parties from within for generations transitioned *between* the parties over time. US politics today operate, in essence, under a different political system than they did in 1965 and the many decades prior.

The process of party distinction unleashed by the VRA has played a crucial role in fueling a subsequent rise in affective polarization. Reinforced by the parallel process of social sorting, strengthening partisan identity has deepened the negativity between the two parties. Though rising ideological consistency is observed as early as the 1970s, the growth of affective polarization has occurred primarily since the 1990s, reflected by increasing emotional volatility among the electorate. Distrust and anger towards the opposing party have exploded among the electorate, and partisan hostility has become the dominant motivational force in US politics.

The degree of ideological divergence in US party politics has likely remained static or declined since the 60s and 70s. Polarization based on policy-preference is difficult to gauge in relative measures – the constant evolution of issue-acceptance in public discourse hampers the viability of relating the ideologies of politicians today to politicians who served in office sixty or seventy years ago. Conservative stances today pale in comparison to popularly-held

conservative positions in the 1960's over a variety of categories, though especially race. Despite these issues, and in some cases because of them, considerable evidence seems to suggest that issue-based party conflict occurs in a more limited and more liberal space than it ever has over the last six decades.

Comparing US party polarization today to its state in the 1960s and 1970s does indeed ground the modern situation in historical context. The Republican and Democratic parties have become more cohesive and distinct, and partisans in both camps are more hostile and socially-distant from each other. At the same time, public policy and voter policy-preference likely have not become more extreme ideologically in either direction. However, it may be most accurate to view the mid-60s not as a separate instance of party polarization ripe for comparison, but rather as the catalyst and initial moment of transition into modern US politics. The historical processes and institutional changes ignited by the Voting Rights Act in 1965 ultimately resulted in the hyper-affective polarization and ideological consistency observed in the United States today.

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