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Turned Off or Turned On? How Polarization Affects Political Engagement

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The scholarly debate about the existence of polarization in the U.S. electorate continues to rage. Using a wide array of survey data on people's self-reported issue preferences, Fiorina argues that preferences are not moving toward the ideological poles. Rather most voters remain moderate on most issues.[1] Others counter that the differences between party adherents have become significantly starker of late, which they take as evidence of polarization.[2] Fiorina characterizes such mass-level party differences as relatively small and, to the extent that they have increased, a function of more effective party sorting, not polarization. To use the nomenclature of the debate, the United States has experienced some *party* polarization but little if any *popular* polarization. In either reckoning, elites are at the core of whatever movement has occurred. Elected officials and party activists are more polarized by any definition, which has made it easier for people to sort themselves into the "correct" party.[3]

The author would like to thank Corey Bike for his research assistance, Pietro Nivola for his insights, and Suzanne Globetti, John Geer, Bruce Oppenheimer, and Christian Grose for various forms of assistance.

1. Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope (2006).
2. For example Jacobson (2006); Abramowitz and Saunders (2005).
3. Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope (2006).

Fiorina's pairing of consistently moderate mass attitudes with those of increasingly ideological elites suggests that a large chunk of the electorate might be turned off by the extreme choices they confront. Research on negative advertising, however, suggests that the intensity of campaigns waged by polarized elites has the potential to energize everybody, even those who express dismay over their choices. To this end, I assess the health of a political system during a period characterized by a normatively troubling disconnect between elite and mass ideology. Are we less participatory or more? Do we see our government as less responsive or more? Do we trust our government less or more?

The evidence I present generally suggests that Americans have responded well to a polarized environment even if they purport to dislike all the angry words and actions that accompany it. Lately, most measures of political participation and engagement have improved—often dramatically. In 2004, for example, adjusted turnout rates were higher than any presidential election since 1968.[4]

Examining highly aggregated data like these can be misleading. In 2004 it is quite possible that ideologues, whipped into a frenzy by polarized elites, increased their participation levels by so much that it offset demobilization among moderates. I segment my analyses by ideology to assess whether ideologues and moderates differ in their reactions to increasingly extreme choices. The findings suggest that, by and large, they do not. Changes in the behavior and attitudes of the nonideological have generally mirrored those of ideologues. This is not true across the board. For example, I demonstrate a polarization of opinion on measures of political efficacy and political trust. But such findings appear more the exception than the rule. The approximately 50 percent of the electorate that professes to be moderate or nonideological is not tuning out.

I also assess the effect of polarization on the 2006 midterm elections. Much of the Washington press corps has hailed the 2006 elections as a triumph for moderation over extremism. When given moderate options, like Robert Casey Jr. in Pennsylvania or James Webb in Virginia, voters chose them. Comparing the exit poll data from the 2006 U.S. Senate elections with the exit polls from the same elections in 2000, however, suggests a more subtle story. Moderates did not turn out in greater numbers relative to ideologues to seize back control of the government. In fact, in many of the key Senate races in 2006, they were less well represented than they were six years earlier. In making sense of the 2006 outcome, I argue that Fiorina's earlier work on voting remains critical.[5] Voters, particularly

4. See McDonald and Popkin (2001).
5. Fiorina (1981).

those with no ideological anchor, are more interested in ends than means. The most compelling narrative of 2006 is that they voted against Republicans because they perceived that they had failed, not because they perceived that they were too ideological. Moderates have had no problem embracing successful ideologues in the past, but they have shown a propensity for voting against them when they fail.

Competing Expectations

The potential effects of polarization on participation mirror the potential effects of negative advertising. Early work on negative advertising started from the fact that many Americans expressed dissatisfaction with its volume and tone during a campaign. As a result, Ansolabehere and Iyengar hypothesized that negativity, which had the potential to activate partisans because they would appreciate the pointed attacks, might demobilize independents because they were less invested in the political process and would grow weary of the angry sniping.[6] Using experimental and survey-based methods, they found some evidence that negative advertising diminished the political efficacy and perceptions of government responsiveness among unaligned voters, which, in turn, caused them to vote less.

Others suggested that negative advertising, at a minimum, ought to have no effect on turnout or, more likely, had the potential to stimulate turnout.[7] This line of research was tied to the fact that negative information tends to have a greater effect on people than positive information because the negative raises the specter of risk and, with it, anxiety, which can stimulate learning and interest.[8] Lau, in particular, has shown that these negativity biases, which all human beings possess to some degree, extend to political thinking.[9] In addition, negative advertisements tend to include more policy information than positive advertisements, which is important because information facilitates participation.[10] Although evidence has been found to support both the mobilization and demobilization hypotheses, much of the most persuasive research suggests that negativity, counter to the conventional wisdom, stimulates turnout no matter how much Americans complain about it.[11]

Compelling cases can be made on both sides for the effects of polarization as well. As Fiorina and his colleagues show, about half of Americans think of themselves as

6. Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995).
7. Finkel and Geer (1998); Bartels (1996).
8. Tversky and Kahneman (1981); Marcus and MacKuen (1993).
9. Lau (1985).
10. Brians and Wattenberg (1996); Geer (2006).
11. Lau and others (1999); Wattenberg and Brians (1999); Geer (2006); Brooks and Geer (2007).

either moderate or are unable to place themselves on an ideological scale.[12] If both parties and their candidates move toward the ideological poles, as has been the case in American politics lately, moderate and nonideological voters may feel alienated, seeing little that they have in common with either side. Of course, ideologues would be likely to participate in greater numbers because one of the parties would be appealing more closely to them while the other party would appear to be a greater risk.

But it is also possible that polarization could have the reverse effect on moderates, especially given how even the partisan divide is today. Polarized elites will produce more heat during the campaign, providing choices rather than echoes. Both sides will attack the other as extreme, which empirically speaking is true. As evidence, Geer shows a massive increase in negative advertising through this period of elite polarization.[13] Significantly, raising the specter of risk in this manner could encourage the public to notice what is happening politically. Moreover, in comparison with ideologues, moderates know precious little about politics. It is possible that they might not even realize that the political system is not really representing their so-called preferences. While moderates might say they hate polarization, they might still respond to it positively.

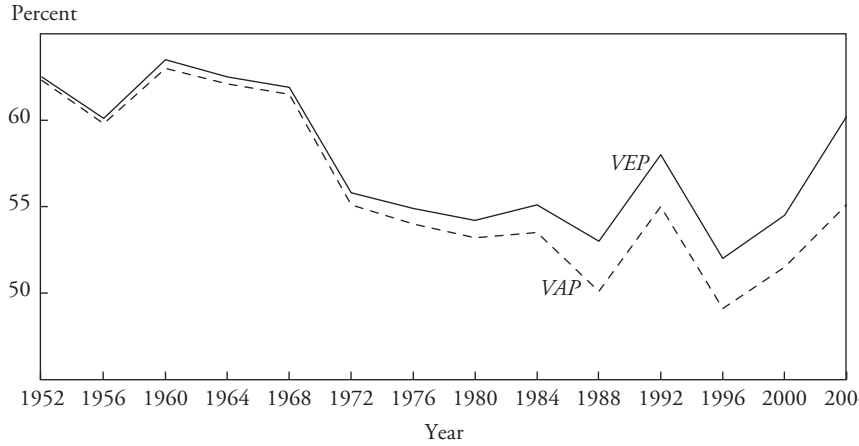
Voter Turnout in a Polarized Age

As elections approach, commentators begin to wring their hands about voter apathy. Such concerns are more urgent with the nation so evenly divided between Democrats and Republicans. When a presidential election can be decided by 537 votes, as it was in 2000, more people ought to feel that their votes make a difference. But what if persistently low turnout rates are a function of the ideological disconnect that Fiorina uncovers between a centrist public and an ideological elite? A moderate public faced with immoderate choices might decide to exit the process altogether. And given that moderates make up such a large chunk of the electorate, this would have a large effect on turnout overall.

Yet despite all the worry about turnout, voters have actually begun to participate more, not less, as political elites have polarized. Figure 1-1 tells this story graphically, comparing the traditional measure of turnout (the percentage of the voting-age population [VAP]) and an adjusted measure of turnout (the percentage of the voting-eligible population [VEP]). The VAP decreased in nearly every election between 1960, when turnout reached 63 percent, and 1996, when it dropped below 50 percent. The only exceptions were a slight increase in 1984 and

12. Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope (2006).
13. Geer (2006).

Figure 1-1. *Measures of Voter Turnout in Presidential Elections, 1952–2004*



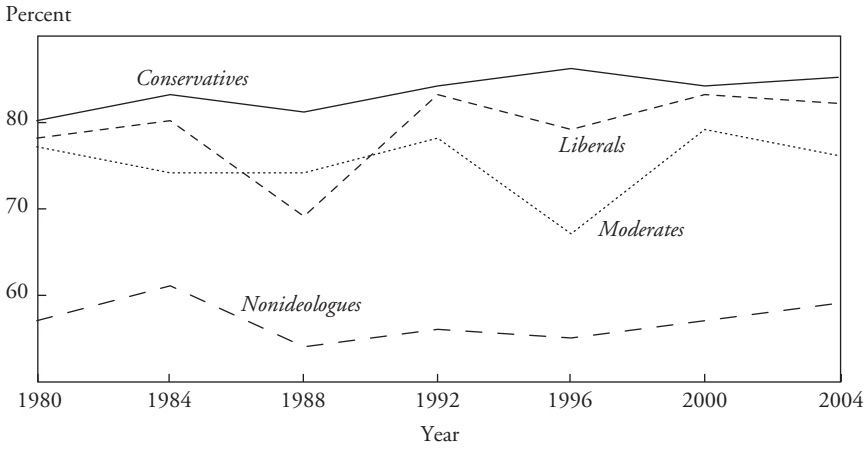
Source: Data supplied by Michael P. McDonald of George Mason University.
a. VAP, voting-age population; VEP, voting-eligible population.

a bigger one in 1992. The general pattern of turnout decay coincided with a time when the parties at the elite level were uncommonly close ideologically. In 1976 presidential candidates Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter were very difficult to differentiate, and measures of congressional polarization (such as Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal's DW-nominate scores) show that the parties' ideological differences in the early 1970s represented the minimum in the twentieth century.[14]

Since 1996, as the parties have become increasingly polarized, VAP-based turnout has increased, though not enough to celebrate. Political scientists Michael McDonald and Samuel Popkin, however, demonstrate that this measure does not allow for meaningful comparisons over time.[15] Today far more people of voting age are ineligible to vote because they have been disenfranchised by past criminal acts or by virtue of their citizenship status. Therefore, the voting-*eligible* population is a more appropriate denominator in calculating voter turnout. When this statistic is used, it shows that voter turnout has surged over the last three presidential elections, from about 52 percent in 1996 to over 60 percent in 2004. VEP-based turnout was almost exactly the same in 2004 as it was in 1956, and only about 3.5 percentage points lower than in 1960. This may be something to celebrate after all: it does not appear that eligible voters are turned off by the polarized environment.

14. Poole and Rosenthal's DW-nominate data sets are available at voteview.com.
15. McDonald and Popkin (2001).

Figure 1-2. *Self-Reported Voting in Presidential Elections, 1980–2004*

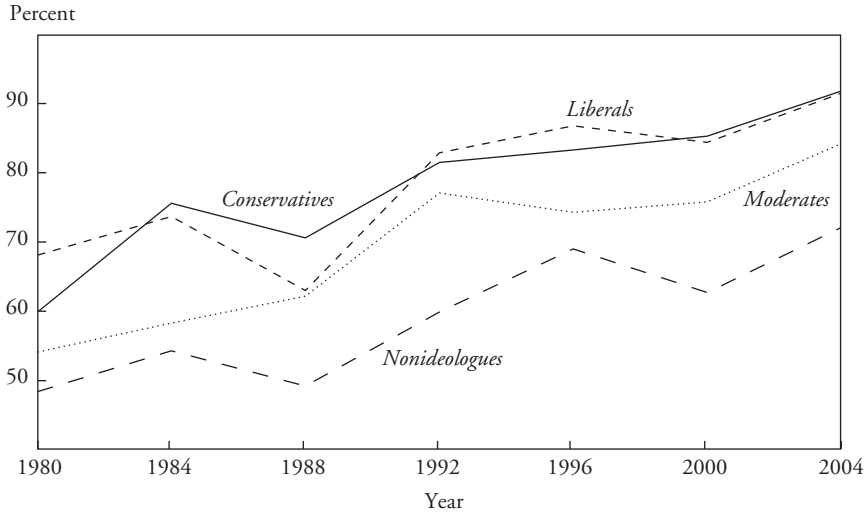


Source: National Election Studies Cumulative Data File, 1948–2004.

But perhaps the recent surge in turnout is asymmetric. Ideologues may be happier with more ideological candidates to choose from, but moderates might be more inclined to drop out. Figure 1-2 does not suggest such a pattern, however. Using data from the National Election Studies, figure 1-2 tracks self-reported turnout among four different, ideological groups: self-identified liberals, conservatives, and moderates, and people who say that they have not thought enough about their ideology to place themselves ("nonideologues"). People are notorious for reporting that they vote even when they do not, which accounts for the fact that self-reported turnout has increased from 71 percent in 1980 to 78 percent in 2004, even though actual turnout in both these elections was far less. But the important point is that self-identified moderates and nonideologues have not been turned off by increasingly polarized elites. Although moderates were much less likely to vote in 1996, their voting participation surged in 2000, such that it was nearly on par with liberals and conservatives. Moderates experienced a slight drop in 2004, as did liberals, but neither change was statistically significant. Far from tuning out, nonideologues actually show a slight upward trend in turnout since 1996.[16]

16. Although the problems with self-reported measures of turnout are legion, these results square nicely with data gathered from recent exit polls. The percentage of people who do not identify as either liberals or conservatives when polled on election day has remained constant. In 1996, 47 percent of voters called themselves moderate in exit polls, exactly the same as in 2006.

Figure 1-3. *Americans Reporting They "Care a Good Deal" Who Wins the Presidential Election, 1980–2004*



Source: National Election Studies Cumulative Data File, 1948–2004.

Determinants of Turnout

One reason turnout has increased in this polarized period may be that the factors influencing whether people vote or not have changed. In their 1993 book *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America,* Steven J. Rosenstone and John Mark Hansen catalogued a range of relevant factors, including caring about who wins the presidential election and having interest in the campaign.[17] These psychological determinants of voting can be tracked over time to assess whether they have encouraged turnout, especially among moderates.

Figure 1-3 shows the percentage of Americans of different ideological stripes who "care a good deal" about who wins the presidential election. The trend since 1980 is upward among all groups, including ideological moderates and nonideologues. In fact, in 2004 more than 70 percent of respondents who failed to place themselves on the ideology scale cared a good deal whether George W. Bush or John Kerry won, a higher response than liberals and conservatives provided in 1980 in regard to their choices. This is a particularly noteworthy finding because the choice between Carter and Reagan in 1980 was not exactly a choice between

17. Rosenstone and Hansen (1993).

Tweedledum and Tweedledee. The steepest increase for moderates occurred in 1992, a possible reflection of moderates' preference for Ross Perot's pragmatic—if sometimes offbeat—candidacy. (The fact that the percentage of moderates remained relatively constant in the next two elections suggests a Perot effect.) But in 2004, with sharp ideological differences between the candidates and no centrist alternative, the percentage of moderates who said they cared about the outcome surged dramatically, approaching 85 percent.

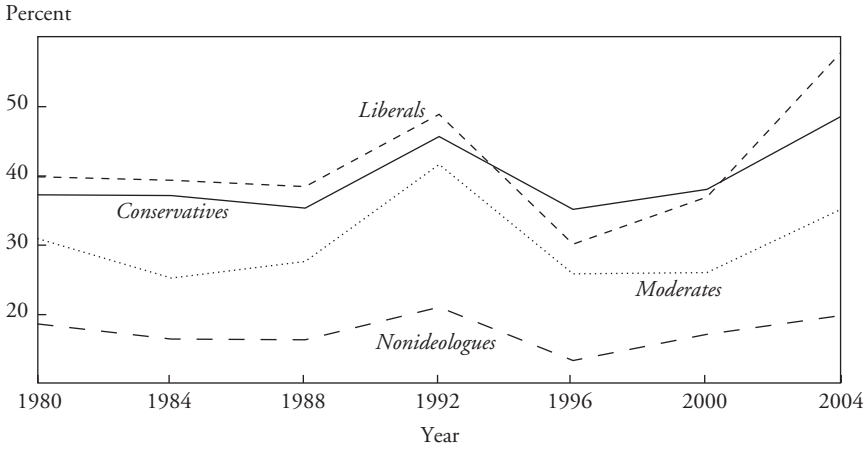
The percentage of Americans who expressed significant interest in the presidential campaign follows a somewhat different pattern, but with the same end point. Between 1980 and 2000, the percentage remained fairly constant, with the exception of a Perot-induced spike in 1992. In 2004, however, an even larger surge occurred. In fact, a higher percentage of Americans reported that they were "very much interested" in the campaign than at any other time in the National Election Studies (NES) time series, which dates to 1952. Figure 1-4 shows that the surge in 2004 was driven disproportionately by liberals and conservatives, but it was not as though moderates and nonideologues were indifferent to the campaign. Interest levels among both groups increased. In fact, both expressed more interest in the 2004 campaign than in any other except the 1992 campaign.

Measures of Nonvoting Campaign Participation

Along with recent increases in turnout, many other measures of electoral participation have also increased, some quite dramatically. Table 1-1 shows the trends since 1980 for five measures of nonvoting participation tracked by the NES. For instance, Americans today are much more likely to have tried to influence the votes of others. In 2004, 48 percent of the public reported that they engaged in this form of persuasion, the highest level since the NES introduced this item in 1952. The median over the prior thirteen election studies was only 32 percent. And while the percentage of Americans who reported attending a political meeting or working for a party or candidate has remained fairly constant over time, the 2004 election cycle saw marked increases in the percentage of people who reported having worn a button or displayed a bumper sticker and who said they gave money to a campaign. In fact, the measures for these forms of participation tied their previous highs going back to 1952. In that sense the present polarized period has seen a remarkable increase in a range of different forms of political involvement.

Although Table 1-1 does not present figures broken down by ideology for these forms of participation, the National Elections Studies data show that moderates and nonideologues have recently become more participatory, just as liberals and

Figure 1-4. *Americans Reporting They Are "Very Much Interested in the Election," 1980–2004*



Source: National Election Studies Cumulative Data File, 1948–2004.

conservatives have. For example, the percentage of conservatives who reported trying to influence the votes of others increased by 16 percentage points between 2000 and 2004. The change in the behavior of moderates was similarly dramatic, increasing over the same period from 30 percent to 44 percent. To be sure, moderates are significantly less participatory overall than are liberals and conservatives. But it is equally important that party polarization has not demobilized moderates and nonideologues. In fact, by many measures, it has stimulated them as well.

Explaining the Pattern of Results

In terms of participation, those who do not organize their political thinking in an ideological manner appear to be turned on, not off, by today's ideologically charged environment. Why, then, do they seem more invested in politics now that it provides choices that clearly do not match their nonideological sensibilities? It is possible that those who think of themselves as moderate or without an ideology might simply miss the fact that they are choosing between more and more ideologically distinct candidates. Perhaps they are unable to discern that the choices offered them by the political system have changed. (This may not be all that surprising considering that a broad swath of Americans are so poorly informed about politics that they know little if anything about the office-seekers on the ballot.)

Table 1-1. *Nonvoting Measures of Political Participation, 1980–2004*
Percent

Year	*Tried to influence others' votes*	*Attended political meeting*	*Worked for a party or candidate*	*Wore button or displayed bumper sticker*	*Gave money to a campaign*
1980	36	8	4	7	8
1984	32	8	4	9	8
1988	29	7	3	9	9
1992	37	8	3	11	7
1996	28	5	2	10	8
2000	34	5	3	10	9
2004	48	7	3	21	13

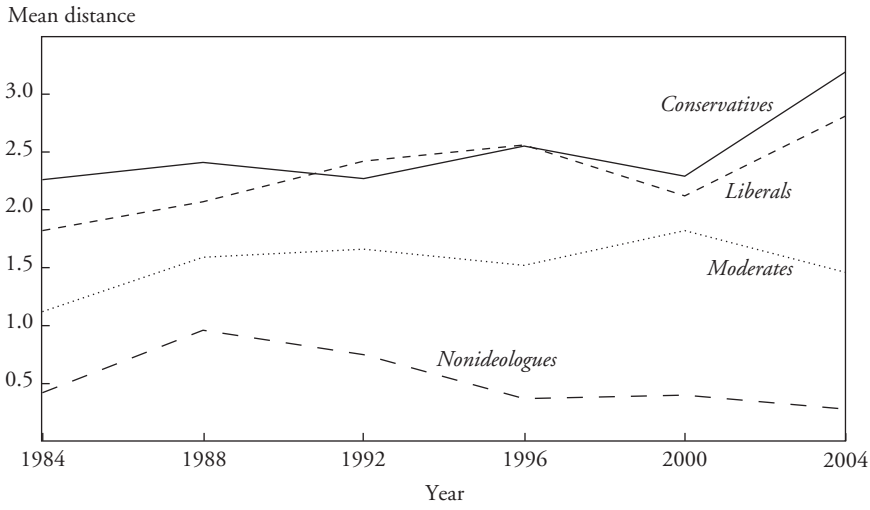
Source: National Election Studies Cumulative Data File, 1948–2004.

The results in figure 1-5 provide the somewhat shocking news: moderates and nonideologues actually saw *less* distance between George W. Bush and John Kerry in 2004 than they saw between any pair of major-party presidential candidates between 1988 and 2000.[18] Liberals and conservatives, not surprisingly, never saw bigger differences between candidates, but moderates and nonideologues saw their choices as basically the same (perhaps even less distinct) in 2004 as in the preceding elections. And while the results are not presented here, the same pattern holds for a host of traditional domestic policy items tracked by the NES, including questions about government services and spending, government-guaranteed jobs and standard of living, government-run health care, government aid to blacks, and a woman's proper role in society. On all these items, moderates and nonideologues failed to see increasingly large differences between the presidential candidates.

Perhaps the answer lies in attitudes about foreign policy, which ought to be much more influential now than in the 1990s after the end of the cold war. Many political leaders are fond of saying that the terrorist attacks of September 11 changed everything. And, as it relates to people's investment in political outcomes, that may well be the case. Since terrorism in the United States is a relatively new phenomenon, it is not possible to track perceptions about candidates on this issue over time. The NES has, however, regularly asked people to place the parties and their standard-bearers on a defense spending question on a seven-point scale

18. To test the hypothesis that moderates and nonideologues have failed to perceive greater polarization on the elite level, I focus on presidential candidates because most of the evidence I have presented thus far deals with assessments of presidential elections.

Figure 1-5. *Perceived Ideological Difference between the Major-Party Presidential Candidates, 1984–2004*[a]



Source: National Election Studies Cumulative Data File, 1948–2004.

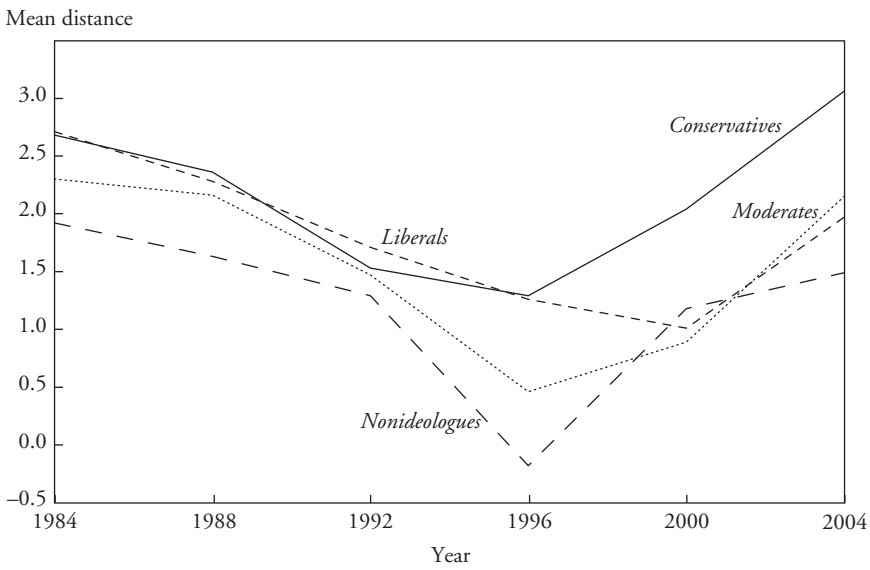
a. To test people's ability to perceive the ideological divergence of their choices, I take the difference between respondents' placements of the major-party presidential candidates on the NES seven-point ideology scale and track it over time.

(ranging from "greatly decrease defense spending" at 1 to "greatly increase defense spending" at 7). Figure 1-6 shows the difference between people's perceptions of the Republican and Democratic presidential candidates, segmented by the four ideological groupings. The results of this analysis provide some indication that perceptions of polarization on issues matter in understanding the increase in voter engagement and participation.

Given the centrality of the cold war and Ronald Reagan's image as a strong anticommunist, it is not surprising that the public perceived the largest differences between presidential candidates in 1984. Although the perception of differences remained high on this issue in 1988, it decreased markedly after that (through 1996 for conservatives, moderates, and nonideologues and through 2000 for liberals). By 2004, however, the perceived difference between candidates had returned to levels reminiscent of 1988 for all ideological groups.

Regarding moderates, it is noteworthy that they saw greater differences between the candidates in 2004 than liberals did, which is quite rare. (It is typical for ideologues to see greater differences than moderates and nonideologues.) The raw magnitude of the recent increase is also striking. For moderates the mean

Figure 1-6. *Perceived Difference between Major-Party Candidates on Defense Spending, 1984–2004*[a]



Source: National Election Studies Cumulative Data File, 1948–2004.

a. To test people's ability to perceive the ideological divergence of their choices, I take the difference between respondents' placements of the major-party presidential candidates on the NES seven-point defense-spending scale and track it over time.

perceived ideological distance between George W. Bush and Al Gore in 2000 was less than one point, but in 2004 the perceived distance between Bush and Kerry was greater than two points, more than double the difference in just one election. Conservatives saw a gaping three-point difference between the candidates, a spread 50 percent greater than that perceived by liberals, at just under two points. Although the defense spending item is not about terrorism specifically, these results probably reflect an orientation toward the use of force in the face of external threats that would be important to people assessing political candidates.

Supporting evidence for the importance of terrorism in shaping the attitudes of moderates and nonideologues comes from the 2004 National Election Study. That year's survey debuted a question that asked respondents to place themselves and the presidential candidates on a seven-point scale bounded at one pole by the statement, "Some people believe the United States should solve international problems by using diplomacy and other forms of international pressure and use military force only if absolutely necessary," and at the other pole by, "Others

Table 1-2. *Perceptions of Bush and Kerry on the Diplomacy-versus-Military-Intervention Scale, by Ideological Self-Identification, 2004*[a]
Points

Group	*Mean perception of Bush*	*Mean perception of Kerry*	*Difference*
Liberals	6.36	2.99	3.37
Moderates	5.94	3.13	2.81
Nonideologues	5.84	3.35	2.49
Conservatives	5.77	2.52	3.25

Source: 2004 National Election Study.
a. Higher numbers correspond to the more hawkish position.

believe diplomacy and pressure often fail and the U.S. must be ready to use military force."[19] The responses to this question cannot be compared across time, but they can be compared to the perceived difference between the candidates produced by other issues in 2004.

The results appear in table 1-2. All four ideological groups saw differences between Bush and John Kerry on the use of diplomacy versus force that were significantly greater than the increasingly larger perceived differences they saw over time regarding defense spending. In fact, the differences on the diplomacy-versus-intervention scale in 2004 were larger for all groups than they were in 1984 on defense spending, when those differences were at their maximum. On average, those who called themselves liberals placed Bush at 6.36 on the seven-point scale, suggesting that a high percentage placed Bush at the scale's maximum—a rarity in survey research. Liberals saw Kerry as 3.37 points to the left of Bush. The average difference perceived by conservatives was similarly large at 3.25 points.

More important for understanding the effect on turnout, moderates and nonideologues saw a wide gulf, too. Moderates saw Bush as 2.81 points to the right of Kerry and nonideologues perceived the gap to be about 2.5 points. These differences are very large relative to the differences these groups perceive on other issues. On defense spending, moderates never perceived a difference greater than 2.3 points and nonideologues never perceived a difference greater than two points over the nearly thirty years that the defense spending questions have been asked.

A second complementary explanation for surging interest and participation among moderates and nonideologues involves mobilization by the political parties

19. The diplomacy option is at the low end of the scale, and the military force option is at the high end; thus higher numbers correspond to the more hawkish position.

Table 1-3. *Mobilization Efforts by Political Parties or Other Organizations, 1980–2004*
Percent reporting yes

Year	*Contacted by a party?*	*Contacted by something other than a party?*
1980	24	10
1984	24	8
1988	24	8
1992	20	10
1996	26	10
2000	35	11
2004	43	18

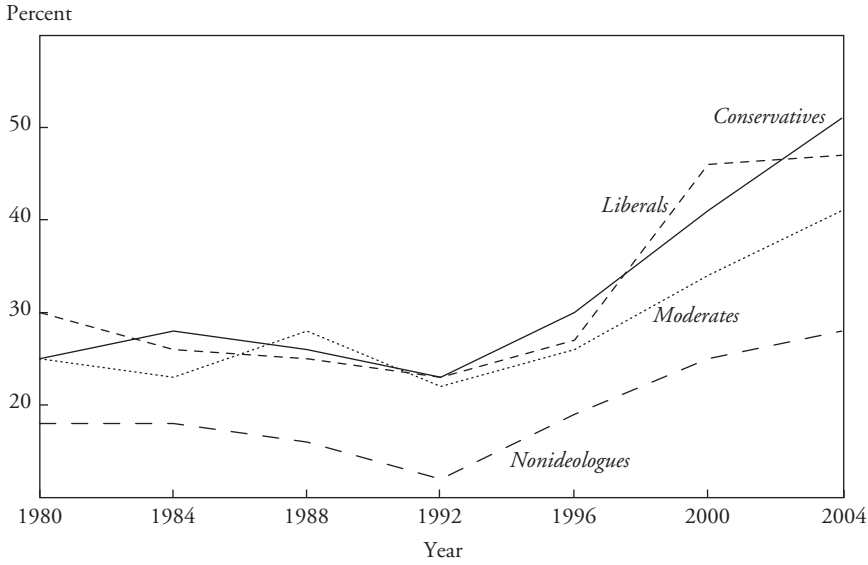
Source: National Election Studies Cumulative Data File, 1948–2004.

and so-called 527 groups. In their classic treatment of declining participation rates between 1960 and 1988, Rosenstone and Hansen cited diminishing mobilization by parties and other social movements as the root cause.[20] The data in table 1-3, however, suggest a tremendous recent surge in these activities. As recently as 1992, only 20 percent of respondents reported being contacted by one of the parties about the campaign. By 2000 this had increased to 35 percent, and in 2004 it reached 43 percent. The percentage of people who reported being contacted about the campaign by a nonparty organization nearly doubled between 2000 and 2004, from 11 percent to 18 percent.

Figure 1-7 shows that much of the recent surge in party mobilization activities has been directed toward ideologues, as Rosenstone and Hansen would have predicted. People with resources, a group that tends to be disproportionately ideological, are thus much more likely to be contacted.[21] But parties have been more active in targeting self-identified moderates and nonideologues as well. In 1996, for example, only about 25 percent of moderates and 19 percent of nonideologues reported being contacted by a political party. In 2004 the level of contact had climbed to 41 percent and 28 percent, respectively. Taken together, it seems reasonable to conclude that people across the ideological spectrum express more interest and participate more in politics because political organizations have encouraged them to do so. In fact, a multivariate test, which appears in appendix A, confirms that both mobilization and perceived candidate polarization on defense contributed to the turnout increase among moderates.

20. Rosenstone and Hansen (1993).
21. Luskin (1987).

Figure 1-7. *Voters Reporting Contact from a Political Party, 1980–2004*



Source: National Election Studies Cumulative Data File, 1948–2004.

In sum, the increased interest and participation among all ideological groups appears to be driven by the public's polarization of perceptions about the candidates' approaches to defense and terrorism and by the enormous increase in the mobilization of voters by parties and interested groups.

Political Efficacy and Attitudes about Government Responsiveness

Political participation is not the only measure of the electorate's orientation toward politics. Elections today are generally fought between ideologues on both sides, which means that an ideologue will tend to win most contests.[22] This certainly has the potential to cause people, especially moderates and nonideologues, to believe they have less influence over the political process (their political efficacy) and to feel more concern about the kinds of policies the government might produce (their perceptions of government responsiveness).

In the National Election Studies series, external political efficacy is measured by asking people whether or not they agree with the following statements: "People like

22. See Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart (2001).

Table 1-4. *External Political Efficacy and Perceptions of Government Responsiveness*
Mean scores

Year	*External efficacy*	*Government responsiveness*
1980	0.534	0.513
1984	0.627	0.518
1988	0.487	0.510
1992	0.515	0.553
1996	0.375	0.551
2000	0.463	0.566
2004	0.465	0.609

Source: National Election Studies Cumulative Data File, 1948–2004.

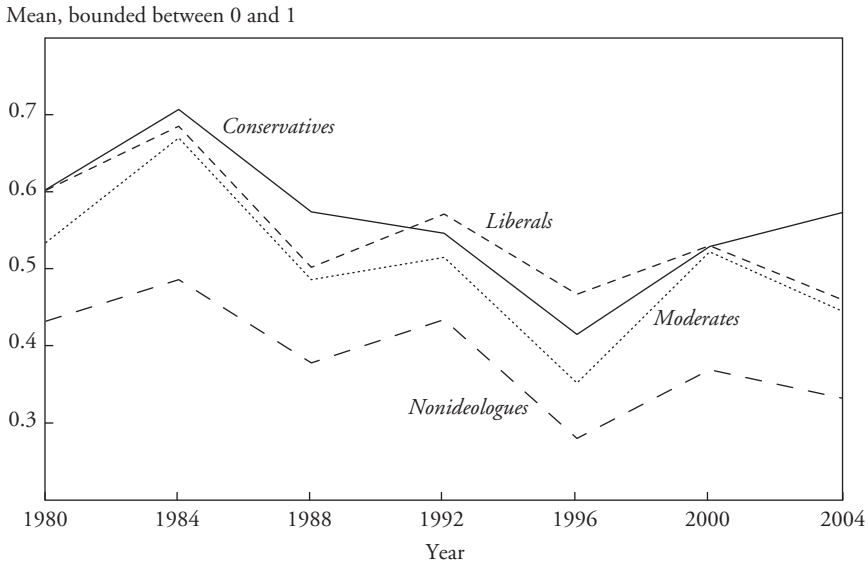
me don't have a say in what government does," and "Public officials don't care much what people like me think." For government responsiveness, respondents are queried about the system more generally, not their personal experience with it. Specifically, they are asked: "Over the years, how much attention do you feel the government pays to what the people think when it decides what to do?" and "How much do you feel that having elections makes the government pay attention to what the people think?"

Table 1-4 tracks the mean scores for these two indexes over time.[23] The results in these two areas are mixed. For external efficacy, the period from 1980 to 2004 produced a great deal of fluctuation. The maximum was achieved in 1984 and the minimum in 1996. As the parties have polarized at the elite level, we see a marked increase in efficacy at the mass level, but the mean in 2004 was still considerably lower than it was in any of the three election years in the 1980s.

Government responsiveness, on the other hand, is a different story. These more sociotropic evaluations of government remained relatively constant throughout the 1980s, with a mean around 0.5. The mean then increased in 1992 to 0.553 and remained relatively constant through 2000. In 2004, with the political environment particularly polarized at the elite level, people's feelings about government responsiveness shot up to 0.609, the highest mean score recorded since 1968.

23. I calculate an average political efficacy score by arraying both statements onto 0-to-1 intervals, with efficacious responses coded 1 and nonefficacious responses coded 0, and taking the mean. The average government responsiveness score was calculated in a similar manner. Unfortunately, the NES did not ask its internal efficacy question in 2004. Hence I do not track responses to this item over time.

Figure 1-8. *External Political Efficacy, 1980–2004*

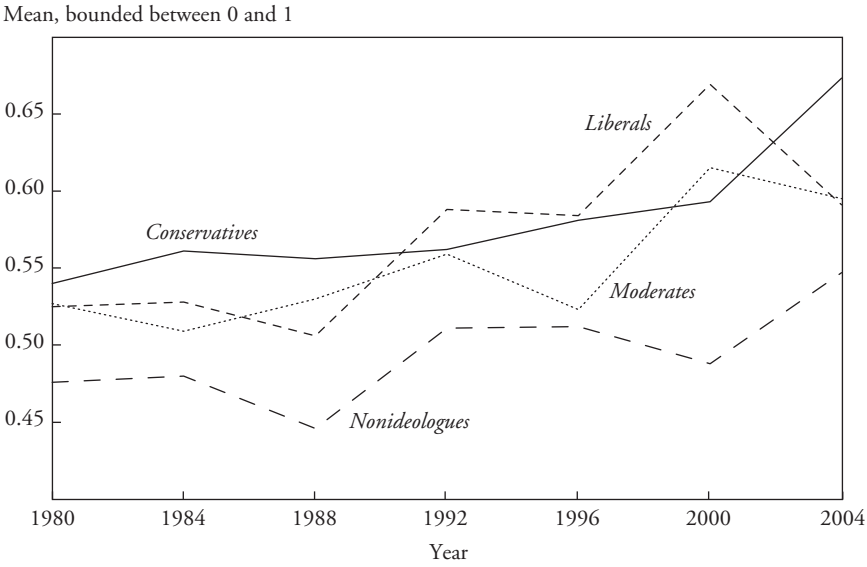


Source: National Election Studies Cumulative Data File, 1948–2004.

Given that the government is now run by ideologues, it would be reasonable to hypothesize that, at least recently, liberals would feel more efficacious (and conservatives less so) when Democrats win elections, with moderates and nonideologues probably somewhere in between. Thus one would expect to see a polarization of these opinions by ideology. In the 1980s, this was not the case. The trends, which appear in figure 1-8, run in tandem for all ideological groups, although efficacy among conservatives dropped less steeply in 1988 than it did for the other groups. In 1992 efficacy among conservatives continued to drop a bit while it increased substantially among liberals, as expected. In 1996 the trends again move in tandem, and in the aftermath of the unsettled 2000 election, liberals, moderates, and conservatives all converge on the same point. Polarization between liberals and conservatives shows up most clearly in 2004. The slight overall increase in political efficacy for the entire sample is wholly a function of conservative responses; all other ideological groups felt less efficacious.

Figure 1-9 reveals that over the time period in question, perceptions of government responsiveness generally trend upward among all ideological groups. But the responses become much more volatile in 2000 and 2004. In 2004 the same polarization of opinion that is evident for external efficacy appears for government

Figure 1-9. *Perceptions of Government Responsiveness, 1980–2004*



Source: National Election Studies Cumulative Data File, 1948–2004.

responsiveness as well. Between 2000 and 2004, conservatives' perceptions of government responsiveness increased by nearly 10 percentage points while liberals' perceptions of responsiveness decreased to a similar extent.

At this point, it does not appear that the polarized political system has soured moderates and nonideologues on the representativeness of the system. Efficacy in 2004 among moderates and nonideologues was low, but it was lower still in 1996. However, it is worth noting that moderates' and liberals' sense of efficacy dropped at about the same rate between 2000 and 2004. It is obvious why this would have happened among liberals, but a similar drop among moderates might suggest that they did not believe that the very conservative Bush administration and its conservative allies in Congress were responsive to people like them either.

Those less efficacious feelings among moderates in 2004 do not extend to their evaluation of the political system's responsiveness more generally, however. Moderates scored higher on the government responsiveness index in 2004 than in any other year except 2000, and the difference between 2000 and 2004 was not statistically significant. In addition, nonideologues' perceptions of government responsiveness was at its maximum in 2004. In other words, the less and non-

ideological appear to express more satisfaction with government responsiveness when it is run by polarized elites than when it is run by more centrist leaders.

Political Trust

Political trust is a measure of people's satisfaction with government compared with their normative expectations of it.[24] Understanding variation in political trust is important because it has a wide range of meaningful consequences. It is the key to understanding why government pursued a Great Society in the mid-1960s (when trust was very high) but a "Reagan revolution" in the early 1980s (when trust was very low).[25] Indeed, both individual- and aggregate-level studies suggest that trust is the foundation of public support for liberal domestic policies.[26] In addition, political trust increases citizen compliance with government demands such as taxpaying, engages collective restraint in the face of social dilemmas, and shapes the likelihood of voting for incumbents and third-party candidates.[27] Finally, by affording representatives greater leeway to depart from constituency ideal points, trust may enable them to place collective interests ahead of parochial concerns when allocating scarce resources.[28] In short, it is an important measure of political health and vitality.

Variation in political trust over time is shown in figure 1-10.[29] Trust was high in the 1960s before beginning a slide that lasted the duration of the 1970s. The nation has subsequently experienced some surges in political trust, notably during Reagan's first term, Clinton's second term, and, although not clear from this figure, after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Perception of government's performance seems to be central to understanding this variation over time: when people think the government is doing well, they trust government more,

24. Miller (1974).

25. Hetherington (2005).

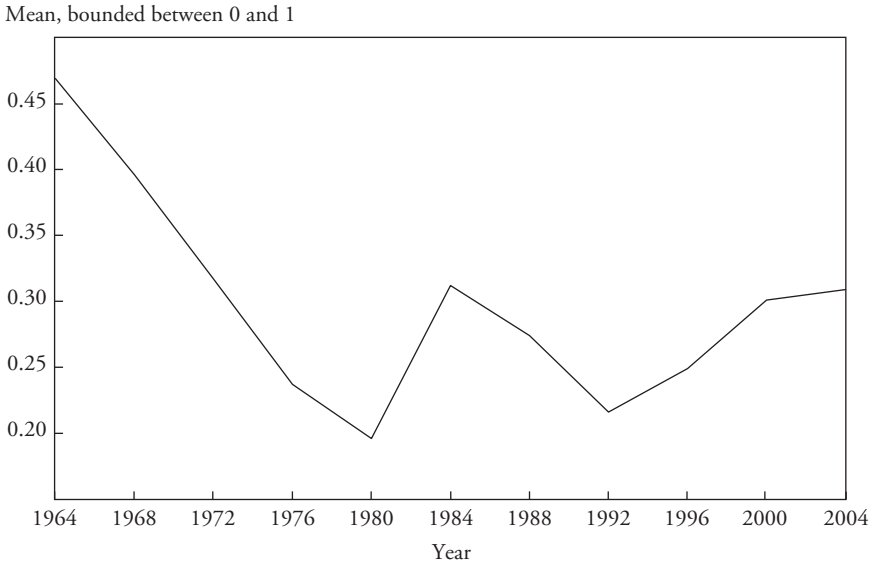
26. Chanley, Rudolph, and Rahn (2000); Hetherington (2005).

27. Scholz and Lubell (1998); Tyler and Degoey (1995); Hetherington (1999).

28. Bianco (1994).

29. Political trust is measured as the mean of four items: "How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right?" "Would you say the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all the people?" "Do you think that people in government waste a lot of the money we pay in taxes, waste some of it, or don't waste very much of it?" And, "Do you think that quite a few of the people running the government are crooked, not very many are, or do you think hardly any of them are crooked?" I map this score onto a 0-to-1 interval, so that differences over time can be interpreted as percentage differences.

Figure 1-10. *Political Trust in Presidential Election Years, 1964–2004*



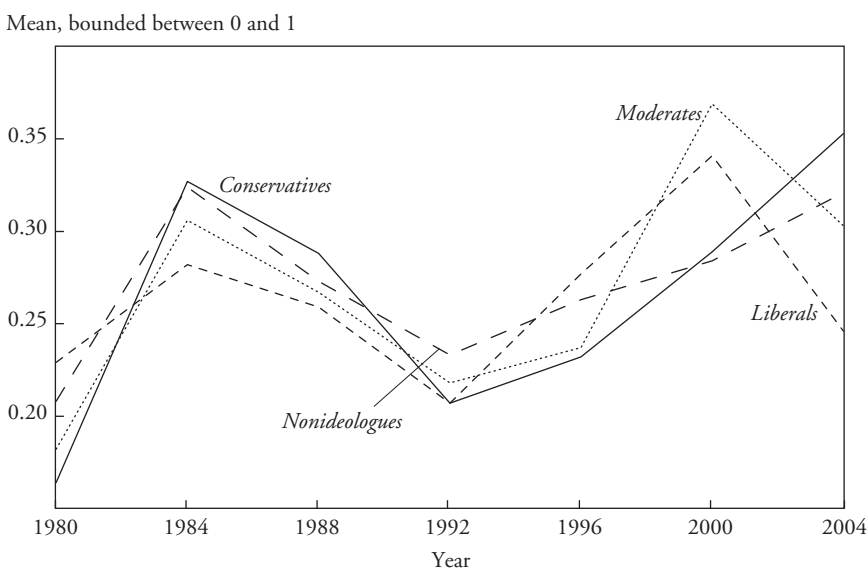
Source: National Election Studies Cumulative Data File, 1948–2004.

and vice versa.[30] In addition, it seems that the issues that people have in mind when they are asked to evaluate government are also important. Americans like the government better when it is dealing with a foreign crisis than when it is attending to economic problems, for instance.[31]

Figure 1-11 reveals that from 1980 to 2004, political trust among all ideological groups has generally waxed and waned in tandem. When liberals are dissatisfied, so are conservatives and moderates. Moreover, the groups' averages are very close together, suggesting a very low correlation between ideological self-placement and trust. This is reassuring in terms of measurement because it suggests that trust is not a short-term reflection of who is running the government. Conservatives trust government a little more than liberals when Republicans occupy the White House (and vice versa in times of a Democratic presidency), but generally not by much. In 2004, however, this relationship changed fundamentally. Although it is unclear whether this pattern will hold into the future, the period between 2000 and 2004 saw political trust among conservatives surge and

30. Citrin (1974); Citrin and Green (1986); Hetherington (1998).
31. Hetherington and Rudolph (2006).

Figure 1-11. *Political Trust in Presidential Election Years, by Ideological Self-Identification, 1980–2004*



Source: National Election Studies Cumulative Data File, 1948–2004.

that of nonideologues increase a little, while political trust among liberals and moderates plummeted.

Using the entire range of the trust and ideological self-placement variables, these correlations can be tracked over time. The results of this analysis appear in the first column of table 1-5. Between 1980 and 2000, the correlation was never stronger than 0.10 in either direction and was often statistically insignificant. In 2000 the correlation for ideology was −0.09, which indicates that conservatives were slightly less trustful of the government than liberals. In 2004, however, the relationship doubled in strength to a correlation of 0.18, with conservatives (not surprisingly) more trustful of a government with Republicans controlling both the White House and Congress.

Tracking the correlations between partisanship and political trust over time reveals a similarly dramatic change (second column of table 1-5). As with correlation between trust and ideology, the correlation between trust and partisanship has generally been very modest. In the 1980s it was slightly stronger, but in the 1990s it ranged from 0.04 in 1992 to −0.11 in 1996 and to −0.07 in 2000. In 2004, however, the correlation jumps to 0.27—roughly double the previous maximum

Table 1-5. *Correlation between Political Trust and Ideology and Partisanship, 1980–2004*[a]

Year	*Ideological self-identification*	*Partisanship*
1980	–0.10	–0.12
1984	0.06	0.14
1988	0.03	0.14
1992	0	0.04
1996	–0.07	–0.11
2000	–0.09	–0.07
2004	0.18	0.27

Source: National Election Studies Cumulative Data File, 1948-2004.

a. Calculated using Pearson's *r* correlation.

correlation between the two variables. Without question the Bush presidency and the lockstep support the president received from the Republican majority in Congress has politicized what it means for ordinary citizens to trust the government in Washington.

The scholarly implications of this are rather interesting. It has been shown elsewhere that political trust is central to understanding variation in the public's policy preferences when supporting government action that requires sacrifice.[32] For example, whites need to trust the government in Washington in order to support programs such as affirmative action or aid that benefits nonwhite minority groups. Among the beneficiaries, political trust has no effect; but among those who are asked to make perceived sacrifices, political trust has a large effect. And this has been revealed to be the case over a variety of years, regardless of which party occupies the White House and holds the majority in Congress.

In 2004 the relationships between political trust and various measures of support for government action requiring sacrifice disappear. For example, among nonblacks the partial correlations between political trust and support for affirmative action and aid to blacks, respectively, are statistically insignificant in the presence of controls for partisanship and ideology.[33] In a politicized political system, then, political trust seems to mean something much different than in a less polarized one. The normative implications of this are much more serious than the scholarly ones. At no time in the four decades that the NES has been asking its current

32. Hetherington (2005); Hetherington and Globetti (2002).

33. More fully specified models like those I have estimated elsewhere produce wholly insignificant results for political trust as well. See Hetherington (2005); Hetherington and Globetti (2002).

trust-in-government questions has the difference between Republicans and Democrats been as large as it was in 2004. The only presidential year that Republican respondents showed more trust in government was 1964, the year the present trust question debuted and the year that trust was at its apex in the population as a whole. Democratic respondents in 2004, conversely, have rarely seen the government in a poorer light.

If political trust provides the reservoir of good will for governments even when times are bad, then government in the early twenty-first century is only getting it from one side of the political aisle.[34] This can have tremendous implications for certain kinds of government actions, as when the United States commits military troops abroad, for instance. Support for military action is, in part, a function of political trust.[35] Yet given the relationship between trust and partisanship that has emerged in recent years, it is little wonder that the largest partisan gulf in attitudes ever recorded about a war in the era of modern public opinion surveys is about the conflict presently occurring in Iraq. For example, partisan differences on Vietnam averaged about 5 percentage points, and for Korea, Kosovo, and Afghanistan, they ran about 12 points. But by the last months of 2004, with the Iraq war about a year and a half old, Republicans and Democrats differed on the war by an average of 63 percentage points—more than twice the maximum partisan difference achieved during the first Gulf War.[36] As the Bush administration is presently learning, it is hard to continue a war with the support of less than half the country.

Perhaps, too, we ought to be troubled by the uncommonly high levels of trust that Republicans express.[37] A compelling case for the pernicious effects of high trust could be made today. Specifically, many believe that the Bush administration will not be remembered kindly by history because of its willingness to pursue extra-Constitutional means to battle terrorism, such as the use of wiretaps without first obtaining warrants; its reluctance to ban torture; and its desire to jail suspected nonmilitary enemy combatants without habeas corpus rights. Republicans' high levels of trust may be at the heart of their support of these initiatives and, consequently, the Bush administration's willingness to pursue them.

The evidence I present below is necessarily indirect because no polls about trust in government also asked about public support for wiretapping without a warrant, torture, or limiting habeas corpus. But the preceding analysis demonstrates that

34. See the earlier studies of Easton (1965) and Gamson (1968).

35. Hetherington (2005, chapter 8).

36. Jacobson (2006).

37. The most common criticism that I have received about my work on political trust is that I have often expressed more concern about *low* levels of trust than *high* levels.

as of 2004, Republicans had much higher levels of trust in government than did Democrats and independents. Hence the vast array of public opinion polls suggesting that Republicans are much more willing than Democrats and independents to back the president on these initiatives indirectly points to the fundamental importance of trust.

In February 2006, Gallup asked Americans, "Do you think the Bush administration was right or wrong in wiretapping conversations without obtaining a court order?" In the sample as a whole, opinion was split evenly, with 48 percent expressing support and 49 percent expressing opposition. But the interesting finding is the partisan split: Republicans (83 percent supportive) were a whopping 57 percentage points more in favor of warrantless wiretapping than were Democrats (26 percent).[38]

The differences in support for the use of torture in the fight against terrorism are also striking. In December 2005, an ABC News/*Washington Post* poll asked respondents, "Would you regard the use of torture against people suspected of involvement in terrorism as an acceptable or unacceptable part of the U.S. campaign against terrorism?" Only about 30 percent of Americans said yes, with Republicans (39 percent) roughly twice as supportive as Democrats (21 percent).[39]

Finally, party differences—probably with trust differences at their core—were also evident from people's beliefs about whether or not it was acceptable for the U.S. government to "hold suspected terrorists without access to lawyers and a trial." According to an August 2006 *Time* magazine poll, 51 percent of Americans sampled supported the idea. Even without explicit mention of the Bush administration in the question, 70 percent of Republicans expressed support for neglecting habeas corpus rights while only 32 percent of Democrats did.[40] Thus the very high levels of trust in the government among Republicans in the post–September 11 world may have a darker side as well.

The 2006 Elections and the Consequences of Polarization

The sweeping Democratic victories in the 2006 midterm elections seem like a triumph for moderation over the forces of polarization. In that sense, the new Democratic majority in both houses of Congress could be the consequence of the

38. CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup Poll data (survey conducted February 9–12, 2006).

39. ABC News/*Washington Post* Poll, "Iraqi Elections, Economic Gains Lift Bush from His Career Lows," December 15–18, 2005 (abcnews.go.com/images/Politics/1001a1Bush-IraqYear-ender.pdf).

40. Data from the *Time*/SRBI Poll, "Slight Bush Gains on Heels of Foiled Terrorist Attack and Post 9/11," August 22–24, 2006 (www.srbi.com/time_poll_arc31.html).

Republicans' polarizing governing strategy. In 2006 even primary electorates—which tend to be the most extreme in American politics and are often fingered for producing the polarization evident at the elite level—seemed to produce moderation. Alabama Republicans, surely among the nation's most conservative, overwhelmingly chose incumbent Governor Bob Riley, a pro-business conservative, over the socially conservative firebrand Roy Moore, who had achieved notoriety three years earlier when he was removed as chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court for refusing to take down a monument of the Ten Commandments installed on state property. Despite struggles during his first term, Riley had no trouble defeating Moore, winning the primary by a vote of 65 percent to 35 percent.

Alabama was not alone. The national Democratic Party provided millions of dollars in financial support to the Senate campaign of Robert P. Casey Jr. in Pennsylvania, despite his pro-life stand on abortion. Implicit in the decision of party elites to support Casey, who is the son of the former Pennsylvania governor, was the belief that voters would prefer a more moderate candidate. The socially moderate Casey trounced the ideologically extreme incumbent, Republican Rick Santorum—who had, among other things, expressed concerns about man-on-dog sex—by a breathtaking 18 percentage points. In Connecticut an activist-dominated primary gave liberal Ned Lamont the Democratic nomination over incumbent Senator Joe Lieberman, but the general electorate handed Lieberman, who ran as an independent, a 10 percentage point victory over Lamont. Similar stories can be spun about Senate races in Virginia, Montana, and Missouri. In all these states, the Democratic candidates who defeated Republican incumbents will almost certainly prove to be more moderate than the Republicans they are replacing.[41]

Moderation, however, is not the only explanation for these outcomes. Jim Webb almost certainly would not have won the Senate race in Virginia had not the Republican incumbent, George Allen, called a Webb campaign worker "macaca," an impromptu remark that was likely a racial slur despite Allen's protestations to the contrary. Jon Tester might have lost Montana by a few thousand votes rather than winning by that margin had Senator Conrad Burns, the Republican incumbent, not been so closely identified with the Jack Abramoff corruption scandal. And Republican senator Jim Talent might have survived in Missouri had Rush Limbaugh not lampooned Michael J. Fox's symptoms of Parkinson's syndrome after Fox appeared in an advertisement backing Democrat Claire McCaskill. Indeed, all these races were so close that the winning margins could

41. These outcomes also square with Morris Fiorina's view that voters would elect more moderate candidates if only they had them to choose from.

Table 1-6. *Ideological Self-Identification of Senate Electorates, 2000 and 2006*
Percent

State	*Liberal*	*Moderate*	*Conservative*
Montana			
2000	20	45	35
2006	19	47	34
Difference	−1	2	−1
Missouri			
2000	20	48	33
2006	20	43	37
Difference	0	−5	4
Virginia			
2000	21	49	30
2006	21	44	35
Difference	0	−5	5
Pennsylvania			
2000	21	49	31
2006	25	46	29
Difference	4	−3	−2

Source: Voter News Service, "General Election Exit Poll," November 7, 2000; Edison/Mitofsky, "Exit Polls," November 7, 2006.

easily be explained by the anti-Republican wave caused by an unpopular president's position on an unpopular war.[42]

Exit poll data on participation do not paint a picture of moderates forcefully reclaiming their government from the forces of polarization. Table 1-6 compares the percentage of self-identified liberals, moderates, and conservatives in 2000 and 2006 in the four states that elected Democrats who are expected to be more moderate than the Republican incumbents they defeated in 2006. In three of the four states, the percentage of self-identified moderates actually dropped between 2000 and 2006. In Missouri and Virginia, the decrease was 5 percentage points, and in Pennsylvania it was 3.

It is possible that moderates were more inclined to choose the Democratic candidates in 2006 than in 2000, but comparisons over time about vote choice are more difficult to make than comparisons about turnout. For example, the 2000 Senate race in Pennsylvania was nothing like the one in 2006 because the 2000

42. It is also worth noting that in two of the six Democratic Senate seats picked up—Sherrod Brown in Ohio and Sheldon Whitehouse in Rhode Island—the Democratic challengers are likely to produce voting records that are ideologically more extreme than the two Republican incumbents they are replacing.

Table 1-7. *Vote for the Republican Senatorial Candidate, by Ideological Self-Identification, 2000 and 2006*
Percent

State	*Liberal*	*Moderate*	*Conservative*
Montana			
2000	17	45	80
2006	9	38	83
Difference	−8	−7	3
Virginia			
2000	22	46	84
2006	12	40	88
Difference	−10	−6	4

Source: See table 1-6.

Democratic challenger, Ron Klink, ran an underfunded and uninspired campaign. Klink raised less than $4 million despite the fact that he faced a crowded Democratic primary and a well-financed incumbent in Santorum, who raised more than $10 million. And, in Missouri the Democrat on the ballot in 2000, Mel Carnahan, died in a plane crash three weeks before the election, which makes it impossible to compare the dynamics of that race with the one in 2006.

Fortunately, the dynamics of the Senate races in Virginia and Montana were relatively similar, although not identical. In 2000 Chuck Robb, the Democratic incumbent in Virginia, was an attractive moderate candidate, as was Democratic challenger Brian Schweitzer in Montana.[43] Robb lost to Allen 52 percent to 48 percent, and Schweitzer lost to Burns 51 percent to 48 percent—both close races, though not as close as either contest in 2006. Table 1-7 shows how the voting behavior of different ideological groups changed between the 2000 and 2006 elections in these two states. In both Virginia and Montana, the Republican candidate lost support among moderates—by 7 percentage points in Virginia and 6 in Montana. In both cases that was enough to cost him the election.

But it was not just moderates who jumped ship. Both of the Republican losers in 2006 lost even more ground among self-reported liberals than they did among moderates—a clear sign of polarization. Allen went from garnering the support of 22 percent of liberals in 2000 to only 12 percent after his "macaca" moment. Burns's support among liberals dropped from 17 percent to 9 percent. If either candidate had run as well among liberals as before, they would have narrowly

43. Schweitzer went on to win the governorship in Montana in 2004.

prevailed. In both states, conservatives, who were very loyal to the Republican candidates in 2000, became even more so in 2006.

We cannot know how moderates in 2006 saw the candidates relative to each other ideologically, nor can we know whether moderates saw the Republican Party as significantly closer to the ideological extreme than before. But if the results presented earlier regarding the presidential contest in 2004 are any indication, they probably did not see the Republicans as *ideologically* less attractive in 2006. Rather than voting against polarization, it seems that the best explanation for changing moderate behavior was dissatisfaction with incumbent performance. In political science, a venerable line of thinking about voting behavior suggests that most voters make decisions about ends rather than means.[44] If they think the "ins" have done well, then they return them to office. But if their retrospective evaluations of the "ins" are poor, they vote them out. Since moderate voters do not have strong ideological commitments, they are more likely than liberals or conservatives to engage in retrospective voting.

The 2006 elections were clearly nationalized, with the results a function of people's perceptions of the Bush presidency and the performance of the Republican majority in Congress.[45] According to 2006 exit polls, voters' views of the economy had improved markedly by late 2006, but they were not giving President Bush or Republicans in Congress much credit for it—which suggests that their evaluations of the political system were not as tightly tied to the economy as they usually are. Rather, Iraq and other noneconomic concerns (such as corruption) topped voters' lists of concerns. These concerns seemed to be embodied in the president's weak approval numbers.

Moderates in both Virginia and Montana had overwhelmingly negative views of President Bush. He enjoyed only 35 percent approval among moderates in Virginia and 39 percent in Montana.[46] Little wonder that they were more likely to turn to Democratic alternatives in 2006. By contrast, when Chuck Robb came up 4 percentage points short in the Virginia Senate race in 2000, Bill Clinton's approval rating in the state was 62 percent among moderates. Robb, the incumbent from the president's party, got 54 percent of moderates' votes that year. In

44. Key (1966); Fiorina (1981).

45. One indication that national conditions were particularly important in understanding Senate outcomes was that Republican incumbent Lincoln Chafee of Rhode Island lost despite having a personal approval rating of better than 60 percent. Rhode Islanders clearly thought a Democratic majority in the Senate would be more effective in confronting their major concerns than even the most moderate Republican the Senate had to offer.

46. I thank Dana Blanton of Fox News for providing these cross-tabulations of the 2006 exit poll data. They are not yet publicly available. When they are, I will be able to do more detailed analysis.

contrast, Allen, the incumbent in 2006, got only 40 percent of moderates' votes with the president of his party at 35 percent approval among moderates.

Although the case that the 2006 elections represented a vote against Republicans' performance rather than an outright rejection of their ideology is far from perfect, the data are suggestive.[47] Moderates over time seem to like ideologically extreme political leaders when times are good and like them much less when times are poor. According to the National Election Studies, Ronald Reagan's approval rating was 14 percentage points higher among moderates in 1984 than it was in 1982; George W. Bush's approval rating was 22 points higher among moderates in 2002 than it was in 2004; and Bill Clinton's approval rating was 21 points higher in 1996 than it was in 1994. Other than Clinton on welfare reform, none of these leaders changed all that much ideologically over time. Rather, moderates approved of them when they thought they were doing well and disapproved of them when they thought they were not. It is likely that the Republicans would have held the Congress had Bush's polarizing approach to solving problems borne more fruit. Moderates certainly did not seem to have a problem with it in 2002.

Conclusion

The results presented here generally suggest that elite polarization has stimulated participation at the mass level even though the masses remain relatively moderate. Not surprisingly, ideologues are now more engaged, but that is also true of the moderates and nonideologues among us. In the aggregate, we are seeing higher levels of voting and nonvoting participation, greater interest and investment in campaigns and elections, and improved perceptions of government responsiveness.

One major reason for the increase in participation among moderates and nonideologues is blissful ignorance. They simply do not realize that their choices have become polarized and that, as a result, the political system today represents their interests to a lesser degree than before. Such ignorance should not come as a shock. Generations of public opinion research have demonstrated that people who favor independent and moderate identifications are not exactly modern-day Athenians, carefully weighing all available policy alternatives and, after much deliberation, charting a middle course. Rather, they simply do not pay much attention and hence do not know very much about politics. As evidence, the 2004 National Election Study included a six-item political knowledge test, asking whether people could

47. John Aldrich and David Rohde's theory of conditional party government rests on the same idea: a centrist public will support an extremist agenda in Congress provided it is effective in addressing their concerns. See Aldrich and Rohde (2001).

identify various national and world leaders, knew which party had the majority in the House, and so forth. Those who self-identified as either liberal or conservative answered an average of about 3.5 questions correctly. Moderates only answered an average of 2.8 correctly, and those who failed to place themselves on the ideology scale got a dismal 1.94 correct. "Moderation" can be a troubling thing.

It is not that this group is completely incapable, either. As a group, they did realize that the presidential candidates in 2004 presented markedly different ideas about the nation's defense and the best way to combat terrorism. Moreover, this finding is generally important to the study of polarization, suggesting that scholars should avoid aggregating a large number of issues into scales of perceived polarization or of individuals' polarization. One issue might be enough, if it is the only issue that matters at a given time.

There is also a potentially troubling polarization of ideologues' attitudes toward government. In 2004 the difference between conservatives and liberals in their trust in government was never greater.[48] This polarization may help explain party differences in support for the war in Iraq. And it may also help us understand the widespread support for more normatively troubling government programs that challenge existing notions of the importance of civil liberties.

Finally, the 2006 elections provided the nation with divided government, which the public seemed to want after five years of the Republicans' polarizing style. Although moderates were not any more likely to vote in 2006 than in 2000, they were more likely to *vote for Democrats* in several key Senate races. Whether this represented a conscious rejection of polarization is unclear, however. As recently as two years before, moderates seemed to endorse the politics of polarization by reelecting the president and Republican majorities in Congress. The 2004 vote, however, was probably no more of a vote for polarization than the vote in 2006 was a vote against it. Rather, moderate voters were simply satisfied enough with the present course in 2004 but dissatisfied when 2006 rolled around. In that sense, moderates in this polarized era are a bit like children with two bad parents: not knowing enough to understand that their interests are not being well represented by either source of power, they support one or the other as long as nothing terrible happens. But at some point the situation eventually sours, leaving them angry and looking for alternatives, which might not be any better. Thus, in politics today, even a supposed vote for moderation gave the majority to a party led by Nancy Pelosi, who is anything but a moderate.

48. The difference was probably even greater in 2006, although the data are not yet available to substantiate this.

Appendix A. Multivariate Analysis of Turnout Change among Moderates

Although the descriptive results of voter engagement presented in the first part of this chapter are interesting in their own right, I can also use them to explain why turnout among moderates has increased somewhat dramatically since 1996 even as candidates have become increasingly immoderate. To that end, I estimate a relatively simple voter turnout model using logistic regression analysis. Regression allows me to estimate the effect of each of the potential variables of interest while holding other potential explanations constant. I use logistic regression, specifically, because the dependent variable, whether someone reported having voted or not, is dichotomous. The independent variables of greatest interest are the amount of polarization between the presidential candidates that people perceive on defense spending, whether people reported being contacted by one of the major parties, external efficacy, and perceptions of government responsiveness. I have shown that each has changed quite a bit over time for moderates, so, provided they are predictive of turnout among moderates, all are candidates to explain change in voter turnout over time. I also control for strength of partisanship and a range of demographic factors, including race (being African American), gender (being female), age, income, education, and being from the south, to make the estimates of interest more secure.

The results of this analysis appear in table A-1. Somewhat surprisingly, neither external efficacy nor perceptions of government responsiveness had a statistically significant effect on voter turnout in 2004, so neither variable can explain why turnout among moderates was higher in 2004 than before. However, reporting contact from a party and perceived polarization of the presidential candidates on defense spending are statistically significant. Provided their values increased over time, they each contributed to the increase in reported turnout among moderates.

Recall that figure 1-2 revealed that self-reported turnout among moderates had increased markedly between 1996 and 2004. Therefore, 1996 is used as the baseline year of comparison. Specifically, I use the regression estimates in table A-1 to estimate the relative contribution to increased voter turnout that party mobilization and perceptions of polarization on defense made between the two years. To do so, I first calculate the predicted probability that someone reported having voted, holding all the variables in the model constant at their 2004 sample means. Next, I calculate the predicted probability that someone voted, substituting the 1996 value only for the independent variables of interest. I then record the difference in the predicted probabilities of voting.

Table A-1. *Self-Reported Voter Turnout as a Function of Perceived Candidate Polarization, Party Mobilization, Feelings about the Political System, and Social Characteristics, Self-Identified Moderates Only, 2004*[a]

Variable	*Parameter estimate*
Constant	−7.659***
	(1.659)
Perceived polarization of candidates on defense spending	0.279*
	(0.149)
Contacted by a party	1.442**
	(0.481)
External efficacy	0.372
	(0.586)
Perceptions of government responsiveness	−0.296
	(0.918)
Strength of partisanship	1.143***
	(0.275)
Race (African American)	1.532**
	(0.654)
Gender (female)	−0.607
	(0.437)
Education	0.853**
	(0.292)
Income	−0.207
	(0.199)
Age	0.040***
	(0.013)
Non-South	0.984*
	(0.449)
Cox and Snell R^2	0.28
N	279

Source: Author's calculations based on data from 2004 National Election Study.
*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, one-tailed test.
a. Logistic regression estimates; standard errors shown in parentheses.

As the analyses above foreshadowed, the increase in perceived candidate polarization on defense and the increase in party contacts were statistically significant. In 1996 the mean absolute difference between the presidential candidates on defense was 1.76 points. In 2004 it had increased to 2.34 points. My model estimates that this increase led to a 2.1 percentage point increase in voter turnout among moderates, other things being equal. Similarly 26 percent of moderates said they had been contacted by one of the parties in 1996, while 41 percent reported this in 2004. My model estimates that this increase led to a 2.7 percent-

age point increase in voter turnout. In short, both variables, perceptions of increasing polarization between the presidential candidates on defense and party mobilization activities, contributed to the turnout increase.

Before one concludes that the effect of mobilization is larger, recall that the defense spending item is probably best considered a proxy for terrorism, an issue area in which the perceived difference between candidates was even larger than for defense. Unfortunately, time comparisons for perceptions of the candidates on terrorism are not possible because the National Elections Study did not ask these questions before 2004. Even so, we should not lose sight of the fact that, other things being equal, the increase in voter turnout between 1996 and 2004 among moderates would have been far less impressive had it not been for the efforts of parties to mobilize voters, even moderate ones.[1]

1. Although explaining the increase in voter turnout between 1996 and 2004 yields predictable results, it is less clear why turnout did not increase between 2000 and 2004 among moderates. Although perceptions of polarization on defense and party contact were both up between 2000 and 2004, increased turnout did not result. Of course, external efficacy and perceptions of government responsiveness dropped during the period, but neither had a significant effect on turnout. This suggests that something not included in the model offset the increases that the variables in the model would have predicted. Unfortunately the literature on voter turnout does not provide many clues. The most plausible explanation to me is the unreliability of self-reported voter turnout. Replicating this analysis with a voter validation follow-up might sharpen the results considerably.

Comments on Chapter One

COMMENT

Deborah Jordan Brooks and John G. Geer

The polarization of American politics has been a much discussed topic in recent years. Not everyone agrees about exactly what is happening, but it seems clear that—at the very least—the parties have become more polarized. This volume and its predecessor attest to the fact that there is an important debate occurring about polarization and its possible influences on American politics. And while it seems obvious to many analysts that polarizing political parties have an adverse influence on the polity, Marc J. Hetherington offers a refreshingly unorthodox perspective—one that challenges this prevailing view. Not only does he make a strong case that citizens do not become disengaged by party polarization, he shows that polarization, in fact, has some notable beneficial effects on the public.

We find much to like in Hetherington's overall position. In our comment, therefore, we will attempt to build upon his helpful analysis by delineating the theoretical links between his argument and the "party responsibility" literature that was prominent in the 1950s, mentioning a few additional empirical patterns about polarization and its most visible symptom (negativity), and discussing some of the general implications that intensified party polarization has for American politics.

Recalling the "Party Leadership" Literature

Hetherington undertakes an impressive array of analyses that exploit a range of dependent variables. His data show that polarization does not appear to be decreasing turnout, nonvoting campaign participation, interest in campaigns, political trust, and other measures of citizen political engagement. There is some uncertainty about how much elite polarization is really trickling down to the public, but even on that point, Hetherington demonstrates that people are clearly able to distinguish between the parties on two of the biggest issues of the day: defense spending and terrorism. There do appear to be differences in patterns of political trust among liberals and conservatives, with it being on the rise among the latter and on the decline among the former—a trend that is potentially troubling. But even so, most of Hetherington's indicators suggest that polarization is not harmful to the electorate and, in fact, appears to be beneficial.

Hetherington's position stands in stark contrast to the conventional wisdom that polarization has detrimental effects on the political engagement of voters. Concerns abound that polarization will result in lower turnout, less interest in elections, and a general disenchantment with politics. But like Hetherington, we agree that polarization seems likely, on average, to yield more benefit than harm with respect to the public's engagement with the political system. The most obvious benefit of polarization is to offer a sharper distinction between the two political parties. For partisans the benefit of this sharper distinction is clear: elite polarization gives partisans further reinforcement for their preexisting ideological and policy preferences. For moderates, the choices are made clear enough that one option is more likely to be preferred, at least marginally, over the alternative. For those who have lower levels of overall political knowledge, it should make the lines of differentiation on at least the most salient issues clearer than they would be otherwise. We would expect that more distinct parties, along with coverage of their differences by the media, would make most people more vested in political outcomes—and more interested and engaged in politics as a result.

While different from the views of many in the field, this position that polarization, on the whole, will benefit voters is not new. In fact, it is quite a long-standing intellectual tradition in American political science (albeit one that employed different terminology). Rather than speaking of the benefits of "polarization" per se, scholars such as E. E. Schattschneider advocated more than half a century ago for "party responsibility"—a concept which, by its nature, requires polarization between the parties. With a unified voice probably not heard before or since within the profession, the American Political Science Association called on Schattschneider to lead a task force to devise suggestions for promoting structural changes to enhance the strength and responsibility of America's political parties. The task force issued its set of proposals in a report, entitled "Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System," in a special edition of the *American Political Science Review* in 1950. The product of input from both academic and political practitioners, the report called for several improvements, including:

—more clearly differentiated and articulated party positions,
—a stronger opposition party,
—more internal party cohesion,
—more effective enforcement of party unity,
—greater party resistance to outside pressure (in order to, among other things, minimize deviance from consistent party platforms), and

—parties responsible to the public such that the public can identify party actions and agendas, and reward and punish for these accordingly in the voting booth.[1]

Ultimately, polarized parties were seen as an optimal state of affairs in that each organization could be held clearly responsible for its actions. At the time, intensified polarization was seen as a solution to a failing party system. While certainly not without rebuttal, the report has been characterized as representing a viewpoint held by much of the profession at the time.[2]

We are certainly not arguing here that we now have a perfectly "responsible" party system, even by the classic definition.[3] But when scholars express concern about party polarization in the current era, they seem to be indirectly concerned that the parties may have achieved many of the goals of the 1950 report *too* well. Those concerned with current polarization levels typically view present-day parties as being too cohesive. Enforcement of party unity is seen as too strong, with the frequent and effective deployment of powerful carrots and pointed sticks to guarantee party discipline. The opposition party is seen as too antagonistic and adversarial. And overall, parties are deemed to present unduly stark choices on issues to a mostly moderate American public.

In other words, many concerns about political polarization come down to the idea that parties have too successfully achieved many of the recommendations contained within the American Political Science Association report. According to that classic definition of the term, parties appear to be "responsible" now—or at least *more* responsible. They have become so "responsible" that they are now "polarized," in today's terms. Relatively few scholars and pundits seem to be worrying these days about weak parties with little responsibility to the public, as they did in the 1940s and 50s, and more recently during the 1970s and late 1980s, when divided government seemed like it was becoming the dominant state of affairs.

Additional Empirical Patterns

It is important to remember that the tables have turned quite quickly away from weak parties and toward stronger and more polarized ones. We think that a

1. See Committee on Political Parties (1950).

2. See Turner (1951).

3. Among other things, one might reasonably argue that the Democrats could have been more unified and platform oriented in recent years, especially during the immediate aftermath of September 11 and early in the Iraq conflict. Or one might argue that our current era of candidate-centered campaigns conflicts with the degree to which parties can be fully held responsible by the public at election time. (The 2006 midterm elections, however, seem to be a fairly convincing repudiation of that concern.)

reminder about the connection between responsible parties and polarization is warranted. In fact, the sometimes forgotten "party responsibility" debate offers a useful framework for understanding and appreciating Hetherington's many findings. Put in this larger theoretical context, it becomes easier to see why Hetherington has uncovered the benefits of polarized political debate for the public. Schattschneider would have predicted such developments—and his faith in them was among the reasons he pushed for major reforms.

When we use the old responsible party model to inform our understanding of polarization, additional empirical patterns come into sharper focus. For example, we know that negativity is on the rise in political campaigns. Scholars ranging from Darrell West, director of Brown University's Taubman Center for Public Policy, to Kathleen Jamieson, director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, have shown this trend.[4] The usual assumption of those concerned about polarization is that attacks have become increasingly personal and that such criticism undermines the political system. But the party responsibility perspective would contend that *issues* should be the source of the increase. That is, with parties polarized on issues, attacks should focus on policy differences, not personal ones. This party responsibility hypothesis appears to be correct. Geer demonstrates that issue-based negativity in presidential campaigns has increased since the 1960s, but trait-based attacks *have not.*[5] The incidence of trait-based negativity has been basically unchanged over the last forty years.[6]

This finding is critical as we consider the debate over polarization. Candidates are more likely to criticize their opponents on their issue positions or records in times of ideological polarization. But the occurrence of trait-based negativity in presidential campaigns, at least, is largely unaffected by polarization—and trait-based attack ads are the kind of campaigning that most upset the public and political observers. Voters want politicians to "focus on the issues." Polarization provides the fuel for more negativity, but in so doing, it also increases the amount of time candidates spend talking about important issues.[7] This strikes us as a good thing.

While there are silver linings to polarization and greater differences between the parties, there are concerns that lurk on the horizon. Most work by scholars has looked at the electorate as whole, with some attention to ideological moderates

4. West (2005) traces the evolution of televised political campaign ads from the 1950s to the present. For an account of negativity in the 2000 presidential campaign, see Johnston, Hagen, and Jamieson (2004).

5. Geer (2006).

6. Geer (2006, p. 86).

7. See Geer (2006).

and self-identified independents as key subgroups.[8] But we need to dig deeper on this front, examining differential patterns among important segments of the electorate. Aggregation could be masking important differences. There is no reason to think that all segments of the electorate will react in the same way to these changing dynamics.

One distinction ripe for analysis involves gender. Do men and women differ in their reactions to different types of political messages? New research shows that the answer to that question is that men and women do react differently to negative messages, with men being far more likely than women to intend to vote in response to seeing uncivil negative campaign messages.[9] Negative messages delivered in a more "civil" manner were actually quite energizing to women; it is only harsh attacks that keep them from going to the polls relative to men. Such findings would be mostly of normative importance if it were not for the fact that the partisan gender gap (men are far more likely to vote for Republicans than are women), in conjunction with turnout rates differing in response to incivility, could potentially skew the voting electorate toward the right during times of political polarization.

Looking Forward

In general, however, the benefits of polarization seem clear: a polarized system provides a chance for those competing for power to make a clearer case for why they should be given power. Of course, the other side can point to the risks associated with that position as well. As a result, this struggle can get nasty—and at times the rhetoric will cross the line of civility and even be insulting to our collective intelligence. Regardless, we need to make room for it in our politics, and moreover, we need to appreciate its contributions to the political process. Assuming that party polarization is here to stay (for a while, at least), we can expect that issue-based negativity will be a part of political campaigns as well. And we can take comfort in the fact that there is little evidence to suggest that polarization and its byproduct, negativity, are disengaging people overall from the political process.

8. For example, see Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995); Clinton and Lapinski (2004); Finkel and Geer (1998); Goldstein and Freedman (2002); Lau and Pomper (2001, 2004).

9. Why might this be the case? Brooks (2006) shows that there are a large variety of findings from fields outside of political science—child development, linguistics, media studies, biology, evolutionary psychology, and the like—that show that men are far more comfortable with conflict than women are. They engage in it more frequently, and it energizes them when they see it. To the extent that elite polarization breeds elite conflict, then an energized response on the part of men and an enervated response on the part of women would not be surprising.

Whether parties are undifferentiated or highly differentiated, there will be complaints. One may recall George Wallace's famous comment that "there is not a dime's worth of difference" between the parties. Perhaps the broader lesson is that whatever the condition of our political system, there will be critics of it. That, of course, is part of the democratic enterprise—the opportunity to question the status quo. It is important to remember that democracy is about disagreement—about that famous battle for who gets what, when, where, and how. Political scientists John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse are convincing about the fact that people say they do not like the "battle" aspect of politics.[10] But what people say they like and dislike about democratic rhetoric does not necessarily translate into their behavior. People may not like polarization—or more likely, the negativity that accompanies it—but it seems to produce a more engaged electorate.

However, our general optimism about polarization is tempered somewhat by Hetherington's observations that liberals and conservatives are differing increasingly on matters of trust in government and, especially, that partisans may be increasingly willing to uncritically embrace the positions of their own party. That being said, we would not be surprised if major differences were reasonably confined to specific years. Of late there are certainly far more Republicans questioning the Bush presidency than had been the case during the first few years he was in office.

Since continued polarization may result in continued incivility, we are also potentially worried by the finding that incivility in campaigns appears to affect men and women differently. If elites keep their negative messages reasonably civil, women are likely to stay engaged in politics. But to the extent that it gets nasty, substantial differences are likely to emerge between the political engagement of men and women. That all suggests that polarization tempered by civility will not be harmful to the relative participation of women, but bitter and nasty politics might be.

Beyond its specific implications, the finding of gender differences in response to incivility is a reminder that Hetherington's piece on the relationship between polarization and political engagement is just a first step at examining the issue. For the most part, he is focusing on the U.S. electorate overall. In some analyses, he breaks voters out by ideology or attention to politics. But beyond those broad-brushed distinctions, big questions remain to be answered about how different types of voters are affected by polarization. Race, age, and education seem to be areas ripe for more analyses. To the extent that we are conscious about keeping all groups engaged in the political system—and especially to the extent that such differences

10. See Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002).

may be associated with persistent partisan voting patterns—we still need to know much more about how different types of citizens are affected by political polarization before we can be less cautious in our optimism about it.

Conclusion

It is all too obvious to call for more work in the general area. We always can profit from more research. Our main point is to generally support Hetherington's position and to do so in a way that provides a greater coherence to his findings. The rise of polarization is not necessarily a bad thing for the polity overall. More "responsible"—or at least more differentiated—parties seem to yield substantial benefits to voters, and Hetherington's paper documents many of those advantages very effectively. But we need to cast a broader theoretical and normative net in considering the question. By so doing, we will be in a better position to understand and assess the shifts in our political system. It would be very interesting to know what E. E. Schattschneider would think of the political system right now. We suspect he would find much to like—and we are very sure he would like the evidence put forth by Marc Hetherington.

COMMENT

Martin P. Wattenberg

Marc Hetherington's chapter nicely outlines evidence demonstrating that political participation in the United States has increased during this recent age of partisan polarization. Such findings are hardly surprising in light of factors that have long been known to stimulate public participation in politics. The more interested people are in politics, for instance, the more likely they are to take an active role in the political process. A highly polarized partisan environment is usually a more interesting one, and this should fire up more citizens to become politically engaged. Furthermore, as polarization between Democrats and Republicans increases, the stakes at the polls are clearly raised—and citizens become more inclined to participate in politics when they believe their involvement will truly make a difference.

Hetherington's findings that political participation, efficacy, and feelings of governmental responsiveness have been increasing in recent years are noteworthy in and of themselves. Yet it is hard to judge whether these numbers are excellent,

good, fair, or poor without some perspective. The turnout rate of 60 percent of U.S. citizens of voting age in the 2004 presidential election was substantially higher than for the previous two presidential contests, but compared to typical turnout rates in other established democracies, it is nothing to brag about. In short, one of the reasons why so many observers of the American political scene continue to be concerned about U.S. turnout rates is that they are relatively low compared to other countries. Thus the most valuable commentary I can make on Hetherington's analysis is to offer a comparative perspective.

Two recent cross-national surveys—the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems and the International Social Survey Program—provide excellent sources of comparative data on the measures employed by Hetherington. Although these surveys were undertaken in established as well as new democracies, my analysis will be limited to advanced industrialized societies that have continually held elections since at least the 1970s. This confines the analysis to about twenty nations whose economic status and historical experience with democracy is relatively comparable to that of the United States. The results clearly show that the United States measures up favorably to these nations in terms of political participation, efficacy, and perceptions of governmental responsiveness. And such findings can certainly be interpreted as a very positive indicator of the health of American democracy in a polarized partisan environment.

Comparative Measures of Participation

My analysis is designed to parallel Hetherington's as much as possible. Therefore, I will first compare nonvoting measures of political participation in the United States to those of other established democracies.[11] Table 1-8 demonstrates that the United States ranks at or near the top of the list in terms of talking to other people to persuade them how to vote, showing support for a party or candidate, and donating money for political purposes. In the typical established democracy, 23 percent of citizens sampled say they have tried to persuade others how to vote during the most recent national election. In 2004 the figure in the United States was 44 percent—a level of political activity exceeded only by Canadians and equaled by the British. Similarly, only Canadians are more likely than U.S. citizens

11. In this and the following comparisons, the questions in the surveys I used are not exactly the same as the questions in surveys used by Hetherington. However, they clearly tap the same concepts. What is most important for my analysis is that the wording of questions in the surveys I used was the same for all of the countries.

Table 1-8. *Nonvoting Political Participation in Established Democracies*
Percentage of voting-age population surveyed

Country	*Talked to other people to persuade them to vote for a party or candidate*[a]	*Showed support for a party or candidate*[a]	*Donated money to a political organization or group in the past year*[b]
Australia	32	16	n.a.
Austria	n.a.	n.a.	12
Belgium	12	7	10
Canada	65	35	n.a.
Denmark	22	8	9
Finland	13	11	7
France	29	7	3
Germany	28	7	9
Iceland	22	16	n.a.
Ireland	13	8	11
Israel	32	11	13
Italy	n.a.	n.a.	3
Japan	12	4	n.a.
Netherlands	12	7	8
New Zealand	8	6	n.a.
Norway	18	7	12
Portugal	11	7	4
Spain	8	6	5
Sweden	13	3	7
Switzerland	15	6	19
United Kingdom	44	25	8
United States	44	30	21
Average	23	11	9
U.S. rank	Second of 20	Second of 20	First of 17
Nations ranking higher than U.S.	Canada	Canada	. . .

Sources: Responses in columns 1 and 2 are from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, "Module 2," 2001–05; responses in column 3 are from the European Social Survey, "Round 1," 2002–03, and from Center for Democracy and Civil Society, "U.S. Citizenship, Involvement, Democracy Survey," 2005.

a. Survey question for data in columns 1 and 2: Here is a list of things some people do during elections. Which if any did you do during the most recent election: 1) talked to other people to persuade them to vote for a particular party or candidate; 2) showed your support for a particular party or candidate by, for example, attending a meeting, putting up a poster, or in some other way?

b. Survey question for data in column 3: During the last twelve months, have you donated money to a political organization or group?

n.a. = Not available

to have actively engaged in a recent campaign by attending a meeting, putting up a poster, wearing a button, or other such activities. On this measure of participation, 30 percent of Americans said they had taken part, compared to just 11 percent in the average established democracy.

The third column of table 1-8 shows that Americans are more likely to donate money to political organizations or groups than the citizens of any of the sixteen Western European democracies surveyed. While many observers of American politics feel that the political process has been tarnished by the seemingly endless pursuit of more and more money to finance campaigns, these data reveal a positive side to American political fundraising—namely, that a comparatively high percentage of citizens (roughly one in five) donates money for political purposes. Political donors will necessarily be unrepresentative of the electorate as a whole (the poor, for instance, are naturally less likely to give money), but surely the more people who give, the more broadly representative such donors to parties and candidates will be. It may well be that the American political process is currently awash with money, but at least it is coming from a comparatively large swath of the electorate.

A second dimension of U.S. political participation that Hetherington focuses on involves mobilization efforts by political parties and other organizations. Given the extraordinary amount of money that such organizations now have to spend, it is hardly surprising that Hetherington finds they have been able to reach more people in recent years. Table 1-9 examines how this performance compares with other established democracies. The results show that only a few countries other than the United States have recently seen such a large percentage of their population being contacted by a campaign or political party. Forty-seven percent of those interviewed after the 2004 U.S. election said they had been contacted to ask for their vote, compared to an average of 24 percent in the established democracies where this question was asked.

Given that American political parties have become quite active in terms of mobilizing participation, it bears asking how responsive they are to the voters they are trying so hard to engage. Those who bemoan the growth of ideological polarization between Democrats and Republicans often criticize the parties for being dominated by supposedly unrepresentative activists who shape the parties' policymaking. Compared to parties in other countries, then, are American political parties small and elite-driven?

The answer, in fact, is no. The survey data displayed in table 1-10 indicate that no other country comes close to the United States in terms of the percentage of citizens who say they "belong" to a political party. This difference probably stems,

Table 1-9. *Contact by Political Parties in Established Democracies*
Percentage of voting-age population surveyed

Country (year)	*Reported that a campaign or a party contacted them to ask for their vote*[a]
Australia (2004)	29
Belgium (2003)	29
Canada (2004)	55
Denmark (2001)	23
Finland (2003)	21
France (2002)	7
Germany (2002)	13
Iceland (2003)	28
Ireland (2002)	53
Israel (2003)	18
Netherlands (2002)	14
New Zealand (2002)	21
Norway (2001)	15
Portugal (2002)	22
Spain (2004)	6
Sweden (2002)	7
Switzerland (2003)	18
United Kingdom (2005)	26
United States (2004)	47
Average	24
U.S. rank	Third of 19
Nations ranking higher than U.S.	Canada and Ireland

Sources: Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, "Module 2," 2001–05.

a. Survey question: During the last campaign did a candidate or anyone from a political party contact you to persuade you to vote for them?

in part, from the fact that belonging to a party in the United States often just means that someone is registered as a Democrat or a Republican, whereas in other countries it typically means they pay membership dues. Yet this difference is indicative of the greater openness of American parties, as evidenced by the extraordinarily high percentage of Americans who say they not only belong to a party but also *participate* in one. Whereas this figure ranges from 1 to 5 percent in other democracies, in the United States it is 14 percent. This aspect of American exceptionalism is no doubt due to the openness of American primary elections, which have yet to catch on in other established democracies. Thus, while it is no doubt true that primaries skew partisan choices toward the ideological poles, it should also be noted that widespread participation in party primaries means that Amer-

Table 1-10. *Participation in Political Parties in Established Democracies*
Percentage of voting-age population surveyed

Country	*Belong to a party*[a]	*Belong and actively participate in a party*[a]	*Agree that parties encourage people to become active in politics*[b]
Australia	5	1	21
Austria	22	5	27
Canada	13	5	32
Denmark	7	3	39
Finland	9	2	34
France	5	2	20
Germany	4	2	20
Ireland	9	3	42
Israel	18	5	41
Japan	5	1	15
Netherlands	10	2	21
New Zealand	11	2	28
Norway	17	3	35
Portugal	6	2	41
Spain	6	3	38
Sweden	10	3	29
Switzerland	9	4	53
United Kingdom	10	2	28
United States	42	14	64
Average	11	3	33
U.S. rank	First of 19	First of 19	First of 19
Nations ranking higher than U.S.	. . .	. . .	. . .

Source: International Social Survey Program, 2004.

a. Survey question for data in columns 1 and 2: People sometimes belong to different kinds of groups or associations. For each type of group, please indicate whether you: belong and actively participate; belong but don't actively participate; used to belong but do not any more; or have never belonged to it—a political party.

b. Survey question for data in column 3: Thinking now about politics in [country], to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Political parties encourage people to become active in politics.

icans are more involved in the internal decisionmaking (that is, selection of candidates) of parties than partisans are in other countries. Consequently, Americans are more likely than the citizens of other countries to agree that "political parties encourage people to become active in politics." Nearly two out of three Americans believe parties perform this positive function, compared to just one out of three in the typical established democracy.

Comparative Measures of Efficacy, Responsiveness, and Trust

Hetherington's trend analysis of public perceptions of political efficacy and governmental responsiveness reveals mixed findings. A comparative perspective, however, makes it clear that just holding steady on such measures is quite impressive, as the United States ranks very high on both fronts relative to other democracies. The first two columns of table 1-11 display the cross-national findings for the same two efficacy items that Hetherington examined. When asked to agree or disagree with the statement that "politicians don't care what people like me think," Americans were more likely to disagree (the "efficacious" response) than the citizens of any other established democracy except Denmark. On the question of whether people feel they have any say about what government does, Americans finished ahead of the Danes and behind only three other countries (France, Japan, and Switzerland). Thus it is clear that the United States ranks extremely high overall in terms of political efficacy.

People who believe they have a say in government and that politicians care about them are naturally inclined to feel positively about governmental responsiveness. Hence, the rank ordering of countries on these two dimensions is likely to be relatively similar. Indeed, only the Danes are more likely than Americans to say that elections ensure that voters' views are very well or quite well represented in government (see the third column of table 1-11). Such a finding is particularly impressive given that many of the countries that scored below the United States on this measure have proportional representation systems that guarantee that even small parties are fairly represented in parliament.

In the absence of proportional representation (and with only two major parties in the United States), we might expect Americans to be less likely than the citizens of other countries to say that a political party represents their views. But as the data in table 1-12 indicate, the U.S. response to this question was actually somewhat higher than the average for established democracies. Where representation in the United States really shines, though, is in terms of leaders. Table 1-12 also shows that Americans are more likely to say there is a political leader who represents their views than the citizens of all other established democracies, except for Australia. Our candidate-centered system thus helps facilitate representation by giving Americans a plethora of choices within parties, as well as between them. All told, 84 percent of Americans say that either a party or a leader stands for their political views—a figure exceeded only by Denmark, Australia, and Norway.

While Americans may feel that someone represents them, a potential problem of a polarized political environment is if one side does not trust the other side

Table 1-11. *Political Efficacy and Perceptions of the Representativeness of Elections in Established Democracies*
Percentage of voting-age population surveyed

Country	*Disagree that politicians don't care what people like me think*[a]	*Disagree that people like me don't have any say about what the government does*[a]	*Feel that elections ensure that the views of the voters are well represented*[b]
Australia	24	29	56
Austria	17	25	n.a.
Belgium	n.a.	n.a.	63
Canada	26	28	40
Denmark	47	41	79
Finland	30	26	48
France	26	83	61
Germany	16	24	38
Iceland	n.a.	n.a.	55
Ireland	22	25	63
Israel	21	28	47
Japan	11	77	24
Netherlands	33	39	59
New Zealand	27	33	56
Norway	31	47	n.a.
Portugal	14	21	38
Spain	25	26	64
Sweden	24	25	59
Switzerland	36	50	58
United Kingdom	23	27	40
United States	39	48	72
Average	26	37	54
U.S. rank	Second of 19	Fourth of 19	Second of 19
Nations ranking higher than U.S.	Denmark	France, Japan, and Switzerland	Denmark

Sources: Responses in columns 1 and 2 are from the International Social Survey Program, 2004; responses in column 3 are from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, "Module 2," 2001–05.

a. Survey question for data in columns 1 and 2: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements: 1) I don't think the government cares much what people like me think; 2) People like me don't have any say about what the government does.

b. Survey question for data in column 3: Thinking about how elections in [country] work in practice, how well do elections ensure that the views of voters are represented by majority parties: very well, quite well, not very well, or not well at all?

n.a. = Not available

Table 1-12. *Comparative Sense of Representation by Parties and Leaders*[a]
Percentage of voting-age population surveyed

Country (year)	*Said a leader represents their views*	*Said a party represents their views*	*Said a party or a leader represents their views*
Australia (2004)	79	83	87
Canada (2004)	68	69	75
Denmark (2001)	70	80	87
Finland (2003)	47	61	70
France (2002)	59	56	71
Germany (2002)	59	57	72
Iceland (2003)	52	61	72
Ireland (2002)	64	67	74
Israel (2003)	54	66	76
Japan (2004)	51	54	52
New Zealand (2002)	68	65	76
Norway (2001)	69	80	85
Portugal (2002)	48	44	59
Spain (2004)	73	74	73
Sweden (2002)	58	75	80
Switzerland (2003)	56	76	80
United Kingdom (2005)	48	55	63
United States (2004)	77	72	84
Average	61	66	74
U.S. rank	Second of 18	Seventh of 18	Fourth of 18
Nations ranking higher than U.S.	Australia	Australia, Denmark, Norway, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland	Australia, Denmark, and Norway

Sources: Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, "Module 2," 2001–05.

a. Survey question: Would you say that any of the parties in [country] represents your views reasonably well [column 2]? Regardless of how you feel about the parties, would you say that any of the individual party leaders/presidential candidates at the last election represents your views reasonably well [column 1]?

when the other side is in power. Marc Hetherington's analysis finds that trust in government was more related to party identification during the 2004 election campaign than ever before. He expresses concern over this development, writing that "if political trust provides the reservoir of good will for governments even when times are bad, then government in the early twenty-first century is only getting it from one side of the political aisle." On this point, I think Hetherington has exaggerated the evidence. A simple cross-tabulation from the 2004 National

Table 1-13. *Polarization between Major Left-Wing and Right-Wing Party Members on Trust in Government, 2004*[a]
Mean trust level

Country and parties	*Supporters of major left-wing party*	*Supporters of major right-wing party*	*Difference*
France: Socialist versus UMP/RPR[b]	39.4	52.7	13.3
Austria: SPÖ versus ÖVP	34.1	44.8	10.7
Australia: Labor versus Liberal/National	48.0	58.3	10.3
United States: Democratic versus Republican	42.4	52.5	10.1
United Kingdom: Labour versus Conservative	52.5	42.6	9.9
New Zealand: Labor versus National	54.8	48.7	6.1
Germany: SPD versus CDU/CSU	37.3	32.4	4.9

Sources: International Social Survey Program, 2004.

a. Survey question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Most of the time we can trust people in government to do what is right—strongly agree (100), agree (75), neither agree nor disagree (50), disagree (25), or strongly disagree (0).

Note: Party support was measured by a party identification question in Australia, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States; by intended vote in Germany; and by recent past vote in New Zealand and Austria.

b. Party abbreviations: France—UMP, Union for a Popular Movement; RPR, Rally for the Republic. Austria—SPÖ, Social Democrats; ÖVP, Austrian People's Party. Germany—SPD, Social Democratic Party; CDU, Christian Democratic Union; CSU, Christian Social Union.

Election Study reveals that 36 percent of Democrats said they trusted the government in Washington to do the right thing always or most of the time, compared to 62 percent among Republicans. This difference of 26 percentage points hardly strikes me as reason for concern. If this is the extent of the difference during the heat of a contentious election campaign, it seems likely that there would be an ample supply of goodwill when it is really needed for governing, as evidenced in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks.

Furthermore, the difference between Democrats and Republicans on trust in government in 2004 was perfectly normal compared to other countries whose political systems are dominated by two large parties. Table 1-13 displays data from the International Social Survey Program, which asked an almost identical trust

question on a five-point scale (as opposed to a three-point scale in the data Hetherington employed). In the United States, the difference between Democrats and Republicans on trust in government was 10.1 percentage points, compared to an average of 9.2 points between the supporters of the major left-wing and right-wing parties in the other six stable democracies. By this measure, the degree of partisan polarization regarding trust in government in the United States is hardly remarkable when placed in comparative perspective.

The Turnout Problem

This examination of how U.S. political participation, perceptions of representation, and trust in government compare to that in other established democracies has revealed many strengths of the American electoral process. From a comparative perspective, the only clear weakness is the abnormally low rate of turnout of the U.S. electorate at the polls. Fortunately, should there ever be the political will to do something about this, the experience of other countries can lead us to a clear solution. As President Clinton is said to have occasionally remarked, the solutions to most public policy problems have already been found somewhere—we just have to scan the horizons for them.[12]

If in an ideal democracy everyone votes, a simple way to realize this goal is to require people to participate. This is how Australians reasoned when they instituted compulsory voting after their turnout rate fell to 58 percent in 1922. Since then, the country's turnout has never fallen below 90 percent—even though the maximum fine for not voting is only fifty Australian dollars and judges readily accept any reasonable excuse.

In my view, political scientists have been far too cautious in recommending compulsory voting in the United States in light of what we know about the seriousness of the turnout problem and how well this solution works to correct it. It is certainly true that many Americans would object to being told that they have to show up on election day (even though they do not actually have to vote—as long as the secrecy of the ballot is sacrosanct, no law can prevent someone from casting a blank ballot). Yet engineering safety experts have not backed off their calls for mandatory seat belt laws just because some people think it is a matter of personal choice whether to buckle up or not. Nor have researchers on secondhand

12. This section harkens back to an article I published in the *Atlantic Monthly* nearly a decade ago—proof enough that the wheels of U.S. electoral reform move very slowly. See Martin P. Wattenberg, "Should Election Day Be a Holiday?" *Atlantic,* October 1998.

smoke backed off on recommendations to ban smoking in public places just because many people think that such restrictions violate their individual rights. Rather, these researchers have continued to try to educate people and shift public policy, achieving a fair degree of success as a result. Political scientists who are concerned about turnout should follow this model, bringing attention to the fact that compulsory voting laws are a proven solution to the problem of low turnout.

Elsewhere in this volume, Pietro Nivola and William Galston suggest that a few states experiment with compulsory voting. This strikes me as an excellent idea. Once the Australian state of Queensland demonstrated that requiring election participation worked extremely well for its state elections, the federal parliament soon adopted the requirement with little controversy at all. In the United States, the best candidate to play this role is probably Massachusetts, whose state constitution explicitly gives the legislature the right to make election attendance compulsory.[13] Once one American state tries out this reform and sees its turnout rate rise over 90 percent, chances should increase that other states—as well as the federal government—will follow and that America's turnout problem will be solved.

13. Article 61 of the constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts states, in its entirety, "The general court shall have authority to provide for compulsory voting at elections, but the right of secret voting shall be preserved."

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