"The Discounted Voter: Polarization at the Congressional District Level"

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This paper has been prepared for delivery at the Leon Epstein Memorial Conference at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. The authors wish to thank Corey Bike for his steady and capable research assistance.

Introduction

The American political system has rarely been as closely divided as it is today. At the presidential level, George W. Bush's victories in the 2000 and 2004 elections rank among the closest in history. Woodrow Wilson's reelection in 1916 was the last one with an Electoral College result as close as these two. In Congress, Republicans controlled both branches of Congress from 1995-2006 with the exception of 18 months, but their majorities were razor thin. For example, in the House, the Republicans never had more than 233 members elected during their run in the majority. The Democratic majorities ushered in by the 2006 election are similarly slight. In short, America's two parties are now very evenly divided.

In addition to being closely divided, American politics is producing conflicts that seem to run deeper than before. The Supreme Court decided the acrimonious outcome to the 2000 presidential election in favor of the popular vote loser, causing Democrats much consternation and Republicans much exhilaration. Income inequality recently reached its highest point since the U.S. started keeping such data in the 1940s (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006), and class based voting is the most pronounced it has been in at least the last fifty years (Stonecash 2000). New and divisive policy questions about issues with the potential to evoke strong feelings, such as the legality of gay marriage and the future of abortion rights, now occupy more space on the issue agenda (Hunter and Wolfe 2006). Religion has become a potent political force, creating a deep new partisan cleavage in the electorate (see e.g. Wilcox and Larson 2006; Green, Rozell, and Wilcox 2006; Leege, Wald, Krueger, and Mueller, 2002; Layman 2001). Finally, a "preemptive war" in Iraq has the political left accusing the president of lying and the political right accusing the left of undermining the war effort. Perhaps as a consequence, 85 percent of Americans said they cared "a great deal" who won the 2004 presidential election, a higher percentage by far than any time since the survey question was first asked in 1952.[1]

As a result, some suggest American politics is not only divided but polarized, pitting the religious against the secular, urban against rural (Barone 2001),[2] minority against white, rich against poor, and even strict parents against nuturant ones (Lakoff 2002). Moreover, although multiple cleavages are at play, new ones are not displacing old ones. Instead cleavages are more likely to be reinforcing rather than cross-cutting (Layman and Carsey 2002). At the elite level, this is certainly so. Scores of studies suggest that Congress is increasingly polarized, with members clustering at the ideological poles and almost no one in the middle (e.g. Rohde 1991; McCarty, Poole, Rosenthal 2006). Political commentators, especially on cable news and talk radio, reinforce this view. For every Hannity, there is a Colmes. For every Limbaugh and O'Reilly, a Franken and an Olbermann. Commentators on the right and left have produced increasingly vitriolic critiques of their opponents (a very incomplete list includes Franken 1996; Hannity 2004; Amann and Breuer 2006; Coulter 2006). In short, elected leaders, activists, and the news media generate a lot of angry sniping.

Yet heated rhetoric and incivility among elites does not necessarily imply polarization in the electorate. Indeed, given all the talk, evidence that ordinary citizens

[1] To put this finding into context, only 57 percent cared a great deal in 1976.

[2] Barone's essay is viewed in many circles as reflecting the thinking of Karl Rove, George W. Bush's chief political strategist.

are polarized is surprisingly scant. The publication of Morris Fiorina's book, *Culture War?: The Myth of a Polarized America*, in 2004, bucked the conventional wisdom of a polarized America (Fiorina, Abrams and Pope 2004). Fiorina argues that voters *appear* polarized simply because the political arena offers mainly polarized choices. Yet, in reality, ordinary Americans' preferences remain moderate, have generally not moved farther apart over time even on hot button social issues, and are increasingly tolerant of difference. This view is at odds, most notably, with the unprecedented partisan differences in evaluations of George W. Bush, a partisan split on the war of a magnitude that has never been seen, and the mental gymnastics that partisans engage in to justify sometimes factually incorrect positions (Jacobson 2006).

Such disconnect between polarized elites and a moderate public is curious from a scholarly perspective. Mass opinion tends to respond to elite frames, an idea central to V.O. Key's notion of public opinion as an echo chamber (Key 1966). If politicians provide polarized cues, then the public ought to reflect them eventually. Alternatively voters might send elite cues that suggest that politicians ought to move toward the center. Neither has apparently happened.

In assessing whether polarization exists in the electorate, the groups under consideration are critical. Much discussion in the popular press centers on differences between people living in "red states", defined as those George Bush won in the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections, and "blue states", defined as those won by Al Gore and John Kerry. Given the drama of these two elections, not to mention the consistency in the results (only New Mexico, New Hampshire, and Iowa changed sides), the desire to make such a comparison is understandable.

It is also unwarranted. Not all "red states" are uniformly red, nor are all blue states uniformly blue. As Fiorina notes, many of bluest of blue states in 2004 were simultaneous voting heavily for John Kerry and electing Republican governors, and, similarly, many of the reddest of red states were electing Democratic governors. Instead many states are quite "purple", a combination of blue and red.

Certainly analysis of states has problems. For example, Pennsylvania is a blue state, having been won by Gore by 2 points in 2000 and Kerry by 3 points in 2004. But it also features heterogeneity, which probably explains why Bush lost only narrowly both times. In tremendous Philadelphia in the east and Pittsburgh in the west, Pennsylvania boasts two major population centers that provide Democrats strong support. But the vast area between them is even more reliably Republican. James Carville, the political consultant who masterminded Bill Clinton's campaign in 1992, aptly described Pennsylvania as "Philadelphia and Pittsburgh with Alabama in between." Consistent with Carville's observation, Pennsylvania's congressional delegation in the 108th Congress included both Robert Brady and Chaka Fattah, two of the more liberal members of the House, and Bill Toomey and Frank Pitts, two of the more conservative. Many other states are similarly split. In that sense, Pennsylvania's residents are, when averaged together, quite moderate, just like California's elevation is only moderately high. But such averaging obscures what we believe might be a very real polarization between residents of different parts of Pennsylvania.

Geography can provide a lesson about why using the state as the unit of aggregation has pitfalls. The average elevation in California is 2,900 feet above sea level, which is the eleventh highest in the nation. The state that ranks just below

California in average elevation is, surprisingly, Nebraska at 2,600 feet above sea level. One might think of both as moderately high. Yet the geography of these states could hardly be more different. Featuring Mt. Whitney, the highest elevation in the lower 48 states, and Death Valley, the lowest, California has the largest range of elevations of 14,776 feet. The range of elevations in Nebraska is only about 4,500 feet, or roughly 30 percent that of California. In that sense, California harbors significant polarization within its borders, even though aggregated at the state level it might not appear so. Nebraska does not.

Focusing on the congressional district level rather than the state, we find evidence that ordinary Americans are more divided than state treatments suggest. This is not to suggest that Americans are polarized by Fiorina's definition; they are not. But our analysis does suggest that party elites are more rational in their pursuit of reelection by appealing to their respective party bases than it might appear at first blush. The preferences of Republicans living in so called red congressional districts are very different from the preferences of Democrats living in blue congressional districts. Since most reelection constituencies are not competitive, we argue that, on the electoral level, this is the most appropriate comparison to make.

Problems Defining Polarization

Operational definitions of polarization are numerous, which helps explain why some top notch scholars argue passionately that it does not exist in the American electorate while other top notch scholars argue, with equal passion, that it does. DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson (1996) provide a straightforward definition of polarization, which Fiorina adopts. Although they use the generic term polarization, it relates to what Fiorina refers to as *popular* polarization, which is simply movement toward the poles of a distribution (DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996; Fiorina and Levendusky 2006). It is characterized by wide dispersion of preference between groups and, eventually, bimodality, or a clustering of preferences near the poles. In statistical terms, this rendering requires 1) a large difference of means (or proportions) between two groups and 2) large and increasing standard deviations in distributions of interest (DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996).

Based on the DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson definition, there is not much evidence of popular polarization. Extending DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson's work (which covered the period from the early 1970s through 1996) into the 2000s, Fiorina quite convincingly shows that Americans' issue preferences have been and remain generally moderate (see also Evans 2003). A key piece of his evidence is the NES's ideological self-placement question. When people are asked to place themselves on a seven point scale from extremely liberal at one end to extremely conservative at the other with moderate, middle of the road at the midpoint, about fifty percent of American either characterize themselves as moderate or are unable to place themselves on the scale.

Figure 1 shows the responses to the ideological self-placement question in 2004 broken down by party. The picture presents a marked contrast to the elite level. The modal response among Democrats is moderate or "haven't thought enough" about it. Less than 40 percent of Democrats are even willing to label themselves as liberals of any sort. Although Republicans embrace the conservative label more easily than Democrats do the liberal label, nearly 30 percent of Republicans think of themselves as moderate or

say they haven't thought enough about it. Fiorina, moreover, shows similarly overlapping, moderate preferences for a litany of issues.

(Figure 1 About Here)

Such an operational definition of polarization has both advantages and limitations. Its main advantage is its face validity. The hostility and venom that is implied by polarization seems to require significant distance between group means. Moreover, because polarization has the word "pole" as its root, examining whether groups are moving toward and clustering at the poles certainly makes sense.

Yet, given what scholars know about the nature of public opinion and the survey instrument itself, such a definition may be too limited because the conditions imposed by it are perhaps impossible to meet. Surveys tend to depress dispersion because respondents, especially the ill-informed, tend to choose the midpoint of survey items regardless of their true preferences (if such preferences can be gleaned at all). If the most esteemed theories of the survey response are correct, a relatively small percentage of Americans will have the cognitive ability and/or the political certainty to cluster toward the poles of a distribution (Zaller 1992; Converse 1964).

The DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson definition also suffers from the fact that there exists no agreed upon amount of distance between groups necessary for popular polarization to exist. Do their preferences, on a scale from 0 to 100, need to cluster around 90 and 10, 70 and 30, or something else? Can groups be polarized if they are far apart but are on the same side of the midpoint?

In comparing residents of red and blue states, Fiorina often dismisses differences of 10 and 15 percentage points as not representing polarization, which seems appropriate. It is theoretically possible for these groups to be 100 percentage points apart. Of course, differences of this magnitude are really a Never Never Land possibility. After all, you can always find some Red Sox fans in a city as big as New York, and perhaps a few more, even braver Yankees fans in Boston. Even during the Civil War, perhaps the most polarized time in the nation's history, significant numbers of southerners sympathized with the north and vice versa, making it unlikely that northerners and southerners would have differed by anything approaching 100 points on slavery. Indeed, as Dahl (1976) notes, 94 percent of blacks were effectively barred from voting in the north as well and, even less than a year before secession, "abolitionist" was not in the vernacular of ordinary citizens. To the extent that group differences approached 100 percent, surveys would have struggled to reflect it.

Some context might be helpful. Although the survey era has generally been characterized by muted differences, the struggle over civil rights provides an exception. Prior to the time that the courts extended civil rights protections to non-southern blacks in the late 1960s and early 1970s, southern and non-southern whites are portrayed to have fundamentally different preferences about segregation. Fortunately, survey data are available to test how different their preferences were, which might provide a sense of how far apart groups must be for polarization to exist.

In 1964, the year the Civil Rights Act was enacted, the NES asked people their positions on whether the federal government should work to ensure school integration, their preferred degree of segregation, and support for housing segregation. The results appear in Table 1. The differences between white southerners and white non-southerners were substantial: non-southerners were 22.7 percentage points more likely to support a

federal role in school integration, 22 points more likely to support desegregation rather than segregation or something in between, and 25.5 points more likely to believe that blacks should be able to live wherever they could afford. Fiorina often dismisses large differences in the contemporary context if both groups are on the same side of the midpoint, indicating that the two sides agree on substance but differ only in degree. But, regarding civil rights in 1964, less than a majority of southern and non-southern whites supported both a federal role in school integration (41.9 percent non-southern vs. 19.2 percent southern) and the notion of full desegregation more generally (31.5 percent to 9.5 percent). Perhaps northerners and southerners were not polarized on civil rights, but, if not on this issue at this point in time, it is not clear where to look for an illustration.

(Table 1 About Here)

It is worth noting that the gulf between non-black Democrats and Republicans on gay rights is roughly the same today as was the difference between southerners and non-southerners on civil rights in the mid-1960s. In fact, opinions today on gay rights are, in some cases, even more divergent.[3] Table 2 displays the results. On both support for gay marriage and gay adoption, Democrats are more than 30 points more tolerant than are Republicans. The differences are somewhat smaller, but still substantial, for protecting gays from job discrimination and supporting gays in the military.

(Table 2 About Here)

A second problem with the DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson definition is that standard deviations and differences of means do not capture salience. Salience helps to determine the weight that opinions carry. Indeed, accounting for salience explains why the politics of race in the 1960s was much more polarized than the politics of gay rights in the 2000s, despite the fact that preferences are more dispersed now than they were then. In 1964, the percentage of Americans who responded "civil rights" to Gallup's most important problem question was generally greater than 30 percent. The percentage of Americans who think gay rights is most important today is typically in the low single digits. Gay rights and other social issues are more important than they were ten years ago, but they do not define politics the way race did in the 1960s (Carmines and Stimson 1989).

Excluding salience from our understanding of polarization, however, can also be used to argue that there is *more* polarization today than working from the DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson definition would suggest. Salience can make issues seem more polarizing even if the distance between groups remains relatively small. Consider public opinion about homosexuals, a hot button issue with the potential to polarize. Since the 1980s, the mean distance between how Republicans and Democrats feel about gays and lesbians on the NES's feeling thermometer has actually decreased from about 12 to about 10 degrees. As Fiorina notes, tolerance among both has increased, but, since Republicans started from a lower baseline, their average score has increased faster. From this, the DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson definition would conclude that no polarization exists because the two sides are not near the poles and are even moving closer.

[3] I confine this analysis to non-blacks because blacks do not identify with the Democratic party because of its positions on social issues. Indeed, African-Americans are, on average, quite conservative on most social issues, while the Democratic party is increasingly liberal. Since blacks have remained the party's most stalwart supporters, it appears that this group is not inclined to leave the party based the party's socially liberal positions.

Such a conclusion, however, misses an important change. Although the distance between parties is now smaller, that distance is substantively more important because gay rights have become more salient. In fact, the very reason that gay rights has become more salient is because public opinion has become so much more moderate. Gays and lesbians were so unpopular in the 1980s (mean feeling thermometer 28.50 degrees in 1988 – seven degrees cooler than for the ever popular "illegal aliens"), that political leaders would have embraced gay rights with political suicide in mind. In 2004, however, tolerance for gays and lesbians had increased markedly (mean feeling thermometer in 2004 - 48.52 degrees), making discussion of gay rights thinkable.

Perhaps, then, another way to consider the relative degree of polarization caused by an issue is as the product of distance between groups and the salience of the issue. Considered this way, gay rights can still be a source of at least relative polarization even as the distance between groups has shrunk. Consider the homosexuality example. The distance, in this case, was 12 in the 1980s, but, since the issue was not salient, its weight was 0. Polarization could be calculated as 12 * 0 = 0. Even though the distance has dropped to 10 more recently, its salience has increased dramatically. Let's say it carries a weight equal to 10. Polarization in this rendering would be calculated as 10 * 10 = 100. Even if the difference in means or proportions remains constant or even shrinks a little over time, relatively higher levels of polarization can result if the weight attached to that issue is increasing.

These mild definitional critiques are not intended to suggest that polarization is widespread in the American electorate. Instead we highlight the importance of salience, in particular, to suggest why ordinary Americans might feel differently about politics even if they are not polarized per se. Polarization is probably best thought of on a continuum rather than as a discrete variable. Feelings are relatively stronger in the electorate today than they were twenty years ago because issues with the ability to provoke strong feelings have become more important. This is likely the reason that Jacobson, Abramowitz, and others find evidence for what they term polarization.

Party Sorting and the Proper Unit of Analyis

Those who argue that polarization exists on the mass level are, for the most part, conceptualizing polarization differently from Fiorina. They most often highlight increasing distances between the average Republican and Democrat in the electorate irrespective of whether those opinions are clustering near the ideological poles (Jacobson 2006; Abramowitz and Saunders 2007).[4] In statistical terms, differences in means and, when appropriate, proportions are the only measures of concern. With the poles out of the picture, Fiorina and Levendusky question the use of the term polarization to describe the phenomena. Instead, they favor the term party sorting (Fiorina and Levendusky 2006). By sorting, they mean that mass partisans are following what are now clearer elite cues to sort themselves into the "correct" party, which decreases intra-party heterogeneity and increases the difference between party adherents.

With sorting, differences in means or proportions can increase, even as the dispersion of opinions in the population remains relatively constant. For example, the distribution of opinion on abortion might not have become more extreme over time, but

[4] Abramowitz also demonstrates that people have become more consistently liberal and more consistently conservative in their preferences over time, which seems more a measure of preference constraint rather than polarization.

the average Democrat and Republican could be farther apart if formerly Democratic pro-lifers changed their party affiliation, realizing their old party was not an appropriate home (and vice versa). Democratic partisans will have become more homogenously liberal and Republican partisans more homogenously conservative, with the average distance between them larger as a result.

But, even with sorting, researchers find increasing distances over time between Republicans and Democrats on issue preferences and values, but they rarely find differences of the size that would be indicative of the fuel that supports the massive differences between elite level Democrats and Republicans.[5] Moreover, Fiorina allows that some sorting has taken place, reflected by modest increases in preference differences, but they are not that far apart. Since it is members of the U.S. House that are most often the focus of analysis to support elite level polarization claims, we argue that focusing on the district level, and more importantly, the reelection constituency in that district, as unit of analysis is imperative.

Many who try to evaluate the extent of polarization in the electorate rely on state as the unit of analysis. And on a couple of levels this choice may seem logical. After all, much of the attention of scholars, journalists, and political pundits has focused on presidential elections and the grouping of states as either Red states or Blue states. Clearly, part of the polarization argument has rested on many states being firmly planted in one of the two categories and how few states were in play in the 2000 and 2004 presidential election, despite the fact that both elections were highly competitive ones in terms of both the national popular vote and the electoral college vote. Further, part of Fiorina's challenge to the contention of growing polarization has centered on undermining the claim that red and blue states are necessarily as polarized as the conventional wisdom would have one believe or that voters in these states are any more polarized politically than in the past. In addition, other important elections, gubernatorial and U.S. Senate contests, are held on a statewide basis, as well. Thus, those who see a growth in partisan polarization point to the increase in the number of states having two senators of the same party.

We question the appropriateness of using state the unit of analysis, however, and instead contend that the congressional district is the more logical and more appropriate electoral entity. States have at least two critical shortcomings if one's goal is to analyze electoral polarization. First, they are, in most cases, exceedingly large and populous electoral units. Aggregating to that level may easily camouflage polarized areas within the states. Ohio, which was the most hotly contested state in the 2004 presidential election, contains sizeable areas where Democrats dominate and others where Republicans dominate. Although the state may appear party-competitive and thus candidates may have incentives to moderate policy positions to win statewide elections, it still may contain single-party dominated, polarized areas in which there are few strategic incentives for candidates to make moderate appeals.

Perhaps we can see the contrast more clearly by comparing the party competitiveness of Michigan and Illinois during the mid to latter part of the twentieth century. Both states scored high on the Ranney index of state party competition. But on

[5] Of course, there are massive differences in evaluations of political figures, particularly George W. Bush. But Fiorina takes great pains to distinguish evaluations of polarizing political figures, which tend to be polarized, from more general values and preferences, which do not tend to be polarized.

closer examination one realizes that they were far from the same. Both states, for example, had state legislatures with close divisions in terms of the number of seats held by Democrats and Republicans. But in Michigan many of the legislators also came from party-competitive districts. By contrast, in Illinois, the individual districts were either overwhelmingly Democratic or overwhelming Republican. Winning state legislative seats in Michigan meant that candidates needed to have some appeal to independent voters and to opposite party partisans, but that was not a requisite in Illinois.

Second, states have drastically different populations, ranging from around a half million in Wyoming to over thirty million in California. Yet in using them as the unit of analysis to study voter polarization, analysts treat states as if they were equal. Thus, Wyoming and the six other states that receive the minimal congressional representation count as much in an analysis of polarization as California and the next six most populous states.

To deal with these shortcomings of states, we suggest that using the congressional districts as the unit of analysis. With the exception of the seven single congressional district states, congressional districts have smaller populations than states. In these smaller units polarization cannot be as easily disguised by having polar opposites offset each other and give the appearance of moderation. In addition, there is little variation in the population of congressional districts, especially within state but also between states (ranging from just under 500,000 in Wyoming to nearly 745,000 in Utah with most districts somewhere in excess of 600,000). As one of us has examined in other research, the real change in the level of one party dominance has occurred at the congressional district level (Oppenheimer 2005) as the underlying partisan advantage of congressional districts has increasingly displaced incumbency advantage in explaining high rates of reelection and wide margins of victory. The traditional indicators of incumbency advantage have had sizeable drops in the 1990s and 2000s as few members represent districts that are party competitive and accordingly have few incentives to increase electoral majorities. Using the presidential vote by congressional district as an indicator, we show the decline in partisan competitiveness using the presidential vote of 1976 and 2000. Because both were extremely close in terms of popular vote outcome, neither involved a third party candidate who received a sizeable percentage of the vote, and neither had an elected incumbent president seeking reelection, the two elections provide a natural control for many of the factors that might affect the underlying distribution of the vote. As the data in Table 3, however, clearly demonstrate, the 2000 presidential election shows a far lower level of party competitiveness at the congressional district than the 1976 election. In 1976, the Republican candidate received between 46-55 percent of the vote in 207 (48%) districts, while in 2000 on 123 (28%) were in this most competitive grouping. At the 41-60 percent range, there were 335 (77%) districts in 1976 and only 234 (54%) in 2000. In 2004, the picture is even starker with only 108 districts falling in the most competitive category.

(Table 3 About Here)

The results we present in Table 4 begin to illustrate the ramification of this larger point. The 2004 National Election Study asked respondents nearly a dozen support or oppose questions ranging from social issues like abortion and gay rights to economic issues like tax cuts and Social Security privatization. The first three columns in the table track the proportion of supporters in red states and blue states and the difference between

them. We define red state residents as those living in states won by George W. Bush in 2004 and blue states as those won by John Kerry.

(Table 4 About Here)

Consistent with Fiorina's analysis, we find little difference on most issues. Social issues like support abortion and gay rights produce differences in excess of 10 percentage points, but, on most issues, red staters and blue staters are pretty similar, especially on the economic issues. On the Bush tax cuts and privatizing Social Security, people from red and blue states are almost identical. The same is true on banning partial birth abortions.

The second three columns in Table 4 compare residents of red congressional districts and blue congressional districts. We operationalize these categories by grouping respondents by whether a Republican or Democrat won the 2004 election in their congressional district. In this case, we find issue differences of 10 or more points on five different issues, rather than just three. In addition, the differences are statistically significant for every issue we included in the analysis. One-third of the differences failed to achieve statistical significance in the state level analysis. Still, by any reasonable understanding of polarization, there is no evidence here to support it.

As we have noted above, however, perhaps the most important feature of contemporary House elections is the absence of strong inter-party competition. Since redistricting and migration patterns increasingly place a solid plurality of Republicans in red districts and a solid plurality of Democrats in blue districts, very few members need to be concerned about the preferences of out party partisans in their districts. Specifically, when considering their reelection prospects, precious few Republicans in the House have to be concerned about the preferences of Democrats in their districts and only a few more Democrats in the House have to be concerned about the preferences of their Republican constituents.

This suggests that, to get a sharper sense of how divided relevant groups of Americans are, it makes sense to compare the preferences of Republicans who live in red congressional district and Democrats who live in blue congressional districts. For example, the preferences of a Democrat who lives in Williamson County, Tennessee, which is one of the reddest counties in the state, will not matter at all to Rep. Marcia Blackburn (R-Tenn.) because she does not need this vote to win her election.

Not surprisingly, much larger differences emerge when we make these comparisons, which appear in the last three columns of Table 4. All are greater than 20 percentage points, and preferences are better than 40 points apart on the two issues most closely identified with President Bush, namely his tax cuts and Social Security privatization. It is worth noting that each of the issues features differences similar to the differences we explored above between southerners and non-southerners on racial integration in the 1960s. Although it is hard to conclude from the DiMaggio, Evans and Bryson definition that any relevant group in the mass public is actually polarized, at a minimum, these groups of people are very well sorted by party.

Sometimes agree/disagree and favor/not favor questions overstate differences. Values and attitudes about underlying principles of government are often viewed in the discipline as more stable measures of preference, and they most often produce means near their respective mid-points. Table 5 replicates the analysis in Table 4 but instead tracks differences in sets of measures of values (moral traditionalism, authoritarianism, and racial resentment) along with a set of the NES's seven point issue scales (government

job/standard of living, government services and spending, and defense). We again draw these data from the 2004 NES.

(Table 5 About Here)

The results follow the same pattern. Red state residents and blue state residents are not usually even statistically different in these areas much less substantively so. Since we have mapped all these items onto (0,1) intervals, the differences can be interpreted as percentage differences between groups of interest. So, for instance, red staters are 2.6 percentage points more morally traditional than blue staters. In terms of their respective philosophies about government, red staters and blue staters are indistinguishable on both the government job and standard of living question as well as on government services and spending.

Moving to the congressional district level, most of these differences grow somewhat larger, although they are still not particularly large. All the differences are statistically significant, but none of them exceed ten percentage points either. The real differences again emerge in comparing the reelection constituencies for members of Congress – Republicans from red congressional districts and Democrats from blue congressional districts. The smallest difference we find is 12.8 percentage points, for authoritarianism, and the largest difference is greater than 30 percentage points, for the government job and guaranteed standard of living question. In general, these differences strike us as very large indeed.

The Polarization of Congress and Sorting of the Electorate

Nearly unquestioned in the scholarly dialogue about polarization is that it has occurred and continues to deepen in Congress. Using Poole and Rosenthal's DW-NOMINATE scores, the parties in the House achieved complete ideological separation when conservative Democrat, Ralph Hall of Texas switched parties during the 108th Congress. Jacobson (2006) suggests that such changes on the elite level, at a minimum, have a reinforcing effect the behavior of political elites.

Generations of scholarship suggest that elite level changes usually cause mass level changes (e.g. Key 1966; Page and Shapiro 1983; Zaller 1992). Hence it seems reasonable to believe that the very real polarization at the district level in Washington must be, in part, at the core of whatever sorting is taking place in the electorate. The data unequivocally support this hypothesis. The trends appear in Figure 2. Here we plot mean distance between Republicans and Democrats in the House using the DW-NOMINATE scores and the mean distance between Republicans and Democrats in the electorate using the NES's ideological self-placement from 1972 to the present (the year the NES debuted ideological self-placement). The fit between these trends is remarkably strong, with a correlation of .92. If we confine the analysis to presidential election years, which is when Americans pay more attention to politics, the correlation increases to a near perfect .98.

(Figure 2 About Here)

This analysis mirrors Jacobson's observation that House members' reelection constituencies are increasingly ideologically consistent with their partisanship. The Democrats that elect Democrats to office are becoming more liberal, and the Republicans that elect Republicans to office are becoming more conservative. Although it is clear that it was political elites that polarized first, the stark differences in mass partisan preferences at the district level reinforce this polarization at the elite level. If members did not feel

much constraint against moving toward the ideological poles from their constituents 20 years ago when the public was not so well sorted, they must feel even less now.

Conclusion

Political elites today are more polarized than they have been in roughly 100 years. Ordinary Americans, in contrast, are better sorted but not polarized. We have suggested here that definitional differences probably explain why some scholars believe that polarization runs deep in the American electorate while others think we are not polarized at all. And, further, we have suggested that choosing the proper unit of analysis is critical to understanding the pattern of polarization that we see at the elite level.

American politics is very closely divided at the national level. Majorities can easily swing from one party to the other in both the House and Senate, as we learned in 2006. Similarly the two most recent Electoral College results have been extraordinarily close by historical standards. It seems the most rational approach for parties would be to focus electoral strategies on the median voter. Of course, the interest group system, the primary system, and other structural features of American politics may work to pull the parties apart. Still, in the final analysis, parties have to win elections, and, if they do not win elections, they find life in the minority much less pleasant.

Rather than pursuing median voter campaigns, however, it appears that both parties are targeting voters more toward their ideological base. This is even true of the Republicans after their sound beating in 2006, a defeat that at least the punditry attributes to an overly ideological governing strategy. Our analysis, suggests a certain method to this seeming madness. It is certainly true that red state residents and blue state residents are not far apart on most matters. Indeed we find that red and blue congressional district residents are not much further apart than are red and blue staters. But, when we account for the fact that most congressional districts are not competitive, we find that the reelection constituencies for House members really are far apart, most often by 20 or more percentage points on most important matters. This is true both of specific policies as well as general values about right and wrong and good and bad. Viewed in this light, the non-median voter strategies employed by both parties make more sense than they do at first blush.

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Table 1
Whites' Opinions about Blacks' Civil Rights, 1964

	Non South	South	Difference
School Integration			
Federal Government Should See To It	41.9	19.2	22.7
Depends	8.2	5.3	
Federal Government Should Stay Out	36.4	64.3	27.9
Failed to Answer	13.5	11.3	
Degree of Segregation			
Desegregation	31.5	9.5	22.0
In Between	49.0	42.2	
Segregation	19.5	48.3	28.8
Housing Integration			
Whites Have Right to Keep Blacks Out	23.7	51.5	27.8
Blacks Have Right to Live Where They Can Afford	54.8	29.3	25.5
Failed to Answer	17.9	19.2	

Source: American National Election Study, 1964

Table 2
Non-Blacks Opinions about Gay Rights, by Party, 2004

	Democrats	Republicans	Difference
Gay Marriage			
Should be Allowed	52.4	17.3	35.1
Should not be Allowed but Civil Unions Should (VOL)	3.9	3.6	
Should not be Allowed	43.7	79.1	35.4
Gay Adoption			
Favor	65.9	34.8	31.1
Oppose	34.1	65.2	
Gays in the Military			
Favor	90.1	71.9	18.2
Oppose	9.9	28.1	
Protect Gays from Job Discrimination			
Favor	86.5	63.7	22.8
Oppose	13.5	36.3	

Source: American National Election Study, 2004

Table 3
Congressional District Competitiveness As Measured by District-Level Presidential Vote - 1976, 2000, 2004

Percent Republican	Ford 1976	Bush 2000	Bush 2004
0-10	3	4	3
11-20	9	26	20
21-30	18	19	27
31-40	53	59	53
41-45	64	38	45
46-50	91	61	46
51-55	106	62	62
56-60	64	73	71
61-70	25	75	91
71-80	2	17	17
81-90	0	1	0
91-100	0	0	0
Total	435	435	435

Table 4
Differences in Issue Preferences with the State, District, and Reelection Constituencies as Units of Analysis

Issue	Red State	Blue State	Difference	Red Cong. District	Blue Cong. District	Difference	Republicans. In Red Districts	Democrats in Blue Districts	Difference
Social Issues									
Support Gay Marriage	30.8	38.0	7.2	29.1	40.1	11.0	18.6	47.2	28.6
Support Gay Adoption	55.7	42.4	13.3	44.1	54.9	10.8	31.0	59.5	28.5
Support Protecting Gays from Job Discrimination	69.5	80.3	10.8	71.0	79.4	8.4	61.7	83.5	21.8
Abortion (Pro-Choice)							65.9	41.9	24.0
Favor Gov't Funded Abortion	32.3	40.7	8.4	32.7	40.5	7.8	23.4	49.1	25.7
Ban Partial Birth Abortion	58.6	59.7	1.1	67.3	51.7	15.6	77.2	41.5	35.7
Favor Death Penalty	70.6	64.3	6.3	74.3	60.7	13.6	85.3	44.8	40.5
Economic Issues									
Favor Bush Tax Cuts	53.4	54.3	0.9	58.0	49.5	8.5	74.1	32.1	42.0
Privatize Social Security	42.4	43.7	1.3	46.0	40.3	5.7	66.5	25.9	40.6

Source: American National Election Study, 2004

Table 5
Differences in Issue and Values Preferences with the State, District, and Reelection Constituencies as Units of Analysis

Issue	Red State	Blue State	Difference	Red Cong. District	Blue Cong. District	Difference	Republicans. In Red Districts	Democrats in Blue Districts	Difference
Values (non-blacks)									
Moral Traditionalism	.579	.553	.026	.608	.517	.091	.706	.419	.287
Authoritarianism	.580	.530	.050	.582	.518	.064	.596	.468	.128
Racial Resentment	.624	.617	.007	.657	.580	.077	.697	.472	.225
Seven Point Issue Scales (0,1 intervals)									
Government Job/Standard of Living	.543	.540	.003	.590	.498	.092	.710	.390	.320
Government Services and Spending	.434	.423	.011	.447	.411	.036	.522	.342	.180
Defense	.615	.584	.031	.590	.562	.028	.715	.498	.217

Source: American National Election Study, 2004

Figure 1
Ideological Self Placement by Party Identification, Leaners Not Treated as Partisans
2004

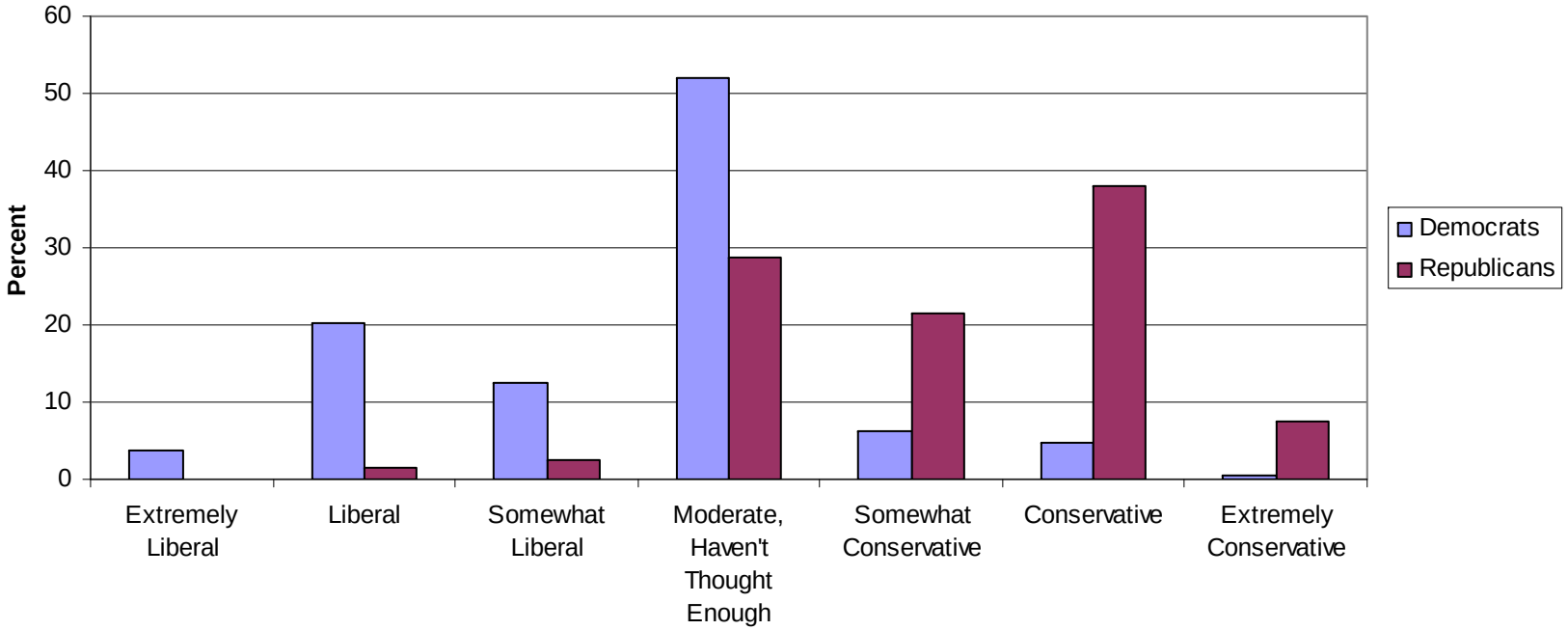

Figure 2
Mean Ideological Distance Between Congressional and Mass Partisans, DW-NOMINATE Scores and NES Ideological Self-Placement, 1971-2006