Political Polarization and the American Public

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Director of Survey Research

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Three Observations About American Politics Today

Many Americans – though perhaps not most – are highly polarized by politics, and becoming more so. The most engaged are the most polarized, which means they have the most influence on what happens (or doesn’t happen).

Americans are divided almost equally between the parties and their views about policies. Despite Democratic advantages in party affiliation, public opinion on key issues is split.

Republicans continue to have a large advantage in many elections and other forms of political engagement by virtue of their greater financial security and its correlates. The financial situation of Americans is very strongly related to their likelihood of voting and participating in other ways.
Is America Coming Apart?
The Mischiefs of Faction

“Among the numerous advantages promised by a well-constructed Union, none deserves to be more accurately developed than its tendency to break and control the violence of faction. The friend of popular governments never finds himself so much alarmed for their character and fate, as when he contemplates their propensity to this dangerous vice.”

James Madison
Federalist #10
Four Notions of Political Polarization

- Increased presence of “extreme” political attitudes?
- Growing ideological consistency?
- Ideological sorting by party?
- Rising partisan antipathy?
Responses to 10 political values questions asked on multiple Pew Research surveys since 1994 were combined to create a measure of ideological consistency.

Immigration • Poverty • Environment • Government Regulation • Racial Discrimination
Government Performance • Corporate Profits • Welfare • Homosexuality • Foreign Relations

Consistently Mostly Mostly Consistently
LIBERAL MIXED CONSERVATIVE
In 1994, 49% of Americans held a roughly equal number of liberal and conservative positions — their ideological views were “mixed.”
What Polarization Looks Like: Growing Minority Holds Consistent Ideological Views

Notes: Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see Appendix A). Republicans include Republican-leaning independents; Democrats include Democratic-leaning independents (see Appendix B).

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Republicans Shift to the Right

1994

MEDIAN Democrat

Consistently liberal

64% of Republicans

2004

MEDIAN Democrat

Consistently liberal

Consistently conservative

70% of Republicans

2014

MEDIAN Democrat

Consistently liberal

Consistently conservative

92% of Republicans are more conservative than the median Democrat

Notes: Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see Appendix A). Republicans include Republican-leaning independents; Democrats include Democratic-leaning independents (see Appendix B).

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Democrats Shift to the Left

Notes: Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see Appendix A). Republicans include Republican-leaning independents; Democrats include Democratic-leaning independents (see Appendix B).

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Political Polarization in the American Public

It was 64% and 70%, respectively, in 1994!
Putting the Republican and Democratic Mountains Together

1994

MEDIAN Democrat
Consistently liberal

MEDIAN Republican
Consistently conservative

2004

MEDIAN Democrat
Consistently liberal

MEDIAN Republican
Consistently conservative

2014

MEDIAN Democrat
Consistently liberal

MEDIAN Republican
Consistently conservative

Notes: Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see Appendix A). Republicans include Republican-leaning independents; Democrats include Democratic-leaning independents (see Appendix B).

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Partisan Polarization Even More Pronounced Among the Politically Engaged

Notes: Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see Appendix A). Republicans include Republican-leaning independents; Democrats include Democratic-leaning independents (see Appendix B).
In both parties, highly negative views of the opposing party has more than doubled since 1994.

**Democratic attitudes about the Republican Party**
- 1994: 16%
- 2014: 79%

**Republican attitudes about the Democratic Party**
- 1994: 68%
- 2014: 82%
Beyond Dislike: Viewing the Other Party as a ‘Threat to the Nation’s Well-Being’

Democrat attitudes about the Republican Party  Republican attitudes about the Democratic Party

27% of Democrats see the Republican Party as a threat to the nation’s well-being

43% Very unfavorable

36% of Republicans see the Democratic Party as a threat to the nation’s well-being

Source: 2014 Political Polarization in the American Public

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Where Are We Today?
More Democrats Than Republicans, But Independents on the Rise
Democrats Retain an Advantage in “Leaned” Party Affiliation
Public Divided Over ‘Who Should Take the Lead’

Who in Washington should take the lead in solving nation’s problems?

- President Obama: 40%
- Republican congressional leaders: 38%
- Both/Neither (Vol.): 17%
- DK: 5%

Survey conducted Feb. 18-22, 2015.

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Democratic Party Has Edge on Image

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Republican Party</th>
<th>Democratic Party</th>
<th>Gap</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Has strong principles</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>R+6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has good policy ideas</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>D+4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cares about the middle class</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>D+17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tolerant and open to all groups of people</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>D+24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is too extreme</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>R+14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

PEW RESEARCH CENTER survey conducted Feb. 18-22, 2015
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Democratic Party</th>
<th>Republican Party</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Terrorist threat at home</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign policy</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxes</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economy</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigration</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abortion/contraception</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health care</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Survey conducted Feb. 18-22, 2015. Both/Neither/Don’t know volunteered responses not shown.

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No Change in Views of Health Care Law

Survey conducted Feb. 18-22, 2015. Don’t know responses not shown.

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Economic Issues Rise and Fall on Public’s Agenda

% who say each is a top priority ...

Survey conducted Jan. 7-11, 2015. From 1998-2001 the question asked about “Paying off the national debt.”

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Environmental Priorities

% saying each is a top priority ...

Survey conducted Jan. 7-11, 2015.

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The Politics of Financial Insecurity
A Democratic Tilt, Undercut by Low Participation

• Measured financial security and insecurity across 10 dimensions, including assets, financial stress, means-tested benefits

• Divided the public into five groups according to their level of financial security
Least Financially Secure Less Likely to Vote or to Otherwise Engage With Politics

% of each group who ...

... WERE REGISTERED TO VOTE IN 2014

1  Most Secure  94
2  79
3  70
4  60
5  54

... WERE LIKELY VOTERS IN 2014 ELECTION

1  63
2  51
3  36
4  29
5  20

... VOTED IN 2010 ELECTION

1  69
2  60
3  51
4  35
5  30

... VOTED IN 2010 PRIMARY

1  37
2  28
3  20
4  17
5  14


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The Least Financially Secure Preferred Democrats in 2014, But Many Had No Preference ...

2014 candidate preferences among the general public, by level of financial security

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Financial Security Level</th>
<th>Democratic Candidate (42% overall)</th>
<th>Republican Candidate (34% overall)</th>
<th>Other/Not Sure/Ref. (24% overall)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most secure</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Least secure</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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... and Most Were Unlikely to Vote

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Democratic Candidate</th>
<th>Republican Candidate</th>
<th>Other/Not Sure/Ref.</th>
<th>Total % Likely Voters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Likely voters</td>
<td>Non-voters</td>
<td>Likely voters</td>
<td>Non-voters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most secure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most secure</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Least secure</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Least secure</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Least secure</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Least secure</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Among the least financially secure, fully 30% supported a Democratic candidate but were unlikely to vote; just 11% supported a Republican candidate and were unlikely to vote.

Most of those who did not express support for either a Democratic or a Republican candidate were unlikely to vote.


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