Culture wars, voting, and polarization: divisions and unities in modern American politics

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Some stylized facts

• National elections are becoming closer, local elections are becoming less close
• Differences between rich and poor states are concentrated among upper-income voters
• In Republican states, the poor have become richer; In Democratic states, the rich have become richer
• Voters are becoming more polarized on issues, but much less than the parties have
• The median voter theorem is true . . . sort of. Being a moderate is worth 2% of the vote
The “polarization” story

• First, the good old days of partisanship . . .
• Then, the unraveling of the consensus . . .
“The Party’s Over”
THE SELLING OF THE PRESIDENT
THE CLASSIC ACCOUNT OF THE PACKAGING OF A CANDIDATE
• Now, the new polarization . . .
WASHINGTON, DC—Mere days from assuming the presidency and closing the door on eight years of Bill Clinton, president-elect George W. Bush assured the nation in a televised address Tuesday that "our long national nightmare of peace and prosperity is finally over."

"My fellow Americans," Bush said, "at long last, we have reached the end of the dark period in American history that will come to be known as the Clinton Era, eight long years characterized by unprecedented economic expansion, a sharp decrease in crime, and sustained peace overseas. The time has come to put all of that behind us."
• Then ...
• And now . . .
• Then . . .
And now . . .
Rich and poor states

Rich and poor voters
Polarization and politics

• From the left: focus on economic polarization (“two Americas”)

• From the right: focus on cultural polarization (“red America vs. blue America”)

• “The common lament over the recent rise in political partisanship is often nothing more than a veiled complaint instead about the recent rise of political conservatism.”

—former House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, 2006
Polarization and inequality

- Compared to poorer people, those in the upper third of income are:
  - Twice as likely to vote
  - More likely to vote Republican
  - Much more likely to give $
  - Much more likely to directly know an elected official (or to be one)
Ordinary Americans

• “Pat doesn’t have a mink coat. But she does have a respectable Republican cloth coat.” —vice presidential candidate Richard Nixon, 1952

Some stylized facts: voting

• National elections (usually) depend on the economy
• Uniform partisan swing—now more than ever
• National elections are closer
• Local elections are less close
The swing from 2004 to 2008 was pretty uniform
Gradual decline in state-by-state variation of presidential vote swings
Close elections (in percentage terms) are increasingly rare in the House but are more common in the Senate.
Rich people vote Republican

• A fact not always realized:

“OK, but here’s the fact that nobody ever, ever mentions—Democrats win rich people. Over $100,000 in income, you are likely more than not to vote for Democrats. People never point that out. Rich people vote liberal. I don’t know what that’s all about.” — TV commentator Tucker Carlson, 2007
Republican vote among upper-income voters, minus Republican vote among lower-income voters
Close elections (in percentage terms) are increasingly rare in the House but are more common in the Senate.
Income distributions within self-reported political categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-reported ideology</th>
<th>Liberal Democrats</th>
<th>Liberal Independents or Moderate Democrats</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Conservative Independents or Moderate Republicans</th>
<th>Conservative Republicans</th>
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<td>Economic issues</td>
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<td>Social issues</td>
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Income

Low | High
Income and voting

McCain vote by income in a poor, middle-income, and rich state

- Mississippi
- Ohio
- Connecticut

Probability of voting for McCain

Voter's family income
Some stylized facts: networks

• The average American “knows” 750 people and “trusts” 100 people
• Dems know mostly Dems, Reps know mostly Reps, regardless of whether you live in a “red” or “blue” state
• People overestimate how much their friends agree with them
Rich and poor states in the 20th century
“Who are the trustfunders? People with enough money not to have to work for a living, or not to have to work very hard.... These people tend to be very liberal politically. Aware that they have done nothing to earn their money, they feel a certain sense of guilt.... They are citizens of the world with contempt for those who feel chills up their spines when they hear ‘The Star Spangled Banner.’” — Michael Barone, author of the Almanac of American Politics, 2005
Did you vote for McCain in 2008?

Income: < $20,000, $20-40,000, $40-75,000, $75-150,000, > $150,000

- All voters
- White
- Black
- Hispanic
- Other races

When a category represents less than 1% of the voters in a state, the state is left blank.
Model checking
Voting trends by occupation

[Diagrams showing trends for Professionals, Managers & Administrators, Owners & Proprietors, Routine White-Collar, Skilled Workers, Non-Skilled Workers, and Non-fulltime Labor Force from 1960 to 2000.]
Perceptions and reality

• Political pundits misunderstand income and voting
• Ordinary Americans are biased in views of the economy
• Misperceptions about demographics, foreign policy . . .
• Increasing partisanship on foreign policy
The moderate benefits of moderation
On individual issues, Americans have not become more polarized
But ... correlation in issue attitudes can yield clustering and polarization.
Example: abortion
Churchgoers and others
Republican vote for regular church attenders minus Republican vote for nonattenders
The opiate of the elites

Bush vote in 2004 by income and religious attendance

- if you attend church more than once/week
- if you attend once or twice/month
- if you never attend church

Probability of voting for Bush:
- 70%
- 60%
- 50%
- 40%
Religious and nonreligious countries

[Graph showing a scatter plot with countries plotted based on average religiosity and per-capita GDP.]
Religious and nonreligious states

Average religious attendance within state vs. Average income within state for different states in the United States.
Religion and income within states

[Graph showing the relationship between within-state correlation of income and religious attendance and average income within state, with states represented by abbreviations.]
Rich and poor in Red and Blue America

![Graph showing average ideologies of different groups of voters in Red and Blue America.](image-url)
Average economic and social ideology scores among Bush voters (red) and Gore voters (blue) in each state.
Open questions

• What about politics?
• What about policy?
• Primary elections
• How politically polarized are our social networks, really?
Take-home points

- To explain **why**, it can often be helpful to know **what** is actually happening
- Vote swings tend to be uniform (more so than ever before)
- Interaction of geography and political differences