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Is Polarization a Myth?

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This article uses data from the American National Election Studies and national exit polls to test Fiorina's assertion that ideological polarization in the American public is a myth. Fiorina argues that twenty-first-century Americans, like the midtwentieth-century Americans described by Converse, "are not very well-informed about politics, do not hold many of their views very strongly, and are not ideological" (2006, 19). However, our evidence indicates that since the 1970s, ideological polarization has increased dramatically among the mass public in the United States as well as among political elites. There are now large differences in outlook between Democrats and Republicans, between red state voters and blue state voters, and between religious voters and secular voters. These divisions are not confined to a small minority of activists—they involve a large segment of the public and the deepest divisions are found among the most interested, informed, and active citizens. Moreover, contrary to Fiorina's suggestion that polarization turns off voters and depresses turnout, our evidence indicates that polarization energizes the electorate and stimulates political participation.

> "Americans are closely divided, but we are not deeply divided, and we are closely divided because many of us are ambivalent and uncertain, and consequently reluctant to make firm commitments to parties, politicians, or policies. We divide evenly in elections or sit them out entirely because we instinctively seek the center while the parties and candidates hang out on the extremes." (Fiorina 2006, xiii)

The extent of ideological thinking in the American electorate has been a subject of great interest to students of public opinion and voting behavior since the publication of Converse's seminal paper on "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics" (1964). Based on his analysis of data from the 1956 and 1960 American National Election Studies, Converse concluded that the sort of ideological thinking common among political elites was confined to a small minority of the American public. The vast majority of ordinary voters showed little evidence of using an ideological framework to evaluate political parties or presidential candidates and very limited understanding of basic ideological concepts such as liberalism and conservatism.

American politics and the American electorate have changed dramatically since the 1950s in ways that might lead one to expect an increase in the prevalence of ideological thinking in the public, as Converse himself has acknowledged (2006). One important change has been a very substantial increase in the educational attainment of the electorate. In his original study, Converse found that education was a strong predictor of ideological sophistication: college-educated voters displayed much higher levels of ideological sophistication than grade school or high school-educated voters. Between 1956 and 2004, the proportion of NES respondents with only a grade-school education fell from 37% to 3% while the proportion with at least some college education rose from 19% to 61%. Based on this trend alone, one would expect a much larger proportion of today's voters to be capable of understanding and using ideological concepts.

Another development that might be expected to raise the level of ideological awareness among the public has been the growing intensity of ideological conflict among political elites in the United States. For several decades, Democratic officeholders, candidates, and activists have been moving to the left while Republican officeholders, candidates, and activists have been moving to the right. Conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans, who were common in American politics during the 1950s and 1960s, are now extremely rare. At the elite level, ideological differences between the parties are probably greater now than at any time in the past half century (Poole and Rosenthal 1997, 2001; Stonecash, Brewer, and Marianai 2003).

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There is widespread agreement among scholars concerning the growing importance of ideological divisions at the elite level in American politics. There is much less agreement, however, about the significance of these divisions at the mass level. Some studies have found evidence that growing elite polarization has led to an increase in ideological awareness and polarization among the public (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Hetherington, 2001; Layman and Carsey 2002). However, other scholars, most notably Morris Fiorina and his collaborators, have argued that when it comes to the political beliefs of the mass public, very little has changed since the 1950s.

In his popular and influential book, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*, Fiorina claims that Converse's portrait of the American electorate "still holds up pretty well." According to Fiorina, the ideological disputes that engage political elites and activists have little resonance among the American mass public: like their midtwentieth-century counterparts, ordinary twenty-first-century Americans "are not very well-informed about politics, do not hold many of their views very strongly, and are not ideological" (2006, 19).

The argument that polarization in America is almost entirely an elite phenomenon appears to be contradicted by a large body of research by political scientists on recent trends in American public opinion. While there have been relatively few studies directly addressing Fiorina's evidence and conclusions (Abramowitz and Saunders 2005; Demerath 2005; Evans and Nunn 2005; Klinkner 2004; Klinkner and Hapanowicz 2005; Rosenthal 2005), a growing body of research indicates that political and cultural divisions within the American public have deepened considerably since the 1970s. These studies have found that the political beliefs of Democratic and Republican voters have become much more distinctive over the past 30 years (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Hetherington 2001; Jacobson 2004, 2005; Jelen and Wilcox 2003; Layman and Carsey 2002; Lindaman and Haider-Markel 2002; Stonecash, Brewer, and Mariani 2003; White 2003), that political divisions within the public increasingly reflect differences in religious beliefs and practices (Layman 1997, 2001; Layman and Carmines 1997) as well as deep-seated psychological orientations (Jost 2006), and that ideological polarization among party elites is explained in part by ideological polarization among party supporters in the electorate (Jacobson 2000).

This article uses data from the American National Election Studies and national exit polls to test five major claims made by Fiorina and his collaborators about polarization in the United States. This evidence indicates that while some claims by culture war proponents about deep political divisions among the public have been overstated, Fiorina systematically understates the significance of these divisions. Americans may not be heading to the barricades to do battle over abortion, gay marriage, and other emotionally charged issues as some have alleged (Hunter 1995), but there are large differences in outlook between Democrats and Republicans, between red state voters and blue state voters, and between religious voters and secular voters. These divisions are not confined to a small minority of elected officials and activists—they involve a large segment of the public and the deepest divisions are found among the most interested, informed, and active members of the public. Moreover, contrary to Fiorina's claim that polarization turns off voters and depresses turnout, we find that the intense polarization of the electorate over George W. Bush and his policies energized the electorate and contributed to a dramatic increase in voting and other forms of political participation in 2004.

Fiorina's Five Claims

1. *Moderation.* The broadest claim made by Fiorina and the one that underlies all of the others is that the American public is basically moderate—the public is closely divided but not deeply divided. Today as in the past, most Americans are ideological moderates, holding a mixture of liberal and conservative views on different issues. There has been no increase in ideological polarization among the public.
2. *Partisan Polarization.* While differences between Democratic and Republican identifiers on issues have increased, they are only slightly greater than in the past. Partisan polarization is largely an elite phenomenon—only a thin layer of elected officials and activists are truly polarized in their views.
3. *Geographical Polarization.* Cultural and political differences between red states and blue states are actually fairly small. The similarities between voters in these two sets of states are much more striking than the differences.
4. *Social Cleavages.* Divisions within the public based on social characteristics such as age, race, gender, and religious affiliation have been diminishing. While divisions based on religious beliefs and practices have increased, they remain modest and have not supplanted traditional economic

divisions as determinants of party identification or voting behavior.

5. *Voter Engagement and Participation.* Growing polarization of party elites and activists turns off large numbers of voters and depresses turnout in elections.

The Evidence: Moderation

Fiorina's central claim is that there has been no increase in ideological polarization among the American public in recent years. It is difficult to compare the ideological views of Americans today with the ideological views of Americans during the 1950s, 1960s, or 1970s because very few issue questions have been included in public opinion surveys throughout this time span. However, since 1982 seven issue questions have been included in almost every NES survey: liberal-conservative identification, aid to blacks, defense spending, jobs and living standards, health insurance, government services and spending, and abortion.[1] We used these questions to construct a measure of ideological polarization ranging from 0 to 7 by computing the absolute value of the difference between the number of liberal positions and the number of conservative positions. We then recoded the polarization scale so that those with a score of 0 or 1 were coded as low, those with a score of 2 or 3 were coded as moderate, and those with a score of 4 or greater were coded as high.[2]

Table 1 displays the trend in ideological polarization from the 1980s through the first decade of the twenty-first century based on the recoded 7-issue scale. Contrary to Fiorina's claim that polarization has not increased among the American public, the results displayed in Table 1 show that there has been an increase in ideological polarization since the 1980s: the percentage of respondents at the low end of the polarization scale fell from 39% during the 1980s to 32% in 2002–2004 while the percentage at the high end rose from 24% to 33%. These results indicate that ideological thinking is more prevalent among the American public today than in the past.

TABLE 1 **Ideological Polarization in the American Electorate by Decade**

Group	1982-1990	1992-2000	2002-2004
All Respondents	24	29	33
Nonvoters	18	19	19
Voters	27	34	37
Low Knowledge	16	17	19
High Knowledge	38	43	48
Low Interest	19	18	21
High Interest	34	39	45
No College	19	20	21
Some College	29	32	32
College Grads	36	43	49

Note: Entries represent percentage of respondents with consistently liberal or conservative views across seven issue questions.
Source: NES Cumulative File

This trend can also be seen by examining the correlations among the items included in the ideological polarization scale. As Knight (2006) has argued, coherence of opinions across issues is generally regarded as one of the key indicators of ideological thinking. It is also closely related to another indicator of ideological thinking—contrast between the beliefs of those in opposing ideological camps. The higher the correlations among respondents' issue positions, the larger the proportion of respondents holding consistently liberal and consistently conservative positions. Thus, the fact that the average correlation among these seven items increased from .20 during the 1980s to .26 during the 1990s and .32 in 2002–2004 indicates that there was a significant increase in ideological thinking among the American public during this time period.

Fiorina's claim that Americans "instinctively seek the center" also ignores important differences in ideological thinking within the public. Some Americans have little or no interest in politics while others care deeply about political issues. Some know very little about politics while others are quite knowledgeable. And, of course, some seldom or never participate in the political process while others participate regularly. Based on past research, we would expect ideological thinking to be more prevalent among the well informed and politically engaged than among the poorly informed and politically disengaged (Converse 1964; Jennings 1992; Saunders and Abramowitz 2004; Stimson 1975), and it is the well informed and

[1]None of the issue items except liberal-conservative identification are available for 2002. Therefore, all of the issue scales for the 2002–2004 decade are based exclusively on 2004 data. In constructing the polarization measure, 7-point scales were collapsed into three categories: 1–3, 4, and 5–7; respondents who declined to place themselves on a 7-point scale were assigned to the middle position on the scale; the 4-point abortion scale was recoded into 3 categories: 1–2 (conservative), 3 (moderate), and 4 (liberal).

[2]The procedure followed here for collapsing the individual items has no effect on our comparison over time since we used the same procedure in every year. Moreover, using a simple additive index consisting of the same items produces nearly identical results concerning the trend in polarization between 1984 and 2004.

politically engaged whose opinions matter most to candidates and officeholders.

The results in Table 1 strongly support this hypothesis: ideological polarization is consistently greater among the well educated and politically engaged segment of the American public than among the poorly educated and politically disengaged segment. Moreover, the increase in ideological polarization since the 1980s has been concentrated among the more educated and politically engaged segment of the public.

In order to measure ideological polarization among the American public in 2004, we created a scale based on responses to 16 issues included in the National Election Study survey. The issues ranged from government responsibility for jobs and living standards to gay marriage, health insurance, abortion, defense spending, and gun control, and the scale has a reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) of .80. Scores on the original scale ranged from -16 for respondents who gave liberal responses to all 16 issues to +16 for respondents who gave conservative responses to all 16 issues. We then recoded the original 33-point scale into an 11-point scale for clarity in presentation.[3]

Table 2 displays the relationship between ideological consistency and three measures of political engagement: interest, knowledge, and participation.[4] The results strongly support the political engagement hypothesis. It was primarily the least interested, least informed, and least politically active Americans who were clustered around the center of the liberal-conservative spectrum. The more interested, informed, and politically active Americans were, the more likely they were to take consistently liberal or consistently conservative positions.

The implication of the findings in Table 2 is that the most politically engaged citizens are also the most polarized in their political views. In order to directly test this hypothesis, we combined the political interest, knowledge, and participation scales to create an overall index of political engagement. We then divided the respondents in the 2004 NES sample into three groups of approximately equal size: the least politically engaged, a middle group, and the most politically engaged. The politically engaged group included 37% of all respondents in the survey and close to half of the voters.

TABLE 2 Political Engagement and Ideological Polarization in 2004

	Ideological Polarization			
	Low	**Moderate**	**High**	**Total**
Campaign Interest				
Moderate to Low	40%	33	27	100%
High	24%	27	49	100%
Political Knowledge				
Low (0-4)	44%	38	18	100%
Moderate (5-7)	30%	29	41	100%
High (8-10)	15%	19	66	100%
Participation				
Low (0-1)	39%	35	26	100%
Moderate (2)	30%	30	40	100%
High (3+)	17%	18	65	100%

Source: 2004 National Election Study

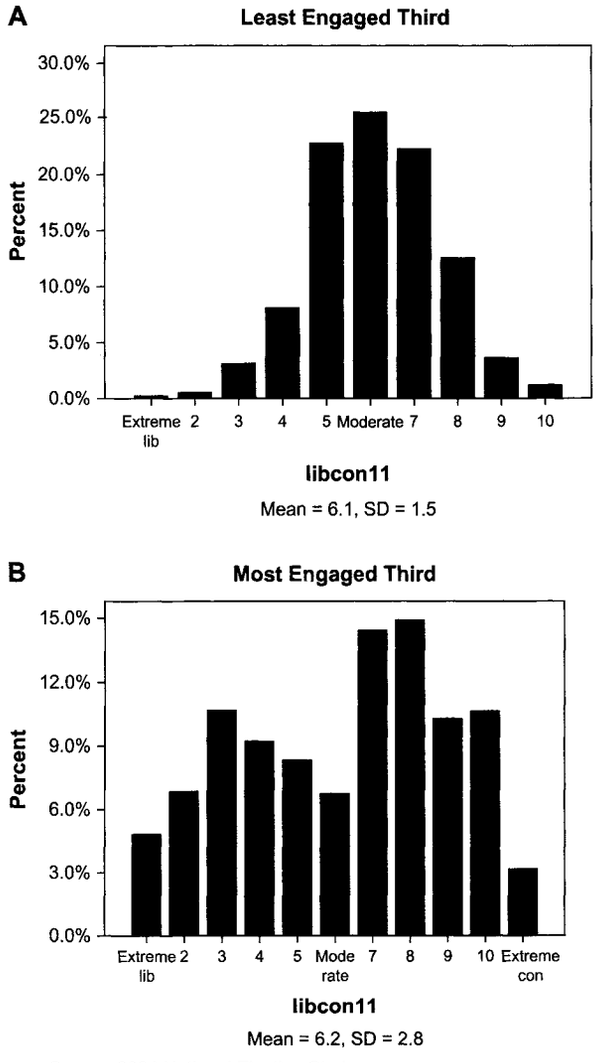
Figure 1 compares the ideological orientations of the least politically engaged group with the ideological orientations of the most politically engaged group. These results strongly support the political engagement hypothesis. The high-engagement group was much more polarized in its policy preferences than the low-engagement group. Although the means of the two distributions are almost identical (6.1 vs. 6.2), the standard deviation of the high-engagement group (2.8) is almost twice as large as the standard deviation of the low-engagement group (1.5). Very few individuals in the low-engagement group had consistent policy preferences: 13% were consistent liberals (1–4) while 19% were consistent conservatives (8–11). In contrast, a large proportion of individuals in the high-engagement group had fairly consistent policy preferences: 32% were consistent liberals while 39% were consistent conservatives (see Figure 2).

These results indicate that the politically engaged segment of the American electorate is in fact quite polarized in its political attitudes. We would expect political elites to be much more concerned about the views of the politically engaged than about the views of the politically disengaged. It is the politically

[3]All of the issue questions except the death penalty question were collapsed into 3 categories (liberal, moderate, and conservative) before they were combined. On all of the 7-point scales, categories 1–3 and 5–7 were combined. On the 4-category abortion scale, categories 1–2 were combined. On the 4-category death penalty question, categories 1–2 and 3–4 were combined. All questions were coded in a conservative direction. We then computed a simple additive scale ranging from -16 to +16. This 33-point scale was collapsed into an 11-point scale by combining categories 1–3, 4–6, 7–9, 10–12, 13–15, 16–18, 19–21, 22–24, 25–27, 28–30, and 31–33.

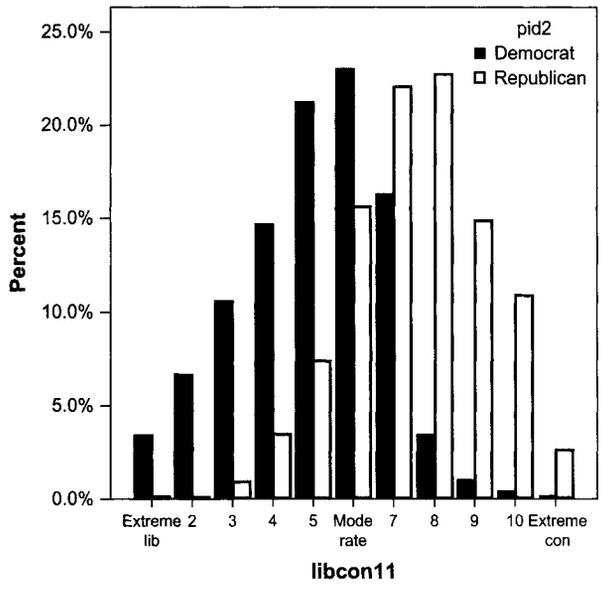
[4]Interest is measured by a single question asking about interest in the presidential campaign. Knowledge is measured by 10 items including questions about party control of the House and Senate, the jobs held by various political leaders, and ability to accurately place the presidential candidates on a liberal-conservative ideology scale and an abortion policy scale.

FIGURE 1 **Ideological Polarization of U.S. Electorate in 2004 by Level of Political Engagement**



Source: 2004 National Election Study

FIGURE 2 **Liberal-Conservative Policy Preferences of Democratic and Republican Identifiers in 2004**



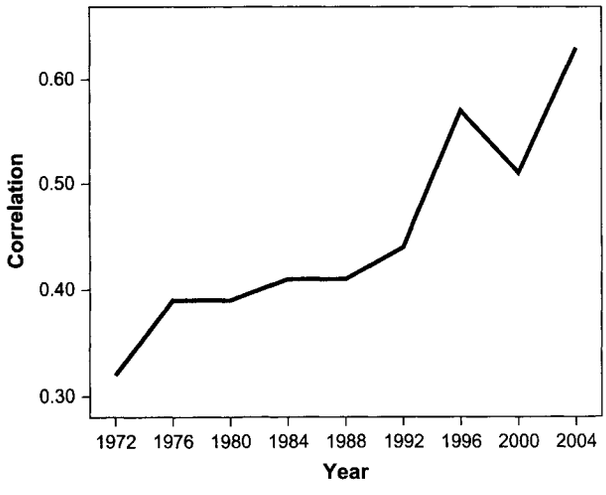
Source: 2004 National Election Study

engaged who pay attention to the positions taken by candidates and officeholders and who consistently turn out to vote in primaries as well as general elections. However, the existence of polarization in a society does not just depend on the overall distribution of political attitudes among the public. It also depends on whether there are differences between the views of important subgroups and perhaps the most politically significant subgroups in a democracy are political parties.

The Evidence: Partisan Polarization

Fiorina argues that partisan polarization is largely an elite phenomenon and that there has been only a slight increase in partisan polarization within the American electorate over the past several decades. Our evidence does not support either of these claims. The evidence from the 2004 NES survey displayed in Figure 3 shows that partisan polarization is not confined to a small group of leaders and activists. The ideological preferences of Democratic and Republican

FIGURE 3 **Correlation of Party Identification with Liberal-Conservative Identification, 1972-2004**



Note: Correlation coefficient is Pearson's r based on 7-point party Identification scale and 7-point liberal-conservative identification scale.

Source: American National Election Studies

identifiers (including leaning independents) actually differed rather sharply. Democratic identifiers tended to be fairly liberal while Republican identifiers tend to be fairly conservative. The mean scores on the 11-point ideology scale were 5.0 for Democrats compared with 7.5 for Republicans. This difference is highly statistically significant ($p < .001$). It is also substantively significant. Fifty-six percent of Democrats were on the liberal side of the scale (1–5) compared with only 12% of Republicans; 73% of Republicans were on the conservative side of the scale (7–11) compared with only 21% of Democrats.

Evidence from the American National Election Studies indicates that partisan polarization has increased considerably over the past several decades. Figure 3 displays the trend in the correlation between liberal-conservative identification and party identification between 1972, when the ideology question was first included in the NES survey, and 2004. This graph shows that contrary to the claim that partisan polarization has increased only slightly, there has actually been a dramatic increase in the correlation between party identification and ideological identification since 1972 and especially since 1992. In 1972, the correlation between ideology and party identification was .32. In 1992, it was .44. In 2004, it was .63. Nor was this trend due simply to party realignment in the southern states. In the South, the correlation between ideology and party identification increased from .24 in 1972 to .56 in 2004; outside of the South, the correlation increased from .37 in 1972 to .66 in 2004.

The result of the growing relationship between ideological identification and party identification has been a marked increase in ideological polarization between Democratic and Republican identifiers. Between 1972 and 2004, the difference between the mean score of Democratic identifiers and the mean score of Republican identifiers on the 7-point liberal-conservative identification scale doubled from 0.9 units to 1.8 units. Given the limited range of this scale—the standard deviation was 1.46 in 2004—this is a substantial increase in polarization.

Differences between Democratic and Republican identifiers have also increased over the past three decades on a wide range of issues. Table 3 displays the correlations between party identification and positions on six different issues during 1972–80, 1984–92, and 1996–2004: the larger the correlation coefficient, the greater the degree of partisan polarization on an issue. On every one of these issues, ranging from jobs and living standards to health insurance to presidential approval, partisan polarization increased substantially.

TABLE 3 Trends in Partisan Polarization on Issues, 1972-2004

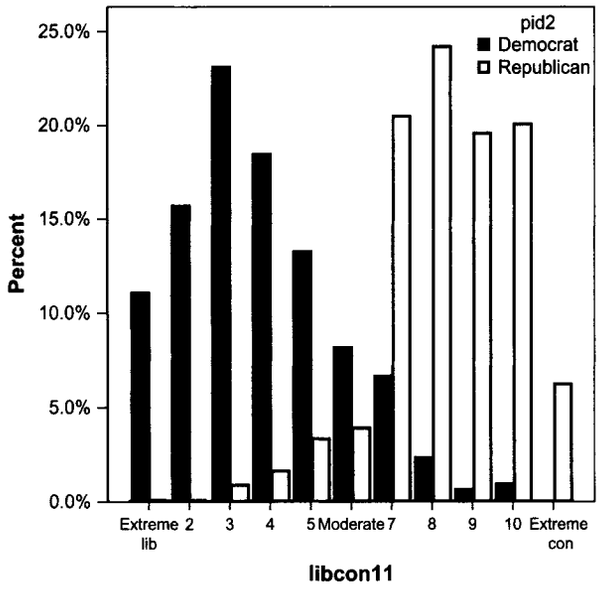
Issue	1972-1980	1984-1992	1996-2004
Aid to Blacks	.20	.27	.35
Abortion	−.03	.08	.18
Jobs/Living Standards	.28	.34	.40
Health Insurance	.25	.31	.39
Lib/Con Id	.42	.49	.62
Presidential Approval	.42	.56	.61
Average	.26	.34	.43

Note: Entries shown are average correlations (Kendall's tau) between issues and party identification (strong, weak, and independent Democrats vs. strong weak and independent Republicans).
Source: American National Election Studies

Evaluations of presidential performance have become increasingly divided along party lines since the 1970s and evaluations of George W. Bush in 2004 were sharply divided along party lines. According to data from the 2004 NES survey, 90% of Republican identifiers approved of Bush's performance and 66% approved strongly; in contrast, 81% of Democratic identifiers disapproved of Bush's performance and 64% disapproved strongly. Evaluations of George W. Bush were more divided along party lines than those of any president since the NES began asking the presidential approval question in 1972. However, the highly polarized evaluations of George Bush in 2004 were not unique—they represented a continuation of a trend that goes back several decades: the difference between the percentage of Democratic identifiers approving of the president's performance and the percentage of Republican identifiers approving of the president's performance was 36 points for Richard Nixon in 1972, 42 points for Jimmy Carter in 1980, 52 points for Ronald Reagan in 1988, 55 points for Bill Clinton in 1996, and 71 points for George W. Bush in 2004.

Figure 4 shows that partisan polarization was considerably greater among politically engaged Americans in 2004 than among the general public. The mean scores on the 11-point liberal-conservative policy scale were 3.8 for politically engaged Democrats compared with 8.3 for politically engaged Republicans. This difference is both substantively and statistically significant ($p < .001$). Eighty-two percent of politically engaged Democrats were on the liberal side of the scale (1–5) compared with only 7% of politically engaged Republicans; 91% of politically engaged Republicans were on the conservative side of the scale (7–11) compared with only 12% of politically engaged Democrats.

FIGURE 4 **Liberal-Conservative Policy Preferences of Politically Engaged Democratic and Republican Identifiers**



Source: 2004 National Election Study

There were dramatic differences between the positions of politically engaged Democrats and Republicans on a wide range of specific issues in 2004. Some of these issue differences are displayed in Table 4. On every one of the eight issues included in Table 4, politically engaged Democrats were much more liberal than politically engaged Republicans. This was true on social issues, economic issues, and foreign policy issues. The smallest differences, 42 percentage points, were on the issues of abortion and the death penalty. The largest difference, 59 percentage points, was on the use of military force versus diplomacy in the conduct of foreign policy. Across these eight issues, an average of 65% of politically engaged Democrats took the liberal position compared with an average of 17% of politically engaged Republicans.

Politically engaged partisans have always been more polarized along ideological lines than ordinary party identifiers. However, like ordinary party identifiers, politically engaged partisans have become increasingly polarized over time.[5] Between 1972 and 2004, the correlation (Pearson's r) between party identification and ideological identification among the most politically engaged citizens increased from .47 to .77. As a result, the difference between the average score of politically engaged Democrats and the average score of politically engaged Republicans on the 7-point liberal-conservative scale increased from 1.4 units in 1972 to 2.7 units in 2008. The level of polarization among politically engaged partisans in 2004 was the highest in the history of the NES even though the proportion of citizens classified as politically engaged was also the highest in the history of the NES.

[5]In order to measure political engagement over the entire time period between 1972 and 2004, we created an additive scale based on one question asking about interest in the campaign, one question asking how much respondents cared about the outcome of the presidential election, and an index of campaign activities. We coded those who scored at the upper end of this scale as politically engaged. The proportion of respondents classified as politically engaged ranged from 12% in 1956 to 26% in 2004.

TABLE 4 **Policy Liberalism among Politically Engaged Partisans in 2004**

Issue	Democrats	Republicans
Abortion	67%	25%
Death Penalty	52%	10%
Diplomacy vs. Force	74%	15%
Environment vs. Jobs	74%	27%
Gay Marriage	69%	18%
Jobs/Living Standards	52%	9%
Health Insurance	66%	16%
Spending/Services	65%	18%

Source: 2004 National Election Study

The Evidence: Geographical Polarization

Fiorina claims there has been little increase in geographical polarization in recent decades and that the differences between red states and blue states have been greatly exaggerated. However, the evidence displayed in Table 5 shows that states have become much more sharply divided along party lines since the 1960s: red states have been getting redder while blue states have been getting bluer. While the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections were highly competitive at the national level, the large majority of states were not competitive. Compared with the presidential elections of 1960 and 1976, which were also closely contested at the national level, there were far fewer battleground states in 2000 and 2004 and the percentage of electoral votes in these battleground states was much smaller. The average margin of victory at the state level has increased dramatically over time and far more states with far more electoral votes are now either solidly Democratic or solidly Republican.

TABLE 5 **The Shrinking Battlefield: A Comparison of the 1960, 1976, 2000, and 2004 Presidential Elections**

	1960	1976	2000	2004
National vote margin	0.2%	2.1%	0.5%	2.5%
Average state margin	8.0%	8.9%	13.8%	14.8%
Number of states that were:				
Uncompetitive (10% +)	18	19	29	31
Battlegrounds (0-5%)	24	24	15	12
Electoral votes of:				
Uncompetitive states	124	131	314	332
Competitive states	327	337	167	141

Source: *Congressional Quarterly's Guide to U.S. Elections*, 4th ed. For 2004 election: www.uselectionatlas.org.

In the 2004 presidential election, 38 of 50 states were carried by George Bush or John Kerry by a margin of more than 5 percentage points.[6] These states included more than two-thirds of the nation's voters. And contrary to Fiorina's claim that there are few major differences between red state voters and blue state voters, the evidence from the 2004 National Exit Poll displayed in Table 6 shows that when we compare voters in states that supported Bush or Kerry by a margin of more than 5 points, there were large differences between the social characteristics and political attitudes of red state voters and blue state voters. Compared with blue state voters, red state voters were much more likely to be Protestants, to consider themselves born-again or evangelical Christians, and to attend religious services at least once per week. They were also much more likely to have a gun owner in their household and much less likely to have a union member in their household. Red state voters were much more likely to take a pro-life position on abortion, to oppose marriage or civil unions for gay couples, to support the war in Iraq, to approve of George Bush's job performance, to describe themselves as conservative, to identify with the Republican Party and, of course, to vote for George Bush for president.

The Evidence: Religious Polarization

It is no coincidence that the largest differences between red state voters and blue state voters involved religious beliefs and practices. Religion has long been an important dividing line in American politics. During most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Catholic voters generally supported the Democratic Party while Protestant voters outside of the South generally supported the Republican Party. However, the most important religious divide in American politics today is not between Protestants and Catholics but between religious voters and secular voters (Layman 1997, 2001).

Americans are much more religiously observant than citizens of other Western democracies (Dalton 2002, 113–14). However, evidence from the 2004 National Exit Poll shows that there is a clear divide within the American electorate based on frequency of religious observance. The large majority of voters were either highly observant or nonobservant. Forty-three percent of voters reported that they attended religious services at least once per week; another 43% reported that they seldom or never attended religious services. Only 14% of voters reported that they attended religious services a few times a month.

Among white voters in the United States, religious observance is now highly correlated with political attitudes and behavior. The evidence displayed in Table 7 from the 2004 NEP shows that there was a very wide gulf in political attitudes and behavior between white voters who regularly attended religious services and those who seldom or never attended religious services. Not surprisingly, the gap was greatest on cultural issues: there was a 47-point difference on the issue of abortion and a 33-point difference on the issue of gay marriage. However, the gap was very large on other issues as well: 19 points on the war in Iraq, 24 points on President Bush's job performance, 25 points on ideological identification, 23 points on party identification, and 25 points on presidential candidate preference.

Contrary to Fiorina's claim that economic cleavages remain as important or more important than religious cleavages, the evidence from the 2004 NEP displayed in Table 8 shows that among white voters, two variables measuring religious beliefs and practices, church attendance and born-again or evangelical identification, were more strongly correlated with party identification and presidential candidate choice than other social characteristics including income, education, sex, marital status, and union membership.

In order to directly compare the influence of religiosity with other social characteristics, we conducted a logistic regression analysis of presidential vote choice among whites in 2004. The independent variables in this analysis were age, sex, marital status,

[6] A list of red states (those carried by Bush by more than 5 points), blue states (those carried by Kerry by more than 5 points), and purple states (those decided by 5 points or less) is provided in the appendix.

TABLE 6 A Comparison of Red State Voters and Blue State Voters in 2004

	Red State Voters	Blue State Voters	Difference
Religion:			
Protestant	69%	41%	+ 28%
Catholic	16%	35%	− 19%
Jewish, other, none	15%	24%	− 9%
Church Attendance:			
Weekly or more	54%	34%	+ 20%
Seldom, never	32%	53%	− 21%
Evangelical, born-again	51%	22%	+ 29%
Gun owning household	53%	28%	+ 25%
Union household	16%	31%	− 15%
Pro-choice on abortion	46%	69%	− 23%
Oppose gay marriage or civil unions	51%	26%	+ 25%
Approve of Bush's job performance	63%	45%	+ 18%
Approve of Iraq war	60%	45%	+ 15%
Conservative identification	41%	27%	+ 14%
Republican identification	44%	30%	+ 14%
Voted for Bush	60%	44%	+ 16%

Source: 2004 National Exit Poll
Note: Red states were carried by George Bush by a margin of at least 6 percentage points; blue states were carried by John Kerry by a margin of at least 6 percentage points.

income, education, household union membership, and a religiosity scale based on frequency of church attendance and born-again/evangelical identification. The results displayed in Table 9 confirm the findings of the bivariate analysis. Among white voters, religiosity had a stronger influence on candidate choice than any other social characteristic. According to these results, with all other independent variables set at their medians, the probability of a Bush vote was .34 for the least religious white voters compared with .81 for the most religious white voters.

TABLE 7 Political Attitudes of Religious and Nonreligious Whites in 2004

	Attend Religious Services	
Issue	Weekly or More	Seldom or Never
Oppose legal abortion	69%	22%
Oppose marriage or civil unions for gays	54%	21%
Approve of Iraq war	68%	49%
Approve of Bush job	72%	48%
Conservative identification	49%	24%
Republican identification	55%	32%
Voted for Bush	71%	46%

Source: 2004 National Exit Poll

These findings indicate that among white voters in the United States, the religious divide is now much deeper than the class divide. Thus, in the 2004 presidential election, 69% of highly observant whites with family incomes below thirty thousand dollars voted for George Bush while 56% of nonobservant whites with family incomes above two-hundred thousand dollars voted for John Kerry. Moreover, the religious divide is likely to deepen in the future

TABLE 8 Correlates of Partisanship and Presidential Vote among Whites in 2004

	Correlation with	
Characteristic	Party Identification	Presidential Vote
Family Income	.094	.107
Education	−.020	−.077
Marital Status/Married	.136	.151
Age	−.058	−.021
Gender/Female	−.077	−.069
Union Household	−.139	−.130
Church Attendance	.205	.287
Born Again or Evangelical	.219	.280

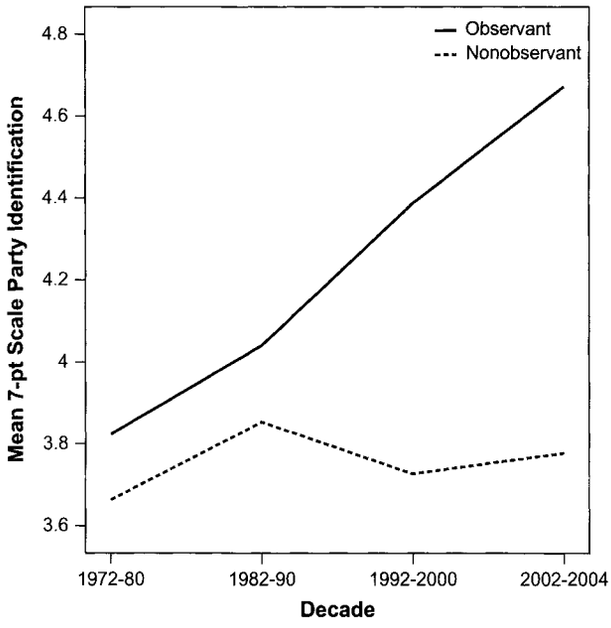
Note: Correlations are Kendall's tau. Party identification and presidential vote coded in Republican direction.
Source: 2004 National Exit Poll

TABLE 9 **Results of Logistic Regression Analysis of Presidential Vote among Whites in 2004**

Variable	B	(S.E.)	Z-score	Change in Probability	Sig.
Age	−.086	(.015)	−5.69	−.166	.001
Education	−.291	(.033)	−8.81	−.277	.001
Income	.140	(.022)	6.37	.232	.001
Married	.411	(.073)	−5.60	.102	.001
Female	−.515	(.066)	−7.79	−.119	.001
Nonunion	.765	(.078)	9.79	.189	.001
Religiosity	.435	(.023)	19.24	.469	.001
Constant	−.331	(.261)	−1.27		N.S.

Note: Presidential vote coded in Republican direction. Change in probability is estimated change in the probability of Republican vote between minimum and maximum value of each independent variable with all other independent variables set at their medians.
Source: 2004 National Exit Poll

FIGURE 5 **Mean Party Identification Score of Observant and Nonobservant Whites in National Election Study Surveys by Decade**



Source: American National Election Studies

because secular voters constitute a growing proportion of the electorate and because religious commitment is increasingly correlated with political attitudes and behavior. According to NES data, the proportion of Americans giving their religious affiliation as "other" or "none" increased from 3% during the 1950s to 5% during the 1960s, 8% during the 1970s, 11% during the 1980s, and 15% during the 1990s. The same data show that the correlation between frequency of church attendance and presidential candidate choice among whites increased from .02 during the 1950s and .03 during the 1960s to .10 during the 1970s, .08 during the 1980s and .29 during the 1990s.

Data from the American National Election Studies show that religiosity has become increasingly correlated with party identification as well as presidential candidate choice among white voters. Figure 5 displays the trend in the mean score of observant and nonobservant whites on the 7-point party identification scale since the 1970s. Before 1980 there was almost no difference in party identification between religious and nonreligious whites. In 1956, for example, 52% of whites who were regular churchgoers identified with the Democratic Party as did 50% of whites who seldom or never attended church. As recently as 1976, 46% of whites who were regular churchgoers identified with the Democratic Party as did 46% of whites who seldom or never attended church. By 1992, however, there was a large gap in party identification between religious and nonreligious whites: only 38% of whites who were regular churchgoers identified with the Democratic Party compared with 51% of whites who seldom or never attended church. The results in 2004 were very similar: only 35% of whites who were regular churchgoers identified with the Democratic Party compared with 51% of whites who seldom or never attended church.

The Evidence: Polarization and Participation

In the 2004 presidential election, Americans were closely divided, but they were not ambivalent or uncertain about George W. Bush. Americans were in fact deeply divided about George Bush, and that division drove a record number of them to the polls. Over 122 million Americans voted in 2004, an increase of 17 million over the 2000 presidential election. Turnout jumped from 54% of eligible voters in 2000 to 61% in 2004—close to the levels seen during the 1950s and 1960s before the voting age was lowered from 21 to 18 (McDonald 2004).

It was not only voting that was way up in 2004. According to data from the American National Election Studies, participation in other campaign

activities also increased dramatically between 2000 and 2004. Twenty-one percent of Americans displayed a button, bumper sticker, or yard sign during the campaign, matching the all-time high set in 1960. In 2000, despite the closeness of the presidential race, only 10% of Americans displayed a button, bumper sticker, or yard sign. Even more impressively, 48% of Americans reported that they talked to someone during the 2004 campaign to try to influence their vote. This was by far the highest proportion in the history of the NES and a dramatic increase from the 32% who reported engaging in personal persuasion during the 2000 campaign.

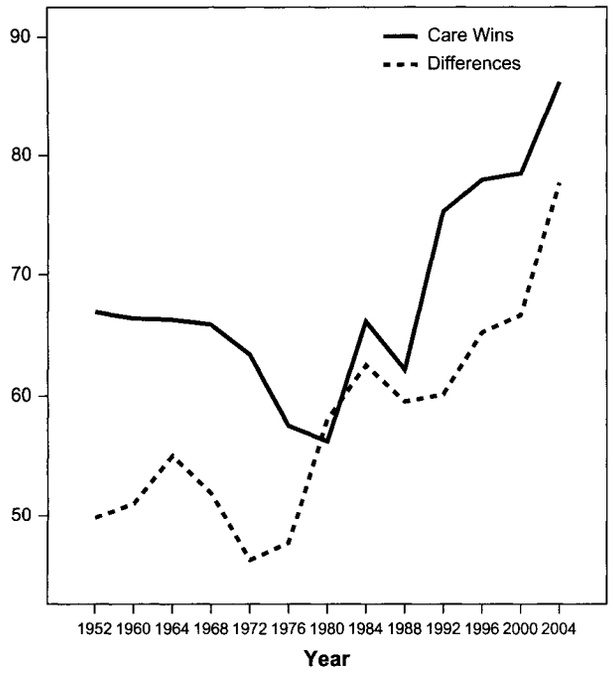
The intense polarization of the American electorate about George W. Bush contributed to the high level of public engagement in the 2004 presidential election. Students of voting behavior have long recognized that there is a relationship between polarization and voter engagement (e.g., Downs 1957). The greater the difference voters perceive between the candidates and parties, the greater their stake in the outcome and the more engaged they are likely to be.

Figure 6 displays the trend between 1952 and 2004 in the percentage of Americans who perceived important differences between the Democratic and Republican parties and the percentage who said they cared "a good deal" about the outcome of the presidential election. In 2004, about 75% of Americans felt that there were important differences between the parties and about 85% cared about who won the presidential election. Both of these figures were all-time records, breaking the previous records set during the 2000 campaign. By way of contrast, during the 1950s and 1960s, only about 50% of Americans perceived important differences between the parties and only about 65% cared about who won the presidential election.

Americans were more engaged in the 2004 presidential election than in any presidential contest in the past 50 years. However, the high level of public engagement in the 2004 election represented a continuation of a trend that began during the 1980s and 1990s. As the Democratic and Republican parties have become more polarized and party identification in the electorate has become more consistent with ideological identification and issue positions (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998), voters have come to perceive a greater stake in the outcomes of elections.

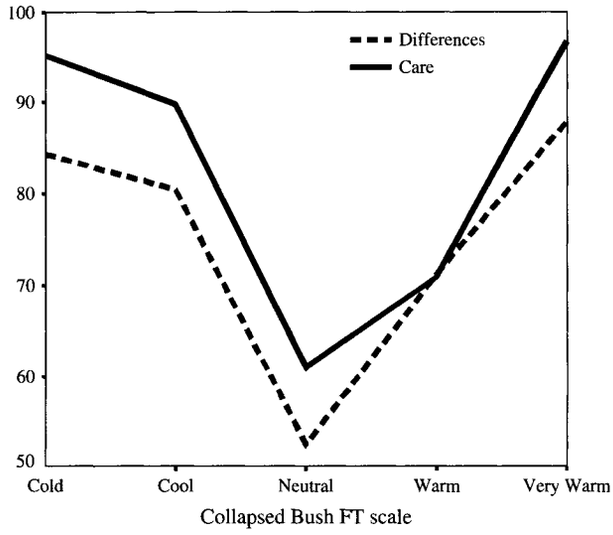
The extraordinary level of public engagement in the 2004 presidential election reflected the intense polarization of the electorate about George W. Bush. Figure 7 displays the relationship between two measures of engagement—perceptions of important party differences and concern about the outcome of the election—and ratings of George W. Bush on the

FIGURE 6 Percentage Perceiving Important Differences and Caring Who Wins Presidential Election, 1952-2004



Source: American National Election Studies

FIGURE 7 Percentage Perceiving Important Differences and Caring Who Wins by 2004 Bush Feeling Thermometer



Source: 2004 National Election Study

feeling thermometer scale. The pattern is consistent with the polarization hypothesis: the more voters liked Bush or disliked Bush, the more likely they were to perceive important differences and care about the outcome of the election. The most engaged voters were those who rated Bush either below 30 degrees (cold) or above 80 degrees (very warm) on the feeling thermometer. These two groups made up over half of the electorate. The least engaged voters were those who were neutral toward Bush (50 degrees). However, this group made up less than 10% of the electorate.

Rather than turning off voters, these data suggest that the intense polarization of the American electorate over George W. Bush increased public engagement and stimulated participation in the 2004 election. As a further test of this hypothesis, we conducted logistic regression analyses of turnout and activism in the 2004 election. The dependent variable in the turnout analysis was simply whether a respondent reported voting in the presidential election. The dependent variable in the activism analysis was whether a respondent reported engaging in two or more campaign activities beyond voting. The independent variables in both analyses were age, education, family income, partisan intensity, ideological extremism, and intensity of feeling toward George W. Bush. Ideological extremism was measured by the absolute value of the difference between self-placement on the liberal-conservative scale and the centrist position of 4, with respondents who declined to place themselves on the scale assigned to the centrist position. Intensity of feeling toward Bush was measured by the absolute value of the difference between the Bush feeling thermometer score and 50, which is the neutral point on the feeling thermometer scale. The results of the logistic regression analyses are displayed in Table 10.

The results in Table 10 strongly support the polarization hypothesis. After controlling for age, education, family income, and partisanship, intensity of positive or negative feeling toward George Bush had a significant influence on turnout in the 2004 presidential election. According to these results, after controlling for all of the other independent variables in the model, an increase from the 25th to the 75th percentile on the Bush intensity scale was associated with an increase of 6.1% in the probability of voting. Both ideological extremism and intensity of positive or negative feeling toward Bush had significant effects on campaign activism in 2004 and the influence of Bush intensity on activism was much stronger than its influence on turnout. After controlling for all of the other independent variables in the model, an increase from the 25th to the 75th percentile on the Bush intensity scale was associated with an increase of 14.6% in the probability of engaging in campaign activism. This was the largest effect of any of the independent variables in the activism model.

Conclusions

The evidence presented in this article does not support Fiorina's assertion that polarization in America is largely a myth concocted by social scientists and media commentators. Fiorina argues that "we [ordinary Americans] instinctively seek the center while the parties and candidates hang out on the extremes" (2006, xiii). But it is mainly the least interested, least

TABLE 10 Results of Logistic Regression Analyses of Turnout and Activism in 2004 Presidential Election

Independent Variable	Turnout Model			Activism Model		
	B (S.E.)	Change in Prob.	Sig.	B (S.E.)	Change in Prob.	Sig.
Age	.019 (.005)	.075	.001	.003 (.005)	.014	N.S.
Education	.377 (.070)	.148	.001	.161 (.056)	.086	.01
Income	.060 (.016)	.073	.001	.020 (.015)	.028	N.S.
Partisanship	.833 (.162)	.092	.001	.518 (.152)	.100	.001
Ideology	.112 (.102)	.033	N.S.	.364 (.085)	.124	.001
Bush FT	.014 (.006)	.061	.02	.029 (.006)	.146	.001

Note: Constant omitted. Ideology measured by extremism on 7-point ideological identification scale. Bush FT measured by absolute value of difference between Bush feeling thermometer score and 50. Change in probability is estimated change in probability of turnout or activism based on an increase from the 25th percentile to the 75th percentile on an independent variable with all other independent variables set at their medians.
Source: 2004 National Election Study

informed and least politically active members of the public who are clustered near the center of the ideological spectrum. The most interested, informed, and active citizens are much more polarized in their political views. Moreover, there are large differences in outlook between Democrats and Republicans, between red state voters and blue state voters, and between religious voters and secular voters. The high level of ideological polarization evident among political elites in the United States reflects real divisions within the American electorate.

Increasing polarization has not caused Americans to become disengaged from the political process. In 2004, according to data from the American National Election Studies, more Americans than ever perceived important differences between the political parties and cared about the outcome of the presidential election. As a result, voter turnout increased dramatically between 2000 and 2004, and record numbers of Americans engaged in campaign activities such as trying to influence their friends and neighbors, displaying bumper stickers and yard signs, and contributing money to the parties and candidates. The evidence indicates that rather than turning off the public and depressing turnout, polarization energizes the electorate and stimulates political participation.

Fiorina's claim that polarization is almost entirely an elite phenomenon has been warmly received by the mass media because it strongly appeals to the populist ethos of the nation. According to his argument, ordinary Americans are not to blame for the political divisiveness that the country has been experiencing. The American people are fundamentally moderate and sensible. It is only the elites and a "thin sliver" of activists who are at fault. Fiorina reinforces this point by using the rhetorical "we" throughout the book to refer to the American mass public. By using this device, he clearly means to identify himself with ordinary Americans who have been the innocent victims of extremist elites and activists.

Fiorina's theme of good people versus bad elites is as old as the nation itself. However, as the evidence presented in this paper shows, it is simplistic and misleading. Polarization in America is not just an elite phenomenon. The American people, especially those who care about politics, have also become much more polarized in recent years. To a considerable extent, the divisions that exist among policymakers in Washington reflect real divisions among the American people. When it comes to polarization, in the immortal words of Pogo, "we have met the enemy and he is us."

Appendix: Red, Purple, and Blue States in 2004 National Exit Poll

Red States (21)	Purple States (12)	Blue States (12)
Alabama	Colorado	California
Alaska	Florida	Connecticut
Arizona	Iowa	Delaware
Arkansas	Michigan	Illinois
Georgia	Minnesota	Maine
Idaho	Nevada	Maryland
Indiana	New Hampshire	Massachusetts
Kansas	New Mexico	New Jersey
Kentucky	Ohio	New York
Louisiana	Oregon	Rhode Island
Mississippi	Pennsylvania	Vermont
Missouri	Wisconsin	Washington
Montana		
Nebraska		
North Carolina		
Oklahoma		
South Carolina		
Tennessee		
Texas		
Utah		
Virginia		

Note: District of Columbia, Hawaii, North Dakota, South Dakota, West Virginia, and Wyoming not included in 2004 NEP sample.

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